INTERVIEWING TIPS
For most law students, legal interviews will arise in one of two contexts – interviews during structured programs like OCI, job fairs, etc., and interviews resulting from direct contact with employers as a result of job postings, personal contacts or mailed resumes.

**Structured Interview Programs**

In structured interview programs, the initial phase consists of *introductory or screening interviews*. These interviews are usually short – only 20-30 minutes. Employers at OCI, job fairs, and the like conduct dozens of interviews in one day, and then select a small number of candidates who will be invited back for more lengthy interviews. Screening interviews are usually conducted by one or two attorneys from each employer.

Do not make the mistake of thinking that a screening interview is just a formality because you meet the employer’s hiring criteria. Employers interview many candidates who meet their hiring criteria during this initial phase of interviewing, and must choose among them. Beyond their hiring criteria, employers are looking for candidates who impress them as professional, intelligent, enthusiastic, capable, hard working, easy to get along with, and interested in the employer.

Careful preparation for these types of interviews is essential because each candidate has such a short time in which to make a positive impression and distinguish himself or herself from other candidates. Before any screening interview, you should research the employer and identify areas of your background that make you a good fit for the position they are looking to fill. Make sure that you highlight these experiences in the screening interview.

**Call-Back Interviews**

The second phase of a structured interview program is the *call-back interview*. Students who are viewed as strong candidates are invited to continue the interview process. You will most likely either be contacted by the attorney who conducted the screening interview (who will likely refer you to someone else for scheduling), or be directly contacted by employer’s recruiting coordinator. If you are interested in a particular area of practice, ask the person coordinating the interviews to schedule you to meet members who specialize in that area.

When choosing a date for your call back, try to schedule it as early in the hiring season as possible. Offers are generally extended on a rolling basis, so the earlier in the process you schedule your callback, the more open positions there are likely to be when you interview. You will also want to schedule only one call-back interview per day. Each call back will require a lot of time, energy and alertness.

A call-back interview is usually a lengthy session which may last from several hours to a full day, and usually takes place at the employer’s office. Candidates frequently meet with several individuals in both formal and informal settings. It is not uncommon to be given a tour of the offices, meet with several partners and/or associates, and be taken to lunch. When you schedule your interview, ask how much time you should block off. You may also inquire whether you will receive a schedule for the interview ahead of time. Some employers will send you a schedule of who you will be meeting with – an invaluable resource for researching your interviewers ahead of time!

Even if you felt well prepared for the screening interview, you will want to continue preparing before the call-back interview. More in-depth research on the employer is a good idea. You will want to have a broad range of questions about the employer to ask during your call back, and research will help you ask informed questions. Not only will the answers to these questions help you determine if the employer is right for you, asking informed questions will demonstrate your genuine interest in the employer.
Direct Contact Interviews
Interviews resulting from direct contact with an employer are a more traditional context for legal interviews. In this scenario, the student directly contacts the employer in response to a job posting, as part of a mass mailing campaign, on the advice of a contact, etc.

If an employer likes the look of your resume and other materials, the employer will contact you directly to set up an interview. The format for the interview can vary considerably. The meeting may be brief or lengthy. The employer may request an initial phone interview, or brief meeting with just one attorney or recruiting professional before bringing you back to the office for a full interview. Other employers will set up an interview similar to a call back interview described above – a lengthy interview in which you will meet with many different attorneys in formal interviews and possibly also at lunch. Since there is no formalized structure for this type of interview, it will depend largely on the personality and style of the employer. When you schedule the interview, be sure to ask how much time you should block off. Then be prepared for anything!

**PREPARATION IS THE KEY TO SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEWING**

Students who enjoy meeting new people, have stellar grades, or who have had successful interview experiences before beginning law school may view legal interviewing as no big deal. For shyer students, students with concerns about their law school grades, or those with little or no interview experience, legal interviews may seem like a daunting hurdle in the path to becoming a lawyer. Wherever you fall on that spectrum, there are a number of steps that **every student** should take to maximize the career opportunities that interviews represent. Careful preparation can set you up for a successful interview experience, no matter what background, prior interview experience or comfort level you start with.

