

INTERVIEW SKILLS OVERVIEW

Interview Types. The structure and format of interviews often vary depending on the type of employer and the type of position (e.g. summer internship versus full-time, post-graduate position). Once you are invited to interview, it is acceptable to ask the employer about the nature and format of the interview.

Law firm interviews for summer associate and post-graduate entry level positions typically consist of a screening and callback.

- **Screening** – Screening interviews are generally brief, 20-30 minute interviews that allow the employer to get a better sense of your skills, experiences, and level of interest in the position. Screening interviews are usually held on or near campus, at an employer’s office, or over the phone.
- **Callback** – Callback interviews tend to be longer and you may meet with multiple attorneys in a series of back-to-back 20-30 minute-interviews, usually in the employer’s office. In addition to letting the employer learn more about your skills, experiences and level of interest, callback interviews provide an opportunity to assess how well your personality and demeanor “fit” with the others in the office and with the organizational culture and values. Sometimes these interviews include lunch, coffee, or some other type of social interaction.

Employers interviewing students for public sector internship often conduct only one round of interviews, and they will be interested in assessing whether you have a demonstrated commitment to the organization’s mission and to public service, more generally. Since you may have only one interview, be aware that it may be your only chance to meet with the employer before they decide whether to hire you.

In the case of public sector interviews for permanent employment, organizations typically conduct both screening and callback interviews. Public defender and prosecutor interviews are an exception, as most entail three rounds of interviews (screening, panel, and meeting with the chief defender/prosecutor). Counselors can help tailor your preparation to the type of employer with which you’re interviewing.

Interview Preparation. Preparation is the key to a successful interview. Good preparation involves conducting research on the employer and reflecting on your own goals, strengths, and experiences. Your research will allow you to articulate why you are interested in the particular employer and what specifically you have to offer that is relevant to the position. Well-prepared students will have an agenda of their own “selling points” and be able to work them skillfully into the conversation. Be thoughtful, confident, and enthusiastic – regardless of your GPA or lack of legal experience.

Employers report that candidates who are fully engaged, confident, and display genuine enthusiasm for the position are far more persuasive than “flat” candidates with stronger credentials or qualifications.

Try to learn as much as possible about the organization, its attorneys, and its clients. You will want to be current on high-profile cases, major transactions, or other noteworthy events. If you have the names of the interviewers, find out about their backgrounds, the nature of their practices, and any recent matters. There are many useful resources on the GW Law Career Center website for conducting research about employers. Speak to any contacts you have that either work at or may know people at the places in which you are interested, so that you can get valuable insight that will help you stand out and demonstrate your interest and initiative.

In addition to preparing your agenda of the main points you want to make, review your resume carefully and make sure you are comfortable speaking about everything in it. You should also anticipate common questions and rehearse your answers, particularly with respect to any weak areas in your background. A list of commonly asked interview questions is included below. We highly recommend that you practice with friends or family members. However, the best way to assess your interviewing skills and determine what aspects may need work is to schedule a mock interview with a career counselor.

Prepare Questions. In addition to preparing your responses to questions you might be asked, you should also prepare several questions to ask the interviewer(s) – questions about the interviewer’s personal career path and current work, as well as the organization’s mission, work, structure, nature of supervision, and environment. Prepare three to five questions for each interviewer you will meet, some of which may be the same or overlap. Asking the same question of multiple attorneys will allow you to get a variety of perspectives.

You may also use your questions to make some of your selling points if you have not already done that in the interview so far. For example, you can start a question by stating something about yourself and then follow with a related question: “When I was a law clerk at the International Trade Commission, I worked on many aspects of Section 337 patent infringement cases. Does your firm do any work before the ITC?” Your questions can also demonstrate that you have done your research: “I saw on your website that you just won the release of a wrongfully convicted death row prisoner. Did you work on that case?”

