SENATE EMPLOYMENT OFFICE

Interview Preparation

(202) 224-9167 | employmentinfo@saa.senate.gov
https://employment.senate.gov/

About the U.S. Senate Employment Office

The Senate Employment Office assists senators and Senate committees with filling entry-level through professional staff vacancies. This office is nonpartisan and administered by the U.S. Senate Office of the Sergeant at Arms.

Each Senate office is an independent employer, responsible for candidate screening, interviewing and selection, as well as job requirements, compensation, and conditions of employment. Although many staff positions are focused on administrative, legislative, or communications functions, specific titles and responsibilities may vary by office. Visit the Senate Employment Office's website for a list of sample positions and descriptions.

Offices within the U.S. Senate are equal opportunity employers.

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Introduction

Congratulations, your application caught the eye of a Senate hiring manager. Now, it is time to prepare for the interview. Although this process may be intimidating, the interview is your time to shine. With proper preparation and practice, you will appear poised and confident, and equipped to position yourself as the ideal candidate for the job.

This resource was developed to help individuals prepare for their Senate interview. Please note that recruitment activities and timelines are at the discretion of each Senate employer. Therefore, general guidance provided by the Senate Employment Office may not always apply to your particular circumstance.

Interview Formats and Question Types

Senate offices typically conduct several rounds of interviews, narrowing the candidate pool at each step of the process. Internship candidates typically complete 1-2 interviews, while candidates for staff positions may anticipate 2-3+ interviews.

Senate interviews may be conducted in-person or virtually. Below are common interview formats:

- **Phone interview**: Offices may schedule a 15-20-minute conversation to screen candidates prior to inviting them to a longer 1:1 or panel interview.
- **1:1 interview**: Typically, a 30 to 60-minute conversation with the hiring manager or other representative of the hiring office.
- **Panel interview**: Typically, a 60-minute conversation between a candidate and a panel of three or more staff who are involved in the selection process.

During the interview, candidates can anticipate a combination of the following question types. A list of common interview questions is provided near the end of this guide.

- **General interest questions**: Ask about the candidate's background, interests, and goals. Some questions may set expectations about the job.
- **Trait-based questions**: Ask about the candidate's attitudes or qualities to gauge their current abilities or aptitude to learn on the job.
- **Behavioral questions**: Require the candidate to share a real-life example about a past experience and describe their actions or behavior in that situation. Behavioral questions are used to determine whether a candidate has the skills and experience required to perform the job.

Preparation

Be mindful of your online presence

Hiring managers often review candidates' social media accounts to ensure that a potential hire will represent the office well. Therefore, make sure your online presence reflects your professionalism and aligns with the values of the Senate office to which you applied. An online search of yourself will provide insight on what information a hiring manager might find.

You may consider making your accounts private or archiving past content to ensure that any inappropriate or unprofessional content will not be viewed by a potential employer.

Do Your Research

Learn about the Senate work environment

A general understanding about the Senate work environment will help you to appear informed and knowledgeable. Although these topics may not be covered in an interview, this information can help in future interactions at the Senate.

- **Understand congressional etiquette**: This includes expectations regarding formal business attire, how to properly address elected officials, and understanding the formalities of Capitol Hill's unique culture.
- **Learn about the legislative process**: Familiarize yourself with Congress, how laws are made, the committee system, and the responsibilities of the House and Senate. A general understanding of current bills or issues under debate is essential, especially for legislative or communications roles.
- **Be aware of current events**: Stay up to date on local, state, national, and international news, particularly issues within a Member's policy priorities. Especially when applying to a Member office, it's important to remain knowledgeable of state and local issues that are important to constituents.

Learn about the Senate office

- **Review the Member or committee office's website**.
    - Member websites typically include a biography, press releases, and information about the Member's legislative priorities.
    - Committee websites include information about their jurisdiction and rules, leadership and membership, subcommittees, recent activities, and other news.
- **Independent news media** may also provide information about a Member's recent work or context on current events.
- **Talk to people in your network**, especially staff who currently or previously worked in the office.
    - Be sure to network proactively and build rapport with your professional contacts, so that you are not reaching out for an introductory meeting during the application or interview process.

- **Tap into multiple sources** to gain a broad perspective about the office and what others are saying. This will help you to prepare relevant and thoughtful questions and show the interviewer that you are genuinely interested in the office and the job. Failure to learn about the office's work or priorities will make you appear uninformed and will reflect poorly in the eyes of a Senate hiring manager.

