THE SCREENING PREPARATION PLAYBOOK

Ready for Toptal

Explain your work clearly. Practise your craft. Deliver with care.

You may know your work well and still struggle to explain a decision while someone watches. This guide helps you rehearse both parts: doing the work and making your thinking clear.

Know what you are preparing for

Toptal describes four entry evaluations, followed by an ongoing standard for client work. Its screening overview gives a **3-8 week** overall timeframe and **1-3 weeks** for the test project. Your invitation sets the details.

01 Communication
Discuss your background and work in English.

02 Skills review
Demonstrate knowledge and problem-solving in your discipline.

03 Live assessment
Work through exercises with a domain expert.

04 Test project
Complete a realistic assignment with care and professionalism.

05 Ongoing client work
Maintain the quality of your work after joining.

> **Your three preparation outputs**
>
> Two project stories you can defend, one reviewed live rehearsal, and a clear plan for completing and handing over a project.

The exercises and practice timings here are HustleSpire suggestions. Use them alongside the instructions you receive from Toptal.

01 / YOUR EXPERIENCE

Make your experience clear

Choose two real projects you can discuss beyond the finished result.

Pick one project that shows strong delivery and another that involved a difficult decision or setback. Be precise about your own contribution, especially when a team did the work.

Build each story in four parts

- **Problem.** What needed to change? Name the user, business need and one constraint.
- **Decision.** What did you choose, what alternative did you consider, and why?
- **Evidence.** What changed? Use a measurement, test result or specific observation you can explain.
- **Lesson.** What would you repeat or change on the next project?

> **A useful level of detail**
>
> "I built a dashboard" leaves the decision unexplained. Try: "The team needed to spot overdue orders. I put those orders first and checked that the view matched the source records." Add your actual evidence.

Write the first version

PROJECT 1 / The problem and my contribution

The decision, evidence and lesson

PROJECT 2 / A setback and what I changed

Rehearse: Explain each project in 90 seconds. Then answer: "Why that approach?" and "How do you know it worked?" Keep the substance; remove the long tool list.

02 / LIVE PRACTICE

Run a 30-minute rehearsal

Practise solving a problem while another person can follow your reasoning.

Record yourself or ask a colleague to act as the interviewer. These are original practice prompts, not Toptal assessment questions.

Use this practice clock

- **0-5 minutes:** Explain a recent project. Invite one follow-up question.
- **5-25 minutes:** Solve a problem in your discipline. State assumptions, compare approaches and check the result.
- **25-30 minutes:** Explain limitations, one alternative and what you would verify next.

Choose a problem that fits your work

> **Developer drill**
>
> Given a list of words, return the first word that occurs only once, ignoring case. Return no result if none qualifies. State how you will handle an empty list. Test a unique word, a repeated word and a case difference; then explain the cost of your approach.

- **Design:** A mobile checkout asks for eight fields. Choose what you would investigate before changing it, sketch one improvement and explain how you would test it.
- **Product or project management:** Three stakeholders need different features this week. Ask for missing information, choose an order and explain one trade-off.
- **Finance:** Customer payments arrive later than planned. Explain what changes in the cash forecast and distinguish known figures from assumptions.

Review what actually happened

Could a listener follow the problem, your reasoning and your checks? Note where you guessed, went silent or rushed. When stuck, name the uncertainty and test a smaller case.

One weakness I will practise again

03 / PROJECT DELIVERY

Prepare the test-project handover

Make it easy for someone else to assess, use and question your work.

Treat the assignment as a small delivery project. Start with the brief, keep the scope visible and leave time to verify the final files.

Before you begin

- [ ] Confirm the objective, required files, deadline and how success will be assessed.
- [ ] Write down assumptions. Ask focused questions where the brief leaves something important unclear.
- [ ] Check the rules for tools, assistance and submission. Plan checkpoints for a first version, review and handover.

While you work

- [ ] Complete the required work before adding extras. Keep a short note of decisions and the reasons behind them.
- [ ] Check the work against each requirement. Raise a blocker early with its impact and a proposed next step.

Before you submit

- [ ] Reopen the deliverable as a reviewer would. Check setup instructions, access, file names and links.
- [ ] Explain how to review it, what you checked and any known limitation. Include every requested item.

Practise a concise progress update

Completed: [specific milestone].
Blocker: [problem and likely effect].
Proposed next step: [action or decision needed].
Next update: [realistic time].

The requirement I am most likely to overlook

04 / FOCUSED PREPARATION

A week of useful practice

Use this as a review cycle. Give weak skills more time when they need it.

DAY 1 Choose your specialism
List the core skills and expected assessment format from your current application instructions.

DAY 2 Prepare your evidence
Complete the two project stories on page 2. Check the results and your personal contribution.

DAY 3 Explain your work aloud
Record a short introduction and both project stories. Replace vague claims with specific examples.

DAY 4 Practise your craft
Complete a timed task in your discipline. Review errors and explain one alternative approach.

DAY 5 Rehearse with scrutiny
Run the 30-minute exercise on page 3. Ask for one challenging follow-up question.

DAY 6 Practise delivery
Take a small brief. Write its scope, checkpoints, verification plan and handover note.

DAY 7 Review and decide
Repeat your weakest exercise. Apply when your evidence is stronger, or plan another practice cycle.

Three follow-up questions worth rehearsing

- A requirement changes halfway through. What do you clarify before changing the work?
- Your first approach fails. What do you check next, and how do you explain the change?
- You have less time than expected. What can you reduce, and what must remain correct?

05 / YOUR NEXT MOVE

Check your readiness

Use evidence from your practice, rather than how confident you feel today.

- [ ] I can explain two real projects, my contribution and the reasons behind my decisions.
- [ ] I can discuss the result of each project without inventing numbers or overstating what I did.
- [ ] I have solved a relevant problem aloud and reviewed what I got wrong.
- [ ] I can clarify a brief, plan checkpoints and explain a limitation in the final work.
- [ ] I have checked my current instructions, appointment time zone and working setup.

Turn the weakest item into a plan

The skill or explanation I need to improve

The next exercise I will complete

What improvement will look like

My practice date and review date

> **Make the decision concrete**
>
> Choose one: apply with the evidence you have prepared, or complete another focused practice cycle. Keep a record of what improved so you can judge the next attempt fairly.

This workbook provides preparation exercises. Your application instructions set the requirements for your screening.

Best of luck with your application!