



10 tips for fantastic interviews

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10 tips for fantastic interviews

Getting the interview is a small victory in itself, so take a second to enjoy it. Somebody read your application and thought: worth meeting.

Most candidates walk in having done almost nothing, hoping charm will carry them. It usually doesn't, which is good news for you, because it means preparation is a genuine unfair advantage that costs nothing but time.

Whether it's a fifteen-minute chat about a Saturday shift or a proper panel for a graduate scheme, here are 10 things that consistently work: 5 for before the day and 5 for the room.

1. Put the hours in before anyone's watching

There's a rough rule that holds up surprisingly well: the candidate who prepared most usually wins. Not the most qualified on paper, not the most naturally confident - the most prepared.

Serious candidates for serious roles put whole evenings into getting ready and it shows in everything from the calm in their voice to the sharpness of their answers.

Scale it to the job. A local café might only need an hour of proper thought while a graduate scheme deserves several sittings spread across a week.

2. Dig deeper than the careers page

Everyone skims the website on the bus there. Go further - the work does two jobs at once.

It gives you better material and it quietly signals commitment, because interviewers can always tell who bothered

Read social accounts to see what they're proud of and check recent news and reviews - including the grumpy ones, because a problem you could help fix, makes a brilliant talking point.

If it's a shop or café, walk in as a customer the week before and just watch how the place runs. If you know anyone who works there, buy them a coffee and ask what it's really like.

While you're at it, find out who'll be interviewing you if you can. A name on the invite email is enough to look someone up and understand what their job involves.

When you can talk about the place like you already half-belong there, most of the persuading is finished before you've answered a single question.

3. Get your stories straight

Most interview questions are really the same question wearing different outfits: give me an example. Tell me about a time you dealt with a difficult person. Tell me about a time you worked in a team. The trick is choosing your examples before you walk in rather than rummaging for them live under the lights.

Go through the job ad, pull out what they're asking for and match each requirement to a real moment from your life. School projects, sport, volunteering, looking after siblings - it all counts, exactly as it did on your CV.

Then shape every story the same way: what the situation was, what needed doing, what you actually did and how it turned out.

That's the STAR method careers advisers love and it works because it forces you to end on a result. Four or five solid stories, told with a bit of pride, will cover almost anything a panel throws at you.

4. Nail the first question

Nearly every interview opens the same way: why do you want this job? It sounds like small talk. It isn't. It's the question that quietly reveals whether you understand the role and whether you're there for a reason or just for a wage.

A good answer plaits three threads together. Why you'd be good at it - your skills matching what they actually need. Why it makes sense for you - the step it represents, even if that step is simply "my first proper job".

What genuinely draws you to the place - write it out, trim it to under a minute and know it well enough that it comes out sounding fresh. Get the opener right and the room relaxes.

5. Say it out loud before the day

Answers that sound great in your head have a habit of falling apart on the way out of your mouth. The fix is embarrassingly simple: rehearse out loud.

Rope in a parent or a mate to fire questions at you, or record yourself on your phone and play it back. Painful the first time, transformative by the third.

An AI chatbot makes a decent sparring partner too - paste in the job ad, ask it to grill you like a hiring manager would and answer in full sentences as if it's the real thing.

We covered that trick in our first-job guide and it applies double here.

The aim isn't a memorised script, because scripts shatter under follow-up questions. The aim is answers you've said often enough that the words find themselves.

That's the groundwork done. What follows is the part people actually lose sleep over - the room itself, the silences, the sweaty handshake. Here's how to handle it.

6. Take a card in with you

Nerves wipe memories. You can know your stories cold at breakfast and lose every one of them the moment someone says "so, tell us about yourself".

Give yourself a safety net: a small card or notebook page carrying a handful of trigger words - your key examples, your questions for them, the one point you refuse to leave without making.

Glancing at notes doesn't read as weakness. It reads as someone organised enough to have notes, which is precisely the impression you're trying to leave.

You may never look at the card at all. Most of the time, simply knowing it's there keeps the panic at arm's length.

7. Steady yourself at the door

The worst minutes of any interview are the ones just before it. Waiting rooms are purpose-built for spiralling. So take those minutes back. Find somewhere quiet - outside the building, a bathroom, anywhere - and breathe slowly for sixty seconds.

In through the nose, longer out through the mouth. It sounds like something off a wellness poster but the physiology is real: slow breathing tells your body the emergency it's bracing for isn't coming.

Then walk in and treat the first thirty seconds as a little job of their own. Smile, make eye contact with everyone in the room rather than just whoever spoke, use names if you catch them.

The interview lasts half an hour. The first impression takes about ten seconds. Make those ten warm.

8. Let the silence sit

When a question stumps you, the urge is to start talking immediately and hope a point turns up mid-sentence. Resist it. A few seconds of quiet while you think doesn't look blank; it looks considered. The pause always feels three times longer to you than it does to them.

If you need more room, buy it out loud: "good question - give me a second to think." Nobody has ever lost a job over that sentence. And if the perfect answer only arrives ten minutes later, you're allowed to circle back at the end: "earlier you asked about handling complaints - I'd like to add something." Panels rate that. It shows your brain kept working after the spotlight moved on.

9. Ask them something real

"Any questions for us?" is not politeness. It's the final scored section of the exam and "no, I think you've covered everything" is a wasted turn. Arrive with three or four questions written down, accepting that a couple may get answered along the way.

Make them questions you genuinely want answered. What does a good first month look like in this role? What separates the people who do well here from the ones who don't? How did you end up at the company yourself? Questions like these do double work: they get you useful information and they demonstrate the exact curiosity every employer claims to be looking for. It's the easiest tip on this list to execute and one of the most reliably impressive.

10. Remember you're deciding too

It's easy to walk in feeling like a contestant. You're not. You're one half of a negotiation, deciding whether these people deserve your Saturdays. That shift in mindset does more for your body language than any posture advice ever written.

So gather your own evidence while they gather theirs. How do they speak to each other? Did they respect your time or leave you waiting forty minutes without a word? Do their answers to your questions ring true? A place that treats candidates carelessly usually treats staff the same way. Wanting the job is fine. Wanting it at any cost is how people end up somewhere they dread every shift - and you're allowed to have standards, even at seventeen.

None of this needs natural charisma or the gift of the gab. Interviews reward the prepared far more than the polished and preparation is the one variable entirely in your hands. Every confident interviewer you'll ever sit across once sat exactly where you're sitting, rehearsing their own name in their head. Do the work, take the breath and go show them who they'd be lucky to get.