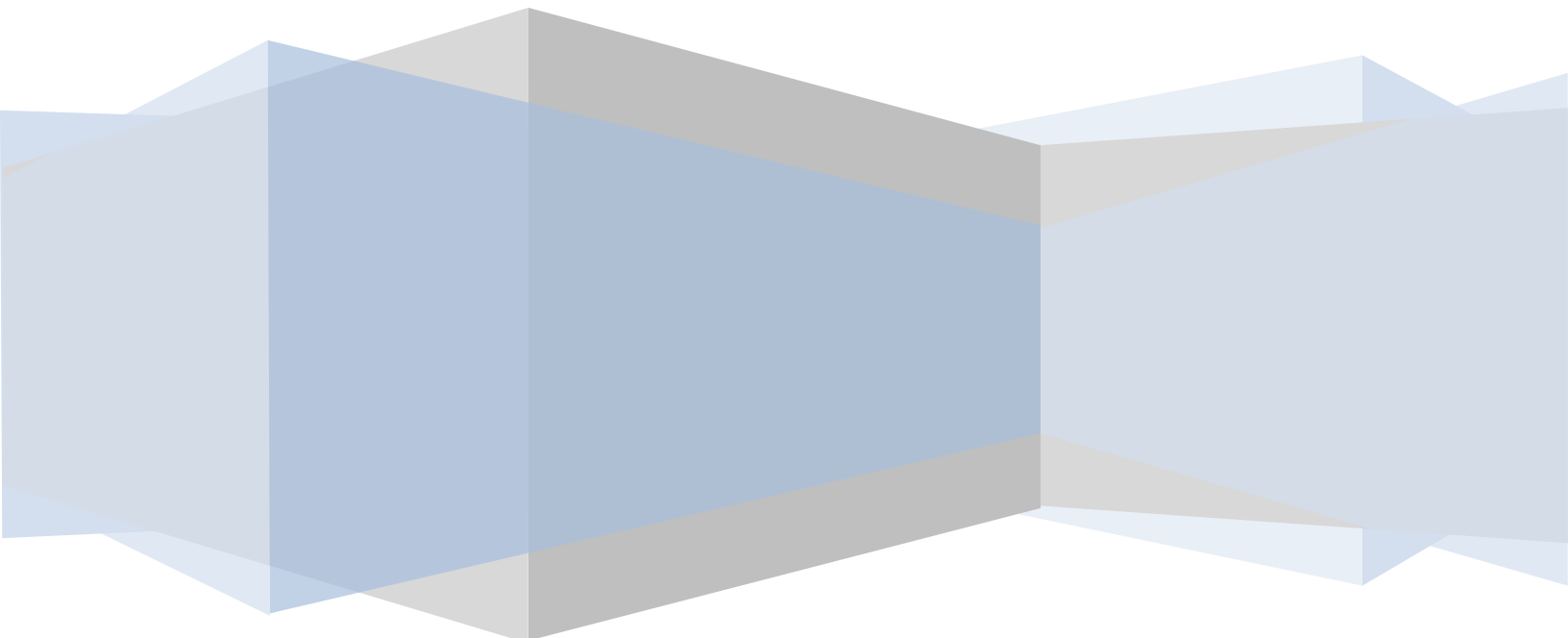


Succeed in interviews

**How to present yourself as the ideal candidate
and get through to the next stage**



Interviews checklist: use this to check that you've covered the basics

The basics: preparation

- Remember what you've written on your CV/application form
- Become an expert on the job role, employer and wider sector
- Plan your route, anticipate transport delays/strikes/extreme weather

The basics: visual impact

- Choose appropriate dress (suit or smart business attire)
- Ensure clothes are clean and ironed
- Subtle not overpowering aftershave/perfume
- Tone down the makeup and jewellery

The basics: on the day

- Greet everyone positively – good handshake
- Demonstrate enthusiasm – smile as appropriate
- Display active listening skills – show that you are interested/engaged with the process and interested in your interviewer
- Turn off your phone

