# National Institutes of Health

# GS- 1085 Technical Writer Editor

# Behavioral Interview Guide

## Behavioral-Based Interview Overview

Behavioral-based interviews focus on discovering how a candidate performed in specific work-related situations. This interview technique seeks to uncover how a potential employee actually did behave in a given situation; not on how he or she might behave in the future. The premise behind this technique is that a good predictor of future performance is how someone performed in the past in a similar situation. Behavioral-based interviews are becoming more common throughout industry and government and many candidates are familiar with this technique and are well prepared for these interviews. Candidates can and should draw on previous work-related experiences as well as non-work-related experiences (e.g., school projects, community involvement) that are relevant to the interview questions.

### Behavioral Interviewing Suggested Protocol

As much as possible, all questions should relate to experiences that have occurred in the last 2-3 years (best for recollection of behavioral details).

All behavioral interview questions should focus on what the interviewee did, said, felt or thought in the past. The interviewer should be looking for phrases such as “I did….”, “I said….” etc.

Do not ask questions about what the interviewee would do in a given situation or what they would have done differently. The focus is on what the interviewee actually did/said/thought/felt in the past. If the interviewee uses such phrases as “I would,” the interviewer should probe by saying, “What did you actually do at that time?”

The interviewee should focus on what he/she did, rather than what “we” did. While working as part of a team is very common and desirable, it is important to understand what the candidate’s individual role was. The interviewer should probe the interviewee if “We” is used in describing actions. For example, if the interviewee says “We implemented the new payroll system by…..”, it is the interviewer’s job to ask the interviewee what his/her role was and what he actually did (as an individual).

Prior to delving into the detail of each question, ask the interviewee to provide a brief (30 second) overview of the situation by highlighting the beginning, middle, and end. This helps the interviewer to keep the interview on track. For example, if you feel lost in the discussion, you can pause the conversation by asking the interviewee where you are in the story (beginning, middle, or end).

### Suggested Introduction to the Interview

This is a behavioral interview, which may be different from interviews you have had in the past. A behavioral interview focuses on what you have done, said, felt and thought in past experiences. Please use the first person as much as possible because I am most interested in what you have done, said, thought and felt in the situations. So, if you use the term “we” rather than “I”, I may interrupt you to clarify what you did in the situation versus what others did.

I am going to ask you specific questions about your experiences and will ask that you try, as best as you can, to only discuss experiences that have occurred within the past 2 or 3 years so that you will be able to recall the details of the situations.

I will ask follow-up questions to get as many of the details around what you were doing in the situation. Imagine that I am making a movie of what you were doing in the given situation. I am interested in everything you did, said, thought and felt.

NOTE: The information provided above offers suggestions for conducting behavioral-based interviews. Interviewers should use this information as a tool and tailor the interview to meet the needs of the individual organization.

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| **Technical Writer Editor** | |
| Competency | Definition |
| **Message Development**  **and Delivery** | Uses writing skills and editorial judgment to strategically develop messages for various audiences; and delivers them by evaluating the most appropriate media channel(s) for the particular needs of the target audience. |
| **Communications** | Delivers clear, effective communication and takes responsibility for understanding others. |
| **Attention to Detail** | Ensures information is complete and accurate; follows up with others to ensure that agreements and commitments have been fulfilled. |
| **Collaboration** | Works cooperatively with others, inside and outside the organization, to accomplish objectives to build and maintain mutually-beneficial partnerships, leverage information, and achieve results. |
| **Data Gathering and Analysis** | Seeks or collects and synthesizes information from a variety of stakeholders and sources in an objective, unbiased manner to reach a conclusion, goal, or judgment, and to enable strategic and leadership decision making. |
| **Planning and Prioritization** | Plans and organizes work activities; manages several tasks at once. |
| **Scientific Knowledge for Administrators** | Maintains basic level of biomedical/scientific knowledge and understanding of areas of research conducted and/or supported by the organization. |
| **Technical Writing** | Prepares written documentation to transfer technical information about concepts, situations, products, services, or results to audiences with varying levels of technical knowledge. |
| **Leveraging Technology** | Seeks out ways to employ technology to optimize organizational and individual performance. |

**Message Development and Delivery**

Uses writing skills and editorial judgment to strategically develop messages for various audiences; and delivers them by evaluating the most appropriate media channel(s) for the particular needs of the target audience.

