

How to Handle Common Interview Questions, Part 2
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Every interview has a unique focus, but some questions are asked so often, it makes sense to do all you can to prepare for them. In order to be successful, you need a strategy -- not scripted answers. Your goal should be to emphasize the experiences in your background that best fit what each interviewer is looking for.

In this series, we'll look at some common questions and what you should consider when formulating your responses. Work through each potential question, creating your own responses, and you will be in great shape for your next interview. It helps to write out potential answers. Even better: Practice aloud with someone.

Question: Tell me about a time you faced an ethical dilemma.

***Intent:** The interviewer is looking for evidence of your high ethical standards and honesty.*

***Context:** You might want to say you haven't had any ethical challenges, but we all have our ethics tested at some point. For example:*

- You discovered wrongdoing, or someone asked you to engage in a cover-up.
- Your employer failed to deliver the full value and quality on products or services paid for by a client.
- A colleague cut corners on a project.

***Response:** Without naming names, describe the situation and how you dealt with it. The response may focus on you, or it may involve other people. Remember, your political acumen is being tested -- sometimes the best action isn't blowing the whistle but taking care of the problem yourself.*

Question: Tell me about a time when you failed.

***Intent:** No one wins all the time, so the key here is to forthrightly discuss what you learned from a situation that went awry. The interviewer also may want to hear how you handled any resulting fallout.*

***Context:** Failure comes in different forms: taking the wrong action, omission, or not doing enough or taking action soon enough. Some failures are big; most are small. Tell a story that isn't a career killer but shows you learned something substantive.*

Response: Perhaps you failed to trust your gut on a hire and the person didn't work out, or you didn't intervene early enough with a problem employee. Talk about the lesson you learned from the mistake.

Question: Tell me about a project you worked on that required heavy analytical thinking.

Intent: This is a [behavioral interview](#) question. The interviewer is asking you to demonstrate your competency.

Context: The only way an interviewer can determine if you have enough analytical horsepower is to hear an example of how you used your analytical skills to achieve a goal: What formal and informal analysis did you do? How did you structure the project? What obstacles did you run into, and how did you overcome them?

Response: "In 2005, I was given project X with a 10-day deadline and goal Y. The goal was clear, but I had to figure out how to get there. So here is what I did (analysis/decisions/actions). The end result was _____."

Question: Why do you want to leave your current position?

Intent: The interviewer wants to make sure you won't walk out after six months and that you'll be satisfied in your new position.

Context: You have greater market value when you are looking on your own terms. Prepare a positive response you are very comfortable with. Refer to fit, personality issues or new directions. Your goals and readiness for a new kind of role are generally safe terrain. Just be careful to emphasize benefits to the employer, not your personal aspirations.

Response: Tread carefully. You don't want to bad-mouth your current employer or put yourself in a weaker [negotiating position](#). You could say, "Actually, I'm happy doing what I am doing now. But recently I have been keeping my eyes open for other opportunities. I don't need to leave, but for the right opportunity, I would consider it. This opportunity seems to fit the criteria I set out."

What book are you currently reading?

Intent: The interviewer is exploring your intellectual curiosity, your interests or perhaps how in tune you are with industry or professional trends.

Context: Consider highlighting reading material directly related to the role and environment you are interviewing for: sales-excellence books for salespeople or talent-management books for HR workers, for example. Be prepared to talk about the book's concepts and your opinions of them.

Response: "I just finished _____ and just started _____." "I am in the middle of _____."

[Ian Christie founded BoldCareer.com to help individuals build bold, fulfilling careers and help organizations attract, develop and retain talent. A career coach, consultant, three-time entrepreneur, former senior director at Monster and former retained executive search consultant, Ian is an expert in the fields of careers and recruitment. He believes that career management is a central theme to both personal and organizational effectiveness. BoldCareer.com offers career services to companies and individuals as well as free career resources.]