

# The Interview Process for Dummies

A (semi) foolproof guide to getting a job. For ND students, by ND students.

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## When should students start preparing for interviews?

Like the old saying goes, “early birds get worms”, we should get our hands on preparing for internships or interviews as early as possible.

Let’s look at internships first. When exactly should we start applying for internships? Keep in mind that more working experience is always better than less. So you should better start looking for internships or other job opportunities as soon as you have acquired basic computer science knowledge that is required for technical interviews. However, as students, we may not have enough time for internships during semesters. To make up this disadvantage, we should definitely take a wise use of our long breaks. And summer is usually our best choice.

To get a summer intern, first of all, we should know that most tech and IT companies collect applications for summer interns in September and March (MIT UPOP, n.d.). This means, if we want to get an internship that starts in June, we should start preparing during the fall semester. By this way, if we failed at the first attempt, we could gain experience, and be able to have another shot in March.

Similarly, we should get ourselves plenty of time to get fully prepared for both general and technical interviews. For computer science internships, there are usually three types of interviews --- the general interview that looks at the student’s overall information and working or practicing experiences; the technical interview, which tests the student’s practical level of coding, algorithms and data structuring skills; and additionally, language interviews, which is set up to quiz about the

student's proficiency in certain languages (Smallman, n.d.). Moreover, companies like Google and Facebook also conduct a team-matching after basic interviews. Even if you have passed all the other interviews, you could still fail at the last stage if you didn't perform well during this process. Each one of these interviews requires a large amount of advanced efforts and dedication. The earlier we start preparing and planning, the better we will be able to perform, and the more likely we are to get the internship we want.

### **How should students prepare or plan for these interviews?**

“Practice makes perfect.” For all interviews, the best way to prepare is to practice over and over again. But since the aims of the interviews mentioned above are different, here are some tips for each one exclusively.

To prepare and plan for a successful general interview, the first step we should take is to learn about the position we plan to apply for, and the background of the company we will apply with. This helps us understand and figure out what is required for us and what we can provide to satisfy that requirement.

Then, we need to prepare a decent resume that clearly demonstrates our capabilities as an eligible and qualified candidate for the job. The resume gives interviewers a preview, and likely, helps them gain a first impression on us even before meet us in person. Generally, a good resume should include the candidate's name, contact information, education history, work experience, activities or accomplishments and technical/language skills (UNLV Career Service, 2016). Be careful that we may need several versions of resumes highlighting specific work experiences or skills when applying for different jobs.

Next, get prepared for interview questions. In most cases, interviewers will ask questions based on your resume information, and also intend to learn about your strengths and weaknesses, as well as why and how you think you would fit the

position or the company. Moreover, for computer science students, interviewers may want to know details about projects you have done. Questions about what the projects were about, and how did you participate in those projects might be asked. Making sure to answer these questions clearly and properly is the basis of a successful interview.

Lastly, prepare questions for the interviewer. This is the chance for you to learn more about the company. But it may not be appropriate to ask about things like salaries. Good questions may be ones like “could you describe a typical day of the position?” Or “what draws you to the company?”.

As to technical or language interviews, they evaluate your abilities to tackle practical problems, and how familiar or professional you are with your knowledge. Easier questions for such interviews may include problems about loops, lists or strings, while harder questions may focus more on specific data structures.

According to particular professional arena, Linux Engineer questions, .NET questions and OOP design type questions may be tested (Hein, 2013). So it is important and necessary to get familiar with the job description. Items listed on the description can give you a navigation for what aspect of knowledge you should focus on, and how should you present your ability to fit the needs of the position (Hein, 2013).

In addition, be clear and familiar with core principles and basics. Also, understand aspects of prospective programming languages. Do not satisfy with fundamental knowledge. Dig deeper and acquire more expansive skills. Because questions may vary from giving simple broad stroke to more advanced tasks (Hein, 2013). An easy but efficient way to practice is to find sample technical questions, and practice coding or other related skills with them. They will definitely prepare you better with the interview.

**Anything else you wish you knew before you went through the whole process?**

The first extra note is that, despite the fact that our job is dealing with computers and codes, we should do well in interpersonal communication as well. Because this is, at least, important for interviews, where you are selling yourself to the company.

Secondly, get comfortable with coding on a whiteboard. Although this is not required at all companies, but it is indeed a common practice asked during technical interviews.

Thirdly, behave in a good manner and dress properly. Interviewers would appreciate it if you initiate the greeting, and introduce your name, with a firm handshake, as soon as you get the chance to speak to them. Also, although we do not need to be in suit-and-tie for all the time while working, we are expected to look formal for interviews. A professional-look outfit shows your attitude and proficiency. This can of course vary between companies; it can be weird to wear a suit to an interview at a company where the programmers wear jeans every day. So if you can get an idea about what company culture is like before, you may have a better idea of what people wear at the office, and dress accordingly for your interview.

Last but not the least, bring extra copies of your resume. You never know what situations you may encounter and whom you may meet. Getting ready to introduce and present yourself at all time will give you more chances to success

**What resources should students consider? Books? Career Services? Student groups?**

Students should consider visiting the career center at Notre Dame. Specifically, there is a career advisor concentrate advising careers in Engineering.

He introduces many companies and small ventures, where ND alumnus are currently working. Although there are many internship opportunities with no pay, the advisor helps a student to get funded from the university while doing the internship. Because career in computer science can be varied such as software, hardware, IT security, IT business, consulting, and others, it will be nice to know what your interest is, and ask an advisor to introduce companies that match your interest. Also networking or getting a mentor of CSE alumni will be helpful for your career. Because the career center has all the contact information and company information of graduates, they also connect graduates to us so that we could ask them directly about the job environment, interview, application review, or other support. Especially for students who are interested in working in startups, it will be beneficial to get the contact information of alumni in startups, because start-up and venture companies are often more selective when hiring or providing internships.

