How To Ace A Job Interview: 7 Research-Backed Tips
Eric Barker | Barking up The Wrong Tree | 09.04.13

1) Be Similar To The Interviewer
“Be yourself!” can actually be a problem. If you want to know how to ace a job interview it’s important to note that study after study shows the key to being liked and being more influential is similarity.

Research shows you can take advantage of this by researching the interviewer and coming across as similar to them: After carefully transcribing and analyzing her interviews and field notes from observations in the firm, Rivera determined that, by the time a candidate had made it through the relevant resume screenings and landed an interview, her evaluation was not necessarily based on “maximizing skill—finding the person who was absolutely best at the soft or the hard dimensions of the job,” as Rivera puts it. Rather, the most common mechanism by which a candidate was evaluated was her similarity to her interviewer.

No lies are necessary. Think attitude. Do they come across as aggressive and hard-charging or calm and passive? Do they come across as cultured or school of hard knocks?

2) Timing Matters
You might not have much control over this but make an effort to manipulate the timing to your advantage.

Research shows interviews go better when:
• They’re earlier in the day.
• The weather is good.
• And, when you’re not interviewed on the same day as your strongest competition.

3) Frame The Conversation
First impressions matter even more than you think. And once they’re set, they are very hard to resist. Mastering first impressions is a key part of learning how to ace a job interview.

Research shows they’re the most important part of any job interview: By careful analysis, the researchers found that all of these factors influenced the final interview ratings, and that this was due to the way they shaped first impressions: after those first few minutes, there was little extra influence of these qualities across the rest of the interview.

Optimize first impressions from the outset by framing the conversation with a few well-rehearsed sentences regarding how you want to be perceived. This will end up being the structure the other person forms their memories around.

If you start out with a few well-rehearsed sentences about why you are the right person for the job, this first impression can help set the tone for your interview and for what is taken away from the meeting.

Persuasion expert Robert Cialdini, author of the classic book, Influence, slyly recommends asking them why they thought you might be good for the role. After people make positive public statements about you they will subconsciously feel the need to not contradict them.

4) Feel Powerful
People who felt powerful before going in to an interview performed better: Priming participants with feelings of power improves professional interview outcomes. In both studies, unaware judges significantly preferred the power-primed applicants.

As I’ve posted before, “fake it ‘til you make it” works.
How can you make sure you feel powerful? Harvard researcher Amy Cuddy recommends doing a "power pose" in private before the interview: Preparatory power posing is taking a few minutes before walking into a stressful interaction or situation to open up, occupy more space, and make yourself big. Stand with your feet apart and your hands on your hips, or with your arms reaching up in a ‘V.’ Or sit with your legs in front of you, feet propped up on desk or a table, leaning back, with your hands on the back of your head, fingers interlaced, and elbows pointing out.

Try power poses in the elevator, a bathroom stall, the stairwell... wherever you can find two minutes of privacy. Does striking poses in the bathroom sound silly to you? Don’t laugh — it works:

As predicted, high power posers performed better and were more likely to be chosen for hire, and this relationship was mediated only by presentation quality, not speech quality. Power pose condition had no effect on body posture during the social evaluation, thus highlighting the relationship between preparatory nonverbal behavior and subsequent performance.

What type of people naturally know how to ace a job interview? Narcissists. Now you don’t want to be overbearing but better to toot your own horn than to have it go untooted: Narcissists scored much higher in simulated job interviews than non-narcissists, researchers found. They pointed to narcissists’ innate tendency to promote themselves, in part by engaging and speaking at length, which implied confidence and expertise even when they were held to account by expert interviewers.

5) Have A Strong Handshake
Your handshake matters a lot more than you might think. Experts at the University of Iowa analyzing interactions in job interviews declared handshakes “more important than agreeableness, conscientiousness, or emotional stability.”

And it’s correlated with getting an offer: Five trained raters independently evaluated the quality of the handshake for each participant. Quality of handshake was related to interviewer hiring recommendations.

6) Know The Right Questions To Ask
Many people struggle with that moment in most interviews where they ask “Do you have any questions for us?” This is not only a good time to get information but it’s a great time to impress them with an insightful question.

Quora and Inc. offer a few winners:
• Thinking back to people who have been in this position previously, what differentiated the ones who were good from the ones who were really great?
• How would you describe the culture of the company?
• What do you expect me to accomplish in the first 60 to 90 days?
We can all agree that interviewing is a pretty imperfect way to evaluate a job candidate. For the interviewee, so much of the experience can feel like a game of guess-the-answer-in-the-interviewer’s-head. It’s hard to know if what you’re sharing is even remotely close to what the hiring manager is seeking. Luckily, there are a few phrases that are almost always on the mark. Given the opportunity, it’s a good idea to try and squeeze these three phrases somewhere into your interview.

