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## INTRODUCTION

An interview is a conversation between employers and job seekers to learn about each other. It is an opportunity for you to highlight your skills and fit. Though a strong resume and cover letter get you in the door, your interview performance ultimately decides if you get the job. Many qualified candidates miss out by not clearly communicating their value, while those with strong interview skills often stand out.

While interviews take many forms (i.e., behavioral, case, technical), this guide focuses on behavioral interviews. For information about other types of interviews, see the Additional Resources section at the end of this guide.

## IDENTIFYING THE EMPLOYER'S HIRING NEEDS

Every employer looks for specific skills and qualities based on their unique needs. Before your interview, research the employer to understand their field, mission, and how they stand out among their peers and competitors. Check their website, news, and reports to learn about their goals, partners, funding, and recent changes affecting them.

Also, study the job description closely to know the role's key responsibilities, required skills, technical and educational qualifications, and personal traits like communication or leadership that will help you succeed. Knowing these details lets you tailor your answers to show you're exactly what they're looking for.

## CONDUCTING A SELF-ASSESSMENT

Once you know the employer's hiring needs, match them with your own education, experience, skills, and qualifications. Think about your past jobs, internships, volunteer work, projects, coursework, research, group memberships, technical skills, licenses, and personal traits like creativity or teamwork. Then focus on what matters most by reflecting on three key hiring questions employers ask:

1. **Can you do the job?** Show you have the skills, experience, and education to handle the core tasks. For example, if budget management is required, highlight any relevant experience managing budgets.
2. **Will you do the job?** Prove your commitment to the employer's mission and field. If they work on domestic violence awareness, emphasize your related work, research, or passion for the cause.
3. **Is there organizational fit?** Demonstrate that your personality and work style align with their culture. If they value teamwork, highlight your experience working or leading teams and use industry-specific language to show you understand their world.

If you identify gaps in your experience, be ready to explain how you quickly learn new skills by pointing to past examples of adaptability and learning. This honesty and positivity can turn limitations into strengths during the interview.

# PREPARING FOR AND ANSWERING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Now that you've pinpointed your most relevant skills and experiences, it's time to practice weaving them into your answers to common interview questions. Being prepared will help you answer confidently and clearly. Here are common questions you're likely to be asked:

## 1. Tell me about yourself.

Usually the first question, this sets the tone for the interview. Prepare a one-minute pitch that highlights your background, key experiences, and why you're excited about the role. Keep it focused on what's relevant to the job and organization, not your life story.

## 2. Why did you apply for this position?

This is your chance to show genuine interest in the organization and the work they do. Reference specific parts of their mission, projects, or populations they serve that resonate with you. Explain how this position fits your career path and goals, showing you've done your homework.

## 3. Tell me about your past/current experience.

Variations of this question will appear throughout the interview, often linked to your resume. Use these moments to clearly connect your experiences to the skills and responsibilities listed in the job description. Be specific about what you did, how you did it, and what the results were. See details about using the PAR method on the next page.

## 4. What are your strengths?

Employers often ask this in different ways to learn about your top skills. Use this chance to highlight your most marketable strengths—both technical skills like research or analysis, and personal qualities like leadership or teamwork. In your answer, briefly summarize these strengths and explain how they'll help you succeed in the role.

## 5. What are your weaknesses?

This question tests your self-awareness and how you grow from challenges. Be honest but avoid mentioning weaknesses that are essential to the job. Instead, pick a past weakness you've worked to improve. Explain what you did to address it and share an example. Always finish on a positive note by showing how overcoming this weakness made you stronger and better prepared for the position.

Practicing answers that incorporate your relevant background and show your fit with the employer will help you communicate your value effectively and leave a strong impression. You should also:

- Reflect on the employer's hiring needs to anticipate likely behavioral questions.
- Focus on relevant experiences from past jobs and internships.
- If using academic examples, choose ones that reflect real-world issues and skills.

## THE PAR METHOD

Behavioral interview questions often begin with phrases like 'Tell me about a time when...' or 'Describe a situation where...!'. These questions invite you to share a specific example that shows how you successfully handled a challenge or task.

The PAR method is a simple framework for answering behavioral interview questions by structuring your response into three parts: **Problem**, **Action**, and **Result**.

