

INTERVIEWING TIPS

Handout Series #3

I. THE KEY TO A SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEW IS PREPARATION

When conducting an interview, potential employers will be trying to assess whether or not you are a “good fit” with their firms.¹ Researching will help you to determine what aspects of your experience, skill set, character, and personality you will need to emphasize in order to prove to a particular employer that you are a “good fit.” Whether you have the opportunity to demonstrate your research in the interview or simply appear more confident and relaxed while interviewing, your research will help you to succeed.

A. Research and Study.

Finding out as much as possible about the employer and the interviewer will help you to do the following:

- Become and appear more enthusiastic about the job opportunity.
- Impress the employer with questions that are specific to the firm.
- Avoid making careless errors—e.g., asking questions about criminal law when the employer’s practice involves only civil litigation.
- Learn more about why you want (or do not want) to work for the employer.
- Feel more relaxed and confident during the interview.

You will find the information you need to be prepared in several places:

- The employer’s website;
- An acquaintance at the firm;
- Newspaper articles: use WESTLAW’s “All News” database or LEXIS’s “NEWS” database;
- Employer databases: Martindale-Hubbell (www.martindale.com); NALP Directory (www.nalpdirectory.com), LEXIS, and WESTLAW;
- A call to a McGeorge graduate who works at the firm; and
- CDO staff, alumni, and classmates who have worked for the employer, and any local attorneys who might be familiar with the employer.

¹Throughout this handout, “firm” is used generically to refer to any employer, including employers in government and non-profit sectors.

B. Develop an “Infomercial” About Yourself.

Many employers begin their interviews by saying: “Tell me about yourself.” While you might like to object to the question as “vague,” we recommend that instead you offer a brief (thirty-second or so), three bullet-point “infomercial.” Do not start with your birth place, give an extensive family history, expose a potential weakness, or drone on too long. Instead, do your best to come across as an interesting, three-dimensional person. Your infomercial can include some of the following: something about your life prior to law school, for example a prior career; something about your law school or legal experience; something about why you are interested in this employer or career path; and something interesting about you as a person, for example, a musical instrument that you play or a hobby that you enjoy. Answering with a three bullet-point format will allow interviewers to follow-up on whatever interests them most.

C. Think Through Your Approach to Answering Questions and Practice Your Responses.

Personality and demeanor. Your personality and demeanor are just as important, if not more important, than your accomplishments. Don’t adopt an interview persona—stilted and humorless. Too often, students let their “boring twin” show up to their interviews. Do not attempt to be “a laugh a minute” or cross boundaries of professionalism, but do let employers get a taste of your personality during your interviews. Show employers that you are the kind of person with whom they want to work—well-rounded, interesting, and friendly—by smiling, laughing when appropriate, and if given the opportunity, offering a safe but humorous aside. Do not make statements that indicate that you do nothing but study for law school. For example, in response to a question about what book you are reading right now, do not say “I don’t have time to read anything but my law books.” Instead, reach back to the last book you did read, and discuss it enthusiastically.

Be succinct. State your answers conversationally, but also relatively succinctly. Try to answer questions in about three sentences. While it is easy for interviewers to ask you to expand on your answer, it can be awkward for interviewers to have to stop you if you go on too long in response to any particular question. Of course, you also should avoid one or two word answers. Even questions that seem to call for a clear “yes” or “no” answer should be answered in a complete sentence. When helpful, you also can offer examples in response to a “yes/no” question.

Frame your answers positively. If you speak negatively about a former position or supervisor, interviewers know there are two sides to the story. They are as likely to wonder whether you were the root of the problem as they are to believe that your supervisor or circumstances were. So, think ahead about how you will respond to difficult questions—especially the ones that you dread. For example, if you hated your prior career in sales and are asked the question, “Why did you leave your last job and decide to come to law school?” try something like, “While I liked some aspects of sales, it wasn’t giving me the intellectual challenge I was looking for in a career. I enjoy using my analytical skills, and since so much of law is about analyzing, I decided to become a lawyer.” This will be far more effective than saying: “I just hated sales and my boss was really difficult to work for. . . .”

