INTERVIEW SKILLS

Your resume (or having good contacts) may get you in the door, but the interview gets you the job. How well you present yourself and your fit with the interviewer and the employer is critical. Luckily, interviewing is a learned skill; it takes practice, but anyone can master the technique. Interviewing is a two-way street. While the interviewer will be assessing whether he wants to hire you, you will be evaluating whether you want to work for that employer.

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

- **KNOW YOUR RESUME.** Prepare by knowing your resume. Be prepared to talk about every aspect listed on it as your resume serves as a guide for the interviewer. The inability to address in even one small item from your resume can lead the employer to question your honesty with respect to your entire resume.

- **KNOW THE EMPLOYER.** If interviewing with a law firm, at the very least review their website and their profile on [www.nalpdirectory.com](http://www.nalpdirectory.com). You should have a sense of:

  - The firm’s main practice areas;
  - The main practice areas in the office in which you are interviewing;
  - The firm’s history (i.e. did it merge recently? Was the first office in the Bay Area?);
  - The firm’s culture or mission and anything specific or unique to the firm.

The following resources are additional sources for research:

- [www.Martindale.com](http://www.Martindale.com)
- [www.law.com](http://www.law.com) (legal newspaper with law firm rankings, surveys and lists)
- Law student evaluations on [USFLawLink.com](http://USFLawLink.com) and OCP library resources
- Lexis/Westlaw and Zief Law Library resources

- **KNOW YOURSELF.** Think about ways to emphasize your accomplishments and strengths. Practice answering questions about your weaknesses or gaps in employment and turning “weaknesses” into “strengths.” Why did you decide to come to law school in the first place and why have you chosen the field of law? Prepare your Top Three skills and be able to sell them to the employer by giving specific examples demonstrating these skills.

- **REVIEW AND PRACTICE.** Review the list “Commonly Asked Interview Questions” section in this chapter to help you prepare. 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 the units 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. 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. Don’t just on time: BE EARLY! It is better to have extra time in the lobby or at a nearby café reviewing your materials, than scrambling to get to the interview and arriving flustered. 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 yourself, your law school, or previous employers and keep your energy level up.

- **LOOK AND LISTEN.** Pay attention to what the interviewer asks and says, and make eye contact. Follow-up with appropriate answers and comments. Do not cut off or interrupt the interviewer.

- **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 a great match for the job. You are the only person in the interview that is advocating on your behalf.

- **ANSWER FULLY.** A common mistake interviewees make is when 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 a complete answer. The point of the interview is that the employer wants to get to know you better; do make the interviewer have to ask a follow up question to dig deeper. Instead, elaborate upon the moment you realized you wanted to go to law school. Was it when you were volunteering at a homeless shelter that you discovered you wanted to advocate on behalf of others less fortunate than yourself? Was it when you participated in Model United Nations and realized you loved to argue 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 keys 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 is okay to ask some 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.”
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? 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 to do with your work ethic, whether you are a team player, how manageable you are, and your enthusiasm and passion for the work.

- **FIT. Will you fit in?** Ultimately, an employer will hire you if they can see themselves still liking you after a long day at the office. Additionally, employers want candidates who will present professionally to their clients.

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 ASAP or 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 your conversation. See the OCP handout *Cover Letters and Other Job Search Correspondence* for thank you letter samples and protocol.

A SAMPLE LETTER MIGHT LOOK LIKE THIS:

Dear Ms. Potential Employer:

It was a pleasure meeting with you this afternoon. I enjoyed learning more about how Multinational Firm operates. I was glad to learn that summer associates are given the chance to work closely with senior partners.

You mentioned that the firm seeks summer associates with exceptional writing and research skills. My writing ability is one of my top skills as evidenced by my CALI Award for Excellence for the highest grade in Legal Research and Writing.

Multinational Firm is among my top choices. My interview today only confirms my belief that I could be a valuable new associate. I hope we have an opportunity to work together in the future. Thank you again for the interview.

Yours truly,
Eager Law Student
### COMMON INTERVIEW MISTAKES
*(Adapted from 101 Dynamite Answers to Interview Questions)*

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<th>Mistake</th>
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<tr>
<td>Showing up late.</td>
<td>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. If you will be late, call.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asking about salary, perks, vacation and benefits during the initial interview.</td>
<td>Avoid the “what's in it for me?” questions. There is plenty of time to ask salary/benefit kind of questions <strong>after</strong> you have received an offer.</td>
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<td>Asking associates how hard they work, or pushing the “work-life balance” agenda.</td>
<td>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. To find out the same information, consider asking an associate to describe a typical day.</td>
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<td>Asking questions that demonstrate your lack of research on the employer.</td>
<td>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 <strong>before</strong> going into the interview.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not asking any questions at all.</td>
<td>Even if you ask the same questions of all interviewers, asking questions demonstrates interest and enthusiasm.</td>
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<td>Not connecting your skills with the employer’s needs.</td>
<td>Make sure you give specific examples that illustrate your skills and accomplishments. Do not give yes/no answers.</td>
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<td>Not showing enthusiasm for the job or the employer.</td>
<td>Be able to articulate <strong>WHY</strong> you want to work for this employer in particular, as opposed to other employers in the same practice area or field. This is a question all employers will ask!</td>
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<td>Badmouthing a former or current employer or coworkers.</td>
<td>Think of a diplomatic way to explain why you left or plan to leave. If you are hard-pressed to say anything nice, talk about the skills you learned in that position.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor body language.</td>
<td>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 message.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearing more interested in the firm’s pro bono practice.</td>
<td>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 <strong>BILLABLE</strong> endeavors.</td>
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COMMONLY ASKED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Review the following questions to familiarize yourself with the type of information interviewers seek. It is not necessary to prepare answers to all of these questions; canned answers defeat the goal of being genuine. Practice answering several of the questions aloud with a friend or OCP.

