



**University of Brighton**

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Careers Service

Guidance  
Employment  
Volunteering  
Enterprise

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# Interviews and assessment centres

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Congratulations! You have been offered an interview.

Selection procedures will vary from company to company. Some hold first and second interviews, some will use online tools or interview by telephone. With some employers the one interview may be your only chance to impress..

Whatever the format, remember that each stage is equally important. They are all hurdles that you need to clear in order to secure the job you want.

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## **Interviews**

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### **Preparation**

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#### **Research the company**

Think about the organisation you are applying to:

- Who are their main competitors?
- Who are the key players in the industry?
- Are there any recent developments relating to this industry?
- Can you find any media reports or surveys about the industry?
- Is there recent or forthcoming legislation affecting the industry?
- What are your views on their website/publicity materials?
- Why have you applied to this company?

#### **Read the job description again**

Think about the post you are applying for:

- Why do you want the job?
- Why do feel you are suited to this post?
- What skills and knowledge can you bring to it?
- How does your experience fit with the job?
- What evidence can you provide to prove that you could do the job well?
- How would you fit into this organisation?
- Have you applied to anyone else?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?

#### **Reread your application**

- What do you think the interviewer will want to find out?
- Does your application refer to events that you feel uncomfortable about? E.g. if you retook your A-levels or stayed in a job for a short time. Think about how to deal with it.
- Be prepared for this and be honest, but stay positive. Everyone makes mistakes; what matters is how you have learned from them

## **Keep up-to-date with current news**

- Keep abreast of the big news stories. Often interviewers want to gauge your awareness of wider issues in society.

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## **Researching an employer – sources of information**

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'In my experience, being able to demonstrate a firm grasp of wider industry issues at an interview is a brilliant way to stand out'

*Ben Cotton, PR Consultant*

A company's website is always a good place to start, but other useful sources of information include:

- Company reports
- Press reports
- Sales information
- Recruitment information

### **Company reports**

Annual and interim company reports include financial information as well as useful information about a company's operations.

- Check the company's website
- Search <http://www.annualreports.com/>
- Request a copy from the company itself or ask the library or careers service to do this for you
- Order reports from Companies House for a fee.

### **Press reports and industry news**

- Press articles are a valuable source of information on a company or industry sector
- Search for newspaper and trade press articles using the university's Online Library. In particular newspaper databases and KEYNOTE for market intelligence reports.
- Check the Financial Times and the Economist
- Subscribe to RSS news feeds from websites you are interested in so you don't have to continually return to the site.

- Use social bookmarking tools (i.e digg, stumbleupon, reddit) to mark the material you might want to come back to and share with others.
- Search and subscribe to blogs (via Google Blog/News Search/Technorati) on topics that might interest you, or written by people working in your field
- Google Alerts - sign up to receive email updates of the latest Google results
- Use a feed reader – a kind of personal webpage - to collectively gather all the news, blogs and information into one place, i.e. Google Reader
- Other tools such as HootSuite or Tweetdeck could be used to monitor and post to multiple social networks/accounts

### **Sales information**

- Read the sales information on the company's products and services via company brochures and websites.

### **Recruitment information**

- Bigger companies often have information on the type of person that they recruit and what it's like to work for them.
- Graduate recruitment websites will give you information on companies that are currently recruiting to graduate schemes. For example, Prospects and Target jobs.
- Discussions forums - for example sites like Rate my Placement and The Student Room, or see the company information on LinkedIn
- Visit our **Occupations and industries** directory for links to sites relevant to your chosen career. See our page **plan your career/explore your career options**.
- Directories of larger graduate recruiters are available to take away from all careers centres.

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## **On the day**

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Eat breakfast, even if your stomach is doing back flips. Food is crucial in helping you maintain energy levels and concentration.

Report to the specified arrival point with your invitation letter. Remember, anyone you speak to may be asked for their opinion on the candidates - be pleasant and polite at all times.

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## **First Impressions**

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When you meet someone for the first time the other person forms an opinion based on your appearance, your body language, your demeanour and your mannerisms. These first impressions are extremely important - they set the tone for the relationship that follows.

Much of what you need to do to make a good impression is common sense, but with thought and preparation you can hone your intuitive style and make every first impression not just good but great;

### **Be on time**

The person you are meeting is not interested in your 'good excuse' for running late. Plan to arrive a few minutes early, and allow for possible delays in traffic or taking a wrong turn.

### **Be yourself, be at ease**

If you are feeling uncomfortable and on edge, this can make the other person ill at ease and that's a sure way to create the wrong impression. If you appear calm and confident, the other person will feel more at ease.

If you feel this might be a problem for you look into simple relaxation techniques to help you feel at ease.