You briefly explain the challenge you faced, the specific steps you took to address it, and the outcome of your efforts.

**Example:** “Tell me about a time you had to do a lot with limited resources.”

### **P — Problem**

“At my previous nonprofit, we were organizing a community health fair, but our budget was unexpectedly cut by 40% due to a funding shortfall just six weeks before the event.”

### **A — Action**

“I reassessed our spending priorities and reached out to local businesses and health organizations for in-kind donations and volunteer support. I also collaborated with our communications team to launch a small social media campaign asking for specific supplies and volunteers, which generated strong community engagement.”

### **R — Result**

“Despite the budget cut, we hosted over 300 attendees, secured donations from 12 local partners, and provided free screenings and services to more people than in the previous year. It ended up being one of our most successful and community-supported events.”

The PAR method helps keep your answers focused, concise, and impactful.

## **COMMON BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

These questions focus on your professional experiences and challenges similar to those you may face in a variety of roles.

- Tell me about a time when you had to lead a project with minimal supervision?
- Tell me about a time that you translated complex data or policy research into a format accessible to a broad audience. What was the outcome?
- Describe a time you had to follow a policy or decision you disagreed with. How did you handle the situation, and what was the result?
- Tell me about a situation where you had to adjust to changes beyond your control. What was the challenge, and how did you respond?
- Tell me about a time when you failed to accomplish something. What did you learn from the experience?
- Tell me about a time that you managed multiple projects with competing deadlines. How did you prioritize and ensure successful completion?
- Describe a situation where you had to meet a tight deadline. How did you manage your time and ensure quality work?
- Give an example of a time you had to write an important document (e.g., report, proposal, analysis). What was your approach, and what impact did it have?

- Tell me about a time that you created a communication strategy for a project or organization. How did you measure its effectiveness?
- Tell me about a time when you had to explain something complex to someone without your level of expertise. How did you make sure they understood?
- Describe an instance when you used fact-finding or research skills to solve a problem. What steps did you take?
- Tell me about a time when you identified a problem and took the initiative to solve it. What was the result?
- Tell me about a time you had difficulty building a relationship with a colleague or stakeholder. What did you do, and what was the outcome?
- Tell me about a time you had to deliver difficult feedback to someone. How did you approach it, and what happened?
- Describe a time when you had to make a decision with limited information. What did you do, and what was the outcome?

## QUESTIONS TO ASK EMPLOYERS

The interview should be a two-way conversation. Most interviewers expect you to ask questions, so come prepared with at least three. If a topic is covered during the interview, don't ask about it again. Sample questions include:

- What qualities make someone successful in this position?
- How is success typically measured in this role?
- What growth or development opportunities are available for someone in this role?
- What originally brought you to the organization and what has kept you here?
- What challenges or changes is the team currently facing?
- What does onboarding look like for this position?
- What are the current goals that the organization is focused on, and how does this team work to support hitting those goals?
- What are some of the top goals for you and your team right now?
- What do you find most meaningful about the work you do at [EMPLOYER]?
- How do your teams communicate about work? How do they build strong relationships?
- Where have successful employees previously in this role progressed to?
- What are the most important things you'd like to see someone accomplish in the first 30, 60, and 90 days on the job?
- How do you promote inclusivity on your team so that all employees can succeed?
- What are the next steps in the hiring process?

Do not ask about salary or benefits until they have made you an offer.

## CRAFTING YOUR ONE-MINUTE PITCH

Imagine you only have one minute to speak with an employer. What can you say to make them want to hire you? This information should come across in your brief introduction—a one-minute pitch—that sets a positive tone for the rest of the interview.

## 1. Begin by reflecting on the employer’s hiring needs and your own self-assessment.

- What is this employer looking for in a candidate?
- What are the most relevant and important qualities I bring to the table? How will they benefit the employer?
- What unique qualities can I offer that other candidates might not?

## 2. Identify one or two key points that you want the employer to know. These might include:

- A brief overview of your relevant educational and professional background.
- How you became interested in this field or organization.
- How the position aligns with your short-term and long-term career goals.

## 3. Incorporate this information into a short introduction that answers the common interview question: “Tell me about yourself.”

