



# INTERVIEW SKILLS

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Your resume (or having good contacts) may get you in the door, but it is the interview that gets you the job. How well you present yourself *and* your fit with the interviewer and organization is critical. Proper preparation and an understanding of the mechanics of a successful interview will reduce your anxiety and increase your confidence. Interviewing is a *learned* skill; it takes practice, but anyone can master the technique. Remember that interviewing is a two-way street, while the employer will be assessing whether they want to hire you, you will be evaluating whether you want to work for that employer.

## PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

- **KNOW YOUR RESUME.** The first and most important thing is to know your resume. Then be prepared to speak about *every* aspect listed on it as your resume will serve as a guide for the interviewer. The inability to address in detail even one small item from your resume can lead the employer to question your honesty with respect to your entire resume.
- **KNOW THE EMPLOYER.** Where does the employer have offices, how many attorneys work for the organization, what practice areas does the firm specialize in, what big cases have they participated in, who are their larger clients? If the firm is in a different geographical area or city, be able to articulate why you would be willing to move to that area. The following resources will help as you begin your research.
  - **Martindale-Hubbell Law Directory and Martindale.com**
  - **Firm resumes, firm websites and NALP forms**
  - **Law Clerk Evaluation Binders**
  - **Lexis/Westlaw**
  - **Office of Career Planning (OCP) resources**
- **KNOW YOURSELF.** Think about ways to emphasize your accomplishments and strengths. Practice how you will successfully answer questions about your weaknesses or gaps in employment - often these “weaknesses” can be turned into “strengths”. Think about your priorities to determine what areas of practice, types of employers, and work styles best suit you. Why did you decide to come to law school in the first place and why have you chosen the field of law? Prepare an “elevator pitch” to answer the question, “Why should we hire you?” Do this by thinking about your *Top Three* skills and be able to sell them to the employer by giving specific examples that demonstrate these skills.
- **REVIEW AND PRACTICE.** The section below entitled “Commonly Asked Interview Questions” will help you prepare for a variety of questions that you may be asked. By thinking about answers *before* the interview, you will be able to frame your answers in a *succinct* manner that best capitalizes on your transferable skills, promote your assets and minimize the impact of your weaknesses. For interview practice, schedule an appointment with an OCP Director for a mock interview or participate in OCP’s Mock Interview program.

## CREATING YOUR \*SPAR\* ANSWERS

One of the best ways to prepare to answer an open-ended question such as “Tell me about your last position?” is to structure your question much like you would structure a legal argument. Think of this as the “IRAC” method for interviewing – the SPAR method. Master this and you should be able to answer any question thrown your way.

- ◆ **S – SITUATION** you faced at **WORK**
- ◆ **P – PROBLEM** you overcame
- ◆ **A – ACTIONS** you took
- ◆ **R – RESULTS** of your efforts

Here is how you would structure an answer to “Tell me about your internship at the City Attorney’s Office.”

**SITUATION:** *The key is to tell a STORY. You need to give enough of the facts to humanize the situation and pull the interviewer into the story.* I was assigned to the Mayor’s Office and was tasked with revising the Low Income Housing Loan procedure manual. The Mayor decided it needed to be redone because many problems had arisen with the low income housing units. These units were only supposed to aid those who could not afford to buy a house in San Francisco but the system was being abused. Instead of living in them as required under the loan program, owners would rent them out at exorbitant prices. Or, owners would default on their loans and face possible foreclosure.

**PROBLEM:** *Explain the problem or issue that you faced so that the interviewer understands the scope, depth or impact of the problem.* The problem was the intent of the program was to increase homeownership. We did not want to throw people out on the streets because they violated the owner-occupancy requirements or because they were unable make their mortgage payments. I needed to find away to honor the policy behind the loan program but come up with enforcement procedures to ensure compliance without making people homeless.

**ACTION:** *There is no need to go into depth about what you did as the interviewer may lose interest. Instead, summarize it by pointing out key lawyering skills you engaged in to get the job done.* So by doing background research, interviewing loan participants and lenders, and reviewing previous policies and regulations, I was able to draft up different options depending on the type of loan violation which honored the program’s intent to provide housing.

