

**THE COMPLETE GUIDE
TO
SUCCESSFUL
INTERVIEWING
FOR
NURSING STUDENTS
AND ALUMNI**

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THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO INTERVIEWING

Congratulations! You've written a strong resume. You've identified the healthcare organizations in which you would like to work. You know what specialty is of greatest interest to you. And you've been sending out resumes. It has all finally paid off! You have been called for an interview! In fact, giving the critical nursing shortage, you may have several interviews ahead.

So, it's time to prepare. You'll want to accomplish two things during your interviews. First, you should evaluate if this is an organization in which you would like to work, and 2) second, you must convince the interviewer that you are fully qualified for the position you are seeking.

If there is one thing to remember about interviews, it's this — the potential employer believes from reading your resume that you have the minimum qualifications for this position. It is believed that you can do this job! That realization should boost your confidence. So now it's time to press your interviewing suit, research the organization and do anything else that will demonstrate you are the best qualified candidate for the job you are seeking. How can you ensure that you will demonstrate your relevant skills? How can you help your potential employer realize that you are the best fit for this job? The purpose of this guide is to provide an overview of interviewing, help you prepare for the interview process, and offer tips for success.

THE PURPOSE OF AN INTERVIEW

According to Richard Bolles (1998), the purpose of an interview is as follows:

...For the employer to figure out whether you will be part of the solution or just another part of the problem... You will see immediately what a switch this is from the way most job-hunters approach an employer! ("How much do you pay, and how much time off will I have?") Will he or she be glad to see you with this different emphasis? In most cases, you bet they will. They want a resource person and a problem solver (p. 65).

In short, the purpose of an interview is to:

- convince the employer that you are the most qualified candidate for the job and that you will fit in with the rest of the staff
- evaluate whether or not this position is right for you.

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Besides having proper credentials in your field, preparation is the key to interviewing success. Before interviewing for any job, be sure to prepare thoroughly by following the suggestions outlined below.

I. Know your personal and professional goals and what you can contribute to the organization.

As you know, interviewing is one of the last steps in the career decision-making process. Therefore, to ensure your success, you should have already completed a thorough self-assessment. During the interview, employers look for people who have done their career planning, are aware of what they

want, and know where they are going. As such, interviewers will not guide you in career planning or assist in goal setting during your meeting with them. Instead, they expect you to know how your academic preparation, previous work experiences, and other activities meet the needs of the job for which you are interviewing. In preparing for your interview, be sure you can answer these questions:

- How do my strengths, interests, and work values relate to the requirements of this position?
- To what extent are my goals compatible with the objectives of this position and the mission of this organization?
- Will this position provide what I've identified as important (opportunity for work-life balance, training, advancement potential...)

(If you are having trouble answering these questions, schedule an appointment with the SON career consultant. You can do so by calling or emailing....)

II. Research the hiring organization.

The more you know about a potential employer, the better. Researching employers will help you make a better impression. It will also help you evaluate whether or not the organization and position are good fits for you. Before your interview, research the organization (including its mission, financial stability, recent awards and compliance record). Find out through networking, reviewing online resources, and by reading articles in trade journals, newspapers, and business periodicals. After your research is complete, you should be able to answer these questions about the hiring organization: What is the reputation of this organization? Is it financially sound? What is its reputation with regard to treatment of nurses? How does it support continuing education? Be sure to find answers to questions of your own as well.

III. Know your worth.

Before your interview, you should determine the average salary and bonus level for the position you're seeking and other benefits information that can help you to negotiate effectively. To gauge this, find out the market value for your skills at similar-sized organizations in the same geographic area. For a first position, you may not have much negotiating room, however, it's important to have as much information as possible. Visit the SON website for links to salary information

IV. Review your resume.

Because a resume creates an image of who you are, it's to your advantage to have one that shows how your experience makes you a suitable employee. As you review your resume, select experiences that you believe are relevant for the position you are seeking. For example, if the position you are seeking will include training others, be sure to be able to discuss any training you've provided in the past. Remember, anything on your resume is fair game. Be sure to can effectively explain any statements included and relate them to the requirements of the position you are seeking. If you need help creating an effective resume, contact the SON Career Resource Center for assistance.

