



Strategies to Answering Tough Questions in the Interview

These questions always seem to come up.

Here are some proven answer strategies that will help you navigate the interview like a pro!

- **Tell me about yourself.**

It's guaranteed that this question will be asked. Yes, they have your resume and yes, they probably looked at your LinkedIn profile, but they want to hear it in their own words.

Most people put interviewers to sleep with their answers because they focus on narration instead of curation. The truth is you can go in a lot of directions with this question. That's partly why, it's so challenging.

Follow one of these strategies and you'll start off on the right foot!

The Chronological Storytelling Strategy.

Start with your earliest job or education and work forward. A word of caution: move quickly through your earlier work history to get to your more recent and relevant experience. This strategy will work for you if your entire career is relevant and your skill sets are cumulative, that is, each chapter of your life builds on the next one. It's also a great strategy if your earlier work experience informs what you do now.

The Traits-First Strategy.

Come up with 3-4 big-category characteristics about yourself and lead with those. Then go back and elaborate on each, pulling evidence-based stories from your work history to back them up. Always choose stories that happened most recently.

The Interesting Event Strategy.

Instead of giving your life's story, tell a single story that exemplifies your values and skills. Don't go for quantified achievements. Instead, go with a story that they will connect with emotionally. At the end of the story, explain why this particular anecdote shows who you really are. What traits, talents, training, and priorities does it illustrate?

The Front to Back Strategy.

This is the complete inverse of the Chronological Storytelling Strategy. You can cover your entire life but start with what's most recent. Start with now. This is a great alternative if you tend to ramble or pontificate when you answer; you'll spend the most time talking about you've been up to recently and then can peter off as you go back into your work history (and realize you're running out of time).

The Path Less Traveled Strategy.

Lead with an unusual element to your work history or qualifications. This is most effective if you came into your career through a non-traditional path. Instead of hiding it, emphasize it. You will stand out and be remembered and you will immediately gain an edge on the competition.

- *Why do you want this job?*

The simplest questions are often the hardest, especially if they catch you off guard.

This is a golden opportunity to cover a lot of ground in a short period of time. Start broad and then get more and more specific as you answer by explaining your interest in the following categories. It's best to go in this order so you appear to be zeroing in on the company and finally the exact work they want you to do.

- Industry
- Company
- Team (Optional)
- Role

You obviously should do your homework ahead of time. Scour the company website, but also look them up on review sites, see what's in the press, and check out your interviewers on LinkedIn. Make sure you know the trends of your industry and job function as well. Prepare, prepare, prepare.

- *What are your reasons for leaving your last job?*

The Golden Rule here is to focus on the future, not the past. Instead of talking about what you didn't like about your last position, discuss what's exciting you about this next one. Think of what you're being pulled toward vs what's pushing you away.

Emphasize what you weren't able to get from the last job that you will SURELY be able to get in this next job. Make the interviewer feel like they have something to offer that you need, which will nourish you.

Never EVER talk bad about anyone at a past job, even if they are the worst person in the world. Keep your comments general (e.g. "Leadership wanted to go in a different direction")

A good way to end on a positive note is to talk about what you learned or gained from your last position. What are you walking away with that you can take into this next job?

- *Where do you see yourself in five years?*

The truth is no one really knows where they'll be in 5 years, but everyone wants to hire people with purpose, drive, and a clear sense of direction. What's behind this question is a worry that you'll leave or that you'll grow restless and want to do something else, including the interviewers' job.

You can't go wrong if you use these tenets as a guide:

- ✓ Connect yourself to the industry and the company.
- ✓ Refer to leadership in some way, whether as a leader of people, projects, or process.
- ✓ Show an emotional link to your work.

- What are your weaknesses?

Perhaps the most loathed question in the interview process, but still a favorite among interviewers. The goal is to get you to slip up and share something you didn't want to.

The key for you is to mention the weakness and then flip it on its head to talk about the complementary strength. Look at the job description and pick a weakness you have that is the exact opposite of the qualifications they're looking for.

- ✓ If they want an outgoing sales person... make your weakness "Isolation"
- ✓ If they want a meticulous bean-counter... make your weakness, "Ambiguity"
- ✓ If they want someone who is flexible... make your weakness "Excessive Structure"

Never say "I am _____." There is too much ownership of the problem. Instead say "I'm not very good at dealing with _____," OR "I don't like to focus the negative stuff, but I'd have to say _____."

Then, instead of talking about the weakness, pivot to what you're good at: "I'd have to say *Isolation*. I much prefer to be in roomfuls of people, talking to people, answering questions..."

