

STEP 6

Building an academic career

What you need to know about excelling at interviews

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WHAT IS AN ACADEMIC INTERVIEW?

The interview is the most common method used to select candidates for a position.^[1] The interview is usually one of the final steps in the selection process and is an opportunity for you to further present your suitability for a position. Formal academic interviews typically involve a panel of 3-4 academics interviewing a candidate. In some cases you may also be required to present your research in seminar format to the wider School of the University.

WHAT CAN I EXPECT?

The interview will most likely consist of the panel members asking a series of questions that fall within 3 broad areas; teaching, research (current and future), and leadership/service. One method that interviewers can use to ask questions is 'situational' interview questions. These are hypothetical questions that ask candidates to describe what they *would do* in a hypothetical situation and is based on the belief that intentions predict behaviour.^[2] Another method interviewers can use is to ask 'pattern behaviour' interview questions. These questions require candidates to describe behaviours that they have done in the past that best answers the question. This approach is based on the belief that past performance is the best predictor of future behaviour.^[3] Both methods have been demonstrated in the literature to be strong predictors of job performance.^[2] Other questions you may be more unstructured and based upon your knowledge of certain areas, concepts or methodologies.

HOW DO I PREPARE FOR THE INTERVIEW?

Prior to the interview

- Research the University/Institute/School you are applying for; What is their strategic plan? How does your research align with their strategic direction? What subjects do they offer that you may be able to teach?
- Research your panel members: What are their research areas? What are their priorities? What methodologies do they use? If you do not know who your panel members are, call and ask.
- Review the job description and selection criteria. These documents can be an indication of the types of questions you may be asked in the interview.
- Practice. Consider the questions you may be asked and practice how you might respond. Consider asking a friend to listen to you and ask them for feedback.

- Consider three key aspects of 'selling points' about yourself that may be different to the other candidates. For example, most candidates will have a PhD, therefore, consider how you are different. Have you received awards or been invited to speak about your research to industry. What makes you different?
- Prepare questions to ask at the end of the interview. These could be general e.g. "Are there any areas of my application where you have concerns and would like me to say more?" or "What key challenges is the School facing?" or you could use the chance to show you have done your research e.g. "I see that your Strategy is to XXX, I wonder if you could comment on how that will be achieved."
- Always take the opportunity to make a final statement to leave a lasting impression.

The day of the interview

- Dress professionally yet comfortably.
- Take a portfolio with you, which may include your résumé, responses to the selection criteria and any publications or proof of awards.
- Just before the interview, take a few deep breaths to steady yourself.
- Smile and shake the interviewers' hands.

After the interview

- Reflect. What worked? What didn't? What would you do differently next time?
- Write down the questions you were asked and keep them in a safe place. After a few interviews, you will have developed a good resource full of sample interview questions.
- Send a polite, succinct email thanking the interviewers for their time, reiterating your interest in the role and welcoming any feedback on your interview.

HOW DO I STRUCTURE MY RESPONSES?

The way in which you structure your responses will depend on the questions asked. For both situational and pattern behaviour interviews, a good way to structure your responses is the STAR method.

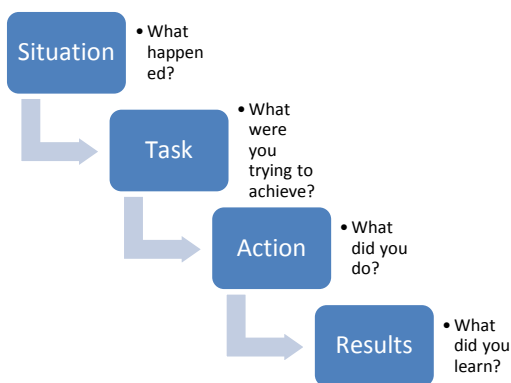


Figure 1: The STAR Response Method

The length of your responses should be guided by the length of the interview (e.g., you would not spend 10 minutes answering the first question if the interview was only scheduled to run for 30 minutes).

WHAT CAN GO WRONG IN THE INTERVIEW?

The interview can be a great opportunity for the interviewers to get to know you. It is also an opportunity for you to get a clear idea of who your future colleagues may be. However, interviews do not always go to plan. Here is a brief reminder of what can go wrong so that you know what to avoid:

- Not being prepared. **Preparation is key** to any successful interview.
- **Don't assume the interviewers have an in depth understanding of your research area.** It is your job to make sure that you can communicate the importance of your research, and how it fits with the strategic direction of the university and department.
- **Seek clarification** when you do not understand a question. For example, "I'm not sure I understand what you mean. Do you mind asking the question in another way?"
- **Keep your answers on point.** Interviewers do not like it when you talk too much. Be aware of their body language. If they look bored, move on.
- **Keep your answers positive.** For example, if you are asked to provide an example of a time when something went wrong with your teaching focus on what you learned out of that experience and how this experience enabled you to improve your future teaching practices.
- Some interviewers take an adversarial approach and may deliberately try and make you angry or confused to see how you respond. The best thing you can do is **remain calm and polite.**
- If the interview does not go to plan, or if you are not successful in obtaining the role, **keep trying!**

References

1. Posthuma R.A., Morgeson F.P., Campion M.A. (2002). Beyond employment interview validity: A comprehensive narrative review of recent research trends over time. *Personnel Psychology*, 55, 1-81
2. Latham, G.P. & Sue-Chan, C. (1999). A meta-analysis of the situational interview: an enumerative review of reasons for its validity. *Canadian Psychology*, 40, 56-67.
3. Klehe, U. & Latham, G.P (2006). The predictive and incremental validity of the situational and patterned behaviour description interviews for team playing behaviours. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 13, 108-115.

Further Reading

Vick, J.M. & Furlong, J.S (2008). *The academic job search handbook* (4th Edition). University of Pennsylvania Press.

For sample interview questions

<https://www.vitae.ac.uk/researcher-careers/pursuing-an-academic-career/applying-for-academic-jobs/commonly-asked-questions-in-academic-interviews>