V. Practice your responses to interview questions.

Prior to the interview, you should decide what you want to communicate so that the employer understands your capabilities, experience, achievements, and skills. For help in this area, contact the Career Resource Center. During your appointment, you can practice your interview skills, and obtain honest feedback about the quality of your responses.

Overall, most interview questions come from an employer's concern with three basic questions: What can you do for us? Why do you want to work with us? What are you like once we've gotten to know you? Specifically, you should be prepared to answer these typical interview questions:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why did you select a nursing career?
- Why are you interested in our organization?
- What contribution will you make in our organization?
- Why do you want this job?
- What are your strengths? Weaknesses?
- Why should I hire you?
- Why do you want to leave your present job?
- What are your most significant accomplishments?
- What are your short-term and long-term career goals?
- How does this position meet those goals?
- What kind of compensation are you looking for?
- How have your educational and work experience prepared you for this position?
- What challenges are you looking for in a position?
- How would you describe yourself?
- How would a supervisor describe you?
- Describe what you feel to be an ideal working environment.
- In your current or last position, what features did you like most? Least?
- What is the most important thing you're looking for in an employer?
- Describe what you believe to be an ideal supervisor.
- What work experience has been the most valuable to you and why?
- What has been your greatest challenge?
- What frustrates you the most?
- What else should I know about you?

Here are some suggestions for answering several of the most common interview questions:

| Question | The point you should make | Response strategy |
|-------------------------|--|--|
| Tell me about yourself. | You are a good employee, as you have proved in the past at other jobs. | Use self-complimentary phrases and keep your response to 2 minutes. Include information on education and work history. |

| Question | The point you should make | Response strategy |
|---|--|---|
| What are your weaknesses? | You have limitations just like anyone else but you work constantly to improve yourself and become a more effective worker. | Mention a weakness and then stress its positive aspect, e.g., “I don’t like to be oversupervised because I have a great deal of initiative. For example...” |
| Why are you interested in our organization? | You have done your homework. | Discuss organization mission, opportunities to develop skills, research areas. |
| Why should I hire you? | You can be part of the employer’s solution to existing problems. | Relate past experience which represents success in solving similar problems. |
| What are your career goals? | You are focused. | Talk first about doing the job for which you are applying. |

You also should be ready to answer behavioral interview questions. Behavioral interviewing is a technique in which employers assess your potential performance based on your past actions and results. This interview style was developed in order to help employers obtain proof as to whether you have the capabilities required to succeed in a specific job. Thus, behavioral interview questions are the next best thing to direct observation because they challenge you to recall in detail what you did, said, thought, and felt in key situations as if you were reliving them (Ziegler, 1994). Some typical behavioral interview questions are:

- Describe a stressful clinical situation and how you handled it.
- Describe an encounter with an angry or frustrated patient and family member and how you handled it.
- Describe the most challenging patient experience you’ve had. Explain why.
- Tell me about a time when your performance did not meet your expectations.
- Give me an example of how you handled rapid or unexpected change.
- Tell me about a time when you had to build motivation or team spirit with members of a work group.
- Tell me about a time when you received difficult (or less than positive) feedback from your supervisor. How did you respond to the feedback? What changes did you implement as a result?
- Define pro-active and give me an example of a time when you behaved this way.
- Tell me about a situation in which you had to work with someone with whom you were uncomfortable. Describe the working relationship that developed and your influence on this relationship.
- Recall a situation or relationship which suffered from poor communication. What happened and how did you resolve it?
- What personal qualities do you feel are important to be successful in this position? Which of these qualities do you possess? Give an example of how these qualities have helped you in your present position.

- What is your definition of leadership, and why do you feel it is important? How have you demonstrated leadership? Tell me about a situation in which you should have shown more leadership than you did.
- Give me an example of when you had to make a quick decision. What were the results?
- What are the motivating factors for your personal happiness? For satisfaction in the workplace?
- Tell me about an important goal you set for yourself and how you were successful in achieving it.
- Describe how you demonstrate professionalism in your activities. What behaviors and characteristics contribute to that image?
- Describe a situation where you persuaded an individual or group to follow your course of action rather than their previously stated position.
- What was the hardest job you held, and what did you do to get through it?

