



The Career Hacker's Guide To

# Successful Job Interviews



**“The interview was a success—I didn’t get the job!”**

**- Isaac Morehouse, Founder & CEO of Career Hackers**

Wait, what?

That’s right: I considered the interview a total success, and I never got called back. What could make interviews successful, if not to get an offer?

In a few minutes you’re going to have a new outlook on interviewing for jobs. But first, a short story from years ago:

I was interviewing for a role as a drug rep for a big pharmaceutical company right out of college. They liked my phone interview and called me in for a live one. I put on a suit, drove an hour, and was the best version of myself.

Halfway through the job interview, I discovered that they wanted me to be someone else. I decided I wouldn’t—if I had to fake it in the interview, I’d have to fake it every day on the job. That didn’t sound like fun at all.

The realization came when they asked, “Why are pharmaceuticals part of your life passion, and how do you see yourself building a career in the field?”

“Although I’m excited by the opportunity,” I replied, “pharmaceuticals are not my life passion. I don’t necessarily see myself building a life-long career in the field.” I admitted I thought the job was interesting

and that I'd do it well, but I wasn't there because this was my special calling. I was respectful and honest.


I didn't bomb on purpose, but when given the chance to fudge just a little (and bend the truth to win a job) I chose not to. If they were OK with me as I really am, maybe it could still work. If not, no loss—and they weren't. I could see it in their eyes and it was confirmed when I didn't hear back.

And thank God! I got a job I loved shortly after and have never regretted it. 😊

Why am I telling you this story? Because I want you to know that interviews aren't about passing or failing. They're not about faking and gaming to win. They are about genuine discovery of yourself, the role, and the company. Discovery is successful even if what you discover is that it's not a fit.

So relax about the outcome and try to make the process as effective, honest, and enjoyable as possible. Ready to dive in?

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# How to prepare for a successful job interview

You got an interview. Congratulations! This is your chance to let them get to know you, and for you to get to know them.

Interviews go both ways. They are not about saying the “right” things. They are about being yourself and discovering whether you and the company are a good fit. Not everyone is a fit with every company or role! Even if you think it’s your dream job.

That’s normal and doesn’t mean there is something wrong with you. You wouldn’t want to marry every person you meet. It’s a small percentage of people that really hit it off, and it’s the same with employers and employees.

A good salesperson doesn’t try to close every lead she speaks with. She qualifies them first—makes sure their needs and budget are in line with what her company can offer—and is in constant search of any reason to say “no.”

In the same way, the best way to prepare for an interview is to prepare to qualify them as an opportunity worth spending more of your precious time on.

So don't stress about screwing up the interview. You've got nothing to lose, only things to learn. And, hopefully, you only want to work for the company if you discover a mutual fit between who you really are (not a fake version of yourself) and the company.

## **BEFORE THE INTERVIEW**

### **Do your pre-interview research.**

Don't go into an interview unprepared. Research your potential employer, and just as importantly research the person you'll meet with — if possible. (Pro tip: If you're being selective about the jobs you apply to, you've already done all this.)

Browse the company website to learn their history and dig up news articles that cover their founding story. Get familiar with their products and services, as well as who their customers are—if you can tell. Try to find which roles and departments exist at the company. Find your interviewer(s) on LinkedIn, and read how they describe their role at the company and what they've done in the past. Look up reviews from current and former employees on Glassdoor.

## Double check the details.

Check the emails and calendar invites twice. Make sure you have everything you need:

- Date
- Time (and time zone!)
- Address / phone number / video link

Block some extra time ahead, to arrive early or test your phone/ computer connection. It may sound silly but you're going to feel way sillier if you have an issue that you could've avoided.



## Email them a confirmation.

A day prior to the interview, send a quick confirmation email to the interviewer / recruiter, letting them know you are excited to interview and will be ready at the appointed time and place! If you don't hear back, do the same thing an hour prior to the interview.

