

ENG4C-A



How to Get Work

Introduction

In this lesson, you will learn about how to get work. It isn't easy. In fact, getting work can be more work than actually doing the work once you've got it! This lesson involves preparing a resumé, writing a cover letter, and having an interview—you will practise all three.

What You Will Learn

After completing this lesson, you will be able to

- write a resumé
- write a cover letter
- script an interview
- solve a job search ethical problem
- use specialized vocabulary related to the working world
- edit and proofread your writing for spelling and grammatical correctness

Getting Work

Getting a job is one of life's most intense experiences. It requires good self-knowledge, as well as knowledge of how others perceive you. Often, it requires careful planning and record-keeping. Language skills—both written and oral—are crucial. The emotional stakes of acceptance/rejection are very high, and of course, there are all the practical aspects involved of what the financial rewards will be. Naturally, since getting a job is of such interest to so many people, it has been and continues to be the subject of a lot of writing.

How to Write a Resumé

Read the following articles about how to write a resumé before trying one on your own. Highlight ideas and suggestions that you find especially useful or important, both in these articles and in articles throughout the unit. At the end of the unit, you will be asked to give advice to someone else about getting a job, keeping a job, and leaving a job.

The art of superior communication in a resume

by Steve Holmes

Summary

- Clarity is the most important thing
- CVs and resumes don't follow proper English grammar
- Remember—"Brevity is the soul of wit"!

Your number one priority when writing a resume and a covering letter is to imagine what the reader wants to know and hear. And what the recruiter wants to hear about is you.

They are not looking for gimmicks and chattiness, they're looking for clarity. That means not listing everything in overwhelming detail but expressing the

essence of your themes. It's fine to leave recruiters with further questions to ask at the interview, so don't do too much.

Buzzwords, used in moderation, are useful signposts that help the reader recognise the complex picture you are painting. But avoid yesterday's buzzwords like proactive and business process re-engineering.

Grammar can have a stunning effect on readers if it is done properly. But throw away the Word grammar checker. Resumes don't follow proper English grammar. There are no sentences and no paragraphs, or there shouldn't be. The resume has its own conventions, based on creating impact and saving space, based on making a few words do a great deal of work.

Aim to concentrate what you say and then further edit it down to the absolute minimum. Brevity is the soul of wit—it makes you look intelligent.

There are no rules in writing a resume (though cover letters are grammatical and follow fairly precise rules). Start by realising that you are freed from convention. The document you are creating has a series of goals and a number of inputs.

Think about your role as an author and have questions like these in the back of your mind, the kind of questions I use myself when writing a resume for someone professionally:

The applicant side of things

- How did you approach your role?
- What scenario did you encounter and what did you do about it?
- How were your methods superior to other ways of handling things?
- What legacy did you leave behind when you left that job?
- What did you go on to achieve in the next job?

The recruiter perspective

Your job applications live in a context that goes beyond what you want, what you have done and what you are good at. This is the marketing side of the task and these are the kind of questions to be asking:

- What is my next career goal? Am I ready for it? Do I need further training? What issues are involved in making this change?
- What do I need to say in order to convince recruiters that I am ready for this particular goal?
- Will that sound convincing to the kind of people I expect to read it? What specific qualities and themes need to be prominent in the application?

The text itself

Journalists get paid for making text attractive. It's a skill you can develop yourself. Start with these basic guidelines.

- What information can I leave out or just use a trace of?
- What information will make me (my client) look stupid if I do include it?
- What can be implied over and above the actual facts?
- What innovations in resume design and content are likely to hit home in this commercial sector? (for example, in civil engineering, going beyond the traditional list of contracts and getting inside the way a project manager has actually shaped the latest contract, change the methodology, achieved commercial targets, etc.)

There are many ways of embarking upon the process of becoming a superior communicator, but if you start to get a feel for these questions you will start to understand what makes an effective written job application. The other superb thing about being

creative in this way is that it helps clarify your career strategy and begins your preparation for performing confidently at interview.

Your resumé is an employer's first look at you. Avoiding the pitfalls described in the next article can improve your chances of getting an interview and showing the employer what you have to offer.

Mistakes on resumé sabotage your chances

Barbara Simmons

February 11, 2003

Here's the encouraging news: You have the capability to draft an outstanding and error-free resumé that can grab the attention of the astute reader. Now here's the caveat: Once your resumé lands in the hands of an employer, any mistakes living on that resumé make it almost impossible for you to repair the ensuing damage. And, if you think that you have lots of time for your resumé to make a great impression, think again. It takes only a few blinks of the employer's eye for your resumé to end up in the 'no' pile.

Take a minute now and quiz yourself on some basic but important information to know when preparing or improving your resumé:

- ***What is the main purpose of your resumé?***
(No, it's not to get the job. It is to get the interview. It also helps the flow of the interview discussion, as questions are asked based on the information you have on your resumé).
- ***How long do employers spend reviewing your resumé?*** (Researchers are finding that a resumé may have only five to 10 seconds to grab an employer's attention and keep her reading).

- ***When preparing your resumé, should you think of it as a means to sell yourself effectively?***
(Think of your resumé as an advertisement that markets your skills and accomplishments relevant to the position. You are both the product and the sales person).

You probably know that typographical, spelling and grammatical errors rank among the top blunders people make. Contributing to the problem is unwarranted faith in computer spell checking. Computers may not be able to choose the correct their or there, or between to, too and two.

