INTERVIEWING GUIDELINES, TIPS, AND TECHNIQUES
Danielle Mihram, Director of the USC Center for Excellence in Teaching

Interview Logistics
• If possible make a trial run to the interview location the day before.  • Know where you are going and arrive early.
• Ask for your interviewer by name.
• You may be asked to wait a little: maintain a professional demeanor. During the Interview
• Project a winning, “can do” attitude in the way you present yourself. Don’t expect the interviewer to tell you why you are right for the job: that’s your responsibility.
• Be yourself; concentrate on being your “best self”.
• If you are asked to describe a failure, a weakness, or a negative experience, try to finish your response with an upbeat note (lessons learned, how you have grown from a difficult experience, what you are doing to improve a weakness; or discuss a failure that later turned into a success).
• Be aware of body language; for the most important “interview nonverbals,” see Appendix B below.
• Avoid phrases such as “To be honest with you,” “Just between you and me,” “Well, I’ll be completely honest about this.”
• If appropriate, bring samples or copies of your work to the interview as concrete examples of your capabilities. Be ready to answer any questions about this sample of your work. You might want to consider leaving samples of your work for the interviewers to look at later (a good technique for future contact).
• Know what your specific advantage is for the program you seek. What makes you stand out in a world of competing candidates? What particular strengths make you unique? Uncommon? What is your competitive advantage? What are your greatest strengths in relation with the others who are being interviewed? (By differentiating yourself, you stand out from among the competition).
• You want to have three or four key points in mind that you make sure to discuss in the interview. These might be personal characteristics, skills you have learned, or experiences you have had, that would show that could perform well on the job. Thinking beforehand about what these points should be for a particular interview will make it easier to include them in the discussion.
• Feel free to take time to think before you answer, particularly when asked a thoughtful question. Five to ten seconds may seem like an eternity, but it is perfectly acceptable to take that time, rather than blurting out something that you regret later.
• You may have to say, “I don’t know”: if it is appropriate, offer to find out and get back to the interviewer later in the day or early the next day. Otherwise, be honest. Some questions may be designed to stump you, and it is riskier to make up an answer rather than tell the truth.
• If you feel that you have a made a mistake or said something you wish you had not, you can address it directly: “I would like to rephrase my answer to the previous question.” This will allow you to remain focused on the remaining questions.
• Most employers know that it is illegal to ask about age, ethnic background, national origin, marital status, family planning, or sexual, religious, or political preference. Try to think about why the question was asked and respond directly to that concern without answering the question. If you feel that your answer will help in the long run, you may choose to answer the question directly, but you should take the incident into account when evaluating the organization.
• The interviewer will usually signal the end of the interview by asking if you have any questions. If you feel that you haven't discussed some key points, take the initiative and say: “Before I ask my first question, there are a couple of points I would like to mention.”

**Your Questions for the Interviewer**
At the end of an interview, you should always have a couple of questions to ask. Such questions are another way for the interviewer to measure your interest in the organization, knowledge of the field, maturity, professionalism and communication skills.

• Prepare at least five questions to ask (knowing that an interviewer may answer some of your questions during the course of the interview).
• List your top questions first.
• Ask questions to which you really want the answer.
• Begin with broad questions first (e.g., changing mission of the organization, directions or plans for the future, where does it see itself five/ten years from now?)
• Ask specific questions that will help you to learn more about the responsibilities of the position and the culture of the organization (it is best not to ask about salary or benefits until you have been offered the position).

**Interviews During a Meal**
• Remember you are being interviewed; so maintain a professional demeanor in any setting.
• Order something easy to eat. Do not order anything too messy; you will be preoccupied about your appearance.
• Ask your host, “What do you recommend here?” so that you will have an idea of what to order.
• Avoid alcohol. However, if you are at a group lunch or dinner and a glass of wine is served, don’t drink it all.
• A meal may be a good time for you to ask very few but select questions: for example, ask your host about his or her own career path.

