



## High Stakes Communication:

## Interviewing for a Teaching Position

Tracy Volz, PhD  
Rice University



BioEd Online

One can envision teachers as “performers” in the classroom. Their role is to communicate to a variety of student audiences while fielding questions and resolving unexpected (yet, inevitable) challenges that arise during a typical school day. Teacher candidates carry out a similar role in job interviews: they share information, answer questions, and sometimes must handle stressful surprises. Thus, interviewers can assess a candidate’s teaching skills, in part, through his or her performance in the interview itself. By preparing for the “high stakes communications” that occur in the interview setting, you can reduce stress, enhance your performance, and increase the likelihood of landing the position.

### Image Reference

People in Business. *Image #015003B*. Getty Images

## Prepare in Advance

- Customize resume for situation
- Research school/district
  - Needs
  - Expectations
- Organize your information
  - Achievements/qualifications
  - Examples of specific skill sets
  - Alignment with school needs



BioEd Online

### Prepare in Advance

This presentation describes strategies that will help you in an interview. But before you can be invited for an interview, of course, you must build a resume and complete the application materials. While doing so, keep in mind that you will increase your appeal to potential employers if you customize your application packet to match a school's/district's specific needs. From this very first step in the process, it is important to adopt a systematic, focused approach to presenting yourself in the best possible light.

Once you get an interview, your goal should be to create an encounter in which you communicate your content knowledge, experience and career goals effectively, and with confidence. Under these circumstances, you have a favorable opportunity to persuade the interviewer that you're the best candidate to fill an open teaching position.

But interviewing under any conditions is stressful, and many people are derailed by unexpected questions, a moment of uncertainty, or challenging situations. The best way to avoid an interview miscue or meltdown is to "do your homework" and prepare in advance.

It is not enough simply to know some background about the school or district with which you will interview. You must thoroughly research and understand a potential employer's needs and expectations, and have a clear vision—and the ability to explain it—of how your skills will help to advance the school or district.

You also must have a detailed, organized view of your achievements and qualifications. You will not always have time during an interview to figure out how best to say things, or which examples from your past experience best illuminate your suitability for this new job. The information and details must be analyzed, compartmentalized and “queued up” in your mind before you walk through the interviewer’s door. This mental prep work will allow you to answer questions with assurance and clarity, and will show that you have thought carefully about how your background, prior experience and goals are aligned with the school’s needs.

Solid preparation will enable you to enter the interview in a more comfortable frame of mind, speak with confidence, answer questions well and clearly, and present a professional, competent demeanor. In short, it will maximize the likelihood of a positive, successful interview experience.

### **Image Reference**

Workforce Personnel 2. (2005). *kcd00251081*. Jupiter Images Corporation.

## Know Your Employer I

- Mission.
- Organizational structure and culture
- Principal and key administrators
- Student demographics
- Curriculum, academics



BioEd Online

### Know Your Employer

To determine whether you are a good fit for a particular school, you should conduct extensive research about the school (and, if possible, the district). Learn its mission and core values, organizational structure, culture, administrative leadership, demographics, curriculum and extracurricular programs.

A school's mission and core values usually are articulated explicitly in its Mission Statement and School Philosophy. Familiarize yourself with these statements, and give serious thought to concrete examples of how you would be able to support and advance them.

While assessing organizational structure and culture, research the names and backgrounds of the school's principal, assistant principals, department heads and other key personnel. This information can prove very helpful, especially as you may be interviewed by one or more of these individuals.

It also is important to know how decisions are made. Is the school's power structure top-down (decisions are made by the highest levels in the organization) or flat (everyone is invited to contribute to the decision-making process)? Do parents and students have a voice in decisions? How much freedom do teachers have to design their own lessons plans, assignments, and tests? Is the culture open or closed? Student-centered or instructor-centered?

Learn about the student population in terms of size, demographic representation, academic performance, percentage of college-bound students, drop-out rate, and eligibility for special programs.

As you prepare for your interview, focus on the school's academic program and curriculum. What is unique or special about them? How do they address preparation for standardized testing? Are there any potential gaps that you might be able to fill? Do your strengths

match the school's curriculum?

In most cases, the school's curriculum reflects the statewide curriculum. In Texas, this is the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS): <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/teks/>. This information is organized by content area and type of school (elementary, middle school, high school). The TEKS outline the skills and concepts you will be expected to teach. They stipulate the goals and measurable outcomes for assessing learning among a particular student cohort in a particular area (e.g., high school biology). Most states now have standardized assessment of student achievement. In Texas, this test is known as the Texas Assessment of Knowledge Skills (TAKS). You can download Information Booklets organized by content area and grade. If, for example, you select Science Grade 10, you will be able to view introductory material, specific objectives for teaching students science, sample TAKS test questions, and links to teaching resources. Other states may have similar information.

### **Reference**

Texas Education Agency. *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)*. Retrieved 04-07-2007 from <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/teks/>

### **Image References**

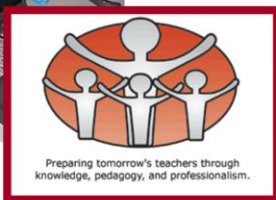
Potts, J. (2002). *School building*. Houston, TX: Baylor College of Medicine.

