



GET AHEAD AND IMPRESS

INTERVIEWS AND ASSESSMENT CENTRES WORKBOOK

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www.southampton.ac.uk/careers



INTRODUCTION

If you have submitted a successful initial application and have been invited to the next stage of the recruitment process, congratulations on getting this far! Being invited for an interview or assessment centre can be exciting, but also a bit daunting. This guide is designed to provide you with an idea of what to expect and how to make sure you perform to the best of your ability.

Interviews are designed to help the employer assess your suitability for a role, and to help them understand you, your values and your experiences in greater depth. They may take place in person, online, over the telephone or through video software which allows you to record your responses to pre-set questions.

We will also discuss Assessment Centres, which consist of a variety of activities spread over a longer timeframe. Activities generally include a combination of individual and group tasks designed to assess a

particular set of skills relevant to the role you have applied for.

This workbook provides free spaces for you to write or type up your research, plan out your own questions, or practise answers. You can also practise your interview technique through our Interview360 tool, which can be accessed by scanning or clicking the QR code below.

For more information on the support available to you, **see page 23.**



INTERVIEWS TOP 10 TIPS

- 1** Research the hiring organisation thoroughly before the interview. What do they do that interests you?
- 2** If your interview is taking place in person, plan your route and allow plenty of travel time. If your interview is online, make sure you have downloaded the required software and that you have a private space to work in.
- 3** Your outfit should be clean, comfortable and professional. Most interviews call for smart-casual attire. If in doubt, contact the organisation to ask what types of outfit they recommend.
- 4** It's natural to be nervous. Take deep breaths, drink water, relax your body posture and take a moment to think about your answers before speaking.
- 5** When answering competency questions, use the STAR format to structure your answers: Situation, Task, Action, Result (see page 11).
- 6** Stay positive! Focus on what you have done, rather than what you haven't. In the case of problems you've encountered, in the case of problems you've encountered, what did you do to overcome these?
- 7** Prepare some questions that you would like to ask the interviewers (see page 13). What do you want to know about the job?
- 8** Practise the use of positive body language. Relax your shoulders (but don't slouch in your seat), make frequent eye contact with the interviewers, and smile!
- 9** Even if your application is not successful, send the interviewers a polite, professional email expressing your thanks.
- 10** Request constructive feedback, whether you get the job or not, in order to learn and improve from the experience. What do you feel you could have done better, and how will you work on this for next time?

WHAT IS BEING ASSESSED?

Interviews and assessment centres are a way for you to get to know the employer, and for them to get to know you. Their main concern will be to assess whether you are able to do the job, but they will also want to see that you are motivated and eager to work as part of their team. The employer will mainly be assessing:

ABILITY

Can you do the job? The interviewers will already know your qualifications from your written application, but you should be prepared to provide additional examples as best you can. How have you previously demonstrated the skills, knowledge, abilities or traits that they are looking for?

MOTIVATION

Why do you want to do this job and work specifically within this organisation? What most interests you about the work you will be doing? Do you resonate with their values? Is the organisation a leader in their sector? Have you used their products or services yourself? How will working with this organisation enhance your career?

TEAM FIT

Are you a good fit for the team? Be prepared to demonstrate how you work with others in a team setting. Smile, relax and above all be yourself. Think about how you have behaved in previous professional settings. How can you embody this in an interview?

UNIQUE SELLING POINTS (USPs)

These are experiences, skills, qualifications and/or achievements that set you apart from other applicants. Be confident, clear and concise when describing your USPs. For example, have you lived or worked overseas, or won a competition?

WHAT SHOULD YOU ASSESS?

Interviews are also an opportunity for you to ask your own questions and assess whether or not you want to work there. What can they do to support your development?

RESEARCH

The research that you carry out for your interview should enhance your existing knowledge from your initial application, and help you to demonstrate your motivation for the role. It is important that you understand the organisation you are applying to, as well as the nature of the role itself and what you can contribute if you get the job.

→ Get a better understanding of the products or services the organisation offers and understand their place in the sector. What sets them apart from the competition?



