



Interview Tips

I

Congratulations! You've crafted a flawless resume and cover letter that have garnered the attention of the hiring committee, and you've been called in for an interview. Don't rest on your laurels just yet, though. You still have a lot of work to do. The first step? Preparing for the interview.

Do Your Homework

Part One: Research

Once you are tapped for an interview, make it your mission to find out as much as possible about the firm or company that has called you in. This will allow you to craft intelligent questions for your interviewer. Knowing something about the firm or company is also a sign of respect. It shows that you take the interview seriously. One easy place to start is with the firm's website. Don't stop there, though. You may also wish to consult the NALP Directory of Legal Employers, Martindale-Hubbell, Lexis, and Westlaw. Your law school career center can also provide a wealth of information. Some career centers may maintain files on students or alumni who have previously worked with the employer. If possible, try to contact past summer associates or alumni to get some personal insight into the workings of the firm. Even if you have already graduated, contact your school's career center to find out what resources are available to you. Finally, if you know who is going to interview you, look up his or her bio on : the firm's website. You can learn their interests and work that knowledge into conversation during the interview. You will show resourcefulness and flatter the interviewer.

If you are considering relocating, make sure you have an answer to the question, "Why do you want to be in Boston?" This is especially important if a firm can tell from your resume that you are a born-and-bred Californian. Saying that you have a great-aunt that lives in Boston isn't going to cut it. Likewise, you don't want to give the impression that you have chosen to relocate simply because your spouse has a job in the area. What if your spouse gets transferred? Make sure you have your own reasons for moving to a particular city, and do some research so that you can show a serious interest in the area. Obtain information from the chamber of commerce, local newspapers, or the local bar association.

Part Two: Marketing

Before you can effectively market yourself, you must have a good sense of what you have said on your resume. This step may sound simple, but just having a well-written resume isn't enough. You must also be able to elaborate on your experiences, articulately and concisely. To do this, you need to determine the most important points to get across to your potential employer. Your research should have helped you determine what qualities are most important to the firm you're interviewing with. Play up the qualities you possess that mesh best with the firm's needs. Always seek to answer the implicit question, "Why should this organization hire you?" If you have some idea about what you would most like to highlight in an interview, you will be less likely to stumble through an unintelligible, long-winded answer when asked, "So, tell me about your experiences at Firm X."



Remember, the interviewer doesn't want you to simply regurgitate what is on your resume. He or she can read that information! Instead, the interviewer is looking for further insight into your past experiences. He or she may also want to see how well you express yourself and how quickly you think on your feet.

Part Three: Smart Questions

Many interviewers say it's a turnoff when a job-seeker has absolutely no questions about the job. To them, it's a sign that you either didn't do any research on the firm or company or you simply don't care that much about the job. No interviewer is likely to answer every single question you could think of in an interview, so make sure you have something to ask! In an interview situation, there is such a thing as a dumb question. Make sure you ask smart questions. The list below can provide you with ideas:

- What is a typical day like for an associate/attorney?
- How would you describe your ideal associate/attorney?
- What traits are most important for success?
- How are new lawyers trained?
- What is the partnership track for associates?
- What are the criteria for advancement?
- What cases best highlight this firm's strengths?
- Do attorneys work together in teams?

You may also wish to ask some questions that can help you develop a rapport with your interviewers. For instance, you might ask why he or she joined the firm or what a typical day is like at his or her level.

Here are some questions you should NOT ask during an initial interview. Some are questions that you should not ask at all:

- What kind of compensation can I expect?
- Does your benefit plan cover mental therapy?
- How many vacation days will I get?
- Does the company give annual bonuses?
- Will I be expected to work weekends?
- Will you pay for my relocation expenses?