As ND is mostly known for business and many students are interested in getting jobs at business or consulting fields, there are actually not as many engineering jobs on Go Irish compared to business job positions. Therefore, what the career center recommends students to get resources is going into websites like 'LinkedIn'. If students want to focus on engineering jobs or technology companies, angel.co is another option that is recommended. It is very simple. If you upload your resume and desired career option, the website generates your information and provide contacts or job positions that are matched to them. Angel.co is specifically known for providing engineering jobs from small startup industries to big companies like Airbnb, Uber, and Fitbit.

As the career center describes, using the ND networks will be the most efficient way to be successful in career, especially with CSE major students. Therefore, visiting the career center and getting networks with graduates will be the best option. But before that, it is always recommended to research on many

companies and fields, so that students could know where they want to start. To get this type of resource, students should often visit IT news websites or blogs, campus recruiting, and contacting with the HR department of companies.

### **What extracurricular activities should students consider?**

Extracurricular activities are differently recommended to the student's field of interest. For students interested in software engineering, students can join the computer club in campus. Because the purpose of the club is to promote the interest in computer science, students and staff share information and provide tutorials for students to enhance their engineering skills. By practicing and discussing about computer engineering and skills, students will get advantages both in academics and in careers. The computer club and other clubs often feature talks by people in the tech industry, which are helpful for learning about opportunities and networking.

For students interested in IT management, there is also an IT management club in campus. Students here also share information on IT industry, career, case studies and news, so that students can prepare for their careers outside the class. Students who are interested in case competition or IT start-up competition, are also welcome to join the club and they can create the teams for challenges.

Other than joining clubs in ND campus, it is helpful for students to participate in school events, companies' events, and events in major department, such as app challenge, Accenture case competition, and McCloskey business plan competition. In this way, students will have more opportunities to meet new people, make great experience, and get new skills directly for their careers.

Especially if you don't do any of these things, it is extremely helpful to code in your free time. Many interviewers will ask you about your "side project" referring to any coding you're doing that is not required by class. Companies want to see that

you're interested in programming outside of class requirements, so it is good to have some side project to talk about. It doesn't have to be a technically complex project; interviewers aren't expecting you to solve world hunger with code in your free time. Even if you're just making a simple game, it is helpful to be able to talk about it in an interview.

### **How can students take advantage of networking and alumni relationships?**

You may have heard people talk about Notre Dame's strong alumni network and how helpful it is in finding job opportunities and making connections. Indeed, Notre Dame has an extensive alumni base spread across cities all around the U.S. You may be surprised to find that your dream company is full of Domers! Although the alumni network is not quite as significant for computer science students as it is for business majors, it can still be very helpful in getting a job.

Networking is a helpful skill that some people are naturally good at, while others are not. For some people, conversation comes easily, and they have no trouble making meaningful conversation with someone they just met. For others (like me), networking was an awkward process in which I had to force myself to talk to someone I didn't know and act way more interested in their company or job position than I actually was. If you are of the second group, I'm sorry to say that you're still going to have to do it in the future whether you like it or not. But don't worry, although it may be uncomfortable, it isn't too hard.

When talking to a recruiter or employee, the main thing you want is to be memorable. At a career fair or recruiting event, the employee will be talking to tons of students in succession, and when all the students are computer science majors who are taking all the same questions, it can be tough to effectively stand out. In my experience, one of the best way to do this is to ask interesting questions. Don't just ask the generic questions everyone asks like "What kinds of projects do you work

on?” Actually, you should ask these questions, because you’re probably interested in the answers, but ask some more specific questions about the job too. Then, it’ll be easier for them to remember you later if you bring up the conversation. After you talk to them, be sure to get their contact information, and email them later that day. It may seem like you’re being annoying, but you come off as way more interested, and it’s better to stand out for being a little annoying than to not stand out at all.

### How should students approach negotiations or contracts?

So, you got an offer. Congratulations! Many students are just happy to get to this point, as they should be, and immediately accept the offer. However, especially for full-time offers, it is important to evaluate all parts of the offer before making a decision. Don’t just think about the pay, too; consider healthcare, stock options, and other benefits. If you have another offer on the table, compare all aspects of both offers and determine which you prefer.

Though it’s not the only thing, the pay rate is very important, which brings us to negotiation. Regarding this, it’s important to remember: you can always ask for more money. You might not get it, but the worst thing that could happen is that the hiring company says no, and you could work your way into a better package. Negotiation can be difficult, because you don’t want to come off as arrogant or selfish. So it’s important to ask in the right way and use polite language. Make sure to state clearly your reasons for wanting more money, whether they are because you think you’re qualified, because you have a comparative offer for more money, or because you believe the offer is lower than comparative offers in the same city. If you do have an outstanding offer from someone else, it may be good to mention that. It gives you some negotiation leverage, and if the company wants you badly enough, they’ll make you a better offer. One tip I’ve been told is to never start off by naming an exact number for the pay you want. It is better to just ask if it is possible



for more money, and have the company throw out the first number. Sometimes, their number may be higher than what you wanted anyway, and you got yourself more money for doing essentially nothing.

Some companies won't allow you to negotiate your offer. That's okay, don't get discouraged by this. If you still want to work for the company anyway, you can accept your offer, or if you have a better one elsewhere (or think you can get one), you can decline it.

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