

Talking the talk: How to prepare for job interview questions

At best, a job interview can be a thoughtful conversation about a subject close to your heart: You!

At worst, it can be a sweaty interrogation.

Don't sweat it. Be prepared. Before an interview, carefully review your transcript and resume, think critically about your personal successes and failures, and inventory your skills and experiences. You should be ready to answer detailed questions about your academic and professional past, and demonstrate that you are thinking about your future.

There are two main question types you are likely to encounter in an interview:

1. Behavior Based Questions:

- Tell me about a situation where you took on a leadership role.
- Give an example of a time when you had to communicate effectively.
- Describe your proudest academic achievement.

2. Personal History Questions:

- Who do you consider to be your role model?
- What are your long-term career goals?
- Why do you want to work for this organization?

In the heat of the moment, these questions can seem overwhelming. By anticipating how you will answer them, you can stay in control of the interview.

1. Behavior Based Questions:

Employers have to assume that the past is precedent, so they will ask you to share personal experiences that illustrate relevant skills. Your examples may come from work experiences, internships, coursework, research, extra-curricular activities or volunteer work.

The STAR technique (Situation or Task, Action, Result) can help you structure informative and concise personal narratives.

Situation/Task: Description of a specific situation or task related to a relevant skill

Action: Description of the specific steps you took in the situation or to

complete the task.

Result: Description of the specific results of the action, and of how this outcome is indicative of your success.

Before an interview, write down several anecdotes in that speak to the skills relevant to the particular position, and practice telling them out loud in the STAR format:

There are two standard types of **Behavior Based Questions**:

Technical questions - For positions in science and engineering, it is common to be asked technical questions that gage your problem solving skills. For example, if an organization is looking for someone with GIS experience, they may ask you to make a specific query using this program. It is important to demonstrate both your analytical and communication skills. If you don't know the answer, be honest, and describe clearly how you might approach the problem.

Case interview questions - These questions are commonly asked by consulting companies trying to get a sense of your problem solving skills. For example: "How many marbles can fit in a cargo plane?" You can leave your marbles at home. Just describe the information you would need in order to answer the question, making sure to ask questions and communicate the steps you would take to arrive at the solution. Demonstrate your logic.

2. Personal History Questions

Employers use these questions to learn more about your academic background, to find out whether your skills and experiences are relevant to the position, and to decide if you are a good match for the organization.

You should be prepared to discuss:

- Academic background: Major, coursework, intellectual interests, and research experience
- Personal initiative: Internships, student organizations, professional experiences, leadership positions
- Specific qualities and skills: Prepare by researching the company and reviewing the job description to understand what skills they value.

Here are some classic **Personal History Questions**, and strategies for crafting meaningful answers:

What are your strengths?

Review the job description and read about the company to identify the skills the employer is looking for in a candidate, and focus on those that match your personal strengths. When asked, "What are your strengths?", name a few qualities that are related to the position and give detailed examples of how you have exercised these strengths in the past. Show, don't just tell.

What are your weaknesses?

Yes, be honest about your weaknesses. In describing one of your weaknesses, give an example of how you are working to address that weakness in hopes of turning it into a strength.

Why do you want to work for this organization?

This is a chance to demonstrate your knowledge about the organization, such as their mission, and their research. Emphasize how your past experiences and skills have prepared you to contribute successfully to the organization.

Why did you choose your major?

Demonstrate why you are passionate about your field. Be specific about why you chose your major, what motivates you to be successful in your program of study, and what you have enjoyed most about your academic program, such as a course or a research opportunity. Explain how your major has helped prepare you for a position with their company.

What are your short-term and long-term career goals?

Relate your immediate career goals to the company. It is okay to be somewhat vague about long-term career goals, but indicate some possibilities for your future that reflect an understanding of your field. Show your commitment by describing how you want to develop as a professional, and contribute to the field.

Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

This question means the interview is coming to an end, so it is your opportunity to share any other information that might be important for them to know about you. It's also a good opportunity to emphasize your sincere interest in the position.

Why should we hire you?

Break out the one-minute pitch: Be prepared to summarize why you think you are the best candidate for the position, and what makes you stand out from other applicants. The interviewer is not going to remember everything you said during the interview, so reiterate your key qualifications, and highlight your unique strengths. You want to leave a positive, lasting impression.

Adapted from: "Interviewing", Career Center for Science and Engineering, University of Minnesota