Towson University Student Success Programs. Retrieved 4-09-2007 from <http://wwwnew.towson.edu/sage/mentoring.asp>

## Know Your Employer II



- Department details
- Professional development
- Facilities and resources
- School ranking, status
- Standardized testing



BioEd Online

### Know Your Employer More

In addition to studying the school in general, learn all you can about the department head and faculty in the department you would like to join. How many faculty members are in the department? What are their areas of expertise? How long have they been teaching at the school? Are they involved in extra-curricular activities as club sponsors or as organizers of outreach activities? Has the school, department or individuals in it been recognized for any particular accomplishments?

Investigate the types of professional development opportunities that will be available to support your growth as a teacher. Find out how you will be oriented to your new school environment and trained for your new role when you first join the faculty. Be sure to ask how your performance will be assessed.

What facilities and resources will be available to you? Are resources easily obtained, or are they scarce? If you are a science teacher, investigate what kinds of laboratory space are available at the school. Any teacher will want to know what computer/technology resources are available (including tech support). Ask whether teachers in your prospective department share materials and supplies.

Take note of any special awards, status, or recognition the school has earned. And finally, if you have not already done so, study your state's standardized tests for your content area and how the school's students have performed. Prepare interview responses about the skills you have that will contribute to the efforts already underway within the school/department.

### Image References

Young, M. S. (2003). *Teachers*. Houston, TX: Baylor College of Medicine.

California University of Pennsylvania's Department of Education. Retrieved 04-05-2007 from [http://www.cup.edu/nu\\_upload/Initial\\_Certification\\_Student\\_Handbook\\_2007.pdf](http://www.cup.edu/nu_upload/Initial_Certification_Student_Handbook_2007.pdf)

## Sources of Information

---

- Web sites
  - School
  - District
  - Teachers
  - State Education Agencies
  - National organizations
- Advisors
- School administrators/teachers



BioEd Online

### Sources of Information

Many primary and secondary schools have websites where you can learn more about the topics introduced on the previous slide. In addition to a school's web site, be sure to visit the school district web site to learn more about the district's goals, core values, and leadership. Some teachers also have their own websites. If you know the names of teachers at the school, it can be helpful to review their sites as well.

The U.S. Department of Education hosts a site that may help you to locate individual state education agencies. To find detailed information on a Texas school's performance, visit the Texas Education Agency's web site. Here, you will find information about a school's student demographics, performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), standardized test scores on the SAT/ACT, graduation and dropout rates, staff, programs, and financial standing. This site provides access to information about a school's performance over multiple years, which may reveal upward or downward trends in specific areas.

Other resources for data on schools include the following:

National Center for Education Statistics: <http://nces.ed.gov/>

National Education Association <http://www.nea.org/index.html>

Council of Chief State School Officers <http://www.ccsso.org/>

In addition to these resources, consult with your educational advisors, or other teachers/administrators you may know, prior to an interview. They may be able to provide additional "inside" information about a school's leadership, culture, and challenges–



information that is not widely publicized. Remember, however, that unless a person's opinion is confirmed by other sources, it is the opinion of only one person and may not be widely held. Finally, it never can hurt to call a school directly to speak with administrators or teachers about specific issues that may help you to prepare for your interview.

### **References**

Council of Chief State School Officers. Retrieved 04-11-2007 from <http://www.ccsso.org/>

National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved 04-11-2007 from <http://nces.ed.gov/>

National Education Association. Retrieved 04-11-2007 from <http://www.nea.org/index.html>

Texas Education Agency. Retrieved 04-11-2007 from <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/>

U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved 04-11-2007 from  
<http://www.ed.gov/about/contacts/state/index.html>

### **Image Reference**

*Typing*. Retrieved 4-04-2007 from <http://www.gamestoeducate.com/typing>

## Know Yourself

- Background
- Reasons for wanting to teach
- Strengths and weaknesses
- Teaching-related experiences



BioEd Online

### Know Yourself

Before you interview, develop a concise, informative description of your background, teaching-related interests, and reasons for wanting to teach. These central issues are certain to be part of your interview, and it will be important to have solid responses immediately at hand when needed.

Also, reflect on your personal strengths and weaknesses as they relate to the job. It is important to be honest with yourself and with your interviewer(s), and to demonstrate realistic awareness of both your strong points and areas in which you need to improve. For example, you may have considerable knowledge of biology based on your undergraduate education and experience as a laboratory technician, but you may not have much teaching experience. You may have a lot of energy and enthusiasm, but those strengths may get taxed to the limit because you have a hard time saying “no” when someone asks you to do something. You may communicate well in small groups and in one-on-one situations, but struggle to present material in front of larger groups.

Think of specific, concrete examples of how your strengths have enabled you to accomplish your goals in the past, and how you are addressing/will address any perceived weaknesses. Be prepared to discuss these issues. Let’s say you’re excited about teaching but don’t have much experience. You might acknowledge that you do not have first-hand experience managing a classroom, but you have interacted with children, and you have realistic expectations of what it will be like when you are given the opportunity to teach. Then you need to provide as much evidence as possible to support your claim.

