

# Interview Guide For Scientists



## Interview Guide

This interview guide aims to give you an overview of a variety of interview styles, tips & tricks on how to answer different types of questions. Not all aspects will be relevant to every interview but it is intended to be a comprehensive guide which should help you prepare for; and perform to the best of your abilities.

Although Interviews are part of a selection process; if done properly they should be two-way and will help employers AND candidates get to know each other and the wants and desires of each stakeholder. Not only does the employer decide who the best candidate for the role is, but you can decide if it's the right company and role for your particular needs.

Most organisations have well structured interview and assessment programmes and provide their Hiring Managers with thorough interview training. This should enable them to ask “open”, “probing” and “funnelling” questions to get the relevant information from you. However, its vital that you prepare properly so can spot different types of questions so you can answer in the right way with appropriate information.

We still see lots of examples where the successful candidate is the one who “performs best” at interview rather than the “best candidate” for the role.

## **Interview Preparation**

Find out the basic information about the company – those who show initiative impress employers. Types of information you should be preparing:

### **You**

The only thing the interviewer knows about you is what's on your CV so make sure you go through this and are confident you can answer detailed questions on all the skills and techniques listed

### **Company**

Use their own website to get an overview to what the company does. Take note of their news section (if applicable) as this will often be packed full of achievements that the company wants to tell the world. Don't just use the company website; use search engines to find other info, news, details about the organisation, events attended or attending etc..

A really useful website is <http://www.glassdoor.co.uk/index.htm> which rates organisations based on feedback from current & past employees. Like all review websites take this as a guide rather than making instant judgements on an organisation. With any review you'll always get very positive ones and some negative ones so its probably the ones in the middle which may be most balanced!

If you get chance, visit the company beforehand. Knowing where you are going can help ease travel anxiety but also seeing the offices, location and surrounding area can help you visualise the company better so when it comes to the interview day you can focus just on you and the interview itself.

### **Contacts/Interviewers**

Having a background knowledge of who you are going to be meeting can be really useful so use LinkedIn or search engine reviews to "google" the interviewer. Hopefully you'll be able to find a photo of them too as seeing who you'll be meeting can be a great benefit.

### **Job Description**

Use the job description to pre-prepare examples/evidence of when you have performed similar task's in previous positions. Make sure you have covered off all requirements and even duties you haven't performed, plan an answer that demonstrates how you anticipate over-coming the lack of experience or where you have transferable skills.

### **Territory**

If it's a territory based position its extremely useful to research the area you'll be servicing so you can start to familiarise yourself with the organisations you may be working with, selling into or servicing. Demonstrating to the interviewer that you know the territory or have done thorough back research will make you stand out from the crowd.

### **Competitors**

Probably most relevant for Sales or Commercial positions but knowing who the potential competitors are can give you a big advantage at interview.

## **Competency Based Questions**

These are easy to spot as they will always ask for examples or evidence of when you have displayed the competency they are looking for. Skilled interviewers will be able to ask clear questions that will bring out the competency and will then ask "funneling" questions to test your resolve and ascertain the depth of your competency. Inexperienced interviews may be less skilled at asking good open questions allowing you to provide examples so its always best to try to include an example wherever possible. Taylorollinson have a comprehensive guide to competencies which can be found at:

<http://www.taylorollinson.co.uk/assets/Competencies.pdf>

But typical competencies will include:

**Problem Solving**

- Analytical Ability - logical and practical solutions to problems
- Decision Making - confident, timely, well judged decisions
- Innovation - novel solutions, thinks outside box
- Initiative - proactive, independent action

**Operational Style**

- Results Focus - strong focus on bottom line deliverables
- Tenacity - determination in the face of obstacles
- Adaptability - changes/learns quickly in varying situations
- Organization - well managed approach to projects
- Customer Focus - driven by customer needs
- Quality Focus - high output standards
- Financial awareness

**Relationships**

- Communication - clear; listens well, informs others
- Networking - proactive in building range of contacts
- Team Work - cooperates, shares, supports others
- Sensitivity - considerate of others

**Leadership**

- Vision - paints clear and stimulating picture of way ahead
- Influence - gains full commitment of others, varies approach
- Empowering - delegates, coaches, supportive

**Example of Competency Questions**

- In your last/current/academic role how did you organise your time?
- How would your friends/colleagues describe you?
- Give me an example of when you have worked as a team?
- Tell me about a time when you had to handle several tasks to meet a deadline?
- In your own words talk me through your last/current job
- What are your weaknesses?
- What are your strengths?
- Describe a situation where you didn't get on with a friend/Colleague. How did you resolve this?

