

The Interview Workbook

University of Lethbridge Co-operative Education Program
Faculty of Arts & Science, Fine Arts, Health Sciences and the School of Graduate Studies
Last updated: October 2019

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Intro

A job interview is a business meeting where you and the employer are contemplating making a mutually beneficial commitment. You have skills the employer needs and the employer has the job you want.

Your goal during an interview is to tie yourself to the position as closely as possible and demonstrate that you will be a good fit for the team and the company. You will do this by telling stories about yourself that demonstrate you have done your research, link your skills and experiences to the position, and provide insight into who you are as a person. You will also have an opportunity to ask questions and to learn more about the company.

Interviews are often set-up through our office but an employer may contact you directly. **Please communicate that to us so we can help you coordinate and make arrangements.** We offer:

- 1-on-1 interview preparation
- Support and assistance prior to the interview
- Quiet interview rooms with access to a phone and hard-wired internet
- Interview follow-up and debrief

What should you do if an employer contacts you directly?

You got the call or email!

The interview starts the moment the employer contacts you to schedule an interview, so always be courteous, polite, professional, truthful, and accurate. During this initial conversation, get as many details as you can:

- Most importantly, the name, number, and email for the person you are talking to. Don't assume the Co-op office will have these details
- What type of interview can you expect? (i.e. phone interview, online interview, in-person)
- Will the interview involve any other components? (i.e. presentation, skills assessment, case study, a tour)
- Is there anything you should bring or have prepared in advance?
- Who will be in interview? If possible, get their names(s) and position title(s). Be sure to clarify spelling and pronunciation
- If you can no longer access the posting, ask for a copy
- If the interview is in-person, ask for the full address of where the interview will take place. Also ask for any recommendations related to parking, which entrance to use, or whom you should speak to when you arrive
- Lastly, ask if there is anything else that would be helpful for you to know

If you have any follow-up questions, you can follow-up once before the interview. Any more than that and you may appear disorganized and thoughtless.

A few important notes

Having a general idea of what to expect during an interview goes a long way in preparing and being as confident and comfortable as possible.

Emphasize what you can contribute

Just as you did in your cover letter and resume, remember that it is about what you will bring to the position, the team, and the company. Avoid mentioning your needs and wants or how this position will benefit you.

Make a plan

Plan to arrive at least 10 minutes early and plan for the interview to last 1.5 hours. This way you will be able to accommodate a long interview or any additional requests.

Driving your route and finding parking a day before the interview can help with your nerves.

What to bring

To the interview, you should bring:

- Your confidence
- A folder or padfolio (like your Co-op one!) that contains a pen, blank paper, your resume and cover letter, the job posting, and any notes you made

However, all you are going to pull out during the interview is the pen and the blank paper. Leave everything else in your padfolio unless you need it.

Know the three stages of an interview

Well-run interviews flow through three stages:

1. *Short opening stage:*

- The interview begins the moment you step in the company's front door
 - Once you step in the interview room:
 - Introduce yourself to everyone with a smile and a handshake
 - Ask where they would like you to sit
 - Get settled and organized
 - Make small talk. This helps everyone to feel comfortable and settle in
2. *Exchanging information stage:*
- Wait for the interviewers to initiate this stage and follow their lead
 - The interviewers will ask questions and you will answer
 - You will be offered an opportunity to ask questions and you should
3. *Short closing stage:*
- The interviewers will likely tell you about their process for selecting the successful candidate and how long it should take
 - Thank the interviewers for their time with a smile and a handshake
 - Promptly leave

Preparing to answer their questions...

There is no way to know the interview questions in advance, but preparation is valuable and important. We can confidently predict most of the questions they are going to ask.

Review your application documents

Review the job posting and your cover letter and resume. Clearly you did something well because they want to interview you! Consider:

- The major themes/skills/traits/requirements from the posting
- What you focused on in your cover letter and resume
- Is there anything new or different you want to highlight or clarify during the interview?
- Put yourself in their shoes. What would you be looking for in an employee for this position?

Do additional research on the company

Consider who they are, what they are about, what the position entails, and what you would bring to the position, the team, and the company. Check their website and social media. Look for mission statements, promotional videos, volunteer projects or associations, interesting facts etc.

Identify what resonates with you, what aligns with your skills and experience, and what provides you with valuable insight.