Understand the job

- Review the vacancy announcement to understand the job's tasks, responsibilities, and competencies. A thorough understanding of the job is especially helpful when answering behavioral interview questions.
- TIP: Create a list of competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities, or behaviors) outlined in the vacancy announcement or other similar positions. This list will tell you what qualities the hiring manager is looking for in a candidate.

Conduct a skills inventory

- Now that you know the job qualifications, take inventory of your skills and experience and brainstorm how you can match them to the job. Include transferrable skills, strengths, and other personal characteristics that you would like to highlight in the interview.

Learn about the interviewer(s), if possible

- When scheduling the interview, ask who you will be meeting with. Try to get the full name(s) and title(s) of your interviewer(s).
- Do some light research to learn about your interviewer's role or experience with the office and prepare a few thoughtful questions for them.

Prepare Responses

Be ready to talk about yourself

The interview is your opportunity to tell the hiring manager about your accomplishments and what you can contribute to the office. You should review your resume and be prepared to elaborate on your past experiences.

Prepare for common interview questions

Review sample interview questions (page 12) and prepare notes or talking points in advance. The length of your response will vary based on the type of question. However, your response should generally be no longer than 2-4 minutes. You may be able to reference your notes if you get nervous or encounter awkward silences during the interview. However, you should not read directly from them, and keep them brief.

The STAR method

The STAR method is an interview technique commonly used to develop a response to a behavioral interview question. Hiring managers ask behavioral questions to determine whether a candidate has the qualifications needed to perform the job. This question format is based on the notion that past behavior predicts future performance, and is becoming more common.

Behavioral interview questions typically follow this format: the interviewer presents a situation or common workplace challenge. Then, the candidate is prompted to share an anecdote about how they acted or dealt with the situation in the past, along with the results of their actions. These questions typically open with:

- Describe a situation…
- Give me an example of…
- Tell me about a time when…
- What do you do when...

The STAR method can help candidates to prepare real-life examples that are structured in a clear, compelling, and easy to follow manner. Candidates should select stories focused on an actual event (not a hypothetical situation), and are relevant to the job. This may include a past work or internship experience, academic group project, volunteer position, or another relevant event.

STAR stands for Situation, Task, Action, and Result. Each phase of the STAR method is defined below. The percentages represent the approximate amount of time that you should dedicate to each section of your story.

Situation (20%): Set the scene by describing the situation, challenge, or task that you performed. Provide pertinent details, and be concise when describing the situation.

Task (10%): Describe your role or responsibilities in the situation. Be specific about your involvement and your objectives or goals.

Action (50%): Your actions should be the primary focus of your response. Explain how you completed the task and why you took those steps to address the situation. Provide specific and clear examples of your actions, and show ownership by using "I" statements or by focusing on how you contributed to the team's efforts. This is an opportunity to reveal "transferrable skills" or actions that you have demonstrated in the past.

Result (20%): Discuss the result or outcome of your actions. Provide concreate examples by quantifying your achievements (if possible). Be sure to end your response on a positive note by talking about what you accomplished, learned, or the steps you took to improve.

Before the interview, think of several stories or examples that you can draw from. Develop concrete examples that showcase your skills and abilities most relevant to the job. You may be able to adapt some of these stories to answer different types of questions during the interview. For each story, take notes on some of the important details, including notable actions, quantifiable achievements, lessons learned, etc.

As an example, let's consider this common behavioral interview question: "Tell me about a time when you worked well with a team."

Senate employers place a high value on teamwork and collaboration. This is a competency that will likely be included in the vacancy announcement and asked about in the interview.