**Follow-up**
• Before leaving an interview you should be clear as to the next step. Your interviewer will usually tell you when you can expect to hear from them. If he or she says nothing, you may ask: “How should we proceed from here?” or “When might I expect to hear from you?”
• As soon as possible after the interview, take notes about what happened: this information will become crucial if there are follow-up communications.
• A prompt thank-you note is a must. The note should be brief: express your appreciation, reconfirm your interest in the job, underline how you think your background and skills would fulfill the responsibilities of the position, and demonstrate that you listened carefully.

**Sources:**

See also:
- MLA Guidelines for Job Seekers & Hiring Departments [http://www.mla.org/jll_jobseekers](http://www.mla.org/jll_jobseekers)
- Interview Guide for Positions in Academia [http://www.usc.edu/programs/cet/private/pdfs/seg0_interview_tips.pdf](http://www.usc.edu/programs/cet/private/pdfs/seg0_interview_tips.pdf)
Appendix A: Guidelines for Successful Interview Dress Men and Women

• Conservative two-piece business suit (solid dark blue or gray)
• If you need to buy a new suit, wear it once to “get the feel of it” and to make sure, ahead of time, that everything works (buttons, zipper; no loose threads, etc.)
• Conservative long-sleeved shirt/blouse (white is best; pastel is next best)
• Clean, polished conservative shoes
• Well-groomed hairstyle
• Clean, trimmed fingernails
• Minimal cologne or perfume. More and more people find they are allergic to perfumes and colognes
• Empty pockets—no bulges or tinkling coins
• No gum, candy or cigarettes
• Light briefcase or portfolio case
• No visible body piercing (nose rings, eyebrow rings, etc.)

Men
• Necktie should be silk with a conservative pattern
• Dark shoes: conservative, clean, and polished (black lace-ups are best)
• Dark socks (black is best)
• Get a haircut; short hair always fares best in interviews
• No beards
• Mustaches are a possible negative, but if you must, make sure it is neat and trimmed • No rings other than wedding ring or college ring
• No earrings or other visible body piercing (if you normally wear one, take it out)

Women
• Always wear a suit with a jacket; no dresses
• No high heels
• Conservative hosiery at or near skin color (and with no runs)
• No purses, small or large; carry a briefcase instead • If you wear nail polish, use clear or a conservative color
• Minimal use of makeup (it should not be too noticeable)
• No more than one ring on each hand
• One set of earrings only

If you are still unsure about the specifics of interview dress, consult any one of the following:
• Molloy, John T. New Women’s Dress for Success. 1996.
Appendix B: The Most Important Interview Nonverbals
From http://www.collegegrad.com/intv

Many interviews fail because of lack of proper communication. But communication is more than just what you say. Often it is the nonverbal communication that we are least aware of, yet speaks the loudest. Following are the top five nonverbals, ranked in order of importance, when it comes to interviewing:

- **Eye Contact:**
  Unequaled in importance! If you look away while listening, it shows lack of interest and a short attention span. If you fail to maintain eye contact while speaking, at a minimum it shows lack of confidence in what you are saying and at worst may send the subtle message that you are lying. Do not just assume you have good eye contact. Ask. Watch. Then practice. Ask others if you ever lack proper eye contact. If they respond that they did notice, ask if it was during speaking or listening. Some people maintain excellent eye contact while listening, but lose eye contact when speaking. Or vice versa. Next, watch yourself on videotape. It does not necessarily have to be your mock interview; in fact, if you were videotaped informally (that is, you were not aware you were being taped), this will provide even stronger evidence. Then sit down with a friend and practice until you are comfortable maintaining sincere, continuous eye contact.

- **Facial Expressions:**
  It continually amazes me how many college students are totally unaware of the sullen, confused, or even mildly hysterical expression plastered on their faces during the entire course of the interview! It is almost as if four years of college has left some students brain dead or worse. Some interviewers (not myself, of course) have been known to hang humorous labels on these students, such as “Ms. Bewildered” (who looked quizzical during the interview) or “Mr. Psycho-Ax-Murderer” (who looked wide-eyed and determined to do something, although you dare not ask what). Take a good, long, hard look at yourself in the mirror. Look at yourself as others would. Then modify your facial expressions—first eliminate any negative overall characteristics that might exist, then add a simple feature that nearly every interviewee forgets to include—a smile! Not some stupid Bart Simpson grin, but a true and genuine smile that tells me you are a happy person and delighted to be interviewing with our company today. You do not need to keep the smile plastered on for the full interview, but remember to keep coming back to it. Think about it—who would you rather spend thirty minutes with?