Think carefully about how to make the most of whatever teaching-related experiences you have had. Be prepared to discuss any past experiences, especially those that involved children (e.g., private tutoring, coaching, leading a troop of Boy/Girl Scouts, Sunday school, training new employees in your department, etc.). In addition, describe any classroom observations that you completed as part of your teacher training and how those have shaped your own teaching philosophy and classroom management style. Be sure to explain how your educational background has prepared you for the classroom. You may even want to mention influential teachers who have shaped your vision of yourself as an educator.

### Image References

Ainsley, S. *Vassar Quarterly*. Retrieved 04-04-2007 from [http://www.aavc.vassar.edu/vq/articles/Greenhouse\\_Effect\\_Winter2002](http://www.aavc.vassar.edu/vq/articles/Greenhouse_Effect_Winter2002)

Young, M. S. (2003). *Individual teacher*. Houston, TX: Baylor College of Medicine.

## Know Your Objectives

- Long- and short-term career goals
- Key job satisfaction factors
- Awareness of current events



BioEd Online

### Know Your Objectives

In preparation for an interview, make a list of your short- and long-term personal and professional goals. A school administrator will be interested in determining whether you envision teaching as a long-term career, or if you view it as more of an experiment, something to pay the bills while you investigate other options. Moreover, the interviewer may want to know what you hope to achieve at the school, in the classroom and outside of it, as a sponsor of school activities, leader of teacher professional development programs, etc.

Once you have produced your list of professional goals, create a table of key factors that will influence your job satisfaction. To get started, consider the following questions.

- Do the school's mission, values and curriculum match your own vision and objectives?
- Can you achieve your goals at that school?
- Are there professional development opportunities?
- Can you advance to a leadership position?
- Can you assume other roles in the school, such as club sponsor, school or district committee member, team leader, or teacher mentor.
- Does the school have sufficient resources for you to do your work (e.g., equipment, lab space, administrative support)?
- Will your colleagues contribute positively to your teaching experience and growth as an educator?

The answers to these questions will be especially useful if you interview at several schools and want to make comparisons to determine which school would be the best fit for you.

Finally, stay aware of current events, as they can be used to generate small talk at the outset of an interview. Demonstrating knowledge of current events also suggests that you value being informed of local, national and global issues, which is one of the implicit goals of most educational institutions.

### **Image Reference**

Business Communications. *Image #07803A*. Getty Images

## Know Your Work

---

- Assemble and review teaching portfolio.
  - Resume
  - Teaching philosophy
  - List of courses
  - Sample syllabi/assignments/lesson plan
  - Warm up activity based on state mandated curriculum
  - Details from classroom observations
- Supervising or mentoring
- Service



BioEd Online

### Know Your Work

As you compile your resume and teaching portfolio and ready yourself for interviews, it is important to analyze, in depth, your past work experiences. How do your experiences and skills qualify you to be a teacher? Perhaps they have provided extensive content knowledge in your discipline, or considerable experience managing a laboratory and training new employees how to work in the lab? Be prepared to emphasize any special skills you possess—such as expertise in certain computers/software, or high-level laboratory techniques or communication skills—and to explain how they relate to the teaching position for which you are interviewing. Also, be prepared to discuss any item on your resume, even the most obscure.

In addition to your thoughtfully-prepared resume, a successful teaching portfolio will include some or all of the following. Be prepared to elaborate upon all of these items verbally during the interview.

- A written articulation of your general philosophy of teaching.
- A list of courses you are most prepared to teach, as well as those that you could teach after building up your knowledge base (see the state approved courses that match the teaching certification that you have and familiarize yourself with the requirements for adding additional certifications to your certificate).
- Sample syllabi, lesson plans, and/or assignments that you have developed. For each, describe the goals you are trying to accomplish and the rationale behind your approach. If it is an assignment, explain how you would evaluate student performance.
- A warm-up activity that you have created using state or district level learning

objectives.

- Plans for a new course that you would like to design.
- Details of any classroom observations you have undergone in a teaching role, the feedback you received, and your strategies for incorporating the observer's suggestions into future teaching situations.

An interviewer will want to assess your ability to manage a classroom. Therefore, be sure your portfolio emphasizes any prior experiences in which you supervised or mentored adults, or preferably, school-age children. Be prepared to discuss what you learned. Give specific examples of the challenges you faced as a leader, and how you dealt with them. In what ways have your previous experiences prepared you to manage a room full of high school students? In what ways did it not prepare you? What did you find rewarding about your opportunities to mentor individuals or lead teams of people?

Many schools seek to engage the local community in their activities or to contribute to the community through outreach efforts. Have you done any volunteer work? Anything related to schools or education? What motivated you to get involved? What was your role? How long did you serve? What did you find most difficult and rewarding about the experience?

## **References**

Bullock, A. & Parmalee P. H. (2000). *Developing a Teaching Portfolio: A Guide for Preservice and Practicing Teachers*. Paramus, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Constantinos, P. M., De Lorenzo, M. N., & Kobrinski, E. J. (2005). *Developing a Professional Teaching Portfolio: A Guide for Success* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Seldin, P. (1991). *The Teacher Portfolio: A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion and Tenure Decisions* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.). Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.

