

How to Interview for the Police Job

An oral interview may be the toughest conversation you've ever had. Are you ready?

August 08, 2008 Police Magazine

You have completed the written test, passed it. Physical agility test was a breeze. Your background investigation was pristine. Now comes along the next hurdle toward your goal of becoming a law enforcement officer, the interview. This can be the most difficult segment of all, but it is one for which preparation will help. Are you up to it?

Yes, there are volumes of books written on this subject, and many are very helpful. But after sitting across the table as a panelist, I have some tried and true tips of my own.

Study Available Materials

Preparation is key. First of all, read the application process and pay attention to the description of this element. Some agencies provide sample questions. If your prospective employer does so, capitalize on this. But use these examples only as a study guide. Remember, they won't cover everything. Do not exclaim, "I didn't know you would ask me that!"

As the candidate you will be questioned by a panel of officers; this means that officers from within the agency will be on the dais. They probably have received some training by human resources on questioning methods. The purpose of these questions is to seek insights into you and how you think—a clinical answer won't satisfy.

Verbalize

You can research, purchase preparation books, and study; but they want you, not a pat answer. You may also know officers on the job who can give you some insights as to what they feel you may be quizzed on. But, you must prepare by verbalization. Do not sit there and think your answers; actually say them aloud. The more you practice this, the easier it will become.

Your voice will telecast uncertainly by cracking or with an inappropriately casual "you know." Do not use levity or say, "yada, yada, yada" while practicing, for under pressure, this could be what flies out. Be sure you do not use any inflammatory words or words that could be misinterpreted, and keep within proper conversational perimeters. You are not there to create controversy, shock, or perform stand-up comedy. You are there to sell yourself to this panel and show that you are prepared for this job.

On the other hand, don't get too uptight. the panel is not there to wash you out. This is a control pressure but not adversarial. It is often a predictor of how you think on your feet and how you verbalize under pressure.

Practice

Practice by several methods. Have a trusted friend ask you the questions while you respond to them verbally. It is important that you can get the words, statements, or phrases out of your mouth. Practice known responses while driving.

The opening question such as ‘tell the panel about yourself’. The brief biographical response is your opportunity to tell them about yourself. You know the answer, they do not. If anyone knows about why you are prepared for this job, it is you! A pointer here: If they have certain requirements such as education, tell them what you possess. Do not make them review your packet to see if you meet the requirements.

If you are hit with police procedural or situational questions, do not panic. If this department is hiring non-certified officers, the panel knows you do not know their procedures or protocols. They want to know if you can multitask. For example, at an accident scene with a child, can you handle the call without getting emotional over a child victim?

Ethical questions are not difficult. Every panel will propose a “What will you do?” question. You came into this quest with ethics and integrity; stay the course. Listen and think before you respond.

Interview Protocol

Basic interviewing protocol is to arrive early; tardiness is not a good start. Dress for the occasion. Wearing your lucky T-shirt is not a career enhancer. Men should wear a suit and tie and ladies should wear business casual. Grooming is important as well. If the agency has a “no facial hair” policy, take a hint here. I am not telling you guys to get a “high and tight” haircut, but do not go in unkempt. You want panelists to envision you in a uniform, not as a lead guitarist in a rock band.

Exhale and relax. Go in, listen to the directions the panelists offer, and smile. You are not going to the gallows. Most panels will shake hands with you; make sure yours are not sweaty. Avoid excessive jewelry—again, be business professional.

At the conclusion of the interview, here are three things for you to do.

First, smile and thank the panelists for their time and consideration. Do not let out a “whew” or “thank goodness this is over.” Show them you can handle the pressure and are professional.

Many boards will ask the candidate if he or she has questions of the board. This is a loaded question. At the conclusion they will tell you if you have any questions regarding the process to contact the human resources department. Do not ask the board procedural HR questions; they probably do not know the answers.

Last, I’d suggest you refrain from saying, “If there is any question you have of me, that you want to ask or did not ask, ask me now.” This is telling the panel you want another question or bonus points, which would be going outside the grade perimeters. They cannot do it and will not. Do not ask them an ethical question.

In closing, practice and visualize yourself going through the interview. Go in confident and get that job.

Train hard, train with heart.