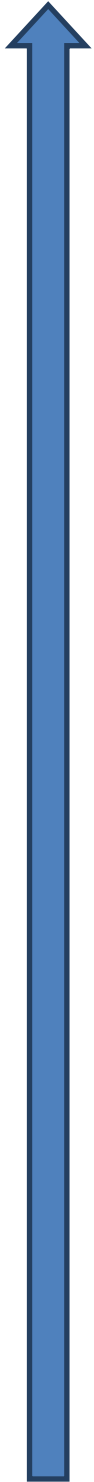
Invited to interview? First things first: congratulations

We say this to lots of students who come into the Careers Centre, but few actually acknowledge their achievement. Why not? The graduate labour market is fiercely competitive and employers will look for any excuse at the application stage to screen you out. For a recent entry level role with a global charity, 600 applications were received, 150 met the essential criteria and 8 were invited to interview. Conducting interviews costs the employer time and money. This means that if you've been invited to interview, the employer is genuinely interested in you and will be looking to screen you **in** by testing to see if you really fit with their organisation. Your job is to convince them that you do.

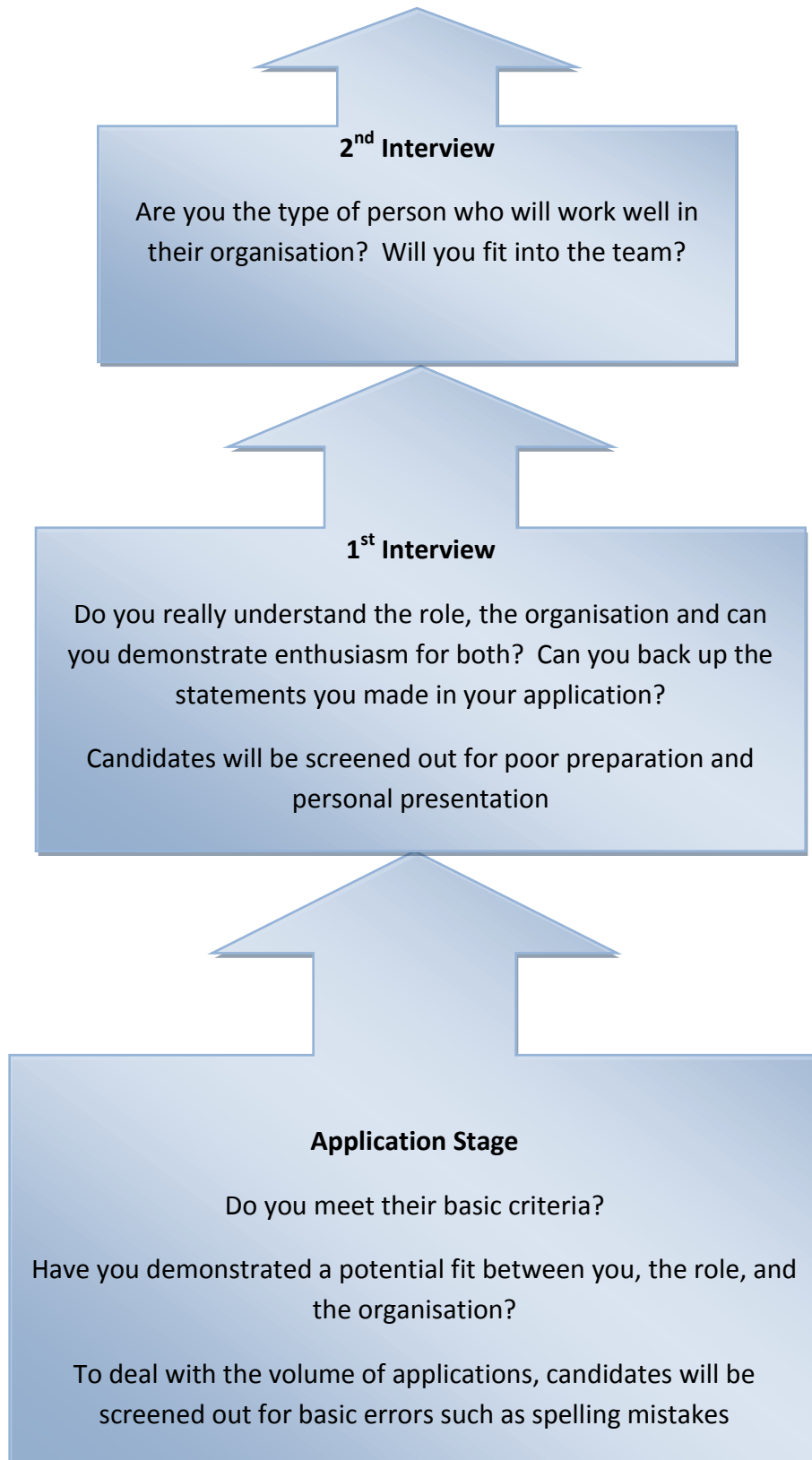
What are employers looking for?

