

Interview Tips for PhD grads

Whether you're applying for opportunities in academia or the wider job market, interviews are an opportunity to demonstrate the quality of your skills and experience for the role.

Academic interview tips

What are academic job interviews like?

With competition usually high for academic posts, getting to the interview stage is a great result.

Commonly, an academic job interview will consist of a panel interview with 2 – 6 academic staff from the department, perhaps supported by university administration staff.

It's common to be asked to prepare a presentation. For a research orientated post, you could be asked to give a summary of your recent work. For a teaching-orientated post, you could be asked to prepare a short lecture or teaching session.

Find more tips on interview presentations on page 4.

There may be informal opportunities to meet and talk to other members of the department. These are a chance to learn more about the department, and your potential colleagues. Despite this being informal it could still be part of the assessment process. The staff participating may be asked to convey their impressions of candidates to the hiring panel, and in a close tie between candidates this could be a deciding factor.

Find examples of questions in 'Sample Interview Questions' on page 5.

What can I do to prepare for an academic job interview?

Much of the wider advice in this helpsheet is equally applicable to academic interviews. In addition, you could:

- **Research the staff on your interview panel.** Investigate their work, and recent papers (particularly those close to your research area or the job description).
- **Review the departmental website**, exploring who the other academic staff are, their recent work, and identifying related areas to your research.
- **Consider how you could contribute** to the department: is there collaboration potential, committees or projects that you're well placed to support?
- Make sure that you understand the institution, department and the nature of the role:
 - **If it's a teaching role**, read the university policies relating to teaching and learning, and research the student demographic you're likely to be teaching.
 - **If it's a research role**, what are the current areas of research strength? What were some of the results of the most recent research assessment exercise (REF)?

General interview tips

What questions will I be asked?

It's unlikely you'll know exactly what questions will be asked, but there are many common forms of interview question.

Your motivation for the job

Questions relating to these are likely to come up regardless of the job you're going for. "Why do you want this job?" or "Why do you want to work for us?" help employers understand what motivates you, but also test how much you know about the role and the organisation.

Having devoted years to your PhD research, it's even more important to be able to convey a compelling narrative as to why you want to do something else, particularly if it's not related to your research topic or academia. You could describe relevant interests, knowledge and skills which have developed alongside or as a result of your study. You might identify how the time spent on your doctorate has taught you what suits you well (which hopefully is what you're applying for now).

Your understanding of the job

They might ask "What do you see as the biggest challenge in this role?" or questions about competitors and clients, so make sure you've researched the organisation and the industry. The organisation's website is a good starting point.

Your skills

Employers tend to ask about examples of your skills, as if you've successfully used a skill in the past, it is likely you'll do so again in the future. The job description and person specification will highlight exactly what the employer is looking for, so use this to prepare; if team work and communication are listed, prepare examples to demonstrate these.

Examples can come from employment, but also from your PhD, prior study, voluntary work and extra-curricular activities. If there's no person specification, then think about what skills are likely to be required, and apply the same principle.

How to structure your answers to competency questions

If asked to give an example of a time that you've used a particular skill (or 'competency'), there is often a tendency to describe the context, rather than give finer details of exactly what you did.

STARR (Situation, Task, Action, Result/Reflection) is a handy acronym to use to structure examples of how you have demonstrated a particular skill.

STARR structure:

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Situation | Briefly outline the circumstances that led to your action. |
| Task | Explain exactly what the task, problem or goal was. |
| Actions | Give a step-by-step explanation of what you did (to show the skills you're giving evidence of) |
| Result & Reflection | Outline what happened as a result. Be specific, this will show your effectiveness in using that skill. |

As a rough guideline, 10% of your answer should be background information (Situation and Task), 80% explaining what you did (Actions), and 10% for the final Result. Sometimes, for example a question about where something went wrong, you could add Reflection to your answer, e.g., what you learned from the situation and what you would do differently.

Strengths-based interviews

Some large employers have switched from competency-based interviews to a strengths-based approach, believing this leads to responses that are less rehearsed, allowing them to get to know the candidate better.

What to expect

The aim of strengths-based interviews is to find out what comes naturally to you, and what you do with ease and enthusiasm, rather than exploring merely what you are able to do. As such, you're more likely to be asked about motivations and values, rather than skills.

How to prepare

As you'll be asked about your strengths, ensure you understand them yourself. Ask yourself the following in a professional context:

- What energises me?
- When do I feel most like myself?
- What comes easily to me?

Improving your self-awareness will aid your performance, so try also thinking about why you enjoy these activities or why you're good at them.

You may be asked follow-up questions. This isn't a sign that your answer is lacking; the interviewer wants to get to know you by seeing you think on your feet.