Part Four: Smart Answers

There are some questions that are asked with regularity during job interviews. While you don't want to memorize an answer and sound too rehearsed, you should give yourself some "talking points" that will allow you to convey your answer without rambling on and on. Some questions are tricky. By giving your answer some thought ahead of time, you can avoid being caught off guard. Some typical interview questions are:



- What is your greatest strength? What is your greatest weakness?
The “greatest strength” question should be easy to answer. You’ll probably have to give your “greatest weakness” a little more thought. It is important to portray any weaknesses in the best possible light. For instance, if you have a stubborn streak, you might say, “I am passionate about my beliefs, so I now make it a point to try and see things from others’ perspectives.” Or, if you aren’t a risk-taker, you might frame it this way: “I usually take the safe path, which brings expected results. I want to broaden my horizons, though, and start taking some calculated risks in my work, which could lead to bigger returns.”
- Why do you want to be a lawyer?
“My father is a lawyer,” or “I’ve always enjoyed debate” are NOT good answers. The interviewer wants to see that you are self-motivated to become a lawyer and that you understand that being an attorney involves more than just arguing. Did you or a family member have an experience with the law that made you want to pursue justice? Did a strong belief in equal rights lead you to law school? Be honest, but avoid answers that are trite or preachy. Just try to remember what first interested you in the practice of law.
- Why are you interested in our firm?
Now is the time to show off the research that you’ve done on this firm. If you are impressed by the number of lawyers who participate in pro bono work, say so. If the strong intellectual property department intrigues you, let the interviewer know. Just avoid giving an answer that demonstrates that you didn’t do your homework. For instance, don’t go on and on about the elder law department when only one or two lawyers focus on that.
- What have you accomplished that you are most proud of?
Wrong answer? “Um, uh, I don’t really know. My good grades, I guess.” Earning good grades is indeed something to be proud of, but try saying something like this: “I’ve always been a good student, but torts was a tough class for me. I worked very hard and devoted extra hours to studying, which is why I am most proud of the ‘A’ I received in that class.” Of course, if you’ve been out of school for several years, you’ll need to come up with a recent accomplishment. Needless to say, it should be law-related, whether it’s an important case you won or an article published in a legal journal. Remember, speak clearly and don’t stutter.

Once you’ve researched the company, have figured out how to market yourself, and have thought of some smart questions and smart answers, it’s time to turn your attention to another matter: what to wear to your interview.

Dressing the Part

The legal profession is still fairly conservative, so that means you should dress fairly conservatively. Whether you are male or female, you’ll need a good suit that fits you well.

Men

A sport coat and slacks won’t cut it for this interview. And don’t even think of trying to get away with a blazer that sort of matches those Dockers. You need a quality two-piece suit. A suit with traditional styling will be most versatile. Sure, those longer, four-button suit jackets worn over a collarless shirt with no tie may look hip on some celebrities, but keep in mind: you’re not a celebrity.



Color

A solid navy blue or charcoal gray is most traditional. Pinstripes are permissible, as long as they are very subtle. *Fabric*

The suit should be 100 percent wool. The shirt should be 100 percent cotton with a matte finish.

Jacket

The jacket should have two or three buttons. Fit is very important. The jacket should button without straining and the sleeves should end at about your wrist bone, allowing about a quarter-inch of your shirt cuff to show.

Pants

Suit pants traditionally have a cuff.

Shirt

White is the safest bet, and it also hides sweat stains the best. Off-white or pale blue are also acceptable. No button-down collars—they are too informal.

Tie

Yes, you have to wear a tie. Look for a quality, 100-percent silk tie with a subtle pattern. Though it became somewhat of a cliché, a red “power tie” still signifies assertiveness. No bow ties. The “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” look is played out and is too trendy for a job interview anyway.

Jewelry

Take out all earrings, tongue rings, and facial piercings. The only acceptable jewelry for a man is a wedding ring.

Watch

A watch adds a nice touch, but your Timex with a plastic band won't add to the professional look you are going for. Choose a watch with a nice leather strap or a metal band.

Shoes

With a navy blue or gray suit, black shoes are best. Make sure they are clean, well-polished and in good repair. Wing-tips or cap toe styles are most appropriate.

Socks

Your socks should match the suit.

Belt

The belt must match the shoes. Make sure the buckle isn't too big or flashy.

Cuff links/Tie Tack

Acceptable if subtle.