### **Present yourself appropriately**

Physical appearance matters – the person you are meeting does not know you and your appearance is usually the first clue they have to go on.

The key is to ensure your appearance (clothing, personal grooming) is appropriate for the setting - smart or casual? Ask yourself what the person you are meeting is likely to be wearing. A clean and tidy appearance is appropriate for most work situations and will help you to 'feel the part'. This in turn will help you to feel more calm and confident.

### **A winning smile**

A confident smile will put both you and the other person at ease. Don't go overboard - people who go too far can seem insincere.

### **Body language**

When making a first impression, body language speaks louder than words. Stand tall, smile, make eye contact and greet with a firm handshake. This will help you project confidence and self-assurance, and encourage both you and the other person to feel at ease.

Most people get nervous when meeting someone for the first time, which can lead them to exhibit nervous mannerisms. By being aware of your nervous habits, you can try to keep them in check. Controlling a nervous jitter or a nervous laugh will give you confidence. Again look into relaxation techniques if this affects you.

### **Be positive**

Your attitude shows through in everything you do. Project a positive attitude, even in the face of criticism or in case of nervousness. Strive to learn from your meeting and to contribute appropriately, maintaining an upbeat manner and a smile.

### **Be courteous and attentive**

It goes without saying that good manners and polite, attentive and courteous behaviour are crucial. Anything less can ruin the one chance you have of making a positive first impression. So be on your best behaviour and don't forget to turn off your phone.

### **More Information**

- What kind of first impression do you give others?  
[http://www.youthink.com/quiz.cfm?obj\\_id=38865](http://www.youthink.com/quiz.cfm?obj_id=38865)
- How to perform well at interviews  
<http://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/intervw.htm>

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## **The interview itself**

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The first 60 seconds of the interview are when you make your crucial first impression. Smile at the interviewer and shake hands if offered. Appear poised and reasonably confident. Be aware of body language. Convey interest and enthusiasm at all times but maintain a professional manner.

Listen carefully to the questions. If necessary ask the interviewer to clarify or repeat the question. Don't be afraid to pause briefly to think about your reply.

The questions may mirror those asked on the application form. Take the chance to enlarge on what you wrote. You don't have to come up with different examples of your experience, but if you do it will emphasise the breadth of your experience and may improve your chances.

Look for verbal and non-verbal clues from the interviewer as to whether you are answering the questions appropriately, in terms of content and length. Do not feel pressured to go on speaking if you feel you have answered a question.

You may be interviewed by a panel, which can be more difficult than a one-to-one interview. When you answer a question from one panel member address him/her but remember that the whole panel will be observing you.

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## **Types of questions**

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The interviewer may use different questioning techniques:

### **'What' questions**

'What did you cover in the final year of your course?' These are factual questions.

### **'Why' questions**

'Why did you choose mathematics at A-level?' Your answers should demonstrate that you have thought about your career goals. You need to show that you can make decisions and explain your actions.

## **Value questions**

‘What do you think of our products?’ The interviewer wants to hear your considered opinion. Your answers should be frank but not overly critical. Present critical comments as ideas for possible improvement.

## **Evidence-based questions**

‘Tell us about a time when you had to resolve a conflict. What was it, what did you do and what was the outcome? On reflection, would you have changed anything and why?’ Don’t ramble. Set the scene, focus on what you did, the outcome of your actions and what you learned from the experience.

## **Scenarios**

There may also be questions that you cannot prepare for. These are usually based on complex problems or situations. They are designed to see whether you can think creatively and solve problems. For example, ‘If the UK had to come into line with the rest of Europe and drive on the right, what steps would need to be taken before this could happen?’

Remember there are no perfect answers for this type of question. Just try and think logically through the problem and propose a clear solution.

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## **Your questions**

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Towards the end the interviewer will usually ask if you have any questions. You could add any additional information that you may not have had chance to do. Just remember to frame it as a question.

Do not ask questions that are answered in the company's literature. Try to gain information that you may require if offered the job, but do not ask about pay and benefits at this stage, unless the interviewer mentions it first.

Before you leave, ask for confirmation of what the next stage of the recruitment process might be and when you should expect to hear from them.

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## **Telephone, online and video interviews**

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Telephone, online and video interviews are sometimes used as part of the recruitment process. They are a cost-effective way for companies to draw up a final shortlist for face-to-face interviews.

Prepare for them as you would for a face-to-face interview because they are just as important.

### **How to prepare**

When arranging the interview choose a convenient time when you are not rushing to or from another activity. You need to be relaxed and unhurried. Make the interview a priority and set the time aside, even if it means missing other things.

Prepare as you would for any interview. Think of questions you may be asked and practise your responses with a friend, family member or university careers counsellor.