And what perturbs, worries and entertains employers is lack of careful proofreading, resulting in bloopers such as “diver’s” experience (meant to say “diverse”), or “seeking a party-time position,” (part-time) or — gasp—this one: “defective with teams” (instead of “effective”). The employer is likely to wonder whether an applicant this careless now will be a smart hire.

Many professionals write on the subject of resumé blunders. Type in the words “resumé blunders” or “resumé mistakes” on an Internet search engine and tens of thousands of links to Web sites appear.

One worth visiting is the Resume Doctor site (ResumeDoctor.com). On staff is former recruiter Michael Worthington who seems to live, eat and breathe resumé.

His company surveyed 2,500 recruiters/head-hunters in varied industries to compile a list of “likes and dislikes” about resumé.

The following are some of the ***employers’ top pet peeves***:

1. too duty oriented (reads like a job description and fails to explain accomplishments);
2. dates not included, or inaccurate dates;
3. no (or inaccurate) contact information and unprofessional e-mail address (1 out of 4 resumé lack an e-mail address, yet it is a basic expectation today);

4. resumé that are too long;
5. paragraphs as opposed to bullet-points;
6. candidates who apply to positions for which they are not qualified;
7. irrelevant personal information;
8. lying, misleading information offered (re: education, dates, titles);
9. meaningless objectives or introductions;
10. resumé sent in .pdf, .zip files, faxed, Web page resumé, mailed resumé and those not sent as a readable attachment;
11. pictures, graphics, or URL links no recruiter will call up;
12. no easy-to-follow summary;
13. resumé written in either first- or third-person;
14. gaps in employment;
15. burying important information.

Worthington warns that “if you are falling prey to any one, or combination of [these] resumé errors, then you are fighting an uphill battle.”

Did anything on the list surprise you? For example, leaving off an objective, which is a traditional resumé component, may be an unsettling concept for candidates as well as for career experts.

Resume Doctor’s research reveals that objectives limit the opportunities for the candidate and they are frustrating for the employer who may want your skills but is unable to place you in the position you targeted. (Resumé for internships and co-op placements obviously work well with objectives.)

In lieu of an objective, Worthington suggests writing a “headline” just under your contact information that says who you are and what you do. Much like a newspaper headline, it succinctly tells the story and

focuses the reader. It also shouts out what you have to offer an employer.

He suggests that you pretend you are sitting at a bus stop and the person next to you asks what you do. Think about what distinguishes you from others and what will garner attention. Do you get an image of the person from each of the following headlines?

- “Experienced Paralegal with extensive knowledge in medical malpractice litigation.”
- “Award-winning senior sales manager with fifteen years of experience in retail and merchandising.”
- “Multi-lingual geriatric nurse with experience in cardiology/critical care.”
- “Human resources professional with knowledge of and experience in post-secondary education sector.”

To strengthen this approach, follow the headline with a point-form skills summary or profile targeted to the position, and you will have made your resumé easier and more interesting to read.

And, don’t forget to research the company so that customizing your resumé is genuine—and memorable—in a first-class way.

Tip of the Week

According to resumé guru Michael Worthington, one of the biggest problems in today’s competitive job market “is a lack of understanding in drafting your resumé as a marketing piece ... effective in today’s electronic and Internet age.” His Web site, ResumeDoctor.com, gives more details.

Don't get personal on your résumé

Diane Moore

March 12, 2004

"I have four lovely children I enjoy spending time with." If employers saw this statement on a résumé, what do you think their reaction would be?

- a. I wonder how much time this candidate will need to take off work when the children are sick?
- b. This candidate is lacking relevant experience and is looking for things to fill up the space on the résumé.
- c. This candidate has no idea of how to prepare a résumé properly.
- d. All of the above.

If you picked "d," you're right. Any and all of these reactions from the employer are likely to get your résumé discarded. I have reviewed thousands of résumés throughout my career and have seen many that offer inappropriate personal information.

Some people list their date of birth, marital status, religion, number of children, social insurance number and even the names and occupations of their parents. One résumé I saw many years ago even included the statement that appears at the beginning of this article. It still stands out in my mind as a prime example of what should not appear on a résumé.

Many people who include this kind of information do so out of a misguided belief that it makes them more interesting to employers by illustrating a skill or quality that might be relevant to the job. Others may be newcomers to Canada and may not realize that including personal details, although appropriate in their country of origin, will likely lead to their résumé being discarded here. Some may simply feel a need to fill up empty space on the page.

The biggest drawback to including personal information on your résumé is that it opens the door to discrimination against you, advises Martin Buckland, a certified professional résumé writer who also holds the distinction of being Canada's only master résumé writer. He reviews dozens of clients' résumés every week, as well as offering a free résumé review service through his Web site <http://www.aneliteresume.com>.

"It's important to remember that your résumé is purely a business document," says Buckland.

"You don't want to give an employer the chance to discriminate against you based on your age, gender, marital status, or other factors."

Organizations are not permitted, under the Ontario Human Rights Code, to ask you about this kind of personal data in employment interviews. In offering them yourself, you run the risk of negatively influencing employers.

One of the most common mistakes Buckland sees is applicants including a photograph on their résumé. In many European countries, a photograph is expected. In fact, if you don't include one, you may not be contacted for an interview.

"You need to know the market you are aiming for," says Buckland, who has assisted many clients with customizing their résumés for applying to positions in foreign countries. "In the North American market, including personal information or a photograph on your résumé is almost certain to cause human resources staff and recruiters to bypass your application instantly, no matter how much experience or training you have."

