

Common Interview Questions and How to Answer Them

Got an interview coming up? The best thing that you can do to prepare is to think through the questions you're likely to be asked and formulate answers ahead of time. Here are the seven most common interview questions, along with what a strong answer will look like.

1. "Tell me about yourself." This question means "give me a broad overview of who you are, professionally speaking, before we dive into specifics." You should prepare about a one-minute answer that summarizes where you're at in your career and what you're especially good at, with an emphasis on your most recent job. Keep your personal life out of it; your interviewer isn't asking to hear about your family, hobbies or where you grew up.
2. "What interests you about this job?" Your answer here should focus on what about the substance of the role most interests you. You should not talk about benefits, salary, the short commute or anything else unrelated to the day-to-day work you'd be doing, or you'll signal that you're not particularly enthusiastic about the work itself. Interviewers want to hire people who have carefully considered whether this is a job they'd be glad to work at every day, and that means focusing on the work itself, not what the job can do for you.
3. "Why are you thinking about leaving your job?" Or, if you're unemployed, "Why did you leave your last job?" This isn't the time to talk about conflicts with your manager or complaints about your co-workers. Job seekers are commonly advised to answer this by saying that they're seeking new challenges, but that answer only rings true if you're specific about what those new challenges are and how this job will provide them in a way your last job didn't. It's also fine to cite things like a recent or planned move, financial instability at your organization or other reasons that are genuinely true -- just stay away from badmouthing employers or complaining about work.
4. "Why would you excel at this job?" This is your chance to make a case for why you'd shine in the job -- and if you don't know the answer to that, it's unlikely that your interviewer will figure it out either. Since this gets to the crux of the whole interview, you should have a strong answer prepared for this ahead of time. A strong answer will point to your skills and track record of experience and tie them to the needs of the job.
5. "Tell me about a time when ..." Good interviewers will probe into times in your past when you had to exercise the skills required for the job. For instance: Tell me about when you had to take initiative / had to deal with a difficult customer / had to solve a problem for a client ... and so forth. Make sure to prepare in advance for these questions, so that you're not struggling to come up with real-life past examples. Spend some time brainstorming about what skills you're likely to need in the job and what challenges you're likely to face. Then think about what examples from your past work you can use as "evidence" that you can meet those needs. When you construct your answer, discuss the challenge you faced, how you responded and the outcome you achieved.
6. "What would you do in your first 90 days if you got this position?" Interviewers are looking for answers that reveal how you set goals and problem-solve, and whether you're ambitious without being unrealistic. You should also acknowledge that you'll need to take time to get to know the team, what's working and what can be improved before you make any big decisions -- but your answer should still get into specifics to the extent you reasonably can.
7. "What salary range are you looking for?" Job seekers are almost always asked this question, yet too often fail to prepare for it and then are caught off-guard when the topic comes up. If you wing your answer to this, you risk lowballing yourself and ending up with a salary offer below what you might have otherwise received. It's crucial to research the market rate for the job ahead of time. Don't let discomfort with talking about money thwart your ability to negotiate well for yourself.

ASSIGNMENT

1. Read over the material in this packet.
2. Summarize the information in 5 PowerPoint slides ...
 - 1 Slide: Title
 - 2 Slides: "Common Interview Questions and How to Answer Them"
 - 2 Slides: "Never Say These Five Things In A Job Interview"
3. Email the finished PowerPoint as an attachment.

Never Say These Five Things In A Job Interview

We are terrible at interviewing. We walk into the interview room without preparing. We spend time worrying about "trick questions" and about what shirt we should wear, instead of the things that really matter. Worst of all, we believe an interview is intended for us to simply answer the questions that the interviewer gives us.

I say this as someone who's sat on both sides of the table: as a candidate, interviewing against some of the world's toughest companies (like Google and a multi-billion-dollar hedge fund), and as a hiring manager. Yet once you can master the interview process, you can secure job offers against other candidates who have many years more experience than you. In today's economy, knowing how to interview is a killer skill. That starts with knowing what to avoid doing in a job interview, or what I call "5 Interview Killers."

"I just sort of... and then... and like... and uh... yeah."

If you ramble, you lose. Think back to when you last met someone and asked them a simple question ("So, what did you do at Acme Corp?"), only to hear 6 minutes of irrelevant details. How did you feel? Now imagine this happening in a job interview. Interviewers aren't just evaluating your technical skills. They're using the "Airport Test," asking themselves, 'Could I see myself being stuck in an airport with this person?' Like it or not, we're evaluated on our personality as well as our skills. And if you can't give a tight, concise answer in an interview, the interviewer will wonder if you'll be able to do it in your job.

"Yeah, I helped out with that but it wasn't just me."

Humility is a great trait, but going out of your way to be self-deprecating is an interview turn-off. You should always be candid about your role, but your interviewer doesn't care about your team dynamics or organizational chart. He wants to know what you did. He wants to know how you think. He wants to know about YOU.

If you keep downplaying your accomplishments, how is a hiring manager supposed to value you enough to hire you? It's okay to be proud of the work you've done. It's okay to be confident. Try it: Practice saying, "I'm glad you asked about that project. I'm really proud of the results we got, including a 13% revenue increase in 6 months." See how that makes you feel. Does it feel uncomfortable the first time? Of course. We're not used to talking about our accomplishments without downplaying them. But the fifth time you practice your confident answers, it will start to feel natural.

"I left my last job because I didn't really get along with my boss."

We've all had bosses from hell, but an interview is not the place to trade war stories. Take the high road: "I really enjoyed working at Acme Corp. One of the things I appreciated was being able to grow my skills in email marketing, but now I'm ready to take my skills to a bigger stage. That's why I'm excited to work with you..."

"I work too hard."

What's your biggest weakness? Interviewers love to ask this question because it separates the top performers from the average workers. The most common -- and worst -- responses are trite: "I work too hard" or "I have trouble saying no to responsibility." Hiring managers aren't stupid. They can see right through these canned responses.

So what is the right answer to a question about your biggest weakness? Look for the "question behind the question." What interviewers really want to know is that you're self-perceptive enough to acknowledge your weaknesses - which we all have - and that you've taken action to improve them.

So instead of a canned answer, explain what a real weakness you have and how you've worked to fix it. Include specifics. Point to conferences you've attended or projects you've taken on. That's how you answer the weakness question and nail the interview.

"I made 40K at my last job, so I'm really looking for something more like 50K. But you know..."

Your interviewer will always want to know how much you made at your last job. But it's not your responsibility to tell them. In fact, you put yourself at a severe disadvantage if they know your salary. For example, if you tell them you make \$50K, and the hiring manager was prepared to offer you \$60K, you've just lost thousands from one sentence.

Even in this economy, few companies will reject you for simply not answering the salary question. That's because it costs thousands of dollars to recruit the average candidate. If they really want you, they'll make you an offer, and you can negotiate from there. When they ask for your salary, here's your line to use: "I'm sure we can discuss salary when the time is right, but for now I just want to see if there's a mutual fit for you and me." Negotiating can be tough, but it can be worth thousands of dollars to you.