## **Tips for Answering**

Draw answers from your past work history, social events you have organised/attended, academic activities/projects, team sports and hobbies. All provide prime examples to demonstrate your competencies.

Most large organisations have agreed core competencies that they live by and recruit by. Clues of these can sometimes be found in company literature and websites.

Use the **STAR** model – **S**ituation, **T**ask, **A**ction, **R**esult – to structure your answer prior and during your interview to stop nervous rambling and ensure you give a thorough but concise answer: -

- Describe the situation e.g. Work/University project, team sport etc...
- Briefly outline the task involved e.g. what was the objective?
- Logically describe the actions YOU took to complete the task
- Result? What did you achieve?

Turn a negative into a positive! – When asked questions that encourage a negative answer e.g. what are your weaknesses? Firstly, be honest and avoid hypothetical answers as these may catch you out later. Describe your weakness, but also describe the positive steps you are taking to overcome it.

Plan, Plan, Plan! Write out some example questions of your own and think of examples from your life that you could use as answers – a “planned for” interview is a successful interview.

## **Technical Questions**

As the name suggests these are all questions that are designed to test your knowledge & depth of understanding of the techniques required to perform the job (or developed for the job). This is where skilled interviewers will ask open and probing questions to test what you “really” know about what’s written on your CV. Good interviewers will ask short follow-up questions known as funnelling to test for a deeper level of understanding.

Our advice for these types of questions is simple – know every detail about what’s on your CV and be honest about what you know and don’t know. If you are being asked technical questions then the interviewer is likely to know the answers so bluffing your way through just won’t work. When the interviewer funnels he isn’t always looking for you to be able to answer all his technical questions but to see how deep your level of understanding goes.

## **Questions About You**

These can be some of the hardest questions to answer. They will look at a variety of things from your motivators, why you are looking for a change through to your ambitions and ability to self-analyse.

There are some fairly common tried and tested questions that are still asked but will get discussed in a few different forms. Detailed below are a few examples of what types of questions may get asked.

### **Ten Common Questions About You**

- **Tell me about yourself.** Leave out the life history - this is a chance to show them you're normal and break the ice.
- **Why do you want this job?** Enthuse about how your skills are a perfect match.

- **What are your long-term aims?** Keep them relevant to the job you're after. Ambition is a good quality, so don't hold back. However, avoid being specific and focus more on being "highly competent in your position" and "respected by peers and management" and "keen to grow and progress within the organisation"
- **What can you bring to this job/company?** Highlight your relevant skills, strengths, experience and qualities. Use examples to re-enforce these.
- **What are your strengths/weaknesses?** Confidently state two or three strengths that match the job and one 'positive' weakness, like 'I'd like to have more skills and training in XXX area'.
- **What do you enjoy most/least?** What you enjoy most should be relevant to the job. What you enjoy least should be something you have no power over, such as those days when you achieve very little due to cancellations, interruptions and circumstances beyond your control. However, let them know that, though you dislike it, you can handle it.
- **What's your greatest achievement so far?** Keep it relevant to the job. Leading your pub-quiz team to victory won't cut it.
- **What would you like to be better at?** Let them know you're open to developing your skills in relevant areas.
- **How would your colleagues describe you?** Don't be bigheaded, but don't put yourself down. Be honest - and try to use real positive examples from your last appraisal, school report or discussion with a college counsellor/tutor.
- **Why should we give you this job?** Unless this is the opening question, think about how your answers have gone down so far, and what you've been asked. For instance, if they've asked a lot about your teamwork skills, make these one of the strengths you highlight in your answer.

### They May Also Ask

- **What attracted you to this company?** A good answer will flatter them but make sense, like talking about the impressive staff-training programme. Mentioning good salaries and free lunches won't go down well.
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- **What do you know about our business?** Show them you've done your research.
- **How would you fit in with our culture?** If you're stuck, answer with a question - ask them how they'd describe their culture and then match yourself to the company
- **What do you think the most important qualities for this job are?** Show you know what's actually involved in the post you're going for on a daily basis. Match up your qualities to everyday tasks - you want them to almost be able to see you doing the job.

### Turning negatives into positives (change your weaknesses into strengths)

- **What can you do for us that someone else can't?** *If you have understood the details of the job then try to answer this with a combination of your skills/experience which others are unlikely to have.*
- **Describe a difficult problem you've had to deal with.** *Clearly explain how you have approached a problem, the result and how the difficult outcome was averted. This will show that you have a positive attitude to all challenges, and you were not discouraged or intimidated by the situation.*
- **What is your greatest weakness?** *This is your chance to show that you have identified and are working on reducing your weaknesses. Turn your weakness into strength.*
- **How do you handle tension/stress?** *Explain how you avoid stressful situations, and if not how you deal with it, for example: exercising and going to the gym.*
- **How do you take direction?** *Show by giving examples of how you can be briefed and finish the task without unnecessary disagreements/complications*

- **Do you prefer working with others or alone?** *Explain how you can work well in both situations.*
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- **How do you handle rejection?** *Much of today's business is commercially orientated, therefore a good answer would tend to be that you move on but take on board what has happened and use it to benefit you in the future.*

## **At The Interview**

Be confident, positive and look directly at the interviewer when you talk and listen.