Joshua Karam, a human resources co-ordinator in the hospitality field, says up to 25 per cent of the résumés he receives offer inappropriate personal information. One of the key reasons employers discard résumés with personal details is they don't

want to risk being accused of reverse discrimination, says Karam.

“If we hire someone who has stated that they are of a certain age or gender, or who has included a photograph, candidates who were not interviewed may be able to make a case that they weren’t considered because they didn’t disclose personal information.”

Is it ever appropriate to offer personal information on a résumé? The answer is yes, depending on why and how you offer it. First, ask yourself what relevance it has to the position. If it is relevant, then consider whether the skills, experience, or qualities you are trying to highlight can be stated without including personal details. If you are looking for work in early childhood education and your primary related experience has been raising four children, you can include this information without disclosing personal information, simply saying you have “experience with providing a safe and stimulating environment for young children.”

Karam says if you’re applying for a position that requires a lot of travel, you may want to emphasize in your cover letter that you are free to travel or relocate, without necessarily volunteering that you are single and childless. And sometimes, divulging something personal may even be appropriate and give you an edge. For example, Liz Diaz, a student in the community worker program at George Brown College recently applied to a position as a peer workshop facilitator at an agency specializing in services for Hispanic women. In her cover letter, Diaz mentioned she was of Hispanic descent, emphasizing her ability to speak Spanish and knowledge of the Spanish-speaking community.

Buckland says this is the right approach. “If you’re going to offer any information of a personal nature that is directly relevant to the job requirements, the cover letter is the place to list it, not the résumé.”

Tip of the Week

Always include a clear, specific job objective when preparing a résumé and cover letter. If you don't give prospective employers an indication of the kind of position you are seeking, they are unlikely to do the work of analyzing your résumé to see where you might fit with one of their available jobs.

Lasting resume impressions

Recently, ResumeDoctor.com asked their recruiter network to share some of the more peculiar details included in people's resumes

**ResumeDoctor
February 18, 2004**

Your resume will be your first impression you have to make to an employer. Recruiters tell us that you have less than 5–10 seconds to make that impression; so you had better make it a good one. Recently, ResumeDoctor.com asked their recruiter network to share some of the more peculiar details included in people's resumes.

Objectives:

Including an objective on your resume can usually only hurt you. Not only do you risk pigeonholing yourself, but also more often than not, most objectives are useless fluff that say nothing about the candidate's background. They simply wind up taking valuable space where instead you should be grabbing your reader, telling him/her who you are and what you do. Here are a couple of objectives that did little to grab their reader:

- *I am looking for a new position due to panic attacks*
- *To make money so I can buy things*

A resume is a marketing tool used to showcase your skills and qualifications. You need to sell yourself in a way that will make you stand out from any other candidate. Here is a candidate that might have taken things a bit too far:

I once walked from Florida to Cuba, I have a cape, but I do not wear it. I know the exact location of every virus in all the computers throughout the nation. I do not sleep, as there are more important things to do. I have read Microsoft Knowledge Base, War and Peace, and the entire set of New World Encyclopedias in a single afternoon and still had time to rewrite Access, stop an earthquake from destroying Los Angeles, and call my mother.

Accomplishments:

One of the biggest problems most candidates have with their resumes is that they are too duty-oriented. Rather, you should be showcasing your accomplishments that can set you apart from similar candidates. We can only hope that these accomplishments are what the employer was seeking:

- *Able to fit a whole Moon Pie in my mouth*
- *Greatest accomplishment—getting shot 70 feet out of a water cannon*
- *Work well as a team or one on one (wink, wink)*
- *I have never been convicted of a sex crime*

Education:

Obviously listing one's education and training is paramount, but if you have a college degree like this candidate, there is no need to include your primary school education:

I've gone to many schools due to moving around a lot. Some I remember are Lochlomond Elementary, Westgate Elementary, Sinclair Elementary, Stonewall Jackson Middle, and Pace and Pace West High School. Some were in Manassas, VA, some in

Fredericksburg, VA, I think, and Pace West was in Gainesville, VA.

Hobbies:

Unless it is relevant to the position you are seeking, hobbies and personal info should be left off the resume. Obviously, these candidates never quite grasped this concept:

- *Remain active by spending time with my 17 children that resulted from 9 marriages*
- *Jell-O wrestling in bathtubs*
- *I enjoy collecting erotic pictures*
- *I'll go ahead and mention some of my interests and activities. I like skating, both with in-line skates and ice skates, and I like hockey and like to watch hockey games, and I also like video games, though there's a lot of games that I can no longer enjoy, but I still can enjoy some of them*
- *I love to FISH, I am an avid Fly Fisherman, I have been Fly Fishing for a very short time, but I enjoy it a lot. I make my own flies, which makes it even funnier*
- *Love, love, love doing body shots*

References:

There is no need to include the phrase: "References Available Upon Request," on one's resume; this is understood. Furthermore, including your personal references on a resume is not a good idea; you do not want to risk employers calling your references before you have had a chance to talk to the employer first. One recent candidate not only included his references, but also wrote a story about each one. Here are two of his references, (he actually included six):

- *Some of my Friends are: Jim Thomas. I have known Jim for about 10 years now, I claim him as being one of my brothers. We met each other in*

high school, and have been friends ever since. He is currently working for Ann's Flowers in American Fork, and he lives with his Wife and two Children Tyler and Sara in Pleasant Grove, UT. 555-1234

- *I have Known Tony for about 8 years. We also met in High School. He lives at home with his Mom and Dad and brother. He is currently not working, and is taking care of his mom who has been ill for sometime. 555-1212*

However, the guy that takes the biggest prize for “bonehead moves” on a resume is the recent candidate who included a form/application for employers to fill out on each resume he sent. Apparently, if you wished to interview this candidate, you had to apply with him first.



Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)



9. Try your hand at writing both a good and a bad resumé. For the good resumé, specify whether you have arranged things chronologically, functionally, or as a combination of both. For the bad resumé, use marginal notations to indicate what is wrong.

There are Suggested Answers to Support Questions at the end of this unit.

The Cover Letter

The cover letter is where you show that you are a good prospect for the particular employer to whom you are sending your resumé. This is where you try to be *personally* (not just professionally) interesting, and where you can highlight aspects of your resumé that you do not want the employer to miss. The employer will be asking him or herself two things: 1) What can this person do for the organization? and 2) Will he or she fit in easily with the people already working there? Make sure that you answer these questions in your letter.

The tone of your cover letter is also very important—you must not be too chummy, nor too distant either. As with the resumé, there is plenty of advice out there on how to write a good cover letter. Here's some of it.

Fundamentals of a dynamic cover letter

Katharine Hansen and Randall S. Hansen

First Paragraph

Do not waste this opening paragraph of your cover letter. It is essential that your first paragraph sparks the employer's interest, provides information about the benefits the employer will receive from you, and helps you stand out from all the other job-seekers who want the job.

Focus on your Unique Selling Proposition (USP) —the one thing that makes you different from all the other job-seekers—and identifying two or three benefits you can offer the employer.

Weak opening paragraph: I am writing today to apply for the account manager position you have posted on your company Website.

Better opening paragraph: I have increased the size and sales levels of my client base in every position I have held, which in turn has increased the revenues and profits of my employers. I want to bring this

same success to the account position you have posted on your Website.

Second Paragraph

Provide more detail about your professional and/or academic qualifications. Provide more information about how you can provide the benefits you mention in the first paragraph. Be sure to stress accomplishments and achievements rather than job duties and responsibilities. Expand on specific items from your resume that are relevant to the job you are seeking. Use solid action verbs to describe your accomplishments and achievements.

If you do not have a lot of solid experience in the field you are trying to enter, remember to focus on key skills that can easily transfer from your previous work experience to the job at hand.

And if responding to a job posting or ad, be sure to tailor this paragraph to the needs described in the ad.

Third Paragraph

Relate yourself to the company, giving details why you should be considered for the position. Continue expanding on your qualifications while showing knowledge of the company.

You need to do your homework—show that you know something about the organization. Use the resources in our Guide to Researching Companies.

Fourth Paragraph

The final paragraph of your cover letter must be proactive—and request action. You must ask for the job interview (or a meeting) in this paragraph. You must express your confidence that you are a perfect fit for the job. You must also put the employer on notice that you plan to follow-up within a specified time.

Weak closing paragraph: I hope you will review my resume, and if you agree with what I have stated here, consider me for the position. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Better closing paragraph: I am eager to help advance the success of your company, and I am convinced that we should arrange a time to meet. I will call your office in the next week to schedule an appointment.

Final Thoughts

One last piece of advice: Follow-up is key, so plan on making some phone calls or sending some emails.

The following letter is perhaps a little too much like a diagram, but it does an outstanding job of showing that the applicant knows what is being asked for, and has taken the trouble to demonstrate that she can and will provide it. The thoroughness and care demonstrated in the letter is in itself a good recommendation. Notice, as well, the careful use of keywords such as “ability,” “skill,” “personnel,” and so on, and the consistent parallel structure within each column. Note, however, that cover letters are usually no more than one page long.

A sample two-column cover letter

Bonnie Ellisberg

Department of Human Resources
Davida Darwin
1900 Cassiopeia Avenue
Cockeysville, MD 21030

Re: Posting 101 Associate Director II

Dear Ms. Darwin:

When I read your ad for an Associate Director II on the Marylandworks job site, I couldn't help noticing how well your requirements align with my experience, education, skills, and background.

While my enclosed resume provides a good overview of my strengths and achievements, I have also listed some of your specific requirements for the position and my applicable skills:

You require:

Ability to coordinate and oversee the work of subordinates.

Ability to strategically plan, develop and implement programs and operations toward achievement of team's mission, goals, and objectives.

The analytical skills to perform needs assessments, evaluate current programs, and initiate changes or adjustments to current systems and improve operations.

Problem-solving and decision-making abilities.

Financial and personnel management expertise.

Interpersonal and communication skills that promote ability to serve as a liaison and resource.

I offer:

Experience in supervising 25 office employees and ensuring staff efficiency as a public-health program director.

Experience developing and implementing treatment programs as a public-health program director.

Success in having brought order out of chaos at an inner-city health clinic and vastly improving processes there.

Success in solving numerous problems at inner-city clinic, such as reducing number of emergency and drug-seeking patients; lobbying for HIV-information dissemination; and increasing number of patients that could be given routine care.

Expertise in both areas, through public-health and office-management background.

Significant experience giving presentations, speaking persuasively, and interacting successfully with diverse individuals.

