



How to Prepare for a Job Interview: An Essential Guide by UCC Career Services

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1. Interview Preparation Checklist – How prepared are you?

Would you like to be prepared for your next job interview but are not sure where to start? The following checklist will help to guide you in the right direction.

Read each of the following statements and ask yourself if it is “true” or “false” for you.	True or False?	False? See page...
I know what to expect at a job interview for an internship or graduate role.		Page 3
I know the types of questions to expect at a graduate job interview.		Page 4
I know how to answer the most commonly asked interview questions.		Page 7
I know how interviewers choose which questions to ask, and why.		Page 11
I know how to prepare for a competency-based job interview, using the STAR technique.		Page 14



2. How to Prepare for a Job Interview – The Fundamentals

Every person can learn to perform well at a job interview by following the necessary steps outlined in the following presentation.

Click [here](#) to play the video on Panopto using your UCC log-in credentials. You can also choose to [download the slides](#).

How to Prepare for a Job Interview

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3. Types of Interview Questions

Biographical Questions:

Biographical questions are broad questions about your experience. They are used very sparingly by trained interviewers, usually as an icebreaker at the beginning.

- Tell us about yourself.
- What has been your experience of university?
- Tell us about your work experience.
- How has your education/experience prepared you for this role?
- What kinds of activities do you enjoy outside of work and study?
- What has been your proudest achievement to date?
- Tell us about your summer in the US this year.

Motivation Questions

Motivation questions are used to reveal your motivations, interests and goals.

- Why did you choose your degree?
- What are your most/least favourite modules in the degree and why?
- What your most/least favourite internship/project/role? And why?
- Why did you apply for this job?
- Why would you like to work here?
- What would you like to achieve in the next 3-5 years?

Self-knowledge Questions

~These questions can reveal your self-knowledge, self-awareness and self-assurance.

- What are your strengths?
- What are your greatest weaknesses?
- How would your last manager describe you?
- How would your best friend describe you?
- How would your worst enemy describe you?
- What would people be surprised to know about you?

Strengths-based Questions:

Strength-based interviewing has its foundations in positive psychology. The theory is that by identifying your strengths and matching them to the role you'll be happier in your work, perform better, learn quicker and stay with the company for longer. Unlike their competency counterparts, strengths interviews are more personal and allow recruiters to gain a genuine insight into the personalities of candidates and to see whether they'd be a good fit for the company. They also allow you, as the interviewee, to be selected on the basis of your natural abilities. Be honest in your answers and allow your enthusiasm to show in your body language.

- What energises you?
- Do you most like starting tasks or finishing them?
Do you prefer the big picture or the small details?
Describe a successful day. What made it successful?
What tasks are always left on your to-do list?



Competency-Based Questions:

Competencies are the skills, behaviours and knowledge you'll bring into the role. Employers will use competency-based questions in job interviews to elicit examples from you of situations when you have demonstrated a competency to the required level. The rationale is that there is likely to be a direct link between past behaviour and future performance. That is why competency-based interviews are also known as "situational" or "behavioural" interviews.

Competency-based interview questions the most commonly used in all sectors due the espoused link between competency-based interviewing and job performance.

Competency-based questions almost always start with these words:

- Tell me about a time when...
- Describe a situation when...
- Talk me through a situation when...
 - Describe a time when you had to deal with a customer complaint.
 - Describe a time when you had to present an idea to a group of people?
 - Did you ever play a leadership role within a team?
 - Tell me about at time when you disagreed with a colleague?
 - Give me an example of a difficult problem you had to solve?
 - When did you overcome a difficult obstacle? Describe a situation in which you had to prioritise effectively?
 - When did you have to take on board constructive feedback?
 - Tell me about a challenging goal that you set yourself, and achieved.

"Growth mindset" Questions:

People who have a growth mindset believe they can expand their abilities through hard work, challenge, and overcoming setbacks. This is a helpful perspective, far more than a "fixed mindset" perspective. People with a growth mindset are more resilient, adaptable, flexible, and demonstrate continuous learning. So be honest when answering these questions – it's okay to admit that you've made mistakes. It's seen as a very good thing to be open about what hasn't worked as well as you'd hoped. It's the only way you can learn and move on. Emphasise what you learned from your mistakes. They won't believe you if you say you've never made a mistake. Obviously, choose your examples carefully – choose minor disappointments rather than major catastrophes!