Answer the question but don't hang on the weakness; move into talking about your strengths.

- Tell me how you overcame a challenge or obstacle.

This one is easy if you have the right strategy. Use the CAR formula to get where you're going without getting lost.

CHALLENGE: What was the problem you were faced with?

This is where you set the context or create a conflict that needs solving.
"We had a project that was behind schedule..."

ACTION: What did you do?

This is you being the hero and coming in to the save the day.
"I created a spreadsheet, set up weekly meetings, and contacted the customer..."

RESULT: What happened after you did what you did?

This is the punchline. Focus on impact on the company and your colleagues.
"In the end, we retained the client and they ended up expanding their contract."

Spend 5% of your time on explaining the problem, 85% on presenting your actions, and 10% on impact. End with quantitative and qualitative results. You can also add in lessons learned.

There are tons of variations of this question that will allow you to use the same CAR formula. Anytime an interview says "Tell me a time when..." or "Give me an example of..." get ready to get in your CAR.

- Describe a conflict you've had with your manager.

The CAR formula will work for this one, but there are some important guidelines to remember. Usually, the interviewer is trying to figure out how you like to be managed and whether or not you're going to bring drama.

When you talk about the problem/conflict, make sure to avoid casting blame on your supervisor. Don't use adjectives to describe your boss. Instead, try to imagine the problem as something that is physically between you two, like a storm cloud. Always refer to it that way: as a problem you both experienced.

Most important, show that you recognized the problem and then took steps to make the relationship work on your end, even if it didn't work out.

If at all possible, pick a scenario where it did work out, where the relationship got better.

Lastly, when you get to your Result, make sure to show business impact. It's fine to allude to both of you feeling better about things but remember to show how it impacted your collective output.

- What's not on your resume?

Good news! The interviewer wants to get to know you. You'll have the most fun with this one if you talk about any of the following topics, which are extremely SAFE:

- ✓ Hobbies & Interests
- ✓ Sports
- ✓ Nonprofit Work
- ✓ Attributes
- ✓ Additional Skills
- ✓ Interesting Projects

Be sure to avoid the following topics as they may rub the interviewer the wrong way or prompt more questions that you don't want to answer

- ✗ Jobs Not Listed On Your Resume
- ✗ A Side Business
- ✗ Day Job to Pay the Bills
- ✗ Religion
- ✗ Politics
- ✗ Family Activities

All of these things may appear to pull you away from your work or just bring up something controversial that turns off the interviewer. And, even if the person in the room has the same religion or also has a startup they're working on, perhaps one of their colleagues will catch wind and decide they don't like it.

Play it safe, stick to the first list.

- **Do you have any questions for me?**

YES! Yes, you do.

Always say yes. If you don't have questions, people take that to mean that you're not really interested. You absolutely must take the time to ask questions. And here are some really good ones that will leave the interviewers impressed and allow you to gather crucial information in the process.

These questions are absolute ringers for any role or company.

What's a 'Day in the Life' of your job like?

People love to talk about themselves and they'll love you for it. Rather than ask a vague question about what it's like to work there and getting some politically correct, trite answer, make them get specific and draw your own conclusions. Remember, you want to interview the interviewers to make sure you actually want to work there.

What surprised you about working here?

This is a fun question to ask because you'll notice that the interviewer isn't expecting it, which means you'll likely get a real answer. It's also interesting to see whether the surprise is good or bad. Either way, it's vital information.

What are your 2 biggest challenges right now?

This is a great one for your manager or your manager's manager. They're constantly obsessing over problems and it's guaranteed they have a quick answer for this. They will appreciate you thinking about their needs and thinking about the big picture in general. A good follow-up is to ask how they're addressing it, which may lead to you both co-conspiring a solution. It's happened plenty of times before.

What are the common traits of people who are successful in this role?

This is a great way to check your work. Essentially, you're asking for the answers to the test. Find out what people are like who have succeeded and then make sure you fit (most of) the profile. If they mention a trait that you haven't covered, wait for them to finish, and then point out how you have that trait (or something close to it).

Do you have any lasting concerns about my candidacy that I can address?

In sales, they call this "overcoming objections." Rather than leave the office and have them discuss your shortcomings, invite them to share their concerns so you can smash them into pieces. If you ask this question, ask it last, as it tends to close the discussion in a natural way.

**For even more great ideas as to how to gain some insights into the company you're pursuing, see "Questions to Ask the Interviewer."*