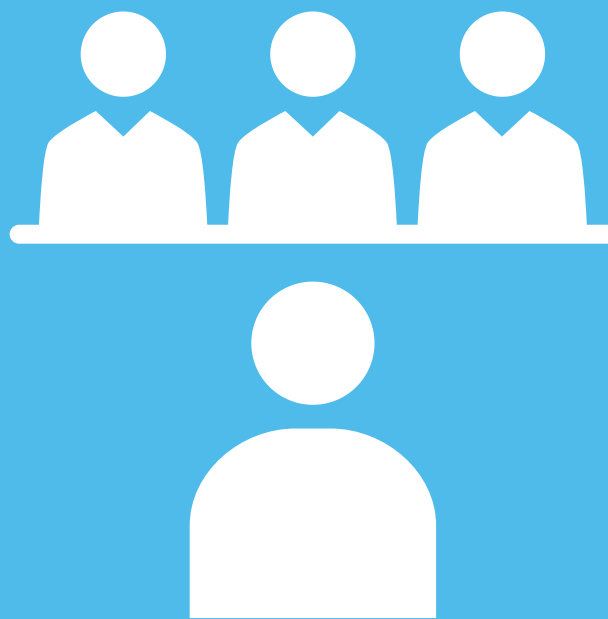


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How to: Answer Difficult Interview Questions



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Introduction

For many of us, undertaking an interview can be an uncomfortable and stressful experience.

What is the best way to answer certain questions in an interview?



These questions can make us feel awkward and be the trigger for a difficult conversation.

Let's try and work out what exactly it is that an interviewer is looking for by taking some of the most common interview questions and exploring the best ways to answer them.

" Tell me about yourself "

This is usually the first question that an interviewer will ask. It's meant to relax you and allow you to answer a question on the subject that you know most about - which is 'you'.

However some people struggle with this question. It's the type of question someone may ask at a drinks party or work's barbeque. It can provoke anxiety, you may start to over-think the question and worry unnecessarily about how you are expected to reply.

The safest ground to take is to divide your response into two distinct sections: The **employment or work part and the **personal** or the '... in my spare time I like to ...' part.**

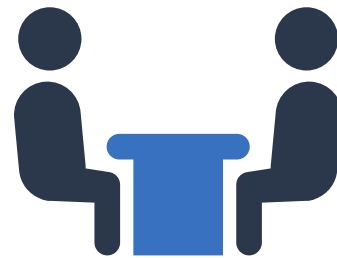
Example

"I'm currently working at Waitrose and have been there for three years. I started out on the checkouts and now find myself supervising a small team. I really enjoy the role and the responsibility and my team help me to keep up to date with all the things we need to do on a day to day basis. Outside of work I enjoy reading and playing football as well as spending time with my family."

This is a well-rounded answer. It covers the two distinct areas of 'work' and 'leisure' without over elaborating. The important thing to notice here is that the answer has an obvious conclusion.

One of the most common pitfalls that many interviewees fall into is not knowing when to stop talking. Be conscious not to ramble on or add another point and then another point. If you find yourself doing this then use the question itself to conclude your answer.

"... so yeah that's a little bit about me."



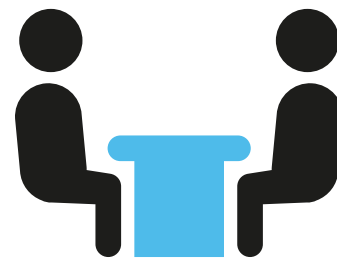
Tone of voice and voice inflection (raising or lowering the tone) can be an indicator of closing a statement. We often raise the tone of our voice at the end of asking a question but lower it at the end of a statement.

Practise this with friends and family.

If you find this difficult, try using a concluding sentence, like in the example above.

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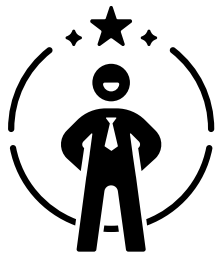
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If however you find this difficult, using a concluding sentence, like in the example above, may help.

" What are your strengths and weaknesses? "

Probably the most hated question of them all. This question can take many forms such as:



"Tell me about a time when you successfully resolved a situation in the workplace?"



"Tell me about a time when you found it difficult to cope with an issue in the workplace?"

