Interviewing Skills:

Interview Objectives
An interview is a meeting of two (or more) face-to-face to discuss employment. There is no set recipe for a successful interview, but the objectives are:

1. To elaborate resume information
2. To supply info NOT on resume (personality, communication skills, general “fit”)
3. To enable you to gain additional info on the employer

Types of Interviews
Screening: This is a general interview aimed at weeding out those who don’t meet the requirements or who don’t fit with the organizational culture. Common places screening interviews are held include on-campus interviews and career fairs. The purpose of a screening interview is to eliminate unqualified candidates.

Selection: A selection interview is a longer, more thorough interview geared toward identifying more qualified candidates. It is often an entire day incorporating three to five people. It might even include a dinner the evening before. Most likely this type of interview is held on site including a tour of the facility.

In the Days Before the Interview
1. Define your Criteria
Clearly define your goals before the interview. What can’t you live without in this position? What is important to you in a career?

Some things to consider may be any of the following:
- Location (city, suburb, region of country)
- Distance drive from family
- Salary vs. cost-of-living
- Culture of organization
- Travel required
- Opportunity for advancement
- Benefits (health insurance, vacation, training program, sick days, retirement plan)
- Fit with co-workers
- Fit with direct supervisor
- Office environment (casual, business)
- Relocation possibilities

2. Link Your Skills to the Skills They Seek
Employers want to see that you possess the skill necessary to successfully perform the job they are posting. An interview is an ideal time to link your experience and skills with skills the employer has listed they are looking for. It will be important for you to make this linkage for them – show them how the experiences, skills, and education you have matches what they need in a specific position.
3. Know the Organization
Research the company, the industry and the competition. Most company information can be found using the Internet. You may also call the company directly and request some company literature be sent to you. When conducting your research focus on locating the following information.

- The function and size of the organization
- The potential for expansion or growth
- The products or services provided
- Typical salary ranges for your desired position
- Geographical locations
- Research or practical emphasis
- Career advancement possibilities
- Opportunities for training or further education
- Stability of the financial condition or backing

4. Practice, Practice, Practice
- Begin by preparing your 60-second personal statement: Your answer to the, “Tell me about yourself,” question.
- Write out at least five success stories using the STAR model to answer behavioral interview questions (“Tell me about a time when…” or “Give me an example of a time…”).
- Practice verbally processing through answers to potential questions.

Behavioral Based Interviewing
Behavioral based interviewers believe that past behavior is an accurate predictor of future behavior. They concentrate many of their questions on situations that candidates have encountered in the past. What they want to hear is an illustration of your behavior. Typical questions focus on understanding a specific situation or challenge that you have faced that will demonstrate a particular quality or skill that is relevant to the position. To maximize the effectiveness of your answers, try using the STAR system.

S = situation
T = task
A = action
R = result

5. Other items to keep in mind
- Research salary data and determine your worth (salary.com). Determine your salary needs based on your living expenses — what is your bottom line?
- Get permission from your references to use their names.

Before You Go to the Interview
1. What To Wear
SUIT, SUIT, SUIT! Employers can assume this is the best you'll ever look. You may be inclined to buy a fun trendy suit, REFRAIN. The more conservative and classic, the better. For more detailed information, refer to the handout Dress for Success.
2. **Items to bring with you to the interview:**
   - Several copies of your resume on quality paper.
   - A copy of your references.
   - A pad of paper on which to take notes (notes are optional). To look even more professional, invest in a leather portfolio. Keep your questions, paper for notes, and a nice pen inside.
   - Directions to the interview site and a phone number of the main interviewer (in case you need to call).

**Upon Arrival**
- Arrive early — enter the building 10 minutes before your appointment.
- Treat receptionist with respect. If she is not formally part of the search committee, you can bet she is informally.
- Smile and greet everyone with a firm handshake. Make eye contact and use names when introduced.
- Review your prepared stories and answers.
- Go to the restroom and check your appearance one last time.
- Announce yourself to the receptionist in a professional manner.

**During the Interview**
- Try to focus on the points you have prepared without sounding rehearsed or stiff.
- Be yourself and focus on positive qualities.
- Never apologize for your lack of anything.
- For every answer you give, you back up everything you say with examples.
- If you talk quickly, count to 3 before answering questions right away. Take a couple seconds to think about what you are going to say so your response is accurate and appropriate.
- Relax and enjoy the conversation. Learn what you can about the company.
- Ask questions and listen; read between the lines.
- At the conclusion, thank the interviewer and determine the next steps.
- Ask for the interviewer’s business card so you can send a follow-up letter.

