

Interviewing Tips for Apprenticeship Programs

It may seem hard to believe that your 5 to 10 minute interview will, in some cases, receive the same weight in the selection process as the test you have taken several months to prepare for. Preparing for the interview, then, requires the same practice and attention. Below are some tips to help you make the most of this opportunity to tell them why YOU are the best candidate.

Making a good first impression

Confidence – it may be difficult to project confidence if you find yourself in front of an interviewing committee, but this is one of the attributes that I am told is most important in assessing apprenticeship candidates. You can improve your chances of giving an effective performance if you:

- Give them a firm handshake
- Make eye contact
- Maintain an upright posture
- Do not fidget

Serious – apprenticeship programs invest many thousands of dollars in training apprentices and their number one criterion is commitment to completing the program. Show them how much you care by:

- Arriving promptly (early is better)
- Taking time with your appearance – good grooming and neat, conservative clothing – whether or not this is work gear will depend on where you are interviewing. If it is a jobsite, wear work clothes, but if it is an apprenticeship school, wear clothes that are nice but not feminine. Do not wear a skirt and blouse with jewelry for example, as you want them to be able to picture you on a jobsite. Do wear neat pants, presentable but practical shoes and a conservative, unisex type shirt, sweater or jacket.
- Bringing all relevant documents – resume, references, letters of recommendation
- Preparing to answer and ask questions

Likable – even if they forget what you say, they will remember if they liked you. Put them at ease by:

- Greeting and thanking them
- Smiling
- Being sincere

Answering Questions

Here are some basic tips for making your answers count.

1. *No equivocating* – you may have doubts about what you really want or your qualifications for the job, but the interviewer doesn't need to know that. Do not say "I think I would like...", say "this is the career I want". You should answer any questions about your commitment or goals as if you haven't a doubt in the world. This is what I want and I have the aptitude/skills/etc. to do it. Even if you have no doubts about your choice, many women have been socialized to communicate less directly and often unconsciously insert phrases like "I think" or "maybe" into otherwise clear sentences. Try to monitor your language and remember, you can always refuse an opportunity, so don't give away the power to choose.

2. *Glass half full* – Apprenticeship programs do not expect you to be skilled in the trade, but they do expect that you know enough to know what it is you are applying for. So don't be shy about talking to them about your limited experiences and your research. Be positive and talk about what you do know, not what you don't know.
3. *Give examples, be specific* - Whenever possible, back up what you say with concrete examples such as, I'm dependable – I maintained perfect attendance in my pre-apprenticeship class or I only missed one day of work last year. Or instead of I'm a hard worker, talk about how your productivity exceeded expectations on your last job. If you have a hard time giving yourself credit, think about things supervisors or co-workers have complimented you on and you can phrase it that way if it feels more comfortable. For example, you might say that your supervisor gave you the highest possible evaluation for customer service. Awards, promotions, or other tangible rewards for good work are also great to mention.
4. *Don't ramble* – Stay on point as much as possible because you have a very short timeframe to make an impression and you don't want to waste it on irrelevant information.
5. *Be logical*- If you are applying to the electrician's apprenticeship program, the answer to "where do you hope to be in five years?" is: working as an electrician. Think about what they want to hear before answering the questions and make sure your answers relate directly to the opportunity you are applying for.
6. *Be prepared* – Learn as much as you can about the trade you are applying for before the interview and practice your presentation so that, even if you are nervous, you will not be tongue tied. You may not know the exact questions they will ask, but you should know what you want them to know about you. Whatever they ask, make sure you make the presentation you intended.
7. *Mention your training with Chicago Women in Trades* – You went the extra mile to prepare for a career in the trades, you didn't just get up one morning and decide to become a bricklayer, so don't forget to emphasize that you attended this course. Also, do not assume your interviewers know what the program is about, so make sure to tell them that it was a 170 hour class and what you studied, particularly the math, measuring, blue print reading etc., and your hands on experience and career exploration.
8. *Be relatable* – Do not be intimidated by superficial differences as it is quite likely that you share many of the same values and motivations as your interviewers. Think about who they are and appeal to these commonalities. For example, most trades people are understandably proud of their skills, their contributions to the community, and their unions and can relate to someone who values these things: someone who is eager to learn, takes pride in their work and will be an active union member.
9. *Do not give superficial answers* – Assume that the interviewer will ask a follow up question so make sure you can talk about the answers you give. An answer such as "I love bricklaying" is really not enough and you will have to be able to answer why you love it. So when you are preparing your answers, think about the likely follow-up questions and make sure that you are prepared to answer those as well.
10. *Be yourself* – we have included some sample answers in the next section, but you don't want to sound like a robot reciting an answer that you don't really own. Instead, make sure that your responses are authentic and use this advice to help you refine your answers.