Author: William Harvey

Verifying Questions

After reviewing your paperwork, the interview will usually begin with personal data questions. These are usually verifying questions designed to make sure the information they have before them is accurate. They may ask you about your current address and telephone number. They may inquire about your schooling and your current employment. These are questions you should have no problem answering.

Probing Questions

After completing the initial verifying phase of the interview, the panel will then begin to ask probing questions. These questions are designed to learn more about you. There are several areas the panel will cover. They may question you about these areas in any order they choose. The following are some standard questions that you may be asked:

What do you know about their agency or department?

If you go into the interview not knowing anything about this particular job, it makes you look bad. The interviewers will ask themselves, Why would this person apply with us when he or she does not know anything about us? Lacking this knowledge makes it look like you are applying with any agency just to get your foot in the door. Even if this is true you do not want to give the appearance that you will use this agency as a stepping stone to a career with another agency. You do not have to know everything about this agency. However, take the time to read up on this agency. Prepare yourself for this question.

Why do you want a career in law enforcement?

If you have always wanted to be a police officer since you were a little kid, then tell them that. Of course, what they really want to know is specifically why do you want to go into law enforcement? If you tell them you want to kick butt and arrest people, you will not pass the interview. Tell them what it is about law enforcement you find attractive. Maybe you like investigative work and would enjoy the challenge of trying to figure out what happened or who did it. Emphasize the high moral standards you have. Protecting your community is something you would like to do.

The panel may also ask why you want a job with their specific agency or department. Do not tell them you always wanted a job with them. Do not tell them they are the best agency even if you feel that way. They will not view your answer as sincere. To them, it looks like you are saying whatever you need to say to get the job. In this case, flattery will get you nowhere. You should tell them what you like about their agency. If you have heard good things about their department, then tell them that. If you know someone who works for them, you can probably mention their name. Tell them that this person had good things to say about them. Be honest but do not try to snowball them. After all, these are police officers that are interviewing you.

Have you applied to any other law enforcement agencies?

The reality is you should apply with every agency you are interested in. Putting all of your eggs in one basket greatly limits your chances of getting into law enforcement. Do not be afraid to answer this question. Tell them every agency you have applied with. They may even ask you what your hiring status is with these other agencies. This does not make you look bad. It shows

you are determined to get into law enforcement.

What are your goals?

Usually this refers to your goals in law enforcement. However, they may ask you about your goals in life. The key is to give them some specific goals which are obtainable. Saying that your goal is to be the best police officer or agent that you can be is too vague. Is your goal to be the Director or Chief? This may be your goal and one day you may achieve that status. However, at this point in time, you should start with smaller goals. Tell them your first goal is to get into law enforcement. Your second goal may be to join a specialized field within the department. Perhaps you want to be on the SWAT team or serve as a canine officer or become a supervisor. If you are able to articulate your goals, this makes you a more desirable candidate.

What qualities do you possess?

This question may also be asked in other ways such as, What are your strong points? or What assets will you bring to this agency? This is your chance to brag about yourself. Everyone has good qualities. Tell them what characteristics you possess that will help you in your job performance. There is a big difference between articulating your strength and boasting. State things as matter-of-fact and avoid embellishing. If you were in a supervisory position, make clear your ability to manage people. Avoid statements such as: Everyone likes me or Everyone knew how well I did this. State your strengths as measurable or documented things. Such statements would be: There was a low turn over during the time I was a supervisor or My boss gave me additional responsibilities. Being liked is an admirable trait but showing your ability to perform is more important. Take some time before the interview and think about your strong points.

What traits do you need to improve upon?

After asking you about your qualities, expect them to ask you about the areas you feel you need to improve. You are not telling them that you are weak or terrible, but you are admitting there are things you could strengthen. This is not the time to air your personal laundry. Choose one or two items, state them and state how you are working to improve them. If you don't mention anything, then you are portraying yourself as being perfect and the panel will feel that you are not being truthful.

What is your employment history?

The panel will probe into your work history. They will look at the duties you performed in your previous jobs. Share with them any supervisory responsibilities you held. You should mention any accomplishments you had or recognitions you received. Don't fret if your work history consists of minimum wage jobs. You can still show them you are a dependable worker who will get the job done.