### Sample Response 1:

"Certainly. In May, I'll be graduating from NYU Wagner with a Master of Urban Planning degree, focusing on transportation. In addition to my coursework, I've spent the past year interning with the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council, where I honed my skills in travel forecasting and regional transportation planning. I also had the opportunity to collaborate with industry leaders—including your organization—who are developing innovative and environmentally friendly transportation systems. I'm extremely passionate about the work you're doing, and I truly appreciate the opportunity to interview with you today."

### Sample Response 2:

"I'm passionate about promoting civic engagement, especially in underserved communities. I've spent the past year and a half studying at NYU Wagner and am now in my final semester of the MPA program, graduating this December. My courses in strategic management and program evaluation have taught me how to effectively scale and measure the impact of nonprofit programs. I'm also currently working on a capstone project in partnership with Common Cause NY and Community Votes, where my team is working to improve the reach and effectiveness of voter engagement efforts. Your organization aligns closely with both my academic background and professional interests, and I'm excited about the possibility of contributing my experience to your work."

## ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR YOUR ONE-MINUTE PITCH

Don't tell your life story. Focus only on what's relevant to the employer. To do this well, you need to know your audience. For every point you make, ask yourself: "*Why does this matter to them?*"

Watch your tone. Your pitch should sound like a natural conversation. Avoid rattling off a rehearsed list of experiences. Instead, use your pitch as a guide to briefly highlight your most relevant skills, experience, and interests.

Be clear and direct. Don't make the employer guess what you mean. If you're passionate about improving treatment quality for medically underserved children in New York City, say exactly that.

# LEVERAGING AI FOR YOUR INTERVIEW PREP

Generative AI tools like ChatGPT can be helpful when preparing for interviews. Like any tool, however, they should be used thoughtfully and ethically. You are ultimately responsible for the accuracy and authenticity of your interview answers, so use AI to supplement your preparation, not replace it.

## GENERATE RELEVANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

You can paste a job description into a tool like ChatGPT and ask for a list of possible questions you might be asked. This can help you anticipate topics and prepare thoughtful responses.

**Example Prompt:** “Here’s a job description: [paste job description]. Suggest ten possible interview questions I might be asked.”

### **You can also follow up with:**

“Generate a PAR answer for question #5 based on my resume.”

Make sure to edit and fact-check the response so it accurately reflects your experience.

## PRACTICE WITH MOCK INTERVIEWS

AI can simulate a practice interview and provide feedback to help you refine your answers.

**Example Prompt:** “Act as a hiring manager for a [position title]. Ask me behavioral interview questions one at a time and give feedback on my responses.”

Use this as a starting point to develop your answers and identify areas for improvement.

## STAY CURRENT ON NEWS AND TRENDS

AI can provide a quick overview of recent developments in your field or issue area. This can help you walk into your interview informed and ready to discuss relevant topics.

**Example Prompt:** “What are the most recent developments related to [issue or topic] in the past three months? I’m preparing for an interview in this field.”

Use this information to guide your own research and verify any facts or events mentioned.

## IMPORTANT REMINDERS

- **Always fact-check AI-generated content.** Do not rely on AI alone for news, statistics, or information about organizations. Use trusted sources such as news outlets, academic research, and the organization’s website.
- **Be cautious with sensitive information.** Avoid sharing personal documents like your resume or cover letter with any tool that does not guarantee data privacy.
- **Keep your responses authentic.** Practicing with AI is useful, but memorizing scripted answers can make you sound less genuine. Practice with other people to ensure you’re ready to speak in your own voice.

- **Research the organization and your interviewer independently.** Use LinkedIn or a web search to look up information about the organizations and your interviewer's professional background. Do not rely on AI for this, as the information may be outdated or inaccurate.

When used responsibly, AI can be a helpful part of your interview preparation. Still, it is *your* knowledge, perspective, and personal story that will make the biggest difference in the interview.

## POST-INTERVIEW STEPS

### 1. THANK YOU NOTE

Always send a thank you email within 24 hours of your interview. Email is the standard and ensures your message arrives before a hiring decision is made.