## Get Organized

- Review notes on employer.
- Match your qualifications to their needs.
- Formulate questions in advance.
- Be prepared to answer questions most likely to arise.



BioEd Online

### Get Organized

It is important to take time prior to the interview to review your notes, match your qualifications with the needs of the employer, and formulate questions to ask the interviewer. This will indicate that you have done your homework, are well suited for the job, and are serious about the position for which you are interviewing. Try to avoid asking questions for which you could easily find the answers on your own by searching the Internet. In addition, it is best to avoid asking questions about salary or vacation time during the interview, as these questions suggest you may be more interested in the benefits than in the job itself.

As you organize, prepare to answer questions that are likely to come up during the interview. For example, an interviewer probably will ask why you want this position, why you consider yourself qualified, what you consider to be your strengths and weaknesses, and what motivated you to pursue a career in teaching. The questions may come in different forms, but such fundamental issues are almost certain to arise, and it is important to be ready with coherent, precise responses.

### Image References

iStockphoto. *Career Move*. Retrieved 05-02-2007 from [http://www.istockphoto.com/file\\_closeup.php?id=2436235](http://www.istockphoto.com/file_closeup.php?id=2436235)

iStockphoto. *3D Question Mark*. Retrieved 05-02-2007 from [http://www.istockphoto.com/file\\_closeup.php?id=2929564](http://www.istockphoto.com/file_closeup.php?id=2929564)

## Listen Actively



- Be attentive.
- Focus on main points.
- Use paraphrasing and reflection.
- Ask questions.



BioEd Online

### Listen Actively

Listening actively during your interview will improve your performance by enabling you to make more intelligent responses. Unfortunately, this is harder than it sounds. The truth is that most of us listen at only 25-50% of our potential. While not paying full attention, we are likely to forget, mishear, or distort the information being presented. To prevent these problems, begin working on your listening skills well in advance of your interviews. Practice listening with your whole body by turning toward the other person and making consistent eye contact. Occasionally you may want to match the interviewer's pace, nod your head, and say, "yes" to signal that you are engaged.

You will be in a position of having to answer questions and provide information. To respond effectively, it is important that you are able to identify the main points of a question or statement from the interviewer. However, this is not always a simple task, as not all interviewers are strong, clear speakers. If you are uncertain about what the interviewer is asking, use paraphrasing and reflection to gain clarity. This practice involves simply trying to process the information presented as best you can and then rephrasing the question for the reviewer. You might ask, "So what you're asking is. . . ?" Even if it turns out you have misunderstood the original question, it is far better to request clarification than to answer a question that was not actually asked.

If you find yourself struggling to follow someone else's train of thought, or if you just need a break, ask a question of the interviewer. You might even ask the same question he or she just asked you. This will demonstrate that you are engaged in the conversation, and will provide an opportunity for you to gain control of the conversation and to regroup.



**Reference**

Bonet, D. (2001). *The Business of Listening: A Practical Guide to Effective Listening*. Ontario, Canada: Crisp Learning.

**Image References**

iStockphoto. *Meeting*. Retrieved 05-02-2007 from  
[http://www.istockphoto.com/file\\_closeup.php?id=106081](http://www.istockphoto.com/file_closeup.php?id=106081)

## Show What You Know!

- Greeting
- Response Strategy
  - Deliver topic sentences.
  - Follow up with details and concrete examples.
  - Organize for clarity.
- Closing (memorize)
  - Summarize qualifications.
  - Reinforce interest in position.



BioEd Online

### Show What You Know!

The opening seconds of an interview are important because the interviewer immediately begins to gather impressions of you. Greet the interviewer with a natural smile and shake his or her hand firmly (but not with a death grip). The interviewer may begin with some small talk about your ability to locate the school, the weather, or current events, or he or she may get right to the business at hand. Follow his or her lead. Be ready to deliver a positive statement about your interest in the position.

Once the formal interview begins, you should lead off your answers with a topic sentence, and then organize your supporting evidence, from the most significant concrete examples to the least. You might think of your response as a two-stage process. First, present a series of two or three main bullet points that serve as an overview to your answer. Second, return to each point and develop the ideas using great detail and concrete examples.

Avoid generalities, clichés, and long lists of experiences or achievements. These are quickly forgotten. Instead, tell a vivid, focused, personal “story” with a limited number of specific names, events and places. Use this story to exemplify diverse skills and experiences that relate to the job for which you are interviewing. This approach will make your responses far more effective, interesting and memorable, and will set you apart from other candidates. If you wait to present your most important evidence, you risk having the interviewer interrupt you to ask a follow-up question that may take the conversation in a direction that prevents you from returning to the first question and describing your most significant experience.

Here is an extended example of these principles put into practice.

**Interviewer:** *How did you become interested in teaching science?*

**Less prepared job candidate:** Well, my mom was a high school biology teacher. She was always planning interesting projects for her students [*Need more concrete detail*]. She

encouraged me to consider science as a career when I attended State University. At the university I found that I really liked chemistry, so I took a lot of classes and ended up majoring in it. After graduating I went to work in a lab because at the time I wasn't interested in going to graduate school [Need more concrete detail]. While I was working in the lab I decided to do some volunteer work at the Museum of Natural Science [Need more concrete detail]. That's basically it.