If you have worked several jobs, they will ask you why you left one job for another job. Be truthful in your answer. If you left because the new job paid more money or because you did not like what you were doing, then tell them that. If you were fired from a job, they will inquire as to why you were terminated.

If you have just graduated from college and have not yet joined the work force, you probably still have a work history. You should talk about any summer jobs you had, or part-time jobs you had

while in school. The panel is looking for reliability: someone who arrives to work on time and gets the job done and someone who does not abuse sick leave and has no problems taking orders from a superior.

Tell us about your military service.

If you were in the military, the panel will ask you about your time in the service. They will want to know which branch you served in, what was your highest rank, and what were your duties and responsibilities. If you saw combat, you should mention it to the panel. They will also want to know what type of discharge you received. They may ask you why you left the military.

If you received a medical discharge, the panel will explore this. They will want to know what percentage is your disability. They will also inquire as to the specific nature of your disability. You will need to show that you can perform the full range of duties required of a law enforcement officer.

Are you currently participating in any type of personal fitness program?

Physical fitness is one of the key attributes of a good police officer. The job may require you to chase a suspect, forcefully apprehend a subject or defend yourself from an attacker. These occurrences do not happen every day, but you must be physically prepared for them. The job of a police officer can be very stressful. Stress can lead to several ailments including heart disease. Studies have shown that a body that is in good physical condition is better prepared to handle stress. Therefore, law enforcement agencies are looking for individuals who have developed a healthy and fit lifestyle.

From your general appearance, the panel will be able to assess to a certain degree your physical condition. You will want to provide them with more detailed information on your current level of fitness. You do not have to be a person who works out everyday performing all kinds of cross training exercises. Even if your exercising program has been limited, tell them what you have been doing. It shows them that you care about yourself, and you are doing something to stay in shape. If you have not been exercising, then it would be wise to begin a doctor-approved program. Not only will this help you at the interview, but it will also help you in other stages of the hiring process.

Have you ever been involved in a motor vehicle accident or received a speeding ticket?

You can be sure they will run a computer check to see if you have had any motor vehicle violations. This is one example of where your ability to tell the truth will be verified. Just because you were ticketed for speeding, illegal parking, or for an accident does not mean you are immediately disqualified from obtaining a position with them. Every agency will accept a person who has minor infractions. Nobody is perfect. The agency may have a certain number of violations they will accept. If you exceed the set number, then you are disqualified. For example, four or more speeding tickets in the past two years may be unacceptable. Each agency usually sets the standards they deem appropriate.

What they are looking for is a pattern of deviant behavior. You are applying for a job which enforces the law. If you have demonstrated that you continually break the law, no matter how minor the violation, they are not going to hire you. The other concern is that a police officer spends a great deal of time in a motor vehicle. They want to make sure you can properly handle

a vehicle and that you are not going to get into an accident.

Have you ever been arrested?

As with your driving record they will run a criminal history through the National Crime Information Center to see if you have a criminal record. Nearly every police agency will not hire you if you have been convicted of a felony charge. A misdemeanor conviction does not necessarily disqualify you for the job. They will inquire as to what type of sentence you received. They will ask you about the details of the case. If this was something you did as a juvenile, then share that with the panel. Their concerns are whether or not this is the only time you were caught. If you were arrested but the charges were later dropped or you were found not guilty, they will question you concerning the charges. Were you truly innocent or did you get off on a technicality? Be prepared for them to inquire about any contacts you had with the police. Maybe you were not arrested but were you detained for questioning?

Do you drink alcohol?

Moderate drinking is acceptable. What they are looking for are those people who drink excessively. Too much drinking can lead to absence from work, poor work performance, bad health, and financial troubles.

Have you ever used an illegal drug?

If you are currently using any illegal drugs, then you will not pass the interview. You cannot break the law while at the same time seek a position which enforces the law. You should openly admit to any previous drug usage. Each agency has certain parameters as to the type of drug and the amount of usage they will accept. If you fall outside of these parameters, there is nothing you can do but apply with another agency.

If you smoked a joint a few times in high school or college, admit to it. This does not necessarily disqualify you. As long as the panel believes this was an infrequent occurrence in your past, and that you are now a responsible adult, you should pass this portion of the interview.

Have you ever sold illegal drugs?