Since my experience and expertise fit your requirements so closely, I am clearly one of the people you'll want to see. I plan to contact you to follow up on this letter and see if we can arrange a meeting. In the meantime, please feel free to call me at my home number listed above. I look forward to our meeting. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Bonnie Ellisberg



Support Question

(do not send in for evaluation)

10. Look in a newspaper and select an advertisement for a job for which you might reasonably apply. Cut out or copy the advertisement. Then write a cover letter to accompany the resumé (the good one, of course) created in your last exercise. Make sure that your letter refers both to the advertised requirements for the position and to your resumé.
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The Interview

You did it! Your resumé and cover letter got you an interview. Now you get to present yourself in person. Everything counts now—what you say, the way you look, your tone of voice, your body language, and your ability to read people and to react quickly and naturally. Will you be impressive? Will you be likable? The stakes are high, and nervousness is both inevitable and natural. Fortunately, there is as much good advice available on how to survive an interview as there is on how to survive a first date.

Are you talking yourself out of a job?

Barbara Simmons

July 15, 2003

Answering the top 15 interview questions. Now here's a tough question—so be honest: In interviews, do you talk yourself out of jobs?

Few would disagree interviews are rigorous. Like an intricate dance with a partner you've never met before, interview savvy is rarely instinctual. The uneasiness of being evaluated creates anxiety for candidates, as does the post-answer silences that can seem unnatural compared with the flow of ordinary conversations. It's enough to make you feel off-balance just when stability is everything.

Believe it or not, more than 2,000 recruiters and hiring managers want to help you.

Surveyed worldwide by the consulting service ResumeDoctor.com, participants from industries including IT, marketing and sales, finance and health care, revealed the questions they most frequently ask during job interviews. More importantly, they offer helpful Recruiter Tips to help you to understand the motivation behind these questions and how to approach your answers.

So, here are the 15 questions, and they are probably quite familiar to you if you have had an interview in the past few years:

1. Describe your ideal job and/or boss.
2. Why are you looking for a job?/Why are you leaving your current position?
3. What unique experience or qualifications separate you from other candidates?
4. Tell me about yourself.
5. What are your strengths and weaknesses?
6. Describe some of your most important career accomplishments.
7. What are your short-term/long-term goals?
8. Describe a time when you were faced with a challenging situation and how you handled it.
9. What are your salary requirements?
10. Why are you interested in this position?/Our company?
11. What would your former boss/colleagues say about you?
12. What are the best and worst aspects of your previous job?
13. What do you know about our company?
14. What motivates you?/How do you motivate others?
15. Are you willing to relocate?

See? No big surprises with these questions. They probe for the essence that makes for good hires by exploring personality, and attitudinal and behavioural characteristics to determine “fit” or compatibility with the company. But now it gets tricky. What do interviewers expect to hear from you?

How much is too much—or not enough—information for you to provide? Do your responses reveal as much about you as a person as they do about your

potential as an employee? And, just how good are recruiters at interpreting what it all means? Are they playing psychologist or are they more like a first date trying to quickly get to know “the real you,” before possibly making the mistake of pursuing you further?

Maybe a little of both. Here is a sampling of these recruiters’ favoured questions and advice—but visit the Web site <http://www.ResumeDoctor.com> for the full list:

Many job applicants find the queries *Why are you looking for a job?* *Why are you leaving your current position?* to be problematic if they left due to interpersonal discord or were forced out.

Here’s some encouraging news from recruiters: Common acceptable reasons for leaving include: looking for a new challenge; current employer is downsizing; current employer is relocating; advancement opportunities are very limited with current employer; business is poor and the company’s financial situation is looking insecure; and relocating to be with a significant other.

Common reasons that send up “red flags” are: fired from a recent position; personality conflicts with colleagues; and it is only about more money.

- **Recruiter Tip:** “If being fired was the reason for looking, try to avoid saying literally, ‘I was fired.’ Never lie, but simply state you had a ‘difference of opinion’ with your former employer. Luckily, many HR departments have policies regarding divulging in-depth information about a former [employee] except to confirm and deny salary history and dates of employment. If you were fired due to criminal activity, be extra careful and possibly seek the advice of an attorney.”

Another question that gets job candidates wringing their hands is *What are your weaknesses?*

Recruiters suggest being truthful and realistic—and when mentioning a weakness, be sure to include ways you hope to improve it.

- **Recruiter Tip:** “I am looking for honesty out of this question. ... It is a question that creates a dialogue between us. With dialogue, you get to know the person better. ... This is not really a make-or-break question. It is just one I like to ask because you can determine a lot about someone, i.e. if they are cocky, shy, timid, arrogant, liars, etc.”

Behavioural-based interview questions such as *Describe a time when you were faced with a challenging situation* probe past performance as an indicator of future performance.

According to the recruiters, this question is “designed to explore the candidate’s ability to work with a team, independently and to give them ... opportunity to describe their leadership skills. These types of questions usually lead the candidate to open up a bit and talk about other attributes ... in addition to their ‘hard skills’.”

- **Recruiter Tip:** “The interview process can be dangerous territory and it is important to watch your step in discussing questions concerning personality and demeanour. Open-ended and hypothetical questions have a tendency to draw the candidate out and be extremely revealing.”

It is worth saying again that preparing for all interviews is crucial when competing for work in today’s market. Determining the motivation behind the question is as important as anticipating it. As you enter your next interview, consider that this is your opportunity to distinguish yourself from the other candidates.

So, focus on your strengths, demonstrate your confidence by speaking realistically about yourself in neither timid nor overblown ways and believe in your

answers—so they ring true and clear. Now, that’s talking yourself into a job!

Tip of the Week

Michael Worthington, a partner at ResumeDoctor.com and a former recruiter, wants candidates to know it is frustrating for interviewers if the candidate has not researched the company. He suggests candidates need this information to ask intelligent questions and use the information to gauge their own interest and fit. A good place to start your research is on the Internet.

