

The Best Answers to Tough Interview Questions

Tell me about yourself.

This is really more of a request than a question. But these few words can put you on the spot in a way no question can. Many quickly lose control of the interview during the most critical time- the first five minutes. This is not the time to go into a lengthy history or wander off in different directions. Your response should be focused and purposeful. Communicate a pattern of interests, skills, and strengths that relate to the position in question. Consider your response to this question as a commercial that sells your autobiography. Provide an answer that includes, what you are getting a degree in, your major, a few highlights from your resume such as projects or classes that relate to the position you are interviewing for, any work experience, leadership experience, and finally include why you are interested in this particular employer. One of the most effective ways to prepare for this question is to develop a 60-second (can extend to 2 minutes) biographic sketch that emphasizes a pattern of interests, skills, and accomplishments. Focus your response around a common theme related to your major interests and skills. Take, for example, the following response, which emphasizes computers.

Since I was a teenager, I enjoyed working with computers. It was my hobby, my passion, and my way of learning. Like most kids I enjoyed computer games. When my parents gave me a computer as a reward for making honor roll my sophomore year, I mastered DOS, Windows, and WordPerfect within six months. I then went on to teach myself programming basics. By the time I graduated from high school, I knew I wanted to study programming. From that point on, everything fell into place. My life revolved around computing. By my junior year at Syracuse, I decided I wanted to work for a major software manufacturer. That is why I had an internship last summer at FastTrack Software. I have also completed several great projects including...[list a few here]...I am involved on campus in several organizations such as Beta Beta Fraternity and intramural sports teams.

I am interested in working for COMPANY NAME so I can be at the forefront of breaking trends and new technology. When my college roommate told me about his start in your department, I was persistent in asking him for details until he helped me get a referral, which brought me here today. I feel like this position is a great fit between my accomplishments and strengths and what you are looking for. I am prepared to answer any questions you may have about my education and experience."

This response sets a nice tone for starting the interview. The interviewee is able to say a lot within 60 seconds by staying focused. The message is clear: the interviewee has both passion and focus relating to the position. He stays on message and concludes by leaving the door open for additional questions about his education and experience. Unfortunately some candidates get off on the wrong foot by rambling on for several minutes about their childhood, family, hobbies, travels, and interests.

Repeat Key Accomplishment Statements

Throughout the interview you will be asked numerous questions about your attitude and ability to do the job. Whenever possible, talk about your accomplishments in terms of what you did and the results of your actions for employers. Give examples of your effectiveness, which should include specific skills and statistics.

We're considering two other candidates for this position. Why should we hire you rather than someone else?

Do not be distracted by the mention of two other candidates, you don't know anything about them and they could be fictitious. Focus on what strengths you bring to the table. These should be consistent with the four things most employers are looking for in candidates during the job interview: competence, professionalism, enthusiasm, and likeability. Remember, they are looking for chemistry between you and them. Be prepared to summarize in 60 seconds why you are the best candidate for the job. Also, let the employer know you want the job and you will enjoy working with them. A lack of interest in the job may indicate a lack of enthusiasm for the job and them.

Why do you want to work in this industry?

Tell a story about how you first became interested in this type of work. Point out any similarities between the job you're interviewing for and your current or most recent job. Provide proof that you aren't simply shopping in this interview. Make your passions for you work a theme that you allude to continually throughout the interview.

"I've always wanted to work in an industry that makes tools. One of my hobbies is home-improvement projects, so I've collected a number of saws manufactured by your company. I could be an accountant anywhere, but I'd rather work for a company whose products I trust."

Tell me what you know about this company.

Describe your first encounter or a recent encounter with the company or its products and services. What would be particularly motivating to you about working there as opposed to working the same type of job in a different company? The recruiter will look for evidence of genuine interest and more than just surface research on the company. Reciting the annual report isn't likely to impress most recruiters, but feedback from customers and employees will.

"I served as an intern to a restaurant analyst last summer, so I followed all the steak-house chains closely. What you've done especially well is focus on a limited menu with great consistency among locations; the business traveler trusts your product anywhere in the U.S. I'm particularly interested in your real-estate finance group and expansion plans."

