Ace the Interview!
Interview Preparation Workshop

Maurice Traylor, M.Ed., M.F.A.
CoE Internship and Co-op Program Manager
career.engin.umich.edu
You may have heard that the resume gets you the interview. Then it stands to reason, the interview gets you the job! But what are employers trying to glean from the interview, and how can you make the most of this time to achieve a successful outcome? That’s the focus of our content as it relates to Interview Preparation.
One of the most important things being assessed during your interview is fit!

Your goals during your interview are as follows: 1.) to Match your Skills, Knowledge and Abilities to the job and the company & 2.) To Determine if the Company is a good match for your Interests and Values.

Your approach to these types of questions will help the employer to determine if you are right for the opportunity based on your research and how you communicate your interest in both the position and the organization.
During the interview process, the employer needs to determine the following three things: Can you do the job, will you do the job, and will you do it well within their organization? You will want to formulate examples based on your research of the organization that will support the notion that you can complete all three items very effectively.
Now that you know what the employer is looking for, you can prepare! Think about the employer’s needs and prepare your success stories to support your experience. In doing so, you will stand out in a positive way! One of the best ways to prepare to speak to your abilities to perform the job well is to utilize the job description as a reference for your interview. By now, you should have tailored your resume for the position to land the interview. You want to plan on tailoring your conversation for the interview as well.

Candidate Goals

- Provide evidence that you can do the job
  - Demonstrate Skills, Knowledge, and Abilities (SKAs)
- Be curious about the role and specific about your interest in working there
- Be clear in your stories, to help them understand how your work style matches their organization
  - Are you collaborative, results oriented, innovative, creative
- Be likeable—people hire people they can work with
Preparation is key for your interview especially in these two areas: professional dress and understanding the interview location! A suit, dress slacks, collared shirt, etc are all appropriate items to wear for your interview. You will also want to prepare on how you will plan to arrive to your interview. Whether it be taking place in-person or virtually, plan ahead for how/where your interview will take place and allow yourself adequate time to prepare and arrive before your interview begins.

Suited for Success – In an effort to help students with a financial need present themselves professionally when interviewing, the ECRC is proud to offer Suited for Success program. Application is on the ECRC Website.

• Familiarize yourself with the interview location
Research the organization and prepare to speak to something about them that resonates with you. Connect your interests with not only the position, itself, but also the organization overall. The rationale behind why you decided to apply for a position could also serve as a key component that will separate you from other candidates. Review the job description as well to prepare your talking points on the relevant skills and experiences you have compared to their criteria.

Prepare several stories based on previous projects, internships and other relevant experiences that demonstrate both success and skill development in a variety of areas (i.e. collaboration, communication, problem solving, etc.). These examples will be helpful for you to provide detailed context on how your skills align with the expectations of the employer.

A series of common interview questions can be found on page #35 within our Career Guide: http://career.engin.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2020/05/careerguide.pdf. We also recommend that you set an appointment with one of our ECRC Career Advisors through your Engineering Careers account. Appointments are available to practice Mock Interviews and discuss the Interview Preparation process based on your specific questions. Additionally, you can utilize the Practice Video Interviews resource within Engineering Careers by accessing the “Resources” tab on the left side of the homepage.

It is also important to prepare questions for your interviewer(s) for the end of the conversation. If you have questions about any of the following items, it is appropriate to ask your interviewer(s) before the conversation concludes:
• Expectations associated with the position that were not already discussed
• How soon the organization plans to fill the position
• Any additional action steps required on your behalf
Employers expect that you’ll answer a behavioral question in the STAR format. The STAR acronym represents:

• **Situation/ Task** - Provide an overview of the situation
• **Action** - Describe specific actions and the process you took
• **Result** - How did it go/ Lesson/ Impact?

This provides structure and allows you to be concise by providing an overview of the situation, what you did and what happened as a result.
One of the most common behavioral based interview questions is: **Tell me about a time when you had a conflict with a team member? What was the conflict? How did you work through it?** Employers want to hire employees who recognize challenge is inherent in almost any team/group project. They want to understand your approach to working through conflict to reach a successful completion. What steps do you take to understand the others’ point of view. Do you engage others in the process?