The 5 most common types of questions

There are 5 types of interview questions you need to be ready for:

- Technical/skill-based questions
- Behaviour descriptive interview (BDI) questions
- Strength and weakness questions
- Specific questions they will have for you based on qualities/information they have identified in your application
- “Tell me about yourself” questions

#1 – Technical/Skilled-based questions

For example:

- Do you have experience with...?
- Have you ever operated a...?
- Tell me what you know about...
- How are you with...?
- Break down the following problem...

These questions focus on your ability to fulfill the specific skills, knowledge and experience required for the position. Nearly all of these will be listed in the posting. Be prepared to speak to each one. It may be easy to answer these questions with a simple “yes” or “no.” Ensure your answers provide as much evidence, details, and specifics as possible.

If the interviewer asks about a technical skill or ability that you do not have much experience with, do not start your answer with ‘No’. Instead, note that while you may not have direct experience with it, you do have transferrable skills and related experience. Then describe those. You should also focus on your ability to learn quickly and express that you are excited for the opportunity to do so.

The interviewers may pose a technical/skill-based problem for you to solve. Keep your focus on demonstrating how you approach and solve problems. Communicate well by talking aloud as you discuss your approach and considerations, break down the problem, take steps to move forward, come to possible solutions, and make decisions (at this point, trust your work and be decisive). It’s not always about ending up at the right answer.

#2 – Behaviour Descriptive Interview (BDI) Questions

For example:

- Tell me about a time when...
- Describe a situation where...
- Outline for me how you ...

Behaviour Descriptive Interviewing (BDI) is a technique built on the premise that the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour. Generally:

- The more recent the past behaviour, the greater its predictive power
- The more long-standing the past behaviour, the greater its predictive power

BDI questions are particularly useful in identifying a number of personal management skills simultaneously. Additionally, there are no wrong or right answers.

So, how do you master the BDI answer? Tell a true story about a specific and related experience so they can get a sense of who you are and how you are likely to handle that particular situation. The key to success is in the breadth and depth of your story. Details and specifics are key.

The STAR(R) Technique – How to tell a good story

The STAR(R) technique is a well-known approach that many employers expect you to use when answering a BDI question. Following the STAR(R) technique will ensure that your answers are clear, well organized, and packed with useful details.

Let's break it down with an example: "Tell me about a time when something didn't go as expected"

S – Situation: Present a challenge/experience/situation in which you found yourself

- Remember, the more recent and more long-standing, the better
- Set the scene and be descriptive
- *Example: In one of my classes, we were put in groups of four to complete a paper. We got to choose the topic ourselves and had three weeks to complete the research and write the paper.*

T – Task: What were you required to do or achieve?

- Demonstrate you understand the problem
- *Example: At the beginning of the third week, one of my group members fell quite ill. This was very unfortunate timing as their responsibility was to compile the individual sections from myself and the two other members into one paper and then make the final round of edits.*

A – Action: What did you do?

- Break it down!
- What were your considerations?
- What steps did you take?
- How did you action each step?
- *Example: I and the two other members met to discuss how we would proceed. Even though we had busy and competing schedules, we knew we needed a plan to have a chance at success. As my section was done and the other two members of the group had more time available to meet with each other, we decided that they would compile the three sections and I would do a final review of the paper, including the last round of edits. We also agreed that we would update each other via email every day.*

R – Results: What was the outcome of your actions?

- What were the results of your actions?
- Where were you successful? Where were you not?
- How did you measure this?
- *Example: The paper came together nicely. While it was more difficult than I anticipated editing three different styles of writing, I was able to find an approach that fit. I learned that I really enjoy editing and it was rewarding to be the last set of eyes on our paper. We received a B+ on the paper and were proud of what we accomplished in a short period of time, especially considering our busy and competing schedules.*

R – Reflection: What did you learn and what would you do next time?

- This is the most important part of your answer!
- Demonstrate that you see the big picture
- Show you can constructively and critically assess yourself

- Are you adaptive to change? If so, how?
- *Example: I learned that no matter how prepared you are or how much you plan, the unexpected will happen and you need to be ready to roll with it. We were successful because we met quickly, devised a plan, stuck to it, and kept in constant communication. It really showed me how much can be accomplished with well-coordinated teamwork. Next time I encounter a problem like this I expect I'll approach it in a similar fashion.*

Now, let's put all the parts of your answer together:

In one of my classes, we were put in groups of four to complete a paper. We got to choose the topic ourselves and had three weeks to complete the research and write the paper.