**RESULTS:** *Keep it short and sweet. Give the results for the client, the employer and/or you – such as the lesson you learned from overcoming the obstacle. This is your opportunity to SELL YOURSELF.* The Mayor’s office was pleased with the new policy and procedures I outlined and many of them were incorporated into the new manual. I felt like I was really able to help the homeowners and the Mayor’s office by pointing out different options and coming up with a win-win situation for all involved.

## DURING THE INTERVIEW

- **THE FIRST IMPRESSION.** You only get one chance to make a first impression. Make your handshake strong and confident! Be ready to engage in small talk to establish rapport with your interviewer. Let the interviewer take the lead, sit up straight and smile.
- **BE POSITIVE.** It is important to show your interest in the interview and your enthusiasm for the job. Do not say anything negative about you, your law school, or previous employers.
- **LOOK AND LISTEN.** Pay attention to what the interviewer asks and says. Follow-up with appropriate answers and comments. Do not cut off or interrupt the interviewer. Watch the interviewer as you relay your answers to make sure the interviewer is following your story and if the interviewer is gazing away or looks disinterested, it is perfectly okay to stop and ask “Is there anything further you want me to elaborate upon in my answer?”
- **REFLECT.** Do not feel the need to answer a question immediately after the interviewer stops speaking - taking a moment to think about what the interviewer has asked and to prepare your thoughts can be very effective. You can also take notes on the question.
- **PROMOTE YOURSELF.** Find appropriate times throughout the interview to share your unique attributes and emphasize your strengths. While you don’t want to be arrogant, you do need to show that you are the perfect person for the job. You are the only person in the interview that is advocating on your behalf.
- **ANSWER FULLY.** One of the big mistakes interviewees make is when they are asked a question like “Why did you go to law school?” they will answer with “I’ve always wanted to go to law school.” This is NOT an answer. DIG deeper. The point of the interview is that the employer wants to get to know you better. Instead, relate the exact point in time when you realized you wanted to go to law school. Was it when you were volunteering at a homeless shelter that you realized you wanted to help others less fortunate than yourself? Was it when you participated in Model United Nations and realized you loved to advocate and debate? The employer is interested in your thought process and vague answers do nothing to promote or sell you. Again, tell your story and pay attention to visual cues to make sure the interviewer is following you.
- **ASK QUESTIONS.** The best conversations include a good balance of questions, answers and comments by **all** participants. Even if you are interviewing with multiple attorneys at one firm, it’s okay to ask many of the same questions of each attorney.
- **BE PROFESSIONAL.** Answer questions from a WORK perspective. If an interviewer asks “What would you like to improve about yourself” do not answer, “I could stand to be neater at home.” Instead, reply using an example from work “I would like to be more organized. I’ve found that when I take the time at the end of the day to organize my desk, I’m more productive the next day.”

## AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- **ASSESS YOUR PERFORMANCE.** What did you do well? What do you wish you would have said? What questions caught you off-guard?
- **FOLLOW UP.** Did the interviewer ask for any additional information? If yes, make sure you send it by the agreed upon date.
- **THANK YOU NOTE.** Send a thank you note within one day of your interview, by U.S. mail or email. Make reference to something specific that appealed to you in the interview or something unique that was said. This will help the interviewer remember you and it will demonstrate your enthusiasm for the employer. See the OCP handout *Job Search Correspondence* for thank you letter samples and protocol.

## THE INTERVIEWER'S PERSPECTIVE

Throughout the interview, the interviewer will be assessing you in the following areas:

- **CAN DO.** *Can you do the job?* Do you meet the requirements and have the necessary qualifications? Typically, if you have made it through the initial screening interview and are now at a call back interview at the firm, then the employer thinks you can do the job.
- **WILL DO.** *Will you do the job?* This has more to do with your work ethic, whether you are a team player, how manageable you are, and your enthusiasm and passion for the work. Are you the type of person that will go above and beyond the call of duty?
- **FIT.** *Will you fit in?* Ultimately, an employer will hire you if, in the end, they can see themselves still liking you after a long day at the office working on the case from hell. Do not kid yourself, most attorneys work long, hard hours and they want to work with someone that they will get along with, who they could spend a lot of time with, and who gets along well with others. Additionally, employers want candidates who will present well to their clients.