Behavioral interviews. Some employers will conduct “behavioral” interviews, which are premised on the idea that past behavior and performance predicts future behavior and performance. In a legal context, behavioral interview questions are designed to elicit whether and how a candidate has previously demonstrated the characteristics and behaviors of successful attorneys. These questions often begin with “Tell me about a

time . . .” or “Describe a situation when . . .” In preparing your answers, first think about what desirable skills and qualities the questions are trying to measure. If possible from your research, determine the qualities the particular employer looks for in hiring new attorneys. Otherwise, consider common characteristics valued by legal employers, such as motivation and drive, planning and organization, oral and written communications, initiative, and problem-solving ability, to name just a few.

Second, develop several short stories about yourself that illustrate the skills, qualities, and knowledge that you would bring to the position, using vivid, interesting examples that make the most of your selling points. Try to use fairly recent (preferably professional or work-related) examples and vary them so that they do not all come from the same experience. Keep in mind that many behavioral questions address *negative* situations. The interviewer is most interested in how you handled the situation and what you learned from it, and your responses should always have a positive tone.

Third, your stories should be brief and have a beginning, middle, and end. Organize them following the STAR formula, recommended by professional interviewers:

<p>Situation or Task</p>	<p>Describe the situation that you were in or the task that you needed to accomplish. You must describe a specific event or situation, not a generalized description of what you have done in the past. Be sure to give enough detail for the interviewer to understand. This situation can be from a previous job, volunteer experience, or any relevant event.</p>
<p>Action you took</p>	<p>Describe the action you took and be sure to keep the focus on you. Even if you are discussing a group project or effort, describe what you did – not the efforts of the team. Don't tell what you might do, tell what you did.</p>
<p>Results you achieved</p>	<p>What happened? How did the event end? What did you accomplish? What did you learn?</p>

In using the STAR technique, be sure to address each of the areas. An effective approach is to briefly describe the situation or task and then focus on what you did and the outcome. If you prepare a list of your skills and a list of examples that demonstrate those skills, with a little practice, you will find that you can mix and match the examples with the skills. When you get a behavioral question in an interview – or any type of question, for that matter – determine what skill or quality the question is targeting and then respond with an example from your list that shows your skills in action.

During the interview. Answer questions directly and specifically. Speak clearly and with energy. Remember to stay positive. Do not disparage a school, a person, or a previous job or employer. You are being evaluated on your presentation and interpersonal skills as well as your qualifications. Greet the interviewer with a firm handshake and maintain eye contact and good posture throughout the interview. Don't forget to smile and show your personality. Do your best to be conversational and try to make a personal connection with the interviewer.

If you are in an interview with a screening/callback format and you are invited for a callback interview, expect to be asked more of the same questions you answered during your screening interview. The same applies if you have multiple interviews with a public sector employer. As you will likely be meeting with several different people during the day, you may be asked the same questions multiple times. Stay fresh and enthusiastic. It may be the fifth time you have answered the question, but it is the only time that particular interviewer will hear your response. Be consistent in your responses, no matter the practice area of the person who is interviewing you.

After the interview. Make notes of your immediate impressions about the interview, organization, people you met, and position. This will help you to write a thoughtful thank-you note, and to remember the details of the interview(s). Thank-you notes are an expression of professional courtesy. They also indicate your continued interest to the employer, and may help to influence an employer's continued interest in you.

It is not necessary to send a thank-you note after on-campus screening interviews with law firms – where the interviewer may have made a decision before you leave the room – although you may send one if you wish. However, you should send a thank-you note to all employers with whom you have had a callback or second interview, and to employers who invite you for interviews outside of an on-campus interview program or job fair. Given that you may only have one interview with a public sector employer, we recommend that you write a thank-you note after those interviews.