- **Clearly define the context** (when did this situation occur? Which class, team, internship, etc.?). *(Situation)*
- **Explain the specific task** you were asked to accomplish or the specific goal of your project. *(Task)*
- **Describe the steps** you took to address the problem or task. Use “I” statements to explain the specific role you played in solving the problem or overcoming the conflict. In other words, answer “What did you do?” *(Action)*
- **Don’t forget** to tell them how the story ends. How did things turn out? Did you achieve the desired outcome? Solve the problem? *(Result)*

---

**A Compelling STAR**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>R</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During my Intro Java class (CS) last semester, we were assigned a partner project at the end of term, which would serve as our final exam. The assignment was open ended. Basically, we were asked to take what we learned in class and create something cool. The basic parameters required us to incorporate networking (a computer telephone) and a database (place to store data). We were given one month to complete the assignment, at which time our project would be evaluated by our peers and professor during the final presentation.</td>
<td>We decided to design a multiplayer fantasy football game simulator. Players would determine the plays and interact with opponents remotely. The code was very complex and there were a lot of features we wanted to include. Mid-way through, we realized time was running short and we had to prioritize our features. We met to discuss our priorities and it became clear that we didn’t agree. My partner wanted to focus on the graphic elements to make the game look really good for a higher professor evaluation. I wanted to focus on more complex code to demonstrate coding skills for a higher professor evaluation.</td>
<td>After losing some time debating our positions, I suggested that we go through each feature one by one, and assign a point value to estimate its impact on our final grade, and then devote time to the features with the greatest impact, working through as many as we could until time ran out. My partner agreed. We assumed that the more visually appealing features were likely to have higher value. So we focused first on the team logos and player pictures. Then we incorporated more advanced coding to give players more play options. Ultimately we were both satisfied with our end product.</td>
<td>We presented a 10 minute demonstration to our class. The final game included a player information window with multiple images (photo, logo, etc.) and gave players more play types. The game was evaluated by our professor and approximately 100 students. We received high marks for both the visual appeal and the coding complexity, earning an A on the project.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

One of the most common behavioral based interview questions is: **Tell me about a time when you had a conflict with a team member? What was the conflict? How did you work through it?** Employers want to hire employees who recognize challenge is inherent in almost any team/group project. They want to understand your approach to working through conflict to reach a successful completion. What steps do you take to understand the others’ point of view. Do you engage others in the process?

- **Clearly define the context** (when did this situation occur? Which class, team, internship, etc.?). *(Situation)*
- **Explain the specific task** you were asked to accomplish or the specific goal of your project. *(Task)*
- **Describe the steps** you took to address the problem or task. Use “I” statements to explain the specific role you played in solving the problem or overcoming the conflict. In other words, answer “What did you do?” *(Action)*
- **Don’t forget** to tell them how the story ends. How did things turn out? Did you achieve the desired outcome? Solve the problem? *(Result)*

---

**A Compelling STAR**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S</th>
<th>T</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>R</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During my Intro Java class (CS) last semester, we were assigned a partner project at the end of term, which would serve as our final exam. The assignment was open ended. Basically, we were asked to take what we learned in class and create something cool. The basic parameters required us to incorporate networking (a computer telephone) and a database (place to store data). We were given one month to complete the assignment, at which time our project would be evaluated by our peers and professor during the final presentation.</td>
<td>We decided to design a multiplayer fantasy football game simulator. Players would determine the plays and interact with opponents remotely. The code was very complex and there were a lot of features we wanted to include. Mid-way through, we realized time was running short and we had to prioritize our features. We met to discuss our priorities and it became clear that we didn’t agree. My partner wanted to focus on the graphic elements to make the game look really good for a higher professor evaluation. I wanted to focus on more complex code to demonstrate coding skills for a higher professor evaluation.</td>
<td>After losing some time debating our positions, I suggested that we go through each feature one by one, and assign a point value to estimate its impact on our final grade, and then devote time to the features with the greatest impact, working through as many as we could until time ran out. My partner agreed. We assumed that the more visually appealing features were likely to have higher value. So we focused first on the team logos and player pictures. Then we incorporated more advanced coding to give players more play options. Ultimately we were both satisfied with our end product.</td>
<td>We presented a 10 minute demonstration to our class. The final game included a player information window with multiple images (photo, logo, etc.) and gave players more play types. The game was evaluated by our professor and approximately 100 students. We received high marks for both the visual appeal and the coding complexity, earning an A on the project.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Plan to either have available (for virtual/phone interviews) or bring materials (for in-person interviews) to take notes during the conversation. This will be helpful to formulate questions for your interviewer(s) at the end of the discussion. You do not need to have a copy of the job description available during the conversation. However, it may be helpful for you to review it for a final time before your interview begins.
It’s natural to be nervous. You want this to go well – and you may put pressure on yourself to perform. But there are several things you can do to reduce your anxiety, calm your nerves and maybe even enjoy the process a little. Keep in mind - The company has made an investment (time and money) in you by bringing you in to interview. They want you to succeed. Employers are here to interview you. Be yourself and let your personality drive the conversation. Prepare for tough questions with practice ahead of time. Review any information provided by the employer in addition to other research you are gathering prior to your interview. Be sure to demonstrate your interest in the position and organization based on your research.