Why should I hire you?

Don't repeat your resume or employment history. Offer one or two examples to explain why you're talking to this particular company. What's the most compelling example you can give to prove your interest? This question often remains unasked, but it's always in the back of the recruiter's mind. Even if this question isn't asked, you should find an opportunity to use your prepared response sometime during the interview, perhaps in your closing remarks.

"My uncle had a company that was a small-scale manufacturer in the industry, and although he later sold the business, I worked there for five summers doing all sorts of odd jobs. For that reason I believe I know this business from the ground up, and you can be assured that I know what I'd be getting into as a plant manager here."

Tell me about a time you didn't perform to your capabilities.

This question forces the candidate to describe a negative situation. Do so in the context of an early career mistake based on inexperience; then demonstrate the better judgment you now have as a result of that learning experience.

"The first time I had to give a presentation to our board, I failed to anticipate some of their questions. I was unprepared for anything other than what I wanted to report. Now my director and I brainstorm all the what-ifs in advance."

What color is your brain?

Be aware that you'll probably be asked zany questions. The point is not to stump you, but to find out what makes you tick. When the standard interview questions are asked, people are prepared, and it's harder for the recruiter to get to know the real person. An advertising recruiter, for example, tries to avoid this. There is no right or wrong answer to this type of question. In fact, the recruiter won't even really care what your answer is. He or she just doesn't want to hear something like, "I don't know, I guess it's blue because that's the way I imagine it." The point is to see how creative you are and how you think. Be sure to explain why you answered the way you did.

"My brain is red because I'm always hot. I'm always on fire with new plans and ideas."

How will you complement this department?

Describe how your personality and/or skills would help round out the department. What types of people enjoy working with you for hours at a time? How would the company's customers or clients react? Assure the interviewer that there will be no surprises about your work personality.

"I enjoy an environment in which people bounce ideas off each other and have the flexibility to ask for help when they need it. I'm usually a great troubleshooter for PC problems in my office, and I'm often going to ask for help proofreading important memos. I believe in give-and-take."

Tell me about an effective manager, supervisor, or other person in a leading role you've known.

Talk about a supervisor's management style and interpersonal skills. Focus on the positive-how the person worked rather than what type of work he or she did. How was the person able to accomplish so much and get your support?

"The best professor I ever had always reviewed the most important points from our last class before he moved on to new material. He also watched our faces carefully and repeated information whenever he saw a blank stare. Sometimes he would just ask for feedback by saying, 'What are you having difficulty with?'" He never assumed too much or made us feel dumb for not grasping a concept quickly."

How do you usually go about solving a problem?

The interviewer will want to hear the logic you use to solve problems as well as the outcomes you're able to achieve. Are you decisive? How do you narrow the options and make decisions? What do people say about your reasoning skills? What examples would they cite of your effective decision-making?

"When I need to solve a problem, I generally start by writing down as many ideas as I can think of about possible causes. Next I look for relationships among causes so I can group together symptoms of bigger problems. Usually, after I study these groups of problems, the real cause becomes readily apparent."

What's your greatest achievement to date?

Be sure that the achievement you describe here is relevant to the job you're interviewing for. Also, be careful that your answer doesn't sound as if the best is behind you. Mention something great that you've achieved, but clearly communicate your belief that the best is yet to come.

"I'm proud of the fact that I graduated on time with a solid GPA while I played varsity basketball for four years. A lot of women on my team either took a reduced course load or let their grades suffer. I believe the reason I got through it all was sheer determination; I never even let myself visualize anything but finishing on time and with good grades. So I firmly believe, as a professional counselor, in the importance of a positive outlook."

Give an example of a time when you were asked to accomplish a task but weren't given enough information. How did you resolve this problem?

Although this example may seem trivial, the candidate demonstrates maturity and an ability to approach work conceptually. The interviewer will want to know that you understand that just getting the job done isn't enough. Your response should show resourcefulness and initiative.