- **Posture:**
  Posture sends out a signal of your confidence and power potential. Stand tall, walk tall, and most of all, sit tall. I don’t say this to offend the “short people” of the world—in fact, I am under 5’5”, which is a full seven inches shorter than your proverbial 6-foot IBMer. Height is not what’s important, posture is. When standing, stand up straight. When you are seated, make sure you sit at the front edge of the chair, leaning slightly forward, moving within an overall range of no more than 10 back or 20 forward, intent on the subject at hand.

- **Gestures:**
  Contrary to popular belief, gestures should be very limited during the interview. So please don’t use artificial gestures to try to heighten the importance of the issue at hand (pardon the pun). It will merely come off as theatrical. When you do use gestures, make sure they are natural and meaningful.
• **Space:**
  Recognize the boundaries of your personal space and that of others. If you are typical of most Americans, it ranges between 30 and 36 inches. Be prepared, however, not to back up or move away from someone who has a personal space that is smaller than your own. Hang in there, take a deep breath, and stand your ground. For most of us, merely the awareness of our personal space is enough to consciously prompt us to stand firm when speaking with someone. If you have a smaller than average personal space, make sure you keep your distance so that you do not intimidate someone who possesses a larger personal space. (P.S. If you want to have fun at a social gathering, step inside the personal space boundary of a friend. With some practice, you can back them up around the entire room without them even being aware of what is happening. But beware. It can also happen to you.)

**Winning the Body Language Game**

Everybody uses body language during the interview, but very few are prepared to be a winner in the body language game. Body language is merely the smaller, less prominent nonverbal cues that we give others while communicating. Following are some typical interpretations of body language cues:

- **Openness and Warmth:**
  Open-lipped smiling, open hands with palms visible, unbuttoning coat upon being seated.

- **Confidence:**
  Leaning forward in chair, chin up, putting tips of fingers of one hand against the tips of fingers of other hand in “praying” or “steepling” position, hands joined behind back when standing.

- **Nervousness:**
  Smoking, whistling, pinching skin, fidgeting, jiggling pocket contents, running tongue along front of teeth, clearing throat, running fingers through hair, wringing hands, biting on pens or other objects, twiddling thumbs, biting fingernails (action itself or evidence of), tongue clicking.

- **Untrustworthy/Defensive:**
  Frowning, squinting eyes, tight-lipped grin, arms crossed in front of chest, pulling away, chin down, touching nose or face, darting eyes, looking down when speaking, clenched hands, gestures with fist, pointing with fingers, chopping one hand into the open palm of the other, rubbing back of neck, clasping hands behind head while leaning back in the chair.

As you can see, there are far more negatives than positives—possibly more than we are consciously aware of. This list is given not so that you can artificially adopt the positive body language techniques, but more to help you recognize and avoid the negatives. If you have a habit of doing any of the above negatives, remove that action from your pattern of behavior before it sends the wrong signal. Concentrate on removing it now so you will not have to think about it during the interview. And keep in mind the opposite side of the desk.

As you talk with an interviewer, be aware of (although not preoccupied with) their body language and nonverbal cues. Do not try to read in more than is actually being communicated, but try to develop a sense of the interviewer’s reception of you. The most obvious example is the smile connection—when your smile brings about a smile from the
interviewer. Do your best to stay connected with your interviewer—both verbally and nonverbally.

The Nonverbal Interview Technique
Don't just give lip-service to the concepts listed above—practice them! How? With a Nonverbal Interview. Unlike the mock interview, this one does not require a great amount of preparation—just an observant friend. Ask the friend to ask questions, but instead of focusing on your answers, ask him to make note of your nonverbals and body language and the messages being sent. Or play back your mock interview with the sound off. The results might surprise you.