

Interviewing

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Interviewing Basics

Congratulations! You impressed the employer with your experience and skills and now have an opportunity to interview with the employer. Interviews may occur on the phone, at the employer's site, at a job fair, or virtually. But no matter where they occur, preparation is the key to success.



Big interview is an online tool available to SJSU students that will help you review, practice and record hundreds of practice interview questions from various industries. Register at sjsu.biginterview.com with your SJSU email.

Types of Interviews



PHONE SCREEN

Phone screens are typically 15-30 minutes and include basic questions. The interviewer's objective is to verify the information on your resume, determine if you fully understand the job, and learn about why you want this job. Prepare for a phone screen by finding a quiet place. Demonstrate enthusiasm by varying your voice and minimize reading off your resume which can sound overly monotonous.



VIDEO INTERVIEW

Video interviews may be used similarly to phone screens to narrow down candidates, particularly if the employer's location is not nearby. Prepare for a video interview by finding a quiet, clean, well-lit area. Practice using the technology in advance. Ensure your camera and sound are working correctly. Look at the camera instead of the screen to mimic eye contact.



1-ON-1 INTERVIEW

1-on-1 interviews are most common. Ask for the interviewer's name and position prior to the interview. Search for the interviewer's LinkedIn to get a better idea of what the interviewer might be looking for.



GROUP INTERVIEW

Group interviews consist of one or two interviewers and a larger group of interviewees being interviewed at once. This type of interview could be chosen by the employer to save time and observe how the interviewees interact with each other. Participate and contribute to the discussion without monopolizing the entire conversation.



PANEL INTERVIEW

Panel interviews consist of multiple interviewers and one interviewee: you. Ask for the interviewers' names and positions prior to the interview. Greet and shake the hands of all panel members when you enter the room. When responding to questions, start your eye contact with the person who asked the question, then rotate eye contact and conclude your answer with eye contact back on the panel member who asked the question.

Common Interview Questions

Write down your responses to the top 10 most commonly asked interview questions.

1. [Tell me about yourself.](#)

Tip: You have a short timeframe to answer this question, so don't just repeat the information on your resume. Instead, focus on your education/degree, key skills and how your education and experience relate to the qualifications for the job.

2. [Why do you want to work here?](#)

Tip: The interviewer wants to see that you studied the job posting and researched the company, and are genuinely enthusiastic about the position. Focus on the education and skills you will bring to the company more than what the company will do for you.

3. [Why should we hire you?](#)

Tip: This is an opportunity to highlight your key strengths and describe your most memorable selling points for the job. One approach is to mention any unique combination of skills and experience that you have that can make you stand out from the other candidates.

4. [What is your greatest strength?](#)

Tip: To prepare your answer, write down a list of your top strengths and decide which 3 are most relevant for the position. Avoid choosing generic strengths that anyone can claim, like you're a "hard worker" or "people person." Be specific and prepare an example to demonstrate each strength.

5. [What is your greatest weakness?](#)

Tip: Choose a weakness that is one of the job requirements that you either haven't done before, or have limited knowledge of, and explain how you are working to improve that knowledge or skill. This allows you to show that you are motivated to learn and contribute to the company, and you can answer this question in a positive way.

Common Interview Questions

6. [What accomplishment are you most proud of and why?](#)

Tip: Review your resume and use an accomplishment that is relevant to the job. Expand on it and tell a story using the STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result) method (for more help, see the [Resume Guide](#)).

7. [Where do you see yourself in 5 years?](#)

Tip: Think about where this position could realistically take you and how that aligns with some of your broader professional goals. Look at the company's team organization and think about how you would like to grow within the company.

8. [Tell me about a time when you faced a challenge and overcame it.](#)

Tip: Look at your college projects or jobs, think about a challenging project or situation you encountered, and the steps you took to address and resolve it, either by yourself or with a team.

9. [Tell me about a time when you had to resolve a conflict with a coworker or classmate.](#)

Tip: Choose a situation in which you found a way to maintain a positive professional relationship. Ideally, this situation allowed you to demonstrate your professionalism, team skills, people skills, and calm under pressure.

