

## PREPARING FOR INTERVIEWS

Whether you are participating in a mock interview or on-campus interview program, now is the time to start thinking about your responses. Remember, you could be asked a question about anything on your resume so you need to be prepared to discuss any specific entry from your undergraduate thesis to your most current work experience.

To prepare for a job interview, consider which are the most important skills and experiences you would bring to the role as well as questions you have about the organization and the position. Each of your answers should be concise, organized and meaningful. Also, be sure to research any employer you meet with so you have an understanding of their strong practice areas, major clients, policies, and recent newsworthy cases.

Below are some sample interview questions, guidance about preparing answers to the most frequently asked questions, and sample questions you can ask. **You will not be asked all of these questions in any one interview, but preparing to answer these questions will provide you with a strong foundation for any interview.**

### **GUIDE TO ANSWERING FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

Tell me about yourself.

- This question is often asked at the start of an interview, designed to learn about how you communicate and your thought process. It can set the tone for the interview, with the interviewer asking follow-up questions based on what you discuss. Your answer should be thorough, but brief.
- The interviewer wants to hear information relevant to the position for which you are interviewing. Consider speaking about prior work or internship experience, what led you to law school, what skills you have, or how your background and experience make you a good candidate.
- You can discuss something personal as long as it is relevant to why you are interviewing for this type of job. For example, if you worked your way through college, if you grew up overseas and came to the US for college or law school.

Why should I hire you?

- This is similar to “what are your strengths,” because the interviewers want to hear how you describe your traits and what will make you valuable to the firm or company.
- Think about what skills and personality traits you possess and how they will serve you well in the position. For example, you can draw upon experiences you have had in prior positions that make you valuable, such as having a strong work ethic, attention to detail, strong writing skills, research skills, working on teams, etc.
- You might also use this question to highlight anything that makes you unique, languages that you speak, quantitative skills, a science background or a demonstrated interest in a specific industry or sector.

What do you consider to be your greatest strengths and weaknesses?

- For strengths, consider the skills that the position requires and how to demonstrate how you have used this skill in prior experience. Remember that firms are primarily interested in answers where you are focused on their client needs.
- For example, if you are good at bringing a team together, give an example of how you did this in a work or volunteer setting.
- For weaknesses, consider the ways in which this weakness has taught you how to compensate or learn from prior mistakes.
- For example, some weaknesses in moderation could be considered useful. A perfectionist in moderation is someone who is detail-oriented.

What do you see yourself doing five years from now?

- Ideally, your five year plans will be consistent with the position for which are interviewing. You might respond by saying that you will be working serving clients in a specific field like healthcare. This is not the time to reveal your plan to form a start-up with your college roommate.
- It is helpful to discuss wanting to grow as a professional and to be specific - what kinds of tasks might you be working on in five years. What level of attorney would you be? If you are a rising 2L, you would be a third year associate. What kinds of tasks might a third year associate be doing?

Tell me something about yourself that is not on your resume.

- This can be a challenging question if you are not prepared! One possibility is to deliberately leave something off of your resume in hopes that you will be asked this question. That is not recommended unless you have a lot of very interesting things to say as it is. Another is to amplify something that is on the resume, and to go far beyond it ("You can see that my resume lists x, but what it does not say is y and z.")
- In general, think about something that shows you in a positive light, specifically something about your values, your attitude, or your abilities.
- If you choose something outside of your professional career, choose something intrinsically interesting or that shows commitment to something difficult over time. Using that approach, the key is to show yourself to be a well-rounded person. If possible, surprise the interviewer by mentioning something that goes "against type." Examples might be a patent lawyer who also does salsa dance, or a shy-seeming person who does improv comedy for fun.

What law school courses did you like best? Least? Why?

- Keep in mind that this may not only be a question about your interests, but also a way to evaluate how you think.
- You may also be asked to talk about a particular case or issue you found interesting in follow-up to this question.

How would you describe your ideal job following graduation? This question could incorporate:

- the skills you would like to be using, for example, negotiating, analyzing data, researching, counseling clients, drafting, making oral arguments, etc.;
- the practice area(s) you would like to pursue, for example mergers & acquisitions, criminal defense, real estate, immigration, etc.; and
- the office environment you would like to work in, for example a large law firm, small law firm, government agency, non-profit organization, etc.

Tell me about a time you had to overcome an obstacle.

- This is an example of a behavioral interview question. Firms develop these to determine whether an associate has the core competencies the firm looks for in associates. Examples that demonstrate teamwork, leadership and attentive listening and communication are all “good” answers.
- To prepare, consider the firm’s stated values from their website. Consider how your experience in the workplace or student activity reflects these values.

Why did you choose to do [x]? (X = anything on the resume)

- Think about how X [interest or experience] could help you as a lawyer. Consider what you learned from the experience and how it may have informed your professional choices and/or developed your professional skills.
- Keep in mind that this question can be about how you make decisions as well as about the experience of the activity.