1. “I’ve had a lot of success with that in the past.”
This is one phrase that’s sure to put a smile on your interviewer’s face. Beyond relevant experience, hiring managers love to hear that you not only have the skills they’re looking for, you excel at them. Of course, this single statement will only get you so far. Back it up with an example of a time where you did indeed excel at whatever skill is being evaluated. And when I say skill, I mean more than hard skills. Think: resolving a team conflict, finding a solution with limited data, leading a remote team, working independently, or meeting tight deadlines.

2. “I’m really excited about that.”
If you were interviewing two candidates who were pretty much identical in terms of the skills and relevant experiences they bring to the table, what would be the deciding factor? For many interviewers, it comes down to how excited the candidate was about the position and company. After all, someone who is enthusiastic inherently seems more motivated. Given the choice, I would definitely want the candidate who seemed really pumped to hit the ground running—wouldn’t you?
While it definitely makes sense to state upfront that you’re excited, you’ll also need to back up that claim by doing some company research. No one is going to believe you if you say you’re incredibly excited about the product, but then can’t explain why it’s better than the competition. Do your homework. Review the website, talk to people you know who work there, and read anything you can get your hands on that might be relevant.

3. “I actually just spoke with Sarah to learn more about that.”
Unfortunately, you’re probably not going to have everything the interviewer is looking for. That’s okay. Show how you’re willing to learn. More importantly, show that you are able to—and that you are, in fact, already learning.
To do this, first identify your areas of weakness—maybe you’re lacking one skill that’s listed in the job description, or you haven’t had much management experience. Then, find someone or something that can help you start learning and improving upon this area. It can be conducting an informational interview, starting an online course, or reading a book. Now, if this weakness comes up during an interview, you can say you’ve spoken with so-and-so or that you just started taking a class about it. This not only shows self-awareness, but also that you’ve already taken the initiative to improve upon this area. What more could a hiring manager ask for?
You’ll probably never know what’s going on inside your interviewer’s head, but at the very least you can know that these few phrases will go over well. Beyond that, keep practicing and with a little bit of luck, you’ll be through this stage in no time.
Like the dreaded “Tell me about yourself,” the question, “Why are you interested in this position?” is sure to come up in an interview.

And, even if it doesn’t, if you want the job you should get this sentiment across regardless. So, really, there’s no way around figuring out how to string together a coherent thought about why this being in this position makes sense for you (and for the company).

Luckily, there’s actually a pretty simple way to go about answering this question effectively without having to go through every big moment or transition in your life and career that’s brought you to this interview. Here’s a smart framework for how you should structure your answer.

**Step 1: Express Enthusiasm for the Company**

First things first, this is an excellent opportunity for you to show off what you know about the company. You can talk all day about how excited you are about joining the team, but nothing will trump actually knowing a thing or two about the place you’re interviewing with. So, to prepare, spend some time honing in on what you know about the company and select a few key factors to incorporate into your pitch for why you’re a good fit.

Say you’re interviewing for a small quantitative asset management company. The start of your answer might sound something like this:

“The first thing that caught my eye when I saw the position posted was definitely that it was at EFG Advisers. I know that you build a lot of your tools in-house, the team is small, and you run a variety of long- and short-term strategies in the U.S. equities markets using a quantitative approach.

Especially with smaller companies, it’s always impressive when a candidate knows a thing or two about what goes on at the company. And the best thing about this is you rarely have to go beyond reviewing the company website or having a quick conversation with a current or past employee to learn enough to sound like you’ve been following the company for a while.

**Step 2: Align Your Skills and Experiences With the Role**

Next, you want to sell why, exactly, you’re right for the role. There are two ways you can do this: You can either focus more on your experiences (what you’ve done before that brings you to this point) or your skills (especially helpful if you’re pivoting positions or industries).

Try to pinpoint what the main part of the role entails, plus a couple of the “desired skills” in the job description, and make sure you speak to that. Follow up your introduction to how excited you are about the company with why you’re a good fit:

“But the part that really spoke to me about this position was the chance to combine both the programming skills I gained from being a senior software engineer and my knack for quantitative analysis in a position that actively lets me engage with my growing interest in investing and portfolio management.

Keep it short—you’ll have plenty of opportunities to talk about how you got your skills or relevant stories throughout the interview—and just focus on highlighting a couple key relevant abilities or experiences for the position.