10. [Do you have any questions for me?](#)

Tip: Ask questions that would help you gain insight for future interviews, such as: What are the key skills and qualities you are seeking in a candidate? What do you see as some of the challenges of this position? What do you want the new person to achieve the first three months on the job? What is the next step in your hiring process?

Behavioral Questions

Behavioral interview questions focus on how you handled various situations in the past. They typically start with “Tell me about a time when” or “Give me an example.” When you hear these words, think about your answer in the STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result) format (for more help, see the [Resume Guide](#)).

Examples:

- Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a difficult customer or co-worker. How did you handle the situation?
- Give an example of a time when you had to be relatively quick making a decision. What was the decision and what was your thought process behind your choice?
- Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a high-pressure situation. How did you cope with the stress?
- Give me an example of a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.
- Tell me about a time when you had to lead a project or team. What did you learn from that experience?
- Tell me about a time when your team wasn’t pulling their weight in a project. How did you handle it?

Situational Questions

Situational questions are theoretical questions meant to assess your critical thinking skills and gain information about how you make decisions and think through difficult situations.

Examples:

- You are given several tasks with competing deadlines. How would you prioritize them?
- You are working with a client who is making unreasonable demands. How do you respond to them?
- You disagree with your boss on how to proceed on a project. How would you handle the situation?
- You are given some constructive criticism from your boss that you disagree with. How would you address the situation?

Difficult Questions

Difficult questions gauge how you respond to situations when you are caught off guard and to assess your critical thinking skills, self-awareness and growth mindset. Don’t be afraid to ask for a minute to think before answering. For riddles such as “How many gas stations are there in the U.S.?” process your answer out loud. The interviewer is not looking for the correct answer, but rather for your critical thinking and problem solving process.

Examples:

- Tell me about a mistake that you made. Looking back what would you have done differently?
- What are three things that you think you need to work on?
- Describe your worst boss.
- What is one thing that you would change about your last job and why?
- How many times does a clock’s hands overlap?
- If you had one superpower, what would it be and why?
- If you could have coffee with anyone in history, who would it be and why?

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Illegal/Improper Questions

There are certain questions that are illegal or improper for interviewers to ask because they can be used to discriminate candidates based on protected classes (race, color, religion, sex, handicap, familial status, national origin). Salary and criminal history inquiries are banned in the state of California, including job applications. For more detailed information on these new employment laws, read: [5 Key California Handbook Updates for 2018](#). When facing an illegal/improper question, determine why the interviewer is asking that question, avoid directly answering the question, and turn the conversation to your strengths.

Examples:

- Are you married or single?
- Do you plan to have children in the next year?
- Do you have a disability?
- What's your race?