Common Interview Questions

Typically you will be interviewed by two or more people, representing the union and contractor sides of the apprenticeship program, who will follow a script and assign a score to your answers. Though each program is a little different, below are some questions to consider when preparing for an interview.

1. Why do you want to be a bricklayer, plumber, electrician etc. ?

This is the one question that you can be sure you will be asked, regardless of the apprenticeship program. Using the advice above, make a list of some of the reasons you are drawn to this trade and present them in a way that shows that this was a thoughtful decision based in reality. Here are some ideas.

- I enjoy working with my hands (working outside, being physical) and recently decided that a trades career would be a good match for my interests. To prepare, I enrolled in Chicago Women in Trades' Technical Opportunities Program, where we studied math and basic construction skills and had the opportunity to visit many apprenticeship programs for hands-on workshops and meet many tradeswomen. Of all these experiences, ?? really stood out as the best fit for me. (you can also talk about research, talking to family and friends in the trades, any experience you might have that confirmed/sparked your interest)
- This trade is my first choice because:
 - I like seeing the results of my effort, and I love the idea I will be able to point to these accomplishments for decades to come
 - I think this trade would offer me the physical and mental challenges I am looking for
 - Everybody needs ?? and I feel like I would be providing a valuable service to my community
 - I think I would be good at this work based on my experience ??????(this is by no means an exhaustive list, think about what attracted you to the trade you are applying for and be able to talk about it without mentioning money etc., do not be hesitant to show them your enthusiasm and sincerity)

2. What do you know about or what kind of experience do you have in _____?

They may or may not ask you this specifically, so try to work some of this into the first question and if you miss anything, find a way to tell them at the end. As discussed under the tips section, the most important point to communicate under this question is: I know what I'm applying for (the good and the bad) and I know enough to commit to this apprenticeship program. Do your research so you can speak confidently about the work of the trade and let them know how you know it, did you read up on it, interview tradeswomen, have experience, talk to friends/family in the trade etc. Also put their fears to rest about your ability to handle the work, examples below.

- I know it's physical and I will have to lift ? lbs. I know I can do this because I: workout everyday, routinely lift ? lbs at my job, etc.
- I know I will work outside in the heat and cold and I know I can do this because: have done it before, I play summer/winter sports, I know how to dress comfortably, etc.
- I know I will need good math skills and I have: a strong background in math, have recently completed the TOP math class with a score of ? on my final, I love math etc.
- I know I will have to travel and I: can read a map, have a good vehicle etc.
- I know I will have to be at work at 6:00 or 7:00 in the morning, which I know I can do because: I have had jobs like this before, I have always been a morning person up at the crack of dawn etc. If you have a good attendance record in school or at work, by all means point to this example.

These are just examples, think about the demands of the trade you are applying for and make sure you communicate why you think you will be successful.

3. You are working on a task assigned to you by your supervisor when your co-worker asks to if you can help him/her out with another task. What do you do?