**What exactly do we mean by preparation?**
Good interview preparation involves much more than polishing up your resume, pressing your best suit and getting a pep talk from your roommate. Preparing a resume and preparing to talk about your resume are two different things entirely. As you put together your resume, you craft concise descriptions of your education, employment, and other activities. Preparing to talk about your resume, on the other hand, means: 1) being thoroughly prepared to go into detail about every entry on your resume; and 2) thinking of concise and easy-to-tell stories about every entry on your resume that will emphasize your skills and experience for the legal position you are seeking.

And preparing for interviews means much more than preparing to talk about your resume. You will also need to be prepared to talk about topics that are not covered by your resume – your plans for the future, professional goals, etc. One of the most sensitive areas of interview preparation is thinking of creative ways to address any weaknesses in your resume or candidacy. And you will also need to research every employer you interview with, and come up with a host of appropriate questions to ask during the interview.

**Discussing Your Resume in Interviews**
You should be fully prepared to discuss any entry on your resume in detail. If you have listed “drafted discovery requests” as a task you undertook as a Law Clerk, you may be asked, “What kind of cases did you draft discovery for?” You will want to be prepared to answer intelligently – “I worked mostly on medical malpractice cases, so the interrogatories and document requests I drafted were largely about hospitals’ practices and procedures.” The last thing you want is to have to respond to this question with an “Ummmm” while you rack your brain for the details of cases for which you drafted discovery. Similarly, be prepared to briefly summarize the key legal issues involved in any pleadings, briefs, or judicial opinions you mention having drafted.

Being prepared to go into detail also means that you should go back and read any papers or publications you list on your resume, including your undergrad thesis. If your interviewer is knowledgeable in the areas in which
you have written or published, you want to be sure that you can hold your own on a topic you may not have thought about for years.

**INTERVIEWING FOR PUBLIC INTEREST, GOVERNMENT, OR JUDICIAL POSITIONS**

The preceding advice about preparation applies no matter what type of employer you are interviewing with. However, there are a few things you should keep in mind if you are interviewing with public interest organizations, government offices, or judges chambers.

**Public Interest**

Public interest employers are looking for passionate candidates – the more a candidate knows about the issue/population the organization serves, the better. When interviewing with a public service organization, it is important to show your interest in what they do specifically, not just a vague interest in public service. So, for example, if you are interviewing with a non-profit organization that serves abused women, when asked why you are interested in the position they have available, you will want to speak about your interest in working with abused women to ensure that they receive the fullest extent of the protections that the law can provide. This will be much more compelling than speaking in general terms about how you’ve “always been interested in public interest work” and “want to help others.”

You will also want to be familiar with the substantive legal issues regarding the area of law the organization specializes in. So, to continue with the example of the non-profit organization that serves abused women, you would want to familiarize yourself with the Violence Against Women Act, with the standards for temporary restraining orders and how they are obtained in court, with recent major decisions in spousal/partner abuse cases, etc. before your interview.

Public interest organizations are also very concerned about retention – be prepared for questions about your long-term plans, as well as your plans to handle law school debt on a low, public interest salary. You will also need to be ready to answer questions about how you will handle a difficult/heavy case load, how you will handle the stress of the job, and how much and what type of supervision you will need to work comfortably in the relevant area of law. These are all questions you should think about and prepare answers for in advance. Specifically, consider how you deal with stress, and what support system you have in place to deal with a job that may expose you to some upsetting, tragic, sad, etc. situations faced by your clients. Being able to speak confidently about your ability to handle these situations will speak well of your overall ability to handle the job without burning out.

**Government Positions**

It is difficult to give broadly applicable advice regarding government positions because the government includes such a broad range of legal positions – prosecutorial (e.g. State’s Attorney), defense (e.g. Public Defender), regulatory agencies (e.g. EPA), agencies with a constituent service mission (e.g. Health and Human Services) and more. Accordingly, the best preparation for an interview with a governmental employer is to talk to people who work or used to work in the department, office, or agency you are interviewing with. The more information you can gather about the structure, mission, and daily work of the governmental employer you are interviewing with before the interview, the better.