Employers will assess you against criteria – this will be outlined in the person specification, job description and/or list of competencies and skills. You will already have been assessed against this during the first stage of the selection process i.e. your CV, application form and perhaps a psychometric test. The fact that you've been called through to interview therefore means that you have what they're looking for – however so do all the other candidates who've got through to interview stage. At interview stage they get to see you in person or talk to you on the phone, they get to find out who you are, what motivates you, what you're interested in, what kind of impact you've made in your experiences so far and whether all of this fits with the type of person who they know works well in their organisation. This goes beyond whether you have the skills to do the job and moves into a more subjective territory where interviewers might ask themselves "can we see this person working here?" It might seem like the employer holds all the cards in this situation, however there is a lot that you can do to assess whether you are the person that they are looking for and whether they are the organisation you want to work for. Talking to current employees using networking sites such as LinkedIn, and at networking events will help you get beyond the graduate brochure or company website and give you the insider knowledge about what it's like to work there and whether it's the right place for you.

Subjective



Objective



How to succeed at interviews

Success at interview is all about making a positive impact and we're going to break it down into 3 stages: Making a visual impact, creating impact through rapport building and finally making an impact in your answers. For the purposes of this guide, our assumption is that you have been invited to a face to face interview. There are other types of interview, which you can read about at the back and many of the same principles apply.

There is a performance element to interviews; you probably don't go around in a suit most days, you're going to need to exude confidence even though you're nervous and you'll need to get on well with the staff and fellow interviewees even though you've never met them before. This doesn't mean that you need to be a professionally trained actor but you may require a rehearsal; take advantage of our mock interview service and put yourself in as many 1-1 situations as possible by attending employer events and networking.