Briefcase

A small leather briefcase is appropriate and necessary to hold extra copies of your resume, a pen, and notepaper. No backpacks or messenger bags. The pen should be of good quality, not a Bic! And please, don't bring a sheaf of loose-leaf paper or a wirebound notebook. Invest in something that looks professional. Try an office supply store. If you carry a cell phone or pager, make sure it is turned off!

Hair

Make sure it is neat and well groomed, but don't make it too sticky, stiff, or slick. Shorter is better. The clean-shaven look is most professional.



Cologne

The last thing you want to do is give your employer an allergy attack, so either lay off the cologne or use it very, very sparingly.

Women

This is not the time to show off your great figure or your fabulous sense of style. This is the time to create a professional image. The best way to do that is in a traditional skirt suit. Yes, a nice dress may look pretty, but it lacks a sense of authority. Yes, pants may be more comfortable, but a skirt suit is more formal.

Color

Navy blue or gray are most traditional. Black may also be acceptable.

Fabric

The suit should be 100 percent wool or a wool blend. Stay away from synthetics, if possible. A silk blouse or shell underneath is classic.

Jacket

Make sure you can button it without having the fabric pull. Once the jacket is buttoned, it should not gape open around the buttons. If it does, it's too tight.

Skirt

The skirt should hover around your knee. Any shorter is unprofessional. Any longer and you may look dowdy. Make sure you can walk without the skirt riding up or wrinkling across your hips.

Shirt

A blouse or shell conveys a professional look. Try white, cream, or any pastel that coordinates with the suit and complements your skin tone.

Jewelry

Keep it simple. Wear no more than one pair of earrings. Small hoops or studs work best. A single strand of pearls adds polish, and your watch should have a nice leather band or a metal bracelet. Keep rings to a minimum—no more than one on each hand. Again, remove any facial piercings or tongue rings.

Shoes

Make sure they are clean and polished. Choose a color that coordinates with your suit. Heels should be no higher than two inches. Make sure you can walk comfortably! If you buy new shoes, it may help to break them in a few days before the interview. Be sure to scuff up the soles so that you won't slip on polished hardwood or marble floors.

Pantyhose

Yes, you have to wear them. A color that matches your skin tone works best. Avoid white or off-white. Stash an extra pair in your briefcase or purse in case of runs.

Purse/Briefcase

Carry one or the other, but not both. A briefcase can look more professional and will provide you with more room to carry extra copies of your resume, a good-quality pen (not Bic!), and some notepaper. Don't carry loose-leaf sheets or a spiralbound notebook like the one you used in high school. Find something more appropriate at an office supply store. If you carry a cell phone or pager, make sure it is turned off!



Hair

Keep it neat. If you have a tendency to play with your hair when you are nervous, you may want to tie it back away from your face.

Makeup

Don't cake it on. If you don't normally use makeup, that is fine. If you do, keep it natural looking. No sparkles or excess shine. A little powder, lipstick, and mascara should be plenty.

Perfume

Keep in mind that heavy scents can trigger a sneezing fit, so consider skipping the perfume or wearing a very small amount. Do not use scented body wash, scented lotion, scented hairspray, or perfume. That's just an asthma attack waiting to happen.

By now, you've done your research on the company and picked out a professional, flattering suit. Your briefcase is packed with extra copies of your resume, a pen, and paper to take notes on. You may even want to throw in some reading material, but make it something of substance, not Cosmo or Maxim. On the night before the interview, you should go to bed early and get a good night's sleep. Now you are ready for interview day.

The Main Event

Make sure you are well rested before your interview. If at all possible, get outside for some fresh air. Know exactly where you are going and leave early. Factor in time for traffic, parking, and any other possible delays. Ideally, you should arrive at your interview site at least 20 minutes ahead of time. Check out the neighborhood, or sit in the lobby perusing your reading material. You should arrive at the receptionist's desk no more than five minutes before your scheduled interview time. Do not arrive even a minute late!

Be Polite

Introduce yourself to the receptionist in a warm, professional manner. In some offices, every employee's opinion counts, so don't act like anyone is beneath you. If the receptionist asks to get you anything, make sure to say "please" and "thank you."

