

# INTERVIEWS

## What should I expect?

For a competitive opportunity with a large number of applicants (e.g. graduate scheme or a sought-after placement), it's common for employers to use more than one interview stage: often starting with a telephone or asynchronous video interview, and then asking successful applicants to take one (or more) face to face interviews. Sometimes one of these interviews is part of an assessment centre – for more see our information sheet on *Assessment Centres*.

For other opportunities the selection process is likely to be shorter, and may just involve a single interview. You're likely to encounter a range of interview formats as you apply for jobs and work experience; there are tips for different formats in this information sheet.

## Interview preparation checklist

Preparation is vital! Use this checklist ✓ to help:

### Research the organisation

- What do they do? Who are their competitors?
- What's going on in the world that might affect the organisation?
- What are their values? What's their mission statement?
- Is there any recent news about the organisation? (check their press releases on their website)

### Research the job/role

- Read the job description in full.
- Consider what the job needs you to do – what might the challenges be? What about opportunities?
- If you know of someone working in this field, ask if you can talk to them and learn key topics for working in this area. Alternatively, browse job-area-specific websites – there are recommended resources to learn about different jobs on [prospects.ac.uk](https://prospects.ac.uk).

### Organise your evidence against the criteria and practice for interview questions

- Make a list of the selection criteria and note down your evidence and key example(s) for each one.
- For each key example, turn it into a STAR answer: see our *STAR Technique* information sheet.
- Use our *Sample Interview Questions and Techniques* information sheet to practice.
- Practice your 3-5 key selling points for this job: it's useful to have this 'elevator pitch' ready.

### Plan the practical elements

- Decide what you're going to wear. If in doubt, go more formal, not less; communicate that the job is important to you. Women who aren't working can get interview clothing from Smart Works [smartworks.org.uk](https://smartworks.org.uk)

- Plan your travel – allow plenty of time for traffic or public transport disruptions.
- Practice a phrase that gives you time to think if you need to regroup in an interview, or consider an answer more fully. For example: “Can I please just take a moment to think about that?” or “I’m just going to take a moment to organise my thoughts”.

## Telephone interviews

Often a telephone interview is a shorter, ‘screening’ interview to conduct an initial check that you have the potential to be a good fit for the role. It’s common for telephone interviews to be quite systematic in checking the competencies the recruiter is looking for. Usually you’ll be emailed a time and date for a telephone interview, but it’s possible to have a telephone interview with very little warning.

### Top tips

- If you typically ignore calls from unknown numbers, suspend your policy while you’re job-hunting! Some big company switchboards mean that calls from recruiters may not show up with caller ID.
- Make sure you check your email daily for details of short notice telephone interviews.
- Take it seriously – ensure you have a quiet place to talk with no interruptions, be available and prepared before the call, even dress the part if it makes you feel more ‘professional’.
- Don’t read from a prepared script: you won’t sound as genuine and will be less able to adapt to the wording of the question and any follow up questions.
- Make a note of the interviewer’s name.
- Listen for auditory clues – if the interviewer has stopped making ‘mmm, yes, ah, okay’ noises, they may not be paying attention. Check if they’re still there, if they’d like you to say more or if you’ve interpreted the question right.
- Give auditory clues – if you’re thinking, you need to tell them ‘I’m just taking a moment to think about that’ (otherwise you’ve just gone silent!)

## Asynchronous video interviews

These are interviews using an online video interface where you’re responding to questions stored in a system. Your answers are recorded for the employer to review at a later date. There is usually a time limit for preparation or thinking time (say, 30 seconds), and then a time limit for your answer (for example, 2 minutes). Typically, you only have one attempt to answer each question. You’ll usually be invited to take your video interview by logging into an online system at a time that suits you before certain deadline. You might not have a lot of notice that you need to take a video interview.

### Top tips

- Check your email daily for invitations to take a video interview.
- Don’t leave it to the last minute, in case you end up missing the window to submit your answers.
- Get familiar with the set up before you do the real thing – how long is the time to answer? Can you re-record an answer? Are there practice questions to try out?
- Don’t read from a prepared script: you won’t sound as genuine and will be less able to adapt to the wording of the question.
- If there’s not a practice feature on the system, you can create a practice by recording yourself answering typical interview questions using a webcam or your phone and a timer.
- Review your practice answers to help you improve:
  - Are you looking at the audience? If not, try looking into the camera.

- Do you look enthusiastic? Smiling helps, as does positive body language (uncrossed arms, no fidgeting).
- Are you answering the question? Listen carefully to what's being asked.
- If you've got lots of time left over, what are there more details you could add?
- If you ran out of time, consider starting with a summary of your key points, and then you can expand further on the most relevant in the time left.
- Give a professional visual impression by wearing what you would normally wear for an in-person interview, setting up your computer and webcam so that the background behind you is plain, and ensuring you have adequate lighting on your face, ideally sunlight from a nearby window.
- Ensure that you are using a reliable internet connection and your device has enough power (plug it in to a power source if you can). Make sure there will be no interruptions – put a sign on your door, turn off notifications and put your phone on silent. Talk to the Careers team if you're encountering practical obstacles to taking your video interview and we'll try to help!