**Step 3: Connect to Your Career Trajectory**

Finally, you want to show that the position makes sense for where you’re going in your career. Ideally, you won’t give the impression that you’re just using the position as a stepping stone. Show that you’ll be around for the long haul, and your interviewer will feel more comfortable investing in you:
I’ve been interested in switching to finance for a while now and have been actively managing my own personal portfolio for a few years. Joining a quant shop makes sense to me because I think it’s one of the few places where I’ll still be able to use my technical skills and spend my day thinking about finance. I’m really excited to learn more and see how I’ll be able to contribute the firm.

Of course, you don’t have to state specifically that you see yourself in the position for a long time. Just show that you’ve given some thought to how the job makes sense for you now and that it continues to make sense for the foreseeable future.

String these three components together, and you have a response that will impress on three fronts: your knowledge and enthusiasm for the company, your relevant skills, and your general fit with the position. Plus, this framework has the added benefit of not stopping the flow of the conversation the way going through your entire life story would.
One of the hardest things about interviewing is balancing the need to get across your stellar qualifications with building rapport with your interviewer. The good news? The best way to achieve that balance is to do something you’ve been doing most of your life: Tell a story.

Stories, it turns out, are more powerful than you may know. Jennifer Aaker, professor of marketing at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, explains that stories are up to 22 times more memorable than facts alone. Our brains are just more active when we’re listening to a story. In fact, if you can tell a good story, you can actually synchronize your listener’s brain with your own. You can literally share the experience with someone else. Talk about making a connection!

You can tell stories when asked specifically—e.g., “Tell me about a time you worked with a difficult person,” but you can also do it when you’re not. It’s worth noting that many interviewers don’t conduct interviews for a living, so not all of them will be great at asking you questions that let you show off your skills. In other words, if your interviewer asks you, “How do you handle stress?” rather than “Tell me about a recent challenge you overcame,” you can still find a way to transition into a story. Try starting by answering the question quickly, then segueing into a story that backs up the statement you just made.

So, how do you do it? Follow these pointers to tell a good—and totally compelling—story in your next interview.

1. **Tell the Punch Line Early**
   You’re definitely trying to charm your interviewer, but ultimately you are not telling a joke. You should certainly pay attention to pacing the same way you would with a joke, but don’t save the main takeaway for the end (or you risk having him or her think that you misunderstood the question).

   For example, if you’re asked about a time you had to deal with failure and you launch into a story about how you won a prestigious local competition after weeks of hard work before explaining the eventually crushing loss at nationals—your interviewer is going to be very, very confused for a good bit while you get through the first half of your spiel.

   **Example:**
   I’d say the biggest personal failure in recent memory is when I completely botched the marketing for a professional development seminar our HR department was hosting.

2. **Give Some Context**
   That said, immediately after giving your interviewer a sense of what to expect, fill in the blanks and give some context in order to create the appropriate atmosphere for the story. Was the situation celebratory or tense? Who were the stakeholders? What did you have to lose? Taking a second to add these details will make the upcoming conflict or challenge that much more interesting.

   Some common setups for stories in interviews are:
   - Everything was going as planned until…
   - Everything was going wrong, and then something even worse happened…
   - The team was working hard for weeks, and then…

   **Example:**
   I was fairly new to my role as an HR coordinator, and I was eager to make a good impression. When I found out one of my favorite writers on leadership was going to be in town, I reached out to him on Twitter to see if he would be interested in speaking at our company. I really wasn’t expecting a response, but then he said yes!
3. Introduce the Situation or Challenge
Again, the challenge shouldn’t come as something unexpected to your interviewer. It also shouldn’t be something you dwell on too much during your response, so keep it short. The important thing to focus on is what you did to resolve the situation.

Because the conflict or challenge in your story is going to be the part of your answer that makes it relevant to your interviewer’s question (for example, “Tell me about a time you had to deal with failure, a slacking teammate, or an unexpected problem in your work”), it’s important to make sure you present this part as directly connected to what the interviewer wants to know. (In fact, if it makes sense, use the words your interviewer uses in the question to describe your challenge.)

Example:
He was only in town for a few days, so I needed to get this event together very, very quickly. I had to handle everything from finding a room that would accommodate a huge event to arranging for his hotel accommodations—all within a few hours—in order for him to confirm.

4. Describe Your Specific Actions
With the problem set up to solve, go into more detail about what you did to solve it. This is the part where you get to talk about yourself, your skills, and your qualifications, using your actions to illustrate what you’ve done—and what you can do. This should be the bulk of your story—it should definitely take longer to go through this than it does to set up the situation or challenge.

