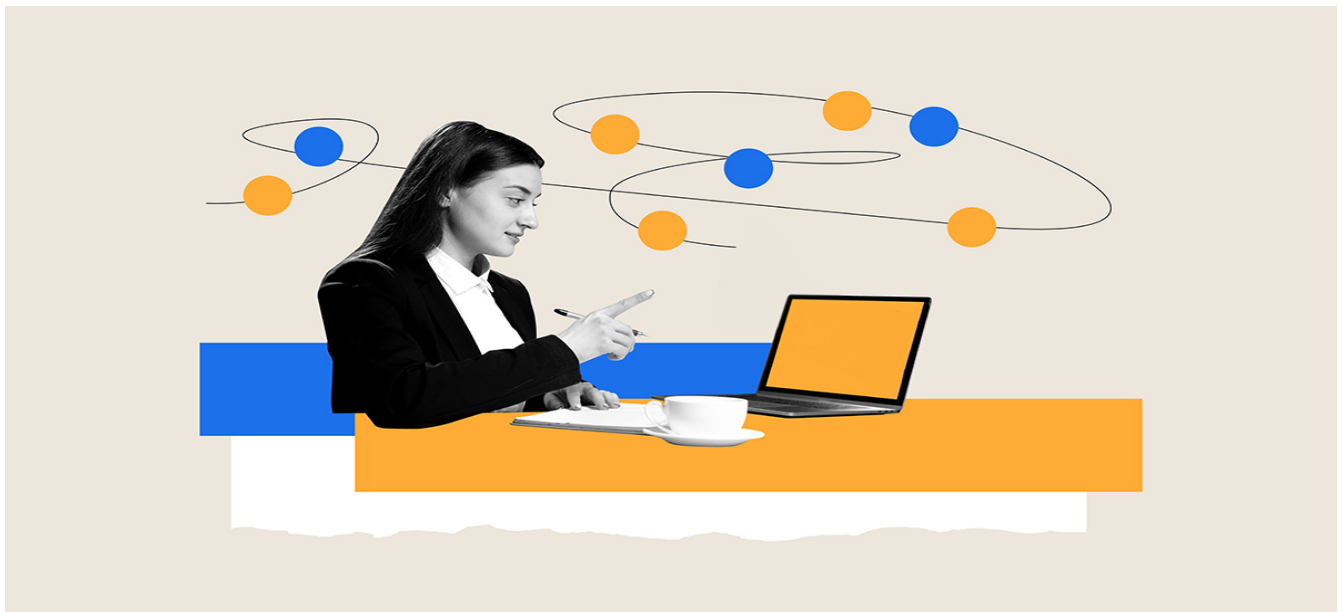


# Harvard Business Review

## The HBR Guide to Standing Out in an Interview

by [HBR Editors](#)

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### Summary.

Job interviews can be daunting. In this video, author Amy Gallo culls advice from top experts in the field and shares strategic tips on how best to prepare, what to do, and what to say so that you can make a great impression in your next interview. She also offers advice on what to do if you notice your interviewer losing interest or you've stumbled over some answers. Mistakes happen. Just keep going and stay focused. Answer the current question as if it's the first one. Even acknowledging the situation with a corrective statement like, "Am I giving you what you need? Is there other information I could give you?" and then following their cues can help dig you out of the current hole and get the conversation back on track.

*There are many moving parts to a job interview, which go far beyond just questions and answers. This video, hosted by HBR's Amy Gallo, offers a quick, all-in-one guide to acing an interview, from preparation to real-time strategies. Have interview-related topics we should cover or questions you want us to answer? Let us know here.*

Let's say you've landed a job interview for a position you really want. Well done. Congratulations.

But when it's time for the interview, you might get a lot of conflicting advice. Be yourself. Whatever you do, don't be yourself. Take charge of the interview. Let the interviewer be in charge. Confusing, right? Well, I'm here to help. I've culled advice from top experts in the field

and want to share strategic tips on how best to prepare, what to do, and what to say so that you can make a great impression in your next interview.