In general, when interviewing with governmental employers, you should be aware of current events and the current political climate. You will also want to be very mindful of the hierarchy to which the position you are interviewing for reports. If you are interviewing with prosecutorial or defense arms of the government, you will want to be able to discuss your clinic experience or any in-court experience you’ve gained in previous positions or intern/externships. For agency positions, you will want to be prepared to talk about administrative law as well as the area of law and type of work that that specific agency does.
Also keep in mind that, if you are interviewing with a governmental employer, the government is often bound by a certain amount of bureaucracy. This may mean that the interviewing process will move slower for a government employer than with other employers. You may also be told by a governmental office that they would love to hire you, but that they are waiting for budget approval for the position.

**Judges**

If you are interviewing with a judge, be aware that your research and writing skills will come under close scrutiny. Be prepared to discuss – in depth – your writing sample and any journal articles (published or unpublished) that you’ve written. Your grades in Civil Procedure and Evidence will also be very important – so be prepared to discuss them as well.

You will also want to have fully researched the judge you are interviewing with. You should be prepared to discuss the judge’s bio, the types of cases on the judge’s call, and recent opinions by the judge. With all that said, bear in mind that some or all of the interviewing may be done by the judge’s clerks rather than the judge him or herself. Personality and fit in the small team environment is very important. Whether the clerks feel like they can work with you can be as or more important than whether the judge likes you, so prepare questions for your interviews with the clerks as well as the judge. You also want to be sure to treat everyone in chambers – including administrative assistants, with respect and courtesy.

Finally, be mindful that most judges are only looking for one or two externs or clerks at a time, which means that as soon as the judge meets someone he or she likes, the position will be filled. With this in mind, when you are contacted about interviewing with a judge, make sure that you schedule the interview as soon as possible. If you have to wait even a few days and the judge interviews others in the meantime, you may get a call cancelling your interview because the position has already been filled.

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**ANSWERING COMMON INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

You will want to have answers to common interview questions planned in advance. Of course, you don’t want to answer questions in an interview as if you are reading from a script, but you do want to have thought of what you want to say ahead of time, and tried your responses out by speaking them aloud – either to yourself, to a friend, or in a mock interview.

Interviews often begin with the old softball, “So tell me about yourself.” Think carefully about how you want to answer this question – it can set the tone for the whole interview. A good answer is about a minute long, and includes both some personal information (especially information that ties you to the geographic location of the employer and/or their practice areas), and some information about your professional goals. For example:

“Well, I’m a transplant to Chicago, but I’m here for good. I was born and raised in Cincinnati, but I came to Chicago for undergrad, and worked as a consultant here for four years after undergrad in PriceWaterhouseCoopers’s tax group. During that time, I met my wife, who teaches 3rd grade at St. Athanasius, so we live in Evanston now. As you know, I’m a 2L at Loyola, and I’ve really been enjoying it, especially my tax classes. I’m really interested in building on the experience I gained at PriceWaterhouseCoopers as a tax attorney. That’s one of the reasons I’m so interested in XYZ firm – I’ve heard great things about your tax practice.”

Of course, your interview may not open with such a softball. Some interviewers believe in hitting you with a tough question first, to see how you react. Other interviewers may lead right off with, “What can I tell you about our organization?” For more on answering common interview questions, see our Interview Questions handout.
DEALING WITH WEAKNESSES

Grades
Grades inevitably are a topic of discussion at interviews. If your GPA does not appear on your resume, an employer is likely to assume that it is not high and ask about it. Do not be defensive and do not offer alibis or apologies. Family obligations, employment, or other commitments which took time from studying can be briefly explained. An illness during a semester or an examination period may account for a somewhat lower rank, but a large number of illnesses throughout law school will appear questionable. Be careful of the "I don’t do well in high-pressure situations, but really know a lot" type of answer. It sounds like an excuse and since the majority of legal positions require the ability to work well under pressure at least some of the time, you may find yourself convincing the employer not to consider you for the job. Remember that 90% of all attorneys were not in the top 10% of their class.

Turning Weaknesses Into Strengths
No one likes to talk about their weaknesses, but employers may persist in asking. The question may be direct, e.g., “What are your personal weaknesses?” or more subtle: “Your grades are a little low. What can you tell me about them?”

