

**School of International and Public Affairs  
Columbia University  
Office of Career Services**

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## **PREPARING FOR INTERVIEWS**

Interviews for jobs or internships are your opportunity to present yourself and your qualifications for the position you desire. To prepare for an interview you need to 1) know yourself, 2) know about the position and the organization, 3) know general interviewing guidelines, and 4) prepare for typical interview questions and plan how you will answer them.

### **KNOW YOURSELF**

- Be sure you are easily conversant on all aspects of your education and work experience, especially the ways in which they are of value to the prospective employer. Be able to "talk" your resume.
- Identify your areas of interest, your skills/abilities/strengths, and your values/priorities. Be sure you know what personal qualities you want to highlight.
- Be prepared to cite examples that give evidence of your personal qualities.

### **KNOW THE JOB AND THE ORGANIZATION**

- Understand as much as you can about the nature of the position and the qualifications needed. You can get this information from the description of the job or internship as well as from any supplementary materials on the organization. It is also helpful to talk to other people who have held the position or a similar one in another organization. You can even seek out SIPA alums in particular fields through the Alumni Career Advisory Program (ACAP). If you are unclear about what a particular type of job entails, you may also want to consult general career guides that describe the nature of the work, typical salaries, etc. for different careers.
- Know as much about the organization itself as you can reasonably be expected to know. Most large companies print information about their products and services, the history of the company, and career opportunities within it. Information on many companies is available in most public libraries. Smaller companies and organizations in the not-for-profit sector may be difficult to research. You can try calling the organization directly to ask if they have any brochures or other printed materials describing them. If you are unable to find out a great deal about the organization before an interview, at least know enough to be able to convey why you have an interest in working for them.

### **KNOW GENERAL INTERVIEWING GUIDELINES**

- Remember that an interview is basically a conversation between two human beings. The interviewer's main goal is to get to know you, not to test or trick you. If you feel comfortable in discussing your background and know something about the position and the organization, you have no reason to feel nervous.
- Always emphasize the positive. If it is necessary to discuss any negative aspects of your background (e.g. jobs or bosses you didn't like), try not to sound bitter or angry and don't make excuses.
- Don't hesitate to be the initiator in the interview. You know yourself and your background better than the interviewer does, so it is your responsibility to be sure that all-important topics are discussed.
- Be sure to answer the questions. Pay attention to what the interviewer is asking. If a question isn't clear, ask for clarification. Take time to think of your answer.
- Elaborate on your responses when appropriate. Give examples whenever possible.

### **PREPARE FOR TYPICAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

No two interviews are exactly alike, but you can prepare to answer certain questions that are often asked. You should practice your answers out loud to hear how they sound, but don't try to memorize them word-for-word or you will end up sounding too rehearsed or might forget them if you are nervous. Some typical questions are:

### **College/SIPA experience questions**

How has your SIPA experience prepared you for a career?

Describe your most rewarding university experience.

Why did you select SIPA? What led you to choose your major?

What academic subjects did you like best/least? Why?

If you could do so, how would you plan your academic study differently? Why?

What changes would you make at SIPA? Why?

Do you think that your grades are a good indication of your academic achievement?

Tell me about one of your papers or your thesis.

### **Questions about you**

Why did you choose the career for which you are preparing?

What do you consider to be your greatest strengths and weaknesses?

How would you describe yourself? or Tell me about yourself.

How do you think a friend or professor who knows you well would describe you?

What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?

How do you determine or evaluate success?

What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?

If you were hiring a graduate for this position, what qualities would you look for?

In what kind of work environment are you most comfortable?

How do you work under pressure?

How would you describe the ideal job for you following graduation?

What two or three things are most important to you in your job?

Do you have a geographical preference? Will you relocate? Are you willing to travel?

What major problem have you encountered and how did you deal with it?

What have you learned from your mistakes?

How would you handle this situation.....?

If you did not have to work, what would you do?

What else do you think I should know about you?

### **Questions about your experience**

Why should I hire you?

What qualifications do you have that make you think you will be successful in this field?

Which jobs or internships have you most enjoyed? Why?

### **Questions about your goals and objectives**

What do you see yourself doing five years from now?

What do you really want to do in life?

What are the most important rewards you expect in your career?

Why do you want to work here?

What do you think about the future of this field?

What are your long-range and short-range goals and objectives? When and why did you establish these goals, and how are you preparing yourself to achieve them?

### **Questions to determine what you know about the position/the career field/the organization**

What do you know about our organization?

What do you think it takes to be successful in our organization?

In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our organization?

What criteria are you using to evaluate the company for which you hope to work?