## **How to Stand Out in Your Interview**

### **Do your homework.**

Let's be honest. Your primary job in the interview is to dazzle them with the fact that you're perfectly suited for the role. But before you can do that, you need to invest time in learning about the organization and the job. So find out as much as you can about how the organization is structured, its culture, and relevant industry trends.

If possible, see what you can find out about the people conducting the interview. There may be valuable professional or personal points of connection that could help make your interview more relatable and memorable.

Lastly, research the requirements and challenges of the particular position you're applying for and the qualities of a successful candidate based on that information. Ask yourself questions like, what technical skills are essential to perform this job? What kinds of people skills would I need to succeed? What do I need to prove I already know how to do or that I'm willing to learn in order to be successful?

Being well-prepared will boost your confidence and give you a better chance of acing the interview. And all of this information is key to your success in the next tip, crafting your stories.

### **Tell a good story about yourself.**

That's right. It's story time. And these stories are all about why you are the perfect person for the job. As author Claudio Fernández-Aráoz reminds us, "people buy into stories far more than they do evidence or data." A good story can also stir up empathy and boost your likability. If you give them a chance to relate to you as a real person, you might just set yourself apart from the competition.

Remember how you just researched the skills required for the job and what's important to the organization? Well, now you get to tell powerful personal stories that connect each of those to your own experiences, values, and achievements in both your work and personal life. Pick three or four main messages you want to convey and craft your narratives accordingly. The goal is to have these in your back pocket so you can smoothly trot them out as answers to relevant interview questions.

Author Vicky Oliver writes that a compelling story has a great beginning, riveting middle, and an end that makes the interviewer root for you to win the job. Have a good opening line, such as, “let me tell you about a time I rescued the organization,” then tell them about any obstacles or issues that arose and how you overcame them. Keep the story short but interesting and impactful. An important note — not all stories have to show total perfection. You will make a real impression and seem more relatable if you can share stories of challenges and even mistakes, as long as you remember to show what you learned from them.

## **Practice, practice, practice.**

Once you select your stories, you need to rehearse. Just like an actor prepares for the stage or screen, you are preparing a character, a confident, competent, likable, flexible version of yourself to perform in the interview. I’m not saying you should be inauthentic or overexaggerate your experiences or skills. But author and coach Cathy Salit writes, “You are literally auditioning for a new role.” You are presenting the best possible version of yourself. And since you’ve done your homework, you know what parts of your personality and experience to emphasize for each position.

So what exactly should you practice? Well, for one, practice your opening. First impressions really matter here. In fact, research shows that people form opinions about your personality and intelligence in the first 30 seconds of the interview, 30 seconds.

So in front of a mirror, pretend you are introducing yourself and assess things like your posture, tone, and body language. You want to communicate a balance of ease, clarity, and confidence.

The most important thing is to practice telling your stories with energy and enthusiasm. You want to be ready to share them as confident, clear, and straightforward responses to relevant interview questions. You can even practice in front of a friend or record yourself on video. You can then use the feedback to make any necessary adjustments to your appearance or your delivery before the actual interview.

## **Treat the interview like a conversation.**

Have a great conversation. Once you’re comfortable telling your stories, Cathy Salit has another unique piece of advice. Instead of performing as someone who is trying really hard to get the job, perform as someone who wants to have a great conversation with the person across from you.

First, be curious. Or at least perform curiosity if you need to.

Ask open-ended questions connected to what you've heard. This will allow the conversation to unfold more naturally. (If you need some ideas, make sure to watch my HBR video on [38 smart questions to ask in an interview](#).)

Be ready to improvise. I know I've just told you to prepare and rehearse your stories, but they aren't just talking points to be rattled off. You also need to [listen attentively](#) and be ready to accept every conversational opening with the classic improv phrase, "yes, and" as a way to build upon the conversation.

Also, as author John Lees reminds us, be flexible, read the room, and adjust accordingly. If your radar is telling you that your stories aren't working, you may need to supply different answers, adjust your tone, or stop speaking altogether because, well, some interviewers just love to hear themselves talk. Pay attention and change course as needed.

