

Eleven Ways to Make Your Interview Successful

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Landed an interview? Wanting to market yourself most successfully so that you are the one who gets the job offer? Are you a rookie candidate? If so, it's difficult to overcome the 'rookie' label and convince the principal and/or interview team to select you instead of the more seasoned candidates. The battle is uphill but is winnable. Try these tips that will make you an interview standout even if you are a rookie candidate.

Do Your Homework

Before you head out for any interview take some time to review the district and campus website. You may not have time to skim it all (the more the better) but at least check out the science department, fourth grade section, or whatever is applicable to the interview you will be having. Don't limit yourself to just one grade if you are heading in for an elementary interview (or to just one subject if you are a science generalist). Wise principals interview with both their current as well as potential needs in mind, and the standout 'second' choice is often called back for another position. Plan at least one statement you can make relative to the 'homework' you have completed. Include in your opening remarks the team name, a note about the school's test scores, fall festival, or significant event. This will let the interview team know you care enough to learn about the school in advance of the interview. If you aren't sure you can remember the information well (after all you are probably interviewing at multiple places) take some notes and have those with you. You win points for being organized as well as knowledgeable.

Rehearse

As a rookie, the question you will inevitably be asked is, "Why did you decide to become a teacher?" Don't let your answer stop with the usually true but trite, "Because I love kids." Add to your answer, "Because I love kids, I see myself interacting with them on a daily basis as a facilitator of their learning and a partner in their success." Or, "Because I love kids, I have successfully led youth groups in college, worked with church or scout troops, and been a day-care provider." You get the idea – personalize!

Dress the Part

While you don't have to look dull and boring, you do need to present yourself as a career professional. That may mean a quick trip to a discount store or raiding someone's closet for an interview outfit. You can wear the same one over and over again and no one but you will realize that. Even if you are not interviewing but just picking up an application (for those districts still using paper) or attending a job fair, dress as though you ARE the teacher. You are selling yourself as an adult who can be given the greatest responsibility in the career world. Look like you fit the role.

Speak the Part

Spell check was invented to save us from embarrassing ourselves on paper. Unfortunately there is no such tool for spoken language. You can, however, control your voice and your grammar by speaking slowly and with deliberation. This will keep you from dropping into slang or simple errors. The first interview is not the time to tell your favorite joke or to show what a cutup you can be at the staff

party. This is a time to present as a serious professional. Check out pronunciations. If the school or principal's name is something that could be pronounced in multiple ways, ask when you arrive for the correct pronunciation. Many an interview has been lost when the chief interviewer was continually addressed by the wrong name.

Be Meticulous With Your Documents.

Many times when we apply for a job we try to personalize our résumé by including the school name. That's great. Just be sure you check carefully and change the name to correctly reflect the campus you are visiting. When principals see a document addressed to the wrong school or district, they assume the candidate is neither efficient nor accurate with detail. Check your grammar, your spelling, and your use of educational terms for accuracy. The role for which you are applying is a detail job – grading papers, assigning grades, and maintaining student records. Show your studious side and win points with the interview team.

Notice Your Surroundings

As you enter the area, observe the grounds, the school marquee, front entrance, hallway décor... anything that will give you clues about the atmosphere of the campus. You can use that information in your responses, again showing that you are interested in that campus and being a part of what is happening there.

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Accentuate the Positive

"What sets you apart from others we are interviewing?" Translated, this question means, "Why should we pick you if we have an experienced teacher applying as well?" Principals invariably describe their ideal candidate as someone who has experience, needs little orientation time, and can hit the ground running. To beat that star-applicant type you will need to optimize the characteristics that you have. Energy, enthusiasm, willingness to learn, quickness at learning, ability to give a large quantity of time, genuine dedication to teaching kids, team player personality—reasons why you as a rookie will make the principal proud to have brought you into the profession.

Emphasize Your Understanding of the Profession

Technology is a tool that engages kids. Learning is not about lecturing but facilitating. Your room is not yours, it's the kids' space in which to grow and learn. Parents are partners, not persons to be held at arm's length. Fellow teachers are your professional learning partners. It's not about math (or English, fifth grade, or media arts); it's about the kids connecting with and engaging in their own learning process.

Rehearse

With a friend, a current teacher, or just the mirror—prepare a set of questions you may be asked and then practice some responses. Don't forget to consider what follow-up questions may be addressed to you. If you mention that you have worked in daycare, you may be asked to describe your greatest challenge or most rewarding moment. If you need visual cues as prompts, use notes. Interview committees will see your use of organizers as a sign of your ability to plan strategically. Translation—if you plan well for the interview, you will plan well for the lessons you present to students.

Never Be Anything But Honest

If the questions cover areas you don't know (unfamiliar acronyms, programs in place at that particular campus), ask for clarification. Above all, don't give the interview team any false information. Don't exaggerate your experience and don't cover up something that could be considered detrimental. Answer with honesty and honor—the same way you plan to teach your kids when you have that classroom assignment.

Smile

You will be nervous but you will improve every time you interview. Going for your first job, you are neither expected to know everything or to have all the answers. That never changes by the way. When you mess up an answer, stop, take a breath, and then continue on with your response. If your first interviews do not land jobs, use them as building blocks. Disaggregate your responses. Go back over the questions that were presented to you and practice your improved answers. Know that every person sitting on the interview team was once a rookie just like you; they all landed jobs teaching some great students. You will too. May you have great luck!

Deal or No Deal?

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Who decides your salary?

In many states, the minimum teacher salary is set at the state level. States and even local districts determine the parameters for possible salary negotiation rules. Check state and district websites for information on salaries.

Can teachers negotiate?

- Yes. But only at private, independent, and charter schools.
- No. In public school districts where starting salaries are set by contracts.
- Maybe. Teachers with years of experience, or those in high-demand areas, can sometimes negotiate where they are placed on the salary schedule.

Total compensation is more than just salary.

Take time to research health insurance, retirement system policies, personal days, and sick leave. Look at the options the district may offer, especially tuition assistance for advanced study, merit-pay alternatives, bonuses for teaching in academically challenged schools, release time to work with your mentor, or other situations which are unique to the district.

The contract is a binding legal document between you and the school district. Read it carefully. Ask questions to verify and clarify details. Once you have signed the contract, you are legally committed to working as a teacher in that district for the agreed time frame. This is not a time to sign a contract and then keep looking for a better one!