Send your thank-you note by e-mail as soon as possible after the interview, preferably within 24 hours. Employers are now used to and expect e-mail correspondence. While some attorneys might still prefer a more formal hand-written and mailed thank-you note, a note sent through the mail is likely to arrive too late to be a factor in the hiring decision. At the same time, be sure that your e-mail thank-you note is just as formal as if it were hand-written. Proofread your thank-you note carefully to correct any spelling errors and avoid using casual language or all lower case letters. A poorly written thank-you note can cost you a job offer.

In addressing the interviewers, use formal titles (Mr. or Ms. Lastname) even if you were instructed to address them informally during the interview. If you are unsure of an individual's name or correct spelling, you should look on the organization's website or

contact the Recruiting Coordinator or another individual at the organization to verify the spelling.

For large firms, it is acceptable to write one thank-you note addressed to the most senior attorney with whom you met, or to the Recruiting Manager. Be sure to ask this person to convey your thanks to the others you met, ideally mentioning the others by name. You may send individual thank-you notes if you like, particularly if you feel you established a good rapport with an interviewer. For public sector employers, and mid-size and small firms where personality and “fit” are especially important, we recommend that you write separate thank-you notes to each of the attorneys with whom you met. Employers typically keep a recruitment file on each candidate, and your letters will be put in your file, so please do not write the same letter to everyone.

There is no point in only writing "Thank you for taking the time to talk to me. I really appreciate your time. Sincerely..." You should tailor your thank-you notes to the individual and reference any specific topics that you may have discussed in your interview. You might also include a few personal details of your conversation, such as a shared hometown or alma mater. Remember to attach any materials requested during the interview, such as a writing sample, transcript, or list of references. Finally, offer to forward anything else that might be helpful to the decision-making process. A sample thank-you note is included at the end of this document.

Sample Interview Questions

General

- How would you describe yourself? Tell me about yourself.
- Why did you accept an interview with us?
- What interests you most about our organization? What do you know about our firm/agency/organization?
- What qualities do you have that will make you a successful lawyer? Why would someone with your personality traits and background be a good fit for our organization?
- What would you consider to be your greatest strengths? Greatest weaknesses?
- Why should I hire you?
- If I called your most recent employer, what three things would they say about you?
- What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Are the most significant? Why?
- What did you learn most from a particular experience (on resume)?
- What is the greatest obstacle that you have overcome in your life/career?
- What is the most difficult decision you have ever had to make?
- With what other employers/kinds of employers are you interviewing? Do you have any pending job offers? If so, where?
- Have you made a decision about the city where you ultimately wish to work? Why have you selected this city?
- Is there anything I should know about you that we have not covered? Is there anything about yourself you want to add?
- When are you available to begin working?
- Does your law school have journal publications? Why are you not a member of one?
- What do you like to do outside of law school?
- Do you plan to continue doing volunteer work once you are working full-time?
- How do you balance school work and your part-time job?
- What persuaded you to become a lawyer? Why did you decide to go to law school/to your particular law school?
- What areas of the law particularly interest you?
- What is your basic career objective?
- Where do you plan to be and what will you be doing five/ten years after graduation?
- In what kinds of permanent employment are you interested? What are you looking for in a summer job?
- How much significance do you think we should attach to your GPA and class rank? Please explain the grading system.
- Under what conditions do you work most effectively? Do you prefer to work independently or with others? How do you respond to guidance and supervision?
- How will you pursue continuing legal education after you have been admitted to the bar?
- What have you learned from participation on a publication or clinical program?

- If you graduated from law school, passed the bar, and had a year to do anything you wanted, what would you do?

Large/Mid-size Office

- What, in particular, interests you about our firm/organization?
- What part of our practice/mission is of special interest to you?
- What relevant educational/employment experience do you possess?
- Identify the personal qualities you possess that would make you successful with our firm.
- How are you prepared to devote yourself to the work of the firm?
- What practice specialties interest you?
- Are you interested in doing pro bono work and why?
- What type of work are you unwilling to do? What would you do if you had to do it?
- What can you tell us about your references?
- If we made you an offer, how soon would you be prepared to give us an answer?
- What are your salary expectations?
- What do you want to gain from working for a law firm?
- What are your expectations about the numbers of hours you'll be working at our firm/organization?