First Impressions

Often, people will form a judgment about you within the first 10 seconds of meeting you. Make your first impression a positive one. As your interviewer approaches you, stand up straight and smile. Extend your hand, look the interviewer in the eye, and say, "Hello, Mr./Ms. Interviewer." Speak in a confident, upbeat tone to convey your enthusiasm to be there.

Body Language

Pay attention to the way you sit. Leaning forward in your chair can make you look eager, but it can also imply that you are nervous or on edge. Lean forward only when making an important point. Try to sit back in your chair to appear comfortable and confident. Maintain eye contact with your interviewer. If that is difficult for you to do, try focusing just above the eyes. Practice active listening. If you really try to absorb what the interviewer is saying, you will seem more focused and alert. Keep your hands folded in your lap when you are not talking, but it is fine to use some gestures when



speaking. Just be aware of any nervous tics, such as playing with your hair or rubbing your nose. Women should keep their legs crossed at the ankle and men should keep both feet on the floor, knees together. Crossing the legs at the knee (women) or propping one ankle on the opposite knee (men) can appear too informal.

Keeping the Flow

In a good interview, you and the interviewer will share the responsibility for keeping the conversation going. You should not be passive, but at the same time, you shouldn't fight to control the interview. Instead, pay attention to the natural rhythm of the conversation. Don't interrupt your interviewer, but when it's your turn to speak, don't hesitate to talk yourself up. Remember, this is your opportunity to sell yourself. When you are asked a question, don't simply answer "yes" or "no." Elaborate with specific examples, if possible. Don't ramble, though. Keep your answers clear and succinct. Remember the marketing strategy you developed for yourself, and be sure to highlight your greatest strengths. This is when your interview practice will come in handy! If you are afraid, you will get flustered. You can keep a "cheat sheet" in your notebook of important points to talk about and smart questions to ask.

Sell, Sell, Sell

Never forget that the point of your interview is to impress your potential employer with your talent, drive, determination, and ambition. You want to turn the question "Why should we hire this person?" into "Why wouldn't we hire this person?" Always maintain a positive attitude, and portray yourself in the best positive light. According to Jim Schwartz, a partner at the Los Angeles firm of Manatt, Phelps and Phillips, "Candidates should be energetic. Law firms are looking for 'can-do' candidates who they believe will be able to become self-starters." A good attitude can be a strong selling point.

The Peer Interview

Sometimes, in addition to meeting with more senior partners, you will interview with associates who are closer to your age. This is a wonderful opportunity to find out what work at the firm is really like for someone at your level. Be careful how you relate to this interviewer, however. Now is not the time to show off your hyper-competitive, aggressive side. Remember, this is someone with whom you could end up working closely. Act warm and friendly, but don't get overly chummy. You may end up talking about life outside the firm, but don't discuss your love life or your hard-partying weekend ways. This is still an interview, so keep it professional.

The Interview Meal

Sometimes, members of the hiring committee will take you out to lunch in an effort to assess your behavior in a more social setting. If this idea makes you uncomfortable, you may want to brush up on your etiquette. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Your bread plate is on your left; the water glass is on your right. If there is more than one fork, use the outermost one for salad and work inward.
- Place your napkin on your lap when you sit down at the table. Men, do not tuck the napkin into your collar or throw your tie over your shoulder while eating.
- If you need to leave the table during the meal, simply say, "Excuse me, please." Don't try to get cute by saying, "I need to visit the little girls' room." Your napkin should be left on your chair.



- Don't order the most expensive thing on the menu. Choose something from the middle of the price range.
- Don't order alcohol with lunch unless everyone else is having a drink. Even then, do so only at your interviewer's urging.
- Treat the restaurant staff well. No one is impressed by a condescending attitude toward the waiter.

The Close

At some point, the interview will naturally draw to a close. The interviewer may ask if you have any more questions. You may want to ask just one more thing, but don't overstay your welcome. If you have another question or a final point to make, keep it brief. If this firm is one of your top choices, now is a good time to say so. You should always thank the interviewer for his or her time and say something like, "I've really enjoyed getting to know more about this firm. I hope we'll have the opportunity to speak again." Even if you think you bombed the interview, don't let on. The interviewer may have an entirely different impression. Remain confident and be sincere.

