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**WINNING**  
interview  
answers  
for first-time  
job hunters



Denise Taylor

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Winning Interview  
Answers for  
First-time  
Job Hunters

**Denise Taylor**

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For Simon, provider of love, support and a clean house

For Tom and Nika at the start of their career journey

*Winning Interview Answers for First-time Job Hunters*

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# Introduction

I want to help you perform well at interview. Too many young people fail to do themselves justice – they don't 'sell' themselves at interview and answer questions in a general, rather than in a specific way. This results in the disappointment of a reject letter as the job they want goes to someone else.

I'm an experienced career coach and I work with a range of clients including younger people, helping them to perform well at interview and get the job they want.

When we first start looking for a job we need to put together a CV or complete an application form, both designed to let a future employer know a bit about us, what we have studied, our hobbies and interests and details on any work experience. We then send it to the company with a letter explaining why we are interested in a particular job. This can seem like a lot of work and we need to take quite a bit of time to make the layout look good and to make sure everything relevant is included.

So it's great news to get a letter or phone call saying that we have reached the interview stage, but it can also be a bit scary, wondering what is going to happen and looking for ways to keep nerves in check.

This book is part of the Winning Series alongside *Winning CVs for First-time Job Hunters*, *Winning Covering Letters for First-time Job Hunters* and *Winning Interviews for First-time Job Hunters*. The first step to getting a job is a great CV sent with a targeted covering letter; once you get short-listed you need to understand the interview process. This book focuses almost exclusively on how to answer questions. You'll get to understand the questions you could be asked and how to respond, with lots of example answers included.

I have written this book to be practical. We'll start with a reminder of the important aspects of interviews and then go into the detail of specific types of

interview questions you will be asked, and how to reply, followed by the questions you can ask. Finally you will learn the ways you can enhance your chance of success after the interview via sending a follow up letter, seeking feedback and also how to review your performance so you can learn for next time.

The transition from education to work is one of the biggest life changes you will face. This book will help you to get your first job and start you on your way to a career that is just right for you.

Good luck

Denise Taylor  
[www.amazingpeople.co.uk](http://www.amazingpeople.co.uk)

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# 1

## I have an interview – what will happen?

Well done! Many people apply for jobs and it is an achievement to be short-listed for interview. You have done well to get this far – you must have submitted a good application and the company are impressed enough to invite you to interview. You may think you are an excellent match for the job, so why would you not get the job offer; but no selection is a formality and no matter what people tell you, you must be well prepared. This is where this book will help.

This chapter will ensure you feel comfortable with the structure of an interview. By the end of it you will be clear on:

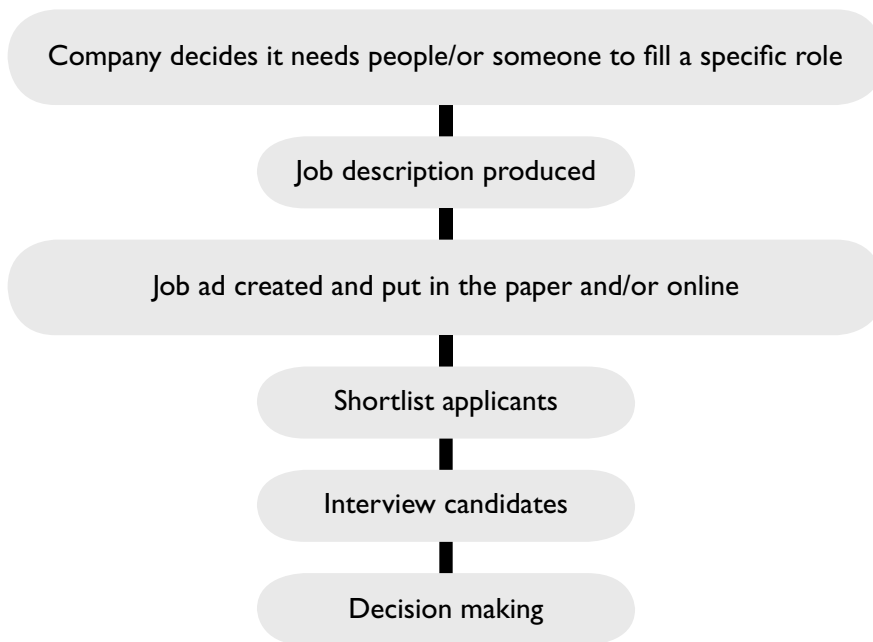
- why companies use interviews
- how you can prepare
- the people you will meet
- when you arrive
- first impressions.

