

Checklist: Nine interview questions you must ask applicants about their writing skills

You've spent all morning digging through cover letters, resumes, and writing samples. It's not easy to figure out whether an applicant has excellent writing skills or even competent ones, and it's painful to discover *after* you've made an offer that your new employee is a poor writer.

Pose these questions during the interview, and you'll learn all you need to know about an applicant's writing skills, problem-solving strategies, and experience helping colleagues with their writing. And, best of all, you'll avoid "hirer's remorse."

1. **Do you like to write? Why?** Liking to write isn't a prerequisite for on-the-job success, but it's one good indicator. The Why? follow-up should give you some indication of whether the answer is sincere.
2. **What are your writing strengths and weaknesses?** Of course, you'll want to know what an applicant is or isn't good at, but the best reason to ask this question is to get a sense of how well the applicant can talk about writing, which is an important skill of its own.
3. **How much writing have you done in your previous jobs?** (Use a specific measure.) Good writers know how much they produce. "I wrote four 250-word articles for each issue of our monthly newsletter" or "I answered between 20 and 30 e-mails to customers each day" would be good answers to this question.
4. **How do you measure the success of one of your writing projects?** This question helps you assess whether the applicant has a results-oriented approach to writing. Does he or she think, as you do, that good writing accomplishes something?

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5. **Can you describe three different writing tasks you had on your previous job?** Can you arrange them in order of difficulty, listing the easiest one first? There's no right or wrong answer to this question, but it will reveal a lot about the applicant's writing experience.
6. **Can you cite one grammar or punctuation rule you are absolutely certain about?** A job interview is stressful enough; you probably don't want to torture the poor applicant with a grammar quiz. But asking a prospective employee to cite one rule, just one, will indicate whether this person is comfortable with the mechanics of writing. It's a fair question, not a tricky one.
7. **Have you mentored or helped anyone else become a better writer?** If so, what steps did you take to help? While not a writing skill per se, mentoring other writers does involve the ability to explain what's wrong with a draft document and help the writer make it better. These are important skills for anyone who will be part of a writing team.
8. **When you have problems with your writing, what steps do you take to improve?** This question may help you get a sense of whether the applicant will take writing feedback well or—even better—seek it out.
9. **What changes could have been made to the workflow at your last job that would have improved the quality of the email, chats, documents or content you produced?** Applicants who can answer this question well will be real assets to your team because they understand that writing well is a process. Improve the process and the quality of the product will improve too.

Need to hire customer service agents who can write great email, chat, social media, or text? Contact E-WRITE's Leslie O'Flahavan at Leslie@ewriteonline.com or 301-989-9583. We can help you assess applicants' writing skills and train them once they're on the job! We believe people can be helped to become better writers, and we never give up on employees who want to develop these skills.