

# A Student Guide to *Acing the Interview*

Interviews are designed for employers, graduate schools and volunteer programs to: verify a candidate's qualifications, evaluate a candidate's fit with the culture of the organization, help team members imagine a candidate doing the work, and more. *In an interview, you need to project a professional presence as well as effectively communicate the value your skills/experience/knowledge could add to a particular organization and role.* Interviews are also critical for you - the candidate - to help determine whether the position and organization fit well with your goals, interests, and preferences. **To put your best foot forward in an interview, as well as properly assess how the organization/role fits with your needs, it is essential to prepare.**

## Interview Lifecycle

There are eight key steps to prepare for and ace an interview. Every time you complete a "cycle" (see below), what you learn will inform and improve your next interview cycle.



## Confirm Logistics

In some cases, the first conversation with a recruiter will be to confirm the date, time and place. Within 1 week of the interview, he/she can usually share other details. If not provided, you may then ask the following of the recruiter:

- Date, time, and address, including parking instructions (or phone call/Skype instructions); ask length of time you should block on your calendar
- Names of those with whom you will meet; ask how many resume copies are needed (bring more)
- The interview format (see types on next page)

## Research the Organization and the Interviewers

- Google the organization; review its website and interviewers' LinkedIn pages to answer questions below.
- Use McCain's LibGuide - Career Research to find the remaining information.
- Know the bio(s) of the people you will meet - what were their career paths? What areas of the organization are important to them? Are they an influencer or decision-maker regarding this open position?

- Know the mission of the organization, key initiatives and important leaders.
- Check recent press on the organization and its competitors.
- Reach out to Alumnae (via LinkedIn) who work(ed) at the organization or industry to get interview advice.
- Anticipate what will interest/concern interviewers about your skills, experience, academics, background

## Develop Your Answers

### Common Interview Formats

Most organizations use a series of interviews to screen and get-to-know candidates. Screening is usually conducted by a recruiter to evaluate whether or not the candidate has the availability, base level of skills and sometimes salary expectations that the hiring manager is seeking. Screening interviews are usually shorter (15 - 30 minutes) and occur via phone, Skype or career fairs. Longer interviews (~1 hour) are generally reserved for pre-screened candidates.

**Phone Interviews** are the most common screening or initial interviews.

- Plan to sit away from distractions with your resume and any relevant notes close at hand.
- In a normal 30 minute session, you will probably be asked 5-8 questions.
- A key challenge of phone interviews is building and gauging rapport with the interviewer without eye contact. Practice interviewing with a friend/co-worker or record yourself, paying attention to the tone of your voice, your level of enthusiasm, the length of your responses and of course how well you answered the questions.

**Video Interviews** are increasingly used to broaden the geographic reach of searches and to increase an organization's ability to evaluate "soft" skills such as relationship building and communication earlier in the interview process.

- Automated video interviews require a candidate to provide a video response to computer prompts. The candidate is usually given a few "takes" at a question and then "submits" via upload the videotaped response.
- Skype interviews are two-way, face-to-face conversations with video.
- Candidates should dress for video-interviews as they would for an in-person interview and conduct the interview in a quiet place with a solid digital connection.
- Candidates should practice video-interviewing (whether Skype or automated) to learn where to direct eye contact and make sure that their screen voice is confident, pleasant and easily understood.

**Face-to-Face or In-person Interviews** are generally included as the final round of interviews.

- Companies often mix one-on-one and panel (group) interviews to obtain perspectives of multiple interviewers.
- Candidates should ask in advance about the agenda and interviewers for face-to-face interviews.

### Common Interview Questions

Organizations use a variety of interview environments, questions and assessments to evaluate candidates.

**Most Common Interview Questions** are straightforward, but do require preparation. Interviewers expect you to be able to position your responses relative to what is required for the role. Anticipate and prepare for these questions:

Tell Me About Yourself:	Prepare a 1 minute response that connects your journey with the opportunity and organization. It is okay to include relevant personal info: interests, clubs, etc.
How did you choose Agnes Scott College or your major?	This question has no correct answer. It is designed to understand how you think and how you make decisions. Develop a logical and meaningful answer.
How would friends or faculty describe you?	Before the interview, make a list of positive attributes you have. Then choose the most relevant ones to mention in a particular interview.
Why should I hire you?	Identify your most relevant skill/experience, interest, <i>and</i> personality trait that relates to the position they are trying to fill.
What questions do you have for me/us?	Be prepared to ask insightful question of them. Avoid questions for which you could find answers online. Good questions to consider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What is their opinion of what it takes to be successful at the company? What is the culture of the organization/department?</li> <li>○ Position specifics: % of time on each task; typical growth path; training</li> </ul>

## Common Interview Questions (cont'd)

**Behavioral Interviews** are based on the principle that past behavior can predict future performance. These interviews inquire about your specific experiences rather than your reported traits, interests, or how you might handle a situation. Questions usually take the form of “Tell me about a time when (fill in the blank).” Consider these behavioral questions:

Faced a stressful situation with a team	Showed initiative and took the lead	Had to go above and beyond the call of duty to get a job done
Tried to accomplish something and failed	Used persuasion to influence someone’s opinion	Used good judgement and fact-finding skills to solve a problem
Dealt with conflict	Missed an obvious solution to a problem	Set a goal and was able to achieve it

To answer these questions succinctly and effectively, you should use the STAR method (Describe: Situation/Task you were in; Action you took; Result or Response you created) to tell stories of relevant experiences. Identify your best story examples by considering the following sources:

Internships	Work experience	Volunteering/Service
Class Projects	Travel/Study Abroad	Campus Leadership
Athletics	Awards/Accomplishments	Mentored Research

Choose stories:

- That are multifaceted and can be used to convey a variety of lessons or endings
- Where you were the primary person leading, making decisions or doing the work (or where you can be very clear about the role you played)
- Where you can quantify or speak specifically to result or response you created

It is not necessary to memorize dozens of “stories” for behavioral or typical interview questions. Before an interview, select your best examples and practice telling them to answer a variety of questions.