There will probably still be questions where you're asked to display evidence of skills, and the STARR approach can still be a useful model for these.

What they are looking for

Employers want to choose candidates who will enjoy the job and feel comfortable with the key skills required, so will pick people whose strengths align with the role. However, don't try to predict what these will be and model your answers accordingly, as the employer will be able to tell you're doing this.

They will however be looking for someone whose values match with those of the company, so research what these are and how they might be applied in practice, both by the company and by you.

Practical advice

- Make sure you look smart and professional. If you're not sure, it's safer to look a bit too formal.
- First impressions are vital, so be polite and professional from the start to everyone you meet. Pay attention to the questions! Answer the ones they ask, not the ones you wish they had.
- Speak slowly and clearly, and don't rush your answer. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification if you don't understand a question, or to ask for a moment if you need time to think.
- Avoid giving unnecessary detail in your answers – use the body language of the interviewer to decide whether you need to expand further.
- If you have to present negative information, be truthful, but stay positive. Say how you learned from it or would do something differently in the future.

Telephone, Skype and video interviews

- Prevent potential disturbances – find a quiet space and take steps to ensure you're not interrupted, either by others or by a phone.
- Check the technology in advance. Try a practice conversation with a friend first, and consider using a microphone or headphones to improve the sound quality if needed.
- If you experience tech issues during the interview, be proactive and let them know, working together to solve the problem or come up with a solution.
- For video interviews make sure there is enough lighting, and that the background is appropriate. The angle of the camera should put you in the middle of the screen with eye contact central.
- Even if the interviewer can't see you, good posture and positive body language can help nerves and make you clearer and more confident.
- Warm your voice before the interview, to allow you to start the call in a professional manner.
- Memory aids such as written notes can make your answers sound seamless and informed if used well. Used poorly, answers are unnatural or distracted. Don't read from a script.
- You may not have visual clues to help decide whether you've said enough or too little; pause periodically and allow the interviewer to interject if they want to.

Interview presentations

- Keep the brief and practice to time.
- Structure should be clear, keeping a focus on your key points. A simple but often effective structure is to
 - a) summarise your key points ('tell them what you're going to tell them')
 - b) elaborate on each ('tell them')
 - c) recap the summary ('tell them what you've told them')
- Use audio-visual elements or handouts if they enhance your presentation or better showcase a skills strength useful in the role.
- Keep all PowerPoint elements clear, simple and practiced – now is not the time to over-animate!
- Speak clearly to the whole audience, don't just read out any slides, but use them to summarise or illustrate.
- At the end, thank your audience and ask for any questions.

Good answers to common questions

Why do you want this job?

Your opportunity to talk about your motivation and enthusiasm for the role, industry and company...basically things other than the salary! It's also testing that you have a realistic understanding of the job and organisation – the best answers will show how your skills and goals line up with these. Be as enthusiastic as you can, without going over the top.

Tell me about a situation where you had to manage multiple demanding deadlines. What was your approach?

This is one example of a competency-based question. Preparation is key to answering these questions well, so plan ahead and identify examples you can use for the skills you may be asked about. Use the **STARR** (Situation, Task, Action, Result & Reflection) model outlined earlier to answer.

What is your biggest weakness?

You need to demonstrate self-awareness, although don't confess something that would majorly impact your performance in the role. Equally, avoid clichéd answers like "I'm a perfectionist." A minor weakness like being impatient or not being assertive enough is the right level, but it's also important to turn this into

a positive by talking about what you do or could do overcome or manage this.

Tell me about yourself

Remembering that you are presenting yourself in the context of convincing the employer that you are a strong candidate for this role, give a brief summary including recent experiences, major achievements and a bit about your passions. Making sure what you say is all relevant to the role; the recruiter is looking for what you can bring to the company and if you are suitable for the job.

What do you think are the biggest challenges facing our organisation at the moment?

Here, you can demonstrate your knowledge of the organisation and the sector they operate within. You might for example talk about how recent developments will affect the company. Prepare for these commercial awareness questions by reading industry news and networking with people already working in this area.

Can you tell me about a time you've worked effectively as part of a team?

Another competency-based question. Make sure your answer is about what you did, rather than what the team as a whole did, although some information about this may provide relevant context. The recruiter will want to know what you contributed to the team.

How many pizzas are delivered in London each week?

Don't panic, you're not expected to get the answer right. Instead, this is testing how you approach and solve problems and basic business maths. You might start by estimating the population and how often the average person would order pizza and go from there. Show that you can keep your cool and talk them through a logical thought process.

When were you most engaged at university?