"At my last internship, my supervisor, an account executive, asked me to assemble five hundred press kits for a mailing. I wasn't sure in what order the pages and press releases should go, but my supervisor had already left for a client meeting. Afraid of putting the information together in the wrong order, I managed to track down her cell phone number and called her in her car. She explained the order of the materials over the phone, and in the end I managed to prevent a mistake that would have cost hours of work and a delay in the mailing-not to mention a few headaches."

Tell me about your least-favorite manager or professor.

Answering this question will be a bit like walking across a loaded minefield, so be aware! Keep in mind that the interviewer doesn't want to learn about your former supervisors; he or she does want to learn about the way you speak about them. Though the interviewer may bait you to make a negative statement about your former employer, doing so can create a host of problems. Even if your claim is completely true and justified, the recruiter may conclude either that you don't get along with other people or that you shift blame to others. The best way around this dilemma is to choose an example that's not too negative, touch upon it briefly, then focus the rest of your answer on what you learned from the experience.

"Well I've been pretty fortunate as far as managers go, and I didn't have any problems with my professors. In my first job out of college I worked with a manager who was pretty inaccessible. If you walked into his office to ask a question, you got the sense that you were bothering him, so we just learned to get help from each other instead. I wouldn't say he was my least-favorite manager, because he was a good manager in a lot of ways, but I would have preferred that he'd made himself more available to us and given us more direction."

What is your biggest weakness?

This is a great example of what is known as a negative question. Negative questions are a favorite among interviewers, because they're effective for uncovering problems or weaknesses. The key to answering negative questions is to give them a positive spin. For this particular question your best bet is to admit to a weakness that isn't catastrophic, inconsistent, or currently disruptive to your chosen professional field, and to emphasize how you've overcome or minimized the problem. Whatever you do, don't answer this question with a copout like "I can't think of any," or even worse, "I don't really have any major weaknesses." This kind of a response is likely to eliminate you from contention.

"I admit to being a bit of a perfectionist. I take a great deal of pride in my work and am committed to producing the highest-quality work I can. Sometimes if I'm not careful, though, I can go a bit overboard. I've learned that it's not always possible or even practical to try and perfect your work-sometimes you have to decide what's important and ignore the rest in order to be productive. It's a question of trade-offs. I also pay a lot of attention to pacing my work, so that I don't get too caught up in perfecting every last detail."

Why weren't your grades better?

It's likely that if you've made it to the interview stage, you fulfill the basic criteria for the position, including the education requirements. The recruiter is probably trying to judge here how well the candidate handles adversity. It's important not to get defensive or to place blame. Instead, try to put a positive spin on the question-for example, by concentrating on what you learned and the extra effort you put in, rather than on the grades you received.

"School was a wonderful experience for me. I really enjoyed learning new ideas, I studied consistently, and I was attentive in class. But I never believed in cramming before the night of an exam just to get a higher grade or staying up all night to finish a term paper. I really believe I learned just as much as many students who went for the grades."

Was there a course that you found particularly challenging?

The interviewer will want to see how well you respond to difficult situations. Demonstrate that you won't fold in the face of difficulty, and that you're willing to put in the extra effort to meet a challenge.

"Initially I was completely overwhelmed by the introductory chemistry course that I took last year. No matter how hard I studied, I seemed to be getting nowhere. I failed the first three quizzes. So I tried a new approach. Instead of just studying by myself, I asked a friend who's a chemistry major to help me with my studies. I also began to seek help from the professor after class. And I found that more time I spent in the lab was critical. I ended up with a B-plus in the course and thought I achieved a solid understanding of the material. More than that, I learned that tackling a new field of study sometimes requires a new approach, not just hard work, and that the help of others can be crucial!"

Why didn't you participate more in extracurricular activities?

The interviewer may be worried that if you don't have many outside interests, you may eventually suffer from burnout. Employers like candidates who are well rounded and have interests outside of work. If you didn't participate in formal extracurricular activities in college, you still may want to talk about some of your interests, such as reading or exercising, that you may have a passion for running even if you weren't on the college track team.

"I wanted to give as much effort as possible to my studies. I came from a high school in a very small town, where I received a lot of A's, but this didn't prepare me well for college. So I studied hard. I have, however, found time to explore the city and make new friends, and I do socialize formally on the weekends."