Know your strengths. Think about your strengths and select three to five that you would like to showcase during your interviews. These strengths should be legal skills (e.g., research and writing) and personal traits that are relevant to performance in the workplace (e.g., strong work ethic, efficiency). When given the opportunity to discuss your strengths, you should back up your statements with examples and accomplishments that demonstrate your abilities. You can offer information about your strengths when asked directly about them and also when asked more general questions, such as “Why should we hire you?”

D. Understand the Needs of the Employer.

The biggest error candidates make when interviewing for a position is failing to understand the qualities that prospective employers are assessing. Legal employers do not usually look for particular answers, rather, they look for certain characteristics, such as the following:

Sincere interest in the employer. Employers want to know that you have a genuine interest in their practice and location. Asking specific questions that seek to expand on research you have done prior to the interview is one excellent way to convey your sincere interest.

Enthusiasm. This characteristic is critical and can be challenging for many candidates, especially those who would describe themselves as introverted. Employers want to hire people who are excited by their work and who are eager to roll up their sleeves. Smiling (naturally, not stiffly or fixedly), modulating your tone, sitting up straight (though not rigidly), and asking questions, help to convey enthusiasm.

Strong Communication Skills. Interviewers will be assessing your communication skills (both oral and written) to determine whether you would work well with the employer’s attorneys and clients, would negotiate effectively with opposing counsel, and would express yourself persuasively in written documents. One of the best ways to improve your communication skills is to practice them in a mock interview with a career advisor.

Confident and Positive Attitude. Employers will gauge your ability to instill confidence in clients. Project confidence by offering a firm, but not bone-crushing, handshake and by making frequent, but not constant, eye contact throughout the interview. Your answers should convey a positive attitude regarding your skills and experience.

Intelligence. Remember that grades are not the only criterion used to assess intelligence. Your preparedness and your responsiveness to the interviewers’ questions also can help to showcase your intelligence. Finally, being well-versed in current events will help you to engage in intelligent conversation.

Organizational Skills. Law practice is a juggling act. Employers want to know that you have the ability to manage multiple projects so that deadlines are met. Think of an example that would demonstrate your ability to do so.

E. Be Familiar with Questions the Interviewer Might Ask You.

Try to anticipate likely questions. Prepare to respond, and if necessary, to redirect the conversation. Review your resume carefully to make sure you can answer questions based on any entry on your resume.

Here are some typical and often tough questions:

“Tell me about yourself.”

See p.2, section B.

“What’s your greatest weakness?”

Highlight a real, but relatively insignificant, skill, or trait. What is relatively insignificant for one job is not for another. For example, you might choose oral advocacy if you are interviewing for a position strictly involving research and writing, but you would not want to do so when interviewing for a position with a district attorney’s or public defender’s office.

When talking about the skill or trait, you should describe it as something that is “challenging” for you. This is a very positive way of talking about your weaknesses. Also, you should tell the interviewer what you have done and/or what you are doing to correct the weakness or to meet the challenge. For example, if you chose oral advocacy, you might say, “Oral advocacy is fairly challenging for me at this point. I don’t have much experience with it, but I am currently participating in the First-Year Moot Court Competition. Also, I now regularly raise my hand to participate in my classes, so I am getting more and more comfortable with speaking in public.”

“What is your greatest strength?”

State a skill or trait that is highly related to the job you would perform if you were hired by this employer. Offer at least one example to demonstrate this ability or personal characteristic.

“Why should we hire you?” or “What sets you apart from others?”

Talk about accomplishments that show legal skills, transferable skills, enthusiasm, willingness to work hard, loyalty, commitment to work, interest in building and developing clients, and ability to work with others. Do not speak negatively about your fellow students or colleagues; even making a direct comparison risks being received as arrogant. Instead, focus on your positive attributes and offer persuasive examples to prove them to your interviewers.

“What will you be doing five years from now?”