As you prepare your answers and questions, keep these traits in mind. You will want your answers to indicate your strength in each one of the following:

- ◆ **Poise and Self-Confidence**
- ◆ **Eagerness to Take on Challenges**
- ◆ **Flexibility/ Adaptability**
- ◆ **Ability to Take Initiative/ Motivation**
- ◆ **Goal-Oriented/ Desire to Learn & Grow**
- ◆ **People Skills**
- ◆ **Good Judgment/ Common Sense**
- ◆ **Dependability/ Reliability**
- ◆ **Diligence/ Work Ethic**
- ◆ **Intelligence/ Resourcefulness**

## COMMON INTERVIEW MISTAKES

(Adapted from *101 Dynamite Answers to Interview Questions*)

<b>Showing up late.</b>	Unless there was a major traffic accident on your way to the interview, this shows bad planning on your part and starts the interview off on a bad foot.
<b>Asking about salary, perks, vacation and benefits during the initial interview.</b>	Avoid the "what's in it for me?" questions. There is plenty of time to ask salary/benefit kind of questions <b>after</b> you have received an offer.
<b>Asking associates how hard they work, or pushing the "work-life balance" agenda.</b>	To find out the same information, consider asking an associate to describe a typical day. Some firms pride themselves on being "lifestyle" firms, however, telling the employer that you want to work there because you believe in "Work/Life balance" sends the message that you are not willing to work hard.
<b>Asking questions that demonstrate your lack of research on the firm or agency.</b>	For example, where the firm/organization has other offices, what practice areas the firm/organization specializes in, and the size of the firm/organization are key items you should know before going into the interview.
<b>Not asking any questions at all.</b>	Even if you ask the same questions of all interviewers, have questions to demonstrate interest and enthusiasm.
<b>Not connecting your skills with the employer's needs.</b>	Make sure you give specific examples that illustrate your skills and accomplishments. Do not give yes/no answers.
<b>Not showing enthusiasm for the job or the employer.</b>	Be able to articulate WHY you want to work for this employer in particular, as opposed to other employers in the same practice area or field, as this is a question you will be asked by almost all employers.
<b>Badmouthing a former or current employer.</b>	Think of a diplomatic way to explain why you left or plan to leave. If you are hard-pressed to say anything nice, you can always explain what great skill you learned because of that employer.
<b>Poor body language.</b>	Make sure you sit up straight and maintain good eye contact with the interviewer(s). Being lethargic, bored or disinterested will come across in your body language and send a negative impression.
<b>Appearing more interested in the firm's pro bono practice.</b>	A private law firm is a business. While firms take on pro bono work and tout it as a selling point, you are being hired to work on <b>BILLABLE</b> endeavors.

## COMMONLY ASKED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

It is not necessary to prepare answers to all of these questions; canned answers defeat the goal of being genuine. Instead, review the following questions to familiarize yourself with the type of information interviewers often seek. Practice answering several of the questions out loud and in front of a mirror or a friend.

Typically, interviews will ask questions regarding: (a) your personal background and education; (b) your career aspirations and goals; (c) your work experience; (d) what you are looking for in a job; and (e) why you are interested in their firm or organization.

