

HOW TO RESPOND TO INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interviewers typically use a variety of question techniques to determine if you're the person they want to hire.

First, they'll choose questions designed to get specific types of information from you, such as (1) your experience and competencies (skills, knowledge and attributes), (2) your motivation, interests and goals, and (3) your knowledge of the organization.

Second, they'll use different styles of questioning to learn about your abilities and how well you've prepared, including (1) general, open-ended questions, (2) behavioural questions, (3) hypothetical questions and (4) questions asking for negative information.

We've organized this resource into five sections, where you'll find sample questions and suggestions about how you might prepare to answer these questions:

- Questions by type of information
- Styles of questioning
- Additional types of questions
- Other types of interview assessment (including role plays or skill demonstrations)
- Questions for the interviewer

Check out the [SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS](#) resource for a more comprehensive list of questions. Want guidance as you prepare for an upcoming interview? Contact us today—we'd be happy to help.

Questions by type of information

1) Questions about your experience and competencies

Most of the questions you'll be asked will be about your experience (work, academic and volunteer) and your competencies (skills, knowledge and attributes). These questions might be as broad as:

- + "Tell me about yourself" or
- + "Why should we hire you?"

In responding to these very broad questions, try to summarize information about yourself so that it relates to the requirements of the position. Your response needs to build on the case you made for yourself in your cover letter and résumé. Show that you've thought about how you're a good fit for the position and that you have confidence in your ability to do it. The questions in this group can also be very specific, such as:

- + "What three words would your previous supervisor use to describe you?" or
- + "Describe how you have used the advanced features of MS Word?"

In responding to these very specific questions, make sure you frame your response in relation to the information you gathered from the job posting and other sources. Speak to the key skills or attributes the interviewers may be most interested in.

Sample experience/competencies questions and responses:

+ **Question:** Tell me about yourself.

+ **Response:** My strength is written communication. That's what led me to pursue a BA in writing. Most recently, I had a chance to put my writing skills to work as a volunteer with Focus magazine. I did a great variety of writing projects while working there, including hard news articles and lifestyle pieces. I also compiled events schedules and assisted with layout design. In my spare time, I do a lot of personal writing, including fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction. I've even had a short story published in 'The Prairie Review'. I'm particularly interested in trying kinds of writing that I've never done before. I think the more I learn about different styles, the better my writing will be. That's why the work you are doing is so interesting to me. From the samples of the projects I've seen your office produce, I know you hold very high standards around written communication. These are some of the key aspects about myself and my experience that I believe would allow me to make a strong contribution to your organization.

+ **Question:** What are your skills related to this position?

+ **Response:** I think my strongest skills are in research and writing. I used these skills during a co-op work term I completed with the Ministry of Children and Family Development. My job was to research provincial initiatives for preventing violence against women and children over the last 3 years. I consulted a variety of existing studies and interviewed a group of women who had experienced violence. I then compiled the results into a draft report. As part of the same project, I helped create a mail out survey and collated the results with the other information I was collecting. The present position with your organization requires the same types of skills and focused attention.

2) Questions about your goals, interests and motivation

These questions are designed to find out how the current position fits with your career aspirations, and could include:

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

+ "Why did you apply for this position?"

In responding to these questions, focus on how you can contribute to the organization, rather than how the experience will benefit you.

Sample questions and responses:

+ **Question:** Where does this position fit with your career goals?

+ **Response:** Right now I'm most interested in getting my career started in genetic research. This is the field I plan to stay in, so I do have some long-term plans to return to university for my Master's and Ph.D. degrees. What's important for me at this point is to get several years of practical lab experience to hone my skills and give me some 'real world' experience. This job is an excellent starting point for me because it'll give me a chance to use the skills I've already developed in school and put them to use.

+ **Question:** What kind of environment do you work best in?

+ **Response:** It's important for me to work in a cooperative environment where people value a team experience but also where there is an expectation of initiative and independence. I also really value working with people who are experts at what they do and where I can keep learning. I function best when the environment is a bit competitive. I like to be challenged to do my best so I work well under pressure and to deadlines. Working directly with clients is also important to me.

3) Questions about your knowledge of the organization:

It's very important to be prepared for these types of questions. Review the organization's website, learning about their products, services, vision, mission and values. Think about how you'd fit into the organization and what you have to offer in relation to what they do. When they ask what you know about them, don't just recite the website; use your own words and take the opportunity to reiterate why you're a good fit.

Sample questions and responses:

+ **Question:** Why do you want to work here?