Show that you are committed to the community and want to be working for an employer like the interviewer, building a clientele (if it is a private firm), gaining responsibility and developing expertise. Do not address personal issues such as starting a family or goals that would not serve the interests of the employer, such as starting your own practice.

“Why haven’t you received higher grades?”

If your grades are not great, think about what the interviewer really needs to know: can you do the work? It is best to acknowledge your less-than-ideal exam performance and grades, and also to state positively your ability to learn and to produce quality work in a practice setting. If you feel that a certain course grade or your more recent grades are particularly indicative of your abilities, point them out to your interviewers. Also, use your achievements to demonstrate your ability to do the work. Consider each of the following:

- Classes in which you did well—particularly if they are relevant to the specific employer,
- An “upward trend” in your grades,
- Clinics or academic-oriented extracurricular activities in which you excelled, and
- Job experiences for which you have received positive reviews.

Stay positive and do not make excuses. Occasionally a student has a “reason,” as opposed to an excuse, that explains their grades, and that would be helpful to share with potential employers, (e.g., death of an immediate family member the week before finals). Because there can be pros and cons to disclosing such personal information, we recommend that you discuss it with your career advisor before doing so in an interview.

“Tell me about your work as an X.”

When asked about prior employment, discuss the most relevant aspects of the job and the most relevant skills that you acquired. For example, if an interviewer asks you about your job as a campaign worker in college, do not spend precious time telling the interviewer that you filed and photocopied, and worked on phone banks, instead tell the interviewer that it was a great position because it allowed you to develop strong communication and advocacy skills through your extensive contact with the public and effective organizational skills from having to plan Get Out The Vote efforts for twenty-five volunteers.

“Is there anything else you want me to know?”

This is often the last question asked. Be sure to look the interviewers in the eye and tell them how much you want to work for their organization as well as why you believe you would be an asset. Plan this statement in advance, and deliver it with confidence.

Do not pass up the opportunity to answer this question—doing so would be like a trial attorney passing on making a closing argument. That said, you should not make a long statement, instead simply offer one to three strong sentences.

Other common questions you should anticipate.

- Why do you want to work for us? (Be specific. Use your research.)
- What do you know about us? (Be specific.)
- Why do you want to do this type of work? (See The Official Guide to Legal Specialties.)
- Why did you go to law school?
- Why did you choose McGeorge?

- What other schools did you get into?
- Why do you want to work in this city? What ties do you have to this city?
- Where else are you interviewing? (They are looking to see if you name similarly situated firms or agencies in town, which will prove your interest in that line of work and in that geographic location.)
- What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? (Use examples that highlight your legal skills and professional traits.)
- What law school subjects do you like the most/least? (And be able to articulate why.)
- In what kind of environment are you most comfortable?
- What two or three things are important to you in a job?
- How do you organize and plan for major projects?
- What is the first thing you would do if I gave you a research project in an area about which you knew nothing?
- How would you feel about writing a brief in which you would have to make an argument with which you vehemently disagreed?
- What have you done that shows initiative?
- Tell me about an academic or professional challenge that you faced.
- Give me an example of how you work under pressure.
- What is the most difficult professional or academic situation you have faced? How did you handle it?
- Do you prefer working with others or alone? (For most jobs you need to be able to do both well.)
- What book are you reading? (It is not acceptable to say that you are so busy with law school that you don't have time to read anything else.)
- What magazines, periodicals, or journals do you read?
- If you could have dinner with anyone living or dead, who would it be?
- If you weren't going to be a lawyer, what would you be?
- What do you do for fun?
- What questions do you have for me? (See below.)

Common Questions for Jobs in Prosecutor's Offices

- Be prepared to answer hypothetical questions regarding evidence, criminal procedure, and prosecutorial ethics.
- Tell me about an ethical dilemma with which you have been faced.
- What would you do if your supervisor told you to file a case but you did not believe beyond a reasonable doubt that the defendant was guilty?
- Can you imagine a case in which you believed beyond a reasonable doubt that a crime was committed but you chose not to file?
- Can you imagine a case in which you thought that the jury would not convict that you nonetheless would file?
- How would a victim's wishes affect your filing decisions?
- Would you consider office resources when making filing decisions?
- How do you feel about the three strikes legislation?
- How do you feel about the death penalty? Could you zealously advocate for death?