Telling an interviewer about yourself

It’s not just a matter of what you say, but how you say it.

Michael Shekter
February 6, 2004

Q: What should be the appropriate answer/reply to the question “Tell us about yourself?” asked by an interviewer? How can we begin to answer and what can we say about our work and education history?

Minesh Patel

A: It’s not just a matter of “what” you say, but “how” you say it.

The question is designed to do two things:

1. Assess what you think are the most important and interesting things about yourself—if you say “I dunno—I guess I’m sort of average, etc” the questioner will lose interest—do you know what you are about?
2. See how well you can answer an ambiguous question. You could go on for hours answering the question “Tell us about yourself”—but who wants to listen. Rather, the questioner wants to see if you can put together a concise, intelligent, well put together answer.

So—what to do. Give a real “Topline” account of yourself—hit all the key points from the beginning.

I was born in (City, province, country) Went to school (i.e. university—we all know you went to grade school) where? Have worked for the last X years at...

You may also want to throw in some stuff about your personal life. It doesn't necessarily have to be your marital status and family status if you don't want it to be, but you might want to say “I enjoy fly fishing in my spare time”.

It gives a rounded version of you and your personality, which speaks to “fit” in an organization.

Make sure you practice this answer so that it can be done concisely.

Good Luck

Fail to ask questions and you'll fail the interview

Barbara Simmons

August 13, 2003

Of the following five behaviours exhibited by job candidates, what do you think recruiters find most inexcusable?

- Poor personal appearance
- Overemphasis on money
- Failure to look at interviewer when being interviewed
- Failure to ask questions
- Late arrival to the interview

One hundred and fifty recruiters, job coaches and hiring managers surveyed by John Kador, author of *201 Best Questions to Ask on Your Interview*, selected the fourth category as most inexcusable in an interview. “Job seekers who fail to ask at least a

few intelligent questions are destined to remain job seekers.”

Preparing cogent questions is essential in a job interview—yet it sometimes gets lost in the myriad of things you need to remember to do.

Unwittingly, some candidates think asking questions is just not important, or they don't want to ruin that “up” feeling when things seem to be going so well, or worse, they assume the interviewer covered all the bases just fine. Big mistake.

Interviewers assign meanings to questions pertaining to the responsibilities of the position, the needs of the department/project, organizational ethics and values and objectives because such questioning:

- can show an interest in and an understanding of the host organization;
- creates a learning opportunity for both sides—the candidate learns more about the culture and needs of the company and the interviewer can more easily gauge the candidate's thinking and ability to prioritize what is important;
- helps direct or redirect the flow and focus of the discussion;
- may enable the candidate to quickly address any misgivings the interviewer has about his or her candidacy.

By treating the interview as an exchange of information your questions can impress an employer and showcase your skills and accomplishments. At the same time, your questions and the employer's answers can help you to determine if this is a place in which you would like to work. You are interviewing the employer as much as being interviewed.

Combine what you have learned from your pre-interview research with the information you hear in their answers, and you might learn about inherent company problems, such as solvency, or get a sense

of whether the organization is genuinely interested and invested in your career success.

As in all aspects of preparing for your interviews, let your logic guide you. Don't ask throwaway questions—those that you can easily get basic answers to elsewhere, such as on the company Web site, in an annual report or by conducting internal information interviews.

You won't go wrong if you prepare questions that pertain to meeting the needs of the employer, such as immediate problems to be addressed: "What is the first assignment I would be working on and why is it important?" Or, "If I were the successful candidate, what would you expect me to accomplish within my first six months?"

For people starting their careers, good questions could focus on training opportunities and long term-growth of the company—an indicator of your genuine interest to stay put for a while and grow in the job.

Use this opportunity to distinguish yourself from your competition by being conversant with the services or products of the organization. You may have more than one interview. So, as you proceed, ask your questions with interest, enthusiasm and confidence.

To determine good questions to ask your interviewers, be guided by your field or industry. For instance, what may be strong questions for teachers to ask may not be valid for computer programmers or bank tellers. So, think strategically.

Start by checking the Internet on your field. For example, teachers can type "questions to ask in education interviews" and they will find the Web site <http://www.buffalostate.edu/~cdc/edu-questions.html>.

You might not find Internet resources with sample questions relevant to your specific field, but be sure to review both industry-targeted and all-purpose job search books as a guide. Compose your own

questions that reflect what you truly want and need to know about this position, company and industry.

To ensure you don't forget to ask your questions and to demonstrate you have prepared, write them down in a small but professional notepad the night before your interview and refer to it when appropriate.

How many questions you ask and when you ask them can depend on the format of the interview. You may be encouraged to ask questions throughout the meeting, or be instructed to hold your questions until the end of the interview.

You may get to ask only a few questions, but, prepare at least six specific questions based on the results of your research. During the discussion, some of your questions might be answered, but if you take notes, you'll be able to incorporate this new information into good questions as well.

Review these guidelines when preparing. Pay attention to framing your questions. A good approach is: "In your opinion..." By keeping questions open-ended—for instance, asking "How does your company...?" rather than "Does your company...?" avoids getting just "yes" or "no" answers.

Keep your questions short, uncomplicated and relevant. After asking each one, give the employer time to answer—and don't interrupt.

Now when the interviewer asks, "Do you have any questions for me?" you'll be ready!

Tip of the Week

For a range of questions to ask during interviews with human resources staff, headhunters, recruiters, hiring managers, company founders and owners, review John Kador's *201 Best Questions to Ask on Your Interview* (McGraw-Hill).

