Interviewing Techniques for Education Majors

The goal of creating a high quality resume and cover letter is to obtain an interview. Once that is achieved, it is easy for job seekers to shrug off an interview as simply a conversation with the employer. However, for many people interviewing can be the most challenging step in landing the job. Interviewing requires preparation and practice to be successful. The major objective of the interview is for the employer to get to know you as well as possible. This means not only your education and experiences, but your personality and beliefs as well. The goal of employers for any field is to find candidates who are a good “fit” within their organization or school district.

Interview Types

There are five major interviewing formats, which include one-on-one, group, panel, series, and phone. Inquiring about the format of the interview can be beneficial in helping you to be better prepared.

- **One-on-One Interview:** One-on-one interviews are conducted between the hiring manager and the candidate.
- **Group Interview:** In a group interview, there are usually several job candidates who are interviewed as a group. This format can be useful for employers to screen candidates into the next round of interviewing by observing which candidates stand out.
- **Panel Interviews:** A panel interview is when a hiring panel (usually five or six people) interview the candidate simultaneously.
- **Series Interviews:** A series interview is when candidates typically participate in a series of 2 or more interviews with different people or groups throughout the day. The interviews can be either one-on-one, group, panel formats, or a combination of the three. Sometimes each person or small group can be in charge of a different kind of interview (behavioral, etc.)
- **Phone Interviews:** A phone interview should be treated the same as a face-to-face interview.
- **Skype/Webcam Interviews:** An interview via Skype or any type of videoconferencing should be treated similar to a phone or face-to-face interview.

Preparation

- Practice answering questions you may be asked in the interview. Thinking and rehearsing your responses in advance will help you more effectively articulate the most important information.
- Write down the interview time, location, interviewer’s name and title, and get good directions.
- Ask what format the interview will be in and with whom you will be meeting, so you may plan ahead.
- Check in 10 minutes early, but no more than 15 minutes early.
- Bring extra copies of your resume in a padfolio and have your papers arranged for easy reference (resume, references, transcripts, and portfolio).
- Greet the receptionist politely and let him/her know why you are there.
- Provide a firm handshake coupled with a smile and good eye contact.
- Pay attention to your appearance. You want to appear professional, so dress conservatively.
Research yourself
- Identify your skills, abilities, and interests.
- Assess yourself in terms of creativity, leadership qualities, communication skills, interpersonal skills, and technical skills.
- Examine your goals and objectives, and decide what you want to do and where you want to do it.
- Review your work experiences (student teaching, part-time, summer, campus), volunteer experience, extracurricular activities, accomplishments, and awards.
- Analyze your strengths, weaknesses, personal aspirations, work values, attitudes, and expectations.
- Review your educational background (classes, projects, presentations, research, major, and minor).

Research the school district
Many prospective teachers apply to several different schools. In order to tailor your resume and cover letter appropriately and prepare for an interview, it is important to conduct research on the school district and the school to which you are applying. Important sources of information are the Human Resources department, the district/school board notes, friends/family/fellow teachers who are familiar with the school, and the website of the school itself. Researching a school district will provide information about the educational philosophies and practices in the school district and will help you to develop questions to ask the employer at the end of the interview. Some benefits to this research include:
- You will be perceived as a serious, interested candidate for the position.
- You will be able to communicate your qualifications related to the position and school district.
- You will be able to ask intelligent questions regarding the position and school district.

What to Find Out
The following are details you may wish to research:
1. Is the school public or private?
2. What grades am I applying to teach? What subject areas?
3. What is the predominant educational philosophy of the school?
4. What are the major projects that the school is involved in?
5. What are the possibilities for providing services beyond teaching?

During the Interview
- Approach the interview with a positive attitude and sincere interest in the school district. Be friendly, relaxed, and most importantly be yourself.
- Let the interviewer initiate the conversation. Do not be afraid of pauses in the conversation; take time to think. Silence is okay! It aids in reflection and thought.
- Do not monopolize the conversation, but be an active participant.
- Respond to questions with more than a yes or no, make sure to incorporate specific results to highlight your qualifications and accomplishments.
- Accentuate the positives and be optimistic. Do not apologize or offer excuses for shortcomings – we all have situations that challenge us.
- Answer negative questions positively. For example, when answering the questions “What are your 3 greatest challenges?”, it is important to highlight what you are doing to improve upon those areas.
- Emphasize what you can do for the organization.
- Never criticize a former employer, colleague, teacher, or institution. Avoid debating the interviewer. Arguing with the interviewer will shorten the interview and your chances.
- Do not discuss salary until you have an offer, or if the employer brings it up first.
- To close, thank each interviewer and shake their hands, re-state your interest in the position.
- Send a thank you note to each of the interviewers within 24 hours.
Phone Interviews

Some school districts use phone interviews to screen candidates in order to narrow the pool of applicants who will be invited for in-person interviews. They are also used as a way to minimize the expenses involved in interviewing out-of-town candidates.