This may seem like overkill or annoying, but it's very valuable. Here are some email templates you can customize:

### In Person

Hi **\_FIRSTNAME\_**,

Just wanted to quickly confirm our interview tomorrow at 2pm Pacific at your **Broadway Avenue** office. I'm excited to meet you and get to know each other!

Thanks & have a great **\_WEEKDAY\_**,

### Video Meetings

Hi **\_FIRSTNAME\_**,

Confirming our interview tomorrow at 10am EST in the Zoom link you indicated. I'm excited to meet you and see if we're a fit!

Thanks & talk tomorrow,

### Phone Call

Hi **\_FIRSTNAME\_**,

Just wanted to quickly confirm that I'm expecting a phone call from you tomorrow at 2pm Pacific for our interview. As a reminder, my phone number is **840-555-1337**. I look forward to exploring the possibilities together!

Thanks & looking forward to it,

First, it signals to them you are conscientious and makes them more likely to be impressed in the interview. Second, it gives you extra grace should something terrible happen and cause you to miss or be late to the interview.

Sending confirmation emails shows them you're organized, and that you being late or a no-show must be out of the norm. They'll be



more likely to give you another chance than if you never email and then show up late or not at all.

Finally, hiring managers aren't always organized and often doing tons of meetings back to back. It can help ensure they show up to send a reminder reiterating the details. It only takes a minute and the downsides are non-existent—but it helps you a lot!

## **Outline your story arc and inflection points.**

Without rambling, you want to tell a compelling story. People remember stories.

Instead of just a list of disconnected bullets about your skills or work history, create a narrative arc. Consider these:

What made you who you are today?

What motivates you, and why are you specifically interested in this role? (hint: if you did a good job with your [video pitch](#), you've already got your answer to this!)

What are the inflection points in your life that caused you to apply to this job, or leave your last, or pursue a particular field of study?

(More common interview questions below)

Don't try to write a script—you'll sound robotic. 🤖 Just have some mental bullets ready for these questions, and a mental map of your story arc. For more about narrative arcs, read ThoughtCo's [How a Narrative Arc Structures a Story](#).

### **Connect the dots for them (why your past = this role).**

End your narrative arc with this job! Combine your passion, motivation, and story to explain how you've come to this point and this job opportunity. Help them see how your past, personality, and journey make this job a logical next step.

Again, no script. Do mock interviews with friends/family members to practice answering why this role is perfect given your past and passions, and have some mental bullets ready. Create a little storyboard diagram using a tool like [Visme](#), if it helps.

### **Prepare your own questions for them.**

Nobody likes a person who only talks about themselves. They want to know you're interested in them. And you want to learn about the company and role. Surely you have questions. List them and ask! Hopefully, you're curious about the company culture, how they handle certain situations, how they measure success in various roles, who your potential co-workers are, etc.

Here's a list of genuine questions you can ask the interviewer:

- What's your own career journey been like?
- What are your their biggest joys and challenges in your role?
- What do you think will make for success in the role you're going for?
- What traits do strong candidates possess in your eyes?
- How has the company changed in your time here?
- What is the company culture like?
- What kinds of people struggle with this role?

These are useful and powerful, and send a signal that you are sharp and empathetic to others' personal experiences.

**Note:** If you're under-qualified  
Don't pretend to be more qualified than you are.  
Own and amplify.

Own the fact that you are fairly raw and inexperienced. Amplify this fact in the positive direction. "That's why I'm so hungry to crush it. I know I'm coming in a little more raw. But no one on earth will work harder or learn faster. I'm excited to level up, and help you build for the long term."



# Types of job interview questions to prepare for (with examples)

These are the most common questions you'll hear in an interview.

## CURVEBALLS AND BRAIN TEASERS

“How many ping pong balls can fit in a Boeing 747?”

“Why is a manhole cover round?”

“How tall is the spire on top of this building?”

Not all companies ask these notorious interview questions. When they do, it's to see how you think on your feet, how you handle pressure, whether you are a gut-reaction or thoughtful analysis type, and how creative you are.