If you have ever sold drugs, don't count on getting hired.

Are you currently in any financial debt?

Just because you have an outstanding balance on your credit cards, a car loan, a student loan, and/or mortgage payment does not mean you won't be hired. Most people have borrowed money to pay for the more expensive things in life. What they want to know is if you are credit worthy. A person who is not capable of paying his bills may not be a dependable employee. If you have accumulated a large amount of debt on your credit cards, this too may disqualify you. Accumulating large amounts of unsecured debt shows that you have exercised poor judgement and may be a risk.

Do you have any medical restrictions which would prevent you from performing a full range of duties?

The panel will probably question you about your overall health. They will ask if you are currently taking any medications. They may inquire as to what your vision is. They want to make sure you are physically fit for the job.

Are you willing to take a (drug, medical, psychological, fitness) test?

All they are looking for is a yes answer. If you add anything to your yes response or you respond with a no, then you open yourself up for additional questioning.

Hypothetical Questions

With these type of questions, the panel is trying to determine how you will respond to certain situations. You cannot answer these questions with a simple yes or no. In each question, you will have to perform an action or take a stance. You will have to explain why you would do something or why you would not do something.

The questions are not designed to put you in a no-win situation. In each scenario, there are things you should do and things you should not do. You may be faced with the dilemma of wanting to do two things at one time. In this case, you will have to choose the most appropriate course of action.

After the question has been asked, pause for a moment to think about your answer. The point is you shouldn't spout out the first thing that comes to mind. Briefly think about your answer before giving it. They are not testing you on how quickly you respond. They are more concerned with your actions in a given situation. If you take too long thinking, that could be a factor in your rating.

Expect the panel to ask you to justify your actions. They may ask you why you did not do something. This does not mean you gave an incorrect answer. In law enforcement, people are going to get in your face. This is essentially what they are doing by challenging your answer. Do not let this upset you. If you know you gave a good answer, then stick to it.

The questions are usually designed to see how you would perform in areas such as judgement, integrity, supervision, use of force, and dealing with co-workers. The questions may be asked in any order. Usually, there will be several questions for each area of consideration. The following sample questions are typical of what the panel is looking for. Read the sample question twice and then think about how you would answer it. We have listed an evaluation of these questions along with appropriate and inappropriate answers.

Judgement Scenarios

1. You and your partner are driving a dangerous prisoner to the jail. While en route to the jail, you observe an accident involving three vehicles. It appears that damage to the vehicles is significant. What would you do?
2. While off duty, you go to a convenience store to purchase a few items. No one in the store knows you are a police officer. While you are paying for the items, the cashier engages in a conversation with you. She mentions that she believes she received a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill today. What would you do?

Answer To Judgement Scenario #1

The dilemma with this question is should you stop to help those involved in the accident or should you continue to do your job transporting this prisoner? If you state that you would stop to provide assistance, the panel will question you about leaving your partner alone with the prisoner. They may also point out that this could be a setup in order to free the prisoner. If you state that you would not stop to help those involved in the accident, the panel may ask you, You mean you would let these people die?

Be sure to convey to the panel that you recognize the situation you are in. You would like to help those in need but you also have a duty to maintain control of this prisoner. If they have not mentioned it, you should tell them that this accident may be a ruse designed to ambush you and your partner.

Since the prisoner is dangerous, you should probably continue on to the jail. However, you will provide assistance to the accident victims by radioing for medical emergency services. Remember, there are other ways to help besides physically lending a hand.

Answer To Judgement Scenario #2

There is nothing wrong with asking to look at the suspected counterfeit bill. Unless you are a Secret Service agent, you should not take possession of the bill. There is no sense in getting involved in the chain of custody. If the bill appears to be phony, tell the cashier to report it to the Secret Service. You may also want to notify them.

The key to this question is to notify the proper authorities. Even though you are a police officer, it may not be your responsibility or jurisdiction to investigate this type of crime.

Integrity Scenarios

1. You and your partners are executing a search warrant on a suspected drug dealers residence. Your team finds illegal drugs and a large amount of money in the house. As your team is securing the contraband in the appropriate evidence bags, you observe one team member place some of the money into his pocket. What would you do?

2. You are investigating the illegal copying and selling of videotaped movies. While interviewing the owner of one of the suspected video stores, he offers you several free rentals. What would you do?

