



Philosophy - Preparation - Practice

Preparing for Your First Teaching Interview

Anyone who has taken a speech class in high school knows that making a presentation in front of an audience, whether small or large, can be a challenging, rewarding, enjoyable, and sometimes anxiety-producing experience. Your first teaching interview can prove to be a similar experience. As with a speech, there is no substitute for knowing what you believe, preparing in advance, and practicing. The interview is crucial in the application process, and many times is the single most influencing factor in selection for a position. It should be approached with confidence and a command of your content. The following model contains tips that will help you prepare for your interview and is intended as a tool to help instill confidence and reinforce what you, as a candidate, already know.

Philosophy

Write down your philosophy and beliefs.

The first step in preparing for an interview is to know and be able to articulate what you believe. In order to ensure that this can be done, an applicant should write out (yes, write out) his or her statements of belief about education. These statements should cover several areas including beliefs about children, teaching and learning, education and its role in the community and society, and a few fundamental educational issues that are particularly important to you. You should be able to share these beliefs in a manner that communicates commitment and sincerity. These beliefs should be second nature and totally internalized. After all, you are what you believe.

Once you are confident that you can articulate a personal philosophy, you should reduce that set of beliefs down to a series of simple and brief (5 words or less) tenets. This makes it easier to communicate the belief system in any interview situation. These tenets should be firmly in mind and heart so that all responses in the interview may be framed around these simple statements, or belief. Examples of tenets may include: the whole child; what is best for students; academic achievement through developmentally appropriate practices; equity; and, reading as the common denominator.

With a personal philosophy internalized, the applicant is ready for the next step in preparing for the interview.



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Preparation

Ideally, a candidate's philosophy will need only fine tuning. This preparatory section will require some time and effort for the candidate to be thoroughly versed and prepared for any question that comes his/her way.

This model was developed to ensure that an applicant could converse knowledgeably and confidently on a variety of topics and issues and to reduce the tension of anticipating the first, or any, interview. Remember that confidence is built through the knowledge that one is prepared. Preparation should begin well in advance of your first interview.

Write down the questions and answers.

- Write down (yes, write) every question you can think of regarding the position for which you are applying in the areas of your subject matter content and the teaching and learning act. Don't be deterred by how long it gets and don't feel that it must be completed at one sitting. New questions will occur to you as you think through your list. Initiate conversations with other teachers, fellow students, and college professors to stimulate the introduction of additional topics to your list. Be exhaustive. Remember that confidence is created from preparation, and even if you "over prepare" for the interview, you are also preparing for teaching itself. Some of the middle school topics you should consider are teaming, curriculum integration, exploratory programs, block scheduling, and professional development. You might also refer to your middle school literature and generate topics from publications like *This We Believe*, *Turning Points 2000*, and other literature containing middle school components.
- After you have developed your list of questions, write (yes, write) the answers. Write in complete sentences, since that is how you must communicate them and complete sentences sound different and take more time than phrases or single words. Writing in complete sentences also helps reinforce what you already know and prompts you to place information into your framework.
- After you have responded in writing to your questions, you will be able to determine for which topics you need additional information. They may be part of your interview, and even if they are not, they will be part of your teaching job. So, research them.
- After you have completed your research, go back to your written answers and read them against the background you acquired. Rewrite any responses for which you have new information and answer any questions that you have left blank.
- Read your answers over until you are sure of the content. Soon, you will begin to anticipate the answers as you read the questions.
- Now, condense all the information in your answers onto a single 8 1/2 X 11 page. Use blocks to surround ideas. Highlight phrases and key words. Draw arrows. Do whatever it takes to help you condense the information into topical, usable chunks.



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Practice

Drill yourself.

- Keep your information sheet handy. Throughout your day, take it out and glance at it, or shut your eyes and place your finger on a random spot. Once you have identified a topic, practice reciting the answer in complete sentences out loud, if possible.
- At least 50% of your practice should be out loud. Things are different when you speak and hear them than when you think them. Speaking is slower, for one thing. Get used to the sounds, the pauses, how you phrase things, what you do when you are hesitant. Get used to how you look and sound when answering in complete sentences. By all means, do some practice in front of a mirror. If you practice in front of a mirror, you will know how you look and how the look matches how you sound. This allows you to focus on the person or team during the interview rather than on yourself. You can see and hear how you project yourself and are perceived. This helps in building your confidence.
- Complete some of your preparation in front of a camera, either video or digital. In addition to practicing in front of a mirror, this record of your interview will let you see how you look during the interview. Use the tape or disc to critique yourself and have a friend critique you.
- Think back to the philosophy section. Ask yourself some questions but don't use your carefully planned preparation in answering them. Or have a colleague or fellow student ask you some questions using their terms and thinking patterns. Respond to the question by framing it around one of your belief statements. Rephrase the question incorporating one of your belief statements, then answer and make your answer connect with that belief, describing how your philosophy might guide your approach. Practice framing answers to questions with which you struggle using core beliefs. Practice this approach and technique until you feel comfortable with it.

