

Question Practice: The Personal-Assistant Mock Job Interview

by **TERENCE McLEAN**

LEVEL: Lower Intermediate and above

TIME REQUIRED: Approximately 45 to 60 minutes (The time can be determined by the teacher, depending on class size and student level.)

GOALS: To practice asking (and answering) questions in English; to develop (and respond to) yes/no and *Wh-* questions; to use modals of ability; to engage in an interview process through a lighthearted activity that can be the foundation for more-formal interview practice in future lessons

MATERIALS: No specific materials are necessary

OVERVIEW: This activity is one way for students to practice forming questions in English as they engage in a fun, communicative task: The Personal-Assistant Mock Job Interview. It should follow lessons on asking and answering questions in English as well as using modals and expressions of ability (*can, able to, etc.*). Students will have learned about forming yes/no and *Wh-* questions. Especially, students should be introduced to how *Wh-* questions are formed, depending on what information they are looking for (the subject or the object):

Q: Why do you want this job? (looking for the *object*—the reason)

Q: Who can work evenings? (looking for the *subject*—the person)

Q: When are you available to start working? (*be* verb following the *Wh-* question word)

Of course, typical job-interview question-and-answer practice is beneficial, and finding examples of questions online is not difficult. A quick Google search will bring up many questions from which teachers and students can choose for practice.

For this activity, which I see as preparation for actual job interviews later on, I have used topics such as interviewing to become the next mayor of the city, the next president of the university, and even a potential partner for one's best friend (that's a lot of fun). However, the topic that seems to interest many of my students most is the position of personal assistant. They show more creativity when they are asked to use their imagination and create questions for candidates who have applied to be their personal assistant. Furthermore, the students who play the role of job seeker often come up with amusing answers, as they are encouraged to use their imagination as well.

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Given that each class/school comprises diverse groups of students, the teacher needs to determine how much job-interview discussion is appropriate before starting the activity. For example, I teach both international students and mature newcomers to Canada, quite a few of whom were professionals in their respective original countries. Younger students may not have interview experience, while mature students may have many tales to tell. I encourage the sharing of past experiences and questions so that students have the opportunity to talk about themselves.

PREPARATION

1. In a prior lesson, teach the students (or review with them) how to make yes/no and *Wh-* questions. This is the grammar focus of the activity. For example, students should know that a *be* verb follows the *Wh-* question word (e.g., *What are your strengths?*). They can also practice correct intonation (rising for a yes/no question; rising, then dropping, for a *Wh-* question). A review of modals and expressions of ability can help as well (e.g., *Can you speak another language? Are you able to deal with unruly fans?*). Although this activity is intended to be lighthearted and enjoyable for students, it is an excellent opportunity for them to practice using correct grammar.
2. Continue with a discussion about job-interview questions. Ask the students to share actual questions that they may have been asked in the past (if they have had experience with interviews). Follow

up with common questions, which, again, can be easily found in a Google search (e.g., *What are your strengths/weaknesses? What can you bring to this company? Why did you apply for this position? Can you manage conflict? How do you manage stress?*). Get the students to practice asking each other these types of questions.

PROCEDURE

1. Begin by asking the students if they know what a personal assistant is. For this activity, a personal assistant is someone who helps a high-profile person with the daily wants and needs associated with living a busy and possibly lavish lifestyle. Examples include assistant to a corporate leader, a celebrity, or a royal-family member: think Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, Shohei Ohtani, or Kate Middleton. Below are links to helpful job descriptions and examples; the teacher could share these onscreen in class to give the students a better idea of what the task will entail.

Personal Assistant Jobs to Billionaires & Celebrities
<https://www.findcelebrityjobs.com/q-a-about-personal-assistant-careers.html>

Becoming a Celebrity PA
<https://tiger-recruitment.com/private-insights/celebrity-pa/>

How to Become a Celebrity Personal Assistant: The Complete Guide
<https://www.pocketbookagency.com/how-to-become-a-celebrity-personal-assistant/>

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These celebrity personal assistants are constantly on call, from the Kardashian's right-hand woman to Selena Gomez's BFF
<https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/gallery/celebrity-pas>

Kate Middleton Is On The Hunt For A New Personal Assistant: Here's The Details
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvs61HHaCro>

2. For the activity, some students will be in groups—each group will be a hiring committee—and some students will be volunteers—each volunteer is a job seeker, hoping to become a personal assistant. The number of volunteers (job seekers) should be the same as the number of groups (hiring committees). Each group should have three or four students. Divide the students into groups, and have the volunteers wait separately.
3. Tell the groups that they are looking for a personal assistant and that they have to prepare questions for interviews. Encourage them to use their imagination and creativity as they make five to ten questions for the candidates. The more outrageous the questions the better, in my view (e.g., *What do you know about shampooing toy poodles?*). Give the groups about 15 minutes to make their

questions; mini-conference, if necessary, to provide support.