This is another strengths-based question. Pick something you enjoyed because it allowed you to use your strengths, and then let your enthusiasm show. Use the **STARR** method to structure your answer, but make sure you explain why you found the task so engaging. For example, if it was during your dissertation, explain how you enjoyed researching and drawing conclusions from this.

Sample interview questions

Academic interview questions

Research-orientated

- What are the key achievements of your PhD?
- If you were to begin your PhD project again today, what would you do differently?
- Describe a research problem you have encountered, and what you learnt from it.
- Outline the project you would undertake if given this opportunity.
- Who are the key researchers in your area? How does your work compare with theirs?
- What opportunities for interdisciplinary work does your research offer?
- What opportunities for outreach or wider impact does your research offer?
- If your current funding application is not successful, what alternatives will you be pursuing?
- What publication potential does your PhD / proposed research have?

Teaching-orientated

- What do you think makes a good lecturer / seminar leader / tutor / supervisor / course director...?
- What teaching experience have you had to date, and what have you learnt from it?
- What techniques have you used in your teaching to increase student engagement / learning outcomes?
- What do you see as the challenges to providing high-quality teaching and learning? How would you meet those challenges?
- What experience do you have with delivering online learning? How have you adapted to online delivery?

Department-orientated

- What contribution do you think you could make to the wider department?
- How would you support your departmental colleagues in their duties?

General interview questions

Open questions

- Tell me about yourself.
- What are your key strengths?
- What are your weaknesses?
- Tell me something about yourself that I wouldn't know from reading your application.

Motivation and values

- Why do you want this job?
- How does this job fit in with your longer-term career plans?
- What would be the main challenge you'd face if you got this job?
- What does success mean to you?
- Teamwork and interpersonal skills
- Describe a situation where you had to deal with someone who didn't like you. How did you handle it?
- What qualities do you have that make you an effective team member? Can you give me examples?
- Please describe a situation in which you had to demonstrate sensitivity and tact.

Prioritising and organising

- Describe a situation in which several things had to be done at the same time. How did you handle it? What was the result?
- Tell me about a situation in which you have had to make compromises in order to get something done by the deadline.
- Tell me about a situation in which your plans for something went wrong. Why did it happen? What did you do? What could you have done to prevent it?

Problem solving, analysis and creativity

- Can you tell me about a time when you have had to make a decision with incomplete information?

- Can you give me an example of a time when you found it hard to make a decision about something?

Why was it difficult? What did you do?

- Describe a time when you thought outside the box.

Decision making and judgement

- Give me an example of a time you had to make an important decision on your own. How did you make it? How does it affect you today?
- Can you think of a situation where something you were convinced about was shown to be wrong? What did you do? What had convinced you?

Drive and determination

- Describe a task that you completed that you didn't enjoy. How did you motivate yourself?
- Tell me about a situation in which you have had to cope with various setbacks.
- Tell me about something you gave up on. What else could you have done to succeed?

Adaptability and initiative

- Describe a situation when you have taught yourself a new skill in order to complete a task.
- Can you tell me about a time when you had to adapt to an unexpected change?
- Can you give me an example of any tasks or projects you started on your own?

Communication and negotiation

- What is the most difficult thing you have had to explain to someone? How did you do it?
- Tell me about when you have persuaded someone to change their mind about something.
- Describe a time when you achieved a win-win result with someone who had competing needs.

Commercial awareness and customer focus

- Can you give me an example of when you have gone above and beyond in order to provide a good service to someone?
- Are there things that our competitors are doing that we should be worried about?
- What are the most important issues facing this sector in the next five years?

Leadership

- Describe a situation in which you took responsibility for achieving something.
- How do you get the best out of people?
- How would you describe your leadership style? Can you give me an example of it in practice?

Questions that you can ask

You are free to ask questions to clarify any of the interview questions that you receive throughout a typical interview.

In most cases, at the end of the interview, you'll be asked if you have any questions for the panel.

This is an opportunity to ask insightful questions that:

- a) Impress your interview panel with your research/knowledge
- b) Help you find out information that you would like to know (and might help you assess whether to take the job if offered)

Don't ask anything that a quick online search could answer!

Remember to keep the questions focused on the opportunity. Any negotiation on salary, working hours and similar is best negotiated after they've given you the offer!

Example questions for them

- I noticed in my research that [this interesting factor] is something you're actively working on – in the future do you think there might opportunities for this role to support that?
- Obviously, there are [this many] key aspects of the job; I wondered if you saw one as the primary purpose of the role, or if they were equally weighted?
- I've read about [advertised benefits of working here] but I wonder if I could ask you what you've found the most rewarding part about working here?