

## Interviewing Questions

There is a lot of information in this document. It may seem overwhelming, but you will hear a good number of the questions here and you need to think before you get to the interview how you will answer. Write down your answers and review them before every interview. If you understand why they might be asking such a question, it will help you answer that question and similar ones seriously and with answers that will better fit what they are seeking and who you are as a person and as a teacher.

Go to the Career Assistance button in the [Resources Catalog](#) and watch or listen to all the webcasts/podcasts on interviewing. Then go to the Video button and watch the videos of real interviews and what Dr. Whitman was expecting with the questions he asked. (There is a total of four videos to watch which will take you a little over an hour, but really help you prepare for interviewing.)

### The Traditional Questions

You should be ready to explain why you want to teach. You should be able to explain your philosophy of education. You should have a short “tell me about yourself” speech prepared—some administrators will even refer to this as your “elevator speech.” A good example: “I spent summers working at camps and felt I connected with middle school students. I love history and have always visited any historical site I could in the United States and in several other countries, so I have quite a number of first-hand stories and my own pictures I can use in the classroom. I just finished an intensive 15-week student teaching experience that prepared me to teach 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I had an incredible supervising teacher, and I learned strategies and methods to reach diverse students who didn’t have 7<sup>th</sup>-grade skills when they started the year. Shall I explain more?”

If you are a career changer, don’t be afraid to refer to your previous professional life. You should point out the advantages it will give you, even if it is only that you realized you didn’t like it and want to help young people avoid making uninformed choices about the job market. Having worked in

another field establishes you as a reliable and experienced employee. Having real life experience will give you credibility with your students when they want to know, “why do we have to learn this?”

Often you will be asked to describe yourself in three words. Choose carefully—have three words prepared. Also keep in mind that if your NCATE framework has a catchy motto, your interviewer will be tired of hearing it. Come up with something original and unique to you.

There is a good chance you will be asked to discuss your student teaching experience. Decide now what you think the best and worst part of that experience was. Never say anything negative about your school or cooperating teacher. “Loyalty to the system” is a factor in most education hires. You may be asked what grade level you prefer and why. You may be asked if you are willing to coach or work with an after-school activity. Although you should not lie, you need to appear open to this. If you have special skills in an area such as yearbook production or coaching a sport, this is a big plus.

You will also almost certainly be asked about classroom management and discipline. You may be asked to describe your own plan or you may be given a hypothetical question about a specific case. Be prepared to describe how you would handle a situation or better yet describe how you handled an actual similar one.

### **Some Newer Types of Questions**

There is a real trend towards hypothetical or “situational” types of questions. This is like an essay question on an exam where you can “show what you know.” Topics that may come up involve:

- Differentiated instruction
- Accommodations for English language learners
- Integration of technology in the classroom
- Dealing with parents

- Multiculturalism (look at the demographics for the schools at which you interview)
- The ever-popular classroom management

For example: One of your students has not been doing well in your class. She appears tired and listless and her attendance has gotten spotty. What would you do?

Although you may suggest any number of things, what they are looking for is that you will try to set up a parent-teacher conference. Something may be wrong at home and it may be affecting student performance. You could also discuss talking with her teacher from last year, reviewing her permanent file, or seeing the school counselor. This is the “phone a friend” option that shows you know how to collaborate with colleagues and use the resources that your school has to offer.

### **Icebreakers**

- Why did you decide to become a teacher?
- Why have you chosen teaching as a profession?
- Tell me something about yourself that isn’t on your résumé.

### **Curriculum**

- Describe an experience implementing the curriculum mandated by the school district and state.
- Tell me about a two-week unit you taught.

### **Methods and planning**

- Tell me about a 50-minute lesson you taught and why it went well.
- Has a plan ever failed? If so, what did you change?
- How do you do daily lesson planning? What is always included?
- How comfortable are you with technology and integrating it into your lesson plans?

## **Classroom routines and management**

- Describe your procedures for starting and ending class.
- Describe a classroom-management plan that worked well.
- What kinds of rewards have you used to motivate students?
- How do you get acquainted with a new class?
- What do you find most challenging when dealing with students?
- How do you incorporate positive reinforcement in a classroom setting?
- What methods of classroom discipline have you found most effective?

## **Homework and grading**

- Describe a grading system that has been effective.
- How can you assess student learning without letter grades?
- How have you dealt with receiving incomplete assignments?

