

Surviving the job interview

You never get a second chance to make a first impression

Finally! Someone has seen your CV/résumé and called you back. Your time has come for that teaching job you've had your eye on. You know you're ready; now all you have to do is convince them.

Whether you're a newly qualified teacher fresh off a training course or out of university, or a seasoned teacher changing schools, you will have to come to terms with the nerve-wracking experience of the job interview. Any search on the internet for job interview tips will give you hundreds and hundreds of websites ready to dispense advice on how to sell yourself during an interview. Here are some words of wisdom particularly relevant to teachers, based on our own experience both being interviewed and placing teachers in jobs over the years.

What to do before the interview

Find out as much as you can about the school before you start. Do you know the answers to the following questions?

- How large is the school?
- How many students per classroom?
- What is the student profile? Are the students grouped by level of English, or are the classes of mixed ability?
- What is the hierarchy within the school system? Are there senior teachers? Is there a director of studies responsible only for the English department?
- What outside factors influence the school? Is it publicly or privately funded?
- How stable is work there?
- Have there been any recent labour disputes (strikes, layoffs)?

The best way to find the answers to these questions is to ask other teachers who work at the school or nearby. You can also ask other local people (landlady, taxi driver, waitress in the coffee shop). News, especially bad news, about schools tends to spread quite quickly.

When to arrive

It's pretty obvious that you shouldn't arrive late for an interview for any job. Many people err on the side of extreme caution, arriving 30 minutes early. This can lead to the uncomfortable situation of sitting around the receptionist's desk reading and re-reading the notices on the bulletin board. It's best to arrive five minutes before the interview. If you do find that you are far too early, go for a walk and get an idea of the school's surroundings. How close is it to public transport? Is there a cheap café in the neighbourhood? Is there a place close by where you could make photocopies in an emergency situation?

What to wear

How you dress for your interview depends very much on the culture of the country where you are working. Jeans and tatty sweaters are not a good idea no matter where you are. Dress comfortably and formally. As the saying goes, you never get a second chance to make a first impression. Take out any piercings for the interview. Men should show up clean-shaven or with their facial hair looking neat. Women should avoid wearing very short skirts. Don't wear overly loud clothes, even if they are formal. Would you employ someone who came to an interview in a lime green suit and orange tie?

What to do

Your interview begins when you walk into the building and continues until the moment you leave. Keep this in mind. Be nice to the receptionist or secretary; they can have a lot of clout, and they are often the ones who hold the real power in the school.

During the interview, sit up straight. Slouching gives an impression of laziness, and even insolence under the worst circumstances. Do not avoid eye contact with the interviewer, but don't stare them down either. Finally, try not to fiddle, especially not with objects on the interviewer's desk!

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What to say

Think of at least ten good things about yourself in relation to this job. Squeeze them into the interview and your CV. Make sure that your interview behaviour reflects them as well.

Ask a critical friend to give you a mock interview before the real one. Try out some of the sample questions from the end of this article. Make sure you can say something about each of them! Always answer questions honestly. It's easier to remember the truth than lies. Listen to the questions you are asked, reflect briefly on them and then answer them succinctly.

Here are some things to avoid in an interview:

- talking too much
- talking on and on about personal experiences
- mentioning negative relationships in previous jobs
- making promises you can't keep
- insinuating that this job is a stepping stone to something you really want to do

The interview may include a dreaded grammar question. This could be the interviewer just checking that you do indeed know what you're talking about as an English teacher. Here are some favourites. Research these tricky areas of grammar:

- *some versus any*
- present perfect
- third conditional
- article use
- countable versus uncountable nouns

Finally, the interviewer may ask you to prepare a lesson plan or even teach a sample lesson before they decide whether or not to hire you. Have a few lesson plan outlines ready that you could produce quickly and confidently.

