

Tips for Telephone Interviews

Prepare Yourself

Record yourself in a mock interview with a friend on the phone and listen closely for “ums,” “uhs,” and other annoying dead-air fillers. You do not need them— a pause in the conversation is perfectly acceptable, as long as it does not stretch out too long (it will feel longer to you than to the committee). By listening to yourself, you will also be able to identify and correct other foibles, such as interrupting the other person, a nervous laugh, or sounding too clipped or angry. Practice as much as you can. Close your eyes if it helps—he or she is on the phone.

Do a Mental Rehearsal

Like a great athlete preparing for the Olympics, going through the process in your mind will improve your interview. Imagine the questions they will ask, consider your answers, think about points you want to emphasize, mentally review your work history and significant accomplishments, think about how you want to frame your experience with key elements of the job for which you are applying, etc. Do this mental rehearsal several times until the concepts and answers flow automatically and articulately.

Create a Peaceful Area in which to Conduct the Interview

Do not, if at all possible, conduct a telephone interview on a cell phone. If you must use a cell, ensure you are in an area with excellent cellular reception so the call will not get dropped. Turn off the television or radio, and eliminate all other distractions. Make sure you have both your current resume and other critical papers and dossiers right at your fingertips for quick and easy reference. If there are key points you do not want to forget or want to emphasize, use a Post-It note—but notes should be prompts only—as the committee will know if you are pre-scripting your answers. If you get a little panicky, it is okay to put the interviewer on hold to take a deep breath or change location. Just do not leave the person hanging for more than ten seconds.

Develop a Signature Statement

This is your career proclamation, a one- or few-sentence summary of who you are and what you bring to the position. The interviewers will obviously want to know about your knowledge and skills, but they are also keenly interested in your motivation—why you want to be a part of their campus community.

Allow the Interviewer to Guide the Conversation, but Be Mindful of Your Own Contributions

Prior to the interview, ask for the names and titles of committee members so you have a sense of your audience. It is also helpful to know the number of questions you will be asked so you can appropriately pace yourself. Being asked six questions vs. a dozen questions in a 30- to 45-minute interview will trigger very different types of answers, and (though it may not be your fault) the committee will be frustrated if your interview ends too quickly or if they run out of time to ask all their questions.

Avoid one-or two-word answers, use specific examples from your experience to substantiate a point, and have some questions of your own for the interviewer that demonstrate your knowledge of the institution.

Inexperienced committees tend to develop multi-part questions, which, on the phone, can be difficult to remember. Make notes as the question is being asked, and do not be afraid to ask for the question to be repeated.

Remember the Nonverbal Cues You Are Sending

Dress for your phone interview, as it will help you set the tone. Your voice will reflect the fact that you are psychologically prepped for the interview. Sit with good posture, or stand up throughout the talk. Your voice will be stronger and carry more authority. Try also to match your rate of speech to the interviewer's. If he or she is speaking slowly, for example, do not speak too quickly—you will sound overwhelming. On the other hand, do not speak so slowly that you make the interviewer wait for every word.

Put a Mirror in Front of You

Here is where you can cheat a bit to give yourself a psychological advantage. If you see in the mirror that you are gesticulating frantically or frowning, you will know instantly you have to calm yourself down, or paste on a smile—and it will be audible in your voice.