> **Situation**: In my current job as a donor coordinator, I worked with a team of five to plan and execute our university's annual fundraising event.
>
> **Task**: There were so many moving pieces. Everyone on our team had different responsibilities, but we all had to work as one unit to bring the event to life. I was responsible for compiling the list of donors, mailing invitations, and coordinating the event speakers and program.
>
> **Action**: Although I was the newest person on the team, I organized a project management system that would allow us to check in with each other daily. The team did not do this before, but everyone loved the virtual task-tracking features. I completed my responsibilities ahead of schedule and offered to assist my colleagues with their outstanding tasks. Additionally, one of my colleagues fell very ill several weeks before the gala. I stepped up to complete her assignments and worked after hours to ensure that everything was done properly. To fulfill her responsibilities, I had to quickly learn about the university's financial aid program. I met with a staff member from this office as well as other university officials. On the day of the gala, all hands were on deck. I performed my emcee duties while also picking up random tasks throughout the evening. As a team player, I believe that no task is too small and was happy to help wherever I was needed.
>
> **Result**: Last year, 2,000 people attended the fundraising gala, and we raised more than $1 million in contributions. Thanks to our team's collaboration, the university president called the gala the best party he had ever attended. The project management system that I developed, has made our meetings more productive, and we are now implementing it to track smaller projects. I have also continued to learn about the university's financial aid program and am now the point person on that issue, and I frequently collaborate interdepartmentally with colleagues in the financial aid office.

Prepare Questions

Prepare thoughtful questions that are specific to the office and position. Asking questions at the end of the interview can help you to determine whether a role is a good fit for your needs and demonstrates that you did your research and are interested.

Make sure that you do not ask questions that you can easily find an answer to online. When preparing questions, you might consider:

1. What do you want to know about the role or office? E.g. work expectations, office culture, management style, other detials not covered by the vacancy announcement, etc.
2. What can you learn from the interviewer(s)?
3. What are the next steps in the office's recruitment process?

A list of frequently asked questions can be found on page 13.

Practice

Practice answering common interview questions in a mock interview with a trusted colleague, friend, or family member. This will help you to gain confidence, improve your delivery, and help you avoid rambling or going off-topic during the interview. If you are not able to practice with a partner, practice talking through your responses out loud. This will help to ensure that your response flows comfortably and naturally.

Since you've prepared and practiced, be sure to get adequate rest so that you will be in the right headspace on the day of your interview.

The Interview

Below are tips to help you appear confident on the day of the interview. These tips apply to both in-person and virtual interviews.

- **Dress professionally**. For the Senate, business professional is the standard. The night before your interview, select an outfit that is clean, comfortable, pressed, and well-fitted. If in doubt, err on the side of dressing more formal.
- **Be on time**. If you are meeting in person, confirm the location and directions to your interview site ahead of time. Give yourself extra time to commute, in the event of traffic or transit delays. You should plan to arrive to the Senate office building at least ten minutes prior to your scheduled interview.
- **Silence your phone** and other electronic devices. Store them away to limit distractions during the interview.

- **Learn the interviewer's name**, its spelling, and pronunciation. Addressing your interviewer(s) by name can help to create rapport, and can be used to personalize your post-interview thank you notes.
- **Follow the interviewer's lead**.
- **Speak diplomatically and with tact**. Considering the diverse opinions and sensitive topics debated on Capitol Hill, speak diplomatically and avoid expressing partisan bias. Although you may hold personal political beliefs, overt bias may be viewed as unprofessional.
- **Be truthful**. Although you should speak confidently, do not exaggerate your accomplishments or embellish your job experience. Remember, the interviewer is looking for someone who can do the job well and fit in with the office, so be honest and let your personality shine through.
- **Be concise and articulate** in your responses, but don't be afraid to ask clarifying questions or ask for time to think if necessary.
- **Be engaged and take notes**. Bring a notepad, pen, and extra copies of your resume.
- **Be aware of your body language**. This includes your posture, fidgeting, facial expressions, and eye contact.
- **Showcase your personality**. Although you still need to remain professional, it is important to be authentic and help the interviewer get a sense of who you are and what you can bring to the job.
- **Close on a positive, enthusiastic note**. At the end of the interview, thank the interviewer(s) for their time and ask about the next steps.
- **Send a thank you note** within 24 hours of your interview. Your note can be emailed or hand written. Keep it brief, express your appreciation for the interview, reference something that came up during your conversation, and reaffirm your interest in the job. As an example, your note can mention a moment from the interview that you enjoyed or found particularly interesting. This is another chance to leave a final positive impression.

Virtual Interviews

Below are suggested do's and don'ts of virtual interviews.

Do's

- Test your technology in advance. Make sure your internet connection is stable, your camera and microphone are working properly, and you know how to use the video conferencing software. Troubleshooting tech issues while the interview is happening can be stressful and can make you appear

unprepared. Despite testing in advance, technical issues can still arise. Don't panic if there are any delays or glitches. Politely suggest troubleshooting or rescheduling if problems persist. As long as you're courteous about the situation, most interviewers will understand.