The key to discussing weaknesses lies in the approach you take. What seems to work best is an approach which (1) identifies the issue and (2) presents the solution. For example:

1. My natural tendency is to be somewhat disorganized. Law school has taught me that disorganization is my own worst enemy, and I don’t want to have to pay that price.
2. I’ve found that what works best for me is the use of my Franklin Planner. It forces me to create a detailed task list so that I can rest assured that nothing falls through the cracks.

1. No, I am not on law review.
2. However, you will note from my resume that I worked throughout law school not only to defray the costs of my education but also, and more importantly, to gain experience in a business environment. I think that the exposure that I gained by working will greatly benefit me when I begin my legal career.

Negative Questions
Be aware that an employer may ask you to describe what you liked or did not like about your last job, fellow workers, or supervisor. These questions should be answered carefully so as not to identify yourself as a "problem employee." Even if you had an absolutely miserable experience at your last place of employment, say something positive and do not go into detail about any specific dissatisfaction or negative experience you may have had. Such a response is a flag for the employer and may prompt follow-up questions which change the focus of the interview entirely. Your goal is to be positive and upbeat throughout the interview. Don't allow yourself to be dragged into negative discussions.

Asking Informed Questions
Do your homework for each interview. Read as much literature as you can find on the firm/corporation/organization. You should speak with anyone who may know something about the employer. You can often obtain literature or information directly from the prospective employer. Use Lexis, Westlaw, the PSLawNet public service database, and/or the Internet as well.

Try to learn about the person(s) who will interview you, particularly name and position or specialty. Employers that interview on campus are often able to provide the interviewers’ names to the Office of Career Services prior to the interview date. However, be aware that interviewers often change at the last minute.
OTHER INTERVIEW BASICS

Attire
Dress professionally and conservatively. Present a professional image by not carrying a backpack or oversized purse. Present yourself in the “uniform” that is appropriate for the organization. Even if everyday dress can be casual in the employer’s workplace, present yourself as you would appear when representing the organization in a courtroom or other formal situation.

What to bring to the Interview
Bring at least three copies of your resume, along with copies of your writing sample, transcript, and list of references. Do this even if you submitted the material in advance. You may meet new people who would be interested in seeing a copy or the interviewer may have forgotten to bring his/her copy.

Logistics
Confirm where the interview will be held. Some organizations have more than one location. Be generous in estimating the time you will need to arrive punctually. You should arrive at the location about ten minutes early. **Never be late!** Before you enter the offices, stop in a rest room to make one last inspection of your appearance. Be courteous to everyone, whether they are on the road, in the parking lot, on the street outside the building, or in the building itself. You never know who you will meet on your way to an interview, and any one of those people could be involved in making hiring decisions for the employer.

Non-Verbal Communication
Throughout the interview, the employer will be studying your non-verbal communication skills and listening carefully to your responses. A *firm handshake and direct eye contact* are two of the most important non-verbal messages you can send to the employer. They indicate that you are confident, energetic, and sincerely interested in the employer. They illustrate how you will present yourself as a lawyer.

Handling Inappropriate or Discriminatory Questions
Interviews are very difficult situations even without the added problem of discriminatory questions. The applicant is under stress, wants to make a good impression, and is probably both shocked and angered by the discriminatory question. Or, as sometimes happens, the applicant may not realize until after the interview is over that the question was probably illegal. Handling this kind of situation is very complex and difficult, aggravated by the fact that the interview situation demands an immediate response. What an individual does in such a situation depends on many things, including whether s/he still wants to be considered for the job, whether s/he immediately recognizes the question as inappropriate, and many other factors. Some will try to handle the situation so that prospects for being hired aren’t harmed; others will walk out of the interview; others will challenge the interviewer. The range of responses is enormous and the decision is yours.

If you are troubled by an interview experience, or you experience overt discrimination, please report it immediately to the Office of Career Services while the experience, feelings, and dialogue are still fresh in your mind. Make notes of the conversation as soon as you can after the interview.