However it is phrased, there is a best way to answer this type of question.

Long silences are awkward so buy yourself some time by taking a sip from that glass of water in front of you and the time will come when you feel compelled to say something.

First of all, if you're struggling to know how to start the answer, you can use the question itself to get you going.

" What are your strengths? "

Example

"I would say my strengths are... communicating well, verbally or through email and via presentations." (This covers the top 3) "I fit well into a team and am able to work on my own initiative. I'm resilient, I use the tools at my disposal to plan my day such as calendar reminders and stick-it notes. I'm accurate and reliable."



The list of good points is endless but communication and teams are arguably near the top.

If you are going to mention communication, list the top 3 ways in which we communicate in the workplace. Just saying "I'm a good communicator" won't be enough so give examples of your skills as this is a huge plus in an interview. It shows you have experience.

Keep the examples short and to the point and be sure to identify which of the main three you used.

Example

"I had to compose a rather difficult email to a customer refusing them a refund and had to follow this up with a call as well. The customer was grateful for the time I'd taken and although they were disappointed I got the impression they accepted the reasoning behind the decision"

This example also shows excellent customer service.

" What are your weaknesses? "

The advice is to always turn a negative into a positive but exactly how you do this when put on the spot can be a challenge.

Think of something that you have struggled with in the past and what you have done to develop more rounded skills...



Example

“My greatest weakness is that I've been known to spend too much time focusing on the finer details of a project. I've been striving to improve this by checking in with myself at regular intervals and giving myself a chance to refocus on the bigger picture.

This has helped me to continue to produce high quality work without affecting my productivity or the team's ability to meet important deadlines.”

Another good way to start an answer would be to mention that you haven't worked for the company before so you would have to learn about their systems and procedures but mention any transferable skills you have to turn this into a positive.

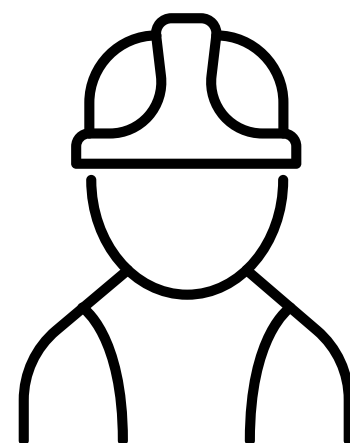
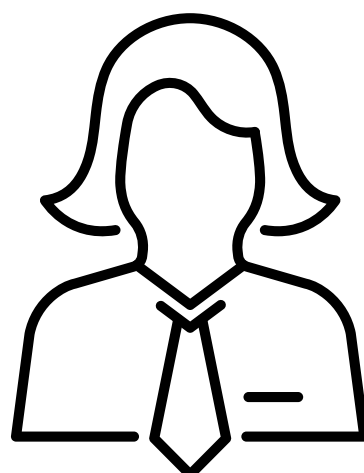
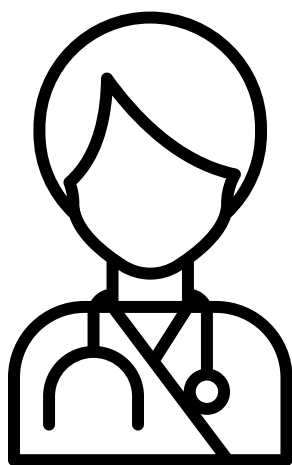
Example

"I've not worked in a residential home before but, whilst many of the processes and procedures will be new to me, I have worked in a similar environment which should help me to pick things up quickly.