Of course nobody expects you to know the answers. These are not right/wrong pass/fail questions. They're gauging the way you respond to the question, which is more interesting than if you

happen to know the answer.

It's not about faking it, but about revealing your true personality and work style. That helps take the pressure off. Just be you! How would you respond if a friend asked you that?

You can laugh, tell a joke, ask why they asked the question, make up a silly answer, attempt an educated guess, ask if you can Google it real quick, or whatever else feels natural and right to you.

You're unlikely to get an extreme brain teaser like this, but if you get something that seems like a random curveball, don't treat it like a pop quiz you didn't study for in school. Treat it as an interesting conversation starter.

## **SITUATION-BEHAVIOR-OUTCOME QUESTIONS (SBOS)**

This is probably the most common structure of an interview question. It's widely used because it's better than open-ended questions at helping interviewers learn about your character and personality.

Typical SBO-style question look like this:

**“Tell me about a time when you felt overwhelmed (situation). What did you do (behavior) and what was the result (outcome)?”**

**“Have you ever had a group project where someone wasn't helping at all (situation)? How did you respond (behavior)? Did it work (outcome)?”**

Some SBOs will only ask about a situation, but this should be a hint for you to respond by also adding your behavior and the outcome.

These are great questions that give you a chance to tell your story and pick examples from your life that highlight your personality, talents, and traits relevant to the job. Think back to situations like these in past jobs or school, and prepare a few examples so you don't have to sit and think for a long time.

## HYPOTHETICAL SITUATION QUESTIONS

### “What will you do in your first 30 days if we hire you?”

Some interviewers may ask you to tell them what you would do in your first 30 days, or how you see yourself growing in the role or with the company. This is your chance to paint a picture for them of what it would be like to have you on their team.

Let your passion and interest show!

Even if not asked, take any opportunity to describe what you would love to do in the role. Show how eager you are to learn the ropes and add value in specific ways.

Before the interview, imagine yourself in the role and think about what you would do and how you'd plan to grow. If you've [pitched yourself](#) well, this part is easy. 😊

## SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

Many interview questions ask you to describe yourself. How you work is important, but even more important is that you have an accurate—and not deluded—view of yourself, and that you are honest and don't just try to say what people want to hear.

I like asking this one:

**“If there’s a continuum with impulsive action on one end and endless analysis on the other, where would you fit on that continuum? Close to action or analysis?”**

I'm not looking for a specific right answer. Both action-biased and analysis-biased people can be a great fit, depending on the role. I'm looking for not only which they are, but more importantly, which they think they are.

The interviewer probably has a pretty good read on your personality, so when they ask you to assess yourself, it has as much to do with seeing what kind of self-knowledge, honesty, and judgement you have as figuring out your traits.

Questions like

**“What are your greatest strengths?”**

**“What do you feel are your weaknesses?”**

fall into this category. Saying, “My biggest weakness is that I work too hard” is a sign of cluelessness, or arrogance, or a fear of giving a

‘wrong’ answer. Just be honest! (Learn to properly turn weaknesses into strengths down below.)

Knowing about yourself is really important. You can learn more about yourself by asking your friends, answering these questions to people who know you well and seeing if they agree, and by taking personality assessments like our [Discover quiz](#).

## BIG PICTURE ‘WHY’ QUESTIONS

Interview or not, this is a great question to answer for yourself:

**“What gets you out of bed fired up in the morning?”**

People who work with you want to know what motivates you. What are you all about? What are your core values? What makes you tick? Not just money or job security—but beyond that: the things you want to achieve once you have money, security, etc.

Then, how does this job fit into that?

Be prepared and be honest. If you don’t feel like you have a calling or clear career goal, that’s OK! But you still have an identity. You still have motivations. What are they? Be ready to answer. Again, our [Discover quiz](#) might help if you’re not sure.