### Key Behaviors:

* Knowledge of the production, communication and dissemination of information and ideas to inform via written, oral, electronic, and visual media.
* Analyzes information needs and determines/develops an information plan and communications products to meet these needs.
* Knowledge of the elements of plain language.
* Plans and conducts evaluations to measure the success of communications plans and products.
* Refines communications plans based on the results of audience research and Institute priorities.
* Writes a variety of communications for example news releases, feature articles, pamphlets, fact sheets and Q & As.
* Prepares communications materials tailored to audiences having different levels of education, interest and points of view.
* Applies knowledge of computer-based information systems, internet applications and technologies to plan, design, and evaluate web sites and pages.

### Interview questions:

1. Part of your role in this position will be to develop relationships with internal and external parties to improve the public’s understanding and awareness of organizational activities. Give an example of how you have built and leveraged a relationship with members of an organization in order to facilitate awareness and understanding of your organization.
2. Discuss your experience working with the press (national and local media). Give an example of when you were the most effective in delivering an organization’s message through the media. What made it successful?
3. How do you determine the most effective channel (e.g. media forums, internal publications) for delivering a message to a particular audience? Provide examples of the various channels you have used and why.
4. Provide an example of a time when you delivered the same message via different channels in order to accommodate two or more different groups. What were the factors you considered when deciding the channel for each group?
5. Describe your writing style. What steps are necessary to ensure that information is communicated as clearly and concisely as possible? What communications methodology do you follow?
6. Provide an example of a time when you developed and tailored the same core message to two or more different audiences. What steps did you take to ensure the content was appropriate for each audience?
7. What is the best approach when writing about controversial issues and targeting a large audience? Tell me about talking points you have prepared for speakers delivering such messages.
8. What is the most challenging document you have written? Why was it challenging? How did you address the challenges and complete your assignment?

### Candidate Response:

### Interview Summary:

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| **Summarize the situation, behaviors demonstrated and outcomes. Then provide an overall proficiency rating for the competency as defined in the Administrative Officer competency model.** |
| Situation: |
| Behaviors: |
| Outcome: |
| Overall Competency Proficiency Rating: 1 2 3 4 5 |

**Communications**

Delivers clear, effective communication and takes responsibility for understanding others.

**Key Behaviors:**

* Asks appropriate questions.
* Identifies and uses effective communication channels and methods (e.g., presentations, electronic dissemination, social media).
* Utilizes skill in presenting information, analysis, ideas and positions in a clear, succinct, accurate, convincing manner, as is appropriate with the audience.
* Clearly and effectively conveys information verbally.
* Organizes, expresses, and communicates ideas clearly in writing.
* Listens actively; asks clarifying questions and summarizes or paraphrases what others have said to verify understanding.
* Ensures that regular communication occurs based on the needs of the work, the individual, management or the situation.
* Uses analogies, visuals, and other techniques to tailor communications to specific audiences.

**Interview questions:**

1. Describe a situation in which you were able to effectively “read” another person and guide your actions by your understanding of their individual needs or values.
2. Have you ever dealt with a situation where communications were poor? Where there was a lack of cooperation? Lack of trust? How did you handle these situations?
3. Describe a situation when you were able to strengthen a relationship by communicating effectively. What made your communication effective?
4. Describe a situation where you felt you had not communicated well. How did you correct the situation?
5. Describe the most significant written document, report or presentation which you had to complete.
6. Tell us about a recent successful experience in making a speech or presentation. How did you prepare? What obstacles did you face? How did you handle them?
7. Have you ever had to “sell” an idea to your co-workers or group? How did you do it? Did they “buy” it?
8. What kinds of communication situations cause you difficulty? Give an example.
9. Tell us about a time when you had to use your verbal communication skills in order to get a point across that was important to you.
10. Tell us about a time when your supervisor criticized your work. How did you respond?

**Candidate Response:**

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**Attention to Detail**

Ensures information is complete and accurate; follows up with others to ensure that agreements and commitments have been fulfilled.

### Key Behaviors:

* Follows process steps as outlined in standard operating procedures.
* Reviews materials to ensure they are accurate, clear, concise.
* Performs follow-up to ensure quality of work product and/or actions are completed.

