Ace the Interview

The ideal interview is a strategic and well-orchestrated conversation. Your job as the candidate is to (1) clearly communicate the unique combination of skills and experiences that qualify you to do the job or perform in the graduate program of your choice and (2) determine if the organization is a good fit for your interests and goals.

The graduate school or employer’s job is to determine whether (1) you have the skills to succeed in the position, (2) you are a good match for the culture of the organization, and (3) you have a clear understanding of what you are getting yourself into.

How do I prepare? The good news is that you began the process when you chose Muhlenberg College; a liberal arts college whose mission includes helping you learn to think and communicate clearly. The skills that are at the hub of the liberal arts experience are the same skills needed to interview well. If you can think about your experiences in terms of how you are different and what skills you have gained, you can match them to the positions you are seeking. Schedule a practice interview with the Career Center.

The interview process:

Step 1: Research, Research, Research

Before the interview:
- Know Yourself - What are you good at? What do you enjoy? What are your values? What skills do you enjoy using? What kind of person are you?
- Know the Organization - What makes them unique in their field? What do they make/do/sell/teach? Who are their competitors? Google the company and your interviewer.
- Know the Position - What would you be doing? How does this position fit into the organization’s mission?

Tip: Keep this information next to the phone so you will not have to rely on your memory if you receive a phone call from the employer.

Note: This step takes considerable time and effort. Don’t underestimate how important it is.

Step 2: The Day of the Interview

- Dress professionally in a manner that is appropriate for the industry. If you are unsure about your field, visit the organization ahead of time to get a sense of their culture, refer to the websites listed in this guide, and see a Career Counselor during Quick Questions. Tip: Make a list of what to take with you in advance.
- Bring extra copies of your resume, reference list, and other materials in a professional padfolio.
- Arrive ten minutes ahead of time so you can stop at the restroom and regroup before your interview. Tip: Practice getting to the interview location before the actual day so you know where you will be going.
- Be in “interview mode” from the moment you leave home. You never know who you might meet on the sidewalk or in the elevator! (Tip: Be cognizant of your nervous habits – Stand tall and proud.)

Step 3: After the interview

- Take a moment to think about how it went and jot down a few of the questions you want to remember later.
- Send “Thank you” correspondence to anyone with whom you spent significant time within 24-48 hours.
- Follow-up by phone or e-mail according to the organization’s timeline. If they said you would be contacted in two weeks, call when that time has passed.
- See Follow-up article in this guide.

What will the questions be like?

This will vary by organization and even among interviewers within an organization. Spending significant time on Step 1 will help in figuring this out.

Traditional Questions The interviewer poses a question (often from your resume) and you respond. Typical questions include things like, “Why did you choose Muhlenberg?” “What did you do in your job at the library?” “What was the best aspect of joining a fraternity?”

The most effective way to answer traditional questions is to use the 1-2-3 method.
1 - State your answer.
2 - Give an example to back it up. (This is the proof that you have the skill or quality, plus the examples will also give the interviewer something to remember you by.)
3 - Relate it to the position.

Sample Question: Why did you choose Muhlenberg?

Possible Answer:

1. I was seeking a school where I could be involved with several activities while taking advantage of a first rate academic program.

2. The psychology major at Muhlenberg regularly produces graduates who are accepted to the best graduate programs and are competitive in market research. My research courses have prepared me well to construct meaningful research studies and analyze the results. I also completed a Leadership Seminar that helped me to increase participation in Alpha Chi Omega events when I served as the Philanthropic Chair.

3. The combination of strong analytical skills and excellent leadership capabilities will help me in the Assistant Project Manager position since I anticipate needing to listen to the customer’s needs, set up a research plan, and analyze and communicate the results to the customer.
More common today is the behavioral style interview in which the interviewer is trying to gauge your future behavior based on your past performance. The interviewer will have determined certain qualities that are necessary for the job (many of these will be mentioned in the job description - read it carefully for clues so you can better prepare for this line of questioning). Questions will be presented that attempt to evaluate how you demonstrated the skill or handled a similar situation in the past. The following phrases indicate a behavioral question:

"Tell me about..."
"Give me an example of..."
"Think of a time when..."
"Describe a situation..."

The SAR formula will help you effectively answer behavioral questions.

S = Situation. Describe a specific instance that demonstrates the quality requested.
A = Action. Tell what your role was or how you acted in the situation.
R = Result. Discuss the result of your action. Ideally this would be a positive outcome. If it is not, be sure to talk about what you learned from the experience.

Sample Question: Describe a time when you worked on a team project.

Possible Answer:

S = I worked as a Career Assistant in the Career Center and together with three other students I presented a "Summer Jobs and Internships Workshop."

A = My role was to research the various internship resources in the career library and present them during the session. One of my partners designed the PowerPoint presentation, so I prepared the key points of my section to be included. This required good time management and communication on my part since she depended on me for information before she could do the PowerPoint. The second time that we were scheduled to do the presentation, one of our partners had a conflict, so I volunteered to deliver the information that was in his section. Since he had done the research and I heard him present it during our first session, I was able to handle it without much difficulty.

R = The workshop was well-received by the students and it was fun to divide the tasks according to each person’s abilities. I look forward to other group projects since this one went so well.

Translation: I can work with others, communicate clearly, meet deadlines, understand that people have different strengths, meet the commitment to deliver the workshop even when conflicts arise, and get the work done without duplicating efforts.

In this guide, there is an exercise to prepare your responses. You may also be asked a situational question to see how you would behave in a new situation. When analyzing the position, consider what situations you may be asked about.

How does the interview end?

Typically, the interviewer will ask whether you have questions. You should. Your questions give you a chance to demonstrate sincere interest in the position, and clarify information that may be unclear.

DO ask about:

- a typical day
- training
- challenges for new hires
- career paths within the organization
- how this position fits into the structure of the organization, etc.

DON’T ask:

- about salary (the first rule of negotiating salary is “whoever speaks first, loses.” Until you have a job offer, it doesn’t matter what the position pays)
- very basic questions that would reveal that you haven’t done your research (if it is on their web site, they expect you to know it)
- when your first promotion will be (their goal is to fill this position).

Tip: If you have a disability, ask questions to help you figure out how / if your disability will affect your ability to do the job. Consider the work environment, values of the organization, and personality match. Review our article in this guide before deciding the best time to disclose your disability.

When you have had your questions answered, take the interviewer’s lead regarding when to stand up to leave. Be sure to request a business card and shake the interviewer’s hand before leaving. (Tip: Practice shaking hands with a friend prior to the interview.) Ask what the next step will be. Re-state your interest in the position. This will help to create a good last impression.

NOTE: The Career Center conducts mock interviews (by appointment) that can be recorded, if you wish. We strongly recommend practicing your interview skills in this non-threatening setting when a job isn’t really on the line.