A Guardian Jobs guide to the top ten interview questions - and how to answer them

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Wouldn’t it be great if you knew in advance what your interviewer was going to ask you? Unfortunately it is difficult to know precisely, but the following questions are more than likely to crop up in some shape or form. Here, interview experts give their advice on how best to answer them.

**Tell me about yourself**  
Yes, it’s a very open question, but the interviewer isn’t looking for a long and rambling story of your life, warns Jon Gregory, editor of [win-that-job.com](http://win-that-job.com/). “What the interviewer most wants to hear is what you’ve got about you that makes you relevant and potentially a great choice,” he explains. Summarise your early career in as few words as possible to cover your background and then cut straight to your most recent and relevant experiences.

“Deliver the facts, rather than a sales pitch and try to relax,” says Gregory. “Smile, be enthusiastic and engage with the interviewer because this is your opportunity to help steer a positive tone to the whole proceedings.”

**Why do you want to work here?**  
Find out as much as you can about the organisation and its competitors - this should help inform your answer.“This is your chance to demonstrate that you have done your research into the organisation’s unique selling points and core values”, says David Cairncross, director at [Hays](http://www.hays.co.uk/).

“Try to avoid saying things that suggest a short-term interest in the role,” advises Cairncross. For example, avoid saying that the role may be a stepping stone to your future goals or, perhaps for a UK-based role, that you are interested in the prospect of international work, as this will suggest you are looking to move on quickly.

**What are your strengths?**  
For this question, Jonathan Burston, founder of[the Interview Expert Academy](http://www.interviewexpertacademy.com/), advises candidates to prepare in advance by following the ‘rule of 3’:

**Rule 1:**Make a list of what you think you’re good at, what you enjoy doing and what others say you’re good at.

**Rule 2:** Take that list a step further and ask yourself why you consider each strength to be a strength - list three reasons per strength.

**Rule 3:** For each strength listed, detail three examples of where you’ve showcased that strength.

**What are your weaknesses?**  
Interviewers ask this question to see how self aware candidates are, according to Sarah Archer of [CareerTree](http://www.careertree.org.uk/). “They don’t want you to start listing all your weaknesses and provide them with a reason not to give you the job – remember they want you to do well,” she explains. “But you must prepare for the question because answering off the top of your head could be fatal.”

Think of a weakness that you have - that is preferably not a crucial requirement of the job - and show the interviewer you have a strategy for managing it. For example: “When under pressure my attention to detail can be less than I like so I build in extra time for checking my work or ask a colleague to do a final proof read for me.”

**Why should we employ you?**  
This question isn’t simply about whether you meet the criteria of the job specifications, you need to demonstrate you can deliver what is required, says Victoria McLean, founder of [CityCV](http://www.citycv.co.uk/). Start by reiterating the role outcomes (“My understanding is that the business requires an individual who can expand the client base and ...”), then illustrate the skills you have to achieve those outcomes with some tangible examples.

Next give them your “differentiator”, says McLean - what sets you apart from your peers, what is your USP? “Use emotive language and wrap up with something super positive and memorable,” she advises. “Reiterate again how excited you are about the opportunity and to close your answer on a really positive note.”

**What accomplishment are you most proud of and why?**  
Use this question as an opportunity to showcase your strengths, says Cairncross. “Think of where you have personally made a difference, but avoid overselling yourself,” he adds. Use the STAR technique to tell a compelling story, outline the situation you were in, the task you had to accomplish, the action you took and then the positive results.

Using the STAR technique should ensure your answer has a clear structure and doesn’t miss out any key details. Cairncross also advises that the candidate highlights the obstacles they overcame to reach the achievement.   
   
**Describe a time something went wrong and how you dealt with it**  
“We all have experiences where something went wrong and employers want to learn how you deal with it,” says Burston. He recommends making a list of examples of projects or goals that didn’t go according to plan and then listing what happened and why. Next, review the reasons it failed, how you felt about it and, most importantly, what you learned from the experience and what you’d do differently next time. Once you’ve got a clear example in your head, you can structure your answer using the STAR technique, in the same way as question 6.

**Where do you see yourself in five years time?**  
This is tricky. “You don’t want to be under ambitious, but equally you need to avoid having unrealistic or mismatched expectations,” says Gregory. What does work, according to Gregory, is to say that you would hope to develop and be trusted with increasing responsibility over this next five years. “This shows that first and foremost you want to be recognised as someone who does an excellent job, and that this would underpin any career development and promotional opportunities,” he explains.

**What motivates you?**  
This is a broad question designed to understand a person in the round, according to Kelly Roberts, head of HR consultancy at accountancy firm [Kreston Reeves](http://www.krestonreeves.com/). Perhaps you might like a challenge? Or you want a job that pays enough for interesting foreign travel? “There is no right or wrong, but honesty, enthusiasm and self-belief are qualities a recruiter will hope to see reflected in the answers,” she says.

**Have you got any questions?**  
Remember that interviews are a two-way process. “Interviewers will want to know if you’re interested in them and their organisation, so you should never go to an interview without a list of pre-prepared questions,” says Burston. Ask about the company and the opportunities for personal development and, of course, ask more about the role, its challenges and the team. Questions directed at the interviewer themselves are a good move too, says Burston. What do they like about their job, the company, the culture?