## **What to Do If Things Go Wrong**

Despite your best efforts to prepare, interviews [don't always go as planned](#). Here are some potential pitfalls and what you can do about them.

Lack of direct experience. If there are areas where your past achievements don't directly correlate to the job, redirect the focus away from where your experience might fall short and towards an emphasis on your potential and overall competence. If you can demonstrate your ability to learn a skill or adapt to a situation, this could convince an interviewer to ignore any potential holes in your CV. Taking charge of the interview in this way can help steer interviewers away from unconscious biases that favor experience over competence.

Tough questions about [your resume](#). If there are some less-than-perfect situations on your CV, like a long pause in your work history or a short stay at a recent job, John Lees recommends [preparing multiple ways](#) to reply so that you aren't left struggling for an answer.

First, prepare a simple, straightforward response that doesn't go into too much detail. Then have an additional reply ready if the interviewer follows up. For example, if you didn't finish a degree that would have been helpful to the job, be ready to answer an initial question with something like, I felt it was better to go straight into the workforce. If the interviewer pushes further, be ready with another level of detail, such as I thought about it carefully. I knew it would carry negative connotations, but I was confident that I would learn a lot more with direct work experience.

Mistakes happen. If you notice your interviewer losing interest or you've stumbled over some answers, don't dwell on the mistakes. Just keep going and stay focused. Answer the current question as if it's the first one. Even acknowledging the situation with a corrective statement

like, “Am I giving you what you need? Is there other information I could give you?” and then following their cues can help dig you out of the current hole and get the conversation back on track.

## Prep Your Space for Virtual Interviews

Many interviews these days take place virtually. If that’s the case for you, here are some specific things you should do to prepare. First, prepare your space. You want your background to be clean and uncluttered. Clean up the area around you, too, even if it’s not visible on camera. Research shows that when our space is messy, so is our thinking. A clean environment will boost your mood and make you feel less stressed. These are things your interviewer can see, and it will make a big difference in your performance.

Your face should be well lit and visible. Make sure your internet speed is in good shape. Pro tip: Google internet speed test and check to make sure the Wi-Fi you are using can handle the call.

Next, prepare yourself. Even though it’s virtual, you should dress for the interview. Unless the organization is an all-suit situation, experts recommend a business casual outfit in neutral colors to appear more authentic, trustworthy, creative, and knowledgeable. Wear something comfortable. You don’t want to be fidgeting with your clothes while on camera.

Use your computer’s camera to check yourself and your space ahead of time so you can see what your interviewers will see and make any necessary tweaks.

## The Do’s and Don’ts of Job Interviewing

OK, let’s review. Here’s a quick wrap-up of the do’s and don’ts so you can stand out in your next interview.

### Do:

- **Do your homework.** Find out as much as you can ahead of time about the organization, job qualifications, responsibilities, and challenges; and even some information about the interviewer if that’s available.
- **Craft your stories.** Choose a few brief, but powerful stories that align your experiences to the skills required for the job and the values of the organization.
- **Practice!** Rehearse your performance of the confident, competent, relatable character that has what it takes to succeed in this position. You want to practice your stories as well as your opening (remember: the first 30 seconds of the interview make a huge

impression!). Use a mirror, video recording or an honest friend to assess and modify your delivery ahead of time.

- **Have a great conversation.** Be curious and flexible, ask good questions and build on the conversation. Read the room for cues to shift your approach, if necessary.
- **If the interview is virtual,** be sure to prepare a clean, well-lit space and dress comfortably and appropriately.

### **Don't:**

- **Don't be afraid to show vulnerability.** It can help to seem relatable by sharing stories of challenges and even mistakes, as long as you remember to show what you learned from them.
- **Don't focus on areas where your resume falls short.** Instead, redirect the conversation to your potential and competence and come prepared with multiple ways to reply in case they press you further.
- **Don't panic if the interview is going poorly.** Focus on giving the best possible answer to the current question and, if needed, ask if you're giving them what they need to help get the conversation back on track.

**This story is by the staff at Harvard Business Review.**