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## **On the day**

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### **General**

- Have a pen, paper to hand in case you need to make notes, and also and your application form in case you need to refer to it.
- Turn off the television and any music that is playing. Tell anyone else who is around that you are taking part in an interview and ask them not to disturb you or make a noise.
- During the interview, avoid speaking over anyone; you may be enthusiastic and eager to make a point but this could be interpreted as rudeness. Also it is important to allow people to finish speaking, otherwise you risk missing information.
- Close positively by thanking the interviewer and possibly reconfirming your interest in the position and the company.

### **Online/video interviews**

- Test your internet connection.
- Dress appropriately in professional interview attire, just as you would for an in-person interview.

- If you are using a webcam record yourself first to see how you appear on camera. Check the lighting and your position; both your location in the room and your position in the onscreen image.
- Consider turning off the 'monitor' box which shows your own image - it will draw your eye and make you appear distracted. This could give the same bad impression that avoiding eye contact would in a face to face interview.

## **Telephone interviews**

- Make sure that your phone battery is fully charged.
- Sit somewhere that is comfortable but allows you to sit upright. You will feel more alert and your voice will reflect this. Don't sit at your computer checking your emails or surfing the internet.
- Listen carefully to the interviewer and try to talk slowly and clearly. Pay attention to the speed of your voice. If you usually talk fast, try to slow down. If you tend to speak in a slow and ponderous way then try to lift the tone and pitch of your voice. Your words, rhythm and tone need to convey what you would normally communicate with body language.
- Smile when you speak, even in telephone interviews. Strange as it sounds, smiles are detectable in your voice and can affect the way you feel. A smile can be the sign of a confident, enthusiastic and positive person, and this will come across in your voice.
- Don't be put off by pauses or lack of encouragement from the interviewer. This can happen in any interview and is simply more noticeable on the telephone. They may be taking notes and looking at the questions they need to ask next.
- Don't drink or smoke - even during a telephone interview, since telephones can amplify noise. You would not do this in person, so don't do it on the phone either.

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## **Types of telephone interviews**

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### **Unannounced**

Someone from the company or their nominated recruitment agency will ring you without warning. This interview will usually be short and structured. The questions will be identical for all candidates so that answers can be scored and compared. If the call is at an inconvenient time, don't be afraid to say so and arrange a more suitable time with them.

### **Prearranged**

You will be contacted to arrange a time when a representative from the company will call you, and are likely to be briefed as to the style of the questions. There are two formats for prearranged telephone interviews:

#### **Automated interviews**

You will be sent a personal identification number (PIN) and asked to call the company during a specified time period.

You will then be asked to answer a number of agree/disagree questions (there could be up to 80 questions) using a touchtone phone. Some of these questions may be very similar and will be used to test the consistency and truthfulness of your answers.

#### **Competency interviews**

These are more like traditional face-to-face interviews, which will test your competency for the role.

#### **Sales**

You will receive a telephone call asking you to sell something to the interviewer.

These are often used for jobs involving selling (e.g. call centre/telesales staff) to test your sales skills and telephone manner.

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## Assessment centres

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Assessment centres can take place in the company headquarters or in a training centre or hotel. Many larger companies hold assessment centres. Usually, these are held after the first round of interviews and before the final selection, but they can be used as an initial selection process.

You might be asked to complete or take part in some or all of the following;

**Psychometric tests**

**Individual tasks**

**Group tasks**

**Presentations**

**Informal events**

**Psychometric tests**

These are likely to be a mixture of diagrammatic, verbal, and numerical tests. It is important to keep calm and read the instructions carefully. Keep a close eye on the time.

You may also have to take a personality test. If so, do not try to guess what the employer wants. Simply answer the questions honestly. If you have researched the job sufficiently before applying, it is unlikely that the results of a personality test will show you to be an unsuitable candidate.

A lack of familiarity with aptitude tests can cause applicants to perform badly. It is a good idea to attempt some practice tests beforehand. See our list of **practice tests and other resources** below.

**Individual tasks**

These could include writing an essay or report, or undertaking an in-tray or e-tray exercise. These tasks have strict time limits and are designed to show how well you can work under pressure, delegate or prioritise. They are intended to reflect the true working situation of a manager.

## **Group tasks**

A variety of exercises are used to see how you perform in a group. Examples include discussions, a role-play or even an activity such as building a bridge or tower.

Assessors will observe the whole group and make notes on how each person performs. They look for evidence of enthusiasm, original thought and the ability to explain ideas, negotiate and work effectively within a team.

You should be yourself and don't worry about taking the lead unless that is your natural style.

In such exercises the focus is usually not on whether or not you complete the task. The assessors are interested in your behaviour as a group and as individuals within the group.

## **Presentations**

You may be asked to give a short talk on a chosen subject or an extended analysis of a current event. Practice delivering your presentation beforehand with a third party (i.e. a friend or family member, or make an appointment to see a careers counsellor).