## STANDOUT QUESTIONS

Some questions are designed to give you a chance to reveal what is most unique about you. PayPal founder and investor Peter Thiel made this question famous:

Interview or not, this is a great question to answer for yourself:

**“What important truth do very few people agree with you on?”**

He explains in [Zero to One](#):

**“This question sounds easy because it’s straightforward. Actually, it’s very hard to answer. It’s intellectually difficult because the knowledge that everyone is taught in school is by definition agreed upon. And it’s psychologically difficult because anyone trying to answer must say something she knows to be unpopular. Brilliant thinking is rare, but courage is in even shorter supply than genius.”**

You may not think you believe anything unusual, or have any world-class abilities, but you almost assuredly do. Often, things that seem normal or commonplace to you are extraordinary or rare to others.

There are other, slightly less daunting questions that aim to get at how you might stand out.

**“What’s one thing you’re world-class at?”**

**“What’s something that is difficult for most people that comes easily to you?”**

These might feel like a setup to reveal your arrogance, but they are really a way to see what’s most unique about you and how comfortable you are with your uniqueness. Personally, I find talking to an audience to be pretty easy and fun. It doesn’t feel like a superpower, but I’ve learned that it is, because most people are very uncomfortable with it.

Think about the things that separate you from most people, and if faced with these questions, be truthful without condescending others. Stay humble.

The best interviewers aren’t just looking for what you know or can do now. They want to see a combination of present AND expected future value. They want to know how you approach problems and skills and tasks. Sure, they want to see enough basic skill to handle the job, but they really want to see eagerness to learn and evidence that you’ll get more valuable over time.



# Advice for virtual interviews

Especially in our current world, many interviews happen via Zoom, Google Hangouts, and other video-conferencing technologies. As I interview, I've noticed a few small but important things that many otherwise-excellent candidates often overlook, and it diminishes the positive impact of their interview. Here are a few tips for video interviews:

## GET THE CAMERA ANGLE RIGHT.

It may seem like a small thing, but so many interviewees have a laptop or tablet sitting on a desk well below eye-level. This results in a weird camera angle, where they seem to be peering down their nose at me.

This is the selfie generation, and we all know the first rule of selfies: you want the camera at or above eye-level for the best effect.

Something about a candidate looking down just doesn't feel right and often casts weird shadows over their eyes and face, making it harder to connect with them. It hurts your first impression.

I like to stack some large books on my desk to raise the level of my webcam and get a better angle that appears more natural, like it would in a face-to-face conversation. It's subtle, but the position of your camera can have a big impact on your overall impression.

I once heard a successful CEO say he only hires people with “forward tilt.” It's his shortcut for identifying people who are truly passionate about his company's mission and are willing to work hard. What is forward tilt? Leaning forward on the interview table (or toward your screen), rather than sitting back in your chair. To him, after thirty-plus years of hiring, this simple body language during interviews became a handy shortcut. It matters.

## **MIND THE BACKGROUND.**

If you have red lights or disco balls in your apartment, keep them out of the frame. Same goes for anything that's supposed to be straight but is crooked (like broken blinds, shelves, or closet doors).

This is not because your interviewer wants you to appear to live in a posh apartment or because it's unprofessional to only own stuff from Goodwill. The only reason it matters is because it's



visually distracting, and just like with public speaking, if someone isn't looking at you, they're probably not listening to you.

Don't let the background steal the show from you. Your Avengers poster may be awesome, but they don't need the hiring manager's attention. You're the one interviewing.

## **MIND THE NOISE.**

It can be hard to find a quiet place to interview, especially if you have roommates or are away from home. Wear headphones whenever possible to minimize feedback and ensure you can hear everything.

If the interview was scheduled in advance, do whatever it takes to ask your roommates to stay out until you're done. Refrigerators opening and glass bottles clinking in the background are a big distraction. They also signal a lack of planning on your part and could reduce the hiring manager's confidence in your time-management and organizational skills.

If you can't even find a quiet place to interview, how will you handle a complex workload?