Do you think that your grades are a good indication of overall abilities?

- This is often a nice way for interviewers to ask you about suboptimal grades.
- Be confident and address the issue head-on. Don’t appear to want to avoid the topic or are making excuses or blaming something/someone else. Look the interviewer in the eye, nod, and acknowledge that the grade(s) to you are suboptimal, **but...**
- **then segue into your other strengths**, which come from different facets of your background and abilities. For example: transferable skills from previous jobs or leadership roles, public speaking, strong writing and research skills, attention to detail, managing many deadlines at once, business or financial acumen, prior degrees and expertise, providing excellent client services with timeliness, empathy, pragmatic understanding of their business or individual circumstances, etc. Bring up specific examples to highlight these strengths. Interviewers will appreciate your demonstration of self-awareness.
- Other points you can raise could include: adjusting to school life after time off, pointing to an upward trend in grades the next semester, and working hard and learning from the experience.

Why are you interested in our (firm, company, organization)?

- This is an opportunity to show that you have prepared for the interview and that you are thoughtful and intentional about wanting a job with that particular organization.
- Interviewers love to hear enthusiasm, so smile and talk excitedly about them and it being a great opportunity for you. As a baseline, read the firm's website and about their practice areas that interest you and who the important players are at their organization/practice area. Look at their recent press releases. Conduct a Google search and read news about the organization—any high profile publicly announced deals/matters on behalf of clients, or the organization's own developments (e.g., mergers, expansions, new hires).
- Talk about the organization's culture and how that aligns with your aspirations and disposition. (This can be from your conversations with upperclassmen, alumni at the firm, or friends/other contacts you have spoken to, panels with their lawyers you have attended at CLS).
- Factors you could mention that make a compelling connection to the organization: your geographical preference, the type of clients (e.g., buy vs. sell-side, white collar defense, predominantly issuer or underwriters-side, pro bono initiatives, etc.), working in large/small teams.

What was the main argument of your undergraduate thesis [or other publication listed on your resume]?

- Employers may ask this question to assess your reasoning skills, as well as out of interest. This question can be a way for an employer to assess how well prepared you may be to explain complex legal topics to internal and external clients.
- Be prepared with a succinct, organized explanation of the issues you addressed as well as your final conclusion.

How have your prior positions helped prepare you for a legal career?

- Consider the skills you developed in your prior positions, such as working with clients, analysis, working in teams, drafting, and other core legal skills.

## **ADDITIONAL FREQUENTLY ASKED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### **VALUES & MOTIVATION**

- Why did you choose the law as a career?
- What do you think it takes to be successful in a firm like ours?
- In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our practice?
- What motivates you to exert your greatest effort?
- How do you work under pressure? (Be prepared to answer with specific examples.)
- In what kind of work environment are you most comfortable?
- What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
- What are your long-range and short-range goals and objectives? How are you preparing to achieve them?
- What qualifications and personal qualities do you possess that make you think you will make a successful lawyer? (Be prepared to illustrate the qualities you list with specific examples.)

### **ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE**

- How do you like law school?
- What was your favorite course during your first year and why?
- Why did you choose your 1L elective?

### **BEHAVIORAL QUESTIONS**

With behavioral questions, employers may be evaluating both how you operate in a professional setting as well as how you think on your feet. Answers should be illustrative and specific.

- Describe a time when telling the truth was difficult.
- Tell me about a time when you worked on a team and your role.
- Discuss a time that you worked as a team leader.
- Tell me about a time you made a mistake. How did you handle it?

### **INTEREST IN POSITION**

- How did you learn about us?
- What criteria are you using to distinguish us from similar employers?
- Who else are you interviewing with? Why? (You may want to answer this question generally, e.g., “Other large New York [or D.C. or Bay Area] firms.”)
- Do you have a geographical preference? (Be prepared to discuss your commitment to a part of the country with which you have had no obvious or little prior contact.)

## **SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING AN INTERVIEW**

You will often be given an opportunity to ask questions of your interviewer. These questions should be informed; **you should refrain from asking questions that could be answered by review of the employer's website or other easily available sources.** You can use this opportunity to demonstrate your research on the employer and to build on what you may have already learned. Keep in mind that you could be evaluated on the judgment and thoughtfulness that you show in the types of questions you ask, as well as on how you answer the questions that are posed to you.

### **Questions about work/working conditions:**

What does a typical week look like for (someone in this position)?

How do entry-level associates progress through the office?

How much direct client contact can I expect to have during my first and second year?

How is work assigned?

What kinds of opportunities are available for someone who wants to work on a special project or with a particular partner?

How long does it normally take for a new associate to be able to participate in a trial?

### **Questions about the firm/organization:**

How do attorneys select practice area(s)?