→ Familiarise yourself with the company's values, ethics and culture. How have you demonstrated their key values in your own life?

→ Some organisations have dedicated webpages for graduate recruitment. What do they recommend that you do to prepare for an interview with them?



→ Re-read the job description and person specification, and review the application you submitted. How might you expand on the answers you have given?

→ Think about what you were asked in the written application. Which competencies have you not yet been asked about?



WHERE TO LOOK

- Company websites, especially pages titled 'About', 'Work For Us', 'Careers' or recruitment microsites
- Social media – LinkedIn, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
- Trade and specialist publications
- News stories from the press or professional bodies
- Testimonials from previous candidates, either for the same company or within the sector. Great places to look include [Glassdoor](#) and [Rate My Placement](#).



TOP TIP: Don't forget to take some time to reflect on your skills. Please scan the QR code to learn how to do this using a Skills Audit activity.



WRITE YOUR OWN RESEARCH



You can use this space to type or write any research that you undertake ahead of your interview or assessment centre.

Large empty space for writing research.

TYPES OF INTERVIEW

Here are some tips to keep in mind for interviews of different types.



GENERAL INTERVIEW ADVICE

Here are some tips which could be applied for all different types of interviews.

Be on time! The interviewers likely have a busy schedule of candidates to meet with, so showing up late to the interview can make a negative first impression.

Interviews can be stressful, and it is totally normal to feel nervous on the big day, but relaxing your body, controlling your breathing and smiling can have a positive effect on your mental wellbeing.

Don't be surprised by unexpected questions – you won't know exactly what you will be asked ahead of time, and dealing with uncertainty is part of the challenge.

There will most likely be more than one interviewer on the panel. Try to divide your attention evenly between each interviewer.

If you have questions or concerns ahead of the day, reach out to your contact at the organisation to ask. It is in their interest to help you perform at your best.



IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS

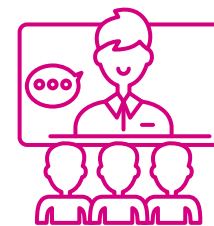
Here are some tips to apply when you have to attend an interview in person.

Plan what you will wear and ensure it is cleaned and ironed beforehand. Most interviews require smart-casual attire, but this may differ between organisations.

Your interview begins from the moment you arrive. Reception staff are often asked for feedback on candidates so make sure that you are polite, professional and enthusiastic from the outset.

Plan your travel. Aim to arrive at your interview 10 minutes early and leave yourself plenty of time to get there.

Ensure that your mobile phone is switched off during the interview. Even if your phone is on silent it can be an unwanted distraction.



VIDEO INTERVIEWS

Here are some tips to apply when you have to attend a video interview, for example, those using video conferencing software such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom.

Ensure you are in a quiet room with stable internet and good lighting, and ensure your background is professional.

Download the software you will need to use in advance and check that it works on your device. You may wish to practise using the programme so that you are familiar with it and can fix any issues.

If you already have an account with the software you need, ensure that your account has a professional username and profile image.

If you live in shared accommodation, make sure your housemates know that your interview is taking place, to avoid interruptions.

Wear smart, comfortable clothing so that you give a professional appearance on screen. This can also help you to feel more prepared.

To boost your confidence, you may want to practise recording yourself. Please use the QR code here to access Interview360, which you can use to work on your interview technique.



PRE-RECORDED INTERVIEWS

Some employers may use specialised online platforms which ask you a number of pre-arranged questions. You will then be given a set amount of time to consider the question and record a response.

If you are told which software you will be using to submit your answers, research this and get used to using it, in order to avoid uncertainty when the time comes to submit your answers.

You will usually only get one chance to submit your answers, so make sure that you are ready before selecting to start the interview.

Be brief and evidence-focused with your responses, as the time you have for each answer may be limited.

Speak clearly and at a steady pace - these answers may be analysed by Artificial Intelligence software, so you want to be easily understood.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

In an interview, you will be asked various questions by the interviewers, in order for them to assess whether you are the right fit for the job. Here are some of the most common types of questions that you are likely to encounter.

INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

These questions usually come first in the interview to help you feel at ease and to provide a better understanding of why you have applied for the role. Some examples include:

- Tell us about yourself.
- What do you know about our organisation?
- Why have you applied for this role?

STRENGTH-BASED QUESTIONS

These questions encourage you to demonstrate your skills and unique selling points. Some examples include:

- What can you bring to the role?
- What has been your biggest achievement?
- What is your greatest strength, and biggest weakness?

COMPETENCY QUESTIONS

These questions are intended to give the interviewers an idea of how you have demonstrated the skills that they are looking for in your professional life so far. Some examples include:

- Give an example of when you have displayed initiative.
- Tell me about a time when you led a team to success.

TOP TIP: An effective way to answer competency questions is to use the STAR method (see page 11).

Online service **eCareersGrad** have created a course on Interview Success, which provides over 60 videos depicting example answers to some of the most commonly asked interview questions. You can access **eCareersGrad** on MyCareer, under the resources tab (mycareer.soton.ac.uk).

HOW TO ANSWER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

By effectively structuring your answers, you will be able to present your skills and experience much more clearly. This also helps you pace yourself when answering and gives you a bit of thinking time.

USING STAR TO STRUCTURE ANSWERS

STAR is a useful framework for answering competency and strength-based questions. STAR is a mnemonic device, which stands for: *Situation, Task, Action, Result*.

Situation: Provide a brief description of the situation in order to set the scene. Where did this occur: during your time at university, or at a previous job?



Task: What was the task that you had to undertake? Was there a deadline involved? What variables were in play? Was it a task you did as part of a team, or individually?



Action: This is the main part of the answer and the most important. What actions did you take to deal with the situation? How did you decide on what to do first? If you performed as part of a team, place emphasis on your own contributions.



Result: Conclude your answer with the outcomes of the situation. Did you achieve your original goal? What skills did you develop? Did you get positive feedback, or a good grade? Did you achieve an award or qualification for your hard work?



Teaching Points (optional): Reflect on how the example went, and what you would do better if it happened to you again. Describing what you learnt can show maturity, reflectiveness and dedication to developing yourself, even in the cases where situations did not go as well as you had hoped.

WRITE YOUR OWN ANSWERS



You can use this space to type or write your own example of a 'STAR/START' situation which you could describe in an interview.

Situation

Task

Action

Result

WRITE YOUR OWN QUESTIONS

It is common practice for interviewers to give you the opportunity to ask them questions of your own. This is your chance to learn more about the organisation and the job, and to make your own assessment on whether the opportunity feels right for you. Interviewers usually like to see that you are ready with questions of your own, as this also demonstrates your commitment to the application process.

Try to come with at least two questions to ask. Some examples might include:

- What do you (the interviewer) like about working here?
- How many people will there be in my team?
- What personal development opportunities exist within this role?

You should avoid asking questions about the salary at this stage, as this can give the impression that your motivations are purely income-focused. Your salary should be made clear if you are offered the job, before you sign any form of employment contract.



You can use this space to type or write some questions of your own which you might want to ask in an interview.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

An interview can be a nerve-wracking experience. You may feel as though you need to provide the perfect answer to every question without a moment of hesitation, but this is not true. Remember that the interviewers are not looking to surprise you or trip you up – they want you to perform well. Here are some tips on how to conduct yourself on the big day, to bring out your best.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

- Drink plenty of water. If the interview is taking place in person, bring along a water bottle which you can refill as needed.
- If your nerves stem from a previous interview that did not go so well, take some time to reflect on what you could do to improve, particularly if you have received feedback from past interviewers.
- Focusing on your breathing may reduce anxiety levels, enabling you to think more clearly.
- You do not need to rush your answers – in fact, speaking slowly and steadily can help you to stay calm, but focused.
- If you do not understand a particular question, ask them to repeat or phrase the question differently, rather than trying to answer something you are not sure about.



For more information on relaxation techniques, please scan this QR Code.