**Prepared job candidate:** I want to teach science because my mother was a science educator, I have first-hand experience working in a lab, and I have been conducting science workshops for children at the Museum of Natural Science for three years. My mother taught 10<sup>th</sup> grade Biology for 13 years, and every weekend she converted our kitchen into her personal lab. I loved helping her feed cell cultures, measure our family members' heart rates, and look up information on the Internet. After majoring in chemistry at State University, I took a position as a lab technician at Chemlink. My responsibilities include conducting experiments, error analysis, training new employees, ordering inventory, and serving as the safety coordinator for my division. While I enjoy my work, I really wanted to share my enthusiasm for science with children, so I began volunteering at the Museum of Natural Science. On Saturdays I do science demonstrations for 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders. For example, I mix together two clear chemicals, and they turn blue, and I explain why. In another demonstration, we test the pH of household substances. Overall, this experience has been incredibly rewarding, and it prompted me to get my teaching certification so that I could turn my hobby into a my profession, knowing, of course, that teaching will be much more challenging than leading science demonstrations.

**Interviewer** (obvious follow-up question): *What challenges or differences do you expect to find between the two activities, teaching high school chemistry and conducting science workshops?*

Finally, imagine the interviewer wrapping up the interview by saying, "In 30 seconds, convince me that you have the qualifications and motivation to make a positive contribution to XX High School." How would you respond? Prepare a two- or three-sentence closing statement that captures your primary qualifications for a specific position and reiterates your genuine interest in it. Practice saying your closing many times so it flows fluently out of your mouth. Even if you are not prompted by the interviewer to share your closing statement, you should work it into the final minutes of the conversation. **This is especially important if your personality is not naturally outgoing or expressive.**

### Image Reference

Shaking Hands. iStockphoto. Retrieved 05/02/2007, from [http://www.istockphoto.com/file\\_closeup/who/emotions/happiness/3232158\\_shaking\\_hands.php?id=3232158](http://www.istockphoto.com/file_closeup/who/emotions/happiness/3232158_shaking_hands.php?id=3232158)

## Responding Well

- Adapt to the moment
  - Type of information
  - Amount of detail
- Anticipate questions
- Request clarification
- Repeat or rephrase
- Stand your ground
- Avoid pitfalls
- Wrap up well



BioEd Online

### Responding Well

Always be aware of your audience and circumstances, and adapt your responses to them during an interview. You want to provide sufficient detail to enable the interviewer to draw sound conclusions about your qualifications and characteristics. But how much is enough? Different interviewers may need different amounts or types of information. For instance, a principal may require more detail about science content issues than the head of the science department does. Only you can make this assessment, and it will happen during the interview. It also is important to consider time constraints and to monitor the interviewer's level of interest by watching his or her verbal/non-verbal cues. Stay on topic and remember that rambling diffuses your message, obscures your key points, and ultimately, undermines your authority.

As stated earlier, it always is helpful to anticipate your interviewer's questions as much as possible. This will assist you in providing concise, well-phrased answers. However, you may devote considerable effort to preparing and still be surprised by an unclear or unexpected question.

What if an interviewer asks a vague question? In these instances, request more specific information. For example, if the interviewer asks, "What's your best class?" You might ask, "Can you explain what you mean?" (e.g., Class that I have taught? Class that I have taken? Class composition?), or if the interviewer asks, "Is it better to appease parents?" You might respond by asking, "Better as compared to . . . ?" Also, it will be helpful to narrow down non-specific questions if the interviewer tends to rattle off several topics without stating a specific question. You might say, "I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understand the question. Can you restate it for me?" Or choose one point raised, the one you consider most important, and elaborate on

that one.

What if an interviewer asks your opinion on a controversial subject? First, assume his or her goal in asking the question is not to see if you share his or her opinion but to see whether you're capable of making a cogent argument and defending your beliefs. Do not worry about matching the interviewer's opinion or dodge the question. Instead, state your own informed opinion and present an argument. If the interviewer challenges your position, listen openly and carefully, but do not abandon your position unless you are convinced by his or her counterarguments.

Avoiding potential pitfalls is as important as answering questions well. During the interview, it is important that you do not: exaggerate your qualifications; criticize your current/recent employer/supervisor; give yes/no responses; demonstrate defensive body language, such as backing up, throwing your arms across your chest, or talking faster or louder.

Finally, remember to wrap up the interview well, using the two-three sentence closing statement discussed previously. Even if the interviewer does not ask for a summation, it is important to provide this quick reinforcement of your qualifications and interest in the job.

## Handling Tough Situations

- Agendas driving questions
  - To obtain clarification
  - To seek recommendation
  - To demonstrate knowledge
  - To embarrass or intimidate
- Managing hostile questions
  - Keep your cool
  - Pause to think
  - Restate question in neutral terms
  - Break away
- It's me, not you



BioEd Online

### Handling Tough Situations

People may ask questions for a number of reasons. Obviously, an interviewer's primary goal is to learn about you and your qualifications for the position, and most times, an interviewer's questions will be sincere professional inquiries designed to help the employer decide upon the best person for the job. Sometimes, an interviewer will ask follow-up questions to obtain clarification or more information about a portion of your response. Perhaps he or she will seek a recommendation or description of how you would respond to a certain situation. While such questions might give the impression that the interviewer is challenging you, do not assume the interviewer is hostile just because he or she is tough. Usually, even difficult questions are founded on nothing more than the desire for more information.