### Interview questions:

1. Developing and using a detailed procedure is often very important in a job. Tell about a time when you needed to develop and use a detailed procedure to successfully complete a project.
2. Describe a situation where you had the option to leave the details to others or you could take care of them yourself.
3. Have the jobs you held in the past required little attention, moderate attention, or a great deal of attention to detail? Give me an example of a situation that illustrates this requirement.
4. Tell us about a difficult experience you had in working with details.
5. Tell us about a situation where attention to detail was either important or unimportant in accomplishing an assigned task.
6. Relate a specific instance when you found it necessary to be precise in your in order to complete the job.
7. Tell us about a job or setting where great precision to detail was required to complete a task. How did you handle that situation?
8. Tell us about your experience in past jobs that required you to be especially alert to details while doing the task involved.

### Candidate Response:

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**Collaboration**

Works cooperatively with others, inside and outside the organization, to accomplish objectives to build and maintain mutually-beneficial partnerships, leverage information, and achieve results.

**Key Behaviors:**

* Maintains positive and productive relationships.
* Serves on committees (e.g., task forces, working groups) to analyze and improve processes and procedures.
* Identifies when to seek additional outside counsel.
* Serves as a subject matter expert for other NIH staff.
* Coordinates efforts with applicable stakeholders to ensure awareness, share information, and provide updates until completion.
* Identifies, organizes, facilitates and/or sustains mutually beneficial partnerships and alliances with internal and external stakeholders.
* Works with others to share information and achieve goals.
* Works towards goals that benefit the team, which includes contributing ideas and participating in team activities appropriately.
* Fosters an environment that emphasizes knowledge sharing and group participation.
* Facilitates agreement by resolving differences of opinions.
* Resolves conflicts, confrontations, and disagreements positively and constructively.

**Interview questions:**

1. It is very important to build good relationships at work but sometimes it doesn’t always work. If you can, tell about a time when you were not able to build a successful relationship with a difficult person.
2. Tell us about a time when you built rapport quickly with someone under difficult conditions.
3. What, in your opinion, are the key ingredients in guiding and maintaining successful business relationships? Give examples of how you made these works for you.

**Candidate Response:**

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**Data Gathering and Analysis**

Seeks or collects and synthesizes information from a variety of stakeholders and sources in an objective, unbiased manner to reach a conclusion, goal, or judgment, and to enable strategic and leadership decision making.

**Key Behaviors:**

* Uses knowledge of data, systems, and their intersections to provide workforce information from the most applicable data source/s in response to standard or ad hoc requests and in support of data quality checks.
* Performs historical trending and projection analyses as appropriate for strategic needs.
* Meets with customers to understand their needs or concerns in order to ensure data, analytics, and reporting are used appropriately.
* Leverages external networks to ensure all relevant information is integrated into analysis and interpretation of data.
* Conducts ad hoc and standard analyses in response to customer needs, incorporating knowledge of parallel, ongoing projects into analysis for customers.
* Analyzes data in order to draw conclusions and identify cause and effect relationships to support leadership decisions, recommend a course of action, or solve organizational issues.
* Uses knowledge and understanding of the organizational context to recognize data inaccuracies and to ensure consistency and the highest quality of data and analyses.
* Organizes and develops data to respond to audits and data calls for NIH.
* Identifies issues, problems, or opportunities and determines if action is needed.
* Gathers, compiles, and interprets pertinent data using various data collection techniques.
* Clearly documents sources and validates the accuracy of data/information to resolve inconsistencies.
* Analyzes and investigates up-to-date information from various sources and in various formats.
* Seeks additional resources when gaps and inconsistencies or variances in data are found.
* Identifies trends in data.
* Understands and analyzes information.

**Interview questions:**

1. Discuss a time when you had to research an issue and prepare a summary report. How did you go about this task? What format did you follow? What was the result?
2. Tell me about the most effective presentation you have made. What made it successful?
3. In this role, you will be required to provide impromptu briefings on unexpected developments or sensitive issues. Discuss a time when you had to work or present under pressure. What was the outcome?
4. Share an example of a challenging research assignment. What made it challenging? How did you work through the difficulties to successfully complete your assignment?
5. Discuss a challenging briefing you had to give (e.g. tough audience, difficult topic). How did you handle it? What did you learn?
6. What tools have you used in the past to research information? Are there sources that are more accurate than others? If so, which?