**Acknowledge & Overcome Nerves**

- Be confident – they called you after all
- Be yourself – trying to be something you’re not will add to your stress and mislead employers
- Be prepared for tough questions
- Be relaxed with practice
- Be ready by doing research
- Be interested and interesting
Now Execute! Arrive to your in-person interviews 15 minutes prior to the start time. For virtual interviews, arriving into the established meeting room roughly 5 minutes early is also appropriate. Be very mindful of your posture throughout the discussion.

The Interview

• **Be on time!**
  – In fact, be 15 minutes early

• **Remember to...**
  – Sit up straight
  – Keep eye contact
  – Stand tall
  – Smile
Keep your answers relevant to the questions being asked throughout your interview. Try to avoid including information or examples that are not beneficial for the specific question being asked. Specific examples are very effective during an interview, especially if any of your experiences are quantifiable. Use these examples to provide further context for your most relevant strengths for the position. Maintain professionalism throughout your conversation. Do not use negative examples about past experiences during the interview. Prepare questions for the end of the interview utilizing the notes you gathered and research performed ahead of time.

7 Tips

1. Keep answers concise and relevant
2. Include concrete, quantifiable data
3. Demonstrate your strengths and back them up
4. Stay positive and professional
5. Maintain conversational flow
6. Keep a journal
7. Ask questions
The most common types of interviews are: Behavioral, Technical and Case. You can learn more about the different types of interviews on page #32 of the Career Guide: http://career.engin.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2020/05/careerguide.pdf.
Phone interviews often serve as the first stage of the interviewing process. During a phone interview, you do not have the benefit of being able to view our interviewer(s). However, you still want to approach your phone interview in a similar manner to that of an in-person or virtual interview. While you are not being viewed by the interviewer(s) during a phone interview, it is still important to find an appropriate place for your conversation that will allow you to maintain professionalism. Use an enthusiastic tone in your responses to reiterate your interest during the conversations.

Prepare for sudden pauses in the conversation. Remember, the employers are working through a series of questions without being able to see you. Therefore, it is likely that this may create some brief and abrupt pauses that may disrupt the conversational flow of your interview. Stay focused on the questions being asked and take your time in relaying your answers.

Phone Interviews

- Maintain good posture and smile
- Be succinct in your responses
- Be aware of your tone
- Expect pauses in the conversation
- Feel free to use notes, but don’t shuffle the papers audibly
- Find a quiet space for your interview
BlueJeans, Skype, and Google Hangouts are common options utilized by recruiters to facilitate virtual interviews. Before the interview, take time to thoroughly test the technology you are using to avoid any unforeseen issues. Do you have a readily available power source? Is the wi-fi strong? Do you have access to a landline in case your cell service is not strong in that particular location? Even if everything is checked beforehand, technology can still fail you. Make sure you have the interviewer’s phone number, just in case! Your email address and voicemail message should reflect your professionalism. Take the same approach with the username you select for your virtual interview. Use your full or given name—no nicknames!

Do not stare into the screen when responding to interview questions. Instead, speak directly into your camera. This will allow you to consistently maintain eye contact with the recruiter throughout the interview. Be sure to practice your positioning and posture prior to the interview. Prepare for the interview as if you are meeting with your recruiter in a face-to-face environment. Dress professionally, silence distractions (e.g. cellphones, pets, roommates, etc.), and find a quiet place. Also avoid distracting backgrounds and harsh backlight that will turn you into a silhouette.
Behavioral Interview

• Past behavior predicts future behavior

• Sample questions
  – Tell me about a time when you had a conflict with a teammate. What did you do to resolve it?
  – Describe a complex problem you have been asked to solve. What steps did you take to solve the problem?