Questions to Ask the Interviewer

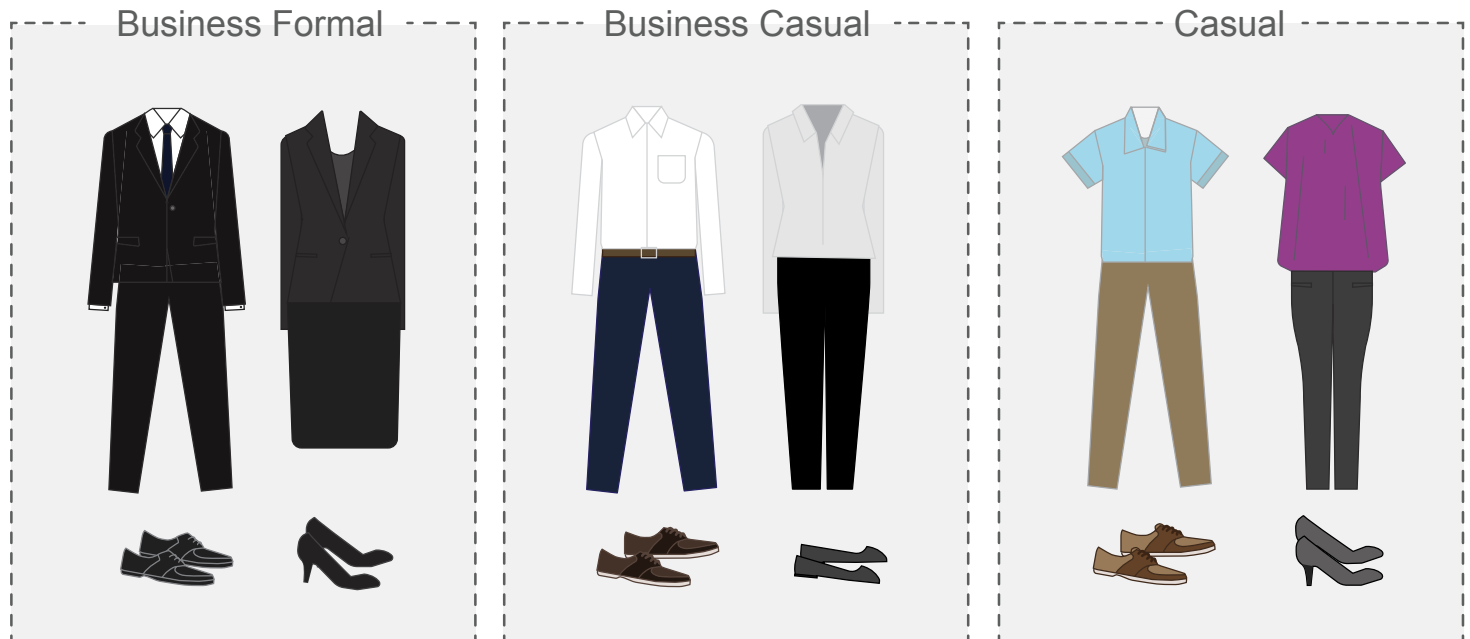
At the end of every interview, your interviewer will most likely ask if you have any questions that they can answer. It is always a good idea to have some questions prepared to demonstrate your interest in the position.

Examples:

- What type of professional development opportunities do you offer your employees?
- Could you tell me about the training and supervision I will receive during my first year?
- What potential growth opportunities are available within your company?
- Can you describe some of the projects and assignments I will be assigned during my first year?
- What are some of the department/company's goals for the upcoming year?
- What are the biggest challenges that new hires face in their first year?

Interview Attire

When preparing for an interview, it is important to dress appropriately to give a good first impression. Do your research on the company and look for their Careers or Jobs page. Often it will have information on the company culture or photos of employees. It is always best to overdress rather than underdress, so dress a step above what employees would typically wear to a work day.



DO:

- Wear closed toe shoes that are polished and comfortable.
- Keep your accessories simple and minimal.
- Keep your hair clean and well groomed. Facial hair should be neat.
- Be aware of natural/disagreeable odors.
- Have your resume and application materials in a professional portfolio or folder.
- Put your phone on silent mode and out of sight.

DON'T:

- Wear anything too tight or sheer. Avoid wearing yoga pants or shorts.
- Wear flip flops or tennis shoes.
- Put on heavy makeup.
- Bring a bulky backpack.
- Look at, text, or answer phone calls before or during an interview.

Interview Etiquette

Your positive attitude plays a key role in the interview process and sets the stage for your success. You can have a great resume, college degree and required skills for the job, but employers are also evaluating how well you fit into the work environment and work with others. Learn how to project polite and professional appeal.

Introductions

- Be friendly to all employees from the moment you enter the building - this is your chance to make a great first impression!
- Make sure to look people in the eyes and smile in order to seem confident and approachable.
- Give a firm (but not too firm) handshake.

Discussions

- Try not to interrupt people in the middle of a story - this shows people you value their ideas and company.
- Don't talk too loudly or for too long - these actions might make you seem self-centered.
- Stay away from negative conversation - this can build mistrust.
- If you struggle with coming up with conversation topics, equip yourself with conversation starters, for example, from watching the news, reading an interesting article, or attending a professional event.

