

HOW TO PREPARE FOR AN INTERVIEW

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A little about me

I'm Alison Green. I started the [Ask a Manager](#) blog because, as the manager of a successful nonprofit organization, I talked to many people who were really confused about how to get a job and how to do well at work once they did. There are a lot of resources out there that say they'll help you with your job search and career, but very few of them are run by people who have actually been managers themselves and who know how managers think. And that's why Ask a Manager— and eventually this guide—was born.

I've run an organization, and I've overseen every step of the hiring process, from the initial resume screen to phone interviews to in-person interviews to reference-checks. And I used that experience to write this guide to help you get a job. I know that the job search process is stressful and intimidating, and I want to help make it easier – so that hopefully you get the right job for you, faster. If that's what you're looking for, read on.

Preparing for your interview (hint: it's more than just showing up)

Whoever said 80% of success is just showing up wasn't thinking about job interviews. Thoroughly preparing for an interview generally makes a huge difference in how well you do. (And it can also make you a lot less nervous.)

Fortunately, while much of the hiring process can feel mysterious or like reading tea leaves, there's a formula to preparing well for an interview. If you closely follow the steps in this guide, I can almost guarantee that you're going to see a difference in how well you do in your interviews.

Step 1: Get to know the employer.

You'd be surprised by how many candidates walk into an interview knowing little to nothing about the employer they're considering working for. And it shows.

It only takes about 15-20 minutes to learn enough about the employer to be able to speak more intelligently about them than much of your competition. Here's a very simple path to doing that:

- Go to the employer's website.
- At a minimum, read the "About us" section. You want to get really familiar with what this company is all about – and, crucially, *how they see themselves*
- Once you've done that, poke around the rest of the site. Read enough to get a good feel for more than just the basics—read about their clients, their work, and their general approach. Ideally, you wouldn't leave their Web site until you can answer these questions:
 - What does this organization do?
 - What are they all about?
 - What makes them different from their competition?

Step 2: Learn the job description like it was your own.

I'm amazed by how often I ask candidates to tell me what they know about the job so far and hear answers that are significantly off-base. So if a job description is posted online, make sure read it and you understand it. A good litmus test is to make sure you understand what the job is all about well enough that you could summarize the job to a friend.

TIP: Always save the job description to your computer at the time that you apply for a job, because the employer may have removed it by the time your interview rolls around.

Take the job description and do the following:

1. Go through the job description line by line. Picture yourself doing the job. What are the likely challenges? What ideas would you bring to the table? If you think through this stuff now, you can weave those thoughts into the conversation at the interview.
2. For each responsibility or qualification, think about how your experience and skills fits in. Write this down for each one.
3. For each responsibility or qualification, think about what examples from your past you can point to as “supporting evidence” that you’d excel at this job.

These don't need to be direct one-for-one matches; the idea is to think now about how your skills and experiences might transfer well to this role. For instance, if you're applying for a sales job without any actual sales experience, you might talk about how you helped make fundraising calls to alumni when you were in college. Or if you're applying for a manager job and haven't formally managed anyone, you might talk about how you were the go-to person for training new employees in your last job, managed numerous group projects, and were known as a diplomatic problem-solver.

Write these examples down too.

Important: Don't be alarmed if you're not a perfect fit. People get hired all the time without being a line-for-line match. The point here is think about the ways in which you *are* a match, so that those thoughts are easily retrievable and can be turned into answers in your interview.

Step 3: Practice the crap out of your interview.

This is my single most important tip for you, and I can promise you that if you do this, you will see a significant difference in your interview experience: *Practice the crap out of your interview*. This means you need to do the following:

1. Write down at least 10 interview questions that you're likely to be asked (see my list on page 11) and write out your answers to them. For a lot of people, the act of writing your answers down somehow ingrains them more in your brain.

(Also, when you go to the interview, take those written answers with you and review them in your car or a coffee shop before you go into the interview.)

2. Now, make yourself practice your answers out loud. Practice saying them out loud over and over and over, until your answers fly off your tongue automatically.

If you can rope a friend into helping you, practice with the friend playing the role of your interviewer. I'm talking a full-on skit in your living room. You don't have to go outside and knock on the door or anything, but sit across from each other and go through those interview questions. You'll feel ridiculous, but it works. And if you can't talk arrange for a friend to help, write down and practice your answers out loud anyway.

TIP: Help someone else rehearse, so that you can play the interviewer. One of the reasons I have no interview nerves anymore is because I've done so many interviews from the other side. You can try to replicate this to some extent by playing the interviewer yourself; you might be surprised by how much more comfortable it makes you feel.

In fact, if you have a friend who is also job-searching, practice with each other and keep reversing roles. Job-searching friends are the best target for this kind of help.

The more you practice, the better you're going to get and the more comfortable you're going to feel.