**Be Prepared**
- Have a copy of your resume, transcript, planner/calendar and the job description in front of you.
- Make sure you will not be interrupted or encounter any unwanted distractions.
- Keep a log of the schools and teaching positions you applied for. This will help you be better prepared if you are called unexpectedly. Have at least one substantive question ready for each school to which you have applied.
- Prepare a “30 second commercial” to sell yourself to the school and practice, practice, practice. This could be the answer to “Tell us why we should hire you,” “Tell me about yourself,” or “How have you been preparing yourself for this position?”
- Stand up, your voice projects stronger.

**Be Professional**
- Record a professional message for your voicemail.
- Turn off music or the TV during the interview.
- Do not eat, drink or chew gum.
- Do not type on your computer or send text messages.
- Treat the phone interview just as you would an in-person interview. Dress in what makes you feel most confident because it makes a noticeable difference in both your mindset and your presentation.
- Use professional language. Do not use casual language because you are on the phone and it feels more informal.
- Do not put the interviewer on hold or answer call waiting.

**Be Personable**
- Be enthusiastic-show interest in the position and the school.
- Talk slowly and be articulate.
- Ask pertinent questions about the job and the school.
- Think before you speak.
- Remember the interviewer cannot see your body language or gestures. Your voice inflection and the words you say are all he or she has to go on. A smile on your face will come through in your voice and reflect enthusiasm.
- Thank the interviewer for his or her time.

**Dressing for the Interview**

**Everyone**
- Limit fragrance, including scented body lotions and deodorants. Interview rooms are often quite small, and many individuals are allergic to fragrances.
- A less than perfect appearance translates to how you would perform the job. Shoes should be shined, hands well-groomed, avoid wrinkled clothing and over-the-top accessories.
- Cover tattoos and take out obvious piercings.
- Dress above what the job requires.
Men
- First choice, in most instances, is a matched suit in solid grey, black or navy blue. Second choice, slacks and a coordinating blazer.
- Belts should be leather with no obvious signs of wear and should coordinate with pants.
- Socks should be dark and in the same color family as your slacks and cover your legs at all times. No athletic socks.
- No necklaces or jewelry other than a wedding ring, class ring, and a dress watch.
- Resist conversational ties; stick with silk ties in a solid, stripe, paisley, or small pattern.
- Wear polished loafers or lace up dress shoes in the same color family as your suit and matching your belt.

Women
- First choice, classic suit, in navy blue, grey, brown or black. Second choice, skirt or pants and coordinating blazer.
- Generally, dresses are not a good interview choice.
- Wear hair up if it is long or you fidget with it when nervous.
- Minimal jewelry: pearls and classic gold/silver pieces (nothing that dangles).
- If you chose to wear nail polish, make sure it is not chipped and in an appropriate color; nails should not be excessively long.
- Shoes should be a closed heel, closed toe pump in a conservative color that matches your belt. Make sure the heel is a manageable height and comfortable.
- Wear natural makeup - make sure you do not have lines or lipstick on your teeth.

Behavioral Interviewing and the STAR Technique
An increasing number of school districts use behavioral-based interviewing, which rests on the premise that past performance predicts future performance. Past performance examples may come from work experience, internships, activities, hobbies, volunteer work, family life, etc. Prepare for the interview by having several different STAR examples in mind.

The STAR Technique
Situation: Describe the specific situation. Set up your story.
Task: What was the task you were trying to accomplish? Tell who, what, when, where, and why (include only relevant details!).
Action: What did you do to solve the problem or meet the task?
Result: Specify results. What happened? Give numbers, volume, dollars, etc. Link the skills you were demonstrating in this example to the specific job. Tell how the employer is going to benefit from hiring you.
“Your student teaching experience included a large amount of time working one-on-one with populations of diverse and at-risk students. Tell me about how this experience changed your philosophy of teaching?”

- **Situation** – My student teaching placement was at St. Paul Central High School in St. Paul, Minnesota.
- **Task** – Part of the time I was at Central, I was asked to work individually with five diverse and at-risk students who were having a difficult time mastering the concepts of their algebra class.
- **Action** – I met with the teacher to determine the specific areas where the students needed extra attention. From that point I developed a course of study that provided reinforcement in basic concepts, differentiated methods of teaching algebra, and time for students to do examples and ask questions that would increase their understanding.
- **Result** – As a result all five of the students improved their general math scores at the end of the semester and had a better understanding of the basic concepts of algebra. Three of the students were also able to take concepts that we had worked on together and use them to successfully pass the mathematics portion of the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment. I understand that part of my job as a teacher will often be to adapt my curriculum to meet the needs of students with different levels of understanding. My experience working with this population has increased my comfort level and has helped me to develop a great number of useful tools and adaptations to help make them successful.

**Common Interview Questions**

**General**
- Tell me about yourself.
- What are you passionate about?
- Discuss your student teaching experience.
- What has been the most rewarding experience during your student teaching practicum?
- Why did you choose the University of Wisconsin-River Falls?
- What has been your favorite class while attending college and why?
- Why do you want to be a teacher?
- What research have you done about our school? Why do you want to work in this district?
- Why should we hire you?

