



Part II - Preparing for Interviews

Dear Reader:

The following document was created from the MTAS website ([mtas.tennessee.edu](https://www.mtas.tennessee.edu)). This website is maintained daily by MTAS staff and seeks to represent the most current information regarding issues relative to Tennessee municipal government.

We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with municipal government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other MTAS website material.

Sincerely,

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Practice Makes Perfect

The most important part of your preparation is to set clearly stated goals for the interview. What is it you want to say? What information do you want to convey? What is your point? It is not a good idea to sit for an interview without first defining your purposes for granting it in the first place.

It is usually best to limit your interview to no more than two or three important points, and summarize each of these points in a single sentence. It may be helpful to make a list of the points you want to make in your interview, along with the single sentence summation of each. Have something you can take with you and occasionally glance at during the interview. The key here is to take control of the interview and stay "on message." Otherwise, the reporter may take you into areas where you don't wish to go.

We see this concern for staying on message at the highest levels of government today. The president, cabinet members, and other political speakers frequently have their message printed on the backdrop behind the stages from which they are making speeches or giving interviews. The message is always short and simple ("Fiscal Responsibility" or "Helping Our Kids" or some such slogan), and the speaker is careful not to deviate from this message.

Municipal officials do not need a backdrop with their daily message stenciled on it in order to give effective interviews. However, good interviews result when you have a point and stick to it.

Additionally, your interview preparation should include the following:

1. Anticipate the hardest questions you might be asked by the reporter.

It is not likely the reporter is going to ask you a lot of cream-puff questions. Ask yourself what questions you would least like to answer during the interview, then develop good responses to each of them. Maybe the reporter won't pose these questions to you during the interview, but you'll be ready for them if they come up. Can't think of any hard questions you might be asked? Talk to your staff or other people you trust who may be willing to play "devil's advocate."

2. Develop a list of questions you are likely to be asked, then have someone pose these questions to you out loud.

Practice giving your answers out loud. Sometimes a tape recorder can be helpful in this phase of the preparation. Listen to your voice as well as to the words in your answers. Are you staying on message? Talking too fast (or too slow)? Pay attention to your choice of words, and weed out technical jargon, poor use of English, and statements that may be offensive to people you do not wish to offend. Have your friends critique your answers and pay attention to their suggestions for improvements.

3. Identify rumors and be prepared to deal with them.

It is a good idea to use some of your interview time to dispel rumors that are circulating in the community and that may have a negative impact on your agency. Don't wait for the reporter to raise these issues. It's OK for you to raise them on your own and then refute them.

4. To the maximum extent possible, try developing answers that are inclusive and are likely to expand the number of citizens who will agree with you. Avoid confrontation.

It is better to use words like "we need" rather than "I want" or "our residents" rather than "my advisers." Your answers should reflect that you are in contact with your constituents and that you have paid attention to their concerns. Most important, avoid making personal attacks on other people in your community. You can point out where other ideas or proposals may not be as good as yours, but avoid criticizing the motives or characters of your opponents. However good it may feel to "zing" your opponents, it will not advance your perception in the community as a reasonable person.

5. Develop a background information package to be given to the reporter at the interview.

An information package, containing pertinent information and quotations, can help assure that the reporter "gets the story" and does not misquote or otherwise misunderstand the points you want to make. The package allows you to explain your proposals in more detail than is usually possible in most media interviews and can contain statistics, charts, photographs, and other documents that may not come up in the interview. The media are under no obligation to use this material, but many reporters will appreciate the value of this assistance and will refer to it in their story.

6. Develop examples or analogies that underscore the point you want to make.

An analogy (“This problem is very similar to...”) can help simplify complex issues for the public. Similarly, you should try to use real life examples that serve to highlight your points.

7. Determine the need for props.

It may help you make your point to have a prop available during the interview; use an object or device that illustrates the point you are trying to make. If you are trying to convince the public of the need to purchase more modern fire trucks, for example, it might be best to conduct the interview in front of the old fire trucks in the fire hall letting the interviewer (and television viewers) see for themselves why new trucks are needed.

8. Have a decent photograph of yourself available to the newspapers.

Look at your driver’s license photograph. Is it a good one? Now imagine this photograph will accompany the article. Newspapers are notorious for taking snapshots that are very unflattering; bad camera angles and poor lighting can make a city official look like an ogre. It is best to avoid letting the newspaper’s photographer take your portrait, a picture you are not likely to review before it appears in the press. Instead, provide a recent photo of yourself to the reporter for use in the story, one taken by a professional photographer or at least a snapshot that does not make you look too scary.

Preparations for Television Interviews

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Preparing for TV interviews is especially crucial. With television, not only will your constituents be judging the answers you give to the reporter, but they will also be assessing your appearance. Unless you are careful, a television camera can be very unkind to an interviewee.

1. Pay attention to your clothing.

On TV, mayors should look like mayors and council members should look like council members: professional. It is usually best to appear on camera in Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes. Shirts and ties for the men, business dresses for the women. No baseball caps or T-shirts. TV cameras are not friendly to the color white or to patterned materials, so select solid color clothing if possible.

2. Pay attention to your grooming.

Television lights tend to exaggerate certain facial features. For this reason, unless they are growing a beard, men should shave before appearing on TV. Shortly before the interview, check your hair in the mirror. If the interview is taking place right after lunch, use a mirror to check your teeth. Perspiration seems to show up well on TV cameras so have a handkerchief handy to dry your face prior to going on camera.

3. Pay attention to your body language.

If you will be standing for your interview, practice talking with your arms relaxed at your side. If you will be seated, plan to sit upright with your hands in your lap or on the armrest of your chair. Avoid reclining. Never cross your arms in front of your chest (it looks defensive or combative). Unless the subject is gravely serious, try to smile.

4. Pay attention to the background.

Especially if the interview is taking place on your turf, try to select a site that will improve your appearance. Avoid standing near a bare, light-colored wall, which might cause shadows that exaggerate the size of your head or your hair. Similarly, standing near or against a window is likely to put your face in an unflattering shadow. Good backdrops include flags, bookcases, flowers, and other nonreflective materials. In good weather, it may be advisable to conduct your interview outdoors, not in the direct light of the sun but under overcast skies or in shaded areas.

5. Pay attention to camera angles.

In a TV studio, this is not usually something you will need to be concerned with. The studio crew will know how to set up the camera shots for your interview. Outside the studio, you’ll want to pay attention to this important factor.

In the minutes before the interview, as the camera is being set up, try to assure that your face and the camera will be on the same level. Do not allow the camera to be placed higher than your face. You’ll look small. Similarly, try to avoid having the camera placed so low that you’ll look like a giant.

Camera angles that are “straight on” are usually not very flattering (again, think of your driver’s license photo). If possible, try to position yourself at a slight angle to the camera (keeping your “best side” to the camera, of course).

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