3. Figure out what question(s) you're most nervous about. If there's a specific area of questioning that you're especially nervous about, you *must* do something about that ahead of time. You cannot just go on being anxious about it without having a plan and knowing exactly how you're going to handle it when it comes up. You need to decide exactly how you're going to answer it and you must practice the hell out of that answer. Say it out loud over and over and over.
4. Rehearse the worst thing that could happen. Think of the thing you dread the most and rehearse how you'd handle it if it happened. What might that be? Some stupid interviewer asking you what kind of tree you'd be if you were a tree? Getting asked about the job you got fired from? Whatever it is, start rehearsing your response.

Step 4: Come up with questions of your own.

You also need to come up with questions of your own to ask, because the interviewer will want to ask you what questions you have at the end of the interview. Their purpose in doing this is twofold:

1. Most obviously, they want to help you flesh out your understanding of the job and company, as well as get you answers to whatever you're wondering about.
2. Less obviously, they'll get some additional insight into you by the sorts of things you ask about. If you just ask about salary and benefits, you signal that you're only interested in what they can do for you. But if you ask probing questions about the work itself and the organization, you signal that you're thoughtful and genuinely interested in this particular opportunity.

So what should you ask? Well, first, think about what you truly want to know when you imagine going to work in that job every day. You probably want to know about the details of the work, the department you'll be working in, your prospective supervisor's management style, and the culture of the organization.

Here are some examples of good questions to ask. (You might not have time for all of these, so pick the ones you *genuinely* want to hear the answer to, not just the ones you think will sound good.)

- What are the biggest challenges the person in this position will face?
- Can you describe a typical day or week in the position?
- What would a successful first year in the position look like?
- How will the success of the person in this position be measured?
- How would you describe the culture here?
- How would you describe your management style?
- Thinking to the person who you've seen do this job best, what made their performance so outstanding?
- Are there any reservations you have about my fit for the position that I could address? (*This is a great way to give yourself the chance to tackle any doubts they might have about you—as well as for you to consider whether those doubts might be reasonable and point to a bad fit.*)
- When do you expect to make a hiring decision?

And this is my favorite question that I've ever been asked by a job candidate, which I guarantee will impress your interviewer: *Thinking back to people who have been in this position previously, what differentiated the ones who were good from the ones who were really great?*

Try this question. The reason it blows managers away is that first of all, no one asks it. And secondly, it signals that you care about being not just good, but truly great. Try it. You'll see.

Remember: Always ask what their next steps are and what their timeline is for getting back to you, so that when you go home you know what to expect next and you're not sitting around wondering.

***Little things that you're probably already doing—
but if you're not, do these too***

1. *Eat breakfast.*
2. *Try on your full interview outfit the day before, down to all the details, including shoes. You don't need to discover the morning of your interview that your suit pants no longer fit or that the shoes don't look right with the outfit.*
3. *Allow yourself way more time than you need to get there. Spend the extra time in your car or a coffee shop reviewing your notes.*

Some advice on nerves

If you get nervous before interviews, there are some mindsets you can adopt – things you can do *in your brain* – that will help.

First, remember the following:

- *They think you're qualified.* This isn't a mindset; it's fact. But it needs to become your mindset too, because you're probably losing sight of it. Trust me, they would *not* be interviewing you if they didn't think you were qualified. No interviewer interviews people just for the hell of it. The mere fact that they set up an interview means that they have already determined that you are qualified enough that there's a very good chance that you might be the best person for the job.
- *The hiring manager wants to hire you.* The hiring manager has an annoying problem—a job vacancy—and is hoping that you're the answer to that problem so that she can hire you and turn her attention back to the actual work of her job. She's going into the interview hoping that you're the answer to her prayers.

- *They've never seen a perfect candidate.* If you think your competition is out there giving perfect, flawless interviews, please know that they're not. No one gives a "perfect" interview, and you don't need to strive for that. You're just aiming to give a good interview that conveys a reasonable sense of what you'd be like to work with on this job day to day. You are a normal person, not some sort of professional interviewer, and that is absolutely fine. So is everyone else.
- *If you're worried they can see what a complete mess you are inside – they almost definitely can't.* First of all, a lot of people in interviews seem nervous to some extent, and interviewers are used to it. So for anything to be particularly notable, it has to be really obvious – you're uncontrollably shaking, or you're so paralyzed by anxiety that you can't actually answer questions. This is extremely rare, so it's probably not the case with you. (And if it is, any normal person would feel understanding and compassion toward you anyway, not judgy, snarky things. And if they do feel judgy, snarky things, they are a bad person and we should all feel judgy and snarky right back at them.) But what's more likely is that you seem pretty normal on the surface and you're the only one who knows that your stomach is a churning pit of despair.
- *You have power here too.* One of the main reasons that some people get really nervous in interviews is that you feel like you're being judged ... and worse, judged by someone who holds all the cards, someone who has something that you really want. The power dynamics are all screwed up. That's nerve-racking. You can combat that by changing the power dynamics in your own head – by remembering that you may not want to work for them, for all you know, and that part of the point of the interview is to allow you to collect your own information and decide if you even want this job or these coworkers.

By the way, doing this may even make you a more attractive candidate, totally aside from the issue of your nerves. As an interviewer, when I can tell that a candidate is interviewing me right back – not just hoping for an offer without truly considering whether or not this job is right for them -- it's really appealing.