- Personalize it: Avoid "copy-paste" messages. Mention a specific topic or project you discussed.
- Reiterate Value: Briefly remind them why your skills are the right fit for the specific challenges they mentioned.
- Pro Tip: If you don't have their email, ask for a business card at the end of the interview or clarify the best way to send a follow-up. You can also find most professionals on LinkedIn.

### 2. FOLLOWING UP

If the recruiter gave you a timeline (e.g., "We'll decide by Friday"), wait until that window has passed plus one business day before reaching out. If no timeline was given, one to two weeks is the standard for a polite check-in.

### 3. HANDLING REJECTION ("BRIDGE-BUILDING" APPROACH)

Responding graciously keeps the door open for future roles. You can ask for feedback, but keep in mind that many companies have "no-feedback" policies for legal reasons—don't take a "no" personally.

#### SAMPLE 1: PERSONALIZED THANK YOU

Subject: Thank you: [Position Name] Interview – [Your Name]

Dear [Interviewer Name],

Thank you so much for the opportunity to interview for the [Position Name] role today. I truly enjoyed our conversation, especially learning more about [mention a specific project or team goal discussed].

Our discussion reinforced my excitement about joining [Employer Name]. I am confident that my experience in [mention a specific skill] would allow me to contribute immediately to your team's success with [mention a goal they have].

Please let me know if I can provide any additional information. I look forward to hearing from you regarding the next steps.

Best regards,

[Your Name] [Your Phone Number/LinkedIn]

## **SAMPLE 2: POLITE FOLLOW-UP**

Subject: Following Up: [Position Name] – [Your Name]

Hello [Interviewer Name],

I hope you're having a great week.

I'm touching base to reiterate my interest in the [Position Name] role. I am still very excited about the possibility of joining [Employer Name] and wanted to see if there are any updates regarding the hiring timeline that you can share.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best regards,

[Your Name]

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## **SAMPLE 3: REJECTION RESPONSE**

Subject: Moving Forward: [Position Name] – [Your Name]

Hello [Interviewer Name],

Thank you for letting me know about your decision. While I am disappointed I won't be joining the team at this time, I truly appreciated the opportunity to learn about [Employer Name].

If you are open to it, I would value any brief feedback you might have regarding my interview or areas where I can improve my candidacy for future roles.

I wish you and the team the best of luck with the new hire, and I hope our paths cross again in the future.

Best regards,

[Your Name]

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

As you prepare for your interviews, you have access to a wide range of resources across NYU.

**The NYU Wagner Office of Career Services (OCS) provides direct support to students and alumni of Wagner via:**

- [Career Advisement](#): Schedule a 30-minute appointment with a Career Services advisor via the Career Directory. Career advisors can conduct behavioral mock interviews with you and discuss ways to best highlight your unique skills and experiences.
- [Wagner Career Directory](#): Wagner's online job database. Use it to search and apply for jobs, internships, and fellowships, and to RSVP for career events.
- [Career Guides](#): Comprehensive guides for all areas of career development, including resumes, networking, interviewing, salary negotiation, and more!
- [Professional Development Resources](#): A collection of job boards, professional associations, and other helpful industry resources to assist in your career exploration. Learning more about your chosen field will help you tailor your resume for specific opportunities.

**Additionally, all NYU students and alumni can access these campus-wide resources:**

- [NYU Wasserman Center for Career Development](#): NYU's central campus career office provides advising, professional resources, and events available to all NYU students and alumni.
- [NYU Wasserman Industry-Based Career Communities](#): Career Communities help you explore career paths, prepare for the job search, and connect with opportunities based on chosen industries
- [NYU Handshake](#): Handshake is the NYU Wasserman Center's online job and event database. Use it to search and apply for jobs, internships, and fellowships, and to RSVP for career events.
- [Firsthand Guides](#): Rankings, ratings, reviews, and background information on over 120 industries, over 5,000 employers, and over 840 professions.
- [Big Interview](#): Interactive tool providing video interviewing lessons and skills practice, as well as coaching to improve technical elements including eye contact, filler words, pace, tone, and more.
- [CaseCoach](#): Comprehensive guide to case interviews, including video lectures, sample recorded interviews and feedback, rubrics, and practice cases and tasks.