Small Office

- What ties do you have to this community?
- What is your understanding of how a small firm operates?
- Why do you want to work with a small firm? How hard are you prepared to work?
- How would our firm satisfy your interests? What specific aspect of our work would be congenial to you?
- If we hired you, at what salary do you expect to start?
- How much courtroom work do you expect to do? Is that experience essential to you?
- Do you consider yourself an easy person with whom to get along? Explain.
- In what environments do you work most effectively and efficiently?
- Do you feel comfortable with supervision or do you work best on your own?
- How much responsibility are you prepared to assume right from the start? Explain.

Government

- Why are you interested in this government agency? Tell me what you know about this agency.
- Tell me about your commitment to public service.
- What employment experience(s) qualify you for this job?
- How are you doing academically?
- What is your career plan?
- In what other government agencies are you interested? In what ways do you prefer this one over the others?
- What training do you have in administrative law?
- How much courtroom experience do you have?

- Why do you want a career in government? What is the minimum time you are prepared to stay in the government?

Judicial Clerkships

- What do you like about law school? What was the most valuable thing you learned in a class or in clinic, mock trial? What were your favorite classes?
- Why do you want to clerk?
- Why do you want to work for specific court/judge?
- Why did you apply for my chambers? In this region?
- What are the particular aspects of a clerkship that you would value?
- What do you do for fun? What are your hobbies or interests?
- What makes you stand out from other applicants? Why should I choose you?
- How would you handle applying the law in a way that you did not personally agree with the outcome?
- How do you feel about the death penalty?
- How do you handle stressful situations and short timelines? How do you reconcile a heavy workload and submitting a quality work product?
- List three people you admire most and why.
- Tell me about your proofreading skills.
- Do you have a good sense of humor and how do you know?
- What are your views on the Exclusionary Rule of evidence?
- What are your views on role of court vs. role of legislature?
- How far do you feel you have progressed in developing your writing skills?
- What judges have you particularly admired because of style, substance, or ideology?
- How important to you are the political views of the judge?
- Questions about current "hot" legal topics, for example: What did you think about the recent Supreme Court case upholding the health care law, or campaign finance laws and corporate spending? Do you think the federal sentencing guidelines are too harsh for drug offenders?
- What newspapers do you read regularly? What was the last non-legal book that you have read?
- What qualities do you have that will make you a valuable law clerk?
- How would you approach this particular issue, case, or problem?

Legal Services Organizations and Other Nonprofit, Public Interest Groups

- What experience do you have working with indigent communities?
- What experience do you have working directly with clients?
- Describe your public service experience.
- What practice areas are you interested in? (Are you interested in: domestic relations cases, rights of consumers, landlord and tenant problems, claim collections, civil rights, anti-discrimination actions, rights to municipal services, welfare problems, or housing?)
- What has been the greatest challenge you have faced during your volunteer efforts? How did you overcome such a challenge?

- How much experience have you had in your field of interest?
- Would you be prepared to accept employment away from this city?
- For how long a period would you be willing to commit yourself to work for this organization?
- How important to you is the matter of compensation?
- What do you see as the basic rewards for working for Legal Services or Public Interest organizations?
- What are your short/long term career goals?
- Where else have you applied for a job?