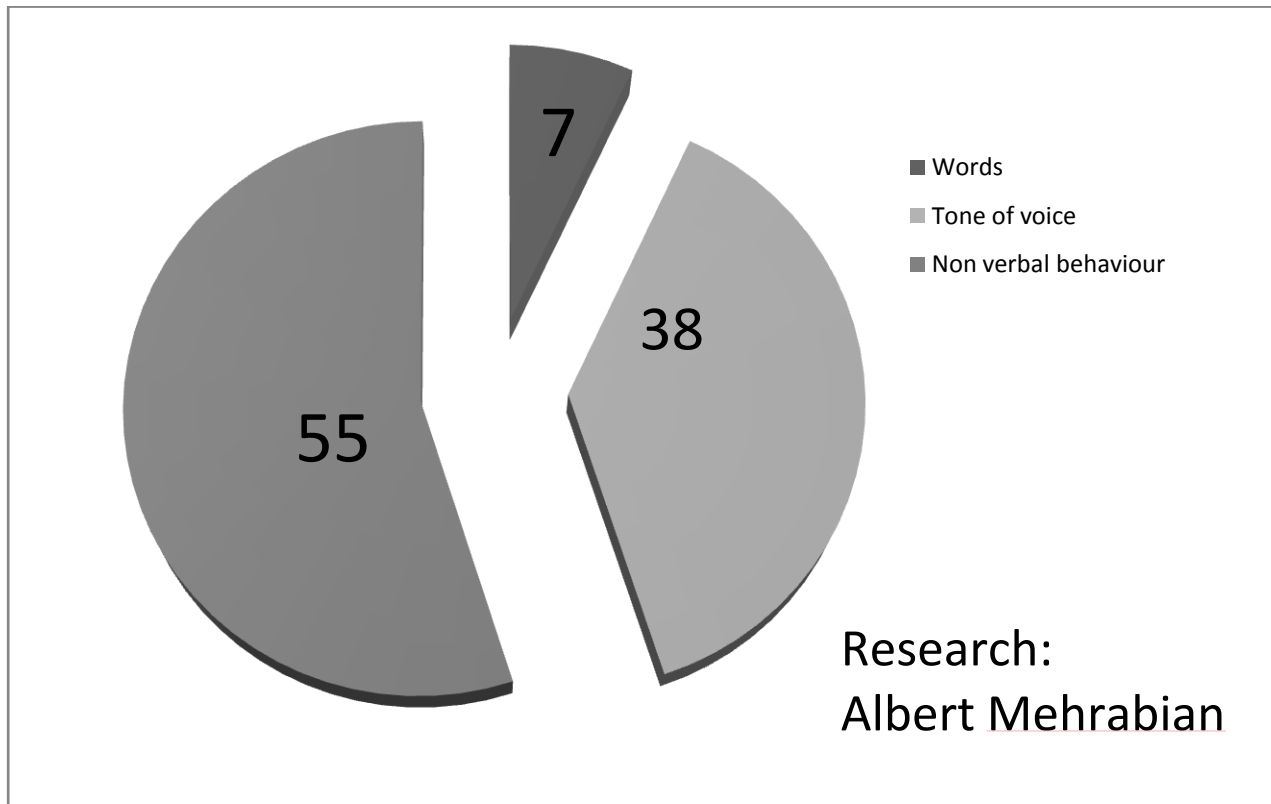
1. Make a visual impact

First impressions count: people can make a quick initial judgement of another person based on what you're wearing, how you greet the interviewer and others (such as the receptionist). Give yourself the best chance as follows:

Dress appropriately: the interviewer has to visualise you doing the job. This means you have to look like a teacher, accountant, advertising executive and so on. If the organisation you want to work in has an informal dress code, we advise that you go one stage smarter for the interview (not a full suit but maybe tailored trousers/skirt and a smart shirt/blouse). At the end of the day you have to look like someone who could command respect from your pupils/clients/ fellow colleagues. You also have to show that you care: badly creased clothes, dirty shoes, ill-fitting suits will give off the message that you're not that bothered about getting the job. Dressing inappropriately also sends a message that you don't have a clue about the workplace environment you're going into.

Exude confidence and warmth: smile, eye contact, good handshake (if offered) and a "pleased to meet you." You might be surprised to hear this but it's your job to make the interviewer feel at ease.

Let your body language do the talking:



This graph shows how important body language is in communication: it's vital to helping you come across confidently. Hunched shoulders, fidgeting with hands, looking at the floor/ceiling/anywhere other than the interviewer all send a message that you're unsure about yourself and what you're talking about. Crossing your arms sends out a defensive message whilst sitting forward on the edge of seat could come across as confrontational.

Sound like you mean it: The graph also demonstrates the importance of tone of voice. The content of your answers could be great but if you don't sound engaged, interested, motivated your answers might not even register. We all know that graduate recruiters are looking for competencies, skills and attributes but underpinning this is a positive attitude and both body language and the way you sound is vital in getting this across.

2. Create impact by building a good rapport

We might be giving the impression here that interviews are a complex process where you have to think about your body language, tone of voice as well as coming across as confident even if you're not feeling this inside. However, on a very basic level an interview is a two-way conversation between two people who have never met. If you think back over your Education so far, it is likely that you've actually been in this situation many times before. Think about what you or the other person did to

create a good rapport. Creating a good rapport is all about making the other person feel at ease and showing that you are interested in them. Here is how to do it:

Actively listen to your interviewer. This means making eye contact when they are talking to you, responding physically if appropriately (nodding to indicate agreement/understanding, smiling to show you're interested etc....).