Common Questions for Jobs in Criminal Defense Offices

- Be prepared to answer hypothetical questions regarding evidence and criminal procedure.
- How would you feel representing a child molester who you believed to be guilty?
- How would you feel cross-examining a child in a child molestation case? How would you go about it?

Common Questions for Judicial Clerkships and Some Large Firms

- Who is your favorite current Supreme Court Justice and why?
- Who is your favorite Supreme Court Justice of all time, and why?
- Tell me about a recent Supreme Court opinion, and tell me why you agree or disagree with the majority opinion.

Common Questions for Judicial Clerkships

- What is your favorite opinion of mine?
- What is your favorite dissent of mine?
- How would you feel about challenging my thinking on a case?
- How would your feel about writing an opinion with which you vehemently disagreed?
- Describe the role of the law clerk.

F. Issues About Which an Employer Should Not Inquire.

By law, interviewers may not ask you about any of the following, unless you open the door to the subject by mentioning it first:

- religion
- race
- national origin and citizenship (some exceptions apply as to citizenship, particularly for government positions)
- medical conditions/physical problems (unless you ask for an accommodation)
- age and age-related issues (some exceptions apply, e.g., many law enforcement agencies have age cut-offs for new officers/agents)
- marital status, children or plans to have children
- sexual orientation (Most states, including California, forbid questions regarding sexual orientation; however, there is no corresponding federal law. The United States military has a policy of discrimination in employment with respect to sexual orientation. Pacific McGeorge School of Law does not condone this policy, which is contrary to Pacific McGeorge's own policy as to equal opportunity; however, we are required by the Solomon Amendment (enacted by Congress in 1996) to provide equal access to military recruiters in order to retain our federal funding.)

Other than the military with respect to sexual orientation, all on-campus interviewers and Symplicity users agree to abide by the McGeorge non-discrimination policy, which can be found in the CDO lobby. If you believe that an interviewer has violated this policy, you may report it to your career advisor or directly to the Assistant Dean for Career Development.

If asked an illegal question, you may politely and gently remind the interviewer that your understanding is that such questions are not permitted in the interview setting. However,

this is difficult to do and can be embarrassing for both parties. In some instances you may decide that it serves you best simply to answer the question, especially if it seems to be asked innocently and in an attempt to make small talk.

F. Prepare Questions You Are Going to Ask.

Be prepared to ask two to four well-thought-out questions. Usually, you will have an opportunity to ask questions at the end of the interview. If there is an opening for you to ask a question during the interview, you should do so, but be sure to preface the question by asking, “Would it be appropriate for me to ask you a question about that right now, or would you prefer that I hold my questions until the end?”

Demonstrate Your Interest.

Questions that demonstrate that you conducted research on the employer and have a sincere interest in the work that they do are the best questions to ask. These questions will show that you are enthusiastic and prepared. Here are a few examples:

- I read on your website about your big win in the diet supplement cases. Can you tell me more about your class action work? (If you know that the interviewers have been involved in the class action work, you can ask more directly about their role in it.)
- I spoke to Julie Nelson who interned with you. She told me that both developers and environmental non-profits deeply respect your agency. How did your agency develop that reputation? How do new attorneys learn to work effectively with these groups?

Do not feel that your questions must all be directly related to the employer, or to the interviewer. Questions about the potential impact of proposed legislation or a recent court ruling on the employer’s practice, or about trends in the local legal market, also are appropriate. Your interviewer will undoubtedly be impressed that you have done a sufficient amount of preparation to consider how outside events may affect the practice of law.

Establish Rapport.