In order to prepare for behavioral interview questions, you should know your strengths, be ready to offer examples of past actions and results, listen carefully, fully understand the question before answering, ask for clarification if needed, make your answers as specific as possible, and be genuine.

VI. Be aware of illegal interview questions.

Be aware that various federal, state, and local laws regulate the questions prospective employers can ask. As such, there are illegal interview questions. In theory, an employer's questions on the job application, in the interview, or during a testing process must be related to the job for which you are applying. Thus, for the employer, the focus of interviewing must be, "What do I need to know to decide whether or not this person can perform the functions of the job?"

If you are asked an illegal question, you have three options. First you are free to answer, but if you do so, realize that you are giving information that is not job-related. You could harm your candidacy by giving the "wrong" answer. Second, you can refuse to answer the question. By selecting this option, you'll be within your rights, but you're also running the risk of appearing uncooperative or confrontational — hardly the words an employer would use to describe the ideal candidate. Third, you can examine the intent behind the question and respond with an answer as it might apply to the job. For instance, if your interviewer asks, "Who is going to take care of your children when you have to travel?" You might answer, "I can meet the travel and work schedule that this job requires."

The following are examples of illegal job interview questions:

- Are you a US citizen?
- Where were your parents born?
- What is your native tongue?
- How old are you?
- When did you graduate from college?
- What is your birth date?
- What is your marital status?
- With whom do you live?

- Do you plan to have a family? When?
- How many kids do you have?
- What are your child care arrangements?
- To what clubs or social organizations do you belong?
- How tall are you?
- How much do you weigh?
- Do you have any disabilities?
- What is your medical history?
- Have you had any recent or past illnesses or operations?
- How is your family's health?
- Have you ever been arrested?
- If you have been in the military, were you honorably discharged?

VII. Prepare your own questions for the interviewer.

Even though for most of the interview you are responding to the interviewer's queries, keep in mind that the meeting is a two-way street — you are also interviewing the employer. As such, it isn't an interrogation, but a conversation between two or more individuals with a similar agenda, i.e., to determine if you have the skills, knowledge, motivation, values, and interest to do the job well (Bolles, 1998). Prior to the interview, you should create a short list of questions for the employer based on your earlier research and any concerns you might have. Here are some examples:

- Describe a typical day on the job.
- Is there room for advancement?—be careful here. You don't want to sound like you see this position only as a stepping stone.
- Describe the ideal candidate for this job.
- To whom would I report, and what is his/her supervisory style?
- What are the training opportunities?
- How is performance evaluated and how often?
- How does this position fit into the organizational structure?
- What are the primary tasks of this position?

VIII. Know your interviewer(s) and meeting location.

During the phone call to set up the interview, find out the names and titles of all the people with whom you will be meeting. Get correct spelling and pronunciation as well as the location and length of the interview. Ask if there are any special items you should bring. If you are not familiar with the location of the interview, make a test run a few days before. Be sure to find out where parking is located. If you can visit during working hours, go inside (if possible) to discreetly observe employees and get an idea of the company culture. Ask the receptionist for a few employment applications, complete them at home, and bring them to the interview. If an interviewer asks you to fill one out, she'll be impressed that you have already done so.

IX. Remember the basics.

Once you have reviewed and completed the above steps to prepare for your interview, you are ready for the big day. But remember the basics! For example, be sure to get a good night's sleep and eat properly. Also, dress in clothes that you feel confident and comfortable wearing and make sure

they're clean and pressed. Do not wear nurse's whites. It's better to dress somewhat formally than the interviewer.