Body Language/Non-Verbal Behavior

- Show that you are focused on the conversation by keeping eye contact, nodding, smiling and using other nonverbal positive gestures.

Thank You Notes

After an interview, job/internship fair, or employer event, always send a thank you email to the person you spoke to. Below is an example:

Dear Mr/Ms. Name,

Thank you very much for the interview yesterday. I wish to reaffirm my strong interest in the position with your organization. As we discussed, I feel that my recent Bachelor's degree in Communications, my semester projects, and volunteer experience have provided me with an understanding of business operations which will prove to be an asset to your organization. I have always been considered a dedicated student, hard worker, and dependable team member, and I am confident that I can make a valuable contribution to your organization. Thank you again for so graciously sharing your time and offering career advice. I also enjoyed discussing our shared interest in the local environment and community service. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Im A Spartan

Negotiating an Offer

Congratulations! Your hard work has landed you an internship or job offer! Now you get to choose whether or not to accept the offer and if you should negotiate. Compensation is only one factor in an ideal job offer, though it is often considered the most important. To determine the range of compensation for similar roles, check sites like the [SJSU Career Outcomes Survey](#), [NACE Salary Calculator](#), [Payscale](#), and [Glassdoor](#) to determine the range of compensation for similar roles. Then consider other factors such as:

- **Benefits:** Does the employer offer medical, dental, and vision? If it does, how much does the employer cover? What options does the employer offer for retirement?
- **Vacation/Sick Time:** How much vacation and sick time will you earn?
- **Location:** How long is the commute? Is there public transit available if needed?
- **Work/Life Balance:** What is the expected work schedule? Does the employer offer telecommuting or flexible work schedules? Will you be an exempt (salaried) or non-exempt (hourly) employee?
- **Professional Development:** Does the employer support professional development opportunities (i.e. conferences, trainings) or provide financial aid for continuing education?
- **Company Culture:** What is the work environment like? If you conducted salary research and found that the offer is fair, you may decide to accept it. In other instances based on your research, you might decide to negotiate salary and benefits.

Under 2018 California Employment Laws, employers will no longer be able to ask candidates about their salary history. Employers will also have to provide the pay scale for a position upon a job applicant's request. See <https://www.shrm.org> for updated information on hiring regulations in the state you plan to work in.

Below are some negotiation tips on how to approach the subject with the employer.

- **Be Reasonable:** Knowing what your employer typically pays, as well as what corporate competitors typically pay, will help you appear informed, educated and ready for discussion.
- **Be Gracious:** If the offer you are given does not fit your desired income, don't panic! Keep your demeanor neutral and express gratitude for the offer before jumping into the negotiation. Express confidence in your ability to succeed in the job and provide reasons to support your request, such as relevant experience, special skills, high GPA or current competing job offers.
- **Be Creative:** Examine the compensation packet carefully and don't hesitate to ask the HR representative questions about employee benefits such as health insurance, employee wellness programs, vacation and sick leave.

If it becomes clear that the salary is fixed, be respectful and ask if it would be possible to establish a 90-day evaluation period to re-visit your salary if you meet (better yet exceed) your goals.

Negotiating an Offer (cont'd)

Sample Negotiation Discussions

What do you say if...	
The pay is less than you had hoped for	“Thank you very much for the offer! I am really excited about the company and the role we have discussed. I have no doubt I will be a great addition to your team. However, based on my research and my experience and skill set, would you consider a salary more in the range of \$\$ to \$\$? Is there any flexibility on your offer?”
You have a competing offer with a higher salary	“Thank you very much for the offer! I am really excited about the company and the role we have discussed. However, as you know, I have been actively interviewing and I do have another potential offer. If you’re able to extend the offer to \$\$, I’d be eager to accept.” Tip: Be prepared to share how you have exceeded expectations in the past. Have an arsenal of stories prepared that show how you have come up to speed quickly, exceeded the expectation of your professors and internship supervisors or came up with a creative idea that drove success in prior roles.
The salary is fixed but you would like to negotiate benefits	“Thank you so much for the offer! I am really excited about the company and the role we have discussed. The salary looks great but I’d like to ask a couple questions about the benefits. The offer said I’d be eligible for 2 weeks paid vacation, but I would like to request 3. How do you feel about that?”
If there is no room for salary negotiation	If the same salary is offered after you negotiate the original offer, the salary is probably fixed.