Questions that help you to learn more about the interviewer and to establish rapport are also very good questions to ask—people, especially litigators, usually love to talk about themselves!

- What is the most interesting case/project you have worked on recently?
- How quickly were you given significant client contact?
- Did you begin your career in your current practice area? If not, how did you develop your speciality?
- What do you find most challenging about this practice?
- How did you choose this firm/agency/office?

Be mindful of the age and experience of the interviewer. For example, while you should not ask a senior partner why she chose a firm that she co-founded, you might ask her how the practice has changed over the last twenty-five years.

Questions to Avoid.

Questions with a “What’s in it for me?” attitude. For example: What are the hours? How much vacation time will I get?

Questions with a negative tone. For example: What don’t you like about the firm? How does your firm compare to employer X? Do you use a micro-management style?

Questions for which it may be difficult for the employer to articulate an answer. For example: What is the culture of the firm?

Any question you could have answered yourself with a little research. For example: How many attorneys do you have? What are your practice areas?

II. THE DAY OF THE INTERVIEW

A. Dress: General

For legal job interviews, always err on the side of conservative dress. Wear clothes that would be suitable in court, whether or not the job you are applying for would require you to go to court. Remember that you want your clothes to complement you, not to compete with you. For both men and women, the optimal dress is a freshly pressed, solid dark suit with a light shirt or blouse, respectively. Shoes should be polished and shined.

Skip the cologne and perfume because your interviewer may be allergic to it. Do, however, wear a strong deodorant/antiperspirant. If your hands tend to sweat a lot when you are nervous, experiment (ahead of time) with putting a dab on antiperspirant (not the kind that leaves white marks) on your palms.

B. Women

- Skirt suits are considered more conservative than pant suits, but pant suits are very well accepted.
- Do not wear skirts shorter than two inches above the knee. (The too-short skirt is among the most common dress errors that women make.)
- If you wear a skirt, wear nylons—either neutral or a sheer tone that matches your shoes. Runs and snags are not acceptable, so carry an extra pair in your purse or briefcase.
- Always wear a blouse, preferably collared and long-sleeved, under your suit jacket. (FYI, while a round-collared shell is also fine, a lycra tank-top is not!)
- Always tuck in blouses, and put blouse collars on top of suit jacket collars.
- Do not expose cleavage—at all.
- Your jewelry should be simple and conservative; earrings should not dangle.
- Do not wear a sports watch; a dress watch may be worn.
- Make-up, if worn, should be subtle.
- Your nails should be clean and neatly filed; polish, if any, should be clear or neutral.
- Long hair should be worn off the face—back or up in a neat unobtrusive style.
- Wear closed-toe shoes, with a solid back (not a mule- or sling-style); a simple pump (one- to two-inch heel) is best. Neither high heels nor flats are recommended.

C. Men

- Wear an undershirt.
- A long-sleeve shirt should be worn under your suit jacket and should be tucked into your pants.
- Choose dark socks that blend in tone with your pants and shoes.
- Do not wear ties with wild patterns, colors, or themes.
- Do not wear a sports watch; a dress watch may be worn.
- Your nails should be clean and trimmed short.
- Comb your hair neatly; use only a small amount of hair gel.
- Keep facial hair (mustache, beard, sideburns) trimmed neat; stubble is not acceptable.

D. A Word About Business-Casual Attire

- Even if a firm has a casual dress policy, you should adhere to the traditional standards of interview attire.

E. What to Bring With You

- Extra copies of your resume
- Your writing sample
- Unofficial (unless they have requested official) copies of your transcript
- Your reference list
- Paper and a pen for taking notes
- Something to read while you are waiting, such as a newspaper

Rather than putting these items in a briefcase, which can be cumbersome, put them in a slim, neat-looking leather or leather-like folder or portfolio. You can purchase these relatively cheaply at the bookstore. If you bring a briefcase make sure it is slim. If you bring a purse, make sure it has a professional look and is relatively small. Do not bring a backpack.