Another important thing to remember as you’re explaining how you overcame the challenge is to avoid too many uses of the word “we.” Certainly give credit to teammates if your story involves others, but remember that the interviewer is most interested in learning about your personal contributions.

Example:
So, I did exactly that. Because it was my sole initiative to bring this speaker, I managed the entire process of handling speaker fees and other accommodations as well as reserving space in our office and ordering food for the event. I spoke about the event to everyone I saw and posted about it on the company intranet boards.

5. Share the Results
Finally, don’t forget to tell your interviewer what happens in the end! Talk about the impact your actions made, and give your story some closure if for no other reason than having a nice way to end your answer.

If your story has a less than successful outcome, you should still share the results, but wrap up with some lessons learned from the experience. Ideally, you’ll also be able to tie your experience back to the role you’re interviewing for and how your skills are transferable.

Example:
Unfortunately, the turnout for the event was—abysmal. I hadn’t realized that in my previous company—of over 1000+ staff, I might add—the only way to get people to come to HR events was to speak to the heads of departments and have them strongly encourage their staff to attend. It was pretty embarrassing for me, but a great master class on the importance of understanding company culture. And, at least within the HR department, I became known as very social media savvy, so that was a nice bonus.

Now that you have a good sense of how to structure your stories in your interviews, try to quickly run through what you’re going to say before you say it: Here’s the situation, this is what the problem was, I did this to help, and here are the results. This will help with pacing and making sure you don’t spend too much time on any particular part of the answer. Practice following this structure for a few key stories from your work history a few times aloud before your interview, and you’ll be prepared for any question you get. Good luck!
Picture it: You’re on a job interview meeting the hiring manager and upper management. It couldn’t go any better. You’re hitting the ball out of the park with specific anecdotes to illustrate your skills and relevant experience as a spot-on match for the position you’re pursuing. And then, suddenly out of nowhere, things take a turn. You blurt out one or two keywords that curtails the momentum and makes them wonder, and then you have to back track only to realize the best way to handle the situation is to not murmur another word relevant to that topic.

That’s right, we’re talking about several words to avoid at all costs during any stage of interviews.

1. “Obsessed.” Yes, obsessed can connote an intense, passionate emotion, but when you say it in a prospective job situation, hiring managers might immediately think about “Fatal Attraction.” Considering the word technically means to talk or think about something too much, there’s another angle to it, too. Most hiring managers want to feel like they can hang out with the candidate in a job situation, that you fit well with the team and have something to shoot the breeze about aside from work. If you only live, breathe, eat and sleep work, you’re not a very well-rounded individual.

Words to use instead: You can get the message across by saying you’re passionate, captivated by, immersed in or hooked by the industry.

2. “And whatnot.” Here’s the thing about fillers like “whatnot” and “you know” – they’re just that. They don’t explain anything further and don’t demonstrate anything of substance. They merely add empty words. Hiring managers want to see that you’re articulate in a meaningful way, which sometimes means less is more. Think of some sentences as a tweet. Do you need to articulate what you’re saying in more than 140 characters aloud? Instead of saying, “I was responsible for leading a team of 10 people during year-end accruals and whatnot.” Simply delete the last two words and you’ll sound a lot more intelligent.

Words to use instead: Nothing. Silence is your friend. Try to visualize the sentence and simply cut out unnecessary words; this is particularly simple to do at the end of a sentence. Don’t stop there – try eliminating fillers when you’re immersed in casual conversations with family and friends. Ask yourself if those words help illustrate your point. Get into the habit of doing this casually and it will feel normal to no longer rely on fillers in interviews.

3. Curse words. What’s a little F-bomb here and there, right? Just say no! Even if the interviewer is casual and speaks with a dirty mouth, you shouldn’t go there whatever you do. It may be tempting if you’re caught up in the moment and accustomed to dropping a less obscene word here and there – it may even seem innocent. But there are certainly enough words in the English language to get your point across without having to swear. Again, practice reducing your swearing, even if it sounds corny: “When travel schedules got rearranged at the last minute and it was incredibly stressful, I remember thinking, ‘Fudge, how is this going to get done?’ I came up with a plan overnight and implemented it with my team.”

Words to use instead: Sometimes you can simply eliminate the profane word altogether; in other instances, feel free to go with a squeaky-clean substitute since it still gets the point across. That’s right – the rated G-version. Ask yourself if you would feel comfortable with your seven-year-old niece hearing the words you’re saying, or if you’d feel comfortable with a transcript of your interview being published on the front page of The Wall Street Journal. Keep it clean, just like you wouldn’t necessarily swear in a work-related email.