Of course, there are rare occasions when an interviewer really is being confrontational. He or she may seek to embarrass, belittle or intimidate you, or simply to make you feel uncomfortable. The best way to handle these moments—or any interview situation—is to remain cool and maintain your composure. Do not get defensive, angry or sarcastic, for this will certainly ruin your chances of landing the position.

If you find yourself fielding hostile questions, always pause to think before you reply. Gather yourself before you answer. You can buy some time and diffuse some tension by restating the question back to the interviewer in neutral terms, removing an aggressive tone or charged language in your version. Continue to make direct eye contact with the interviewer and if possible, identify common ground between your position and his/hers. Try to respond with specific facts and figures to support your argument. If all else fails, rather than continuing along an unproductive or negative line of questioning, simply state

that you have nothing more to add to your response. This will place the burden back upon the interviewer to move along the interview.

Also, remember that not all interviewers are trained at this job, or particularly good at it. Some may be as uncomfortable as the interviewee during the process.

Finally, keep in mind the old “it’s me, not you” line. It is entirely possible that a hostile interviewer is not upset with you, and may not even be aware that he or she is being hostile. You do not know what the interviewer may be experiencing in his or her life. And while it is unprofessional for an interviewer to allow outside events to influence his or her conduct in an interview, this certainly can happen. Then again, perhaps the interviewer is always unpleasant! So keep in mind that his or her perceived foul mood may have nothing to do with you. Maintain your poise and professional demeanor, and keep focused. You may receive a positive review even if you got negative feelings during the interview.

## **References**

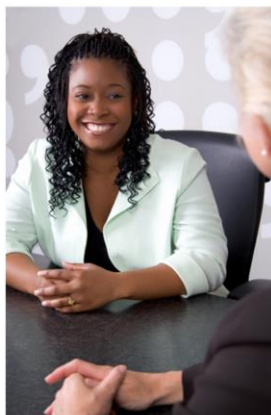
- D’Arcy, J. (1998). *Technically Speaking: A Guide for Communicating Complex Information*. Columbus, OH: Battelle Press.
- Stein, D. (2002, November). Under Attack: Dealing with Hostile Questions. *Public Management Magazine*. Retrieved 04-09-2007 from [http://www.gcastrategies.com/books\\_articles/article\\_008\\_nc.php](http://www.gcastrategies.com/books_articles/article_008_nc.php)

## **Image Reference**

Learn.com. Retrieved 4-04-2007 from <http://www.tutorials.com/09/0957/0957.asp>

## Presenting. . . You!

- **Stance/Posture**
  - Sit/stand up straight.
  - Plant feet firmly.
  - Lean forward to show interest.
- **Gestures**
  - Use hand gestures to reinforce concepts.
  - Project from chest height.
- **Eye Contact**
  - Make direct, sustained eye contact.
  - Speak to entire group, not just one person.



BioEd Online

### Presenting. . . You!

Twenty years of research in psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, neuroscience and speech communication has shown that we are judged not only by knowledge, but on how we conduct ourselves and how we look and sound. You probably have experienced situations personally where, based on a person's greeting and appearance, you instantly started to form opinions about his or her personality, character, intelligence, and temperament. First impressions may not always be correct, but an interviewer will begin to form them the moment you walk through the door. Therefore, from the very start, you want to project a positive, professional image to your interviewer(s). You can achieve this through your stance, gestures, eye contact, voice quality and attire/appearance. Bring some energy into the room, smile, and show that you're enthusiastic about teaching.

**Stance/Posture.** Position your body so that it is open to the interviewer, and do not turn your back. When you are standing before this person, hold your head up, stand up straight and plant your feet. Try to keep your feet under your hips, your shoulders relaxed, weight evenly distributed, and your arms dropped loosely at your sides. When seated across from the interviewer, show your attentiveness by maintaining good posture. You want to sit up straight and lean forward a little bit to emphasize a point or to show your interest. Avoid standing with your feet extended too far apart, wider than your hips, because it looks too casual. Try not to stand with one foot crossed over the other. This causes one shoulder to dip, which makes you look unstable. Do not slump in your chair, sway, rock, pace, or nervously tap your foot.

**Gestures.** Use hand gestures to emphasize particular points or to reinforce concepts visually. These gestures should project from chest-high, so that the interviewer can watch your face and the gesture simultaneously. If your hands are too high, they will block your face. If they are too low, the gesture may not be seen, or may be distracting, as it will draw the audience's view away from your face, and thus, away from what you may be saying. To promote effective gesturing, and to avoid giving an unintended perception, resist the following common practices: crossing your arms in front of your body; clasping your hands in front of body (the "fig leaf" pose) or behind back; placing your hand in front of your mouth, or fiddling with your pen. All of these behaviors can create a negative or unwanted impression.