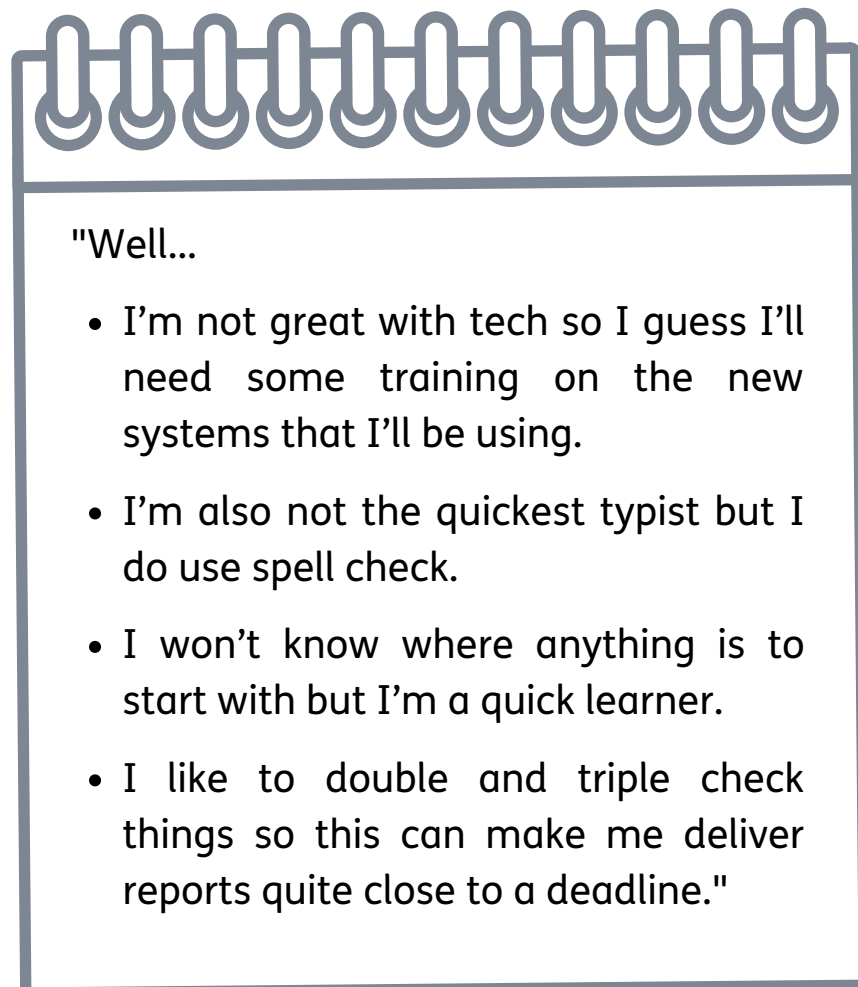
I'm assuming every home has their own unique practices and time tables so I will need to learn these. I am confident that my experience of team-working will be really helpful as will my ability to use my own initiative."

'Residential home' could be substituted by any workplace; warehouse, shop, bank, trust company, dental practice, etc.

In the above example, the weakness you've identified is that the workplace and work environment will be new to you and as such it's perfectly fine to point this out as a potential weakness. This would certainly be the case if you are completely changing professions and it's the obvious one that many interviewees don't think of.



Even if you are going from one supermarket chain to another or from one bank to another, the processes and procedures will not be identical. By verbalising this, you can then add in other possible areas of weakness in a single statement instead of falling into the trap of listing things individually (as shown below).



This disjointed and listing approach is not the best way to answer the question so try and avoid it as much as you can. It can be a sign of strength to admit that you find something tricky but never admit that this is a weakness so be careful about the language that you use.

" What are your salary expectations? "

No-one likes to talk about money but this question is asked quite often.

It's another difficult conversation so what is the best way to address it?



Unless you have experience in the role that you are applying for and can therefore guess the salary, always use a pay band and never a single figure. For example; between £13 and £16/hour.



Overthinking. 'Am I underselling myself or even pricing myself out?' This is a whole new dilemma and one to be avoided.



Take time to answer as this shows maturity and contemplation. It's fine to admit that you hadn't really thought that much about pay as it's the role itself that interests you. This could include; role diversity; level of autonomy; opportunity to join a progressive organisation; chance to take certain exams, etc. so say this in your answer.

Example

"To be honest, I haven't really given it that much thought. I saw the role advertised and felt that this was the job for me. The advert didn't give a salary but I wanted to apply anyway.

What really attracted me was the diversity of the role and for me this has a value all of its own. Not having two days the same is important to me. I trust that I'll be paid the going industry rate. Is there a salary path that I will follow as I gain more experience?"

Putting it back on the employer is not a bad ploy but you haven't answered the question. However, your reasoning is sound and your response might be accepted but what if you are pressed?

If asked again to give a figure, then accept that you do now have to. This is where job preparation is key; find out via the internet or from friends or from your ESO what this particular role pays.



Example

"Well, from what information I've been able to take from the internet and from friends who do something similar I would guess this is somewhere between..."