DO’S AND DON’TS OF THE INTERVIEW

Do’s
- **Do** make an appointment with the CSO for a mock interview before any interview.
- **Do** pay attention to your scent. Women with powerful perfumes and men with intense colognes can destroy interviews. Moderation is recommended. You may not be personally aware of how strong your scent is.
- **Do** go to the bathroom before your interview. It is embarrassing to interrupt an interview to “go,” and you want to be as comfortable as possible during this “pressure cooker” happening.
• **Do** get a good night’s sleep before each day that you search for employment. If you are noticed to be yawning during the interview, it will cost you.

• **Do** look the interviewer in the eye. Recruiters place a lot of emphasis on eye contact.

• **Do** make sure you get the interviewer’s name right.

• **Do** have some money with you. You never know what might happen.

• **Do** let the interviewer decide when the interview is over.

• **Do** ask the interviewer or recruiting coordinator what their hiring timeline is so that you will know when you will hear from the employer again.

• **Do** your very best at every interview, even if you are not sure that a particular job, firm, or agency is right for you. You can’t turn down an offer until you receive one.

• **Do** ask for business cards of each person that you meet during the interview process. You may want to send a thank you letter following the interview.

• **Do** be positive in all your responses. If questions arise regarding experiences that were negative in some way, focus on the best aspects of those experiences, not the worst. If a prior work or academic experience was less than stellar, prepare in advance by sorting out anything useful you learned from the experience.

**Don’ts**

• **Don’t** be late. In fact, be 10-15 minutes early for any scheduled interview.

• **Don’t** wear your hat, coat, gloves, backpack, or rain gear into an interview. It gives the impression that you are anxious to leave. Carry them if not offered a place to put them.

• **Don’t** have anything in your mouth—no gum, no candies, no breath mints, no cigarettes.

• **Don’t** lean on or put your elbows on the interviewer’s desk. Sit erect. Don’t wear sunglasses into an interview, and if you don’t wear your eyeglasses all the time, don’t park them on top of you head.

• **Don’t** show your nervousness by drumming your fingers, swinging your foot, or cracking your knuckles. You should have no loose change in your pocket—most tend to jingle it when nervous.

• **Don’t** keep adjusting your clothes; nor should you “pick” imaginary lint off your clothing.

• **Don’t** fiddle with your hair.

• **Don’t** call the recruiter “sir” or “ma’am” too much. Respect is mandatory, but don’t go overboard.

• **Don’t** overuse the interviewer’s name.

• **Don’t** call the interviewer, secretary, or recruitment coordinator by his/her first name unless invited to do so.
• **Don’t** be a jokester. Wisecracks and laughter can come later. Be pleasant, but remember that the interviewing process is formal and serious.

• **Don’t** give one and two word answers. The recruiter is trying to get to know you. If you go into a shell, you probably won’t be hired.

• **Don’t** slip into a speech-making or preaching tone of voice.

• **Don’t** hog the conversation. Answer the questions thoroughly, but don’t drone on forever. Your answer should be between 20 and 120 seconds long.

• **Don’t** use profanity, even if the recruiter does.

• **Don’t** use a lot of slang.

• **Don’t** chatter while the interviewer is reviewing your resume.

• **Don’t** try to overpower the recruiter with bragging or overstatement.

• **Don’t** lie about anything. Sometimes candidates lie about their salary. Recruiters often ask for proof, such as a W-2 form.

• **Don’t** criticize your present employer.

• **Don’t** get angry or even irritated during the interview. You can be firm--not angry--if the questioning becomes improper or begins to slip into irrelevant areas.

• **Don’t** answer questions that you don’t want to answer because you consider them to be too personal--and explain your reasoning.

• **Don’t** ask “Will I get the job?” or “Can I have the job?” Those questions tend to box the recruiter in and s/he won’t like that. Rather say, “I hope you consider me as a candidate for this job” or “I’m really interested in this job.”

• **Don’t** talk about salary or benefits until later in the hiring process or until the recruiter mentions the subject.

• **Don’t** schedule anything after the interview. It will be very embarrassing to leave in the middle of an interview or before you have met all the key players.

• **Don’t** be irritated if there are a number of interruptions during an interview. Maintain your composure and be prepared to remind the interviewer where you were in the conversation if they ask.