

# Be a Winner not a Winger

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I have a long history of “winging it”. I think it all started in second grade when I patched together a book report the morning it was due after March break. I got an “A”. That’s my first, but certainly not my last memory of being rewarded for bad behavior. Not that I think this behavior is entirely bad. After all, there’s something to be said for being able to work successfully under time constraints and being able to think on your feet. You often hear people talk about how they work best under pressure. I myself have experienced surges of creativity in conditions of stress.

As a freelancer, I often find myself stumbling upon interesting opportunities. Some, I’ve actively sought out. Others have come to me through my network contacts. A common theme among them is that once contact has been initiated, the wheels are set into motion pretty quickly. On more than one occasion I found myself with less than 24 hours to fire off a resume and meet with a potential client or employer. Having a current resume on hand at all times is essential. Furthermore, with such limited time in which to prepare for an interview, having answers to typical questions is also essential. A flair for “winging it” also helps.

I’ve come to realize that winging it is a great skill to have in a pinch. However, it’s not an ideal approach in situations where it can be avoided. Sometimes winging it just won’t do. And when it fails you, it can be embarrassing. Welcome to my most recent interview.

A friend and prior colleague recommended me for a particular job at an excellent organization. I received an email at the beginning of the week inviting me for an interview two days later. I was flattered and excited about this. I also happened to be extremely busy with other obligations that week. I agreed to the suggested interview date and time, which happened to be in between meetings. I then proceeded to go about my business as usual. Before I knew it, that interview date and time arrived. I showed up, portfolio in hand, personal pitch rehearsed on the elevator, prepared to wing it. “Prepared”, in this case, is a misnomer.

So how did I do? I certainly didn’t ace it. Nor did I blow it...or did I? Highlight: I was moderately articulate, expressive, and clearly passionate about my craft – though I do have a tendency to speak too quickly. Lowlights: I lacked focus and clarity in my responses. I also neglected to discuss a key piece of my experience that was directly related to this particular job. Most embarrassingly, I had to respond with a sheepish “no, I didn’t get a chance...” when asked if I researched the company’s current activities online. This was the very first question posed, and pierced my confidence immediately. Just writing this down brings me back to the moment and fills me with shame and regret all over again. Why am I admitting this? So we can all learn from my mistakes.

## So what lessons did I learn in this situation?

- **Winging it doesn’t always work.** You may think you’re quick on your feet, but you can’t anticipate how an interview will unfold. You may be caught off guard, as I was, by a simple question. When winging it starts to break down and lack of preparation surfaces, your confidence starts to erode and performance diminishes.
- **Lack of time is not an adequate defense.** Unless you’re literally pulled away from your work and thrust into an interview, which is highly unlikely, you’ll always have at least some time to prepare. Even if the interview is the next day, make sure you review your resume, browse the company website, speak to someone in the company if possible, and rehearse your answers to common questions. It’s amazing what you can accomplish in a single hour if you focus your attention.
- **Be accommodating but realistic.** I agreed to the suggested date and time of the interview because I wanted to be accommodating. This is generally a good approach, but as I mentioned, the interview was sandwiched between two other meetings in a particularly busy week. There’s no reason why I couldn’t suggest an alternate date and time under the circumstances. My attention was divided and this impacted my ability to both prepare and perform well.
- **Interest has to be demonstrated, not assumed.** I keep coming back to the embarrassing moment of admitting to the interviewer that I didn’t research their organization. It’s not that I wasn’t interested, I most certainly was. However, the message I sent was quite the opposite – that if I were truly interested in the opportunity, I would have taken the time to learn more about them and what they do.
- **Some preparation is better than no preparation.** I did review my resume and portfolio before the interview. I also rehearsed my personal pitch, which I actually didn’t use, though I should have. Between the minimal preparation and a bit of winging finesse, I didn’t completely mess up. Or, did I? See how the lack of preparation messes with your confidence and memory?
- **Ask in advance what to expect.** I didn’t realize that there would be a second interviewer as part of the process. Nor did I expect a behavioral component. I assumed it was going to be a more informal chat rather than a formal interview. A simple email or phone call in advance would have clarified this for me. Winging your responses to behavioral questions is never recommended.
- **Respect the person who recommends you.** My friend recommended me to this organization because of my skills and talent. I am extremely grateful for this. An appropriate expression of gratitude would be to do adequate preparation and perform as best you can in the interview. Bombing the interview not only reflects poorly on them, it also compromises their support and endorsement of you for future opportunities.