Interview Best Practices
An Introduction
Today will provide a few concrete tips on interview best practices as well as frameworks for answering representative questions during job interviews.
Today’s Agenda

1. Pre-interview
2. Interview (esp. research and teaching)
3. Post Interview
1. Pre-Interview
Pre-Interview

For Skype interviews:
- Technology
- Staging
- Quirks
- Etiquette

For in-person first round interviews:
- Accessories
- Non-verbal

For both:
- Attire
Technology

- Use a hardwired connection if possible
- Rent a microphone (or make sure that your space has great acoustics)
- Find the right volume on your speakers (headphones are not ideal)
- Make sure you’ve used the equipment
- Always have a second device
Staging

- “Find a bookcase”
- Keep things **simple** but **not bland**
  - Don’t distract the viewer
  - e.g. Table with a flower vase off to the side
  - Bookshelf: varied patterns/empty space
  - Art posters on a blank wall
- What to **avoid**
  - Busy, Blank, Bright (or reflective)
- Ask a friend for help with staging
Quirks

Eyes up
No matter what, your focal point is the camera!

It’s tempting but avoid constantly checking to see how you look
Etiquette

- **DO** close all programs
- **DO** use your hands
- **DO** sit with feet flat
- **DO** pause

- **DON’T** cross arms
- **DON’T** hunch over
- **DON’T** shout
- **DON’T** get too close to the camera
On-site Interviews
Prep for the Elements
In the **Week(s) before:**
- Do **research**
- Record **yourself**
- ...in front of a **mirror**
- Practice with **partners**
- Develop **questions**
- Know:
  - Your resume
  - Your strengths
  - Your weaknesses
  - Your work style
  - Tricky questions

**24 hours before:**
- Arrive in town with **time to spare**
- Check out **location**
- **Sleep** (but caffeinate)
- Read something unrelated—even **enjoyable**—on the morning of your conversation.
- **Goldilocks** zone
Accessories

- Your pens
- Copies of resume
- Notebook
- H₂O or Coffee
- Post-it notes
- Breath mints
Accessories: This, Not That
Non-verbal

- **80% in 20 Seconds**
  - Smile / Energy
  - Handshake-ready

- **Eyes up**
  - Where?
  - Bridge of the nose
  - Keep them level
  - But you can look off!

- **Posture**
  - Hands at side
  - Minimal gestures
  - Feet flat
  - Back straight
Attire

EVERYONE
- FIT, NOT $$$
- Dress professionally (no half-half even if it’s Skype)
- Avoid bright colors
- Avoid busy prints
- Consider the “corporate” question
- Layer for flexibility

WOMEN
- Easy on the jewels
- Make sure the hair is not getting in the way

MEN
- Very clean facial hair
- Simple tie
Questions?
2. Interview
The Interview Breakdown

- Most first-round interviews last anywhere from 30 minutes to 1 hour. However, some are as short as 15-20 minute.
- Usually, 5-10 minutes are devoted to your own questions, and the rest is split between skills/fit/behavioral (and at times technical)
General: Ten Tips for Success

- 80% of what hiring committees think of you is determined in the first 20 seconds
- Your answers are too long (and/or too detailed, too dense)
- Understand what motivates the question
- Know your strengths and weaknesses
- Answers have beginnings, middles, ends
- The # of possible questions is not infinite
- It’s okay to ask for time and clarification
- Practice the way you play
- Always have good questions ready
- Always send thank you notes
Examples of Questions (I)

The Question
“Tell us about yourself/walk me through your resume”

Motivation
The interviewer wants to see how you situate yourself within a specific field.

Traps
- Thinking and speaking like a student.
- Repeating your resume.
- TM’s: Too much information, too much specialized information and jargon, too much monologue.

Tactics
- Brevity: Two sentences instead of three
- Use smaller “building blocks”: instead of a 3-minute response think about three, 1-minute responses.
- Focus on broad stakes and not details.
Being Modular

István Banyai

grad.uchicago.edu
Why be modular?

- Allows you to be interruptible
- Helps keep you organized
- Creates hierarchy of importance
- Ensures central message isn’t truncated
Your ultimate goal, regardless of settings, is to have a good conversation.

Monologues, by definition, are not conversations.
The Question
“Why do you want this job?” [“Why should we hire you?”]

Motivation
Interviewers want to get a sense of your vision for your career path—past, present, future.

Traps
- Being generic
- Not interweaving your specific story with theirs

Tactics
- Express the specific things that excite you about this job (aside from the paycheck!)
- Link the aspects of the job to your past experience and your future career plan (as someone who has done X, and who sees their future in Y, this opportunity is especially exciting because of...)

Examples of Questions (II)
Examples of Questions (III)

The Question
“What’s your greatest weakness?”

Motivation

Traps
- Thinking that this question is about empirical truths
- Offering too much information/details
- Being too personal or too generic
- Not ending on a positive note

Tactics
- Remember that this is an exercise in self-narration. You’re expected to choose a weakness that showcases an understanding of context
- Keep story short, details minimal.
- Being too personal or too generic
- Use “softeners” (past tense; I have a tendency); indicate steps you’ve taken to improve and your happiness with the progress/growth
This isn’t about “the TRUTH”
The Questions
Do you have questions for us?

Motivation
The interviewer wants to see how you see yourself fitting in, that you understand the position and the various contexts of the job.

Traps
- Not knowing or not understanding the specifics of a position
- Not understanding the difference between a first round and second/third round interview

Tactics
- Do your homework (“it’s a great company!” will not get you the job)
- Contextualize and explain your motivation (“I’ve spent time doing ABC and have enjoyed the experience. Can you say more about opportunities to do similar things in company X?”)
- Weave things that excite you about the position into your story—a story that combines your past and present with the future you see yourself having at that position.
- Find out as much as you can about the company’s hiring process.
Illegal Questions

Illegal Questions
Questions about national origin, citizenship, age, marital status, disabilities, arrest and conviction record, military discharge status, race, gender, or pregnancy status are illegal. Any question that asks a candidate to reveal information about these topics without the question having a job related basis are a violation of various state and federal discrimination laws.

Examples of Illegal Questions
- Are you a U.S. citizen?
- Are you planning to have children?
- What does your husband/wife do?
- How old are you?
- What is your religious affiliation?
How to Deal with Illegal Questions

If asked an illegal question you can:

- **Choose not to answer**
  
  “I’m uncomfortable with this question and prefer not to respond”

- **Choose to answer**
  
  - Respond directly and briefly if you feel comfortable doing so
  - Respond to the intent of the question
  
  “Nothing in my personal life will prevent me from taking this job”

  - Ask for the motivation behind the question
  
  “It’s not clear to me why you’re asking about this. Can you please explain?”

  - Deflect
  
  “It’s interesting you ask me about children--do you have kids yourself?”

  - Ignore and change the subject
  
  “I hear the music scene here is great”
Questions?
3. Post-interview
Follow up

- **Follow up every interview with a thank you email**
- If you can, send individual emails
- However—
  - In short Skype interviews it may not feel right. You still should email but can send a group email to the search committee as a whole.
- **Consider sending hand-written thank you notes**
  - Depends on job/field, interviewer, turn-around time
Questions?