Public Defender's Office

- Why do you want to be a public defender?
- What qualities do you have that you think would make you a good public defender?
- Why do you think you will be a good trial attorney?
- Why do you want to work in this specific office?
- What do you think is good/bad about our office?
- Where else are you interviewing and what office is your first choice?
- What will you do if you are offered this job?
- What classes have you taken to prepare for this position?
- Did you have a chance to participate in a criminal law clinic in law school, and if so, did you take it?
- Tell me about your clinic experience.
- Tell me about your favorite client. What made him/her your favorite client?
- Tell me about your experience working with people from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.
- How would you go about building a trusting relationship with a client?
- Is there any type of crime you would have trouble defending, like child molestation or rape?
- What would you do if your client admitted guilt but wanted to plead not guilty?
- Tell me about your experience doing [relevant internship/job.]
- What did you learn from that experience?
- What surprised you the most during your time there?
- Tell me about a difficult experience you had in [work setting] and how you overcame it. What would you do differently in the future?
- [If student has prosecutor-side experience] Why did you decide to work for a prosecutor? Why do you now want to be a public defender? Do you think you are better suited to be a prosecutor?
- [If a student has experience working with victims, particularly victims of domestic violence] Do you think you will be able to represent clients accused of domestic violence?
- Tell us one thing about you that is not on your resume but you think we should know about you.
- This position pays \$X – is that going to work for you? Have you thought about the financial implications of pursuing a career in indigent defense?
- How would you handle the stress of this job?

- If you could change one law or rule affecting criminal defendants, what would it be and why?

Students should also be prepared to answer challenging hypothetical questions. While these can vary widely, common themes include:

- Hypotheticals that probe the candidate's understanding of ethical rules
- Hypotheticals that probe the candidate's understanding of 4th Amendment
- Hypotheticals that probe how client-centered a candidate is, and whether the client respects client confidentiality and advocates zealously for the client
- Hypotheticals that probe candidate's commitment to working with clients that may be guilty of repugnant crimes
- Hypotheticals that probe the candidate's ability to handle the stresses of the job

For additional guidance on how the public defender hiring process differs from that of other legal employers, please consult the following guides: [How to Get a Job in a Public Defender Office](#) and [Careers in Indigent Defense](#).

Prosecutor's Office

- Why do you want to be a prosecutor?
- What qualities do you have that you think would make you a good prosecutor?
- What do you know about our office and our District Attorney?
- Why do you want to work in this specific office?
- What do you think is good/bad about our office?
- Where else are you interviewing and what office is your first choice?
- What will you do if you are offered this job?
- What classes have you taken to prepare for this position?
- Tell me about your experience doing [relevant internship/job].
- What did you learn from that experience?
- What surprised you the most during your time there?
- [If student has defense-side experience] Will this experience make you a better or worse prosecutor, and why? Would you be better suited to work in a public defender's office?
- Tell us one thing about you that is not on your resume but you think we should know about you.
- This position pays \$X – is that going to work for you? Have you thought about the financial implications of pursuing a career in prosecution?
- How would you handle the stress of this job?
- In your opinion, what is the role of the prosecutor in the criminal justice system?
- Where do you stand on the death penalty?
- Do you think, as a matter of policy, our government should continue to pursue the war on drugs?
- How will you handle prosecuting a case where you disagree with the policies of the DA, the law and/or the sentencing guidelines?

Students should also be prepared to answer challenging hypothetical questions. Common variations include:

- Hypotheticals that probe the candidate's understanding of ethical rules, including rules about disclosing exculpatory evidence ([Brady](#)) and impeachment of witness evidence ([Giglio](#))
- Hypotheticals that probe the candidate's understanding of 4th Amendment search and seizure
- Hypotheticals that probe how a candidate would interact with witnesses, including protecting witnesses, handling a reluctant witness, and dealing with sensitive witness situations such as child victims of sex crimes
- Hypotheticals that probe how a candidate will balance sensitivity to victims with the obligation to represent the state's interests

For additional guidance on how the hiring process for a prosecutor's office differs from that of other legal employers, please consult the following guides: [Sizing up the Prosecution](#), [Criminal Prosecution](#), and [The Fast Track to a U.S. Attorney's Office](#).

Second Career

- After working for a few years, why did you decide to return to school?
- Tell me about your background/work experience. What did you gain from it? What does your experience allow you to bring to our firm/organization?
- Of which past experience are you most proud?
- Why are you leaving the military/your business?
- How will you deal with a new boss?