- When have you failed?
- When have your disappointed yourself?
- When have you been "thrown in at the deep end" at work?
- When have you felt that you were not good at something at work?
- When did you make a mistake?

Scenario-based Questions:

Scenario-based questions ask you how you would respond in various hypothetical work-based scenarios similar to the situations you might encounter in the role. They are used very commonly in interviews for nursing, clinical therapies and other medical roles.

Use your knowledge, professional judgement, knowledge of relevant legislation and organisational policies to answer these. And feel free to bring in a relevant past example if you have one.



What would you do if ...

- ... you made a mistake that no one else noticed?
- ... you witnessed a manager sexually harassing a colleague?
- ... you were assigned a task that you didn't feel competent to perform?
- ... an angry customer attacked you verbally
- ... you received unfair criticism from a manager?
- ... a colleague took credit for your work?

Commercial Awareness

A commercially aware employee is one who understands the inner workings of both the organisation they work for and the industry it operates within. Commercial awareness (also known as “business focus”) is an invaluable skill in a variety of careers, particularly ones such as law, accountancy, management, consulting or engineering. Be prepared to answer these questions intelligently, read an article from a quality business publication daily, follow major news stories and check the news on the morning of the interview.

- What do you know about this company?
- What is our market position? Who are our main competitors?
- What business publications do you read regularly?
- Tell us about a recent new story that caught your interest.
- Which sector is likely to be most affected by Brexit in your opinion?

Brain Teasers

Brain teasers are sometimes used in interviews for roles requiring Critical Thinking, Mental Arithmetic and/or Creativity. Brainteasers have been created to assess candidates on the key skill such as problem solving (how far can they get without help?), analysis (can they look at the big picture?), creativity (do they think “outside the box”?) and performance under pressure (can they keep calm while dealing with the unexpected?). The best advice is to keep calm, take a logical, sensible approach and be ready to explain and justify the steps you took to solve the riddle. Don't fall apart if you didn't solve it. They are meant to be difficult.

- How many square feet of pizza are eaten in the UK every year?
- How many gas stations are there in the US?
- How many cent coins, piled, would it take to reach the top of the Eiffel Tower?
- How can you tell if the light inside the fridge is on or off?

“Curveball” Questions

It's impossible to predict these – that's the idea! They are to catch you off-guard and reveal your personality and sense of humour. There is no wrong answer, so have fun with these.

- Which book or film has influenced you the most?
- If you were an animal/biscuit, which would you be?
- What would the name of your debut album be?
- Would you prefer to fight one horse-sized duck or 100 duck-sized horses?



4. How to Answer the Most Common Interview Questions – Dos and Don'ts!

<p>Tell me about yourself.</p> <p>May also be phrased as: “Talk us through your CV”. “Give us your elevator pitch”.</p> <p>This is one of the most commonly used interview “openers” and, as such, sets the scene for the whole interview. It’s vital to get it right.</p>	
<p>DO:</p> <p>Prepare an interesting (for them) relevant, positive, 90 second overview, not your life story.</p> <p>For inexperienced graduates, this is a good structure to use:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Educational Highlights (qualifications and project/module(s)/result) Work Highlights (roles, achievements, knowledge/skills gained) Extra-curricular Highlights (voluntary work/roles/achievements) Your Current Career Goal and link to this job <p>Ending with your current goal leads you nicely to why you are sitting in front of them, e.g. I would ideally like to complete my accountancy training in the IT industry which is why I’m delighted to have the opportunity to be interviewed today by your company...”</p>	<p>DON'T:</p> <p>Ramble; keep things to a brief couple of minutes. They can ask for more details on anything afterwards if they want it</p>