**Teaching and Involvement**
- Describe how children learn.
- Tell me about your philosophy of education and how it will impact the way you function as a teacher.
- How have you been involved with the development of new curriculum or programs?
- How do you work as the member of a team?
- What do you want to accomplish as a teacher?
- What are you most proud of?
- What provides you with the greatest satisfaction as a teacher?
- How have your past experiences prepared you for teaching?
- What are your greatest strengths/weaknesses as a teacher?
- How do you feel about giving a student a zero on a test or an assignment?
- Tell me about one of your most successful teaching experiences or units.
- What instructional strategies have you found most effective?
- Do you believe in detailed lesson plans? How do you use lesson plans?
- Describe a lesson which was particularly successful by walking me through each stage from planning through delivery.
- What are some professional goals you have for yourself, and how do you plan to accomplish them?
- How do you go about deciding what should be taught in your class?
• Tell me about a mistake you have made and what you learned from it.
• Tell me about a problem you encountered at work or in school and how you dealt with it.
• Provide an example that illustrates your ability to be creative and innovative.
• How do you correctly diagnose and meet the range of skills and different learning styles commonly present in the classroom?
• Describe how you have differentiated a lesson to accommodate varying student needs.
• How do you get students excited about the subject matter you teach, and what techniques do you use to stimulate active participation in the classroom?
• How do you feel about switching grades (teaching a different grade level)?
• How do you make district-wide decisions?
• What extra-curricular activities might you direct or assist?
• What is your experience with diversity? How do you integrate diversity into the classroom and lesson plans?

**Parent Involvement**
• How would you like to report your student’s progress to the system and the parents?
• How would you facilitate collaboration between home and school?
• How do you handle a difficult phone call to a parent?
• What is your philosophy of discipline? (Be prepared to give examples.)

**Trends**
• What do you see as some of the greatest challenges facing education today?
• What are important issues in your field? (Give specific examples.)
• If you had the power to change education in any way you wished, what changes would you make?
• How do you measure student success and how do you improve student achievement?

**Classroom Management**
• What would your ideal classroom look like?
• If I were to step into your classroom on an average day, what would I see?
• Provide an example of your classroom management style.
• How do you keep students on task?
• Describe some characteristics of a well-managed classroom. What are some of the techniques/rules you will implement to maintain classroom control?
• What performance standards do you set for your students?
• If you had a problem with a student in your class, at what point would you notify administrative staff?
• Describe your most challenging student discipline situation and how you managed a positive outcome.

**Rapport with Students**
• Give a specific example that best typifies your relationship with students.
• How would you describe a highly effective teacher?
• What is the personal quality which students admire in you the most?
• How will (do) you learn about students’ feelings about your class?
• How do you go about finding out what students are good at?
**Situational**

Situational questions ask the candidate to respond to a fictional situation. These questions are used to ask indirect questions about a candidate’s beliefs, goals and philosophies of education.

- A group of students ask if they may organize a week long course of study. This would require a change of your plans. What do you do?
- A teacher tells you that no matter how hard he tries to explain things, a few students always get mixed up. What would you want the teacher to understand about this situation?
- You are giving an assignment. A couple of students interrupt your presentation, complaining that it is confusing to them. How would you respond?
- A parent comes to you and complains that what you are teaching his/her child is irrelevant to the child’s needs. How would you respond?
- A student is doing poorly in your class. You talk to the student and are told that he/she considers you to be the poorest teacher he/she has ever met. What would you do?
- What would you do if a parent accused you of speaking inappropriately to his/her child?
- You’re in the teacher’s lounge eating lunch and you encounter a teacher acting unprofessional. What do you do?

**Observational**

Observational questions ask applicants to reflect upon the actions of others. These questions are designed to understand things about how you deal with conflict, how you work with other people, and some general thoughts about your philosophies of education and classroom management.

- Some students have been disruptive in a third grade class. They are reassigned to another third grade teacher and she refuses to take them. What are your thoughts regarding the decision of the teacher?
- An experienced teacher offers you the following advice: When you are teaching, “be sure to command the respect of your students immediately and all will go well.” How do you feel about this?

**Questions for the Interviewer**

Employers expect that candidates will arrive to an interview with several questions for them. It is very rare for an interview to end without the interviewer asking, “Do you have any questions for me?” Having several well-thought out questions ready to ask shows your preparation, interest in the position and appreciation of the school district and its goals. These questions should be formulated from research performed on the school district. Some common questions that could be asked are:

- What are you most proud of about your school?
- How do teachers integrate technology into the classroom?
- Do you offer a mentoring program?
- How does the school district support professional development?
- What do you see as the greatest challenge in this position?
- Can you explain the performance review process, or how I would be evaluated?
- Describe the typical first year assignments for this position.
- What are the extracurricular opportunities for teachers at your school?
- How much freedom is given to teachers in the area of curriculum development?
- What is the educational philosophy favored by your school?
- What is the relationship/involvement between parents and the school?
- What are the procedures/mechanisms for dealing with challenging students?