

The Interview

After you have sending off your resume and cover letter, you need to begin thinking about the interviewing process. Being prepared is vital to your success in this often competitive stage of getting a job.

When should I contact the prospective employer?

If you are applying for a specific position that has been advertised, the prospective employer will likely contact you within two weeks to acknowledge receipt of your resume. In cases where you have sent an unsolicited letter and resume, follow up your letter with a phone call about ten days later.

In either case, calling to follow-up on the receipt of your resume is appropriate after two weeks. Inquire if the letter and resume have been received and whether you can make an appointment to meet for further discussion.

If the prospective employer invites you to come for a specific job opening, and it is located in another city, the employer often covers travel expenses. (This may not be true for the Federal Government or Non-Profits). If the prospective employer is simply agreeing to meet with you, in response to your unsolicited request, you should expect to cover your own expenses.

This section includes the following:

- Step One: Pre-Interview Preparation.
- Step Two: The actual Interview.
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Specific Tips for Specific Interviews
- Interview Follow-up

Interviewing

Step one: Pre-interview preparation. Do your homework.

- **Research the organization.** What is their mission? What projects are they currently working? Have they been in the newspaper recently?
 - Check out their website.
 - Ask CPPA staff, professors, your colleagues (other students) or contacts you have from previous work/volunteer experience.
- **Ask the organization directly** for information about the interviewing process. Appropriate questions include:
 - Will it be an individual or group interview?
 - Who will I be interviewing with?
 - What is the appropriate dress for the interview? Over-dressing can be just as bad as under-dressing.
 - What is the salary range for the position being offered?
- In some cases you may not be comfortable directly asking for a salary range. However, it is important that you not waste your own and their time on a job that pays less than you are willing to accept. So, again, do your research and find out what similar jobs at other organizations pay.
- **Research yourself.**
 - Think about how to talk about **your interests** in ways relevant to the position.
 - Do a **skills inventory**. This can help you be more specific about what your strengths and weaknesses are.
 - Think about how to put a more **positive spin** on your what your weaknesses honestly are. Interviewers have already heard the line about how you are a perfectionist. For example, procrastination can be presented as a time management issue. Or, if you are that person in the office with a messy desk than perhaps your weakness is resource management.
 - **Practice** interviewing preferably with someone who you do not know that well.
- **Get ready for the actual day.**
 - Find out where the interview is, how long it will take to get and where you can park.
 - **Prepare a folder** with extra resumes, contact information for your references and your business card. Make sure the resumes are the same as the one that you sent them. Always contact your references so they are ready to talk about how great you are.
 - **Pick out your outfit.** Try it on if you haven't worn it in awhile. Make sure you are comfortable and confident with your outfit. Your clothes and physical appearance do make an impression.
 - **Research the law** regarding questions they are not allowed to ask during the interview stage. The interviewer may not be aware they are breaking the law but you should be. Prepare yourself by considering what response you are most comfortable with given the circumstances.

Interviewing

Step Two: The Actual Interview.

- **Be early.** Don't plan to just get there on time. Plan to be early so that if something unexpected happens you won't be late.
- **Be aware of your body language.** Communication comes in many forms not just what you say. Look interested. Don't fidget. Sit up straight. Be confident.
- **Avoid excessive jewelry, perfume/cologne and smoking.** If you have done your research then you should know if piercings/tattoos are appropriate or not. But being conservative is always a safe bet. Perfume/cologne and the smell of smoke can be distracting or even offensive.
- **Don't take notes** during a first interview. It is more appropriate to take notes during subsequent interviews. If you really want to take notes, then ask the interviewer if it is okay to do so.
- **Don't bring a drink.** If they offer, it is fine to except one.
- **Have a sense of humor.** Unexpected things happen, like you spill your drink. Try to take it in stride and not get flustered.
- **Avoid saying um, ah and like.** If you need time to think, talk slower or rephrase the question back and ask if that is what the interviewer meant.
- Be prepared to **deflect or address unlawful or inappropriate questions.** You may want to ask "How does that question relate to the position?" Or, you want to change the subject by asking a question of your own. Another approach is to answer the question as vaguely as possible.
- **Ask for a business card** from the interviewer and ask permission to send follow up correspondence or questions. Ask if they would prefer you to contact them via email or regular mail.
- **End the interview on a good note.** Tell them that this was a good experience, that you are looking forward to hearing from them and communicate your interest in the position. Inquire as to when they will be getting back with you.

FAQ's about Interviewing

What are they going to ask me?