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. ALSO – employers are now asking “Behavioral” interviewing questions based on the idea that the best way to predict your future performance is to examine your past and present performance in a similar situation. It focuses on experiences, behaviors, knowledge, skills and abilities that are job related

1. Could you tell me about yourself? How would you describe yourself?
2. Why are you interested in our firm/organization?
3. Why did you decide to come to law school?
4. What do you like most about law school? What do you find most challenging?
5. What courses do you like the most/least and why?
6. 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?
7. What was the issue you argued in Moot Court? What was the argument on the other side?
8. Tell me about your participation on the journal (in your externship, your clinical program, your thesis or research project, publication, or your courses).
9. What areas of practice are you interested in and why?
10. Where do you see yourself in five years? Ten years?
11. In what environment do you work best?
12. What are your strengths/weaknesses?
13. What are you most proud of? What is your best accomplishment?
14. Tell me about a situation where you failed. Why did you fail and what did you learn it?
15. How do you work under pressure? How do you deal with stress?
16. What's the last book you read? What do you do for fun?
17. How would you handle a situation where you and your supervisor disagreed about an issue or course of action? What happened?
18. Tell me about ethical work situation you had to deal with; how did it turn out?
19. Discuss a problem that you had to solve creatively.
20. Tell me about a time when you had to act in a leadership capacity.
21. Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a difficult client or coworker.
22. Why should we hire you?
TYPES OF QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO ASK

In every interview you will be asked if you have any follow-up questions. Never say “I don’t have any questions.” Be prepared with at least 3-5 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 of law firms. Change them accordingly for other types of employers.

1. What are the firm’s long-range goals? Are there plans to expand the office? Move into or develop new practice areas?
2. What practice area of the firm is growing the most?
3. What attracted you to the firm/organization?
4. How did you become involved in your practice area?
5. What type of cases do you work on? Describe your most interesting case.
6. What is a typical day like for you? (Use this question for a newer associate.)
7. What do you like about working here?
8. What’s the best thing that’s happened to you while working here?
9. What type of attorney succeeds here?
10. How have you developed professionally as a result of working here?
11. Did you start off in your current practice area? If not, why did you switch?
12. Are there any concerns about my candidacy that you’d like me to address further?

For partners and senior attorneys:

1. How as the practice changed over the past 5 years?
2. How have the clients’ needs changed over the last 5 years?
3. Where do you see the firm heading in the next 5 years?
4. What changes do you see on the horizon for the firm?

For smaller firms: (to show an entrepreneurial spirit)

1. How soon are associates expected to engage in client development?
2. When can associates expect to start arguing their own motions or doing depositions?
3. What are the opportunities for associates to take on more responsibility?

For government/non-profits:

1. How has the current political and economic climate affected your organization / agency?
2. How does your organization select these cases it will take on?
3. What is the biggest success this organization has accomplished in recent years?
4. What is the biggest challenge your office now faces and how do you see this organization rising to the challenge?
5. What are the opportunities for advancement and growth in your organization / office?
6. What is the organization’s record in hiring from its legal intern / summer law clerk pool into permanent positions?
INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

- Confirm date, time, address, and directions to the interview
- Program the phone number of the employer into your cell phone
- 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
  - Men: wear a suit, white or blue shirt and tie
  - Women: a skirt suit or pant suit with a light colored blouse is appropriate
- Check your hygiene
  - Make sure your breath is fresh, your hair is neat
  - Refrain from using any perfume or cologne
  - Select a lightly scented deodorant or anti-perspirant as interviewers may be sensitive to scents, especially when interviewing in a small enclosed space.
- 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
- Plan on arriving at the interview at least 15 minutes early
- During the interview:
  - Be kind and cordial to all you meet, including the receptionist and especially the legal recruiter
  - Strike up a conversation with the person escorting you from one interview to the next
  - It’s okay to ask to use the restroom in between interviews, as well as for water
- After the interview:
  - Be sure to ask when you can expect to hear from them regarding a decision
  - Thank you emails are appropriate for on-campus interviews or when employers indicate they will be making employment or call-back interviews quickly
  - If writing hand-written thank you card, send them via US mail within 24 to 48 hours and proof-read carefully
  - Send any follow-up materials the employer requested