+ **Response:** Arthur Walburg is a really respected firm that has a clear sense of direction. I was impressed when I read in the VIATeC Directory that the firm has grown over 80% over the last two years. I also feel that the company's mission: "to bring a youthful, forward and vibrant direction to the accounting field" was in tune with my own personality. I think I have that mix of traditional accounting skills and modern world vision to work well on your team.

- + **Question:** What do you know about the services we offer?
- + **Response:** I looked at your website and your promotional materials once I decided to apply for this position. I know that you specialize in developing educational software and multi-media tools for educational institutions. I'm really interested in your focus on blending Information Technology with education. My own recent experience developing a multi-media presentation for a fourth-year university project gave me the chance to get my feet wet doing this sort of work.

Styles of questioning

1) Behavioural questions

Behavioural questions ask you to talk in detail about a specific experience. These questions usually start with the phrase:

- + "Tell me/us about a time when..."
- + "Give us an example of a situation where..."

When responding to behavioural questions, it is important to give a specific example and not just give general information on what you would do in a situation. Use the STAR technique: Clearly explain the Situation, your role or Task, the specific Action you took, and how your actions led to a positive Result or learning experience.

Sample questions and responses:

- + **Question:** Describe a time when you took initiative.
- + **Response:** Last term, I worked as a volunteer with one of the departments on campus that provides drop-in hours for new students who are seeking information about services, clubs, or other events on campus (Situation). After about a month, I noticed that there was not much student traffic and I figured that the volunteers could do a better job of marketing our services (Task). I initiated a group e-mail to my co-volunteers and volunteer supervisor asking for ideas on how we could see more students and included my own ideas on how we could do this (Action). As it turned out, many of them had great ideas that were supported by our supervisor. At my next drop-in shift, I drew up a marketing plan based on the ideas and we put the marketing plan into place this term. So far, drop-ins have significantly and steadily increased (Result).
- + **Question:** Tell me about a time when were unable to meet a deadline.
- + **Response:** During my final year of my undergraduate degree, I failed to hand in my Honours thesis on time (Situation). This was because I was heavily involved in cutting-edge research right up until the end of my course and was waiting for results from surveys being undertaken by researchers at other academic institutions. Considering this was my final piece of academic work, I wanted to ensure it was based on the most accurate and up-to-date sources of information available, even if this meant a delay in production (Task). Before choosing to miss the deadline, I contacted my Thesis supervisor and reviewers two weeks before my due date to discuss my particular situation. I explained the delay, and was consequently allowed an extra two weeks to produce my work (Action). Although my work was delayed, I feel that this delay was justified in that the work was of the highest quality it could be. Furthermore, I sufficiently organized myself in relation to my department, so that all relevant people were aware of a possible delay (Result).

2) Hypothetical questions

Hypothetical questions ask you to imagine yourself in a difficult situation and then describe how you would behave in that situation. They often begin with the phrase "What would you do if...?" Interviewers ask hypothetical questions to learn how you problem solve. They also want to know that you would communicate in a timely manner and act in the best interests of the organization.

When responding to hypothetical questions, describe how you would deal with the specific situation, detailing the sequence of specific actions you would take and the outcome you would work towards. If possible, back up your answer with a concrete example from your experience.

Sample questions and responses:

- + **Question:** What would you do if you had three projects due on the same day?
- + **Response:** As a student, I often have several projects due at the same time. I set mini goals for myself to have aspects of each project done early along the way, with each project being complete well in advance. This gives me room in my schedule to allow for unexpected projects or problems that may arise in the meantime. Last term, I had three large papers due the same day, and I had each one completed more than a week in advance. When I had a midterm scheduled for the same day, I was able to study effectively for it, and got good marks on all four projects.

- + **Question:** How would you deal with an angry client who was screaming at you?
- + **Response:** I always find the best way to deal with an angry person is to stay calm. I also find that when people are angry, what they want most is for someone to listen to them, so I would make sure that I hear them out and try my best to understand why they are mad, explain what can be done, and most importantly, do it! Last year I worked at The Bay in the China department, and a woman came in with a broken teapot. She yelled at me for packing it badly and getting it broken and that she needed it right away to give as a gift at a wedding. I apologized and told her I would call the other stores to see who had one in stock and get it sent over immediately. I did this and found one in stock in Vancouver and arranged to have it expedited to our location to arrive the next day. I explained all of this to the woman and she calmed down and was happy with the resolution. I feel it's important to always listen to and respect the client and not get into an argument with them, but at the same time, follow workplace procedures.