The above point is critical to approaching an interview situation with a sense of security and confidence. In an interview situation, this can move you from "I don't know" to a more thoughtful, connected response that supports what you know and believe.

- Now, reduce all your 8 1/2 X 11 information onto a single note card. These are your key ideas, your most important concept summarized in a word. By this time, your command of your answers has been reinforced through your writing, research, thinking and speaking. Glance at your note card as you make final preparations for the interview.

The Interview

Be punctual.

Be on time – better yet, arrive early. Drive to the interview site in advance so that on the day of the interview you don't get lost. Be sure you know the way. Anticipate that traffic or unforeseen events may delay you. Know who you are to speak with when you arrive at the interview site and ask for that person by name.



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Project an image.

Dress with care and make sure the image you create through your grooming and clothes is one that will complement your interview, not detract from it. Remember that you only have one chance to make a first impression and you will want to create a professional impression.

Be yourself.

What you sell about yourself and who you are is what you must deliver. A good interviewer will know when you are trying to be someone you are not. Even if it works, the school won't be getting the person they hired.

Answering the questions.

Respond to questions in your interview by first listening to each question all the way through. Be thorough but to the point. Don't try to use one question as the catalyst to recite everything you know. If you heard the question, but lost a part of it as you thought ahead, ask to have it repeated or rephrased in order to give yourself a little time. Listen carefully, then formulate your answer. It is all right to say, "I'm not sure what you are asking. Would you rephrase it for me, please?" It is also all right to tell the interviewer you don't know, if indeed you don't know and even if you tried, you couldn't fit the question into one of your belief statement frameworks. Really, it's OK. If you try to make something up, the interviewer will know, and you will only just make yourself more nervous. Need a few seconds to formulate an answer? Take the time. It is better to answer thoughtfully than to ramble while searching for something to say.

Asking questions.

This part varies according to the interviewer. Some interviewers will ask if you have questions, and if you do, it is OK to ask them. If you have questions, but are not invited to ask them, feel free to ask if there is time for a few questions after the interview is complete. Take your cues from the interviewer on how long you have to continue. Don't feel pressured to ask questions. Ask questions if you have them, but do so in a sincere, "looking for information way," not in a "this is a required part of the interview" way.

Do your homework.

If you accept an interview, you should have researched the district and/or school. You can usually gain valuable information on the district's Web site or through a telephone call to the human relations or public information department. If you know someone who lives in the community, contact them and ask what they think of the schools or what the current issues are within the district. This will help you to determine if it is a place you would be comfortable working should you be offered the position. The interview IS NOT the time to do your homework about the district or school.

Are you a match?

The interviewer is trying to determine if you are a match for the school, the staff, the community. Many times this is the determining factor in being offered a position. If you have prepared thoroughly and accurately presented who you are and what you can and would like to do, feel confident that you have done all that is within your control. It is now up to the district. Most interviewers or teams are looking for something specific, something that complements the talents, skills, knowledge, and teaching styles that are already in place. If you are invited back for a second interview, it is clear that the school and the district are interested in you. At this time, depending on how the interview proceeds, you may be offered a tour of the building. If you are not and if you are interested in further information about the school, you might suggest a tour.



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Beliefs, process, content.

Usually the interview questions will fall into three general categories – your beliefs, your knowledge about the educational process, and your grasp of your subject content. Some members of the interview team will want to know what you believe about children and education. Other interviewers will want to know what you believe about learning and what teaching strategies you use. Still others may want to know your understanding of and position on school issues and reforms. Finally, there will be questions that determine how well versed you are in your subject matter.

Regardless of the size of the interview team, if you know what you believe and you base your answers on your experiences and belief system, you will be able to represent yourself and your abilities confidently.

Hint: Keep the note card handy during your first year or two as a teacher. Colleagues, parents, or a new administrator may ask, “What do you believe?” You’ll have it in print and by reviewing your key phrases and concepts you can respond just as confidently as you responded in your interview.

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Additional Resources

www.Teachers-Teachers.com.