Take an interest in your interviewer. This could be right at the beginning where you're being escorted to the interview room, at the beginning of the interview or at the end of the process. This isn't the same as interviewing the interviewer – how you might go about this is going to depend a lot on how you are greeted and the information they volunteer about themselves. Appropriate questions could be about their own career at the organisation or a project they're working on.

Learn how to do small talk. If you get asked about your journey, try and provide more than a one word answer. Don't go to the other extreme though – the interviewer is just making conversation!

Be positive – you might be fed up with going to interviews, you might not have been sent the right directions – but whatever is bugging you, keep it to yourself.

3. Making an impact in your answers

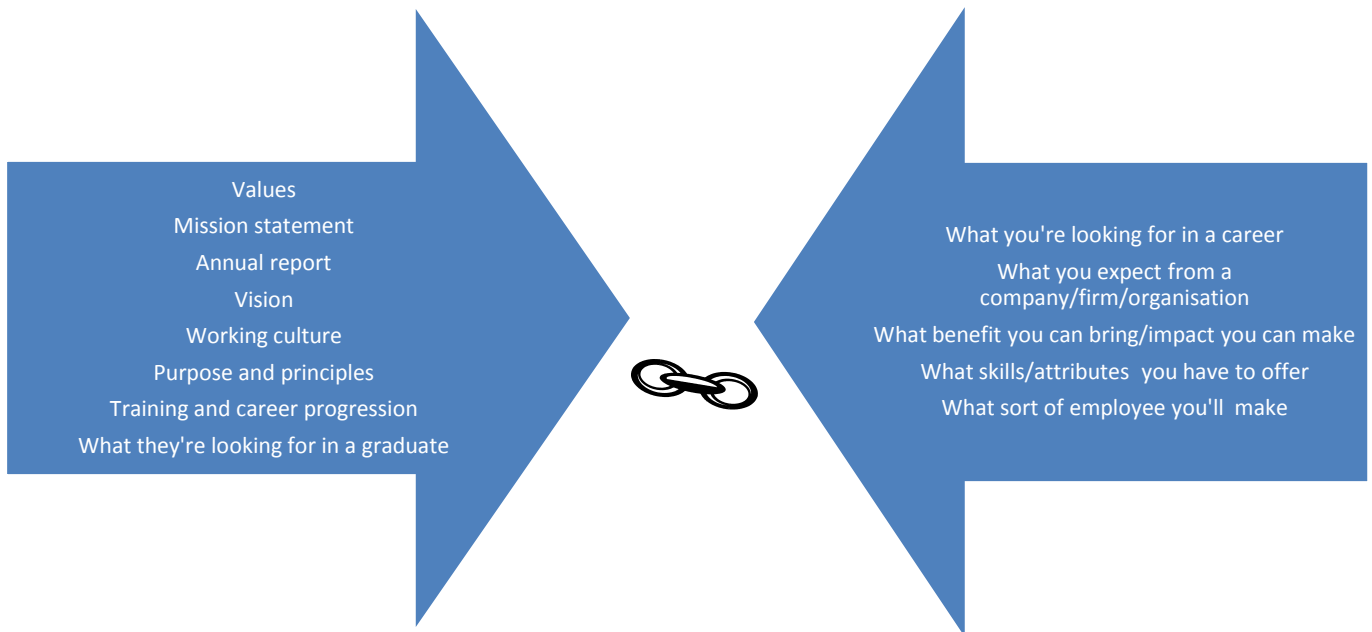
To succeed in an interview, you've got to make the employer feel special. This means you know about the history of the organisation, you know its aims, objectives and values, who the clients are, who it's in competition with, what sector it operates in and what is going on in that sector and what's likely to happen in the future. You know all about the job role from the day to day to the bigger picture, the department you'll be working in, working culture, training and career progression. If this hasn't been made clear on their website, you've been proactive in making sure you know by talking to current employees, reading industry magazines and utilising social media and professional networks such as LinkedIn. Think of it like exam preparation; you don't actually know which question will come up so you'll need to revise it all. This isn't the same as writing out answers to questions and learning them by heart; it's about having a toolbox full of information that you can draw on during your interview.