### **Why companies use interviews**

Companies use interviews as a means of selecting the best person to do the job. They have details on you from your application form or CV and cover letter; but will you live up to what you have included there? Many people get help with applying for a job so the company want to see how well you can answer questions, and some of these will mean you need to think on your feet; that is why you must do careful preparation.



### The recruitment process



- 1** The company has **identified the need for a new member of staff** – either because they have a vacancy, somebody has left or got promoted or because there is so much work that they need more staff.
- 2** The company produces a **job description**, which tells people what they need to do in the job, and also a person specification, which outlines the essential and desirable characteristics of the person. This information is used to **create a job ad** and usually sent out to help people to apply for the job. Please be aware that the bigger the company the more detailed approach is usually taken, often a small independent shop for example will not have much written down.
- 3** The company will then **short-list** on the basis of people's application. Some companies will decide to interview perhaps four people for one job, other companies may have so many good people apply that it is difficult to make a decision and so may opt for a preliminary stage before the face to face interviews. This could be done by sending you a list of questions to answer by email (Chapter 5 on competency based questions will be very useful preparation for you) or

by conducting phone interviews. All of the information throughout this book will help with the phone interview; but the most important thing to remember is that they can't see you, so you must sound enthusiastic in the replies that you give.

- 4 Once they have decided who to bring along to the **interview** they will contact candidates by letter, email or even a phone call. Do make sure to get details on where the interview will take place and make sure you know where you are going. It is often worth doing a trial run so you don't get lost and end up late. Make sure you know where to park if you drive and have change available in case you need to pay for car parking.
- 5 Finally the company decides who gets the **job offer**.

### BE WELL PREPARED

Do **read the letter carefully** as there will be plenty of useful information. You may be told the name of the person who will be interviewing you so you can look them up – both on the company web site and also via an Internet search such as Google. You may find out something very useful about them (such as they won employee of the month, or have spoken at a conference) and you can possibly make a reference to this at the interview – perhaps asking them about the conference or praising them on winning their award.

**The letter may also tell you more about what will happen.** It could be an interview with more than one person – and a panel interview could be with three or more people. Please don't be alarmed by this. The key point to remember is to always look at the person who asks you the question when you reply, and then look around at the other people in the room with a slow sweep.

## How you can prepare

Preparation includes mental and physical preparation and also preparing answers to probable questions.

## 1 Mental preparation

Mental preparation concerns the inner talk we all have – we can say positive and encouraging things that support our belief that we can do well, but what many people do is to have a less than positive self talk, with a conversation running through their head that reminds them of all the reasons why they won't be successful – things like 'why would I get the job', 'I'm really bad at interviews', 'I haven't got any relevant work experience, they must have made a mistake in short-listing me.'

**TIP**

The company will not have made a mistake! You have been short-listed because they know that you match up on paper with what they are looking for, and now they want to meet with you.

So if you find these negative thoughts going through your head there are ways to deal with them. One way is to visualise a large red stop sign, and when you think of a reason why you won't get the job say **Stop** and change your focus to something else. Another technique is to challenge these thoughts by saying something different. So when the voice in your head says

'I haven't got any relevant work experience; they must have made a mistake in short-listing me.'

you can challenge this statement by saying something like:

'The company is impressed by my education and my hobbies and interests and I will discuss these with enthusiasm when we meet.'

And if you hear the voice in your head say:

'Why would I get the job?'

you can challenge this by saying

'Who am I not to get the job?! I've got plenty of interesting things to talk to the interviewer about and I completed a very good application form.'

**TIP**

Believe in yourself – whether you think you can or you can't you are right!

## 2 Physical preparation

Physical preparation includes things such as:

- how you talk
- voice tone
- your posture and
- remembering to breathe!

### How you talk

We all talk but have you ever listened to yourself, or got some accurate feedback from other people? In an interview situation which is seen as quite stressful our voice may often change from what it is usually like, so instead of talking in a normal tone we often find ourselves talking more quietly and sometimes squeaks come out so we sound more like a mouse than a confident young person. This is when practicing answers to questions can help.

**TIP**

The more you practise answering interview questions out loud the more your voice is likely to sound confident.

There is also a tendency for people to rush through their answer – talking so fast that the interviewer can't grasp what they have to say, so take your time and speak more slowly, putting emphasis on certain words.