This is a common question to get at your problem solving abilities. There is no actual right or wrong answer, but they want to hear the logic behind whatever you say. The best answers show that you can think for yourself and prioritize as well as take instruction. Something like, if my co-worker's request was an emergency or if I could not proceed with my job until he/she finished what they were doing, I would help out. If I wasn't sure what to do, I would ask my supervisor, is a good answer to a question like this. I heard another version of a problem solving question this year that went like: "List in order of priority: family, job, career, car and cell phone.?" Again, they want to hear you talk this through logically. For most people, family comes first, next might be job or career (you can't have one without the other) to support your family. Of course you need a reliable car to get to work and a cell phone may not just be a luxury if your boss needs to be able to reach you in the field.

4. Some version of "How will you make sure you are at work on time" ?

Do not just say, I will set my alarm clock. Instead show them that you are a reliable person because:

- I keep my car well maintained and ready to go
- I can read a map and if I am going to a new location, I would get the directions and review them in advance.
- I understand the importance of being on time and I have never (? Out of ? days) been late to my current job. I received an attendance award from ?????
- I have no problem getting up early and I always give myself more than enough time to make the drive, just in case there is unexpected traffic etc.

5. What are your weaknesses?

This is not a terribly common question for apprenticeship programs, but you should prepare for it so you won't be taken off guard. Do not tell them something false sounding like I'm a perfectionist and certainly do not tell them about a personal fault that they do not need to know about like I'm disorganized. Keep your answer specific to the opportunity at hand, which for most people means telling them something they already know, you do not have very much practical experience as a ??????. In some cases, the program will actually prefer that you have no experience, because it means they can train you from the beginning and do not have to break any bad habits. You can also emphasize that you are quick learner (give an example) and that you will take advantage of every training opportunity you are provided with.

Another approach is to share with them a weakness that you have overcome, which can also provides them with insight into your character. If you are very small for example, assume that the interviewer is thinking "Can she really handle this physical job". Since this is likely the case, you can actually use this question as a way to address the concern. You might say "I was concerned about my physical strength, so I have been working out for the past ? months, and at this point I can lift over ? pounds fairly easily" etc. Or maybe you were afraid of heights, but have been practicing climbing up and down ladders and now feel comfortable enough to be confident that you can meet the challenge.

6. Why should we choose you?

This is also not a common question, but the answer to this question should be in your mind as you prepare your answers. Think about your qualifications and, wherever possible, include examples so that you are not just giving them a generic list of adjectives. Begin by emphasizing your commitment to the program/trade, backing up your statement with concrete attributes that will make them take you seriously. For example:

If you give me this opportunity, I will be:

- Dependable – at my last job I missed just ? unscheduled days, or I have held down the same job for the past 10 years, etc.
- Prepared to succeed – TOP class, math background, knowledge of trade, physical fitness, etc.
- Hard working – I was recognized at work for ?????, I raised my math score by ??% in the TOP class, etc.

There are obviously many more qualities you can emphasize, all of which will be stronger if you can point to an example as proof. Try to integrate this kind of information into all your answers as you may not be asked such a direct question. If you get to the end of the interview and find that you have not clearly made your case, it is acceptable to end the interview by saying something like, “I want to thank you for this opportunity and let you know that if I’m selected I will

Illegal Questions

Although it is illegal to ask about your marital status or your childcare, it is very possible that you will be asked such questions. It would be interview suicide to get huffy about it during the session, but there is no need to provide a lengthy response either. You can just answer the question or politely deflect it by saying something like, “My family is very supportive and has never kept me from giving my job the priority it deserves. In fact I have an excellent attendance record with my last employer”. One former participant once answered the question “Are you married?” with the answer “Why, are you looking?” which turned out to be a big mistake. She probably would have been better off saying, I would rather not answer that question. You can make a note of such illegal questions after the interview in case you later come to believe that you were discriminated against.

Asking Questions

Asking questions shows you are serious about the opportunity, so if there is an opening, it is good to have one or two prepared. Do not ask questions about things you should know if you had done your research and avoid any questions related to what’s in it for you, such as pay, benefits, etc. You can ask questions such as: “When will decisions be made?” or “What can I do to prepare for work in this field?”



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