**Candidate Response:**

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**Planning and Prioritization**

Plans and organizes work activities; manages several tasks at once.

**Key Behaviors:**

* Determines necessary sequence of activities and the efficient level of resources needed to achieve short and long-term goals.
* Maintains a high level of energy and commitment to juggle multiple tasks and priorities and use available resources to get more done with less; all without losing focus.
* Anticipates problems and mitigates risks.
* Provides work-in-progress status updates proactively and informs others when work is completed.
* Coordinates with customers when problems or conflicts occur that might impact the timely completion of work.
* Negotiates adjustments in timelines and/or scope of work, when appropriate. Consults with supervisor to determine priorities if necessary.
* Sets, commits to, and maintains high standards for quality work and responsiveness in providing administrative services; readily re-adjusts priorities to respond to pressing and changing demands.
* Coordinates with others in response to multiple, competing demands to ensure work is completed in a timely manner.
* Organizes work, sets priorities, and determines resource requirements.
* Implements or utilizes strategic plans on a daily basis.
* Recognizes and addresses the interdependences of activities and resources.
* Assesses relative importance of activities and assignments; adjusts priorities when appropriate.
* Takes advantage of available resources (individuals, processes, departments, and tools) to complete work efficiently.
* Uses time effectively and prevents irrelevant issues or distractions from interfering with work completion.

**Interview questions:**

* 1. Describe an event or meeting you planned or helped to plan from beginning to end. What challenges did you face? How did you overcome them?
  2. Of your current assignments, which do you consider to have required the greatest amount of effort with regard to planning/organization? How have you accomplished this assignment? How would you asses your effectiveness?
  3. Tell us about a time when a job had to be completed and you were able to focus your attention and efforts to get it done.
  4. What challenges have occurred while you were coordinating work with other units, departments, and/or divisions?
  5. Tell us about a time when you were particularly effective on prioritizing tasks and completing a project on schedule.
  6. How many projects do you work on at once? Please describe.
  7. Give me an example of a project that best describes your organizational skills.
  8. Describe the most difficult scheduling problem you have faced.
  9. How do you decide what gets top priority when scheduling your time?
  10. What do you do when your schedule is suddenly interrupted? Give an example.
  11. How do you schedule your time? Set priorities? How do you handle doing twenty things at once?
  12. What do you do when your time schedule or project plan is upset by unforeseen circumstances? Give an example.
  13. What have you done in order to be effective with your organization and planning?
  14. Tell us about a time when you organized or planned an event that was very successful.
  15. When you have a lot of work to do, how do you get it all done? Give an example?

**Candidate Response:**

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| Outcome: |
| Overall Competency Proficiency Rating: 1 2 3 4 5 |

**Scientific Knowledge for Administrative Staff**

Maintains basic level of biomedical/scientific knowledge and understanding of areas of research conducted and/or supported by the organization.

### Key Behaviors:

* Adjusts administrative services provided in response to an understanding of the core work activities of the scientific workforce.
* Translates scientific understanding to the types of positions, staff, and learning and development activities needed to successfully carry out the mission of the Institute.
* Develops a general understanding of the scientific research priorities for the Institute as a whole and for specific customers served.
* Understands the core work activities that Program staff engages in to carry out their work and how these impacts.
* Analyzes, verifies and documents scientific research reporting requirements.
* Checks for developments in intramural research, extramural research and/or clinical trials.
* Reviews professional, medical and other scientific literature to ensure up-to-date and accurate scientific information is included in communications materials.
* Consults with scientific experts to interpret complex biomedical research information to include in communications products.

### Interview questions:

1. Share an example of a time when you analyzed financial information to make recommendations for your office or organization.  How did you approach this endeavor?  What challenges did you face and how did you handle them?
2. Describe the methodology or models you have used for analyzing data. How have these tools helped you make sound decisions?
3. Provide an example of a time when you had to gather and interpret data from various sources in order to identify trends. What challenges did you face? How were these challenges overcome?
4. Share an example of a time when you had to gather, evaluate and reconcile conflicting or ambiguous data from multiple sources and present your findings. How did you ensure the results were comprehensible?