Jokes in interviews no laughing matter

Barbara Simmons

January 27, 2004

To joke or not to joke in a job interview? This short but compelling question is actually surrounded by many complexities. Used improperly by a job candidate, a remark that seems humorous, quick-witted and spontaneous can have far from funny results.

The use of humour is something most candidates don't even think about until they are faced with the situation and the uncertainty of what is and is not appropriate. While humour can often defuse or relax a situation, it can also backfire and ruin a candidate's performance.

That is likely what happened to Joe (who asked his real name not be used). Joe is an educator who knows his way around interviews, having had many in his career. But even he was not prepared for what happened in one recent interview: "As I sat down to meet the small panel of interviewers, I took out my Thermos of water. It is just something I always bring so that I don't ruin my presentation with a dry mouth and delivery. This time, one of the interviewers jokingly said, 'Maybe he has something harder than water in that Thermos,' and everyone laughed. At the same time, I joined the laughter and joked back, 'Yes, just a little vodka' and made the motion of chugging down the contents.

"We all laughed, but after the interview I wondered how that might have been perceived by them. I never would have said anything like that without cause, but I wanted them to know that I was relaxed enough to go with the flow. It seemed natural to do at the time. But, these were people I didn't know at all and, because I didn't get the job, I am still wondering."

Maybe it wasn't the attempt at clever repartee that resulted in the lack of an offer, but it is possible such humour had an effect on the impression he made.

If Joe had been in another industry, joking about liquor may not have been an issue to worry about, but in his field, the message his interview panel received might have been that his judgment was questionable.

As in all post-interview reflections, identifying what may have gone wrong is critical in doing better the next time, but most candidates never think to consider that it was their use of humour to sidestep a question that may be problematic.

For example, many people dread the interview question, “What is a weakness of yours?” It is a question that often seems to lull candidates into offering what they think is a funny or clever answer, but overused responses such as “chocolate,” or “ask my wife” can actually be evasive or manipulative and an annoying time waster to interviewers.

The interviewer is trying to determine if the candidate is self-aware, has any fault that could interfere with doing the job, or requires additional training in an area that needs attention. It is a serious and important question that merits a well thought-out answer.

Tom Washington, author of *Interview Power* (Mount Vernon Press) makes a point of advising job candidates that “employers are not looking for the life of the party, or the person with a thousand jokes. ... (They) want people who work well with others, are co-operative, considerate and friendly, and who are enjoyable to be around.”

There are many positive reasons and ways to use your humour in an interview:

- A light, gentle and non-disparaging kind of humour can lessen the tension and give the interviewer a sense of who you are.
- It can demonstrate how you might handle high-pressure situations.

- It is a way to show you can take a joke when the humour is appropriate.
- Inclusive humour can be an exceptional attribute as it can demonstrate you have a sense of fun—something well-regarded in the day-to-day seriousness in most workplaces.

A challenge is what to do if an interviewer tells a joke or uses inappropriate humour in the interview. For the jokes and humour that are benign or funny, candidates would do well to laugh at the interviewer's joke, but not fall on the floor laughing at it. But many job candidates are naturally nonplussed when the interviewer displays questionable taste or makes racist, sexist jokes, or uses ridicule of any type. What to do? Some people might laugh out of embarrassment or misguided courtesy, others might walk out and abort the interview. In today's diverse workplace, joking and the use of humour is actually fraught with other challenges, such as what is funny to one person may be misinterpreted by or offensive to others.

Be extra cautious in a meal interview, where everyone is seemingly more relaxed. Be cognizant of either initiating or responding to inappropriate humour, or using humour inappropriately by matching it, or escalating it. You are still in a job interview and being evaluated every step in the process.

To joke or not to joke in an interview? Clearly, that's a question to start thinking about now.



Support Questions
(do not send in for evaluation)

11. Write a dialogue, complete with stage instructions, for *part* of an interview you might have with the company for which you wrote the cover letter. The interview should be challenging—it should include difficult questions, and inappropriate remarks by the interviewer. Have yourself perform in as ideal a way as you can imagine. A real interview rarely lasts for less than 20 minutes, which would turn into quite a long writing assignment. For this assignment, aim for 300 to 500 words, and present only a portion of the complete interview. Introduce it properly, though—for example, you might write:

It is 10 minutes into the interview. I am being interviewed by a woman and a man. Some of the usual questions have been asked, such as “Why are you interested in this position?” and “What skills would you bring to this position?” So far, so good—both the interviewers seem to like my answers and have been smiling encouragingly. Then the woman asks:

Continue, using actual dialogue, until you reach a convenient break.

12. Take a look at the following ethical problem, and then answer the question that it poses.

You have been looking for full-time work for a year but the best you can come up with is a series of short-term, dead-end contract jobs. A friend says it’s because you are too honest. He says you should exaggerate your experience and skills on your resumé and tell a few white lies, if necessary, in job interviews. Everyone does it, he says, and the chances of anyone catching you are remote. Should you take his advice?

Think about it, and then write down your advice in a paragraph or two.

Volunteer Work

One good way to gain experience to put on your resumé is to volunteer. There are lots of opportunities to do meaningful work and learn valuable skills and knowledge while offering your services without pay. If you can possibly afford it, volunteer work can be as useful as some training programs in preparing you for a job and making you more employable. Here is an article about a person who volunteered in another country.

Helping out

by **Scott Edmonds**

Although looking for sea turtles and putting together chicken coops might sound like child's play, Sherene Nabatian says the activities she did while on a 10-week volunteering excursion to Guyana really made her grow up.