What to ask

At the end of the interview, you will often be given the opportunity to ask questions. To begin with, you may want to ask one of the questions

in the 'What to do before the interview' section, although we don't recommend asking the last three. Knowledge is power, so be sure you are making the best-informed choice you can before you accept a new job. To help you do this, read the information at the end of this article.

Be sure to thank the interviewer at the end of the interview.

Some final words

Remember that in this situation, the power does not only reside with the interviewer. It's also your choice whether or not you work there. If the interview makes you uncomfortable, or if you just get a bad feeling about the school, then it's your right to leave.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Pollock, Robert W. *Teacher Interviews*. Advanta Press, 2002.
- Brause, Rita S.; Donohue, Christine P. and Ryan, Alice W. *Succeeding at Your Interview: A Practical Guide for Teachers*. Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002.

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THE ANTI-INTERVIEW

Look at the typical TEFL interview questions on the left. Match them to the 'bad' answers on the right, then prepare your own good answers!

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| 1. Why do you want this job? | A. In my last school they were all idiots, especially the principal, who was a real jerk. I can't understand it because I'm a really easy-going person. |
| 2. What are your strengths and weaknesses? | B. I'm really funny, and my mum says I'm great with people. I guess my weakness is that I'm a perfectionist. |
| 3. What problems have you encountered teaching? | C. Well, I really need the money. |
| 4. How do you feel about teaching children? | D. My approach to discipline is a principled one: he who shouts loudest, shouts last. I once had a teenager who wouldn't listen to me. I made him sit in the corner for the whole term with his face to the wall. |
| 5. Describe a situation where you had a problem with classroom management. How did you deal with it? | E. I don't know really. I'm at a bit of a loose end and thought I'd try teaching. |
| 6. Where do you see yourself in five years? | F. Not here [laughs]. No, seriously, I see myself with a real job and making some good money. |
| 7. What's your approach to teaching English? | G. The teaching bit is OK – I like talking and explaining things to people. I often have problems with the students, though – they're just so lazy. |
| 8. How flexible are you? | H. I can't stand the little monsters. Don't give me any kids' classes. |
| 9. How do you feel about working in a team? | I. I usually walk through the front door, open the book and we begin. |
| 10. Why should we employ you rather than any of the other candidates? | J. I haven't been to the gym in months [laughs]. In terms of work, I don't want to work mornings, late evenings or Saturdays. And no kids' classes. |

Answers: 1.E 2.B 3.G 4.H 5.D 6.F 7.I 8.J 9.A 10.C

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“If only I’d known ... !”

We asked teachers and people who interview teachers what were the most important or useful things to find out at an interview. Many of them are clarified during interviews anyway but sometimes they are forgotten – to the teacher’s regret! Here’s what they told us.

Cancellations and conditions

- What happens if a class is cancelled at the last minute?
- What happens if a course I’m teaching is closed (e.g. due to insufficient numbers of students)?

Contracts and holidays

- What kind of contract do teachers have?
- Are there paid holidays?
- Are teachers paid for lesson preparation time?

Health issues

- What happens if I’m sick?
- Is there health insurance?

Legal requirements (for foreign teachers)

- What legal documents do I need in order to work? How will the school help me obtain them?
- Are there any important laws I need to know about (e.g. things that cannot be discussed in class)?

Professional development

- Are there workshops for teachers at the school?
- Is there a staff room? Is there a place for teachers to share ideas?
- Are there chances for advancement in the school (e.g. senior teacher, mentor)?



Resources

- Are there resource books for the teachers?
- Do I have a photocopy limit? What happens if I go over (i.e. do I have to pay)?
- Do students buy their own books?
- Do teachers have access to computers, the internet and/or a printer?
- What other technology is available to teachers in the staff room or in class?

Finally ...

One director of studies told us that the questions teachers ask the interviewer are often the most revealing part of the interview! If you only ask about sick pay and holiday pay then that says something about your expectations. If you go in and show interest in your potential professional development then that says something else.