Why do you want this job?	
Here, you need to your ambitions and passion to the role and identify clearly why you should be considered. You need to impress them with your knowledge and effort you put into preparing for the interview.	
DO: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research the role and organisation fully and highlight the specific things that excite you the most; ensure you demonstrate how your skills will apply to the role. • Be passionate and discuss your ambitions; talk about how this role will motivate you. 	DON'T: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid giving reasons such as salary, training, holiday allowance or the role being a stepping stone.
What interests you about our company?	
The interviewer wants to see if you understand what the company does and what type of employer they are in terms of values and workplace culture. Most of all, make sure to convey genuine enthusiasm for the business.	
DO: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know all your basic facts on the business, product lines, customers, culture etc. • Research the HR and career pages of the site, their social media pages, and talk to any current employees you know. 	DON'T: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a short, bland, answer that makes generalist statements, e.g. about the company being big, dynamic etc..
What are your key strengths?	
Also phrased as...Where do you excel? Why should we hire you? Name three reasons why you should be hired. To answer this question well, you need 2-3 Unique Selling Points (USPs) that help to differentiate you from the competition.	
DO: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose USPs that link to the requirements of the role. • Support each USP with strong, compelling evidence. • Use personal qualities as they are perceived as permanent and integral to you as an individual. 	DON'T: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose irrelevant or basic, “given” qualities, such as “punctual”, “honest” – you’ll need to take it up a notch. • List too many strengths – it sounds unfocussed and unrealistic.



What are your weaknesses?

Also phrased as... Where do you need to improve? What are your developmental needs?

This question is a real test of your self-awareness and willingness to constantly develop and improve. Weaknesses are often more apparent to the interviewer than you might realise.

DO:

- Choose one true weakness that is not a core competency for the role.
- Choose a skill rather than an attribute as skills can be developed through training and practice. A “sub-skill” is even better because it confines the weak spot to one aspect of the skill, e.g. MS Access rather than IT skills in general.
- Be honest but prudent in your choice of words.
- Reflect for a moment before answering to avoid sounding too rehearsed.

If asked for an example of the weakness action (e.g. “when did you make a mistake? Not succeed? Disappoint yourself?):

- Prepare an honest answer to these questions that you comfortable discussing and that doesn't show you in a negative light!
- Emphasise what you learned from situation and do differently now as a result.

DON'T:

- Offer more than one weakness, unless you are pushed for a second one – have at least two back-ups prepared just in case.
- Say you have none – everybody has weaknesses if they're being honest.
- Invent a weakness or provide a clichéd answer (e.g. perfectionist) – people trust others who are open and aware of their limitations.
- Choose a personal attribute that impacts how you relate to other people, e.g. patience, assertiveness, shyness – these can seem entrenched and “soft skills” are difficult to train/fix.



Where do you see yourself 5 years from now?

Also phrased as: What are your career goals? How might this role fulfil your longer-term aspirations?
 Research the typical career paths of graduates within that firm as much as you can, using the Graduate Recruitment pages, their social media pages and the LinkedIn Alumni Tool. Then research the paths of successful graduates within the industry/field, wherever you intend to build your career. Where are the really successful role models that graduated five years ago. How did they get to where you want to be?

DOs

- Outline a career plan relevant to that role, company and industry.
- Ensure you sound committed to the company.
- Be able to explain, step-by-step, how you think you would reach your longer-term ambitions.
- Demonstrate enthusiasm for the immediate role.

DON'T

- Talk about doing your manager's job!
- Talk about an ambition that could not be fulfilled within the company (e.g. become self-employed).
- Show a lack of ambition.

Have you any questions for us?

It is vital to have prepared some questions to ask your interviewers at the end of the interview. Ask questions focused on the role, company that you really want to know the answer to.

DO:

- Ask questions that reveal the perspective and priorities of the interviewer, e.g. What is your greatest concern in hiring for this role? What will be the greatest challenge in this role for the first 2 months?
 What would an ideal candidate achieve in the 1st year?

DON'T:

- Don't ask too many questions or none at all. Gauge the body language of the interviewers – are they rushed?
- Ask questions that veer into negotiation (e.g. salary, working hours, funding for training etc.) – this can wait until you have a job offer.



5. Want to Predict Interview Questions? Think like the interviewer!

How can you tell what questions you will be asked at the interview?

