

Successfully Navigating the Interview & How to Answer Common Questions

Interviewers are looking for two things in an interview:

1. The **content** in your responses, and
2. The **confidence** that you project.

In order to successfully achieve **confidence** and recall the **content** for responses, practicing before an interview is critical. Practicing out loud, either with a friend, a faculty/staff member, or by yourself in front of a mirror, gives you the opportunity to practice not just your content but also your body language.

Body Language = Confidence

55% of first impressions are based on body language, while only 7% are based on spoken word. The other 38% of first impressions are based on tone of voice. So while you might be primarily concerned with the content of your responses, you should be equally concerned with all of the other aspects of the interview. **Tone of voice and body language convey your level of confidence throughout the interview.**

The very first moment of contact in an interview will be a firm, sturdy **handshake** accompanied with eye contact. **Steady eye contact** throughout the interview is crucial for conveying confidence. Remember to blink normally, and don't look away from your interviewer when you're saying something important. It is ok to look away when you're thinking about a response, but keep eye contact when the interviewer is speaking to you. Do not have shifty eyes, which will make you seem untrustworthy. Do not stare at the floor or ceiling.

Keep a **steady pace when speaking**. Warm and low tones sound more confident, so if you have a higher-pitch voice, then practicing in a lower register will help you sound more confident. Remember to stay calm during the interview, even if you're thrown off by a question. And make sure your **facial expression** matches not only what you're saying but what the interviewer is saying to you. Even if you're thinking about your response, a furrowed brow could be misinterpreted. Smile pleasantly throughout the interview.

Your **posture** tells the interviewer whether or not you care about the position and what they are saying. A slightly forward position is engaged body language, rather than leaning back in your chair, which reads as not caring. **Crossing your legs** at the knee is sometimes risky, as it can be seen as too casual. Crossing at the ankles is usually the safest way to position your legs. If you're sitting at a chair with arms, be careful with how you position your **elbows**, as it can sometimes become too relaxed, especially if you are in an interview for nearly an hour.

Also, be aware of your **fidgets**. Do you play with your hair? If so, wear your hair up during interviews. Do you tap your pencil? Be sure you set it down unless you're writing. Do you pick your fingernails? Do you shake your knee? Discover your fidget by practicing with a friend or the Career Counselor. Your fidgets will be more distracting to the interviewer than anything

else. If the interviewer is so distracted by your knee shaking that they aren't listening to your responses, then you will certainly not get the job.

Recognizing Types of Questions

There are multiple types of questions that you may face in an interview. The primary types are traditional, situational/behavioral, critical incident, or hypothetical. These questions are meant to assess different skills, qualities, and attributes. Regardless of the type of questions you're asked, it is most important to **stay calm, breathe, and think before speaking**. Think about **what they are really asking**. Listen to the **whole question** before starting to think about your answer because often questions have multiple parts. Although you can find responses to questions online, and you'll have practiced interview questions previously, **don't give canned responses because questions vary slightly**. Listen to the interviewer and **demonstrate you're a match** for the company and position. **This should be the goal of every single response you give.**

Traditional

Traditional questions gather **important job-related information but are not specific to a situation** that you have had in the past. They can relate to your interest in the organization or position, teamwork, work-related skills, your education/training, your career path/goals, performance/assessment, salary, the career field/industry, etc. Common traditional questions are the "Tell me a little about yourself" (60 second elevator pitch) and strengths/weaknesses questions. It is important to listen to the entire question and **answer what's being asked**. Remember, **K.I.S.S—Keep It Simple, Silly. Refrain from rambling** once you've completely answered the question.

Situational/Behavioral

Situational/Behavioral questions are designed to **assess how you've dealt with a work-related situation in the past**. The **story you choose to tell and how you choose to tell it** are equally important during these responses. Interviewers are not just assessing your skills but also your **attitudes** to see if you're a good match for their company. Always **stay positive** about your previous employer and choose stories where you made a positive difference on the outcome. Interviewers like to see the **results you produced**. Also, be prepared for probing and **follow-up questions**. These questions often start with "Tell me about a time when...", "What's a time when...", "Describe a situation when..." etc. Using the **S-T-A-R Method** or **P-A-R Method** are effective when answering these questions:

- **S**ituation—Describe the setting/backstory (where, when, with whom).
- **T**ask—What needed to be done and why?
- **A**ction—What did you do and how?
- **R**esult—What happened—accomplishments and/or consequences?

- **P**roblem—Problem/Task you were assigned.
- **A**ction—Steps you took to solve problem.
- **R**esult—Results/Consequences of your actions.

Critical Incident

Critical incident questions are formed from **actual scenarios that are occurring or have occurred at the company**, and the interviewer asks how you would handle the situation. It is first important to **figure out what skill the interviewer is trying to assess**; get to the root of the question. Are they asking a question about ethics and morals? Are they asking about communication and teamwork? Is this a problem solving and creativity question? Once you've got that figured out, you know how to frame your response. They are not truly asking you to solve their problem, as it's likely already resolved and you're not the solution. Although if you give them something brilliant, they'll likely hire you! Using a **Mini-speech Method** keeps you from rambling and on track:

- **Introduce your idea:** What are you going to tell them?
- **Body:** Tell them your idea
- **Conclusion:** Recap and why was it important?