Sample Behavioral Questions

- Describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion successfully to convince someone to see things your way.
- Tell me about a time when you had to learn something new in a short period of time? How did you proceed?
- Have you ever had a research assignment, either in school or on the job, where you initially had no idea how to start? What did you do?
- Describe the most difficult writing assignment you've had either in school or on the job. How did you approach the assignment and work through it?
- Give me an example of a time when you had to inform a superior of an unexpected outcome of a project, meeting or assignment.
- Describe a time when you were faced with a stressful situation that demonstrated your coping skills.
- Tell me about a time when you had to resolve a difference of opinion with a co-worker or committee member.
- Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- Give me an example of a time you set a goal and were able to meet or achieve it.

- Tell me about a time you had to use your presentation skills to influence someone's opinion.
- Give me a specific example of a time when you had to conform to a policy with which you did not agree.
- Tell me about 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 too many things to do and you were required to prioritize your tasks.
- Give me an example of a time when you had to make a split second decision.
- What is your typical way of dealing with conflict? Give me an example.
- Tell me about a difficult decision you've made in the last year.
- Give me an example of a time when you tried to accomplish something and failed.
- Give me an example of when you showed initiative and took the lead.
- Give me an example of a time you used your fact-finding skills to solve a problem.
- Tell me about a time when you missed an obvious solution to a problem.
- Describe a time when you anticipated potential problems and developed preventive measures.
- Describe a time when you set your sights too high (or too low).

Sample Questions to Ask During an Interview

General

- What type of work does the interviewer do?
- How long has the interviewer been with the firm/organization?
- What made him/her decide to join the firm/organization?
- Describe the firm/organization and the people who work in it.
- What distinguishes the firm/organization from others?
- Describe the organizational structure.
- How would you describe the work atmosphere here?
- What are sources of funding?

Attorney Positions

- How does the firm/organization determine what type of work an entry-level attorney is assigned? How is the work supervised? How are the evaluations of that work communicated to the new attorney?
- How is an entry-level attorney trained? Are there formal training programs?
- Does the firm/organization require its attorneys to specialize? When and how does the decision to specialize occur?
- How soon does a new attorney have direct client contact?
- What are the criteria for advancement? To what extent is the development of new clients a prerequisite to advancement?
- In what departments has the firm experienced the greatest growth in the past five (or ten) years? What are the firm's expectations for future growth? How many new attorneys do they anticipate hiring?
- What drew you to this organization?

- What do you find most challenging about this work?
- What are two or three aspects of this work you find most rewarding?

Internship Positions

- What kinds of work do interns do? Is there a rotation among departments? How is the choice of departments determined?
- What kind of supervision can an intern expect to receive? Is there an evaluation process? How is performance communicated to the intern?

DO NOT ASK:

- “How will I benefit?” questions, including those related to amount of work expected or billable hours, vacation time, leave policy, benefits, and pro bono programs. Ask these questions after you receive an offer.
- Negative questions, including rumors about the firm/organization, how the firm/organization compares with others, or what employees dislike about the firm/organization.
- Questions you could answer yourself through simple research.
- Questions answered during the interview. Pay attention and listen!

Sample Thank-You Note

Dear Ms. Lastname:

Thank you very much for meeting with me today. Your description of the firm’s litigation practice and the excellent training opportunities for summer and junior associates only reinforced my strong interest in working as an intern with your organization next summer. I particularly enjoyed our conversation about the Americans with Disabilities Act cases in the Labor and Employment group and what constitutes a reasonable accommodation. I believe that my previous experience at the EEOC, together with my excellent academic record, would allow me to help serve the clients of Smith & Jones LLP.

Please contact me should you have further questions or need any additional information. I may be reached at flastname@law.gwu.edu or 202-123-4567. Thank you again for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

First Lastname