**After the Interview**
- As soon as possible, write down what you are thinking and feeling.
- Later in the day, look at what you wrote and assess how you did.
- Write a follow-up thank-you letter, reminding the interviewer of your qualities—maybe something that you forgot to say in the interview (send within 24 hrs).

**Common Interview Questions**
**Indicates a behavioral question**

1. **Education**
   - *How and why did you select Mount Mary College?* The important section of this question is in the word ‘how’. The manner in which you make large decisions is vital information for an interviewer, who believes that you probably will be quite consistent in your decision-making mode.
CAREER DEVELOPMENT

• **What led you to this major and what courses did you like most/least?** Let the love of your favorite subject matter show! If your major or classes that you enjoyed the most do not seem to have a direct connection to the position you are interviewing for, concentrate on the skills that these classes developed. If the main reason that you didn’t like coursework was the professor, the interviewer will wonder about your ability to be productive in the occasional difficult work situations that are common to any professional position.

• **How has your education prepared you for this job? In which respects are you best prepared or most knowledgeable?** Your education has given you much. Be prepared to discuss three areas – theory/facts via coursework, hands-on experience (labs, internships, projects, co-ops) and the total experience of a Mount Mary College education (include your major, the core curriculum and your volunteer activities).

• **What is your GPA and how does it reflect your academic abilities?** All employers wonder if you are mature, if you will be a hard worker or if you will prefer to do the minimum that is required. This question is a test of those qualities. What is your maturity level? How would you describe your work ethic? If your GPA is low, be prepared to talk about it. Hopefully, it will have been rising each semester and will be highest in your major.

• **What honors or awards have you received?**

2. Skills/Achievements

• **Tell me about yourself. / How would you describe yourself?** Do not get rattled by these questions, and do not go into your life story. These questions are meant to probe not only your ability to do the job but also your preparation for the interview. Your preparation (or lack of it) will be immediately showcased. Have you thought about and are you able to give illustrations of your skills, knowledge bases and traits that match the position? Think of the qualities that employers look for: Do you have an example of how you demonstrated some of these qualities? If you do, then state that. If that doesn’t work for you, then qualify the question. Ask “What area of my background would be most relevant to you?” and take it from there.

• **Why should I hire you?** This is where you should really sell yourself. Highlight areas from your background that relate to the company’s needs. Recap the interviewer’s description of the job, matching it with your skills.

• **What are your skills or strengths?** Share a short list of 3-5 transferable skills that are critical to performing this position well. A good way to assess which skills are most important is to study the job description and the ad. Usually the responsibilities are listed in order of importance and require specific skills to perform them well. Then design at least one story in STAR format (situation, task, action, result) that will illustrate this strength. Isolate high points in your background. Always back your answers with specific examples. Your biggest mistake here is to sell yourself short!
• **How do you think a friend or professor who knows you well would describe you?** Of course, be honest. Think about any compliments you have gotten on projects or activities. Don’t just tell characteristics, but include examples of why friends or professors would describe you that way.

• **In what areas do you need to improve / What do you consider your biggest weakness?** Everyone has weaknesses, but a careless answer can virtually end your consideration as a candidate, so prepare this answer thoughtfully before you arrive. The interviewer is trying to find out 1) are you aware of your weaknesses, 2) have you thought about how you might improve, and 3) are your weak points going to jeopardize how you perform? There are three ways to approach this question. If there is a minor part of the job about which you lack knowledge, but will gain it quickly, use that. Be careful using this one. Put the weakness in the past. You had it once, but now you are over it. Design the answer so that your weakness is ultimately a positive.

• **What accomplishment has given you the greatest satisfaction?**

• **What is the toughest challenge you have faced? Why?** In your story, include the skills, traits and knowledge that aided in this achievement. Use the STAR system and be certain to end with positive results. Make sure you are proud of something you accomplished rather than being proud of someone or something else of which you had no contribution.

• **As we make our decision about your fit for this position, what do you want us to remember about you?** These are typical wrap-up questions at the end of an interview. Always be ready to give a summary of your qualifications in 2-3 sentences. This could be your skills, personal traits, work ethic, or passion for the career. Make the answer short and spirited.

• **Can you work under pressure?** Don’t just give a yes or no answer; elaborate. Explain why. Give an example of a time when you felt that you were working under pressure. Talk about how you successfully dealt with the pressure.

3. **Work Experience/Environment**

• **Tell me about the position that has given you the most satisfaction.** Talk about the most career-related position you can. If you really loved organizing the last homecoming as a student leader, talk about that experience and the skills you used, relating it to your current field. If you loved planting flowers for your grandmother and you’re seeking an accounting position, the employer may wonder why you’re not pursuing a career as a green thumb.