F. Miscellaneous

- Arrive at least five minutes, but no more than fifteen minutes, early for your interview.
- Use a firm, but not a bone-crushing, handshake.
- Remember that the best interviews are great conversations. Take an active part in your interview—maintain frequent eye contact and listen attentively. Be yourself and try to enjoy the experience!
- If the interviewers are taking notes, do not let your eyes wander to their notepads.
- Be extremely courteous and friendly to the support staff. They are almost always asked to evaluate you based on their brief interaction with you.
- Be positive in both your words and body language. Speak professionally; do not use slang, colloquialisms, or profanity, even if the interviewer does.
- You do not need to wait for an interviewer to ask you a question about a specific trait or skill. Rather, you may find ways to highlight your skills and knowledge throughout the interview. That said, be mindful not to over step your bounds or to take control away from the interviewer.
- Stress your commitment to the city where the employer is located.
- Get any information you will need for a thank-you note, for example, a business card.
- It is okay to ask about the employer's time line for hiring and when you might expect to receive a response, though such questions will not help you to advance in the

interview, so be sure that you first have asked questions that will further your candidacy.

- Do not worry if the entire interview is about your personal interests. This could be a good sign. The interviewer may have decided that your credentials meet the firm's objective standards and may be assessing how well you will fit in with the firm. Finally, if the interviewer spends the entire time talking instead of listening, keep in mind that in at least one study, the more the interviewers talked, the better they felt the interviews went!
- Do not forget that the interview is an opportunity for you to assess the employer just as the employer will assess you. If your interview takes place at the employer's office, use the time you are waiting to become familiar with the surroundings. Look around the waiting area. Observe how the receptionist addresses clients and lawyers in the firm. Look for signs of congeniality and teamwork as you walk through the halls. Ask yourself whether this is a place in which you would feel comfortable working.

G. Mistakes to Avoid

- Do not show up late or unprepared.
- Do not fail to show enthusiasm.
- Do not let negative body language negate what you say.
- Do not volunteer your flaws, and do not be defensive or apologetic.
- Do not be overly focused on what you consider your weakest points.
- Beware of relaxing too much with an interviewer who seems extremely friendly. The interviewer may be trying to see how you act when you let down your guard. Be especially cautious with young associates—it is important to bond with them but also to show them respect as a potential employer; it is also important not to intimidate them.

III. **AFTER THE INTERVIEW: SEND A THANK-YOU NOTE.**

Within forty-eight hours of the interview, send a typed thank-you note. Your note should be tailored to the specifics of the interview for which it is written. In the note, emphasize an aspect of the interview that you would like the interviewer to remember, e.g., "As we discussed, I am especially interested in your firm because I want to work with a litigation department that encourages alternative dispute resolution." Such information will help the interviewer remember you and impresses upon the interviewer how suitable for and interested in the employer's particular practice you are.

If you have met with more than one interviewer, it is sufficient to send one thank you note to the hiring partner or other key person. In the letter, you can state that it was a pleasure to meet with him or her and with attorneys "x," "y," and "z," and that you thank them all for their time and consideration. Within the same letter, you should also thank the human resources manager or assistant if such a person made the arrangements for your interview. In addition, it is nice to send a separate thank you note to the human resources manager or assistant who worked most directly with you. However, do not ask human resources personnel to extend your thanks to all of the attorneys with whom you met because they may feel as though they are being asked to do *your* work.

Thank-you letters are an important form of common courtesy; however, a poorly-drafted or edited letter can "break the deal." Thank you notes should be sent promptly, that is

within forty-eight hours. If you believe that the employer will be making a decision within forty-eight hours, send your thank you note via e-mail. Be sure to proofread your letters carefully. Feel free to bring them to the CDO for a final proofing by a career advisor.

IV. A FINAL NOTE

If you would like to work on your interview skills, make an appointment to meet with a career advisor for a practice interview. The advisor will conduct a 20–30 minute mock interview and will then debrief it with you for another 20–30 minutes. If you want to practice an interview for a specific employer, let us know in advance so that we can prepare accordingly.