After Accepting an Offer

Once you accept a job/internship offer, we recommend that you stop applying or interviewing for other roles. The acceptance of a job offer means that you have officially committed to work for a specific organization. Review of our [student rights and services guidelines](#) for more information. If there are circumstances in which you are considering another offer, please [schedule an appointment](#) with your career counselor to talk through your specific situation and best options to move forward with minimal negative impact to the employer you are working with.

Keep in mind the following considerations, tips, and sample language if you decide to move forward with withdrawing an accepted offer.

What does it mean to renege an offer?

- The act of reneging an offer in the job search process happens when a candidate accepts a job or internship offer (verbally or in writing) and then rescinds that offer (before starting or soon after starting).
- California is an “at will” state meaning that the employer or the employee can legally terminate the employment relationship at any time, with or without cause.
- Keep in mind that there are short and long term consequences that need to be considered prior to reneging an offer.

Why does it happen?

- The candidate doesn't stop interviewing and applying for jobs, even after accepting an offer
- The candidate receives a better offer from a competing organization
- Emergency circumstances occur such as a personal illness or needing to care for an ill family member
- An unexpected move

Things to consider before you renege an offer:

- It can take a lot of time and resources for a recruiter to interview multiple candidates and decide who they will make the offer to. Once a hire is made, other candidates are turned down and recruiting stops.
- When a candidate reneges, the recruiter has to start the hiring process all over again which also leads to the position not being filled for a longer period of time.
- When students renege an offer, it reflects badly on the university and the recruiter may decide to stop recruiting going forward, which affects the whole campus.
- Even in a large metropolitan area, like Silicon Valley, it is not uncommon for professionals in similar industries to be connected. You don't want to create a negative reputation for yourself or SJSU as “flakey” or unreliable.

Before you renege an offer, make sure you:

- Consult with a [career counselor](#) to discuss the situation and how to approach your communication with the employer.
- Speak with the hiring manager first to share that you have received a competing offer from another organization and allow your current employer the chance to counteroffer.

After Accepting an Offer (cont'd)

- Choose the right form of communication. Reneging an offer in-person or over the phone is the preferred delivery method if possible.
- Follow up the conversation with a formal renege letter that confirms your decision.

A professionally written renege letter contains the following:

- Gratitude and appreciation for the opportunity
- Your reasons explained briefly and professionally

Sample Renege Letter #1 (due to a family emergency):

Dear [Hiring Manager Name],

Thank you so much for offering me the position of [position title] at [organization's name]. It has been a pleasure speaking with you and learning more about your organization.

Unfortunately, after giving a great deal of thought to this career opportunity, I have decided that it is in my best interest, as well as the organization's, not to move forward with the offer at this time. An unforeseen health situation arose in my family which requires me to move to [location] as soon as possible. I understand that this will affect the department and I apologize for any resulting inconvenience to you and the team.

I continue to be impressed with [organization's name] role in the international marketplace and particularly with the great work you have done as manager of the organization's Midwest branch.

Wishing you all the best in your future endeavors, and I hope to see you at the upcoming [name of conference] in October.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

Sample Renege Letter #2 (due to accepting another offer):

Dear [Hiring Manager Name],

I am writing to thank you for your consideration to work for your organization. However, I must decline the offer due to receiving a counter offer from another organization. I appreciate the time and opportunity you offered and didn't make this decision lightly. After careful consideration, it became clear that the other position is more aligned with my overall career goals.

I understand that you may have already started making plans for me to join your team, and I sincerely apologize for any disruption this may cause. I wish you the best of luck in finding a great candidate.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]