**Eye Contact.** Eye contact is the most powerful form of non-verbal communication. In North American culture, individuals who make direct, sustained eye contact usually are thought to be trustworthy and credible. In contrast, people who make too little eye contact are sometimes perceived as being dishonest, shy, or inattentive. Therefore, you should keep your eyes on the interviewer most of the time, even if he or she is scribbling notes and not making much eye contact with you. That said, avoid staring intently because it may make the interviewer uncomfortable. If you are being interviewed by a panel of people, make sure you address your answers, through eye contact, to everyone and not just the person who asked the question.

## References

- Burgoon, J. K., Manusov, V., Mineo, P. & Hale, J. L. (1985). Effects of gaze on hiring, credibility, attraction and relational message interpretation. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 9, 133-146.
- D'Arcy, J. (1998). *Technically Speaking: A Guide for Communicating Complex Information*. Columbus, OH: Battelle Press.
- Jacobi, J. (1996). *How to Say It with Your Voice*. Paramus, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Palmer, M. & Simmons, K. B. (1995). Communicating Intentions through Nonverbal Behaviors Conscious and Nonconscious Encoding of Liking. *Human Communication Research*, 22, 128-160.
- Tickle-Degnen, L. & Rosenthal, R. (1990). The Nature of Rapport and Its Nonverbal Correlates. *Psychological Inquiry*, 1, 285-293.

## Image Reference

iStockphotos. *The Interview*. Retrieved 5/2/2007 from [http://www.istockphoto.com/file\\_closeup.php?id=2093215](http://www.istockphoto.com/file_closeup.php?id=2093215)

## Presenting. . . You! (2)

### ■ Voice Quality

- Use inflection.
- Adjust pacing.
- Enunciate clearly.
- Avoid “fillers.”

### ■ Attire/Appearance

- Dress professionally.
- Wear comfortable, but professional shoes.
- Get used to wearing your selected outfit.



BioEd Online

## Presenting. . . You! (2)

**Voice Quality.** Your voice is an important tool through which to convey your energy and enthusiasm, and to keep the audience engaged. Speak in an authoritative tone to project confidence and credibility. Speaking too quietly, trailing off at the end of sentences, or mumbling will make it difficult for the interviewer to hear or understand you. Use inflection (speaking louder or softer to emphasize certain words or phrases) to indicate significant points, and also to provide variety and interest for those listening.

Adjust the pacing of your speech, speeding up during the details, the “telling of the story,” and slowing down to emphasize key points. However, always speak slowly and deliberately enough for the interviewer to understand clearly what you are saying at all times. Think of pauses as oral punctuation, during which time the interviewer can process what you have just said. Speaking too fast usually indicates nervousness. If you have a tendency to speak too fast, or if English is not your first language, force yourself to slow down and use one breath per phrase.

Make an effort to pronounce words properly, and to enunciate the final consonants/syllables of every word. For example, say “tesTS” not “tes’s,” “facTS” not “faks,” “anD” not “an,” “goiNG” not “goi’n,” “want to” not “wanna,” and “have to” not “hafta.” Even more important, be sure to use correct grammar and vocabulary. You will not impress the interviewer with “big words” or complex sentences if he or she cannot understand what you are saying, or worse, if you are not making sense.

Fillers such as “um,” “uh,” “and,” “like,” “you know,” and “basically” make it more difficult

for the listener to follow what you are saying by breaking up the coherence of your statement. Work on eliminating fillers from your everyday speech by becoming more self-conscious of this tendency. You might even have friends or colleagues remind you every time you use one in conversation. If you continue to struggle, train yourself to rest the tip of your tongue on the inside of your top front teeth during pauses.

**Attire/Appearance.** You want the interviewer to remember you, not your outfit, so choose clothes that contribute to a professional image. Aim to appear tastefully dressed, preferably in crisp, clean clothes. Wear something that makes you feel good about yourself. Choose comfortable but professional shoes, as the interviewer may take you on a walking tour of the campus. It also is a good idea to carry a small umbrella in your briefcase. Practice answering questions in your interview clothes, including your suit jacket, so that you become comfortable sitting and gesturing in more formal attire.

## **References**

- D'Arcy, J. (1998). *Technically Speaking: A Guide for Communicating Complex Information*. Columbus, OH: Battelle Press.
- Jacobi, J. (1996). *How to Say It with Your Voice*. Paramus, NJ: Prentice Hall.

## **Image Reference**

iStockphoto. *Business Negotiations*. Retrieved 05-02-2007 from [http://www.istockphoto.com/file\\_closeup.php?id=2824344](http://www.istockphoto.com/file_closeup.php?id=2824344)

## Overcome Anxiety

- Breathe
- Stretch/Loosen up
- Eat
- Sleep
- Avoid caffeine



BioEd Online

### Overcome Anxiety

Job interviews are a source of anxiety for most people. Their anxiety manifests itself in some subtle and not so subtle ways, such as a flushed face, trembling hands, or a quivering voice. This slide presents a few strategies to help you overcome anxiety and stay relaxed during your interview. While different strategies work for different people, one or more of those described here might help you.

