

Ten Tough Interview Questions and Ten Great Answers

Mental fear of the unknown is often what produces the physical symptoms of nervousness. In addition to preparing yourself physically, you need to prepare yourself mentally. The best way to prepare mentally is to know what may be coming. Fear of the unknown can only exist when there is an unknown. Take the time to understand some of the "standards" when it comes to interviewing questions.

The following are some of the most difficult questions you will face in the course of your job interviews. Some questions may seem rather simple on the surface—such as "Tell me about yourself"—but these questions can have a variety of answers. The more open ended the question, the wider the variation in the answers. Once you have become practiced in your interviewing skills, you will find that you can use almost any question as a launching pad for a particular topic or compelling story.

Others are classic interview questions, such as "What is your greatest weakness?" Questions most people answer improperly. In this case, the standard textbook answer for the "greatest weakness" question is to provide a veiled positive such as: "I work too much. I just work and work and work." Wrong. Either you are lying or, worse yet, you are telling the truth, in which case you define working too much as a weakness and really do not want to work much at all.

The following answers are provided to give you a new perspective on how to answer tough interview questions. They are not there for you to lift from the page and insert into your next interview. They are provided for you to use as the basic structure for formulating your own answers. While the specifics of each reply may not apply to you, try to follow the basic structure of the answer from the perspective of the interviewer. Answer the questions behaviorally, with specific examples that show that clear evidence backs up what you are saying about yourself. Always provide information that shows you want to become the very best _____ for the company and that you have specifically prepared yourself to become exactly that. They want to be sold. They are waiting to be sold. Don't disappoint them!

1. **Tell me about yourself.**

It seems like an easy interview question. It's open ended. I can talk about whatever I want from the birth canal forward. Right?

Wrong. What the hiring manager really wants is a quick, two- to three-minute snapshot of who you are and why you're the best candidate for this position.

So as you answer this question, talk about what you've done to prepare yourself to be the very best candidate for the position. Use an example or two to back it up. Then ask if they would like more details. If they do, keep giving them example after example of your background and experience. Always point back to an example when you have the opportunity.

"Tell me about yourself" does not mean tell me everything. Just tell me what makes you the best.

2. **What are your top five strengths and why should I hire you?**

The easy answer is that you are the best person for the job. And don't be afraid to say so. But then back it up with what specifically differentiates you.

For example: "You should hire me because I'm the best person for the job. I realize that there are likely other candidates who also have the ability to do this job. Yet I bring an additional quality that makes me the best person for the job--my passion for excellence. I am passionately committed to producing truly world class results. For example . . ."

Are you the best person for the job? Show it by your passionate examples. Personalize your response : at ABC company ... I ... and... (give specific examples of your past behavior and work)..

3. **What are your long term goals or long-range objectives?**

Make my job easy for me. Make me want to hire you.

The key is to focus on your achievable goals/objectives and what you are doing to reach those objectives.

For example: "Within five years, I would like to become the very best accountant your company has on staff. I want to work toward becoming the expert that others rely upon. And in doing so, I feel I'll be fully prepared to take on any greater responsibilities which might be presented in the long term. For example, here is what I'm presently doing to prepare myself . . ."

Then go on to show by your examples what you are doing to reach your goals and objectives.

4. **How has your education prepared you for your career?**

This is a broad question and you need to focus on the behavioral examples in your educational background which specifically align to the required competencies for the career.

An example: "My education has focused on not only the learning the fundamentals, but also on the practical application of the information learned within those classes. For example, I played a lead role in a class project where we gathered and analyzed best practice data from this industry. Let me tell you more about the results . . ."

Focus on behavioral examples supporting the key competencies for the career. Then ask if they would like to hear more examples.

5. **Are you a team player?**

Almost everyone says yes to this question. But it is not just a yes/no question. You need to provide behavioral examples to back up your answer.

A sample answer: "Yes, I'm very much a team player. In fact, I've had opportunities in my work, school and athletics to develop my skills as a team player. For example, on a recent project . . ."

Emphasize teamwork behavioral examples and focus on your openness to diversity of backgrounds. Talk about the strength of the team above the individual. And note that this question may be used as a lead in to questions around how you handle conflict within a team, so be prepared.

6. **Have you ever had a conflict with a boss or professor? How was it resolved?**

Note that if you say no, most interviewers will keep drilling deeper to find a conflict. The key is how you behaviorally reacted to conflict and what you did to resolve it.

For example: "Yes, I have had conflicts in the past. Never major ones, but there have been disagreements that needed to be resolved. I've found that when conflict occurs, it helps to fully understand the other person's perspective, so I take time to listen to their point of view, then I seek to work out a collaborative solution. For example . . ."

Focus your answer on the behavioral process for resolving the conflict and working collaboratively.

7. **What is your greatest weakness?**

Most career books tell you to select a strength and present it as a weakness. Such as: "I work too much. I just work and work and work." Wrong. First of all, using a strength and presenting it as a weakness is deceiving. Second, it misses the point of the question.

You should select a weakness that you have been actively working to overcome. For example: "I have had trouble in the past with planning and prioritization. However, I'm now taking steps to correct this. I just started using a pocket planner . . ." then show them your planner and how you are using it.

Talk about a true weakness and show what you are doing to overcome it.

8. **If I were to ask your supervisors to describe you, what would they say?**

This is a pre-reference check question. Do not wait for the interview to know the answer. Think through what your prior bosses or supervisors would say in advance. Check with them before going to an interview and ask them if they would be willing to provide you a positive reference, or ask them for a letter of recommendation.

Then you can answer the question like this:

"I believe he/she would say that I'm a very energetic person, that's results oriented. One of the most hard working people he/she has ever worked with. Actually, I know he/she would say that, because these were his/her recent comments. May I show you his/her letter of recommendation?"

Be prepared in advance with your letters of recommendation.

9. **What qualities do you feel a successful manager should have?**

Focus on three words: leadership, vision, and development.

Here is a sample of how to respond: "I believe that the key qualities in a successful manager should be leadership--the ability to be an influence. A visionary, one who gives direction to the people that are working with him/her. Thirdly, a person who develops and mentors others by setting the example. The highest calling of a true leader is inspiring others to achieve company goals and helping them reach their potential. I'd like to tell you about a person whom I consider to be a true leader . . ."

Then give an example of someone who has impacted your life and how their qualities have helped shape your professional and personal development.

10. **If you had to live your life over again, what one thing would you change?**

Focus on a key turning point in your life or missed opportunity. Yet also tie it forward to what you are doing to still seek to make that change.

For example: "Although I'm overall very happy with where I'm at in my life, the one aspect I likely would have changed would be focusing earlier on my chosen career. I had a great position with ... and look forward to gaining more experience in this field. I simply wish I would have focused here earlier. For example, I learned..." (provide a couple of examples of things that you want to develop and grow in).

Stay focused on a positive direction of your professional life and backs it up with examples.

In reviewing these responses, please remember that they are only to be viewed samples. Do not rehearse them verbatim or adopt them as your own. They are meant to stir your creative juices and get you thinking about how to properly answer the broader range of questions that you will be asked in an interview.