" Where do you see yourself in five years time? "

This question can be a kind of trap and, if it comes way down the list and you've settled into the conversational tone of the interview, you may just fall into it.

Be careful not to say something like...

"Well, in 5 years time I hope to be travelling. I'd love to see South America..."

Or to sound over ambitious and say something like...

"In 5 years time I would expect to have been promoted and perhaps be in charge of a small team."



The answer that the interviewer is looking for is that you will still be at their company, will be part of a successful team, will be contributing to the success of that team and sharing ideas and support, etc.

" Why is there a gap on your CV? "

The gap on your CV could be for any number of reasons such as; going travelling; needing support to recover or recuperate from a physical or mental condition; serving time in prison; having a child; lacking motivation to find work.

Some of the above are easy to address but what about serving time in prison or recovering from a mental breakdown or PTSD?

Think about the earlier question: "What are your weaknesses?" and try turning a negative into a positive.

Example

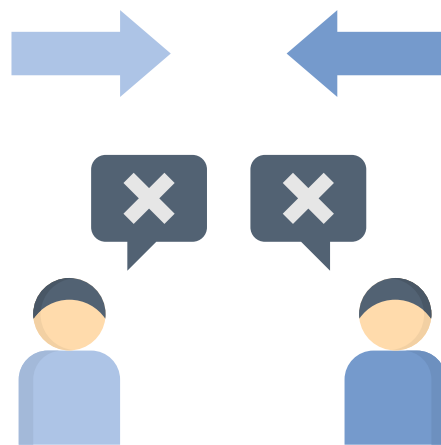
"The 18 month gap on my CV is because I became stressed at work after taking too much on. When I hit burn-out I just crashed and took time out to rethink my life, where I was and where I wanted to go. It took a while to properly switch off from work but after seeking medical help and support I recovered and now I understand my body and my limitations much better than I ever did before.

I've learned to delegate and to lean on the team more when I need to and, that no matter how great you think you are, you cannot do everything on your own. The entire experience matured me a great deal. I appreciate work more and understand the importance of the work/life balance."

" When was the last time you disagreed with a colleague? "

This is a question about team work and about how that dynamic works when things are not going so well. We will all, at times, not agree with a colleague but how do we handle that situation when it occurs?

Showing respect is key. Understanding that everyone's opinions and points of view are valid and should be listened to. It's ok to disagree with a colleague as it can show engagement and passion about something and spark a constructive debate but how do we do that?



Example

"I disagreed with a colleague about the amount of content in a guide that I'd put together. Their view was that it was too wordy and needed to be trimmed but I felt that by doing so, much of the meaning would be lost. I was advised to have a think about how to condense my work without diluting the message and this really made me focus on the points that I was trying to make. I asked for a compromise and resubmitted my work minus a couple of hundred words and was pleased with the results."

" Why did you leave your last role?"

Let's consider this question by dividing up the good and the bad reasons:

The good reasons could be because I've always wanted to work with/for someone/a company...I've always wanted to test myself in this kind of role/environment...and so on.

The bad reasons could be because I was fired/let go...because I fell out with the manager...because I never really liked working for 'said company'.

The good reasons will look after themselves but how do we explain the bad reasons?

Remember the rule about negatives? Avoid them if at all possible...

...because I was fired/let go

"One thing I really learned from my last role is that it is really important that the fit has to be right for everyone. I enjoyed the job but soon realised that it simply wasn't a great fit for me or the company and so accepted that it was better for me to move on."

...because I fell out with the manager ...because I never really liked working for 'said company'

"I realise now that I wasn't able to fully settle into the culture of the company and at times found myself struggling and isolated. It was obvious that it wasn't going to work out so I left. I have no regrets about it as I tried my best. I learned a lot about myself too and I don't see what happened as being a negative. In fact, it's been the exact opposite and I now know what it is I want to do with my life."

" How do you deal with pressure in the workplace? "

This is a common question and one that can be difficult to answer. We all deal with and identify pressure differently. For some, having to get a report out in 2 hours is just part of the job whereas for others the pressure of the clock can be almost too much.

A good answer is one that does not make you out to be either Superman or Wonder woman but one that shows your vulnerability alongside your efficiency and resilience.

