



Ace Your Interview!

Professor Beto's tips from the other side of the table:

If you're like me and lots of other people, you can feel confident and fully prepared for any challenge life throws at you... right up to the moment you walk into an interview for a job, scholarship, political appointment, or other important program. The good news is that interview skills, like almost any other skill set, improve the more you experience them, and the quality of your performance is directly related to the amount of preparation you put into it.

Here are some things I've learned both as a nervous interviewee, and as someone that has interviewed numerous applicants for a range of competitive positions over the years. I hope these are helpful to you. Good luck!

1. Do your homework: An absolute must. Go to the organization's Web site, read everything on there about what their priorities are, their key issues, objectives, etc. Make notes about everything you have done, skills, experiences, etc. that relate to what you learn about the organization or program. You want to be able to answer the question "*Why are you the right person? What makes you uniquely well-suited or ideal for this?*" by speaking in terms that are meaningful for the organization. Also review whatever you wrote in your application, especially essay questions. They are likely to refer to something you wrote and you don't want to look like you're hearing it for the first time.

2. Script & rehearse your key points:

- **Mockerview:** Based on what you know about the organization and about the position or program you are interviewing for, brainstorm 5-6 questions that you think the committee is likely to ask, and then write out your responses to these questions. Ask someone to read the questions to you and practice responding to them. Ask for their feedback afterwards and write down their suggestions and critiques. A review sheet is provided at the end of this document for your practice session. Ask someone to use the worksheet to provide you with notes and suggestions about your performance in the mock interview.
- **Go-to list:** Also, write down a short list of specific things about yourself (characteristics, experiences, skills, stories, etc.) that you think are important to mention. It is generally preferable to memorize these points rather than refer to a written list during the interview. Make it a short list because the interview will go quickly, and if it's too long of a list, you won't be able to remember all of your points. Go over your list many times and have it clear in your mind.

3. Stories & anecdotes: If you want to answer a question by telling a story or anecdote, here are some things to keep in mind:

- Make it quick, avoid lots of unnecessary detail
- Start by telling them what the point of the story is, ex: "*Well, I really learned a lot about prioritizing issues I care about when I...*"; or "*I realized that my main passion is x, as a result of an experience I had that...*"
- Being emotional, funny, or sad in your story telling can really be a powerful way to make an impact, as long as it makes the point but doesn't turn into theater. Funny is especially great, but keep it professional.
- If you see their attention drifting, quickly make your point and end it right away! "*So that's when I realized that my strongest asset is blah. Thank you.*"
- If you're unsure about time, it's okay to say "*How am I doing on time?*"

4. Image and Body Language:

- **Attire:** Dress more conservatively than you normally would for the job. Avoid excessively flashy jewelry, showing too much of your "goods", or anything that you would wear out to go dancing or bar hopping. This does not mean you are "selling out" or surrendering your true self, it is a way of showing the committee that you respect them and want to look your best for them. Make sure your clothes are clean. If you share space with a shedding beast, bring a lint brush or roll of masking tape to make sure you are free of fur before your big moment.
 - Ladies, if you plan on wearing a skirt/dress, practice sitting in front of a mirror – make sure that you "stay covered" and firmly in place as you lean forward and straighten up in the chair, and that a limited amount of leg shows as you sit and cross AT THE ANKLE. If your skirt rides up to the thigh when you sit, pick another outfit.
 - Gents, check to be sure that you have "closed up shop" before you enter the room. You should have made sure you don't have any rips or holes in your clothing before you left home, but be extra sure that you don't have any "gaps in coverage" in any critical areas! Long-sleeve shirts and close-toed shoes (no sandals!) are a must.
- **Hair:** Whatever you do with your hair, it should not hide one or both eyes; it should look clean and well groomed, and not be constantly falling into your face. If you have issues with dandruff, wear a lighter color and/or texture that will downplay or disguise the flakes – *DON'T* wear black or navy blue, which will shout "*Look at my dandruff! LOOK AT IT!!*" Also, don't wear so much product in your hair that you look like the victim of an environmental disaster. Strive for a neat, clean and approachable look. Gentlemen with facial hair, make sure it is clean and well groomed or at least neatly trimmed. Ladies, if you have to touch your hair in any way or get hair out of your eyes, find a new 'do' for the interview.