Show them how **proactive** you are in your response and demonstrate you're a match for the company.

Hypothetical

Hypothetical questions pose unrealistic and often silly situations to the interviewee, which can sometimes throw you off in an interview. Don't let them! Stay calm and, again, think about what the interviewer is really asking you. **It's not so much about the right answer but how you answer it. Problem solve**, stay **positive** throughout your response, and **verbalize your thought process** to your interviewer. Talking them through your thought process gives the interviewer insight into how you analyze information. Examples might be: "You're going to open a burger shack. What's your strategy?", "Why are manholes round?", or "How would you go about counting all the golf balls in the U.S.?" Using the **Mini-speech Method** to respond to hypothetical questions is helpful, as well.

Recognizing and Responding to Illegal Questions

You'll often see "**EEO**" or "**Equal Employment Opportunity**" displayed on Human Resources company websites or directly on job postings. This means that the company recognizes equal employment opportunity laws, whether at the state or federal levels. It is important to know your rights as a job seeker, including what questions can be asked of you during the application and interview processes. Interviewers violate EEO laws both knowingly and unknowingly, so it's up to the job seeker to know how to recognize and navigate questions.

Every question that is asked of you during an interview must pertain to **bona fide occupational qualifications (BFOQs)**, which are essential requirements directly related to successfully performing the job: skills, training/education, experiences, etc. **BFOQs do NOT include gender, age, race, religion, marital status, physical appearance, sexual preference, disabilities, citizenship, place of birth, ethnic group, veteran status, military records, military discharge status, and arrest records that have no bearing on one's ability to perform the job.** Exceptions

are made when BFOQs directly relate to job performance (e.g., age and bartender job; religion and pastoral position).

When asked an illegal question, take 3 factors into consideration: **(1) the intent** of the question, **(2) how much you want the job**, and **(3) how your response might affect your prospects** for getting it. Identify **why the interviewer is really asking** the question, then tailor your response to the concern. Gracefully **avoid the illegal part** of the question, and **focus on your job-related skills**. For example, if asked a gender question about, "How would you handle managing a team of all men?" then simply drop the last part of the question, focusing on your management and leadership skills generally. Or if you're asked about whether you attend church on Sunday mornings, then determine whether the interviewer is prying into your personal choices or whether you can be flexible with your work schedule. Try responding with "What is the schedule like for the position?" or "I'm certain that I'll be able to work the schedule you need for this position."

Remember, if a question is truly offensive and discriminatory, think about if you really want to work for that company. And you always have the option and right to file a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

"Do you have any questions for us?"

Of course you do! This will inevitably be the **interviewer's last question**, and your response should never be "No." You're interviewing them just like they're interviewing you! **If you don't have any questions to ask, then they will assume you're not interested** in the position or company. It is important to ask questions to not only learn more about the company but also about the job's challenges. **Prepare 8-10 questions in advance, write them down, and bring them to the interview with you.** There's no reason for you to try to memorize your questions, especially since you're already remembering so much. Think about potential questions as you're preparing/ researching before the interview.

Questions should be about **getting to know more about the company or position**, not about you and your needs. Your questions will reveal to the interviewer your preparation for the interview, maturity level, interest in the job and company, professionalism, motivation about career/industry, values, and more. Don't ask any questions about salary, vacation, retirement, promotions, benefits, etc. It will sound as if you are only focused on "What's in it for me?" Focus on **organization-centered** and **team-oriented** questions. The best questions come as a result of listening to the questions the interviewer asks you: "*From what you've been asking during the interview, it sounds like you have a problem with...Can you tell me a little more about the current situation and how that would affect....?*" And don't ask questions that were already answered in the position description, during the interview, or on the "About Us" webpage (which you should have read during your research/preparation).

At the very least, find out the hiring **timeline**: "**When do you expect to make a hiring decision?**" ...or some version of this question. If you leave without this information, then you'll drive yourself crazy waiting by the phone. You can also ask if it's OK that you follow-up with them. Tell them how interested you are in the position and what a good fit you believe you are. At the end of the interview is when you close the deal.