Secondly, you have to be a complete expert on you. You know about your strengths, weaknesses, skills, attributes, work experience, education, career goals, reasons behind your choices and decisions, likes/dislikes, values, what motivates you, what ideas you have, what you're like in a team/as a leader/problem solver/under-pressure worker and most importantly of all, you have the evidence to back up your statements.

You've got all your examples ready to demonstrate that you've successfully applied the competencies and skills you know they're looking for (because you're expert on the job role too). Unfortunately all this will do is level the playing field – you'll be at the same level as all the other students/graduates

out there who have also got examples from their gap year, degree, part-time job and internship. To raise your answers to the next level you need to demonstrate your fit with them.

Demonstrating fit between you and the organisation



Most students do OK at both arrows – they research the organisation and they think about what it is they can offer, however many students struggle with actually linking the two together and end up just describing what they've read about the organisation and describing what they have to offer. The key with success at interviews is to link them together by answering the question “which means what?” Think of the interviewer as a client – you are making a pitch to win a contract so that you can provide them with a service which will deliver the results they want and help them achieve their objectives in a way that fits in with their values and culture.

Here is a technique that will help you to do this:

Identify, Describe, Evidence or Example and Apply (IDEA)

Example question: *Why do you want to become a teacher?*

- Identify the factors which influenced your career choice
- Briefly describe each factor
- Provide evidence which helps the interviewer to understand how these factors emerged
- Apply your answer back to the question by answering “Which means what?”

Example answer 1

I know that I want to be a teacher for three reasons; my love of History, the enjoyment I get from working with young people and the chance I'll get to use my creativity **(Identify)**. I've always loved studying History and how by analysing the past we can understand the present, which I think makes it such a relevant subject for young people to study. I enjoy the challenge of finding interesting ways to engage them with the subject and using my creativity to motivate them to learn **(Describe)**. During my classroom experience, I persuaded the Head of Department to let me help the sixth formers set up their own history blog where they wrote about current political news stories and how these linked with events in the past. The factors I've described came together in this project and I received great feedback from the students, which confirmed that teaching is the career for me **(Evidence)**. I've heard that the PGCE can be a tough course but I know I've got the motivation to reflect on and evaluate my practice which will help me to succeed on this course and as a future Newly Qualified Teacher **(Apply)**.

Example 2

Tell me why you have applied to PG Holdings

I first came across PG Holdings at a careers fair where I got talking to a current trainee. I knew that I was looking for a company that offered graduates opportunities to take responsibility for real projects early on in their training so this was the first question I asked. **(Identify)**. He went on to describe the project he was working on where he's responsible for meeting staff at his clients' headquarters, liaising with 3 other in-house support teams, travelling abroad to the site and regular reports to senior management. As he was talking he couldn't stop smiling which immediately told me that despite the hours he was working and the problems he encountered he was loving the opportunity he'd been given. He really motivated me to find out more about the company and I discovered that trainees are encouraged to create their own project ideas and put them into action **(Describe)**. I know that I find this kind of work environment motivating because I completed a placement at a small start-up company which had a similar approach and encouraged me to implement an idea I generated for a project to reduce marketing expenditure **(Evidence)**. I really enjoyed this experience and having confirmed that PG Holdings encourage their graduates in this way, I'm confident that this company is the right place for me to start my career and develop my ideas. **(Apply)**.

This structure can be used for any type of career motivation/open question "Why do you want to work here?" "What makes you a good candidate for this position?" "What have you enjoyed about your time at University?" "What do you think you'll gain from undertaking this internship?" "What motivates you?" "What is your greatest achievement to date?" "Talk me through your work experience to date."

You can also use a version of this structure for questions designed to assess your ability to reflect and evaluate such as “What are your weaknesses?” Instead of Evidence and Apply, you use Evaluation and Action.