• Be specific in your answers

Your resume provides a snapshot of your accomplishments, but it doesn’t tell the reader how you accomplished these things. Interviewers need to understand the “how” to determine whether your approach is a good match for their environment. As you consider your experiences and the achievements you will describe, make sure you provide evidence of the skills they are looking for. The most commonly required skills or competencies include problem solving, teamwork/collaboration, communication, etc. Utilizing the STAR technique can serve as a helpful tool to navigate these types of questions.
In the engineering world, the technical interview is quite common because it enables employers to assess your technical skills through a demonstration of how you solve problems, reach conclusions, and incorporate novel thinking into your approach. Some technical interviews are general, meaning you may be asked to solve math problems or brain teasers. Others may be specific based on the type of work you will be doing with the company.

- When answering technical interview questions, make sure to think out loud.
- Pay attention to the information that the interviewer provides to you throughout the process. In many instances, the interviewer will provide clues and direction to help you find the answer.
- Do not be afraid to ask questions in the technical interview. If you are stuck or need more information to determine the answer, ask!
- If they provide tools like a whiteboard, use them. Show them visually how you are conceptualizing your answer.

---

The Technical Interview

- Emphasizes problem solving and more detailed knowledge
- Sample questions:
  - Write a program that mimics the game Minesweeper
  - Why are manhole covers round?
- When answering technical interview questions:
  - Think out loud. Verbally walk the interviewer through your thought process and actions
  - It is okay to ask clarifying questions
In a case interview you are asked to analyze a business question or case. However, unlike most other interview formats, the case interview is an interactive process. Case interviews are most often used by consulting companies. In a case interview, the interviewer is assessing your thought process—both analytical and creative—in answering the question(s) posed. Typically, the more specific and quantitative your process is, the better! When working through the case, make sure you let the interviewer know how you are conceptualizing the problem, what evidence you are weighing (or missing) when formulating recommendations, and the recommendations themselves.

The Case Interview

• Analyze a business question or scenario

• Most often used by consulting companies to assess your thought process, how you “think on your feet”, how you cope with ambiguity, and how well you communicate

• Preparation tips:
Recruiter Feedback

“Some students need to work on citing specific examples. One especially good thing to have is an example of a creative or innovative design/process developed.”
– Ford Recruiter

“Be sure to give specific examples versus theoretical situations. Focus on what you did to resolve the issues.”
– Cummins Recruiter
The interview is not the time to be humble. It’s your time to share your accomplishments and elaborate on the contributions you have made to a team’s/group’s success! Provide evidence that you will add value to their team using past experiences!
At the end of the interview, it is important to have several questions to ask your interviewer(s). This will help you demonstrate your engagement in the discussion. You can also utilize your questions to further assess whether or not you feel the organization is a good fit for you. It is also appropriate to ask for contact information from the interviewer(s). This will allow you to send a “thank you note” at the end of the day. Additionally, it will be helpful to learn about the timeline associated with their next steps. You can use this information to follow up with the employers to inquire about any updates in the event that you have not received further information in the meantime.
Plan to send a “thank you note” via email to your interviewer(s) within 24 hours of the conclusion of the interview. This has long been an expected step in the process in the eyes of employers, and many candidates don’t do it. This can allow you to set yourself apart from other candidates potentially interviewing for the same position.
Your “thank you note” does not need to be a long and in-depth communication. Simply reference the role, itself, as well as something from the conversation that speaks to your interest in the organization. Finally, reiterate your enthusiasm and appreciation in a concluding statement. Provide your contact information as well.
Please contact the ECRC by scheduling an advising appointment via Engineering Careers or through ecrc-info@umich.edu to discuss any questions associated with your offers before accepting them. Our Offers and Acceptance of Employment Policy can also be viewed on our website through this link: https://career.engin.umich.edu/career/job-search-policies/.
Review common questions in the Career Guide and write down your answers. Find time to practice your responses with a friend, classmate, family member, etc. Utilize Engineering Careers to schedule an appointment with an ECRC Career Advisor for a Mock Interview or Interview Preparation discussion.

Consider using the Practice Video Interview tool within Engineering Careers, by Symplicity. To access the Practice Interview tool:
1. Login to your Engineering Careers account
2. Click Resources on the left hand navigation menu
3. Select Practice Video Interviews
4. Select Record New Attempt under a scenario