## **Individual student needs**

- Which approaches to teaching your subject have worked with all students?
- How have you worked with students who speak English as a second language?
- How have you modified a lesson for gifted students? For special-needs students?
- What do you do to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of individual learners?
- Please describe what a “middle schooler” is.

## **Communication**

- Tell me about a positive parent communication you’ve initiated.
- How have you made requests of a colleague, mentor teacher, or principal?
- Describe the relationship you would like to have with the administration of your school.
- What type of relationship do you strive to have with the parents of your students?

## **Professionalism**

- What do you think professionalism is? What aspects of your life does it include?
- Have any journal articles led you to make any changes in your classroom?
- How has a conference or special training improved your teaching?
- What accomplishments have you realized at your current or most recent job?
- Why do you think you are a better candidate than the 600 other people applying for this job? Or, what do you bring to the table?
- Name three professional books you've read lately. Or, tell us about the most recent professional book you've read.

## **Answering Interview Questions**

Answer questions in a manner that demonstrates your knowledge and experience. Share short, concise examples of lessons that went well, even if those lessons were during your field experience. Explain what you have learned about children and how your past experiences have made you a better teacher.

The best answers will demonstrate your experience with the topic and your willingness to improve. Express yourself in a positive light. For example, you could answer the question "What do you find most challenging when dealing with students?" by replying that dealing with students' social and emotional problems makes classroom management a challenge. However, a better answer would be: "During my student teaching, I worked with students who had high energy levels. If I didn't plan for management and academics, these students had problems getting, and staying, on task. I know today's students bring plenty of problems from home, but I am charged with making the classroom a positive place for them. Motivating and guiding them is my job." Follow up your answer with a quick example of how you motivated or challenged an individual student.

Your answer to the question "What accomplishments have you realized at your current or most recent job?" should emphasize roles in which you supervised children or adults, created programs, directed activities, wrote

reports, evaluated paperwork, and similar tasks that teachers do. If you had perfect attendance or were promoted early, don't hesitate to mention it. In an interview, you are selling yourself, your experience, and your work ethic.

Whatever you do, don't get defensive. Simply answer—even if that answer does not necessarily put you in the best light. Don't dwell on it. Try to think how to turn the lemon into lemonade such as, "I plan to collaborate with my colleagues and mentors to improve in this area."

## **Uncommon Questions You Should be Able to Answer**

### If you could . . .

- If you could be any flavor of ice cream, what would it be and why?
- If you could go anywhere for vacation, where would you go, and why?
- If you could be any type of shoe, what would it be and why?
- What cartoon is/was your favorite or best describes you?
- What song best describes your life? What is your life's theme song? What is the theme song to your life right now?
- You've just painted your kitchen purple. Why?
- What are 10 uses for a pencil besides writing with it?
- How do you prepare meatballs?
- If your life was a patchwork quilt, what would it look like?

This type of question is to see how well you think on your feet. Can you create a plausible, somewhat logical answer? Do you get flustered easily? Will students' questions and comments "throw you for a loop"?

Think of an answer to each of these that relates to your teaching style and personality and jot down those relationships. That will help you if you get one of these or a similar question. To answer the second question, you might say: "I like to visit places I've never been and take pictures I can use as in various ways with my students. I'd be open to going almost anywhere, but would love to visit \_\_\_\_\_ because the architecture and history are so interesting. I could then do a unit on \_\_\_\_ with my students. They could do webquests, I could use pictures as story or essay starters, and each one could choose a building to research and present their research."

### What happens in your classroom . . .

- If I were a mouse in the corner of your classroom, what would I see?
- How would your administrators know if you were under too much stress?
- How would your colleagues describe you?

This type of question is an attempt to understand how your classroom functions and to “see” your teaching style. Answer the first type of question by describing how you facilitate learning and engage learners. For example, “Students would be out of their assigned seats, working together and talking. Each small group would be working on a different aspect of a problem or engaged in some hands-on activity with discussion.” Try to visualize how you engage students and describe what a person walking into your classroom would see.

The second question is an attempt to understand how you deal with stress since teaching and all its demands are very stressful. Answer the second question by describing your use of exercise or yoga or involvement in a hobby to diffuse stress.