DRESS CODE

At an interview you want to appear confident and professional, so make sure that your outfit and hygiene levels reflect this.

- Dress code should be comfortable, professional and appropriate for the sector the role is in.
- Ensure your shoes are clean, professional and comfortable. Avoid excessively high heels or trainers.
- Avoid excessive jewellery, make-up or overpowering fragrances, and keep your hair neat and tidy.

EFFECTIVE BODY LANGUAGE

You only get one chance to make a positive first impression, therefore it is important to think about the use of positive body language to put into use throughout the interview.

DO:

- Make eye contact with the interviewers.
- Occasionally nod when they talk to demonstrate engagement.
- Sit upright with your arms at your sides or gently placed on the table.
- Speak clearly and at a comfortable pace, and don't forget to smile!

DON'T:

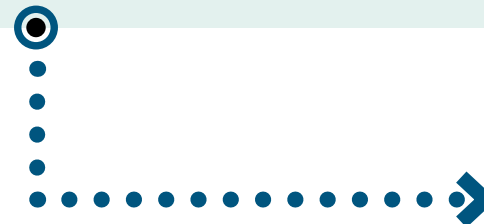
- Slouch in your seat, or cross your arms.
- Interrupt the interviewers.
- Check your phone - turn your phone off to avoid distractions, or if you may need to take an urgent call during the interview, let the interviewer know.

HANDLING INAPPROPRIATE QUESTIONS

There are a number of questions that, by law, interviewers are not allowed to ask. These include questions referring to disabilities and physical appearance, sexuality, gender, race and ethnicity, marital status, family planning and childcare, or any previous convictions.

Examples of inappropriate questions include:

- Where were you born?
- Do you have a disability?
- What childcare arrangements do you have in place?



You do not have to answer these questions, but if you decide to respond keep it brief and general. For example you might say “there’s nothing that would interfere with my ability to do the job.”

For more information on discussing disabilities, and your rights in the interview process, see page 19.

ASSESSMENT CENTRES

An assessment centre will be made up of a series of different activities and tasks, each designed to assess certain skills and characteristics that are critical to the role you are applying for.

TOP TIP: Just like an interview, the assessment centre starts as soon as you arrive. Be polite, professional and respectful to everyone there, from receptionists to any staff members not associated with the assessment centre, as well as the other candidates.

GROUP PRESENTATIONS

Some tasks will require you and your group to present your findings in a presentation to the other candidates and the staff.

- Listen carefully to instructions given, and address the aims and objectives of the presentation.
- Throughout the activity, keep an eye on the time you have remaining to complete the task.
- Agree presentation structure, timings and format based on resources you have been given.
- Ensure that every member of the group has an opportunity to contribute, and they all know their role in delivering the presentation.
- If you are usually quiet, do your best to speak up in order to be accurately assessed. If you are outgoing, try not to dominate the discussion.
- Try to include all members of the group in the discussion and address them by name if possible.

CASE STUDIES

For some roles, you may be asked to present business decisions or suggest recommendations based on information such as company reports. The objective for these activities is not to find a single correct answer, but to show that you are capable of working through problems logically, and maintaining clear communication.

- Ask questions and take notes about the brief, to ensure your recommendations are well informed.
- In the group, discuss ideas and ways forward, keeping an open mind to others' suggestions.

Please scan this QR Code to access our Assessment Centre Tool and learn more about what to expect and how to prepare:



ROLE PLAYS

Individual role play exercises are commonly used for public facing roles to assess your customer service skills and confidence. The activity could involve several possible situations, such as a role play phone call with a customer, or addressing a conflict in the workplace.

- Research the role fully before the interview; this will make it easier to assume the role and get into character.
- Remember your time keeping skills and pay close attention to all physical and verbal cues given to you in the scenario.
- Be yourself, let your professional personality come through in your role play.

ONLINE ASSESSMENT CENTRES

Some organisations run assessment centres through video calling software such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom. This allows them to see a large number of candidates simultaneously and without candidates needing to arrange travel.

