# National Institutes of Health

# GS-1001 Communications Specialty

# 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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| **Communications Specialty** |
| 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. |
| **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. |

**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 |

**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:

### 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 |

**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:

### 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 |

## 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.
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| **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.
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| **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.
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| **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.
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| **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.
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