Next, try these mindsets:

- *Pretend you're a consultant.* As a consultant, people pay for your expertise and if a client doesn't think your expertise is quite what they need, no hurt feelings. Go into the interview the way a consultant would go into a business meeting: Approach the employer as a business partner and try to find out as much information as you can about the organization, the work, and how you might be able to fill their needs. Think of the interview as a collaboration where you're trying to figure out if working together makes sense.
- *Assume you're not going to get the job.* How often have you heard people say that their best interviews were the ones they weren't that invested in? Use this to pull a mind trick on yourself: Pretend that someone else has already been pegged to fill the job (the boss's kid, a former employee of the company, whoever) but they're interviewing you because they have to talk to their top three candidates anyway. So this is really just a practice interview for you. Nothing's on the line, their decision won't be a reflection on you, and it's just a helpful little practice session.
- *Decide you probably don't even want the job.* Another variation on the above, which works for the same reason: Imagine you heard terrible things about the company from a friend who used to work there. You're doing the interview, but you're bringing a healthy skepticism with you and aren't sure you'd accept the job if they offered it to you.
- *Imagine the worst-case scenario.* What's the absolute worst thing that could happen here? You don't get the job? You don't have it now either, so nothing changed. So let's make it worse. Not only do you not get the job, but your interviewer—one person in the world—thinks that you're an idiot and totally unqualified for the job. So? How does that impact you after today? You never need to see this person again.
- *Think about all the weird/annoying/awkward people you've ever worked with.* They somehow got hired – what do you think they were like in their interviews? I mean it, really try to picture their interview. They were probably at least a little weird/annoying/awkward in the interview, right? And they are living, breathing proof that you can be weird/annoying/awkward and still get hired. So when you start thinking you have to be a super-polished all-star, remember these people.

- *Idiots, too.* When you worry that you'll come across as an idiot, think about the actual idiots you've known. They've gotten hired too – probably multiple times. Even coming across as an idiot isn't going to kill you.
- *If you're worried you're not qualified, consider your self-awareness a good thing.* If you're worried you're really not the right person for the job, decide that the interview is going to be your information session so you can find out. By the end of the interview, if you're still feeling unqualified, you're probably right – and thus this isn't a job you want (because you don't want a job you're going to struggle in). And that's okay – you're qualified for other things, just not this one. Good for you for not talking your way into a situation you'll regret.

A couple of other tips to try:

- *Visualize the interview in your head.* I'm not one for new-agey visualization techniques (although if you are, now's the time to use them), but try simply visualizing how the interview is likely to go –picture the wait in the reception area, the greeting, getting settled in the interview room, the ice-breakers, questions that are likely to be asked, and how things will be wrapped up. There's something about doing this that can make it feel less like the unknown.
- *Try to get your interview scheduled in the morning if you can.* You don't need it hanging over you all day, with your nerves increasing as each hour passes. (Personally, the more nervous I get about something, the more I start thinking crazy things, like "Maybe I can cancel this." You don't need that.)

List of practice interview questions

This is a list of interview questions that you're likely to be asked. These are good questions to use when you're practicing. Remember, write down your answers first. And then practice delivering them out loud, over and over.

You're highly likely to be asked:

- Why did you leave your last job? (Or why are you thinking about leaving your current job?)
- What interests you about this opening? (Or why do you want to work for us?)
- Tell me about your experience at _____. (Fill in past job.)
- Tell me about your strengths.
- What experience do you have doing _____? (Fill in each of the major responsibilities of the job.)
- Tell me about a time when... (Fill in with situations relevant to the position. For instance: Tell me about when you had to take initiative ... you had to deal with a difficult customer ... you had to respond to a crisis ... you had to give difficult feedback to an employee ... You get the idea.)
- What kind of salary are you looking for?

You might be asked (bonus points if you practice these too):

- What things are most important to you in a new position?
- How does this position fit in with the career path you're taking?
- How would the people around you describe you?
- What has your biggest achievement been at ____? What results there that you produced are you most proud of?
- What were your major goals last year? How did you settle on those? To what extent did you meet them?
- If I spoke with your previous boss, what areas would he or she say you should work on improving in?
- What are the first five things you would do if you got this position?

So...now what?

If you liked this guide and want more advice on how to get a job, please check out my e-book, [**How to Get a Job: Secrets of a Hiring Manager**](#).

Written from my perspective as a long-time hiring manager, it gives you step-by-step guidance through every stage of your job search ... explaining at each step what a hiring manager is thinking and what they want to see from you ... from getting noticed initially, to nailing the interview, to navigating the tricky post-interview period, all the way through your offer.

You'll learn things like:

- what hiring managers are looking for when they ask common interview questions
- how to talk about sensitive issues when you interview -- firings, bad bosses, "overqualification," and more
- how to avoid companies that aren't a good fit
- 6 ways you might be sabotaging your job search
- 2 ways you can turn rejection to your advantage

You can find out more [right here](#).

Thanks for reading!

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