What Interviewers Like

- Energetic, enthusiastic candidates
- Candidates who have done research on the firm and can intelligently discuss how they would be a good fit. This is especially important, says Jim Schwartz, because "It is, with limited exceptions, a buyers' market at large-level firms these days." The candidate who best fits with the firm's identity is most likely to be the successful candidate.
- Candidates who can distinguish themselves from the masses. If you have something that sets you apart, whether it is exceptional writing skills or a unique job experience, be sure to highlight it.
- Candidates who have strong ties to an area. A firm does not want to hire someone who may just move away after a few years. If possible, candidates should discuss "what organizations, volunteer work, or other activities they engage in that provide ties to the community," says Schwartz.

What Interviewers Dislike

- Candidates who are unprepared. If you can't bother to do some research on the firm, why would an interviewer believe that you will make an effort to do good work once you are hired?
- Candidates who don't ask any questions. This makes you seem passive or disinterested.
- Candidates who reveal that they aren't all that interested in the practice of law or in practicing in a particular area. "We eliminated from consideration a candidate who reported that he wanted to practice for a few years and then become a law professor," said Rocky Walker, a partner at Jackson Walker in San Antonio, Texas. "Ditto for a law student who was not sure that the practice of law in Texas was sufficiently sophisticated."
- Inarticulate candidates who answer questions with a "yes" or a "no." The interview is a two-way street, and ultimately, you should leave your interviewer with the impression that he or she actually enjoyed talking to you.
- Candidates who are disrespectful or display a cocky, "know-it-all" attitude. A sense of entitlement will get you nowhere.
- Candidates who show up late.



All right. You've asked smart questions, you've given smart answers, you were well-dressed, you showed up on time, and you avoided all the pitfalls that turn interviewers off. What more can you do? There is one final step in the interview process that can make you shine.

Thank You, Thank You, Thank You

The thank-you letter is the finishing touch in the interview process. It shows that you have excellent manners and that you valued the time you spent with the interviewer. You should write a thank-you note even if you don't feel like the firm was a good fit for you. You never know when you might cross paths with your interviewer again.

A thank-you letter should be hand-written on good stationery. If your penmanship isn't what it should be, practice. A hand-written note conveys a touch of personality that a computer-generated letter or email just can't match. The letter does not need to be long; a few sentences should suffice. You should write a thank-you letter to each person who interviewed you. Make sure to vary the content. Your interviewers will most likely compare letters and a "personal" note that tells three people the exact same thing doesn't seem so personal anymore. Also, your letter should be prompt. Write it the same day that you have the job interview, and get it in the mail so that it will arrive just a few days later.

In the first paragraph, express your appreciation for the opportunity to meet with the interviewer. Give a specific example of something you enjoyed learning or talking about. In the second paragraph, mention a relevant skill that you could bring to the job. If at all possible, tie it to something that the interviewer mentioned. In the final paragraph, reiterate your strong interest in working for the firm, and let the interviewer know that you would be happy to provide any further information he or she might need to make a decision.

A sample letter might look like this:

Dear Ms. Potential Employer,

It was a pleasure meeting with you this afternoon. I truly enjoyed the opportunity to learn more about how Multihyphenate Firm operates. I was glad to learn that first-year associates are given the chance to work closely with senior partners.

You mentioned that the firm seeks new lawyers with exceptional writing and research skills. My writing abilities are getting a thorough workout in my "Legal Research and Writing" class, and I expect to receive an excellent grade.



Multihyphenate Firm is among my top choices. My interview today only confirms my belief that I could be a valuable new associate. If you have further questions, please contact me at 555-HIR-EME. Again, thank you for the interview. I hope we have an opportunity to work together in the future.

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Yours truly,

Eager Law Student

Once you have written a warm, polite thank-you letter, you have done all you can to make yourself a stellar candidate. If, for some reason, this particular job does not work out, remain confident in your abilities, and focus your attention on the next interview.

Best of luck!