3) Questions asking for negative information

These are bound to come up but don't panic — there's a way to answer these questions honestly and come out with your confidence and job prospects intact. Employers use these questions to gauge how you cope, overcome, solve problems, and prevail in the face of adversity.

When responding to negative questions, prepare ideas ahead of time so you know what you'll discuss and how. Focus on competencies, events, or subjects that are not central to the job. For example, if the job focuses heavily on computer skills, don't choose this as your weakness. State the negative simply and factually. Don't dwell on it, blame anybody or overstate. End with a positive: describe how you dealt with the difficulty, explain what you learned from the experience and if possible, describe how you improved things. When asked for specific examples, it helps to phrase your answer in terms of STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result).

Sample questions and responses:

- + **Question:** What's one of your biggest challenges/weaknesses?
- + **Answer:** I have a really hard time saying no when someone asks me to do something. I tend to automatically say yes to things without checking to see if I really have the time to commit to getting it done well. As a result, I find myself struggling to meet deadlines with quality work. After putting in a lot of overtime at my previous job to get projects done, I have learned to realistically assess whether I have the time necessary to do a good job before I automatically take on more work. I have also learned to delegate tasks and accept help from others to ensure that the quality of work is excellent, as well as on time.
- + **Question:** Tell me about a time you had a conflict with a co-worker
- + **Response:** In my last position, I worked as the assistant to the head secretary. She took a lot of pride in her work and was not comfortable assigning me tasks, so I found that I was often lacking in work to keep me busy for the day. At first I found it very frustrating that she didn't trust me to do my job, but when I realized that I needed to earn her trust, I continued asking her to give me small tasks, and I ensured I did them well, and worked my way up to bigger and bigger tasks with more responsibility. After a few months, I was doing large-scale projects and was entirely responsible for the accounting for the office. When the head secretary went on vacation for two weeks, she even left me in charge of her time-sensitive work. That was a real vote of confidence, and I am proud of myself for earning her trust.

Additional types of questions

1) Creative and analytical questions

Employers may ask questions that seem to be unusual, but are actually looking for insight into your creativity and analytical skills. If the question is asking for an estimation or a numerical analysis, the interviewer is typically hoping to hear about the reasoning behind your calculation. If the question is more open-ended and hypothetical, the interviewer is probably looking for how you respond to the unexpected. Don't be afraid to think creatively. See the [SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS](#) info sheet for examples.

2) Inappropriate questions

These questions include anything about your age, gender, sexual orientation, race, politics, marital status, etc. You are not required to answer these. It is fair to abstain from answering them or seek clarification as to their relevance.

Other types of interview assessment

1) Role plays

During some interviews you may be asked to imagine you are in the workplace-related situation and to act out how you would respond. Often, the interviewer will act as a client or co-worker and you'll engage in a discussion to solve a problem or reach a positive conclusion. Role-plays often focus on working with a potential client or customer, or test your ability to cope with an urgent situation or a conflict. You may want to anticipate role play scenarios related to the position and practice with a friend.

2) Skill demonstrations

It is becoming more common to require applicants to complete a testing or skill demonstration activity as part of the interview process. This might be an online test, a written assignment, a presentation or a typing, technical or math test. Learn as much about the test as you can and practice or study for it.

Some employers may ask you to work from 20 minutes to a full shift to demonstrate your ability to do the job. This can be awkward when no training is provided and you have to jump in to demonstrate your competencies. If this will be part of the selection process, you may want to prepare by practicing your skills with friends, and visiting the work site ahead of time if it is accessible to the public. If you are asked to work for more than 30-minutes, the employer generally offers to pay you.

Questions for the interviewer

At the end of the interview, most interviewers will ask you if you have any questions for them. You should have one or two questions prepared that will provide you with meaningful additional information about the position or the organization. Write these questions down and take them with you to the interview. This is your chance to learn what you want to know in order to decide if you would accept the position if offered.

Sample questions:

- + I'm interested in learning more about _____ (some facet of the organization's operation) Could you tell me a little about it?
- + I'm clear on the role. Will there also be an opportunity for me to _____? (name a skill that you would like to get the chance to develop)
- + What do you see as the greatest challenge or most rewarding aspect of working in this department?
- + What does success look like for this position?
- + How do you see this position changing or developing over the next few years?
- + How would you describe the work environment?
- + What training do you offer to new employees?
- + What would a typical day look like?
- + When will you be making a decision about the position?