1. Could you tell me about yourself? How would you describe yourself?
2. Why did you choose law?
3. Why are you interested in our firm?
4. What qualities do you think a good lawyer should have and why?
5. In what environment do you work best?
6. What are your strengths/weaknesses?
7. What are you most proud of? What is your best accomplishment?
8. What is your biggest failure and why?
9. How do you work under pressure? How do you deal with stress?
10. What's the last book you read? What do you do for fun?
11. How would you handle a situation where you and your supervisor disagreed about the law/the direction a case should take/how to handle a client?
12. What was the issue you argued in Moot Court? What was the argument on the other side?
13. Tell me about your participation on the journal (in your externship, your clinical program, your thesis or research project, publication, or your courses).
14. Tell me about the brief / motion / memorandum you wrote.
15. What was the most difficult situation you had to deal with and how did it turn out?
16. Discuss a problem that you had to solve creatively.
17. What areas of practice are you interested in and why?
18. Where do you see yourself in five years? Ten years?
19. How do you operate in a leadership capacity?
20. What type of person don't you get along with?
21. What criteria are you using to evaluate the employer for which you hope to work?
22. What are you looking for in your first law job?
23. What do you like most about law school? What do you find most challenging?
24. What courses do you like the most/least and why?

25. Do you think that your grades are a good indication of your academic achievement? Are they an indication of your ability to do a good job at this organization/firm?
26. How would your experience at \_\_\_\_ job help you in this position?
27. Did you get an offer from your last (summer) employer? If not, why not?
28. If you got an offer from your last (summer) employer, why didn't you accept it?
29. What didn't you like about your previous job?
30. Why should we hire you?
31. Do you have any questions I can answer?

## **TYPES OF QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO ASK**

In every interview you will be asked if you have any follow-up questions – don't say you do not. Be prepared with some (2-3) select questions. Your questions should be appropriate for each interviewer (take into consideration if the person is an entry-level associate, mid-level associate, partner, recruiter, etc.). The following samples illustrate the scope of questions that you may want to ask.

1. How is work distributed?
2. Do entry level associates have mentors?
3. Who oversees/supervises/evaluates work?
4. Are new attorneys assigned to a specific partner or attorney or to a specific department?
5. How are new attorneys trained? Are there formal in-house training programs?
6. Are new attorneys encouraged to attend outside conferences or training seminars?
7. How much flexibility is there within this firm/organization for attorneys who want to transfer between one specialized department and another?
8. How quickly does a new attorney get direct client contact?
9. Can you describe your partnership track?
10. What are the criteria for advancement?
11. What are the firm's long-range goals? Are there plans to expand the office? Move into or develop new practice areas?
12. What practice area of the firm is growing the most?
13. How does the firm/organization feel about pro bono work? (This is best asked on a second interview).
14. Do summer associates have mentors?
15. Are summer associates assigned to a specific partner or attorney or to a specific department?
16. What type of supervision and responsibilities are given to a summer clerk?

17. How many people does the firm/organization anticipate having in its summer program?
18. How many summer clerks will be offered permanent jobs?
19. What attracted you to the firm/organization?
20. How did you become involved in your practice area?
21. What type of clients do you represent?
22. What type of cases do you work on? Describe your most interesting case.
23. What is a typical day like for you? (Use this question for a newer associate.)
24. What do you like about working here?
25. What type of attorney succeeds here?

## INAPPROPRIATE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

While it is unlikely that you will be asked to answer any of the interview questions below, there are times when an interviewer may act outside of the appropriate limits. It is important to think about how you will handle yourself if asked a question that you feel is not appropriate. If you are concerned about any of the questions below, meet with an OCP Director to discuss suitable answers. Additionally, if these types of questions are asked during your interview, we encourage you to inform the Office of Career Planning.

In accordance with EEOC and many state and local rulings, interviewers are specifically prohibited from asking:

- **Original name or maiden name, if changed by court or other manner** (May reveal race, ethnicity, religion, citizenship, national origin)
- **Citizenship or citizenship of relatives** (Although information about an employee's citizenship is required by the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 when an employee starts work, it should not be requested during the pre-hire stage; however, an employer may advise an interviewee that the information will be required once employment commences)
- **National origin / length of residency in the United States**
- **Religion** (Hiring lawyers because they belong to a particular religious group is as discriminatory as not hiring such lawyers)
- **Holidays observed** (May reveal religion, political views, etc.)
- **Languages written, spoken or read** (May reveal ethnicity, national origin, race, or religion), unless an employer is seeking employees with expertise in a particular language
- **Membership in organizations: Clubs, churches, lodges, fraternities** (May reveal race, ethnicity, religion, national origin)
- **Names/addresses of relatives** (May reveal race, ethnicity, religion, national origin)
- **Age**