Example answer:

I feel less confident working with pupils with special educational needs (**Identify**). During my placement I was given the opportunity to work with a group of SEN pupils and I struggled to communicate with them. It took a long time to get them settled into the task (**Describe**). Having reflected on the experience I realised that I need to spend more time building a relationship with the pupils before asking them to start working on the task. I arranged to speak with the TA who specialises in SEN and learnt that you need to be patient and get to know the pupils and their needs which means that you can be more responsive and help them to learn more effectively (**Evaluation**). To improve my interpersonal skills and rapport building, I am volunteering in a student-led society which runs an after-school club for children with learning difficulties. I have learnt to apply techniques such as using photos and drawings to represent words and activities, which has really increased my confidence with communication. (**Action**).

Other useful answer structures: competency based questions

Competency based questions usually start with “Describe a time when...” “Can you tell me about a time when” and are used to assess competencies such as teamwork, communication, leadership, problem solving and so on. A good technique is S.T.A.R because it encourages you to focus on a specific example and the action you took (which is what the employer is most interested in).

Situation – briefly describe the situation

Task or Objective – briefly state your objective or the team’s objective or the problem you faced

Action – provide details about what you did, your role, your approach to tackling the objective/problem/task – this should be the bulk of your response

Result – provide details about the outcome and if applicable evaluate your performance

Example answer:

Tell me about a time when you have worked as part of a team and failed to reach your team objective.

During my second year myself and a group of 3 friends decided that we wanted to go travelling around South America for two months which included a 4 week voluntary placement in Brazil working with a project to help street kids in Rio (**Situation**). Our objective was to raise £3,000 each (**Task**). I suggested that we each take responsibility for a particular action; I volunteered to raise money by applying for a university bursary and to write to Educational charities and trusts. The other activities

included setting up a savings account, organising sponsorship for two sport challenges and researching and planning the trip to book flights/accommodation in advance to secure the cheapest deals. Three weeks after the initial meeting, I suggested that we meet again to discuss progress. There had been little correspondence other than a few emails to confirm the savings account details. At the meeting it emerged that some members of the group hadn't been able to start their tasks. In particular, the person with responsibility for booking flights and accommodation had experienced problems which meant she was unable to start her research; as a result we had missed out on the early cheap deals; the amount of money we now need to raise had increased. As I worked through the agenda, I identified that we weren't communicating effectively or supporting and motivating each other; we weren't really working together as a team and wouldn't be able to raise the increased amount of money in the time we had left; in this sense we had already failed (**Action**). I persuaded the team to still try and raise money for the voluntary project - this reduced our target back to an achievable one which we worked towards and were able to meet. Despite failing to meet our initial objective of travelling we were able to complete our voluntary project, which was a fantastic and rewarding experience (**Result**).

Structuring your answers might seem a bit robotic but a good structure will help the interviewer to follow your train of thought and stop you from waffling.

After the initial open questions, it is likely that you will get asked probing questions to elicit more detail from you. This is why you need **substance** behind your initial answer, especially if you are using the same answer you gave on your application form. If we take the answer given above, this is how the candidate might have been probed further:

Open competency based question

Tell me about a time when you have worked as part of a team and failed to reach your team objective.

Probing question

OK. You made the initial suggestion of dividing up the responsibilities for each task.

How did the team work out the individual tasks and responsibilities?

Closed questions

You arranged the second meeting and led the agenda, identifying the problems in the team.

Would you say that you were the team leader?

Is this typical of you?

Reflective question

What do you think you could have done to prevent the situation that occurred?

Summary question.

OK to summarise, you weren't nominated as team leader initially but took on this role in order to keep the project on track and in the end you succeeded – is this how you view the situation?

The following structure is useful for **case study/hypothetical questions** where you may be presented with a real or fictitious business problem or professional situation and asked how you would resolve the problem or deal with the situation.

For example:

A pupil is persistently disrupting your lesson despite the warnings you've given. What is your next action? (Teacher training interview)

A high street book retailer wants to move the majority of its business online. What would you advise? (Graduate management scheme interview)

Analyse the question – what are the issues/factors that you need to consider?

Describe your options – what are the different approaches you could take?