Always try and give examples that show understanding, team dynamics and the importance of communication and planning.

Example

"I guess pressure means different things to different people. The main thing is to use the team around you and dip into that huge pool of knowledge and experience when you feel that something is getting on top of you. I had a report to complete in about 2 hours and I got myself so worked up about it. I spoke to my colleague who suggested we had a coffee break which at the time I thought was a crazy idea!

In that 10 minutes I discussed what it was I had to do and where it was I had to find the information. By talking it all through I formulated a plan of action which helped me to focus and reduce the pressure on myself. The deadline was tight and I did speak to my supervisor who told me not to worry and just concentrate on the task at hand. In the end I got the report in on time and found myself not getting too worked up over it."

" How do you prioritise your workload? "

Most roles have a degree of multi-tasking and at times deadlines can get mixed up or overlap so how do we keep track of our workload?

One way to address this question is to recognise the relative importance of the various tasks that we have to do.

What are the company's core values?

Which aspects of our workload have a SLA (Standard Level Agreement) attached? This is something that has to be completed in accordance with a company's terms and conditions or else a penalty will be incurred.



Other deadlines may relate to set meeting times or the provision of information needed by others for a set time; some of our work colleagues may ask us to do something for them. There is also the usual 'house work' type tasks that we need to do every day like responding to emails or something time-critical such as placing an order or dealing with other time zones when communicating with people in other countries around the world.

A good answer would be one that recognises the different ways in which a task can be graded in order of importance. However, everything is relative to the role itself and as there are too many roles to offer individual advice on, let's look first at a general office based role....

Example

"Firstly, I would identify any SLAs and action those that would incur any form of penalty or reputational damage to the company if they were not completed on time. Obviously, anything with any kind of legal implication would head this task list.

I would then scan through my emails and send off any quick replies so as to reduce the need for any chasing emails as can relieve the pressure for someone else. I would tackle any time critical tasks next and prioritise these based on when and who they were for.

I would also look at my work load and ask myself some simple questions: Is there anything that I can delegate to the team or ask for some help on? Is there something that I can speak to my manager about deferring? Shall I activate my voice mail so as to reduce any interruptions and help me to concentrate? Can I do this with my emails as well for a set period of time?



Or if you worked in a café....

Example

"If the café was really busy and one of the other waitresses had called in sick, I would need to prioritise my workload. I'd take a moment to think about how the café works.

There would be people waiting to be seated, people waiting to have their order taken and people waiting for their food. If our process is that we hand customers the menu then I'd ask if we could put the menus on the tables to save time.

If there are people waiting to be seated, or are already seated at a table only recently vacated, then I'd clear these tables first so as to keep customers in the café.

I'd then take the orders for the tables that have been waiting longest so that the kitchen can keep busy and manage their workload as well. Throughout this process I'd serve any hot food that the kitchen presented so as to keep the flow of the café in motion. Diners eating; diners waiting for their food and new diners in."



" Do you have you any questions for us? "

Usually, at the close of an interview you will be asked if you have any questions and, although it is presented as optional, it is always good to have a question or two to ask as this shows a level of engagement that most interviewers will appreciate.

Try to avoid single answer questions like 'where do I park?' or 'when is my lunch hour?' It's perfectly fine to ask these but try and ask something more substantial first.

If you're really struggling then try 'What would my first day look like?' and ask if you could email in a question that may come to you later, once the stress of the interview has passed.



Examples

"Can I ask what attracted you to this company and what to date is your biggest success?"

"Is there an opportunity to undertake some study for the role, and is there anything that I could be researching should I be successful in my application?"

"How do you see this role developing over the next couple of years?"

Summing Up

Interviews are nothing to be afraid of. They are an opportunity for you to present yourself to an employer who has already shown interest in you.

They are not designed to trip you up but they are at times there to test you.

Whether or not you are suitable could depend on how you deal with pressure or how you explain a gap on your CV.

It's an opportunity for you to speak about yourself and to show your willingness to maybe learn something new or take on a challenge.

Practice can also help. Your ESO can arrange a mock interview with the team at GET, or another helpful employer, so that you can practice answering these questions and receive some feedback and feel better prepared.

Most of all, behind all the great answers, an employer wants to see a person; they want to see you, so be the best version of yourself that you can be as this will give you the greatest chance of success.





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