"I was looking for something meaningful and worthwhile to do between graduating from high school and starting university," says Nabatian, 18, who will attend the University of British Columbia in September. "Volunteering in Guyana was the perfect answer."

While Nabatian's desire to help others took her far from her home in Ottawa, it isn't the only way to make a difference. There are tons of rewarding ways to contribute your time and effort in your own community.

In 1999, it became mandatory for high school students in Ontario to complete at least 40 hours of volunteer work to graduate. In other provinces, students can get credit for volunteering their time. Some young people just want to be given the satisfaction of lending a hand to those in need.

Whatever your reasons for volunteering, you'll be able to make an impact on others and gain valuable skills at the same time.

Seventeen-year-old Nafisa Jadavji started volunteering when she was 12 and, despite having a part-time job and a heavy course load at school, she doesn't plan on stopping any time soon.

"I can't stand to stay at home and laze around," Jadavji says. "It's just kind of built in me to volunteer."

Jadavji, who lives in Calgary, has been assigned to various projects. They range from painting murals to brighten up construction sites to helping out at a day camp for physically challenged youths. Recently, while taking care of children at a women's shelter as their mothers were getting counselling, Jadavji was told by a worker that her presence was invaluable.

"Before she said that to me, I thought it was just babysitting, having fun with the kids. But when she made me realize that I was actually helping these women get a second chance at life, I thought, 'wow, I feel so amazing right now,'" she says.

Making the decision to volunteer your time is a selfless one. After all, why would you want to spend your free time doing something you're not even getting paid for?

Besides the fact that being selfless is a good thing, in the long run it will pay other dividends too, Jadavji and Nabatian both agree.

The skills you will get from applying yourself to different volunteering situations will count for a lot when you apply for a "real" job or for college or university.

It can be tough to get a job without experience, but how do you get experience without a job? That's where volunteering comes in.

When Jadavji applied for her part-time job at a Calgary public library, she brought with her a portfolio of the volunteering projects she'd been involved with.

“They were really impressed that I had already done so much,” she says.

Listing all of the skills she’s gained would take a long time, Jadavji says, but some of the more valuable ones include time management, organization and leadership. She has also learned about people with disabilities and addictions.

While in Guyana, Nabatian says she gained “a ton of confidence” to keep travelling and volunteering.

During her 10-week stay in the South American country—arranged through the Toronto office of Youth Challenge International—Nabatian was called on to do everything from painting schools to teaching English, and from monitoring sea turtles to building chicken coops at a women’s shelter.

“To be honest, I think (the people I helped) impacted me more than I impacted them,” she says. That’s an important thing for youth volunteers to realize.

“I think I’m a much richer person (since volunteering in Guyana), and I think everyone I come into contact with will in some way benefit from my experience there.”



Key Question

Save your answers to the Key Questions in your Course Journal or e-Journal.

3. In an opinion essay of about **750 words**, give reasons to support your view that volunteering is or is not a good idea for a job seeker. Choose a point of view, and make that your thesis statement. Then develop three reasons to support your position, each in a separate paragraph. Write a conclusion that summarizes your main points, in the fifth paragraph. Use examples and precise, descriptive language to develop your supporting reasons. **(75 marks)**

The following rubric will be used to evaluate your answer.

Rubric for Key Question 3

Categories	Below Level 1 (0–49%)	Level 1 (50–59%)	Level 2 (60–69%)	Level 3 (70–79%)	Level 4 (80–100%)
Knowledge/ Understanding	ideas and/or facts are inaccurate and/or unclear	a few ideas or facts are accurate though minimally presented	some ideas and/or facts are accurately and clearly presented	ideas and facts are accurately, clearly, and adequately presented	ideas and facts are presented accurately, clearly, and in detail
/20	0–9	10–11	12–13	14–15	16–20
Thinking/Inquiry	there is no thesis; there is no supporting material or support is unclear, irrelevant, or not connected to thesis	thesis is stated; there are some examples, facts, quotes, or statistics but they are irrelevant or are not connected to thesis	thesis is stated; there are some clear examples, facts, quotes, or statistics but they are not all relevant or connected to thesis	thesis is stated; relevant examples, facts, quotes, or statistics effectively support thesis	thesis is stated; relevant examples, facts, quotes, or statistics effectively support thesis, and raise counter-examples and/or complexities
/20	0–9	10–11	12–13	14–15	16–20
Communication	no discernible essay structure: introduction, body, and conclusion; little organization evident	introduction, body, and concluding paragraphs may be present but they do not all fulfill their roles, even mechanically; body paragraphs are not unified and do not follow a logical order	introduction, body, and concluding paragraphs are discernible and fulfill their roles mechanically; body paragraphs are not unified and/or do not follow a logical order	introduction clearly presents thesis; body paragraphs are unified and logically ordered, one for each supporting point; conclusion summarizes main points and provides closure	introduction engages reader while integrating a clear statement of thesis; body paragraphs are unified, logically ordered, and effectively linked to one another; conclusion summarizes main points and provides closure
/20	0–9	10–11	12–13	14–15	16–20
Application	spelling and/or grammar errors obscure meaning in at least one place	spelling and/or grammar errors distract reader	some errors in spelling and grammar, but they do not distract reader	few errors in spelling and grammar	no, or almost no errors in spelling and grammar
/15	0–7	8	9–10	11	12–15

Now go on to Lesson 4. Remember, you do not send your journal to the Independent Learning Centre until you have completed Unit 1 (Lessons 1 to 5).