Deep breathing is a popular relaxation technique among performers and athletes. It requires practice, though, so you should not expect to walk into a room, take one deep breath and have all of your anxiety melt away. Instead, you need to breathe deeply from your abdomen for 3-5 minutes prior to the interview. Pretend that your lungs are balloons ready to be inflated with air. Focus on the rhythm of your breathing. Inhale, filling your lungs from the bottom up, and then slowly release all of the air until the balloons are flat and empty. Repeat cycle. As your heart rate slows down, you should feel much more calm and composed.

Many speakers experience tension in their jaws and throat. To relieve this tension, find a private space in which to stretch your muscles. Yawn in an exaggerated way to loosen up your jaw. Gently pat your face. Rotate your neck from side to side. General stretching also can help you to relax. Extend your arms towards the corners of room. Bend over and slowly exhale as you touch your toes. Repeat several times.

Try to eat something that will give you energy and get a good night's rest the night before your interview. You want to be awake and alert during the interview. But avoid caffeine! It may over-stimulate you and cause you to speak too fast, start to sweat, or jumble your thoughts.

Instead of caffeine, rely on your body's adrenaline to make you sharp. Prior to (but not during) the interview, you may want to suck on hard candy or sip warm water if your mouth tends to get dry.

### **Image Reference**

Unbeige: A Blog about Design. Retrieved 04-04-2007 from  
[http://www.mediabistro.com/unbeige/magazines/told\\_you\\_theyd\\_be\\_shaking\\_things\\_up\\_over\\_there\\_25818.asp](http://www.mediabistro.com/unbeige/magazines/told_you_theyd_be_shaking_things_up_over_there_25818.asp)

## Eliminate Negativity

---

- Replace negative thoughts with positive ones.
- Imagine the interviewer as an advocate, not a judge or adversary.
- Remember the employer has chosen to interview you instead of someone else.



BioEd Online

### **Eliminate Negativity**

While it is natural to be nervous before an interview, it is important to go in with a positive attitude. Before you walk through the door, be sure to replace any negative thoughts with positive ones. For example, like a lot of people walking into an interview, you might be thinking, “I’m freaking out! I’m going to blow this!” That will not do. Instead, remind yourself of how well you have prepared for this moment, and how ready you are to win over the interviewer.

Instead of thinking of your interviewer as an adversary standing between you and the position you want, think of him or her as being the connection to it. Understand that your interviewer is eager to hire someone with your talents. This is why the employer has invited you to interview! They obviously think enough of you to meet you in person, and remember, they are invested in this process, too. There are needs on both sides. So if your thoughts begin to wander toward “He/she thinks I’m an idiot!” consider instead that he or she is looking for someone like you to fill the position. Your goal during the interview is to convince them that you are THE person for whom they have been looking.

## Practice!

---



- Rehearse out loud.
- Mock interview with different people.
- Do NOT try to memorize answers.
- Get videotaped.
- Keep a journal.



BioEd Online

### Practice!

Practice answering common interview questions out loud. Most people are more comfortable rehearsing silently, but rehearsing aloud builds fluency and familiarity with your thoughts, identifies organizational problems, and can reveal places where concrete examples are needed to support your claim.

Mock interview with several different people so that you learn how to adjust to different types of interviewing styles. Ask the person mock interviewing you to provide feedback to help you improve your interviewing skills. Get videotaped during a mock interview session, and then review the tape and note strengths and weaknesses in the quality of your responses as well as your non-verbal mannerisms.

While practicing is crucial, you should not try to memorize answers to common questions. There are several reasons for this. First, people who have memorized their responses usually speak too fast, or in a monotone robotic voice. Even worse, they may sound insincere because they are not really interacting, but merely playing back a mental recording. Second, memorization causes speakers to trip up because they have memorized answers to questions which may not be precisely those being asked in the interview. Thus, memorized responses may not be appropriate for the actual questions posed by the interviewer. Third, relying on memorized answers will make you less able and prepared to “think on your feet” and more likely to provide clumsy, ineffective responses. So rather than a set of “canned” answers, it is far better to enter the interview with comprehensive knowledge of your qualifications, interests and goals, and a thorough understanding of how they relate to the position for which you are interviewing. This will allow you to adapt with confidence and provide solid, timely answers within the flow of the conversation.

After the interview, it is very useful to reflect on the experience by keeping a journal. Note the various people you met and record what you learned about them and the school. Describe in your journal how you felt before and after the interview. What did you do to relax? Did any questions catch you by surprise? Which ones were most difficult? Write them down so that you are better prepared next time. Did any questions occur to you after you left the interview?

As a separate, final point, write a brief thank you note after your interview, expressing your appreciation for the time and consideration of the people you met. This letter also provides an opportunity to ask any follow-up questions you may have, and to offer small pieces of information you may not have mentioned during the interview. Keep the letter short (less than one page). Address it to the interviewer(s), but copy anyone else who played a key role in your interview process. It is a nice touch to include some form of personal notation in the note (“good luck with your bass fishing!”), possibly based on something written in your journal. This will indicate that you were paying attention, and it helps to personalize the relationship between you and the interviewer(s).

### **Image References**

Janis, M. *Mock Interview*. Virginia Commonwealth University. Retrieved 04-04-2007 from <http://www.news.vcu.edu/images.aspx?imgid=191>