



Panel Interviews: “Multiple” Is Just A Number

How to embrace, face, and ace a committee-style interview.

For many, facing one interviewer is daunting enough. Addressing a *panel* with multiple interviewers can be downright *terrifying*. All those people staring at and peppering you with questions. How do you respond when it feels like target practice or a cross examination?

Preparation reduces perspiration

To simplify, panel interviews pretty much share the same rules as their one-on-one counterparts—they just include more people. Saving time and money, they can comprise HR, managers, department heads, and others relevant to the job opening. Often used when filling government, academic, and executive positions, or for second interviews, panel interviews enable members to share concerns, compare notes, assess how applicants handle stressful situations, and better reach consensus on a candidate’s fit.

Research and practice are key to acing committee-style interviews. Contact HR for the names, titles, and roles of *each* interviewer ahead of time. Research backgrounds and use relevant details strategically to build rapport during the interview. Nail down the job description, know the ins and outs of the position, and be ready to articulate the value you bring; the more you know, the more prepared and confident you’ll be. Practice answering behavioral questions; the panel will be evaluating how you address and solve problems. Also, bring plenty of résumés for all.

Connections start with a name

Address people by name during the interview; it’s a great way to impress. If you couldn’t find names and titles beforehand, collect business cards or quickly jot down the information when introduced. To help commit names to memory, repeat them out loud. For example, “Nice to meet you, Ms. Hall.” Or, use a mnemonic or rhyme, *e.g.*, “Hall of Fame” or “Brave Dave.” Also, look for a friendly face or focus on a receptive panel member during the interview; it can help you feel more at ease.

Keep calm, carry on, make eye contact

If possible, position yourself in the center where you can face the panel squarely without having to turn to see someone. Body language counts, so project confidence and control, even if you’re nervous.

Panelists may bombard you with questions if time is limited, or to test how you handle stress; no surprise, panel interviews are often likened to firing squads. Focus on staying cool and composed; don’t become flustered or defensive. Address one person at a time but be inclusive and maintain eye contact with *everyone*; sometimes the quiet ones are the decision makers. Listen *carefully*, answer every question. Don’t rush. Speak slowly and clearly; don’t make the panel strain to hear you.

It’s not an interrogation

Being interviewed by multiple people can feel like you’re on the witness stand. But, a panel interview is really a conversation—with a lot coming at you. To remember what each interviewer said and asked, take *quick* notes on key points to address in the meeting, or for thank you notes; spend 90-95% of your time conversing and making direct eye contact, not writing. Ask questions to gather information, to keep things flowing, or to catch a breath.

Remember, you were *invited*. So, turn the tables: ask why the panel is interested in *you*, what the organization’s strengths/weaknesses are, what people find exciting about their roles. Then, follow up with how you can add value to the team. If hired, you might be working with these people, so use the opportunity to see if the place is right for *you*.

Deliver a performance, not an act

Bring your “A” Game and your best self. If you’re naturally introverted, show enthusiasm and engage; you want to impress. Still, be true to yourself. Don’t sell the company a false bill of goods or do yourself a disservice. Pretending to be assertive and high-octane can backfire: the organization will expect you to be something you’re not—and you’ll be unhappy over time. Finally, be sincere and gracious. Thank *everyone* and get their contact information. Then send *each* interviewer a personalized thank you.



in a nutshell:

Use panel interviews as opportunities to impress multiple people and to show your group skills:

- **Research and rehearse thoroughly; know your stuff**
- **Engage and maintain eye contact with everyone**
- **Get names, titles, and contact info; address people by name**
- **Ask smart, relevant questions; take notes but don’t bury your head writing**
- **Be focused, not flustered**
- **Don’t misrepresent yourself; be sincere and true to you**
- **Follow up; send a personalized thank you to each interviewer**

In the end, the size of a panel is only a number once you master all the interview basics, are confident in yourself, and give it your all.