At the beginning of the third week, one of my group members fell quite ill. This was very unfortunate timing as their responsibility was to compile the individual sections from myself and the two other members into one paper and then make the final round of edits.

I and the two other members met to discuss how we would proceed. Even though we had busy and competing schedules, we knew we needed a plan to have a chance at success. As my section was done and the other two members of the group had more time available to meet with each other, we decided that they would compile the three sections and I would do a final review of the paper, including the last round of edits. We also agreed that we would update each other via email every day.

The paper came together nicely. While it was more difficult than I anticipated editing three different styles of writing, I was able to find an approach that fit. I learned that I really enjoyed editing, working independently, and it was rewarding to be the last set of eyes on our paper. We received a B+ on the paper and were proud of what we accomplished in a short period of time, especially considering our busy and competing schedules.

I learned that no matter how prepared you are or how much you plan, the unexpected will happen and you need to be ready to roll with it. We were successful because we met quickly, devised a plan, stuck to it, and kept in constant communication. It really showed me how much can be accomplished with well-coordinated teamwork. Next time I encounter a problem like this I expect I'll approach it in a similar fashion.

Categories of BDI Questions

Spend most of your time preparing for BDI questions. They will be the bulk of your interview.

These are the 6 main categories of BDI questions that you should be ready for:

- Communication* (verbal, written, technical)
- Active listening* (Hearing an answer, non-verbal cues, demonstrating comprehension)
- Extroversion (Interpersonal skills, willingness to engage and ask questions, ability to speak up)
- Leadership (Ethics, professionalism, responsibility, reliability)
- Ability to deal with conflict (Empathy, communicating concerns, accepting criticism)
- Organization (Discipline, independence, time management, and prioritization)

* During an interview, communication and active listening are being observed and evaluated at all times. Ensure what you are saying is being echoed in your actions.

#3 – Strengths and Weaknesses

For example:

- What do you consider your most important abilities?
- Tell us about your greatest strength
- What are two of your weaknesses?

Here are the rules for strength and weakness questions:

- Only provide the number of examples you are asked for
- Ensure your strengths and weaknesses are related to the position
- Have 2-3 examples prepared for each

Strengths: Determine your strengths that are related to the position. Choose ones that are unique to you and that you are proud of. Be confident and decisive in describing them and provide as much evidence and as many details as possible. Be careful that you do not come across as aggressive, too competitive, or egotistical.

Weaknesses: Most importantly, do not choose a critical flaw or a weakness you do not have a solution for. Try one or both of these approaches:

- Choose something that is not a natural strength, but that you have a solution for or are taking active steps to improve. Ensure you describe these active steps in your answer. For example, “While I struggle to maintain a to-do list in my head, I effectively use a notebook to track the items I am assigned. I also use my Google calendar to view and manage approaching deadlines.”
- Choose something that most applicants will have. For example, “I have never completed this procedure outside of a lab setting in university. But I am a quick learner, will work hard, and am excited for the opportunity.”

#4 – Answering questions about your personal history

Try to anticipate the specific questions the interviewers may want to ask you. If there are negative aspects in your work or personal history, think about how you can present them positively and constructively. For example, if they are aware of a mistake you made at work, be prepared to admit it. Then quickly move on to explaining what you learned from it and what you would do different next time.

Interviewers cannot ask you about certain topics such as your age, gender identification, family status, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, and physical and mental disabilities. If you are asked one of these questions you will have to decide how to deal with it. One approach is to say, “I’m sorry, I’m not comfortable answering that question.” Another is “Can you please tell me how this question relates to the position?”

In certain circumstances, it may be to your advantage to bring up a physical disability or mental disability, or a medical condition. You do not need to identify it or be specific. Focus on sharing reasonable accommodations the employer could make to ensure your success. Speak to your Coordinator for help and resources.

#5 – “Tell Me About Yourself”

For example:

- “Why should we hire you?”
- “Take me through your resume...”