Think of three words or phrases your colleagues would use to describe you such as hardworking, collegial, student-centered, flexible, easy to work with, focused, or whatever. You should also think of three words or phrases your students would use to describe you such as caring, involved in our lives, engaged with her content but able to help us understand it, demanding, sets high expectations, advocates for us, etc.

### Realistic problem solving

- How would you deal with boyfriend/girlfriend things in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, like hugging?
- What would you do if a student did not do his homework because there was a drive-by shooting at his house last night?
- Give an example of a time when you worked with someone you didn’t like or couldn’t get along with. How did you solve the problems?

- What would you do with an unruly special needs student when you have absolutely no parental support?

These are real situations. Give them some thought. You may be able to find a student handbook online before going to the interview to know how the school administration views such things as hugging—or even the special needs student. Obviously, the second question is going to get at your caring attitude, how you help the student (and others) debrief, whether you value your lesson over the students' mental health, etc.

If you have never worked with someone who was hard to work with, you will need to totally make up this answer! You can describe a professor who was hard to please and how you found common ground or a person at a summer job and how you found something you could both talk about. Finding common ground and learning when and how to disagree but work for the common good are both factors. Your coursework may have prepared for the unruly special needs student in giving you some of the state and federal laws. Your best bet beyond that is to talk about consulting with a special education teacher in the school system or back at your college and continuing to try to work with the parents.

You are the best candidate we've seen, but you don't teach what we need:

- A music teacher was asked if she'd get a truck driving license. This was probably because the rural school system did not have bus drivers to take music students to competition, so the teacher also had to drive the bus.
- A teacher holding a pre-K-3 certificate was asked if she would be willing to teach 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading. She is probably totally unprepared so if she is desperate for a job, this would entail much discussion and support from the administration and other teachers.
- "I know you did not apply for the position for Youth in Custody, but would it scare you too much if we offered it to you." Again, the candidate will need support and coaching, but if you are not afraid to try, you will get lots of brownie points!
- How many other interviews do you have scheduled? How many interviews have you had? These really are not questions they should



be asking, but they are trying to assess how desperate you are so they can decide if they should offer you a job other than what you applied to do. Or, they are trying to figure out how quickly they need to grab you!

- Would you mind working nights and weekends too? It's hard to say what they wanted with this question. This may refer to how much effort you put into preparing lessons, creating activities, grading papers, and all those other things all teachers do at night and on the weekend. It may refer to their desire to offer you a coaching position which will entail evening practices and weekend competitions. Simply say you assume you will work many nights and weekends as a first year teacher working to be the best teacher your students have ever had.
- An art teacher was asked to teach reading skills. If you have had a course on teaching reading, let them know, but remind them that you don't have too much background in that area, so you will need help and support from them and the media specialist or a reading specialist. Be honest if you aren't comfortable doing this, especially if you wouldn't get to teach any art classes.

**Other off-the-wall questions:**

- What do you think of our website? What were you looking for? They are wondering if you did your homework and checked them out. Or, they are preparing to change the website and are gathering information.
- Do you believe there is life in outer space?
- Which GLE is most important?
- Who was the ninth President?
- If you had an infinite amount of money in your classroom budget, what would you do with it?

## Questions they are legally not allowed to ask

- What is your age or birth date?
- What is your height, weight, high school graduation date, race, or skin color?
- What language do you usually speak?
- What is your marital status?
- Do you have any children or plan to have any? What will your childcare arrangements be? How many more children will you be having?
- Do you own or rent your home? Would you move into the school district? (some schools do require you to live in the district and that is not illegal in some states, so this could be a legitimate question)
- To which faith do you belong? If you are applying to a faith-based school, they can ask this and it is important.
- Are you in good health?
- Have you ever been arrested? (They can do a background check and find out, but you have to sign for them to do a background check. If you have an arrest record, that will be a deal-breaker.)
- Will you discuss your class on Facebook? While this is not yet illegal in most states, it may become so. Until then, be sure you answer that you won't or that you would only give kudos on Facebook.

If you are interviewing for a private or religious school position, they can ask you all about your religious views, marital status, children, childcare options, and so forth. They may even have weird questions related to their views. Learn all you can about the school and their philosophy before the interview.

If you are asked an illegal question, don't accuse them of asking illegal questions or say you don't have to answer it. Instead, comment that time is limited and that you'd rather focus on teaching.