• **What have you learned from your work / internship / co-op experiences?**

• **How have your extracurricular activities provided experience applicable to the workplace?** All of your life experiences are connected in some way. What skills, traits and work habits have you utilized and strengthened? Ideas for illustrations: positions of leadership, being an active responsible member, adding quality, or designing new programs.
• **Tell me about your favorite supervisor – your least favorite supervisor.** / Describe what you think would be an ideal relationship between a supervisor and a subordinate / What qualities does a successful manager possess? In order to assign you to an appropriate manager or section of the company for a second interview, the interviewer needs to know how you want to be supervised. He/she also wants to know what management styles displease you. This is a time for being able to succinctly describe the qualities and attitudes that you would desire in a supervisor. This is not a time for character assassination. Think about why you would want a supervisor to be supportive or hands-off or a mentor or give autonomy, etc. Be realistic in thinking about whether or not your potential supervisor is asking the question and what his or her style seems to be now. This is a good question to ask of him or her, too.

4. Tell me about a time:**

• **When you had a major problem and explain how you dealt with it.** / **When you made a poor decision and how you corrected it.** / **When you had to adapt to a difficult work situation.** / **When you worked with someone you disliked and how you handled the situation.** Describe these events as non-judgmentally as possible. Explain difficult situations using facts (not emotions) and be as succinct as possible. Discuss the event in a professional manner and even though the result may not have been ideal, remember to also share what you learned. Possible examples: Differences in work habits, work values, or ethical attitudes.

• **In what type of work environment are you most comfortable?**

• **How do you work under pressure?**

• **Will you be willing to relocate? Do you have a geographical preference or limitation? How much are you willing to travel?** Tell the truth. State amount of travel in terms of annual percentage. If you are willing to relocate, know what locations the company presently has and refer to them. You may need to ask questions about what type, how much, and to where you would be relocating or traveling. Be as flexible as you can. Remember, though, if you aren’t willing to do this, don’t accept the position if offered. A bad “fit” is the number one reason for leaving a position.

5. Traits/Values/Beliefs

• **What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?** Is it financial reward, work environment, the supervisor, helping others, variety, challenge, etc.? Employers want to assess this area because they know what factors they can and cannot provide.

• **How do you determine and evaluate success?** Do you have standards? What are they? What does quality mean to you? How will you know whether or not you are successful? How much do you depend on other people’s feedback?
• **What are your salary expectations?** Until you are offered a position, this question should not be answered. Right now you are searching for a position and a company that are a good match. If you share your ideas, and your expectations are significantly different than theirs (whether low or high), you may no longer be a candidate. If you both come to the conclusion that this could be an excellent situation, then you must be ready to discuss this subject. Before your first interview, conduct research on salaries in the industry, in this type of position, and in the geographical area. What is fair for you in terms of a total package? What do you need vs. what might you desire? Remember to assess benefits as well as the salary.

• **What two or three things are most important to you in your work?** Be honest here, too. But also be professional and career-oriented. Talk in terms of values such as: helping others, interacting with many different people, making tough decisions, having a variety of responsibilities, having the opportunity for advancement, being recognized for your contributions, making a difference in peoples’ lives, etc. Stay away from those more egocentric reasons such as pays well, great vacation and benefits package, fun social atmosphere, easy commute, cool uniform.

6. Career Plans and Goals
   • **Why did you choose this particular career field?**

   • **What are your long and short-range goals and objectives?** These questions are designed to find out 1) if you set goals, 2) if your goals are related to your profession or industry, and 3) if you have goals of pursuing excellence. People want to hire someone who is self-motivated, who wants to improve, and who has taken the time to establish a vision beyond today. An exact career goal is not necessary nor is a plan that stretches far into the future.

   • **How do you balance the needs of work and school with your personal life?** This is a time to discuss what balance means to you and how you achieve it. Employers are concerned about your physical, mental and emotional health because they believe a well-balanced employee will be productive. You may wish to talk about a few of your activities that you believe promote your well-being. Personal relationships are not of interest to the employer.

7. Specific to Organization
   • **Why are you seeking a position with our company?**

   • **Tell me what you know about our organization.** This is a test! It is assumed that, as a college student, you have the abilities to learn and to research. Now this company wants to know if you were motivated enough to have utilized these skills in learning about them. Know the company’s mission, its competencies and goals so that you can relate honestly to the issues that they believe are important. This question is one of the most important ones that interviewers ask. Interviewers want to know if you care about this company and what it does.