You should make use of audio-visual aids where appropriate. Make sure your presentation doesn't overrun the allotted time. This will certainly count against you.

Book an appointment with a careers counsellor to review your presentation content or to have a practice run-through.

## **Informal events**

You will probably attend social occasions such as lunch or dinner with managers and recent graduates who work for the company. Your conduct at these events may also form part of the assessment. Use the time wisely to ask sensible questions and make a good impression.

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## Practice tests and other resources

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**Assessment Day** - practice aptitude tests and assessment centres  
<http://www.assessmentday.co.uk/>

**Cubiks** - verbal and numerical reasoning tests  
<http://practicetests.cubiks.com>

**Numerical reasoning test** - sample psychometric test from Norton Assessment  
<http://www.numericalreasoningtest.org/>

**Online Test Centre** - A wide variety of practice tests and general advice on test taking  
<http://www.theonlinetestcentre.com/>

**Practice aptitude tests** - developed with chartered occupational psychologists who have previously worked for large test publishers.  
<http://www.practiceaptitudetests.com/psychometric-test/>

**Practice psychometric tests** - covering ability/aptitude tests, personality questionnaires, interest inventories and graduate assessment exercises  
[www.markparkinson.co.uk/psychometric\\_links](http://www.markparkinson.co.uk/psychometric_links)

**SHL Direct** - verbal, numerical, cognitive and situational reasoning  
[www.shldirect.com](http://www.shldirect.com)

**SHL psychometric tests** - tips for candidates by Kim Larkins of KSL Training.  
[www.ksl-training.co.uk/shl\\_candidate\\_help](http://www.ksl-training.co.uk/shl_candidate_help)

**Verbal reasoning test** - sample test from Norton Assessment  
<http://www.verbalreasoningtest.org/>

**Wikijob** - how to pass SHL tests, Watson Glazer tests and situational judgement tests, as well as assessment tests commonly used in the UK. Also has feedback from applicants undergoing tests.  
[www.wikijob.co.uk/wiki/aptitude-tests](http://www.wikijob.co.uk/wiki/aptitude-tests)

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## What can the Careers Service do to help?

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### Practice interviews and presentations

Book an appointment to talk to a careers counsellor about the interview process. We also can run a formal mock interview and/or presentation. You can assess your techniques, iron out mistakes and identify areas for improvement before the big day.

### Video resources online

You can watch a series of films online at our page **cv's and interviews**. These cover the application procedure, interviews and assessment centres.

### Your online presence

Your online presence consists of all the information about you on the internet - this usually comes from your social network profiles (like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google+), photographs that you, your friends or family have posted online (and tagged), anything you have written or that has been written about you on blogs, wikis or forums.

It's quite likely that you are already using social media for socialising, keeping in touch, making new friends, finding and sharing information. However, the function of social media is not just 'social'.

Having social networking profiles and regularly engaging with others through social media is generally seen by employers as a good thing. It shows you can use new web technologies and also gives employers an idea of what you are like beyond your CV, and it can be an invaluable tool for evidencing your skills.

However employers are also using social media for screening candidates, so what you say and do online (or not, if you don't have a presence at all) could prevent you from getting an interview or even cause you to lose your job.

Find out more about safeguarding and growing your online presence at our page **CVs and interviews/your online presence**.

## Contact the Careers Service where you study

Come and carry out your research, speak to a member of the team or make an individual appointment to discuss your plans (or lack of them).

### **Eastbourne**

Room 113, Trevin Towers, Gaudick Road,  
Eastbourne BN20 7SP  
(01273) 643845  
[careers.eastbourne@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:careers.eastbourne@brighton.ac.uk)

### **Falmer**

E Wing, Checkland Building, Village Way, Falmer  
Brighton BN1 9PH  
(01273) 643584  
[careers.falmer@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:careers.falmer@brighton.ac.uk)

### **Grand Parade**

Student Services, First Floor, Grand Parade  
Brighton BN2 0JY  
(01273) 643187  
[careers.grandparade@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:careers.grandparade@brighton.ac.uk)

### **Hastings**

Priory Square Building,  
Hastings TN34 1EA  
(01273) 644643  
[hastingsstudentservices@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:hastingsstudentservices@brighton.ac.uk)

### **Moulsecoomb**

First Floor, Manor House, Moulsecoomb Place,  
Brighton BN2 4GA  
(01273) 642855  
[careers@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:careers@brighton.ac.uk)

Careers Centres are usually open Monday - Friday 9.30am - 4.30 pm

This leaflet and related information is available online at [www.brighton.ac.uk/careers](http://www.brighton.ac.uk/careers) or in alternative formats – please ask for details.

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