It is possible to predict the questions to a large extent... you just need to think like the interviewer! Put yourself in their shoes... what would you ask if you were them?

Imagine that you are the IT Manager of a large, national recruitment consultancy and you are currently hiring a graduate to manage a number of projects simultaneously in a role that requires ongoing travel across the country and direct contact with SME clients. 100 graduates applied for the role and you have shortlisted 6 candidates to interview.

Given the demands of the role, you need an organised, adaptable team player with influential communication skills, business awareness and a strong customer focus.

The role also requires a high degree of self-motivation and problem-solving skills as the successful candidate will need to work largely without supervision and will have to manage their own schedule and activities.

Like most employers, you have listed all of these requirements in the job specification, for candidates to review in advance. By carefully underlining the relevant text, it is easy to identify at least 10 competencies!

What questions will you ask to ensure that you choose the best candidate?

Like all trained interviewers, you have a set list of sample interview questions that choose from, tweak and expand as you see fit.

Review your list of competency-based questions on the next page and decide what question you will ask to test for each competency.



6. Set list of Sample Competency-Based Interview Questions

PLANNING AND ORGANISING

- Tell me about a time when you have had to plan a project/task/ event.
- Tell me how you schedule your time on an unusually hectic week.
- Describe a time when you had several deadlines falling at the same time. How did you cope?
- Tell me of a time when you have had to re-prioritise in response to unforeseen circumstances.

TEAMWORK

- Describe the team of people you work with and how you fit into the team. What obstructs the progress of the team you work in?
- Give me an example of where you had to work as part of a group to achieve a goal.
- How do you deal with conflicts, disagreements or misunderstandings within a team?
- Tell me about a time when you have had to join a new team.

CUSTOMER FOCUS

- When have you exceeded customer expectations?
- Give me an example of a customer complaint you have dealt with.
- Can you describe a situation where a customer tested your patience?
- Describe a situation when you acted as an “advocate” for your customers’ needs.

ADAPTABILITY/FLEXIBILITY

- Can you describe a time when you had to adjust quickly to changes over which you had little control?
- How did the changes impact on you?
- Can you think of a time when you changed your plans as a result of new information?
- Describe a time when you altered your own behaviour to fit the situation.

SELF-MOTIVATION

- What motivates you? And how do you motivate yourself in challenging circumstances?
- Give me an example of a challenging goal you set yourself and achieved.
- When have you failed or disappointed yourself?
- Tell me about a difficult obstacle you have overcome.
- Tell me about a time where you went above and beyond your role and expectations. Why did you do this? What exactly did you do?



INNOVATION AND CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

- Describe a situation when you came up with a solution to a difficult problem.
- Describe an occasion when you solved a problem with an unconventional solution.
- Give me an example of a situation where you've found a better way of doing things.
- Give me an example of a problem you were unable to solve.

INFLUENCING

- Describe a time when you have had to enlist the help, support or cooperation of other people to complete a piece of work.
- Tell me about a time when you found it very difficult to get the agreement of a person or group.
- Have you ever been in a group in which some of the members did not work well together?

BUSINESS FOCUS/COMMERCIAL AWARENESS QUESTIONS

- What do you know about this company?
- What is our market position? Who are our main competitors?
- What are the greatest challenges facing our sector in the next five years?
- Tell me about a recent business story that grabbed your attention.

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7. How to Prepare for Competency-Based Interviews

Hopefully, thinking like an interviewer has helped you to realise the importance of asking interview questions that related directly to required competencies. This approach is known as “competency-based interviewing”.

Competency-based interview questions are one of the commonly used types of interview questions and require thorough preparation.

Learn how to prepare for competency-based interview questions in the following presentation. Click [here](#) to play the video on Panopto using your UCC log-in credentials. You can also choose to [download the slides](#).

Competency-Based Interviews and the “STAR” Technique

UCC Career Services



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8. The STAR Interview Technique: A “How-To” Guide

This is a guide to using STAR to create excellent answers to tough interview questions. STAR stands for Situation, Task, Action(s), Result(s) and is a vital framework for structuring answers to interview questions. Search YouTube using “STAR interview technique” as a search term and find numerous videos by top graduate employers, to see practical examples of people using STAR to answer interview questions.