You may be split into 'breakout rooms' for group activities. Be open minded as you are unlikely to know who you are grouped with until the activity starts.

- After a set time, the interviewers will close the breakout rooms and return you to the main group; be mindful of timekeeping.
- Download and get yourself used to the software involved, before the big day.



ONLINE TESTS

Online tests, such as aptitude or psychometric tests, are a method of measuring specific capabilities, for example, numeracy, situational judgment, or critical thinking. Online Tests are sometimes included as part of Assessment Centres, or as an activity to undertake on the day of an interview.

Numerical tests

These assess your ability to work with numbers in an accurate manner.

- Prepare for numerical tests by doing basic maths revision exercises, particularly equations involving percentages, ratios or balancing addition and subtraction, for example to calculate sales totals or market trends.

Verbal reasoning tests

These require you to read a short passage of text then answer several questions based on the information given.

- Forget all previous knowledge and assumptions about the topic. Answer the questions only using information that you have been given.

Situational judgment tests

These tests are based on hypothetical scenarios to see if your responses align with the company's values and priorities. You may be asked to rank various options in order of priority, or choose one approach to the situation from a list of options.

- Research the company's values - this will help you make informed decisions. What do they prioritise? Client satisfaction? Adaptability? Teamwork?
- Be prepared to discuss your answers and explain your reasoning behind the decisions you make.

To learn more about the different types of online tests and practise your technique, please scan this QR code to access free practice tests:



For more tips on effective preparation for different types of tests, scan this QR code:



The UoS Career Hub also hosts information and examples of tests which are specific to certain career pathways such as Medicine, Mechanical Engineering, and Postgraduate study. Please scan this QR code to learn more:



DISCUSSING A DISABILITY

You don't have to share details about a disability, specific learning difference or long-term health condition during an interview or assessment centre; it is completely your choice. You can discuss your disability later in the application process if you wish, although there is no legal requirement for you to do so before a job offer has been made.

Many employers have excellent equal opportunities policies and recruitment practices and encourage applicants to ask for any adjustments that may be needed. This is to ensure the recruitment process is fair and you are not at a disadvantage. They cannot ask you whether you have a disability, just the adjustments you require at each stage of the recruitment process.

Look for the Disability Confident symbol to identify employers who are committed to promoting opportunities for people with disabilities.

If you do choose to talk about your disability, you can illustrate what you have from your disability. Acknowledging any difficulties that you have had and specifying the ways that you have overcome them demonstrates your maturity and determination to succeed.

YOU CAN MAKE A POSITIVE STATEMENT ABOUT YOUR DISABILITY BY:

- Focusing on your strengths, experience and skills. Think about sessions that you may have attended to help with your academic studies – these skills can be transferred to the workplace e.g. writing minutes, giving presentations.
- Promoting and demonstrating your resourcefulness and coping strategies.
- Not assuming that an employer will view your disability in a negative way.
- Emphasising the different perspective that you can offer the organisation.

For further support and information about discussing a disability:

Careers, Employability and Student Enterprise webpages offering support for those with a disability, specific learning difference (SpLD) or long-term health condition (including mental health)



EmployAbility

MyPlus: Applying to roles with a Disability pathway



Your Career, Your Mental Health pathway



AFTER THE INTERVIEW/ ASSESSMENT CENTRE

SECOND INTERVIEWS

If you are asked back for a second interview, this is usually a positive sign that the interviewers want to know more in-depth detail about you to make their final decision.

- Give more detailed and varied answers from your first interview or assessment centre.
- Reiterate the skills you have that the organisation is looking for, paying particular attention to your Unique Selling Points (see page 5).
- Prepare new questions to ask the interviewers. Use this opportunity to find out more information about the company.
- Follow up after the second interview by sending a thank you email and express your continued interest in the role.

FEEDBACK

Whether you have been offered the job or not, you may still want to contact the organisation for feedback. This can be a good learning opportunity for you to develop your interviewing technique for the future.