We can often have a tendency to say 'umm's', and 'you know's' and other such phrases – we are often not aware of doing these and sometimes when my husband listens to me on the phone he points out that I add 'err's' into my sentences when I'm thinking, so be conscious of it and try to cut out some of these.

**Voice tone**

It really is important to convey enthusiasm in your voice so don't just say that 'my interests include playing football', but instead say something like 'I **love** playing football' with a more enthusiastic rather than a flat tone.

However well thought through your answers to questions, most interviewers will make a final decision based on your enthusiasm and keenness to do the job. Of course you need to have answered the questions well, but when a decision is between two candidates, it is the one who has demonstrated enthusiasm and keenness that is most likely to get the job. This is not just enthusiasm without any substance, it is enthusiasm based on knowing who you are and why you want the job.

**Posture**

Posture is about how you stand and sit! You know how your parents have probably moaned at you to stand up straight and not to slouch; well an interviewer expects the same. They expect people to walk confidently into the room – not to walk in with an apologetic air. By the time you have finished working through this book you will be feeling confident and this should show in how you enter a room. Posture is also concerned with how you sit.

**ACTION**

Sit down on a straight chair as if you are in an interview and get some feedback from others on how you look to them.

It's tempting to slouch, and also to sit with your limbs wide spread. The interview is not the time for you to sit with your legs as far apart as possible; no matter how comfortable this makes you feel. You really need to sit with your legs close together, and your arms neatly near to your body, not floundering around.

**Breathing**

Finally, breathing; of course we all breathe, but have you ever thought about your breathing? When we are nervous we tend to breathe shallower, so we

take in air but all the breathing is done at the top of our chest, not deep in our diaphragm. When we notice this happening we need to breathe slowly and deeply, not only does it get more oxygen through to our brain but it will also mean that we feel less nervous. I always recommend to my clients that they focus on their breathing and consciously count in for 8, hold for 4 and out for 16 as they walk to the interview and at any other time that they feel nervous. Why not try now – slowly breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Doing it a few times can really help.

### 3 Preparing answers to questions

I'm not going to go into a great deal of detail on this here, as this is the focus of the book. What is good to know is that by the time you have carefully read all subsequent chapters, including doing the exercises, you will be feeling confident on answering most of the questions that an interviewer could ask you. So many interview books just touch the surface of how to answer interview questions, but here you have seven chapters to guide you through this.

To get an invite to interview you will already have produced a great CV or application form. The preparation that you need to do is to both re-read what you have already written and to think of examples you can use to answer questions and to practise them.

Nika, who at 18 years old has already had a number of part-time jobs and now has her first full time job, gaining every job she has ever gone for, says that the best way to get a job is to:

- smile
- be confident
- be enthusiastic
- know why you want the job.

## The people you will meet

You will expect to meet the person who will interview you, but you will meet other people as well.

- **The receptionist or an administrator** who you will meet on arrival, check who you are there to see and take you to meet the interviewer.

- **One or more interviewers** who will ask you questions. These could be your potential line manager or the human resources manager.
- You may also meet **other people who you may be working** with.

You may find yourself facing more than one interview. There is sometimes an introductory first interview and then a much more detailed second interview with the best two or three candidates. The interviewers will vary from the highly trained who will ask well prepared and searching questions to those that are not prepared and could spend more time talking to you than listening and be unfocused in what they ask.

**TIP**

In some small companies it may not feel like an interview at all, just a chat to let them get a feel for if you would get on, so you need to expect the unexpected!

In some companies, with a close knit team you may get to meet everyone you will work with, although not all in the formal situation of the interview. When I used to manage a team we would invite short-listed candidates to meet two or three members of the team informally for a coffee to enable them to ask questions about what it was like working in our team. Before I made a final decision I would always talk with my team.

**TIP**

Some companies will ask the opinion of the people you meet, such as the receptionist. That's why you need to make a good impression with everyone you meet.

## When you arrive

You will want to be confident when you arrive for your interview, but most of us will also feel nervous. We're concerned to do our best and often aren't

really sure how the meeting will go. When we get nervous we will often breathe shallower and start to feel a bit agitated and perhaps get a knot in our stomach and even feel a bit sick.

So recognise that you might feel like this. It's a natural thing to feel and the other candidates probably feel the same. Remember to concentrate on your breathing to help you relax more.