4. The job seekers also need guidance. Take them aside (to another room or the hallway) and tell them that they can answer in any way they want. Channeling their inner Pinocchio, they should try to get the job—the more drama and embellishment in their answers, the better. For example, they may want to say that they have a degree in personal assistantship from Harvard and can survive on four hours of sleep. Their goal is to convince the interviewers that they should get the job.
5. When the groups are ready, bring in the job seekers and assign one to each group. Let the groups know how much time they will have for each interview; I suggest about seven or eight minutes. (Of course, the timing can be adjusted, and the activity can be extended over two lessons, if necessary.) The interview panel can then start by introducing themselves and asking their questions. The interviewers might want to take notes as the job seekers respond.
6. After time is up, say, “Switch!” The candidates then rotate and join a new group to be interviewed again. Repeat this until all candidates have been interviewed by each group. (If your class is large, with many groups, you might want to stop after a certain number of rounds—three or four—because having each job seeker interview with each group would take too much time.) Throughout the entire process, walk around, monitor, and help. Also, take notes on troublesome usage and grammar mistakes that can be addressed



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in a focus-on-form lesson after the activity (or in the next lesson).

7. Ideally, after the interviews, ask each group to explain who they would choose as their personal assistant and why. This can be fun, but there is the possibility that a candidate or two may not get any votes and feel left out. The teacher should be able to determine whether or not this step is necessary, depending on class atmosphere and rapport. (I have not had a problem as of yet.)
8. Shift to reality. Of course, students must be made aware that in a real job interview, honesty is essential. So, now that the students have had a fun experience asking and answering questions related to an imagined position as a personal assistant, the teacher can use this as a springboard to further lessons that focus on realistic, practical job-search/interview practice. At this point, serious discussions about appropriate (and inappropriate) job-interview questions and answers will help the students, who no doubt will experience real job interviews in the future.

As a follow-up, students could research common job-interview questions and share questions that they have had to answer, including unexpected questions that might be asked to gauge how a candidate responds. I have shared questions that surprised me in real interviews: for example, “What book are you reading now?” and “What will we be missing if we don’t hire you?”

This discussion could even tie nicely to a lesson on pragmatic awareness and the use of appropriate language, depending on context. I recommend showing students

this short video: *Steven Pinker on Language Pragmatics* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKbp4hEHV-s>).

VARIATIONS

As mentioned, it is a good idea to encourage students to be creative. For example, I told my students to imagine that they are a wealthy family with over-the-top needs, and they produced excellent questions, such as these (with sample answers in parentheses):

- Can you put nail polish on my cat’s claws? (Yes, I can do the turtle, too.)
- When you dress up as me as a decoy, how will you fool others? (I can learn to mimic you.)
- How much sleep do you need? (Three or four hours a night is more than enough.)
- Where did you study personal assistantship? (Oh, I got a degree in it at Harvard!)

Of course, the teacher can ask the students what job they would like to prepare questions for. They may want to hire an engineer, a nurse, a manager, or a chef. By giving students the choice, the teacher may be able to elicit even more participation.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This activity gives the students an opportunity to practice using question forms in English as they conduct mock job interviews in an informal, fun way. In many of their classes, students are often on the receiving end of the line of questions, so by placing them in the interviewer chair, we can give them the needed practice of doing the asking. Also, when both asking and answering, my students

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have impressed me with their creativity and sense of humor. At first, they seem serious as they prepare the questions, but once the interviews begin, the individual personalities shine. Some students relish telling tall tales as they try to get the job; this, in turn, encourages the interviewers to up their game as they grill the candidates.

Overall, sometimes we need to give students a chance to have fun with grammar. Only learning the rules and doing tests can lead to loathing, so I recommend an activity such as the mock job interview to give students a practical way of consolidating what they

have learned while having fun in the process. Then, building on this practice, students can tackle more-realistic job-interview practice in preparation for life after school, which is the goal for most in the long term.

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Image by Pete Linforth from Pixabay