On the day of the interview, arrive 15 minutes early so you can relax, review your surroundings, and visit a restroom to check your appearance. Here are some additional tips to help you make a great first impression:

- There are really no excuses to be late for an interview. However, if there is an emergency, call the interviewer as soon as possible to say that you will be late or unable to make the appointment. If you must reschedule, get to the new appointment early. Missing an appointment without calling can often eliminate your chances of obtaining a position at this organization.
- Take extra copies of your resume and a list of references with you. Be sure to put your name, address, and phone number on the reference list.
- Take a pad and pen along for any notes you may wish to make immediately after the interview. Taking notes during the interview may be distracting.
- Bring your nursing license (if you have it) and relevant certificates.
- Bring a list of questions to ask, including:
 - What do you perceive as challenges of this position?
 - What training/orientation is available for this position?
 - At the end of the interview, be sure to ask: what's the next step?
 - Do you have an idea of when you'd like to fill this position?
 - Can I provide you with any additional information?
- Make allies of everyone (receptionist, secretary, etc.) along the way.
- Read organization materials or an appropriate magazine while you wait.
- Never, ever speak negatively about former employers or educational institutions.
- Use a firm handshake and look the interviewer in the eye.
- Be enthusiastic and interested.
- Do not smoke or chew gum even if others are doing so.
- Relax — be yourself.
- Use your interviewer's name from time to time as you speak. Never use the interviewer's first name unless you have been specifically requested to do so.
- Use good grammar.
- Use good diction. Say "yes" instead of "yeah."
- Don't fill pauses in the conversation with "ahs" and "umms."
- Use active verbs when you talk about your skills and experience. Say "I treated," "I supervised," "I trained," to emphasize your strengths.
- Don't "think," "guess," or "feel," anything. These indecisive words make you appear less than assertive.
- Avoid negative terms as "pretty good" or "fairly well." When you talk about your skills and experience, use positive, strong words.
- If you are interviewing for your first nursing position, don't apologize about your lack of experience. Instead, emphasize your willingness to learn and the successes of your nursing program.
- Offer examples of accomplishments. Support your claim to skills with descriptions, statistics, and testimonials. If possible, bring along copies of publications you've authored and information about professional activities with which you've been involved.

- Do not bring up salary or schedule/hours during a first interview. Rather, wait for the interviewer to do so.

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

There are several types of interviews, and you should be prepared to handle them all. The following describes the most common.

I. Screening interview

This interview is often conducted by a human resources professional, not the hiring supervisor. The goal of the screening interview is to reduce the number of applicants and to determine if there might be a match. Because you have focused your career search, you should be fairly clear about the responsibilities required for the position, and you should be able to communicate satisfactorily to the interviewer that you can perform those duties.

Keep in mind that the interviewer is looking for reasons why you might not be a good fit. Medley (1992) maintains that the human resources person is:

...an expert at discovering reasons not to send you on to the next stage, the selection interview. The screener may not have the power to hire you, but does have the power to reject you, and will do so if you appear unqualified in any way. Therefore, in the screening interview, the key is to follow the interviewer's lead. Do not try to exert any control over the interview. Answer any questions asked in a simple, straightforward manner and leave it at that. Since you have nothing to gain, don't put yourself in a position from which you can only maintain the status quo or lose (p. 36).

During this meeting, the interviewer will inquire about your employment status, gather information about your qualifications and ask other "closed-ended" questions such as: Where have you worked? What educational level have you achieved? What software programs have you used?

As in all interviews, but particularly in screening interviews, be sure to ask what the "next steps" will be. Find out when you can expect to be contacted, with whom you will be meeting, and what the projected time line is for the completion of the hiring.

Screening interviews are often conducted over the telephone or in person at job fairs. If you receive a call from a potential employer, consider it an interview. Be sure to have a copy of your resume handy and find a place to talk that is free of distractions. Just the same, consider a discussion about positions at a job fair an interview as well. Be prepared, be yourself, and be confident.

II. Selection interview

If you were successful in the first interview, you most likely will be called a second time for a selection interview. Selection interviews are usually conducted by the hiring supervisor. During this session, the interviewer is looking for reasons to keep you in the running.

You can expect to be asked many specific job content questions as well as broad, open-ended questions. The interviewer will be trying to answer the following questions: Does this person have

the necessary skills for success in this position? Why does he/she want to leave her current job? Is he/she a team player? Will he/she complement the rest of my staff?

The interviewer will be evaluating your enthusiasm for the position, level of confidence, knowledge of yourself, familiarity with the company and general demeanor. Be sure to use this situation as an opportunity to sell yourself by highlighting your education, experience, and relevant skills for the position.

