VIRTUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

Tips for Making the Best Impression
During Your Interview

VIRTUAL INTERVIEWS

Virtual interviews are becoming more and more common. Whether for an internship or a new position, companies are increasingly using the virtual interview as a screening tool or as a means to facilitate a hiring process when there are travel or other limitations. To be sure that you are as prepared as possible for all interview formats, we have developed this guide to assist you in the preparation of your environment for a virtual interview, as well as preparation of yourself.

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PREPARING YOUR ENVIRONMENT

All interviews are nerve-racking. While video interviews offer flexibility for candidates and companies, they also introduce some unique challenges. Interviewers often record and share online job interviews, which means any mishaps won't only be seen by the recruiter on the other end, but also by other team members who assist in the hiring process. The key is to have the equipment, your setting, and yourself prepared in advance so that you can feel confident during the interview.

Step 1: Setting the Stage

Location

First impressions are essential! It's important to pick a quiet place to interview without an elaborate backdrop or distractions so that you can be the focal point on the screen. Always set up in a spot where you can manage your environment and have access to a good internet connection.

Do Not Disturb

Make sure you're in an environment you can manage for the duration of the interview. Any background noise or movements will distract both the interviewer and you. Stop the laundry machine and dishwasher, and don't forget to silence any noisy reminders on your computer. Keep pets and roommates out of sight and hearing range, so no one interrupts the interview.

Background

Look for a simple, clean background. Too much on the walls and clutter behind you can be distracting. While you want the area to be simple and neutral, stark white walls can wash some people out and reflect light. It's nice to have something of interest behind you. Color on the walls, a picture, a plant, curtains, or a couple of books can add some visual interest without overwhelming the frame.

Test out different backgrounds with your computer's native camera application, Quicktime, or a video conference app like Zoom. You can use the the video settings tool to test out the camera to see what will work best for you. This will help to see how the natural lighting and different backgrounds and spaces will look in the frame. When in doubt, clean and clutter-free is your best option.

VIRTUAL BACKGROUNDS –
Sometimes you may have issues creating a setting and need to rely on a virtual background. Penn State and the School of Public Policy have some available for you to download. You can also find backgrounds online, or you can easily create a graphic using templates from providers like Canva.com. Using a virtual background comes with some challenges, but if you remember to follow a few guidelines, you'll look like a pro!

- Make sure your physical background is a high contrast, solid color, matte/non-reflective surface (think about the contrast and brightness of weather forecasters using a green screen).
- Keep your background close to you.
- Make sure your clothing contrasts to the physical and virtual backgrounds.
- Make sure your lighting is even across your shot. Avoid windows since sunlight can change with cloud cover.
- Use a high-resolution image with an aspect ratio of 16:9 (Zoom recommends a minimum 1280 x 720 pixels).
- If the virtual background includes text, be sure to disable the mirror option in your video settings.

Lighting

1. Sit facing your light source.

Whenever possible, sit facing the window, desk lamp, or another light source to ensure your face is well illuminated and visible. Sitting with your back in front of a window or bright light source can give you a harsh silhouette effect.

2. Make sure you have enough, but not too much light. If your window is too bright, move away from the window to avoid overexposure. If a light source like a lamp is too bright, move it away from you. If you see shadows on your face, you can use multiple light sources like lamps off to the side to fill in shadows and make the overall room lighting as even as possible. Best positions are ten o'clock and/or two o'clock in front of you. If you want to get fancy you can put a light slightly behind you at four o'clock.

3. Test your lighting. Use your computer's native camera app and/or your external web camera to test different lighting situations at the time of day the interview will take place. Keep in mind, weather and time of day will alter the lighting if your main light source is a window.

Step 2: Mechanics and Technology

Video

A sharp, clear, well-positioned image will help make you look professional and presentable. Should you purchase a webcam? Not necessarily. If you have a newer laptop, your laptop's native camera should work just as well as a webcam. If you're looking for an external webcam, many affordable ones will give you a great image. Read reviews and search for a webcam that will work best for your needs.

Do not use a tablet or phone camera if you can avoid it. If you must, make sure you have your phone or tablet stabilized on a stand or propped up on books so that you're not shaking and moving the camera.

FRAMING/DISTANCE/EYELINE —
When deciding where to place your camera, bear in mind that the camera lens should be looking slightly down toward you. Take a cue from social media selfies — looking down at the camera lens is not a flattering angle. Try and make sure the camera is positioned a little above your eye level. If you're using a laptop, you may need to put books or use a laptop stand to get the camera at your eye level.

Don't sit too close to the screen—you want your head and shoulders visible. Think about having your face and upper torso filling the center of the screen. Leave about 10–20 percent of the top screen empty in case you move during the interview.