- **Aroma:** Please, *please* use deodorant or antiperspirant on the day of your interview, whether or not you believe that you are someone that needs such products. However, if you use cologne or perfume, please be considerate and use these *very sparingly, if at all*. Many people have medical issues related to exposure to these chemicals. And the rest of us really don't appreciate being enveloped in a cloud of your favorite scent that will persist long after you have left the room. Patchouli oil is never okay for an interview unless it's for a position at the local head shop or *Grateful Dead* memorabilia store.
- **Nervous tics:** Most people have some physical expression of their nervousness or anxiety. Some are more distracting or dismaying than others, and you're not always aware you are doing it. Some things to watch out for: Talking at the speed of light, nervous chair fidgeting/bouncing, chair swiveling, giggling, constantly adjusting bangs or strands of hair that fall into the face, twisting strands of hair, flipping hair back, scratching, fiddling with watch, bracelets, necklaces, etc,. It's a good idea to test yourself by having someone videotape you in a mock or real interview and watch it afterwards. Have a notepad to jot down things to work on as you watch your interview. If you have these nervous gestures, find a way to compensate. For instance, holding onto (but not obsessively clicking) a pen is a good way to keep the hand busy.
- **Posture:** Hold your body as erect as possible while still feeling natural. You don't want to look like you just had back surgery, but you *really* don't want to slouch forward. Keep shoulders up and back, don't let them hunch forward. This will also help you to breathe more easily and keep you from getting out of breath and sweaty.
- **Eye contact:** Make sure to gradually look around at all of the interview panelists, maintaining confident, direct eye contact. But don't linger on any one person too long, because then it becomes spooky. You also want to avoid shifting your eyes back and forth too quickly like a bank robber.
- **Smile!** As often as possible but only when in proper context. You don't want to be smiling sweetly as you describe how your parents abandoned you down by the old mill.

5. Some other things to keep in mind:

- **Don't be "On Time," be EARLY!!** Plan to arrive at least 15-30 minutes before your scheduled interview or check-in time. This will give you time to go over your talking points and, most importantly, to calm down and relax. When you first arrive, you will have an elevated heart rate and you will need at least 5-10 minutes for your breathing and heart rate to get back to normal. If you are pulled into your interview as soon as you arrive, you will look and feel more anxious and nervous. Arriving right at the exact time as your interview tells the committee that you are someone that takes unnecessary risks. And, heaven forbid, if you arrive late, the committee will be likely be angry with you or at least annoyed for making them wait. They will look for any and every opportunity to detract from your interview score or to find reasons to disqualify you

from consideration. Conversely, if you are early and the person before you is late, you may be asked to interview in their place, which will gain favor for you with the committee, and count against the late-comer. If you know you are going to be late, despite your preparations, call ahead and let them know that you are on your way, don't leave them guessing. Have the number with you so you won't waste time looking it up.