According to Medley (1992):

Despite all the pressures that are placed on selection interviewers to make a good decision, the way they arrive at their judgement is not scientific. You must recognize that no matter what they say they are looking for, they are going to reach their conclusions based upon the feeling they have after the interview about the interviewee. The way you think, the way you express yourself, what you say, how you say it, your manner and style, all are more important to the selection interview than the bare facts on your resume. It is a very personal assessment. Each selection interviewer is different; each makes decisions based upon his prejudices. It is always advisable in any endeavor to approach it as if you are going to be faced with a conscientious, knowledgeable, and well-researched person. If you take this approach, you will never be unpleasantly surprised. If you enter expecting less than the best and you happen to get the best, you'll be at a disadvantage. On the other hand, if you enter expecting the best and get less than the best, you'll have the advantage (p. 38).

III. Series interview

Series interviews are a variation of the screening and selection interviews. In this arrangement, you will meet with several staff members individually. It is very important to treat each successive interview as if it were your first and as a selection interview. Indeed, for the person you are meeting, it is his/her first chance to meet you. Be sure to spread your enthusiasm, interests, and attention equally among the interviewers. Listen attentively and answer as fully and carefully with each interviewer as you did with the first. (Series interviews are not as common for entry-level nursing positions, however, you can expect these as you apply for more senior nursing or management opportunities.)

IV. Panel interview

Although you can most often expect to meet with one individual, you should also prepare for the possibility of a panel interview. These consist of a session with a number of individuals from differing departments in the organization with varying levels of responsibility. Panel interviews can be stressful because you are in a reactive position. Questions can be quickly paced as interviewers prepare questions while you answer another.

The advantages of participating in panel interviews include seeing the staff working together. Further, multiple interviewers may be more objective and you may better overcome individual biases. When in a panel interview, be sure to maintain eye contact and involve the entire group in your presentation regardless of who asks the most questions.

STRUCTURE OF THE INTERVIEW

Interviews are usually comprised of three stages: establishing rapport, exchanging information, and closing the session. You'll want to let the interviewer set the pace, but you'll also want to demonstrate why you're the best candidate for the job and get all your questions answered. Understanding how the interview works will help you accomplish this.

I. Establishing rapport

The purpose of this stage is to help you and the interviewer get to know each other. It's brief — five to 10 minutes — and usually includes small talk about the weather, traffic, or another innocuous subject. Some career specialists suggest that you discretely look for a book you've read or evidence of a hobby or other activity that is an interest of yours and the interviewer's. Ask questions about it and be interested, but don't gush.

In spite of its length, this stage is extremely important since many candidates are screened out during the first five minutes. Initial presentations are critical. You'll want to appear confident, pleasant, and professional. Doing so will encourage the interviewer to learn more about you, i.e., why you are the best qualified candidate for this job.

To an astute observer, your physical mannerisms provide insight into your emotional state. Hiring managers will peg you as too nervous or uninterested if you're fidgety, shaky or unresponsive during an interview. Thus, it's important to take control of your body language from the start. A firm handshake can work wonders. Interviewers also watch your eyes, so be sure to maintain good eye contact with them. Posture is another key to conveying physical energy. By sitting up straight and leaning toward the interviewer, you create a more favorable impression of yourself as an active listener.

You will be moving into the next phase when the interviewer asks a more direct, job-related question such as, "Why are you interested in working for this company?" You should, at this point, be prepared to talk about yourself as related to your career.

II. Information exchange

During this stage, which may last 20-30 minutes, the interviewer will begin to ask a series of job-related questions. The interviewer should be in charge here, but if you notice long pauses between questions, it may be appropriate for you to initiate conversation about your qualifications for the job. Adapt your behavior to the interviewer's style. Listen carefully to his/her questions and respond with the most pertinent, relevant information you can, taking a moment to organize your thoughts if necessary.