- Tell us about yourself and what you can offer us in this position
- What motivated you to apply for this position?
- Why did you choose public policy graduate school? Why did you choose CPPA?
- What do you think makes a good policy analyst/consultant/legislative director/administrator/supervisor?
- What accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction?
- Do you have a single greatest accomplishment?
- Describe a challenging experience and how you handled it.
- Tell about a mistake you made in your last job.
- Give me examples of public speaking you have done. How did you prepare?
- What type of work do you do best? What type of supervisor suits you best?
- What are your three or four greatest strengths/weaknesses?
- Why should I hire you?
- Have you read any books for pleasure lately? What are they and why?
- Tell me about a difficult decision you had to make. What process did you use?
- Tell me about a time when you had to get people to help you who didn't want to help.

Should I be asking questions as well?

Some questions will naturally come up during the interview. Generally, the interviewer will also leave time at the end for you to ask questions. If you read something interesting about the organization, ask about it. If you need some clarification of the duties of your position, its place in the organization, or the internal workings of the organization, ask them now.

More specific questions about benefits, salary, performance evaluations, office space, and vacation time should be left until the organization makes an offer to you. At that time you will need to evaluate the offer very carefully and consider your approach to salary negotiation.

What are common mistakes to avoid?

- **Talking too much.** Try not to repeat. Practice answering questions succinctly.
- **Not listening to the question.** Don't start thinking about your answer until the question is clear. Otherwise you will fail to answer the question fully.
- **Panicking.** An interviewer may throw in a strange or completely unanticipated question with some specific result in mind. Do your best to answer the question without showing too much shock, then forget about it and move on.

Specific Tips For Specific Interviews

Informational Interviews: An informational interview is a crucial and often overlooked aspect of networking and is used to find out about a job and make a contact.

- Gather information about a particular organization/sector/field of interest.
- Make a list of potential interviewers: use your own networks, or ask fellow students, faculty and staff for contacts.
- Write or email the person you want to meet, emphasize that you are not looking for a job but researching an organization or sector.
- Set up a meeting, making sure you know how long the meeting will be.
- Before the meeting it is imperative that you research the organization you are curious about and formulate a list of questions you wish to ask – do not waste your contact's time.
- Try to make more contacts by asking “If you were in my place, having seen my resume and heard my goals, what would you do and who else would you talk to?”
- Bring extra copies of your resume.
- Follow up regularly with successful contacts (but do not inundate the person).
- Send an email/letter thanking the person for their time/counsel/advice/willingness to share their knowledge.

Telephone Interviews: Telephone Interviews often supplement in person interviews when organizations cannot afford the expense of an in-person interview. The average telephone interview lasts 15-20 minutes.

- Keep a copy of your resume beside the telephone.
- Maintain a file with information on the organizations to which you apply, and have it handy.
- Keep blank paper and pencil near the telephone.
- Make sure your housemates take phone messages seriously and are aware that a professional contact will be calling the house.
- Conduct yourself with the same demeanor you would if you were in the employer’s office having an interview. Convey energy and enthusiasm!
- Turn off distracting noises and maintain good posture.
- If you have time, dress as if you were at an in-person interview and set up and label chairs for each person in the interview, so you can visualize being in the room.

Case Analysis Interviews: A case analysis interview is used to assess your analytical skills. The interviewer will present a hypothetical problem and you will be asked to figure out your approach to a problem. The focus is on your thought process more than your actual knowledge of a subject, or a correct answer. The interviewer will be looking for a response similar to a policy analysis; in other words, demonstrate your ability to:

- Frame the problem and identify the relevant issues
- Break the problem into workable components
- Identify a number of creative solutions
- Communicate solutions in a concise and linear fashion
- Generate thoughtful questions, if necessary.

Interview Follow-up

Thank You Notes.

- **Write a thank-you note to every person** with whom you interview and to other people who helped you in your search.
- Thank you notes should be mailed no more than **2 or 3 days after** the meeting occurred. The letter does not need to follow business format.
- Be careful to **address the person correctly**. Use the business care that you requested at the end of your interview.
- Hand-written or typed thank you notes are both appropriate (using professional cards or resume paper). E-mail is also appropriate.
- **Be brief** and thank the recipient for their time.
- **Highlight key points of the interview and resume**—as another chance to emphasize the parts of the interview that went well.
- Ask a **follow-up question**, if you have one.
- Be sure to include your return address on the envelope.
- For an added touch, create your own professional letterhead using Microsoft Publisher.

Example:

Date

Dear Mr./Mrs. Last Name,

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me on Thursday. I enjoyed the opportunity to learn more about the work that the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission does for the local community.

As follow-up on our conversation, I examined the previous *State of the Pioneer Valley* Reports and was quite impressed with how the project has progressed over the last two years. The reports are an excellent means by which to disseminate information to people at all levels of the community.

Again, thank you so very much for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you towards the end of next week.

Sincerely,