Speak clearly, be enthusiastic and express keen interest in the position.

Always be honest

Always be positive

Don't bad-mouth old managers or companies

Keep to the point and don't ramble – remember **STAR**

*(it isn't always essential to follow the exact STAR steps but just use it as a guide to structure our answers)*

During the interview you need to look for opportunities to be proactive and ask your own questions or try to lead the discussion where appropriate. Questions should reflect your keenness to work for the company. Generally you should limit yourself to just a couple of significant questions such as:

- What are the key tasks and responsibilities of the job
- What support and guidance is available
- What training will be available

*Other aspects to talk about are:*

- Structure of the organisation
- Success of the organisation, it's profitability and product portfolio
- Future strategies and development

Keep your concentration levels up during the interview and make sure you listen to the responses the interviewer gives you. The worst mistakes happen when people end up asking questions about topics that have already been covered, or don't hear or understand what the interviewer has said.

Keep focused from start (the moment you pull up in the car-park through to the moment you get back into your car. Chit-chat as you talk to the receptionist, get a tour of the lab or get walked to and from the interview are ALL part of the assessment process. Little mistakes or saying the wrong thing when you think the interview is over can have a BIG impact of the result!

## QUESTIONS TO ASK AT INTERVIEW

**This is often a very over looked part of interview preparation and is your opportunity to:**

- Ask sensible questions relating to any points where you require additional clarity regarding the job description or person spec
- Demonstrate a knowledge of the business/sector/market

Try to avoid the obvious questions and have 2-4 questions pre-prepared so if a few points get covered during the interview you still have good questions to ask at the end.

Try to memorise these but if your memory fails its a good idea to have these written down in a (smart) notebook which you can get out of your bag. Alternatively you'll be under pressure may end up asking a nonsense questions that can have a detrimental effect.

**Typical Questions to ask:**

### **Business-Related Questions**

How has your business been influenced by the shaky economy?  
How does someone advance in this company?  
Where do you see the company in ten years?  
Has the recent merger had an impact on customer service?  
What challenges is the department/organisation currently facing?

### **Job-related questions**

How would you describe the corporate culture?  
What is the management style in this department?  
What are some of the skills and abilities necessary for someone to succeed in this job?  
What makes someone successful at this company?  
How do you measure and determine success for this position?  
How will my performance be measured?  
How are targets set? How much say would I have in setting them?  
What do you see as the immediate challenges for me if I were to be given the job?  
How do you see this role developing?  
How quickly are you looking for someone to take on this role?  
What's the makeup of the team as far as experience?  
What are the issues for this role in terms of maintaining & developing effective inter-departmental relations?

### **Personal questions**

Why did you decide to join this company?  
What do you like most about working here?  
What is the most challenging thing about working here?  
If you could change one thing about the company, what would it be?  
What do you consider your company's strengths and weaknesses?

You should always have a few "soft" questions in your back pocket, if you find your inquisitive nature going dry at the end of an interview. It's nice to have personal questions that you can ask anyone in any department or at any level, and it's OK to ask different interviewers the same personal questions.

If you were to name the three most important priorities for the successful candidate to achieve in the first six months, what would they be, and how would they be measured?

### **Never Ask**

You never want to ask obvious questions that you can find out from the job description or the web site such as "Who are your clients?" or "Where are your offices located?"

Also, don't ask the salary question during the interview. You wait to ask those questions once you have received the job offer.

**Pay attention to the answer and ask a follow up question.**

A great question and answer session and conversation at the end of your interview can leave a lasting impression.



**Ask about next steps.** You should always leave the interview knowing the company's timeline or intentions.

- What are the next steps?
- What is your timeline?
- When can I expect to hear from you regarding next steps?

Make sure you "close" the interviewer to get some feedback and commitment to the next stage

Do you have any questions or concerns about my ability to perform this job?

Do you have any concerns that I need to clear up in order to be the top candidate?

**Say thank you and restate why you would be a great fit.** As the interview draws to a close, you want to sum up everything:

Thank you for taking the time to interview me. After hearing more about ABC Company, I know my drive and perspective would be a great fit here. I'll look forward to hearing from you next week."

*By asking questions and following these steps, you show that you are curious and strongly interested in the position and the company.*