Sometimes we feel nervous as we think we are going to be late, so make sure you have allowed plenty of time to get there. This will give you time to go to the toilet and you can wash your hands and check your hair is tidy and your tie, collar etc is straight.

### **POSITIVE SELF TALK**

As you get close to the building remind yourself how well prepared you are. You will have read this book which will help you. Remind yourself that you are going to be great in this job. If they don't think you can do the job you wouldn't have been short-listed to interview.

You are likely to need to speak to a receptionist at an office or to a member of staff in a shop, bar, nursery etc. You need to appear confident, polite and friendly.

**TIP**

**Walk into the building feeling friendly, and smile.**

You'll meet with someone who will ask you a question. Listen to what they say; they'll want to know how they can help you. You will reply with something like

'I'm here for an interview – my name is Tom Smith and I have an appointment with Mr Jones at 3pm.'



Say this in a clear and confident voice tone, and try not to mumble. This is certainly something you can practise in advance. Smile as you talk and act friendly. In some companies, people you meet will be asked for their informal views on you so give them lots of positive examples to refer to.

## **ACTION**

**Say out loud what you will say to the person you will meet when you arrive for your interview. Practise until it becomes easy.**

Say it out loud now, and say it a few times as you go for the interview, it will get your vocal chords warmed up and mean you don't get a dry mouth where no words come out as you try to answer a question.

You'll probably be asked to take a seat while you wait for the interview.

The interviewer will both collect you and take you to the interview room or perhaps their assistant will take you to the room. Make sure to be warm and friendly, say hello, and have a firm handshake if they offer their hand to you, but best not to put your hand out first. Sometimes an interview will involve more than one person either because there is someone there to listen in or because two (or more) people will be asking you questions. You don't always know in advance that there will be more than one person so don't let this put you off.

## **First impressions**

People do make instant impressions on others, and so the first few minutes of an interview are vital. You need to think about how you present yourself, so act in a confident, but not cocky manner.

## **TIP**

**Remember: You only have one chance to make a first impression so make it a good one.**

Many interviewers make up their minds about a candidate within seconds of meeting them. This is called the 'halo effect'. When we observe one good thing about someone, we assume all kinds of other good things about the person. It's not fair, but it's what people do.

For example, if you are well dressed, many interviewers will assume you are probably responsible in other ways, even if in truth, you are a bit scatty. This means that for everything you do right, many more good things are assumed!

Of course there is also the other side, which is called the 'horns effect'. If there is a poor first impression, you are late, mumble, or are dressed a bit scruffy then it will be very hard to correct this impression.

When you go into the interview room, wait to be asked to sit down, and think positive thoughts. If you think you will do well, you probably will, but if you think you are going to mess up the questions, then that's what will probably happen. The interview is your chance to show the interviewer that you are the person they are looking for.

Sit well back in your chair, in an upright but comfortable position. If you use your hands when talking be aware of it and don't overdo it. Make friendly eye contact with the person asking questions, but don't stare.

---

# 2

## What will I be asked?

This book is all about winning interview answers, and you will see in the next five chapters that we go into significant detail on the different types of questions you may be asked alongside some example answers. These are not model answers and there are plenty of other ways to respond, but sometimes people aren't sure what to say and reading through what other people have said can spur us on to think of an example of our own.

These answers have all been used by young people I have worked with. You will read quite a bit about Tom and Kate. These are the most recent younger clients I have coached into being successful at interview and both got the jobs they wanted.

There are many different types of interview questions that you might be asked, and different ways of asking them. By the end of this chapter you will be clear on:

- the order of questions
- the different types of questions
- the style of questions
- preparing yourself.

### TIP

You must not memorise other people's answers – your answers must be real to you, otherwise an interviewer will pick up on this and you won't get the job.

## The order of questions

There is a structure to the interview and the questions you will be asked.

- Introductory questions to put you at ease.
- Questions which relate to the job and any relevant work experience you may have.
- Questions about you as a person including hobbies and interests, strengths and weaknesses.
- Time at the end for you to ask questions.

In a 30 minute interview just a couple of minutes will be spent on introductory type questions and at most 5 minutes left for the end, so you will have around 25 minutes to answer the questions asked.



**Make good use of the time – prepare strong answers to probable questions**

## The different types of questions

Have you ever thought about how questions can be asked in different ways? Different styles of questions can encourage you to respond very succinctly if they just want a yes or no answer or in more detail when they want you to talk.