And dogs. Dogs are not just part of the background. They're very distracting. You think your Fluffy is quiet and calm, but he's probably not. Even when the interviewer doesn't hear your pet, you do. And if you love your pet, hearing them will take your mind away from the task at hand.

Make arrangements ahead of time (ones that don't include shutting the dog in another room so it can bark and scratch the door the whole time). Definitely don't get up during the interview, leave the screen, and bring the dog over to sit on your lap. (Yes, it's happened. More than once.)

## **BE EXTRA-EXPRESSIVE.**

If you've ever been a stage actor (or talked to one), you discover a surprising fact: it's almost impossible to be too expressive with your face and vocal inflection.

Unlike acting for the camera, where close-ups, multiple angles, and audio editing can bring out nuanced expressions, stage acting requires conveying emotion to a large audience often far in the back of the theater or at less-than-optimal angles.

The video interview doesn't need to be—and shouldn't be—as over-the-top as a stage play, but the same basic truth applies. Audio and visual fidelity are never what face-to-face can give.

You always sound look more flat than you really are. Push yourself to let your interest and excitement come through in your voice and face more than you would in person.

Whatever level of expression you're typically comfortable with, go a little beyond it. Don't be fake. Just make sure the interest comes through.

## **MIND YOUR MANNERS AND DRESS CODE.**

Just because it's virtual and in the comfort of your own home doesn't mean it's not as serious. Wear a proper interview outfit—depending on the role, usually a button-down or polo is fine. Maintain eye contact, and don't try to do anything else. You may think you can be clever, but I guarantee it's obvious if you're not paying full attention.

Don't do things you wouldn't do in person. This doesn't mean you have to fake it and put on a tux and use formal language normally unnatural to you. It's just the little things.

A lot of remote interviewees appear unshaven or like they just rolled out of bed. Yes, it's nice you don't have to commute somewhere. But don't treat the virtual interview like it's just part of your waking-up routine. Don't be sniffing, wiping your nose, rubbing your eyes, or otherwise appearing unprepared for the day.

This of course applies to in-person interviews as well, which leads us to our next section.



# Advice for all job interviews

Whether you're interviewing in person, on video, or just on a phone call, these key points matter.

## ENJOY THE SMALL TALK, BUT DON'T OVERDO IT.

They want to get to know you and see how you give personality-wise. Expect a little small talk at the beginning, and sometimes also the end (or even the middle!) of the interview.

Some interviewers will get right to business, so don't feel offended if they skip small-talk, but many will look for a connection point to help put you and them at ease up front. Where did you grow up, how's the weather, what are your hobbies, etc.

It's not a test, so enjoy it and be friendly just like if you were chatting with a stranger in a coffee shop. Ask them about themselves too! You can initiate small talk as well if the opportunity arises.



Ask them a question or two about themselves to start. It's perfectly acceptable—but don't go overboard.

You want to keep the interview within the allotted time or they will begin to get stressed and think of the next interview. You want to be sure you have a chance to answer their questions about you and ask yours about the company and role. So, when you start chatting about the baseball team you both love, be mindful not to go on for too long. 😊

## LEARN TO TURN YOUR WEAKNESSES INTO STRENGTHS.

If you lack relevant work experience, you can actually make that a positive: often, companies have to re-train new employees who learned “wrong” ways of doing things. This costs them additional time and money. If you've never been trained on something, you have nothing to unlearn!

Therefore, you can say that you'll get up to speed with their methods and philosophy more quickly. You can up-sell your “blank slate” aspect.

If they ask, “Do you have any previous experience in [sales]?” and you don't, be truthful. But also let them know that you are eager to learn. Here's a great example answer:

**“I have never done [sales] before, but I've always loved [helping people who have a problem I can help them solve] in my previous jobs. That is exactly why I am**

**so excited to dive in and learn to master it! No one will absorb the basics and level up faster or more diligently.”**

You've been honest about what you don't currently have, and given them a taste of what you will do in the future. They can sense your eagerness and upward trajectory. Any great company will jump at the chance to hire people who will add more value each day.