Audio

Using headphones helps prevent echoes in a large room, and if your headphones have a microphone on them, that will make it easier to hear you. Avoid giant over-the-ear headphones or gaming headsets. These do not reflect the professional appearance you want to present. Test out headphones microphones with family and friends to find a system that works for you.

DIY a laptop stand to make sure your camera meets your eyeline.
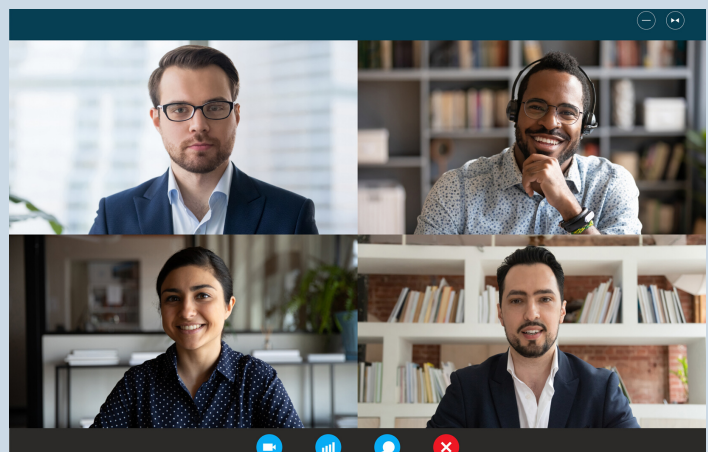
*Examples of good framing (as seen above).*

Software

The company will probably use an application you are familiar with, such as Skype, Google Hangouts, FaceTime, Zoom, or other video conferencing programs. If that's the case, then be sure to clean up the profile you're going to use or create a new professional account. Sometimes recruiters use video software with candidate tracking tools. The interviewer will provide connection details, but don't be afraid to ask for additional instructions before the interview.

Internet

Use a wired Ethernet connection instead of Wi-Fi. If you can't use a wired connection, make sure your laptop or computer is as close to the router as possible.

Before the interview, you need to close unnecessary programs and web pages. Also, ensure that you aren't downloading/uploading anything in the background. Test your internet speed with an app like Speedtest.
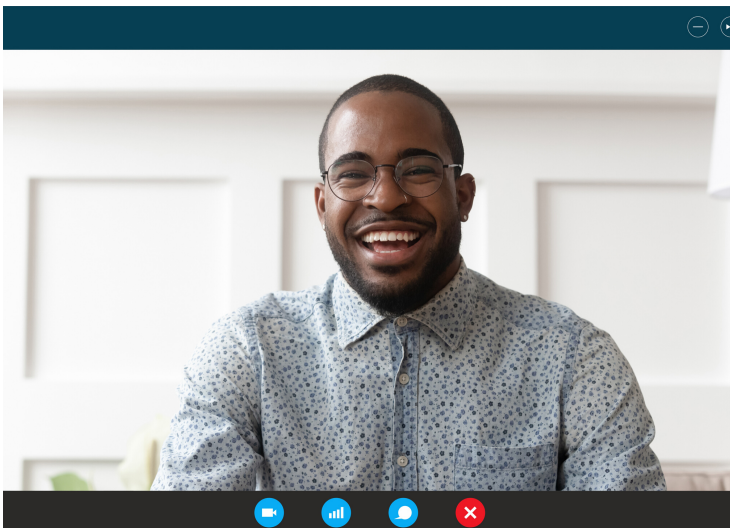
Testing and Troubleshooting

An hour before the interview, test out the following:

- Is your internet connection stable?
- Is your laptop plugged in and charged?
- Check your lighting. If your primary light source is a window, the weather may be different from the day you selected the location.
- Make sure your camera and microphone are working. Check your computer settings and make sure the correct devices are selected.
- Make a test call using the application that will you'll be using for the interview. Skype, Zoom, and BlueJeans have these features.
- Stop all downloads on all your devices. Turn off all your notifications. Ask anyone you live with to avoid any downloading, uploading, or streaming.
- Make sure your phone is set to silent, not vibrate.

Technical Difficulties?

Audio or video issues? Double-check the application and your computer system settings to make sure the microphone is not set to mute, your camera is enabled, and correctly selected. If you're using a webcam and you have video issues, use the computer's native camera as a backup. If you're using headphones with a microphone, switch to the computer's speakers and microphone. Just make sure you know how to quickly change your settings in both the operating system and the video conference application.

When using technology, there's always the possibility something could go wrong. If that happens, it's essential to have a backup plan already in place. Before the interview begins, ask the interviewer for a phone number where you can reach them if the video or audio stops working. This way, if you experience any technical problems that you cannot solve right away, you can call them to continue the interview by phone.