- **Arrest record**
- **Type of military discharge / status as a veteran**
- **Physical/mental/learning disabilities** (Including alcoholism and drug addiction). An employer is allowed to ask only whether you can do the job with reasonable accommodations, but cannot ask what those accommodations would be
- **Views on civil rights**
- **Sexual orientation** (specifically prohibited in California)

Additionally, employers may not request information that might be used to discriminate against women, minorities, gays, lesbians, bisexual, or transgender individuals.

## **WAYS TO RESPOND TO INAPPROPRIATE QUESTIONS**

Interviews are anxiety-provoking situations even without the added stress of discriminatory questions. The student wants to make a good impression, and is probably both shocked and angered by the inappropriate question. Or, as sometimes happens, the student may not realize until after the interview is over that the question was probably illegal.

Handling a situation in which an insensitive or discriminatory question is asked is difficult. A student's response will be affected by many variables including whether s/he still wants to be considered for the job or whether s/he immediately recognizes that the question is illegal.

### **Possible “on the spot” responses to inappropriate interview questions:**

- ◆ Choose to determine and address the potentially legitimate concern that may lie behind the question and ignore the improper question itself. You might do this by noting “I think what you are really asking is ...” then go on to provide the information you choose the interviewer to have.
- ◆ Respond to the question by saying, “I’m sorry, I believe I missed the point, could you explain the reason you are asking me this?”
- ◆ Answer the question as asked without any reference to the appropriateness of the question or the assault on your dignity.

OCP can offer suggestions and information on possible responses, but we do not presume to recommend the best response for your particular circumstances. Only you can determine that. Some students will try to handle the situation, as mentioned above, so that their prospects for being hired are not damaged; others continue the interview even though they have determined this is not an employer they would want to work for because of the inappropriate question; and still others will challenge the interviewer. The range of responses is broad, and the decision is ultimately yours.

There are several factors you might want to keep in mind:

- First, illegal questions violate USF School of Law’s non-discrimination policy, and procedures are in place for processing student complaints against employers.
- Second, OCP follows up on all formal complaints about interviewers. Frequently, we find students who would like to discuss a bad interview, but who prefer, for a variety of reasons, not to lodge a formal complaint. We encourage informal discussion and will work with each individual student to resolve the incident in a way most consistent with the student's interests and wishes.
- Third, interviewers are not always experienced at interviewing or even at interacting with people, and even though they are lawyers, many of them are not at all familiar with employment law. In addition, they may not reflect the attitude of the majority of attorneys in their office or organization. You may want to keep communication open in the hope that when you meet the other attorneys you will discover that the first interviewer you met was not representative of the firm or organization.

One important skill for lawyers to develop is the ability to turn a negative into a positive. Therefore, if you think someone is steering a conversation into inappropriate territory, you may want to try turning them around by showing them just how verbally skilled you are. Do it in a positive way. After the interview, come into OCP and speak with the Director while the experience and the dialogue are still fresh in your mind. Keep in mind, however, that you always have the option to withdraw from the interview if you choose.

### **INTERVIEW CHECKLIST**

- Confirm date, time, address, and directions to interview
- Obtain list of interviewer names in advance if possible
- Conduct research on the employer and interviewers
  - Formulate interview questions
  - Practice your responses to likely questions / work on your “SPAR” answers
- Dress professionally – err on the side of conservatism; once you get the job and prove yourself, then you can let your individual style shine through
- Check your hygiene: make sure your breath is fresh, your hair is neat, that you use fragrance or cologne sparingly or not at all
- On the day of the interview:
  - Bring a notebook and pen for note-taking
  - Bring extra copies of your resume, cover letter, references, writing sample, transcript and any other materials the employer requested
  - Bring the directions and allot enough time to arrive at the interview early