### **ALWAYS BE HONEST. SERIOUSLY.**

Do not oversell yourself. Be honest when you don't know the answer or don't have the skill or experience. If you struggled in a past job and they ask how it was, tell them you struggled and why.

Don't undersell yourself either. If you were really damn good at a past job and they ask how it was, tell them you were really damn good and why.

Don't bluff. Repeat: DON'T BLUFF.

It's OK to bet on yourself and let them know you believe you have huge upside. It's OK to truthfully state the success you believe you can have and the value you believe you can create for them.

But do not make claims you can't or aren't willing to back up. Even if the bluff gets you the job, it will destroy your reputation once you start and it's clear you were bluffing. A great example is when in Harry Potter & the Chamber of Secrets, when the Hogwarts faculty calls Professor



Lockhart's bluff:

Don't be like Professor Lockhart.

Don't lie about work history, skills, education, or anything else. It'll just come back to bite you. Own who you are and what you've done and what you do and don't know without shame.

**Prof. Snape: A girl has been snatched by the monster, Lockhart. Your moment has come at last.**

**Gilderoy Lockhart: My... moment?**

**Prof. Snape: Weren't you saying just last night... that you've known all along where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is?**

**Prof. McGonagall: Then it's settled. We'll leave you to deal with the monster, Gilderoy. Your skills, after all, are legend.**

**Gilderoy Lockhart: Very... well. I'll just be in my office getting... Getting ready.**

And then explain why that makes you all the more eager for the next step on your journey.

Even if you don't get that particular job, you always win when you tell the truth.

## READ THE VIBE.

Just like any conversation, read your interviewer for tempo, tone, and timing. If they are bored, get to the point. If highly engaged, don't hold yourself back. If they are straining to hear, be louder and clearer and slow down. If they keep interrupting you, speed up.

If they are casual and joking, you can too. If they are serious and to the point, mirror that.

This isn't to be fake or phony. It's to be respectful of their time and approach, and to cut through any external distractions and get the content conveyed as effectively as possible.

Conversation is a dance and you've got to be in sync for best results. Interviews are just conversations with a purpose. 😊

## THANK THEM AND DETERMINE NEXT STEPS.

At the end of the interview, these two steps are super important. Thanking, obviously, is just polite. Thank them for their time and consideration.

And, equally importantly, get clarity on what the next step is. Always discuss next steps.

Will there be a second interview? Are they getting other people's opinions? If so, whom? Will they follow up via email? Within how many days, approximately?

(Pro tip: if you want to be even more impressive, tell them that you will follow up in a couple days. This will further show your professionalism and initiative.)



## Caution: Avoid this during an interview

Some things are best left until you have a job offer in-hand.

Job interviews are an exploration of whether you and the company are a good match. If you like them and they want you, they'll make an offer. That's the time to talk about what you can get from the role and negotiate.

Don't ask about hours, vacation days, pay, benefits, or other perks during the interview process. This stuff matters, but not yet. If you bring it up too soon, it'll make them feel like you think you already have the job—like you're just searching for an easy paycheck and thinking only of how to minimize your effort.

Imagine a first date where you start with, “So if we continue to date, how often do you expect me to pay for dinner just so I know how you compare to other dates?” 🤖

For now, show them your excitement and the value you can create before asking about what you can get or making demands. We've got a separate guide that teaches [How & When to Properly Negotiate a Job Offer](#).

Now, go forth and conquer!

And if now you're asking yourself, "when should I follow up?" you can start reading the next guide in this series to learn about follow-up sequences via email and social media, what we think of handwritten thank-you notes, and more.

# Final resources

Congrats on making it this far!

*Subscribe to the Daily Job Hunt newsletter. Join 200,000+ readers and get a kick in the inbox every morning.*

*Read the Career Hackers Manifesto: The core principles of discovering and doing what makes you come alive.*

## THE DAILY JOB HUNT

 careerhackers  
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*And check out the other career-hacking guides in this series:*