### Open questions

These are questions which cannot be answered with a yes or no answer, and are designed to get you to talk. The questions start with phrases such as:

- tell me about ...
- how do you feel about ...?
- describe how you ...
- what sort of things have you found useful in that situation?

### Probing questions

These are direct questions when the interviewer wants some specific information. They may also be used to get you to focus on a topic if you are talking too much. They are likely to be quite specific, and are similar to those listed here.

- What was your reason for ...?
- Who else was involved in that project?
- How did you react to ...?
- How did that affect the outcome of ...?

### Hypothetical questions

These questions try to place you in a 'What if' situation to see how you will respond. If you don't have experience of a work area you may be asked how you think you would deal with a particular situation. This includes questions such as:

- what would you do if an irate customer confronted you?
- tell me how you would set about organising ...

### Multiple questions

These questions can be confusing. Which bit do you tackle first? These may be the sign of a poorly trained interviewer, or of a memory test! Don't be fazed by it – and if you can't remember everything they asked, ask them to repeat the rest of the question. It could be a question such as:

- Can you tell me about your early school days, what you do outside work and which parts of the job you find the most frustrating?

### Leading questions

Occasionally you can be asked a question where it looks like the interviewer wants you to agree with them. Sometimes it can be really sneaky and they are seeing if you will stand up to them. You must decide for yourself whether you agree or disagree with something.

- I think ... What do you think?
- Isn't it quite dreadful, the way that ... nowadays?

- I suppose you feel that ... is acceptable?
- I wouldn't want to try ..., would you?
- You can work under pressure can't you?

### Closed questions

These questions are framed in such a way that theoretically you can answer with a yes or no. Unless it is very specific, such as 'Do you have GCSE in maths;' do go beyond the question asked to give them some more information. The questions will begin with phrases such as:

- I see you have ...
- did you like ...?
- did you feel that ...?
- have your frequent changes been due to ...?

### YES OR NO QUESTIONS

Unless you are being asked something very specific, if you are asked a question that could be answered with just one word, treat it as an open question and provide a lot more detail. Let's look at some questions which fall into this category.

#### **We want someone reliable, enthusiastic and hard working; do you tick all the boxes?**

You don't give a yes or no answer but you give an example of this. Perhaps you were reliable for your paper round, enthusiastic for your studies and willing to work hard. Make sure to provide some detail.

#### **Can you be flexible?**

Again it is not yes/no but you will include an example of when you have been flexible, such as: 'Yes, I am definitely flexible, for example ...'

#### **Do you handle conflict well?**

'Yes, I do for example ...'

**Do you handle pressure well?**

'Yes, I do for example ...'

**Do you always meet deadlines?**

'Most of the time. If I'm honest I did struggle when I first started studying for my A levels, but after getting a detention for handing in a piece of work late I knew I had to make sure to submit homework on time after that.'

## The style of questions

Questions can be asked in either a formal or informal way, so be ready for either.

The formal style will be with questions asked in a direct style, with the interviewer or interviewers sat behind a desk and you on a straight chair in front of the interviewer(s). Questions will have been prepared and asked of each candidate and your answers noted. You may find there is little encouraging eye contact from this sort of interviewer.

The more informal style will often have you sat on an easy chair and probably with your chair at right angles to one interviewer or around a coffee table when there is more than one person. Questions will be asked less formally, but will often be searching. This is how I interview and I find that the more relaxed I make the candidates I interview, the more open they are in their responses. I always want to bring out the best from a candidate but then make very objective decisions.

### IT MIGHT BE MORE THAN QUESTIONS

You may find that the interview is more than just an interview – it could be that you also have to take part in a group exercise or make a presentation, a task based exercise or perhaps they want to see how you are likely to do in the job by asking you to, for example, work on the shop floor for 30 minutes. We will cover this in Chapter 6 – Task based questions.

## Preparing yourself

The general areas you need to prepare is to be able to answer the three questions.

- 1 What do you know about the company?
- 2 Why do you want to work for us?
- 3 How do your education, skills and experience make you suitable for this job?

You can't afford to wing it, hoping that what you say will be good enough. Don't fall into the group of people who fail to prepare – if you want this job you must be as well prepared as you possibly can be.

You can anticipate many of the questions and this book will help you to prepare for them. Questions will relate to your application form and/or CV so make sure that you can remember what you have written and can think of examples.

**TIP**

When you do reply be sure not to waffle – if you don't know an answer say so.



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