- **Courtesy Counts:** It is not uncommon for committee members or the chief decision-maker to ask others about their impression of the applicants, especially the finalists. You cannot afford to make a bad impression by being rude (intentionally or otherwise) to anyone during any part of the application process. Secretaries and other support staff that you deal with during the application process, scheduling the interview, checking you in for your interview, or that you encounter in the elevator, lounge, lobby, etc., are paying attention to you, and may well report on your crass, dismissive, or disrespectful behavior. Rule of thumb: If you are mean or rude to my assistant, you should count on me finding out about it.
- **Please Actually Answer the Question!** It is amazing how many times a response is given that never really answers the question. Listen to the questions and jot down prompts if necessary. Answer clearly with pertinent points and/or examples that illustrate your response. There is a difference between answering that “yes, I have project management experience” and “yes, I have project management experience, including the coordination of..... or as evidenced by....” If it is a two or three or four part question – answer EVERY part. It's a good idea to ask them to repeat the question if you lose track during your response, or to ask if there was any part of the question you might not have spoken to.
- **Say, what?** If the question is unclear, or you just didn't hear it entirely, it's perfectly okay to ask them to repeat it. Or, if a word or phrase that they used is unclear to you, it's better to ask for clarification than to take a guess and possibly answer the wrong question. In many cases, the committee will appreciate your courage for asking: “I'm not entirely sure what you mean by ‘psychographic anomalies’. Can you please define that?”
- **Need a break?** It's perfectly okay to take a few seconds to think about your response before you start talking. Conversely, it is painfully obvious to the panel when someone is just talking to fill space while they are desperately trying to think of something to say. It's annoying. But it can take practice to learn to give yourself a few silent moments before you answer a question. A good rule of thumb is to allow yourself up to about 3-4 seconds to ponder the question before you speak, unless, of course, you do immediately know what you want to say in response to the question. Usually, interview committees provide you with a bottle of water or a glass of water. That's not really to make sure you're hydrated. It's a time crutch, so if you need more than 3-4 seconds to think about your response, take a sip of water. Go ahead, we'll wait.

- **Final question:** Often times, interviews will end by giving you a “wild card” question such as "Is there anything we didn't ask you about that you would like to speak to?" Don't waste this question! Quickly do a mental review of your talking points list (See Step 2, above), and if there is something you haven't gotten to, throw it out there. If they ask, "Do you have any questions you would like to ask us?" Have a question in mind! That should be part of your homework. Come up with a legitimate question about something you are wondering related to the organization or the program, but not just a question for the sake of asking a question. If you honestly have nothing to ask, just say so, and thank them for their time.
- Do NOT, however, ask questions about employment terms, pay packages, vacation days, etc. These questions will leave the interviewers thinking that you have already assumed you got the job, or that all you really care about is the money and benefits. If you really have a burning question about any of these points, ask an administrator or the staff support person for the interviews either before or after your interview.

6. Above all else, be yourself and believe in yourself!

What interviewers really want is to get a sense for who is this person beyond what we see on the application. Please let us see your personality! Don't be too stiff and polished to the point erasing your real identity.

After the interview, you will most likely think of several things you wish you had said, wish you hadn't said, wish you could have said better. Get over it. That's true for everyone, and in most cases, you did much better than you think you did. Schedule something to do immediately after the interview in order to avoid having time to dissect the interview and torture yourself about it.

It's also a good idea to send a thank you letter or email to the committee to tell them that you appreciate their consideration of your candidacy, and of your time, regardless of the outcome.

If you well and truly bombed in your interview, however, debrief with yourself about what went wrong, and what you could have done differently to be better prepared. Then, learn from this experience and use it to make your next interview that much better.

Now go out and get 'em – *buena suerte!*

-Profe. Beto

MOCKTERVIEW NOTES AND SUGGESTIONS:

1. Overall appearance (including attire, hygiene, etc.)	Poor 1	Neutral 2	Good 3	Great! 4
Notes:				
2. Body language & eye contact:	Poor 1	Neutral 2	Good 3	Great! 4
Notes:				
3. Level of preparedness / ability to answer the question	Poor 1	Neutral 2	Good 3	Great! 4
Notes:				
4. Appropriate use of stories and anecdotes	Poor 1	Neutral 2	Good 3	Great! 4
Notes:				
5. Repetitive or nervous gestures and movements	Poor 1	Neutral 2	Good 3	Great! 4
Notes:				
6. Level of confidence / positive attitude	Poor 1	Neutral 2	Good 3	Great! 4
Notes:				
7. Level of energy (Too sleepy? Too peppy?)	Poor 1	Neutral 2	Good 3	Great! 4
Notes:				
8. Response times (Too long? Too short?)	Poor 1	Neutral 2	Good 3	Great! 4
Notes:				
9. Other notes and comments	Poor 1	Neutral 2	Good 3	Great! 4
Notes:				