Give your answer – provide an explanation about the conclusion you've reached

Evaluate your decision/response - are you satisfied with your answer? Are there any other factors you could have considered or an alternative course of action?

The importance of language

Using positive language is important in coming across as confident and getting across your skills.

Here is what to avoid:

- Tentative language – “I hope” “I think” “I just” “It was only”
- Passive language – “This required me to” “My duties were to”
- Drawing attention to negatives – “I originally wanted to get into social work but couldn't get the funding so I decided to apply for this course instead”

Instead make sure you make full use of active verbs “I organised, developed, gained, persuaded, completed” and so on. If you can, use the employer's language when describing your skills – if they ask for teamplayers, try and weave this into a sentence.

Thinking on your feet

There are many graduate forums, blogs and wikis where interview candidates will share interview experiences and the questions that they've been asked. With regards to graduate training schemes the best well known is wikijob. These sites can be really useful for interview preparation, however no matter how many questions you prepare answers for you'll always get one that you didn't expect. Here are some tips for dealing with this situation:

- Don't panic – the interview is a two way process and just because you haven't got an answer ready doesn't mean that you've failed the entire interview
- If you need a moment to think, ask for a moment to think – take a sip of water, ask for clarification if you need it
- If you are completely stumped for an answer, say so but be positive: "I've not really looked into that but something that I learnt from talking to a current trainee is....." Or "I'm not really sure about that and I'm looking forward to the opportunity to learn more during my training which I know will include....."

Endings

Don't leave the interviewer feeling like you don't care. Not having any questions to ask gives the impression that you're not that interested. There are some obvious questions to avoid such as those about salary and anything that's been made clear already. A good tip is to ask something that the interviewer may have referred to at the start such as "I recall you mentioning at the beginning that you started off in a different department; is it quite common for people to move around like that?"

Types of interview

Phone

- Charge your mobile, pick a quiet room, vary your tone of voice and make sure you *sound* as motivated as the content of your answers suggest
- You won't get the same visual clues or cues from the interviewer so when appropriate ask the interviewer if they need any more information or if they would like you to expand or provide another example
- Don't panic over silences – they might be making notes – you could check this by asking the questions suggested above
- You might need to trick your brain into believing that this is a formal situation as unless you work in a call centre, most of us are used to taking informally on a phone. Choose an office type chair to sit on as opposed to a bed or sofa and if necessary put on your interview suit!

Panel

- Address your answer initially to the interviewer who has just asked the question. As you give your response, bring in other panellists using eye contact
- Consider who is on the panel – it might be a mixed panel with people from within and outside of your field so bear this in mind when answering questions. For example, you might need to offer to explain something further.

Group

- If another candidate has been asked the question, listen to their response as you may get asked your view of this
- Remember this is likely to be a test of your interpersonal skills so respond positively to other candidates – make eye contact and smile to show that you are listening and if appropriate refer to their answer when giving yours e.g. "I think Ahmed's point was interesting because....my view is that...."

Sequential

- You might get asked the same question as in the previous interview. It's fine to give the same answer but make sure you still sound enthusiastic!

Resources



Graduate career sites, with articles and insights into interviews

targetjobs.co.uk/, <http://www.prospects.ac.uk/>, <http://careers.guardian.co.uk/>,

<http://www.realworldmagazine.com/>

<http://www.wikijob.co.uk/> - students and graduates share information about what questions they were asked in their interview – useful for graduate management schemes



www.jobsite.co.uk/bemyinterviewer/ - practice answering interview questions

<http://www.careerplayer.com> – employers giving advice

<http://vimeo.com/user3283496/videos> - University of Melbourne shows students and graduates being interviewed by actual recruiters including KPMG



Available from the Careers Library:

Pitch Yourself: The most effective CV you'll ever write. The best interview you'll ever give. Secure the job you really want. Bill Faust and Michael Faust

Ultimate Interview: Make a great impression and that job. Lynn Williams

How to Answer Hard Interview Questions and everything else you need to know to get the job you want. Charlie Gibbs

Get that Job: Interviews – How to keep your head and get your ideal job. A & C Black.