The reason you are planning this question now is because it should be a summary of all of your interview preparation thus far. You will usually be asked this kind of question early in the interview. The interviewer’s goal is to learn what is unique about you and to gauge your interest in the position. Use it as an opportunity to elude to what you want to talk about during the interview.

This answer should be an extended elevator speech (2-3 minutes). As you build this answer, think back to CSI:

- Who is your audience?
- What is the purpose for your speech?
- What is your unique selling position (USP)?

Emphasize the appropriate and related aspects of your background, skills, knowledge, and experience. Demonstrate that you have given careful thought to why you want this position. A good way to start is by simply stating, “I really want to work here because...” or “I really want this position because...”

Building your stories

“Plans are worthless. Planning is everything.” - Dwight D. Eisenhower

To be successful in an interview you are going to need to be ready with:

- STAR(R) stories
- Strengths and weaknesses
- Technical/skill-based details
- A plan for communicating your problem-solving style
- Constructive answers for negative aspects of your personal/work history
- An extended elevator speech

Good story building is an essential skill. Through it, you will realize and appreciate the related value of your experiences. This includes key details, specifics of a situation, moments of learning and growth etc. Only with this insight and exploration can you choose the best and most related stories. You should choose quality over quantity as a good story should be useful for more than one interview question.

Do not try to memorize your story or build it perfectly. There is no one story that will get you through the interview and there is no one way to tell it. Focus on learning and understanding the opportunity and value of your story. That way, when you are asked a question you will be able to quickly recall the information and can communicate the best and most related parts. You will avoid a situation where you are compiling and constructing stories and answers during the interview

The Steps to Building a Good Story

Step 1: Start by picking a technical project, a challenging moment, or a specific situation

- Think of something that is directly related to the position
- You may choose examples from work, school, volunteer or extra-curricular experience, and even personal projects!

Step 2: Write out this story in its entirety using full sentences

- Writing by hand establishes connections between the details of the story and your memory
- Following the STAR(R) technique ensures the story flows, is comprehensive, is in chronological order, and has lots of detail
- Do not shy away from the specifics, nuance, extent, or complexity of the situation
- Consider these additional points:
 - A description of the task/project
 - Who you worked with (was it a team? How many people? What was your role?)
 - Which pieces you did independently, and how you collaborated when required
 - The problems or challenges you encountered (how you broke them down and handled them)
 - How you prioritized and managed your tasks
 - The outcome
 - What you learned from this experience

Step 3: Read and edit

- Make sure you have enough detail
- Don't go down the rabbit hole
 - Keep your stories focused on you
 - Have the other participants in your story be 'blank faces'
 - Include specifics and details that are related to the job
 - Don't say anything bad or critical of others

Step 4: Practice!

- Read your story aloud to yourself or a trusted friend
- Ensure it fits with your speaking style. Some people write differently than they speak

Step 5: Repeat

- Make sure that you have prepared stories that address the information in the posting and cover what you want to share with the employer
- Ensure you have covered the 6 BDI themes

2 other questions to be ready for...

Now that your stories are ready, there are two more questions to note:

- Random/oddball questions
- “Do you have any questions for us...?”

Random and oddball questions

It is important to be prepared for the unexpected. For example, they may ask, “If you could be an animal, which animal would you choose to be?” or “If you could have dinner with three people (living, non-living, or dead), who would they be and why?” If you receive a question like this, roll with it as best you can, process the question aloud, and commit to your answer once you have made it. There is no right or wrong answer. They are likely looking to see how you handle the unexpected, how creative you are, or want insight into your thought process.

Your Questions at the End

There are two types of questions you should have ready for the interview. Regardless, be sure to phrase your questions tactfully.

Type 1 – Questions to gather information about the position and company

What do you want to know about the job and the company? What questions will improve your understanding of the job requirements? Examples include how many people you will work with, the training that will be required, the first project you are likely to work on, or what a typical day entails. Do not ask questions about salary and benefits until an offer of employment has been made.

You may save these questions until the end (jotting them down as you go) or, if you are comfortable, you may consider asking these types of questions at the end of a related answer. For example, if the interviewer asks you to describe your experience with teamwork, you may, at the end of your answer to this question, ask, “I’m curious, how many people are on the team here?”

Type 2 – “Do you have any questions for us?”