4. “No.” Any form of this word just comes across as closed off. Even using a phrase like, “That wasn’t my job but it was hard to say no …” can be dangerous, as the hiring manager may lose sight of what you’re saying and just hear the word “no.” And sure, in some instances you may need to describe where you pushed back or had to stand up for yourself by using the word, but you always want to turn the situation into a positive.
Words to use instead: You can often turn negative situations and descriptions into more optimistic, positive ones. If you’re explaining how something couldn’t be done because you were inundated with work, or that it wasn’t your job yet it was difficult to say no, you can say, “I really wanted to take on the additional work and say yes to a colleague, but I had to remain fixated on my main priorities so I had a discussion with my manager. We decided the solution was to hire a temp to help out for the season so I could get the top priorities accomplished for the department while the temp was able to handle paperwork and answer phone calls.”

5. Describing a victim mentality. If you’re tempted to dwell on the recession or the tight job market or the abundance of competition or the temperature of the weather outside as a reason why you haven’t been working for a while or why you haven’t gotten ahead, think again. Employers don’t want to hear excuses even though they may valid. Sure, you can say something like, “I graduated from college in the middle of the recession and as you can imagine, competition for few jobs was fierce.” You’re stating a fact and then coming up with a solution.

Words to use instead: “I decided that was the ideal time to pursue a graduate degree and now that I’ve completed it and worked in retail for two years just to make ends meet, I’m ready to put my knowledge to good use.” Don’t play victim to your circumstances; employers want to see how you thought outside the box and took initiative even when economic situations or external factors may have played a role in telling your employment story.
The 50 most common interview questions for 2014 are:

1. What are your strengths?
2. What are your weaknesses?
3. Why are you interested in working for [insert company name here]?
4. Where do you see yourself in five years / 10 years?
5. Why do you want to leave your current company?
6. Why was there a gap in your employment between [insert date] and [insert date]?
7. What can you offer us that someone else cannot?
8. What are three things your former manager would like you to improve on?
9. Are you willing to relocate?
10. Are you willing to travel?
11. Tell me about an accomplishment you are most proud of.
12. Tell me about a time you made a mistake.
13. What is your dream job?
14. How did you hear about this position?
15. What would you look to accomplish in the first 30 days / 60 days / 90 days on the job?
16. Discuss your résumé.
17. Discuss your educational background.
18. Describe yourself.
19. Tell me how you handled a difficult situation.
20. Why should we hire you?
21. Why are you looking for a new job?
22. Would you work holidays / weekends?
23. How would you deal with an angry or irate customer?
24. What are your salary requirements?
25. Give a time when you went above and beyond the requirements for a project.
26. Who are our competitors?
27. What was your biggest failure?
28. What motivates you?
29. What’s your availability?
30. Who’s your mentor?
31. Tell me about a time when you disagreed with your boss.
32. How do you handle pressure?
33. What is the name of our CEO?
34. What are your career goals?
35. What gets you up in the morning?
36. What were your bosses’ strengths/weaknesses?
37. If I called your boss right now and asked him what is an area that you could improve on, what would he say?
38. Are you a leader or a follower?
39. What was the last book you have read for fun?
40. What are your co-worker pet peeves?
41. What are your hobbies?
42. What is your favorite website?
43. What makes you uncomfortable?
44. What are some of your leadership experiences?
45. How would you fire someone?
46. What do you like the most and least about working in this industry?
47. Would you work 40+ hours a week?
48. What questions haven’t I asked you?
49. What questions do you have for me?
Unconventional questions you may be asked:

- What don’t you want to be doing five years from now?
- What would you say is the biggest misperception people may have of you?

Questions you may be asked and what the interviewer is looking for:

- Tell me about our company. Give your top-line analysis.
  - Looking for: initiative, analytical ability, values, confidence.

- Walk me through the first 5 things you would do if you got this job.
  - Looking for: strategic thinking, prioritization skills, execution style.

- What 3-5 things do you need to be successful in this job? What are the deal killers?
  - Looking for: culture fit, expectations, work style.

- Talk about a time that you took a risk and failed, and one where you took a risk and succeeded. What was the difference?

- Tell me about one of your proudest moments at work.
  - Looking for: drive, personal motivators, preferred work style (team builder, solo contributors, etc.).

- What do you want for your career two jobs from now, and how does this position help you get there?