Strategies for Answering Interview Questions

Question	Strategy to Answer
Please tell me a little about yourself.	Present-Past-Future Formula (professional, position-specific focus)
How did you hear about this position?	Name drop , share excitement for position, share what caught eye about position.
What can you tell me about the company?	Don't regurgitate "About" webpage/mission, rather asking whether you care about it; give 1 line that says you understand company goals then demonstrate you care: " <i>I'm personally drawn to this mission because...</i> " / " <i>I really believe in this approach because...</i> "
Why are you interested in this job?/Why do you want to work here?	Identify why you're a key fit (What does the description need? What skills do you have?). Be specific with examples. Then say why you love the company.
What's your ideal company?	Be sincere. Use a specific company value or 2 that resonate with you, tell them why it represents your ideal.
Why should we hire you?	Cover 3 things: you can do the work , you deliver great results , you'll fit in with the team/culture .
What are your greatest professional strengths?	Be accurate (don't say what you think they want to hear), relevant (choose a strength relevant to position), specific (e.g., not "people skills" but " <i>small group leadership</i> "), then provide an example of how you've demonstrated strength
What do you consider to be a weakness?	Interviewer is gauging self-awareness and honesty; strike a balance between red flag struggles and something you're working on: <u>W-A-R Method</u> : <u>W</u> eakness, <u>A</u> ction to overcome, <u>R</u> esult since action
Tell me about a challenge or conflict you've faced at work, and how you dealt with it.	<u>S-T-A-R Method</u> How did you handle it professionally and productively? Close with a happy ending/resolution/compromise.
Where do you see yourself in five years?	Honest and specific about goals; realistic expectations for career; show ambition ; does this position align with your goals? It's ok to say you're unsure what the future holds, but that this position will play important role in helping you make those decisions
What's your dream job?	Is this position in line with ultimate career goals?
What other companies are you interviewing with?	Mention you're exploring a number of similar options in the industry where can apply xyz skills (skills applicable to this same job)

Why are you leaving your current job?	Keep it positive , especially about previous employers. Be eager about new opportunities and this position is a better fit for you than current/previous position. <i>"Unfortunately, I was let go"</i> is ok to say, too.
What did you like least about your last job?	Don't get trapped; don't be negative. But be honest. Focus on tasks rather than people/politics.
Why were you fired?	Be honest; share how you've grown and how you approach your job/life now as a result
What are you looking for in a new position?	The same things that this position offers, be specific
What type of work environment do you prefer?	One that's similar to the environment of the company you're applying to, be specific
What's your management style?	Best managers are strong but flexible ; share your best managerial/leadership moments with specific results
Tell me about a time you exercised leadership./ What was the last project you led, and what was the outcome?	Choose an example that showcases your project management skills (spearheading from beginning to end, juggling multiple moving parts) or one that shows your ability to confidently and effectively rally a team. This depends on the position.
Tell me about a time you disagreed with a decision that was made at work.	Don't say you gave in to keep the peace or where you realized you were wrong. Choose a story where your actions made a positive difference on the outcome of the situation, whether it was a work-related outcome or a more effective/productive working relationship
How do you handle working with people who annoy you?	Are you adaptable and good fit ? Be positive and honest about what bothers you. Don't say you never get annoyed by people. Demonstrate little things don't annoy you, and show patience when you are annoyed.
How would your boss and co-workers describe you?	Be honest and remember they'll call your references . Talk about strengths and skills you haven't discussed yet .
Why was there a gap in your employment?	If unemployed, be direct and to the point about what you've been doing , perhaps volunteering or other mind-enriching activities like blogging, exercising, or taking classes? Steer conversation toward the future (this job, contributing to the organization)... <i>"I decided to take a break at the time, but today I'm ready to contribute to this organization by..."</i>
Can you explain why you changed career paths?	Explain and give examples as to how your previous experiences and skills are transferrable to this role, even if indirect
How do you deal with pressure or stressful situations?	Demonstrate you can meet stressful situations head-on in a productive, positive way and nothing stops you from accomplishing goals ; what is your stress-

	reduction tactic? Share an example of a stressful situation you navigated with ease.
Tell me about a time when you did something wrong. How did you handle it?	It's not about what you did/didn't do. They're evaluating how you handle bad situations. Don't answer, "Never." Don't spread the blame to others. Instead, tell a story that explains in detail how you solved the problem and handled it like a champ. Show flexibility and explain lessons learned in your response.
What would your first 30, 60, or 90 days look like in this role?	Start by explaining what you'd need to get ramped up. What info do you need to get familiarized with company? Then, choose a couple areas where you'd focus on, make meaningful contributions (this shows initiative and are excited to get started)
What are your salary requirements?	Have already done research on the industry and location. Provide a range based on experience, education, and skills. Say you're willing to negotiate.
What do you like to do outside of work?	Be careful not to give too much personal info, but interviewer wants to see if you fit in with culture of company. Show your personality. It's ok to talk about hobbies and open up about what makes you tick. Keep it semi-professional. Ok to talk about enjoying bicycling on Saturday mornings, not ok to discuss drinking Saturday night.
If you were an animal, which one would you be/want to be?	This is <i>seemingly</i> random; bonus points if your answer shares strengths/personality/connects to job traits/connects with interviewer.
How many tennis balls can you fit in a limousine?	Brainteasers are designed for the interviewer to watch you think on your feet and problem solve. Ask follow-up questions, if needed, and verbalize your thoughts. Use Mini-speech Method.
Are you planning on having children?	This question is illegal, but you could be asked anything about family, religion, politics, etc. Steer all questions back to the job at hand: <i>"You know, I'm not quite there yet. But I am very interested in the career paths at your company. Can you tell me more about that?"</i>
What do you think we could do better or differently here at XYZ company?	Interviewers are seeing (1) you've researched the company, and (2) you've thought critically about them and have (or can come up with!) new ideas.

Resources:

Stewart, C. J., & Cash, W. B. (2014). *Interviewing: Principles and practices* (14th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill Education.
<https://www.themuse.com>
<http://www.monster.com/career-advice>