This will be one of the final questions you will be asked in an interview. You should ask a specific question that will initiate a conversation amongst the interviewers and will leave a lasting impression. Do not ask for information you could easily get through pre-interview research.

Here are some topics to explore:

- Team-based goals (these may be more specific than the company mission statement)
- Future projects
- Why they like working for the company
- What they like most about their job
- Training or professional development opportunities

Final preparation tips

Practice! Practice! Practice! One of the best ways is in front of a mirror and/or by getting a friend to role-play an interview situation with you. Consider recording yourself and then reviewing the video. It will help you improve your posture, facial expressions, gestures, and the verbal and the nonverbal messages you send.

With each answer, ensure you:

- Are honest and accurate
- Go beyond yes or no answers
- Expand and elaborate on your skills, knowledge, experience, and achievements

If you do not understand a question, ask for clarification. If you do not know the answer, say so.

You do not need to rush into your answer. Take a few seconds to think about your answer. Do not think aloud, but do not worry about the silence or pauses. Taking a sip of water can also buy you a few seconds.

If you get the impression that the interview is not going very well, do not let it show. Take a breath, focus on slowing down your answers, and try to maintain your confidence.

Agree with any requests to fill out application forms or provide additional details about your references.

Good luck and please reach out to your Coordinator with any questions or for more focused, one-on-one interview preparation.

Appendix A – Interview prep worksheet

With every answer you give during an interview, ensure you are honest and accurate, go beyond yes or no answers, and expand and elaborate on your skills, knowledge, experience, and achievements.

You now know that to be successful in an interview you are going to need to be ready with:

- STAR(R) stories for BDI questions
- Strengths and weaknesses
- Technical/skill-based details
- A plan to communicate your problem-solving style
- Constructive answers for questions related to negative aspects of your personal/work history
- An answer to “Tell Me About yourself”
- An approach for random and oddball questions
- Your questions

To Build a Good Story

Step 1: Pick a technical project, challenging moment, or specific situation. Think of something you did that is directly related to the position and the work you will be doing. Remember, you may choose examples from work, school, volunteer or extra-curricular experience, and even personal projects!

Step 2: Write out this story in its entirety using full sentences. Follow the STAR(R) technique and do not shy away from the specifics, nuance, or the complexity of the situation. Make sure you have enough detail, keep yourself as the focus and main protagonist of your stories, and even consider reading it aloud to yourself or a trusted friend.

Step 3: Make sure that you have prepared enough stories that address the information in the job posting, what you want to share with the employer, as well as each of the 6 BDI themes: communication*, active listening*, extroversion, leadership, ability to deal with conflict, organization

Strengths and Weaknesses

Here are the rules when you answer these questions:

- Only provide the number of examples asked for
- Ensure your strengths are related to the position
- Have at least two examples prepared for each

For strengths: Choose ones that are unique to you and that you are proud of. Be careful that you do not come across as aggressive, too competitive, too individualistic, or egotistical.

For weaknesses: Do not choose a critical flaw or a weakness for which you have no solution. Instead, identify something that you are aware is not a natural strength of yours but that you are actively improving on and have a current work-around for. Or, identify something that every applicant is likely to have.

Technical/Skilled-based Questions

You will pull nearly all of the specific skills, knowledge, and experience required for the position from the posting. Be ready to speak to each one. Know that the interviewers may pose a technical/skill-based problem for you to solve. Communication is key. Talk aloud as you identify each step you would take, express your thoughts and considerations, and make decisions. If you do not have much experience with a tech or skill, do not start your answer with ‘No’. Instead, note that while you may not have direct

experience with it, you do have transferrable skills and related experience with something similar or related. Also, focus on your ability to learn quickly and your excitement to do so.

Answering questions about your personal history

Try to anticipate the specific questions the interviewers may want to ask you. If there are negative aspects in your work or personal history, think about how you can present them positively and constructively.

“Tell Me About Yourself”

This answer should be a summary of your interview preparation thus far and should focus on what makes you different from the other applicants and your interest in the position. Your answer should be 2-3 minutes long and focused on emphasizing the appropriate, constructive, and positive aspects of your background, skills, experience, and knowledge.