How do attorneys develop working relationships with particular partners or particular clients?

What is the structure/management style?

### **Questions about the summer program:**

What types of projects do summers work on?

How are summer associates evaluated?

How is feedback provided during the summer?

How do summer associates get their assignments?

### **Questions about training:**

What kinds of ongoing training and professional development support is provided?

How are entry-level associates supervised?

How are associates evaluated?

**Questions about the firm's future plans:** (note: these questions should be asked tactfully and directed to a partner or more senior attorney.)

- How have you seen your practice evolve?
- Where are you focusing business development in your practice?
- Are there plans for future growth in the firm overall? If so where and in what practice areas? Where does the firm see itself in 5, 10, 20 years? If growth is expected, what type of growth is anticipated?
- Tell me about the long-term vision of the firm.

**Questions about firm policies and culture** (note: sensitivity should be shown when asking questions about policies tied to economic conditions.)

- What types of outside activities (bar-related and otherwise) are your lawyers involved with? How would you describe the firm's culture?
- How would you describe the personality of the firm?
- What do you think sets this firm apart from other firms of its type [size?]?

**Questions that come from your research:**

These questions can be particularly impressive because they display that you have done your research and are taking the time to educate yourself about the current legal market. Ex:

- In a recent article in the *New York Law Journal/Wall Street Journal/New York Times/Financial Times, etc.*, I read that your firm was involved in a significant case regarding...I found it interesting; can you tell me more about it?
- On your website, I read about the expansion of a certain practice group; can you tell me how this fits into your firm's overall plans for growth?

**Questions about the Interviewer:**

These questions can be easy "go to" questions because most interviewers enjoy talking about themselves. For example:

- What do you find most impressive/exciting about the firm?
- Why did you choose this firm?
- What is your favorite part of the work you do?
- What made you decide to pursue a career in [litigation]?

**Questions that are suggested by interviewer responses during the interview:**

"Earlier in our conversation you mentioned that.....Could you tell me whether....."

## **SAMPLE COMMENTS FROM EVALUATIONS**

The comments below are real responses from interviewers gathered from evaluations:

- “A very impressive, thoughtful person — one of the best I’ve seen this fall. Intelligent questions, well thought-out with realistic appraisal of New York practice in large firm.”
- “Candidate is outstanding — a polished and well-rounded individual with a profound awareness of her strengths and weaknesses. While she may have idealized practice somewhat, I feel she will succeed wherever she goes.”
- “He is quite a memorable interviewee. I think the best thing I can say about him is that I’d hate to be on the other side of a litigation in which he was participating. He’s very bright, open-minded and, with some reservations about his fitting in, a good prospect.”
- “Mature, pleasant, confident. Not really articulate — choice of words and ideas in conversation creates a plain, flat impression. I would like to see what courses went to make up the improved second year performance. I found it hard to form a judgment about how keen she is.”
- “A lukewarm candidate. A very pleasant person — almost too agreeable. I sensed a lack of self-confidence and defensiveness about past grades and the reason for her choosing the law.”
- “A bit goofy. I think he’s bright enough to do the work but I question whether he would mature quickly enough to be safe to turn loose on clients.”
- “I found her to be a very enjoyable person to talk to. She seems down to earth in her expectations about the practice and responds well to new ideas. My only concerns are New York contacts and whether her grades compare well with other summer applicants.”
- “Seemingly lacking any self-confidence. Agreed with everything I said — was left with the sense she’d have endorsed the most outrageous and irrational propositions I cared to advance.”
- “Never — I repeat, never — looked at me once during the entire interview. Seemed to be fascinated by various spots on the wall behind me — so intently that I once turned around myself to see what he was looking at. Altogether lacking in poise and self-assurance. And, unfortunately, I’m sure that this is more than just plain surface nervousness.”
- “I’m afraid I didn’t like this interviewee very much. His manner seemed pompous and pedantic. He spoke for great lengths of time without saying anything. There was no evidence that the applicant was extraordinarily bright or capable, but there was every indication that he is convinced that he is just that. I disagree.”

· “I could not engage this interviewee in conversation in any depth on any questions. He seemed bored at what I was asking and bored at having to ask me questions. I doubt if the interviewee would be a hard worker or enthusiastic about his work. He said he had heard we have a reputation for working our people very hard. He also said he could accept that, however, as he thinks it is true of any Wall Street firm and perhaps true of any legal job. The attitude evidenced by this response suggests the interviewee really does not want to make the commitment to his work which we require.”

· “He’s a real know-it-all who clearly believes no one else knows a thing. From his record and his conversation I’d say he’s clearly bright. But so what? I wouldn’t want him working for me and I’d never inflict him on our clients, associates — or our secretaries. In my experience arrogance of this magnitude usually marks some real insecurity. In this case, though, I don’t see it ever moderating.”