- Dress professionally. While the interviewer won't see your whole outfit, dressing professionally can help you feel more confident and communicate that you are taking the interview seriously.

- Make sure there is nothing inappropriate or unprofessional in view of the camera. Find a clean, uncluttered space or use a professional backdrop or digital background. You should also make sure that you are in a quiet location, free from noise and distractions.

- Make eye contact with the camera. Looking directly at the camera mimics eye contact and helps to build rapport, even though you're not physically in the same room. Glancing away can seem like you're disengaged or distracted.

- Pay attention to your body language. Even though the interviewer can only see you from the waist up, practice confident body language like smiling, nodding, and maintaining an open and relaxed posture. This can help you feel and appear more at ease. Also, be aware of any hand gestures, these may be seen on screen by the interviewer.

- Follow up appropriately. Send a thank you email or note within 24 hours to reiterate your interest in the role.

Don'ts

- Don't be late. Being late to a virtual interview has the same negative effect as being late to an in-person interview. Build in extra time in case you run into technical issues. It's better to be a few minutes early than risk being late.

- Don't get distracted. Silence or minimize notifications on your devices and avoid multitasking during the interview. Stay focused on the conversation and avoid glancing off-screen or typing on your keyboard.

- Don't forget to smile. While it might feel unnatural or unnecessary since the interview is not being done face to face, smiling can help to make you feel more at ease, and can make you appear engaged and enthusiastic.

Conclusion

It is important to remember that the interview is a two-way conversation. As employers gauge whether you are a match for their role or office, the interview allows you to present yourself in a positive fashion and conversely, see whether the opportunity aligns with your needs and goals. Now that you are equipped with the knowledge to succeed, we wish you the best in your upcoming interview!

Common Interview Questions

General Interest Questions

- Tell me about yourself and your qualifications. How has your experience prepared you for this role?
- Why do you want to work for the senator?
- What interests you about this role?
- What will you bring to our office that other candidates will not?
- What is the professional achievement you are most proud of?
- What are your goals for the future?
- Are you willing to relocate?
- What is your expected salary?
- Do you have any questions for us?

Trait-Based Questions

- Describe your ideal work environment.
- What is your greatest strength that would help you to succeed in this role?
- In what areas do you feel the need to improve?
- How do you handle pressure or stressful situations?
- Do you prefer working in a team or on your own? Why?
- How do you stay on top of current knowledge in your field?
- What are you passionate about?

Behavioral Questions

- Give me an example of a time that you went above and beyond the call of duty at work.
- Tell me about a challenge or conflict you've faced, and how you dealt with it.
- Tell me about a time when you came up with a creative solution to a challenging task. What was the result?
- Give an example where you showed leadership and initiative.
- Tell me about a time when you worked well with a team.
- Can you share an example of when you had to manage multiple priorities or deadlines? How did you organize your time and tasks?
- How would you describe your communication style?
- Tell me about a time you had to learn something new quickly. What was the situation and outcome?
- Describe a time when you made a mistake at work. How did you deal with this situation, and what was the outcome?
- Give an example of when you received negative feedback. How did you respond?
- Tell me about a time when you disagreed with your boss. How did you resolve it?
- Have you ever been in a situation where your role or responsibilities were not clearly defined? What did you do?

- Describe a time when you had to deal with a difficult colleague or customer. Why was it difficult? How did you handle it? What was the outcome?
- Give examples of ideas you've had or implemented through legislation.

Questions for the Interviewer

- Can you describe a typical day or week in the job?
- What are the skills or characteristics of an ideal employee for this position?
- What kind of training could be expected for this position?
- What are the key challenges or problems of this position?
- What are the top priorities for this position over the next 3 months? 6 months? 1 year?
- Can you describe the office's management structure to me in greater detail?
- What is the office's policy on in-person, hybrid, and remote work?
- How would you describe the work environment?
- With whom would I be working?
- How is performance judged and by whom?
- Are there opportunities for growth or advancement in this role?
- Could you tell me a little about how you came to work here?
- What do you like best about working for the senator?
- What is the office's timeline for hiring for this position?
- Can you provide examples of the type of work or responsibilities performed by interns in your office?
- Does the [summer] internship program have a mentor system?
- Does your [summer] internship program have an official start and end date? Are there a minimum/maximum number of weeks that an intern is expected to work?
- Are interns assigned to one department or rotated through several? How is their work determined, assigned, and evaluated?