



INTERVIEWING-WHAT ARE THEY *REALLY* ASKING?

OFFICE OF CAREER SERVICES

Answering common interview questions can be a challenge without practice. Use the following as a guide on strategies to answer some of the most common questions posed during an interview.

“TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF.”

Start with the **PRESENT**: “As you can see from my resume, I am a... major graduating in.... I chose...as my major because...”

Transition to the **PAST**: Provide a summary of relevant academic projects, work and volunteer experience, campus involvement, and skills you have gained through each area. Cite a specific example to demonstrate how your experiences relate to the job.

Finish with the **FUTURE**: State why you are excited about the job. What is your vision for your role in this company or field? What are your ultimate career goals?

TIP: Stay professional. The employer is more concerned with your qualifications and experiences than with personal hobbies or interests.

“WHAT ARE YOUR THREE GREATEST STRENGTHS?”

The employer wants to know how you stand out from other candidates. Your job is to show that you stand out. Set yourself apart from others by naming the strength AND using examples to demonstrate each quality. Most employers have heard interviewees claim that they are “hard-working”, “good with people”, “determined”, etc. So, don’t just say that you have the quality: show it! Cite your resume to expand on the experiences you have gained that have cultivated each of your skills and abilities.

Example: “As you can see from my resume, one of my greatest strengths is my work ethic. I managed a full course- load of classes each semester as a...major while working my part-time job at and leading the...organization as an executive board member. Even while managing each of my responsibilities, I have cultivated and maintained enriching relationships with my peers and professors, and I will graduate with above a 3.5 GPA”.

TIP: If they ask about a weakness, provide one, explain why it has been a weakness for you, AND explain how you are working to strengthen this area of your skillset.

“TELL ME ABOUT A DIFFICULT SITUATION YOU HAVE FACED IN YOUR WORK. HOW DID YOU HANDLE IT?”

Conflict management is a central skill within any professional capacity. This question gives you the opportunity to showcase your ability to handle concerns in a productive, deliberate manner.

Consider times in your professional, academic, and leadership experiences. Describe the situation and explain your role within the company, class, or organization. What was the conflict? If necessary, be sure to indicate why it was a conflict within this context. Then, elaborate on your response. What did you do? What did your colleagues do?

How did you contribute to the resolution of this concern? SHOW how your efforts aided in the solution by taking an employer through the process, step by step.

TIP: Think “STAR” – Situation/Task, Action, Result

“DESCRIBE A TIME THAT YOU FAILED AND HOW YOU RESPONDED.”

“Failures” could include disappointing grades on a test or a project, unmet deadlines, unsatisfactory work experiences, or unmet expectations for yourself. Even a “B” in a course might be considered a failure to some. Be sure you choose a real experience but remember to stay professional in your answer. To start, outline your perspective of failure and explain your example.

The important part of this question is not the failure itself. It is about how you respond to that failure or unmet expectation. Take the employer through the process. Explain what you have learned as a result and discuss your key takeaways from the experience. Have you improved this area of your work since? Explain and use examples to highlight your progress.

Example: “I applied for a scholarship in the spring of last year. Though I made it to the final round of interviews, I did not receive the award. After the announcement of the winner, I reached out to the award committee to learn more about how I could improve my future applications. They recommended that I have a trusted faculty member review my written essay for future applications. This experience has helped me realize the value in leaning on others for support and guidance. This year, I have scheduled a meeting with my advisor to review my essay before the submission deadline next month”.

“DESCRIBE A TIME WHEN YOU WORKED WELL AS PART OF A TEAM.” OR “TELL ME ABOUT A DIFFICULT EXPERIENCE YOU HAVE HAD AS PART OF A TEAM”

In almost any work environment, working well with others is both important and necessary. Be sure to provide a specific example and explain your role within the team to the interviewer(s). Clearly express your contributions to the team and discuss the positive end result of your collaboration, if applicable.

If the interviewer wishes to hear about a difficult team experience you have faced, be honest about a more negative experience (i.e., do not dodge the question). However, be careful about focusing on the problem rather than the solution. For example, instead of focusing on a “lazy” or “disagreeable” team member, show how you used your skills to keep the group organized and productive. Stay positive and show that you can accomplish the task regardless of the cards you are dealt!

Example: “During my general psychology group project, one of my team members had trouble meeting with us each week due to schedule conflicts. To maintain cohesion and agreeability within the group, I assumed a leadership role and met individually with this member to update him on our progress and to collect the research he gathered for our project. As a result, each of us contributed our part (in both our work and our time) to the project’s successful completion. The group remained satisfied with the quality and quantity of work from each individual and was well-prepared for our final presentation. In the end, we received an ‘A’ on the assignment”.

“DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS FOR ME?”

The answer to this question should always be “Yes”! Asking questions of the employer highlights your preparation for the interview and showcases your interest in the company and position. Be sure that your questions are professional. For example, do not ask personal questions about specific employees or interviewers.

You may wish to learn more about the day-to-day responsibilities of your desired position, or about how you will be evaluated as an employee at the institution. You may choose to ask about the company mission statement or the ideal candidate for whom they are searching. Be careful to avoid questions which are already answered in the job description or position listing.