If you are able to get feedback, thank them for taking the time to provide you with this. Give yourself time afterwards to reflect on what the employer has told you. You may not agree with all of the feedback, but it can often show you areas to improve on.



JOB OFFERS

If you are offered the job, congratulations! In most cases it is perfectly acceptable to take some time to think about an employer's offer before deciding either to accept or decline.

ACCEPTING A JOB OFFER

Once the employer has told you that they would like to hire you, if you wish to accept the job, thank them and ask to get this information in writing. You may want to consider the following:

- Do you genuinely want the job? Based on the interview, did it feel like a good place to work?
- When are you able to start work? Do you need to give any notice to your current employer?
- How much will you be paid and when? If the salary is negotiable, have this conversation before you sign your contract.
- Do you need to supply any documentation to your new employer, for example anything proving your right to work?



TOP TIP: It is not considered good practice to accept more than one job offer at a time, only to later decline one of the offers. Doing so could reflect badly on your professional reputation. If you receive more than one job offer, think carefully about which opportunity feels like the best option for you.

For more information about what you can do if you receive two job offers, please scan the QR Code to read more on targetjobs:



If you would like to have a discussion about handling multiple job offers, book an Ask the Adviser appointment:



DECLINING A JOB OFFER

There are many reasons why you may wish to decline a job offer. The organisation might not be a good fit, or you may have a more competitive opportunity.

- Once you are sure you do not want the job, decline as soon as possible. The employer can then offer the position to another candidate. You should do this over the phone, then follow up with an email to the main point of contact.
- Explain in a polite, professional and friendly manner why you do not wish to accept this position, and thank them for their time.

PREPARATION CHECKLIST

Now that you have read about how to prepare, use this checklist to make sure that you are ready.

RESEARCH:

- Have you re-read your application and prepared to expand upon examples you have already given?
- Have you used the job description to identify key skills that the employer is looking for?
- Have you reflected on your skills and experiences and prepared appropriate examples as evidence for these key skills?
- Have you practised using 'STAR' to structure your examples?
- Have you thoroughly researched the organisation's products/services, values and culture?
- Have you prepared questions to ask your interviewer?

IN-PERSON PREPARATION:

- Have you arranged your travel route?
- Have you allowed plenty of time to attend early, in case of unforeseen issues, e.g. traffic delays?
- Have you got your outfit ready?
- Do you know who and where to report to upon arrival?

ONLINE PREPARATION:

- Have you downloaded all necessary software, and practised using it?
- Do you have a secure, private, quiet space to conduct the interview?
- Have you ensured that your internet connection will be stable, to the best of your ability?

Use the Interview 360 tool to practise your technique:



Use the Assessment Centre Tool to help your research:



Book an Ask the Adviser session to discuss interview preparation:



FURTHER SUPPORT AND USEFUL LINKS

CAREERS, EMPLOYABILITY AND STUDENT ENTERPRISE



Careers, Employability and Student Enterprise can support you in all aspects of career preparation, application, and information. For further information about what we offer please scan this QR code to read our Careers, Employability and Student Enterprise Guide.

MYCAREER

MyCareer is your online careers platform, allowing you to easily access a range of opportunities including graduate roles, internships and part-time vacancies, plus details of events, skills workshops and much more.



UOS CAREER HUB



The UoS Career Hub is an online platform which has hundreds of employability e-learning courses, an AI based CV review tool, an interactive mock interview simulator providing feedback from real employers and much more.

CAREERS, EMPLOYABILITY AND STUDENT ENTERPRISE WEBSITE

Our website, giving further information about the services and opportunities we have on offer.



TALK TO AN ADVISER



If you would like to talk to an adviser, visit this page to find out how to book an appointment. This service is available to current students and to alumni for up to five years after graduation.

CAREER CHOICE

If you're considering which career you'd like to pursue after graduating, you can talk to an adviser or have a look at our subject-specific career information pages.



VIRTUAL CAREERS FAIR TOOLKIT



Online resource developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education to support career development for students and graduates from traditionally underrepresented groups in higher education.



Find out more:

www.southampton.ac.uk/careers

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