## Face to face interviews

Face to face interviews range from relatively informal interviews in a conversational style with one person, to a traditional interview featuring a number of people on a 'panel' asking prepared questions. Occasionally you might encounter less typical situations such as a group interview with more than one candidate present. Where you need to travel a significant distance to take an in-person interview, the employer may offer to pay your travel and expenses, or it might be possible to take the interview via Skype (or equivalent) instead.

### Top tips

- Make sure you listen to and make eye contact with the person who is speaking. In your reply address your answer to the person who asked the question, but also make eye contact with the other people present who are listening.
- Remember to smile – you instantly look more motivated and enthusiastic about the job!
- Feel free to take notes, if it makes you feel more confident, but try not to use them. Rifling through papers or reading written paragraphs doesn't not make you appear professional, engaged or prepared! If you worry about forgetting things you want to say, try noting down few key bullet points that you can quickly glance at if needed.

## Portfolio interviews

Portfolio interviews are sometimes found in creative fields such as art, design, animation, journalism or performance. Depending on the role, you might need to provide a hard-copy portfolio, online portfolio or showreel, which will form the basis of discussion.

### Top tips:

- Consider how you decided on the examples in your portfolio; what do they say about your work?
- Revisit the process used in the work you've selected: what were the influences, inspiration, methods?
- What does your portfolio mean for your future – is there a key aspect you want to focus on more, or are you keen to increase the breadth? Who are the role models that might influence your next steps?

# Postgraduate study interviews

Interviews are not always required for entry to a postgraduate course, but where they are used, they assess your suitability for the course. They therefore typically focus on your academic aptitude and your motivation (particularly for multi-year courses).

Top tips:

- Consider your 'story'– how does your previous study/experience relate to what you want to study now? Have you made choices towards this area before? What was your dissertation or final year project? What lessons have you learnt in your academic career so far?
- Gather evidence in support of your motivation: where does your motivation come from? Does it link with career plans? Academic ambitions? Personal history? Role models?
- Think about your strengths as a student/researcher: if you've encountered challenges and setbacks in the past, what have you learnt and improved on as a result?
- Research the funding options: have a plan for how you might fund the opportunity (and if that plan isn't guaranteed, a back-up plan).

## Managing interview nerves

Nervousness is natural when we are competing for something that's important to us. Many people are nervous at interview! Nervousness is only a problem if it impairs your ability to perform in an interview. If that's the case, you might want to try out the following tips, or book an appointment to talk to a Careers Consultant.

- Start by reflecting on what happens when you get nervous? Does your heart beat faster, palms get sweaty, do you talk faster? Identify your own experiences. Does this impair your interview performance? If so, how?
- Physiological remedies: a focus on your body can help you feel more in control and it's possible to relieve some physiological symptoms. Ideas include practicing slowing your breathing (e.g. in for 3, hold for 2, out for 3), running cool water over your wrists to cool your body temperature before the interview, taking a pause for a deep breath before you answer a question, and focusing on the feeling of the chair against your back (a good way of making sure your lungs have room for those deep breaths). Try noticing the pressure of your feet on the ground (literally making you feel a little more grounded).
- Cognitive remedies: write down the negative thoughts that plague you about/during interviews. If your best friend was thinking like this, what would you say to them? Write positive equivalents down to balance things out. Reading about unhelpful thinking styles can be useful here if your thoughts are fuelling anxiety. There are more tips on managing anxious situations from Counselling and Wellbeing. Discover the support available at **Student Essentials** [student.reading.ac.uk/essentials](http://student.reading.ac.uk/essentials)
- Visualisation: Take 5 minutes and visualise how you would feel if the interview went well. What would it be like during the interview? How would you feel? How would you feel afterwards? Make the image colourful and detailed and positive. Top athletes visualise winning!
- Prepare well and practice: familiarity with your material and the experience of being interviewed can reduce anxiety. This means that every interview you do, you'll become more familiar with the process and thus regardless of the outcome, that's a valuable experience and an investment in your future.

## Practicing for interviews

- Use the Interview Question Identifier tool on **Graduates First** [reading.ac.uk/careers/graduates-first](http://reading.ac.uk/careers/graduates-first)

- Role play the interview with someone else to get used to speaking out loud.
- Film yourself answering a typical question (e.g. 'why do you want the job?') and watch it back – are you smiling? Audible? Staying on topic? Convincing?
- Book a career advice appointment to discuss your interview. View and book the latest availability on **MyJobsOnline** for a mock interview and feedback with a Careers Consultant.