

Katharine Hansen, PhD

520 Inchelium Hwy • Kettle Falls, WA 99141 • 386-871-9490 • DD_kathy@tmd9.club
<http://katharinehansenphd.com/WritingPortfolio/>

This article was initially published on March 13, 2006, on the Quintessential Careers site that was sold to Live Career in 2015 and eventually deleted from that site.

Promising Interview-Prep Technique: Composing Written Responses to Interview Questions

By Katharine Hansen

Looking for a relatively painless way to prep effectively for a job interview? Try composing written responses to questions typically asked in job interviews.

Based on our research, personal experience, and anecdotal evidence from the college students we have taught, we are convinced that preparing written responses to job-interview questions will:

1. increase the interviewee's level of confidence in responding to questions;
2. show evidence of preparedness by providing thoughtful, non-rambling responses;
3. increase the level of relevance by specifically addressing the questions;
4. provide more detail and thoroughness in responding to questions;
5. allow the interviewee to focus more on response delivery in the interview setting.

A number of years ago, we discovered that preparing written answers to job-interview questions helped us perform better in job interviews. That discovery prompted us to assign our students to compose responses to frequently asked interview questions.

Because this assignment frequently has seemed to enhance performance both in mock interviews and actual job interviews, we turned to two disparate areas of research to understand why the technique was effective. We concluded that the phenomenon is closely related to Writing to Learn theory.

Research by Perry and Goldberg in 1998 suggested that interview preparation is important because their study showed that when recruiters were asked about college students they interviewed, interviewing skills surpassed the students' background or experience in recruiter assessments of the likelihood that their companies would consider hiring a given student. We can then speculate that students (and other job candidates) who have better interview skills than others may have dedicated more effort to interview preparation than others.

Most career experts agree that few interviewees prepare adequately for interviews. In 1995, Barone and Switzer went so far as to note that, while college students spend in excess of 4,000 hours studying and attending class to prepare for their career, the average interviewee spends less than an hour preparing for a job interview. These experts also agree on the reason for the lack of preparation – job-seekers have no idea what questions will be asked in interviews, so they assume there is no way to prepare. Finally, career authors agree that this typical job-seeker rationale for lack of preparation is faulty because interview questions – or at least general areas of interview questions –

actually can be predicted to some degree, and lists of frequently asked interview questions are available in any number of books, articles, and on numerous Web sites.

Agreeing that it is impossible to predict exactly what questions a given interviewer will ask of a job-seeker, interviewing guru Carole Martin nevertheless notes that “the secret to success in any interview is preparation.” Author Tom Washington points out that since so few job-seekers prepare for interviews, those who do will “gain a real edge over others through preparation.”

Career experts are virtually unanimous in their view that responses to interview questions should not be memorized but should nonetheless be prepared – in some fashion – ahead of time.

You’re probably aware of advice suggesting that job-seekers review lists of typical questions to gain an idea of what types of information the interviewer likely seeks.

Taking this advice a step further, you can use these question lists to organize your thoughts about high points you want to share with employers and develop a list of what characteristics might be needed for success in the position for which you are interviewing. You can also engage in verbal mock or rehearsal interviews; however, Janet Emig points out that “writing tends to be a more responsible and committed act than talking.” Thus, writing-as-interview-prep suggestions include:

- writing an autobiography, which can reveal areas that you may not wish to discuss with an interviewer;
- practicing describing yourself by citing professional characteristics with examples from school and work experience;
- writing detailed proof statements that are tantamount to 30-second commercials about yourself;
- identifying about 30 accomplishments and writing 100-400 words on the top 12 of these, followed by isolating skills demonstrated by each accomplishment;
- composing success stories to prepare for interviews.

Why are these writing exercises effective in enhancing interview performance?

We credit Writing-to-Learn theory. James Britton, considered by many to be the father of the Writing-to-Learn movement, asserts that writing is learning because writing enables learners to organize their knowledge “and extend it in an organized way so that it remains coherent, unified, reliable.” Janet Emig notes that “writing through its inherent reinforcing cycle involving hand, eye, and brain marks a uniquely powerful multi-representational mode for learning.” Other scholars expand on Emig’s “reinforcing cycle.” “It’s a physical activity, unlike reading,” writes William Zinsser. “Writing requires us to operate some kind of mechanism – pencil, pen, typewriter, word processor – for getting our thoughts on paper.”

David Joliffe asserts that this physical act of writing compels writers to become “actively involved” with what they’re writing about. Through writing, Joliffe says, participants “generate challenging ideas ... engage in a substantial process ... practice analysis and synthesis ... and demonstrate a personal commitment to their ideas...” Suzanne Cherry calls writing “thinking on paper.”

Composing written responses to interview questions works because it helps candidates learn and remember concepts and content, improve thinking and cognitive abilities, organize their thoughts, enhance communication skills, bolster their self-image, and make connections. Demonstrating thoughtfulness and organized thinking is positively associated with interview performance, according to a study by Maurer, Solamon, Andrews, and Troxtel. Noting that cognitive ability in applicants has been shown to be a “strong and consistent predictor of job performance,” and, in fact, to predict job performance more “accurately and universally” than other constructs (largely because this ability indicates candidates’ ability to rapidly learn job requirements), Huffcutt, Roth, and McDaniel posit that applicants with higher cognitive ability may exhibit greater effectiveness than other candidates in responding to situational and abstract questions. Writing-to-Learn’s claims to help its practitioners organize their thoughts and make connections suggests that the Writing-to-Learn approach would be one way to sharpen communicative abilities for interviewing.

We tested this Writing-to-Learn approach to interview prep on three sections of a basic marketing class consisting mainly of college juniors, with a small number of sophomores and seniors also participating. Students in the sections who were assigned to complete the written interview-preparation assignment were given a list of 20 common interview questions for college students and asked to submit written responses to each. A local human-resources professional with many years of interviewing experience was recruited to interview and score the participants. He was instructed on how to complete the evaluation forms, but at no time did he know that one group of interviewees had previously prepared written responses to the potential questions and that the other group hadn’t. The group that prepared the written responses to the interview questions scored higher on the study’s evaluation instrument than the group that did not. Although the difference we saw did not prove to be statistically significant, it may be trend-indicative.

Based on the possible trend indication of the study, as well as previous scholarly dealing with interview preparation and Writing-to-Learn, we are confident of the relationship between written interview preparation and interview success. We are committed to the idea that preparing written answers to common interview questions will make job-seekers more confident and allow them to focus their energies on other aspects of the interview while providing detailed, yet concise responses to questions.