Random and Oddball Questions

It is important to expect the unexpected (i.e. “If you could be an animal, which animal would you choose to be?”). Roll with it as best you can. Take a moment to consider the question, process the question aloud, and commit to your answer once you have made it. Remember they likely want to see how you handle the unexpected, how creative you are, or some insight into your thought process.

Your Questions at the End

Type 1 – Questions to gather information about the position and company

What do you want to know about the job or company? What questions will improve your understanding of the job requirements? Do not ask questions about salary and benefits until an offer of employment has been made. You may save these questions until the end (jotting them down as you go) or, if you are comfortable, you may consider asking these types of questions at the end of a related answer.

Type 2 – “Do you have any questions for us?”

Ask a specific question that will initiate a conversation amongst the interviewers and will leave a lasting impression. Some topics to explore include: team-based goals, future projects, what they like about the company or their work, and training and professional development opportunities.

Final Tips

Practice! Practice! Practice! One of the best ways is in front of a mirror and/or by getting a friend to role-play an interview situation with you. Consider recording yourself and then reviewing the video. It will help you improve your posture, facial expressions, gestures, and the verbal and the nonverbal messages you send.

If you do not understand a question, respond with something like “would you mind rephrasing the question?” If you do not know the answer, say so.

After you are asked a question, don’t be afraid to take a moment to think about the answer you want to give. Do not think aloud, but do not worry about the silence or pauses either. Taking a sip of water can also buy you a few seconds.

If you get the impression that the interview is not going very well, do not let it show. Take a breath, focus on slowing down your responses, and try to maintain your appearance of confidence.

Agree with any requests to fill out application forms or provide additional details about your references.

Appendix B – Resources for sample questions

Sample Answers for BDI Questions – https://www.job-hunt.org/job_interviews/smart-behavioral-interview-answers.shtml

125 Common Interview Questions, including 30 with examples and tips – <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/interviewing/top-interview-questions-and-answers>

30 Behavioural Interview Questions You Should Be Ready to Answer – <https://www.themuse.com/advice/30-behavioral-interview-questions-you-should-be-ready-to-answer>

Interviewing – The Indeed Career Guide. It includes tips, articles, and more – <https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/interviewing?from=careeradvice-US>

Appendix C - Telephone and e-interviews

Before the interview:

- Remove all background noise and distractions before the call
 - Find a quiet location with no interruptions (Ask us about booking an interview room)
 - Ensure your phone is charged and alerts and messages turned off.
- Ensure you have a back-up plan
 - If you get cut-off or experience technical difficulties, be sure you have a phone number and email so you can reach the interviewer directly with minimal delay
- Confirm the time zone your interviewers are in
- Make use of the space the interviewers cannot see
 - Do not be afraid to leave yourself key notes on either side of the camera or on the wall in your line of sight. Good ideas include STAR(R), a reminder to speak slowly, a reminder to smile, and positive affirmations
- Be aware of what the interviewers CAN see
- Ensure all of your notes and documents are single-sided
 - This will keep you organized, articulate, and you won't have to worry about flipping pages.

Take a surprise call in stride. Sound positive, friendly, and collected: “Thank you for calling. Would you wait just a moment while I close the door?” Put the phone down, take three deep breaths, get organized, and start the interview.

During the interview

- Speak directly into the telephone
 - Speak slowly and clearly. Even more than normal
 - Smile! Putting a smile on your face improves the timbre of your voice
 - Do not eat or chew gum while on a phone or e-interview
- Don't fill the silence
 - Since you cannot see the interviewer, it is difficult to know what is going on. It is quite likely that the interviewers are making notes. When your answer is complete, patiently wait for them to ask you the next questions.
- Don't be afraid to ask them to repeat a question
 - Phone and e-communications can be more challenging in-person. Do not be afraid to ask them to repeat or clarify a question for you.

Appendix D – Post-interview reflection

Learn from each interview by reflecting on the following questions afterward:

- Did the interviewer ask questions that I was not prepared for? What were they?
- Did I fail to demonstrate my research about the position or company?
- Did I follow the STAR(R) technique when telling my stories?
- Did I emphasize the connection between my skills and experience and the skills required for the job?
- Was I pleasant, honest and sincere?
- Did I answer the interviewer's questions with enough detail?
- Did I address the employer's needs in a positive, constructive way?

Make a list of the things you struggled with and make an appointment with your Coordinator for a debrief.