Today, being pretty good at interviewing for a job isn’t good enough. You may have suffered through numerous interviews – each time knowing that you’re one of hundreds of candidates for a single position. You may have searched for information on how to make yourself stand above the crowd.

That’s a good start, but the real key to success lies in four steps you can take before your next interview. These steps will help you answer the tough questions better, decrease your nerves and increase your chances of getting the right job for you. These steps aren’t revolutionary; however, most people skip at least one, if not more. By completing all four, you will be on your way to giving your strongest interview ever.

**Step 1: Know Yourself** Sound simple? It might appear easy, but this first step involves critical reflection and self-awareness. It will help you with every aspect of the job search, not just interview preparation. It’s a step that ideally should be taken long before you ever apply for a job. And it’s probably the step that most people skip. Knowing yourself starts with understanding your values and priorities. Your values can be lofty – *I want to make a difference* – or very practical – *I want a short commute*. They can include an interest in developing specific skills, making more money, being
entrepreneurial or working on a particular issue. Once you’ve identified your values, then you need to prioritize them. What is the most important, related to your job, and what can you incorporate into your life outside of work. After values and priorities, you’ll want to consider strengths and interests. Jan Fischoeder, who leads Career Services at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin, Germany, says, “You should consider your own strengths and weaknesses and how to present them. The crucial point in conveying your weaknesses is to present them as challenges or dynamic strengths. For example, if one has a problem in delegating work to team members, it is good to mention that one knows about this problem and that one has developed an open communication strategy to meet this individual challenge. This, in turn, makes you come across as open to learning and as a thought-through personality.” Remember, just because you’re good at something, doesn’t mean you have to like it or want to make it your career. Make a list in each category: priorities, values, interests and strengths. Then, when you have considered all of these areas, focus on what is relevant to your job search and, more specifically, your upcoming interview. Using your four lists, you will be able to develop questions for your interviewer. Questions demonstrate your knowledge of the organization, that you’re seriously interested in the position, that you have taken initiative and that you understand how you could fit in the organization. As you develop your questions, show your knowledge of the organization or industry, when possible. This is also a time to prepare concrete examples or anecdotes that demonstrate your relevant strengths, your key skills that are needed in the particular industry, and any special abilities and experiences that the organization is seeking in candidates. Paul Binkley, career development services director for the Trachtenberg School at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., says, “Too many people don’t know their own résumé. This may seem obvious, but many people don’t think they need to review what they included in their application. Remembering what you put on your résumé will help you remember multiple examples to use. It is bad form to use the same example to answer more than one question, and even worse to say, ‘I can’t come up with any examples for that.'” This preparation is especially helpful for a behavioral-based interview, where the interviewer looks at past performance in similar situations as the most accurate predictor of future performance. You also want to think about your salary requirements. What do you want, and what do you need? You also need to research the field and learn what is realistic to expect in terms of compensation. By thinking about and researching the compensation possibilities ahead of time, you will be much more prepared to handle any surprise salary questions in an interview. Fischoeder notes, “Once you know your values, you are also in a much better position to present your value in terms of salary expectations.” Remember, you want to avoid discussions related to salary until you have an offer; this is when you have the most negotiating power.
Step 2: Know the Organization and the Job  After establishing a foundation of knowing what you want and what you have to offer, it’s time to learn more about where you’re potentially going. Of course, you should have conducted extensive research into the job and the organization before you submitted an application. Now it’s time to revisit that research. Even if you examined it before, it’s time to dig in and study all that the organization’s Web site has to offer. In addition to the obvious sections, review recent press releases, any executive summaries, what other jobs are offered and even the obscure pages. Leave no link unchecked. Know the organization’s mission, vision, history, accomplishments and current projects. Review any other information you can find about the organization. Search online for similar organizations, such as their competitors. Talk to people at the organization or in the field. Informational interviews can garner great insights. The more you know, the better answers you can provide at the interview. Next, revisit the job description. Make sure you remember exactly which job you’re interviewing for. But don’t just read the announcement, study it. Underline the knowledge areas and experiences required and requested. Match those with the anecdotes you’ve already thought of and think of new ones: Have two to three anecdotes for each skill or experience sought. Katharine S. Brooks, liberal arts career services director at the University of Texas at Austin, recommends, “When you read the job description, note the characteristics or skills the employer is seeking and then match yourself to them. Be ready to tell stories that illustrate your skills – don’t just tell an employer that, ‘yes, I am a hard worker.’ Instead, explain how you’re a hard worker, as in, ‘I noticed that your job description mentioned the hard work involved in this position. You might be interested to know that last year I worked on three projects simultaneously while also…’ – any story that illustrates how/why you have the skills or knowledge the employer is seeking.” At this point, you should develop additional questions. Beyond the regular questions you have during interviewing, what do you want or need to know about this position or organization? Write the questions down, and take them with you to the interview. An interview can be stressful, so don’t assume you’ll remember all the questions you have. In the corner of the page in small print, make a concise list of the key items about yourself you want to cover in an interview. You can refer to this throughout the interview to ensure you’ve covered all that you have to offer.