### Candidate Response:

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| Overall Competency Proficiency Rating: 1 2 3 4 5 |

**Technical Writing**

Prepares written documentation to transfer technical information about concepts, situations, products, services, or results to audiences with varying levels of technical knowledge.

### Key Behaviors:

* Designs format and content of publications or communications products to work within a cohesive structure that optimally conveys intended messages to target audiences with clarity and precision.
* Applies a thorough understanding of grammar, sentence structure, and intended audiences to the process of reviewing, editing, or constructively critiquing a document, publication, or message.
* Communicates policies, procedures and concepts through scientific writing in scholarly journals and other forms of media.

### Interview questions:

1. Describe your writing style. What steps are necessary to ensure that information is communicated as concisely as possible? Do you follow a particular communications methodology? If so, what is that methodology?
2. In this role, you must be able to communicate information on the level of technical literacy and understanding of the target audience you are addressing. Tell me about a time when you had to communicate technical concepts to a novice audience. What communication methods did you use?
3. What are the most challenging documents you have done? What kinds of proposals have your written?
4. What kinds of writing have you done? How do you prepare written communications?
5. How do you go about explaining a complex technical problem to a person who does not understand technical jargon? What approach do you take in communicating with people?

### Candidate Response:

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| Outcome: |
| Overall Competency Proficiency Rating: 1 2 3 4 5 |

**Leveraging Technology**

Seeks out ways to employ technology to optimize organizational and individual performance.

### Key Behaviors:

* Utilizes and stays current on available technology and office equipment.
* Utilizes web-based resources to research information (e.g., NIH Intranet Sites).
* Enters, updates, and extracts data from NIH and IC-specific systems (e.g., employee data systems).
* Maintains accurate and accessible electronic- and paper-based administrative files to support backup coverage and changes in staff assignments.
* Generates reports for routine reviews and in response to special inquiries using various information systems.
* Skillfully uses state-of-the-art resources and employs technology to assist in work activities.
* Demonstrates proficiency in using on-line tools and business application packages for assigned area and related materials.
* Understands how to use applicable systems and search engines.

### Interview questions:

1. Give examples of the office technology and equipment you have used. Please be specific.
2. What tools have you used in the past to research information? Are there sources that are more accurate than others?

### Candidate Response:

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## NIH Competency Proficiency Scale

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Score | Proficiency Level | Description |
| **1** | **Fundamental Awareness**  (basic knowledge) | You have a common knowledge or an understanding of basic techniques and concepts.   * Focus on learning. |
| **2** | **Novice**  (limited experience) | You have the level of experience gained in a classroom and/or experimental scenarios or as a trainee on-the-job. You are expected to need help when performing this skill.   * Focus on developing through on-the-job experience; * You understand and can discuss terminology, concepts, principles and issues related to this competency; * You utilize the full range of reference and resource materials in this competency. |
| **3** | **Intermediate**  (practical application) | You are able to successfully complete tasks in this competency as requested. Help from an expert may be required from time to time, but you can usually perform the skill independently.   * Focus is on applying and enhancing knowledge or skill; * You have applied this competency to situations occasionally while needing minimal guidance to perform successfully; * You understand and can discuss the application and implications of changes to processes, policies, and procedures in this area. |
| **4** | **Advanced**  (applied theory) | You can perform the actions associated with this skill without assistance. You are certainly recognized within your immediate organization as "a person to ask" when difficult questions arise regarding this skill.   * Focus is on broad organizational/professional issues; * You have consistently provided practical/relevant ideas and perspectives on process or practice improvements which may easily be implemented; * You are capable of coaching others in the application of this competency by translating complex nuances relating to this competency into easy to understand terms; * You participate in senior level discussions regarding this competency; * You assist in the development of reference and resource materials in this competency. |
| **5** | **Expert**  (recognized authority) | You are known as an expert in this area. You can provide guidance, troubleshoot and answer questions related to this area of expertise and the field where the skill is used.   * Focus is strategic; * You have demonstrated consistent excellence in applying this competency across multiple projects and/or organizations; * You are considered the “go to” person in this area within NIH and/or outside organizations; * You create new applications for and/or lead the development of reference and resource materials for this competency; * You are able to diagram or explain the relevant process elements and issues in relation to organizational issues and trends in sufficient detail during discussions and presentations, to foster a greater understanding among internal and external colleagues and constituents. |