Answer To Integrity Scenario #1

A bad answer would be, I would report it to my supervisor. The first thing you should do is confront your co-worker. Tell him what you observed, and ask him what he did with the money. Suggest to the panel that perhaps he logged it into another evidence bag.

The panel will probably ask you, What would you do if he says he did not put any money into his pocket? You should tell them that if your co-worker continued to deny taking the money, you would then notify your supervisor.

Answer To Integrity Scenario #2

Tell the panel that you recognize this could be a bribe. Even if the owner was not bribing you, it would be inappropriate to accept such an offer. Therefore, you will not accept the free video rentals. You should make a note of what transpired in case this would be used against the store owner at a later time.

Supervision Scenarios

1. Everyone in your office has had the chance to participate on a special assignment. When another detail comes up, your supervisor gives it to a co-worker who has already been on a similar assignment. This pattern continues two more times with you getting passed over for any special assignment. What would you do?

2. After working in one office for five years, you receive a new supervisor. After six months under her supervision, it appears that she does not like you. You discuss this with her, but she acts like nothing will change. At the end of the year, she gives you a low rating. You talk to her about your rating, but she appears to be inattentive. What would you do?

Answer To Supervision Scenario #1

You should go to your supervisor and ask why you have not received a special assignment. Maybe he overlooked you or maybe there is something you need to do.

If the problem persists or you have not received a satisfactory explanation from your supervisor, you should then go to the next supervisory level.

Answer To Supervision Scenario #2

This is similar to the previous question in that you should try to work things out with your supervisor before going to the next boss. This question differs in that your supervisor is a woman. Some people, men and women, have a problem taking orders from a woman. The panel is looking to see if you react to the fact that your boss is a woman. You should not make any reference about her sex.

Use Of Force Scenarios

1. You are by yourself driving through an area that has several retail stores. You witness a man grab a woman's purse. The two of them are struggling for control of the purse. The man starts to strike the woman with his hands. What would you do?

2. You and several other officers are attempting to arrest a subject at his residence. As you are walking up to the house the front door opens and the subject appears. He steps out of the doorway and onto the front porch. He has a gun in his hand and he begins shooting at you. What would you do?

Answer To Use Of Force Scenario #1

There is nothing wrong with getting on the radio and calling for assistance. However, in this

scenario you should do more than that. Get out of your car and identify yourself as a police officer. Order the man to let go of the woman. If the man does not stop attacking the woman, you are going to have to physically stop him. You would then place him under arrest.

The panel may ask you if you would draw your weapon. In this type of situation, you probably cannot shoot the attacker. If you see no weapons in his hands, then your gun will probably remain holstered. You may not know what type of intermediate weapons this agency allows its officers to carry. However, you can still suggest that you may use a baton or pepper spray on the subject if he refuses to stop the attack.

Answer To Use Of Force Scenario #2

The first thing you should do is seek cover. The subject is firing his weapon at you so there is no time to give verbal commands for him to stop. You should draw your gun and return fire. You are attempting to stop the subjects aggression. When it is safe to do so you should get on the radio and call for assistance.

Dealing With Co-Workers Scenarios

1. For the past several months, there have been many assignments which required someone to work late at night. Everyone in your office has done their share of working late hours except for one person. His continual refusal to work after hours is causing a strain with his co-workers. What would you do?

2. There are two co-workers in your office who do not like each other. Their refusal to work together is causing problems in scheduling assignments. Morale in the office is low because of their bickering. What would you do?

Answer To Dealing With Co-Workers Scenario #1

You should confront the co-worker. It would probably be better if you did this as a group and not individually. Share with him the burden he is placing on everyone by his refusal to work some of the late hours. Tell the panel that you hope things could be worked out. If the panel suggests that things are not working out, then you will have to talk with your supervisor.

Answer To Dealing With Co-Workers Scenario #2

Again the key is to talk to both co-workers. Try to find out what the problem is. Arrange for the two of them to have a meeting with each other in order to resolve their differences. Suggest that they do not have to be best friends but they need to work with each other. The panel is looking to see if you would make an effort to help in these situations. Going straight to your boss is not always the best answer.

For additional information visit: www.policejobsinfo.com