PUTTING YOUR VIDEO INTERVIEW SET TOGETHER

1. Choose a quiet spot with a good internet connection where you won't have any interruptions.
2. Choose a simple, uncluttered background.
3. Use natural light if possible. Have your main light source right in front or no more than 45 degrees in front of you. Be aware your computer screen may be a source of light so make you balance the screen's light with your room source.
4. Check for any glare in your glasses and from jewelry.
5. Place the camera at eye level. Put your laptop on a stand or books if you need extra height.
6. Frame your shot as closely to an in-person interview as you can. Don't sit too far away or too close to the screen.
7. You want your head and shoulders visible. You should be the most prominent subject filling the frame, not the background.
8. Leave 10–20 percent of the screen empty above your head.
9. Headphones with a microphone help prevent echoes.Test out the quality of your microphone before the interview.
10. Dress for an in-person interview from head to toe.

The backgrounds are simple, but effective; cameras look to be at eye level; consider in-ear headphones and microphones.

The bright light behind the subject causes overexposure. Good use of headphones and microphone.

The background has some nice color and interest with books. Framing is good.

Seating and wardrobe is too casual; the background with the plant looks nice. Great use of headphones and microphone.

The camera is at eye level. Background is interesting, not too cluttered.

The background has some nice color and interest. Make sure the camera is at eye level. Good use of headphones/microphone.

Step 3: Personal Preparation

A video interview is still an interview. Even though the camera may only see you from the shoulders up, don't skip on looking and acting professionally from head to toe.

Wardrobe

It's important to dress for a video interview the way you would for a face-to-face interview. If in doubt, go with business attire. With that said, you should make some minor adjustments when working with video.

Colors work a bit differently on camera than in real life. Stark white, red, and busy prints can be distracting or cause the camera to over-adjust, shifting focus away from you. Navy, light blue, gray, beige, tan, pink, and jewel tones are great options. The attention should be on you, not what you're wearing.

Keep accessories simple. Be mindful of any jewelry such as bracelets or earrings that jingle or reflect light as you move. Check the position of lights and the camera to see if you're getting a glare in your glasses. You may need to make adjustments to your location and the position of lights.

Appearance

You must look your best by being appropriately dressed and groomed. The interviewer will be looking for things like the neatness of your clothing and how you carry yourself during the video conference call.

Avoid heavy, dark makeup; video tends to create natural shadows. Light foundation and lipstick or gloss will help keep you from looking tired or washed out. Make sure you shave or trim your facial hair before your interview.

Do your hair before the interview starts. Don't let anyone catch you fixing your hair on camera.

Body Language and Etiquette

Like an in-person interview, body language is crucial in how you will be perceived. Video can amplify any nerves. The good news? You can practice and manage your surroundings to help boost confidence.

- SMILE - this makes you look confident and comfortable.
- Avoid nervous fidgeting with pens, glasses, change, etc. If you need to fidget with something, grab a stress ball and practice playing with it in such a way that it's always out of the frame.
- Be aware of your posture. Keep shoulders relaxed and both feet on the floor.
- Maintain eye contact with your interviewer. Look at the camera lens and not the person on screen. Placing the video window with the interview in it as close to the camera as possible will help you mimic eye contact with the interviewer. Even if someone else is talking, the camera is still on, and you may be showing in the shot. Continue to participate in the conversation by using body language to show your interest.
- Speak clearly and slowly. It's easy to get nervous and rush through your responses. Practice using the software and ask for feedback on your setup by rehearsing with family and friends.
- No Googling. In general, do not do anything that steers your attention from the interview. Have everything you need in front of you. In fact, some software applications allow the video conference host to track when you're utilizing other programs.
- Be Present – be an active listener (but avoid vocalizing i.e. hmmms and uh-ha's) and don't do anything you wouldn't do in an in-person meeting.

PREPARING YOURSELF

The more time that you take to prepare for the interview, the more likely you are to be relaxed. While the preparation may feel tedious, you will find that the time is well spent.

Step 1: Interview Preparation

Do Your Homework

It is crucial that you research the company with whom you will be interviewing. Know key company facts. Understand their mission and vision. Be well-versed in the expectations of the position. Be aware of issues facing them or their segment of public policy. Scan for news articles that may impact their organization or constituents.

As you learn more about the organization, think about how your background and skills might fit what the organization needs. Think about how you might share your skills and experiences to benefit the organization.

It's always important to be able to share examples of how you have used your skills to solve problems, introduce new ideas, or to improve something about an organization. Identify those potential areas as you do your research.

Know Your Material

While an interviewer does have your résumé and your application, it's important to remember that you are most likely not the only candidate for the job. If the interviewer asks, "tell me about yourself," being able to highlight your experience and skills in a conversational way is very important.

It is highly probable that the interviewer will ask you questions about responses on your application or in your cover letter. Be familiar with your answers and be able to respond quickly and with the command of the information.