The employer's goals during this stage include: obtaining data about you and your qualifications, analyzing how well your qualifications match the requirements of the company, evaluating your ability to communicate what you have to offer, and assessing how prepared you are for the interview. Depending on who is interviewing you, you will be asked different questions. In addition to evaluating your responses to the interview questions, the employer may be attempting to answer these questions as well:

- How alert and responsive is the applicant?
- How well does the applicant follow my train of thought?
- Is the applicant able to draw proper inferences and conclusions during the course of the interview?
- Has the applicant used good judgment in the manner in which his/her life has been planned and led so far?
- Can the applicant think and respond spontaneously?
- What is the applicant's capacity for problem solving?
- Is the applicant self-centered or can he/she identify with the company's goals and values?
- How well does the candidate respond to stress or pressure?
- Is the candidate dressed professionally and appropriately?
- Does the applicant seem interested in the job and the company?
- Does the applicant ask intelligent and thoughtful questions about the company, demonstrating knowledge of the company and where he/she might fit?
- Is the applicant a "go-getter?"
- Will the applicant fit into the company?
- How well does the applicant compare with others interviewed for the position?

Accordingly, the following characteristics can eliminate you from future consideration:

- Overbearing presence
- Inability to express oneself clearly
- Lack of planning for career
- Lack of interest and enthusiasm
- Lack of confidence and poise
- Failure to participate in activities
- Overemphasis on money
- Poor scholastic record
- Evasiveness
- Lack of tact
- Lack of maturity

- Lack of courtesy
- Condemnation of past employers
- Lack of vitality
- Failure to maintain eye contact
- Indecision
- Little sense of humor
- Lack of knowledge in field of specialization
- No interest in company or in industry
- Narrow interests
- Inability to accept criticism
- Radical ideas
- Lack of familiarity with company

Your goals during this stage should include: demonstrating your motivation, interest in the position, and capabilities; identifying traits about yourself that are needed for this position; communicating clearly why you are best qualified for this position; and determining if there is a match for you in this organization by evaluating your level of comfort with the environment, people you meet, and details of the position.

III. The close

The purpose of this stage of the interview is to pull together loose ends. The interviewer may ask if you have additional questions. He/she may also ask you summary questions. Use this as an opportunity to emphasize your strengths and interest in the position.

The employer may also give you an evaluation of the interview and outline the next steps. It is appropriate to ask (if the interviewer does not tell you) how the job search is being conducted and when you can expect to hear from the organization about the next interview. Hopefully, you both enjoyed this conversation and can end the session by telling each other so.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

The first thing to do after leaving the interview is breathe a sigh of relief! The second is to start a follow-up procedure. Sitting in your car, on the bus, train, or plane, do a written recap of the interview while it's still fresh in your mind. Answer these questions:

- Whom did I meet?
- What does the job entail?
- What are the first projects and/or biggest challenges?
- What aspects of the interview went poorly? What aspects went well? How can I improve my performance?
- What questions would I like to have asked and didn't?
- Do I want to receive an offer from this employer?
- What is the next step to take with this employer?

Next, write a follow-up note to the interviewer to acknowledge the meeting and to keep you fresh in his or her mind. Be sure to mail this letter within 24 hours of the interview. According to Hirsch (1996), a good thank-you letter is an ideal way to make sure that you express the kind of interest and enthusiasm employer desires. But it's not enough to send a form letter. You must sound genuine and sincere, and that requires a personal touch. Besides expressing interest in a position, thank-you letters can reinforce or correct a first impression or build on the relationship you've already established with an interviewer. Sending quality correspondence will reflect favorably on your personality and writing style. You may want to use the following four-part structure to get more mileage from your message:

- Tell the interviewer how much you enjoyed meeting him or her.
- Express your enthusiasm for the organization and the job.
- Reiterate a specific discussion point.
- Establish your next point of contact.

Also, if your interview was the result of a networking contact, part of your follow-up should include a call to your networking source. This can motivate your contact to redouble his or her efforts on your behalf, stimulate a conversation about you between the interviewer and your contact, and help you get additional information about the position and the company.

SUMMARY

Now that you've read this interview guide, you should feel better prepared to sell your skills as a resource person capable of meeting the needs of the potential employer. If you would like to obtain more information on interviewing, review literature on interviewing, or learn about other aspects of the career management process, contact the SON Career Resource Center at -----.

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