Step 3: Practice  Now it’s time to practice. Run through typical interview questions, including the ones offered in the sidebar to this article. Just like Table Topics, make sure you answer questions thoroughly but concisely. Focus especially on any questions you know are personally challenging. You can anticipate questions related to
the skills and experiences outlined in the job description. Research and try the STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result) or CCAR (Context, Challenge, Action, Result) techniques, especially for behavioral-based questions. You can find sample interviews using these techniques online. Practicing with questions from different interview systems can help you add more clarity and depth to your answers. As you practice interview situations, always answer in the most relevant way. (And, of course, do this in the real interview as well.) Don’t share a fact, such as where you grew up, unless it matters. Brooks notes, “It’s great to know your strengths generally, but you need to articulate them in a manner that speaks to the position and the organization. Bringing up strengths that aren’t needed for the position will indicate that you haven’t done the research and don’t understand the position.” If you can, demonstrate knowledge of the organization by paralleling what you’ve done and inserting examples of projects, approaches or techniques similar to what the organization is doing. Be concrete, positive and naturally enthusiastic. Don’t be afraid to take a moment to think about an answer. And don’t forget to smile. It’s also important to practice out loud. Catherine Stace, career advisor at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, says, “If you are a student, visit your career center for a mock interview. If you are not a student, there are many community organizations that offer interview skills workshops and practice sessions. If all else fails, ask a friend to find you someone you don’t know to conduct a mock interview.” Of course, your club meeting is also a perfect place to practice. Arrange a Table Topics session dedicated to interview questions or videotape yourself practicing with fellow Toastmasters. Regardless of how you practice, it’s important to vocalize your answers. Don’t memorize answers word for word – you don’t want to sound like a robot. Instead, work to reach a comfort level with the potential questions, skills and experiences involved in the position. You might be asked a tough question – one you never anticipated – but your research and practice will make it easier to handle.

**Step 4: Make the Right Impression** Now that you thoroughly know yourself, the position and organization, and you’ve practiced articulating what you have to offer as well as how it relates to the opening, you’re ready to showcase that in your best light. That means you must dress the part. Stace says, “Where I often see students fall short is in understanding the importance of first impressions. Choose your clothes wisely. Take some time to prepare, and try on your clothes well beforehand and leave enough time to fix any problems that might arise. Keep jewelry to a minimum and, as quite a few workplaces have perfume/cologne bans, avoid putting on scents.” Unless you are told differently, you should dress in standard business attire. Most often, this means a suit. Look polished in other ways, including your hair, shoes, jewelry, make-up and other potential accessories. Take a briefcase, professional bag or some type of portfolio. You
should have extra copies of your résumé, especially if you’ve revised it. You could also consider bringing references or samples of your past work. And don’t forget your list of questions for the interviewer, with the list of items you want to cover about yourself. Arrive 10 to 15 minutes early. Any earlier and it will be an imposition. You can arrive earlier to the general area, as long as you don’t go into the office. Arriving extra early can help you regain composure if you’ve had a stressful day or travel experience. Visit a nearby restroom to put that final polish on your appearance and recheck your portfolio items. Now you’re ready for the interview. Take the time to go through each of these four steps for every interview, and you will find yourself consistently giving your best interview ever!

Jennifer L. Blanck, ACS, AL, is assistant dean of career and alumni services for the Georgetown Public Policy Institute at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. She is the founder and current Vice President Education of the Georgetown Toastmasters club.

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