Situation /Task

- Choose a situation that is as similar as possible to the type of situations you will encounter in the job you seek.
- Be very specific rather than general – these specific examples have a much more powerful impact.
- Avoid spending a lot of time describing the problem – state the problem as briefly as you can while ensuring that the listener understands the situation.
- Do not discuss a situation you are angry about. Do not discuss a problem that you caused.

Action

- Describe in detail the positive and appropriate action you took to resolve the issue or to get the task completed.
- This step should be the focus of your answer (60%+).
- This part of the story is often overlooked.
- Provide good detail – it will show the employer that you know how to take appropriate steps to resolve work-related issues.

Result

- Describe the positive result of your action.
- If no positive result, choose a story that does have a positive result!
- If you can quantify the result, do so.
- Don't forget to mention the positive result!

	SITUATION	TASK	ACTION(s)	RESULT(s)
Final Year Project	Did you choose the topic? Was it an individual or group project? Did you choose your team mates? How many credits was it worth?	What was the objective of the project?	How did you go about achieving your objective? What was your rationale? What methods did you use and why?	What were the positive results? E.g. academic result (if good), new skills/knowledge/insights gained, publications, contribution of data to a larger project etc.
Additional Projects	With which module was this project associated?	What was the objective of the project?	How did you go about achieving your objective? What was your rationale? What methods did you use and why?	What were the positive results? E.g. academic result (if good), new skills/knowledge/insights gained, publications, contribution of data to a larger project etc.
Job	How did you get the job? Where did you work? Where did you fit within the wider team or organisational structure?	What was your role? (What were you hired to do?) Keep this brief.	How did you fulfil your role? What methods, approaches did you take and why?	What evidence do you have that you did a good job? <i>I.e. achievements (promotion, awards) or quantifiable results (e.g. sales targets) or new skills/knowledge/insights gained</i>
Role of Responsibility	How did you land this role? What was the organisation? Where did you fit within the team or structure?	What was your role? (What were you appointed to achieve? What were your aspirations?)	How did you fulfil your role? What methods, approaches did you take and why?	What evidence do you have that you were successful in the role? (e.g. new initiatives or improvements/ enhancements to existing programmes or quantifiable increases such as # of events, attendees, funds raised etc.

Competency:	SITUATION	TASK	ACTION(s)	RESULT(s)
Teamwork	When was your best example of teamwork?	What did the team aim to achieve?	How did the team approach the task? <i>How did you personally contribute to the team effort? (Most Important)</i>	What evidence do you have that the team achieved their objective? How much of the overall team success can be attributed to you personally?
Interpersonal/ Customer Service	When did you help/support/mentor/console another person? What was your relationship to the person and why did they need you?	What did you aim to do for them?	How did you help/support/mentor/console the person? What words, body language, tactics did you employ and why?	What evidence do you have that you were successful? What new knowledge/skills/insights did you gain from this experience?
Problem solving	When did you solve a difficult problem or generate a creative solution?	What was the problem you aimed to solve?	How did you solve the problem? What methods did you adopt and why?	What evidence do you have that the problem was solved? What evidence do you have that the solution has been an effective one?
Initiative	When have you used your initiative?	What did you set out to achieve?	How did you go about achieving your objective? What actions did you take?	What evidence do you have that your efforts were worthwhile? (E.g. improved system, leaner service etc. etc.)
Multi-tasking (Prioritising)	When have you juggled conflicting demands?	What did you set out to achieve?	What system did you use to prioritise tasks? Talk me through the steps you took.	What evidence do you have that you prioritised effectively?
Failure	When have you failed or disappointed yourself?	What were you trying to achieve?	What did you do wrong (with benefit of hindsight)?	What did you learn from this experience?

Now that you've done you've completed this essential guide to interview preparation, it's time to get that all-important practice of answer questions out loud.

Use Shortlist.Me to practise answering different types of interview questions and to receive detailed, question-focused feedback to achieve your “personal best” at the real-life job interview:

<https://go.shortlister.com/marketplace/unicollegecork>