**Computer Assessments.** Many organizations use online tests or quizzes to evaluate sales ability, customer service mindset, proofreading or grammar skills, quantitative skills or software expertise (Microsoft Excel, PowerPoint). Usually, these assessments are part of the screening stage; however, some organizations use them later in the process.

***While less common, the following three types of interviews are used in specific situations:***

“**The Airport Test**” is a catch-all phrase for questions an interviewer may use to try to get to know the candidate on a more personal, but still professional level. Designed to unearth a candidate’s interests, hobbies or every day personality/demeanor, employers may ask questions like “What was the last book you read?”, “If you had a free day with nothing to do, how would you spend it?” or “How do you engage with your community?” The name, “Airport Test” comes from wanting to get a sense for how this person will get along with the team for long periods of time as if they were all “stuck at the airport” together. Be prepared to answer such questions with a professional response. While you want to be authentic, you probably would not want to reply that “50 Shades of Grey” was the last book you read.

**Case/Simulation Interviews** are designed to evaluate how a candidate approaches a problem and thinks on their feet. Typically used by management consulting and investment firms, in a case interview, the candidate is asked to analyze a hypothetical situation/problem and discuss how they would address it. McKinsey & Company, Boston Consulting Group and other leading consulting firms have excellent case interview resources on their websites. If you think you will be given a case interview, seek out a consultant alumna in the Scottie Career Connect to help you practice.

**Technical Interviews** are those where the position requires mastery of specific skills that are not easily learned on the job - e.g., computer programming/coding, statistical analyses, numerical problems, mastery of technical software, editing or public speaking. The candidate is given a timed “assignment” to complete while at the interview.

## Practice, Practice, Practice

**Practice is the #1 recommendation.** You are encouraged to take advantage of the following resources for practice:

- ✓ Round Robin Interviews with Alumnae on Oct 22<sup>nd</sup> and in late March (RSVP required)
- ✓ Mock interview with a Career Coach
- ✓ Industry-specific feedback via the Scottie Career Connect - a virtual group of alumnae who have agreed to practice phone and Skype interviews for students

Use [compass.agnesscott.edu](http://compass.agnesscott.edu) to book appointments or reserve the Skype rooms near Buttrick classroom G4.

## Visual Impressions Matter

### What to Wear

For interviews, professional business attire (suit or tailored dress), is required with close-toed, professional shoes. Agnes Scott alumnae share that across the spectrum of employers, interview attire is always more conservative than typical office attire. Do not assume that a nonprofit, healthcare or public service organization has a casual expectation for the interview. In some cases, intern employers accept more relaxed interview attire, but if so, we'll let you know. If are unsure what to wear or need professional clothing, contact our Career Development Coordinator Irene Foran: [iforan@agnesscott.edu](mailto:iforan@agnesscott.edu). We partner with Dress for Success Atlanta and can arrange a styling appointment where you will receive at least one free outfit for interviewing.

**AVOID:** too short, sheer, low-cut or skimpy attire; heavy makeup or perfume; loud make-up or peeling nail polish

### What to Bring

Before your interview, prepare your Professional "Toolkit":

- Dark tote bag that is well-organized
- Copies of your current, proofed resume on 20 lb. paper (You may find this at an office supply store or make up to 5 copies of your resume in our office in Buttrick G12.)
- Padfolio and 2 pens in case you need to take notes
- Agnes Scott College business cards available for order here: [cardcafe.com/agnes\\_scott\\_college](http://cardcafe.com/agnes_scott_college)
- Reference list with complete and accurate contact information (if requested)

### Plan to arrive early and ready

- Map it ahead of time. Be sure you know where you are going.
- Go to bed early the night before. Allow time in the morning to review your answers to common questions.
- Eat a light snack before hand - you don't want a growling stomach; no gum!
- Bring a journal/newspaper article to read- not your phone or an issue of *US Weekly* or a "beach" novel.
- Remember to silence your phone before you walk in the door.

### Convey a Positive, Professional Presence

As with all relationship building, it is important to establish rapport and convey professional confidence.

- Introduce yourself with eye contact, smile and firm handshake to everyone you meet from receptionist to CEO.
- Do not badmouth prior experiences/employers.
- Remember/write down names or ask for business cards so you can send a thank you.
- Use active posture to show engagement and listening, and positive, engaging facial expressions.

## Follow-up - A Written Thank You is Crucial!

Send a thank you email to all decision makers and influencers within 24 hours. Refer back to your interview conversation to show that you heard what they are looking for and make the link to your experience.

Thank alumnae or others in your network who may have helped you prepare and let them know how the interview went. Every communication is a chance to reinforce your fit with the career opportunity and learn from your network.

***Need more help preparing for an interview? Use [compass.agnesscott.edu](http://compass.agnesscott.edu) to schedule an appointment.***

**Thank you to Alumna Jasmine Adams Langevine '07 for contributing to this guide.**