Research
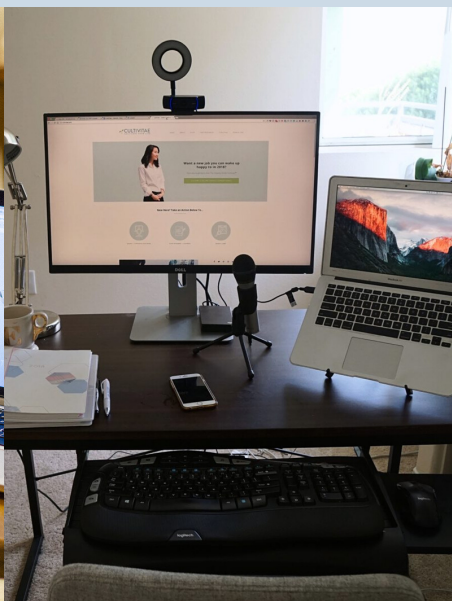
Test out your setup and equipment

Practice with family and friends

Step 2: Interview Practice

Questions to Anticipate

According to Penn State Career Services (2020), there are three types of questions you might anticipate:

TRADITIONAL

These questions help employers get to know what makes you unique. The interviewer is listening to how your responses align with the needs of the position as well as their goals and values.

Examples of traditional questions include:

- Tell me more about yourself.
- Why are you interested in our organization?
- Why this position?
- What do you do best?
- What would you like to do better?
- Where do you see yourself in five years? How can this position help you to get there?
- Why are you the best candidate for the job?

BEHAVIORAL

The SBAR framework, developed by the U.S. Navy, can help you to think through past experiences in an organized way.

- Situation—Describe the situation. What happened to create an issue?
- Background—What may have contributed to the situation?
- Assessment—What investigation did you do? What caused the situation?
- Recommendations—What actions would you take to address and resolve the situation?

Examples of behavioral questions include:

- Give an example of a time when you had to resolve a conflict.
- Share a time when you dealt with what you felt to be unreasonable expectations.
- Tell me about a time when you had to address an underperforming team member.
- Has there ever been a time when you had an ethical dilemma about a task you were asked to complete? How did you handle the situation?

CASE

The interviewer might give you a case example to address. For instance, they might describe a situation that a company such as theirs might confront and ask you to explain how you would approach and or handle the situation.

Like behavioral interviewing, it's important to listen carefully and frame the circumstances of the case. Consider using SBAR to guide your thinking. According to Penn State Career Services (2020), you might consider the following approach:

- Listen carefully to the material the interviewer is presenting. Take notes if you'd like, and be sure to ask questions if you need additional details.
- Take your time. If you need a minute to collect your thoughts, say so.
- Offer a general statement or framework at the beginning to serve as an outline.
- Focus on key, broad issues first.
- Orient your answer toward action. Suggest specific steps that can be taken rather than just theory.
- Be conscious of resources. If it relates to the problem, ask the interviewer about the budget, capital, and other resources that the client can allocate to the situation.

Effective Response Preparation

Consider the questions listed and draft responses. Practice those responses with your adviser and friends until you feel comfortable that your answers are genuine.

Be prepared to ask questions during the interview. Use your homework on the company to draft several questions to explore at the appropriate times during the interview. Some sample questions include:

- What are the biggest challenges your company faces?

- How would you describe your organizational culture?
- What types of positions have interns secured after an internship or job with you?
- What do you like most about working for this organization?
- What are the biggest priorities for an intern or employee at your organization?

Step 3: Post-Interview Follow-Up

At the conclusion of the interview, always thank the interviewer for their time and insights. Confirm any follow-up that you have agreed to do post-interview. Sending a thank you note is always a nice touch. Handwritten notes in an email world are a pleasant surprise. If a follow-up timeframe is not offered by the interviewer, it is fair to inquire when you might expect to hear about the next steps in the process.

Additional Tips

It's essential to do a technology check on the platform you are using to interview. Test the sound and connection. Be sure that you know how to operate the equipment and are comfortable. Create a setting, as explained in **Preparing Your Environment**.

Your interviewer will schedule the interview for a set timeframe. Do not panic if the duration of the interview is shorter or longer than originally planned. Too short does not necessarily mean that you did not do well. Some interviewers are listening for specific information and get to that information more quickly than others.

Preparation will calm you for the interview. However, be careful about being too relaxed. Always remain polite and appropriate for the situation.

Remember that you are representing the Penn State School of Public Policy. Be the intern or employee that everyone wants in their organization.

Resources

The Penn State Career Resource Center has some great resources to support the services already provided by the School of Public Policy.

https://studentaffairs.psu.edu/career/resources/interviewing

Do your research, set up equipment and your space, and practice in advance of the interview.

Preparation will allow you to focus on your interview responses.