

How to Handle Common Interview Questions, Part 3
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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 your past experiences 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 when you faced a major obstacle at work.

Intent: Similar to the [proudest achievement question](#), this is a [behavioral interview question](#) focused on an event. In this case, the interviewer is interested in your ability to overcome a major hurdle.

Context: Pick an example that illustrates a significant obstacle that best demonstrates how you work and that had a positive, tangible outcome. Obstacles might include business problems, a difficult objective, key people who stood in your way or lack of resources. Once you have your example, explain the steps you took.

Response: You could include the analysis you performed and the resulting strategy, the process you took, the key actions performed, your arguments or anything else that clearly demonstrates how you achieved your goal. A great response technique for this kind of question is to break your answer down into phases or steps: "First, I... Second...."

Question: How do you deal with conflict?

Intent: Conflict is part of any workplace, and the reality is that you often can't get ahead or perform well in your job unless you can deal with conflict at a basic level. Do you avoid conflict or face it? Do you think it through, or are you impulsive? Do you use constructive techniques to resolve the situation?

Context: There are different forms of conflict of course: The everyday interpersonal sort, disagreements in direction or strategy, and conflict over resources. You should describe how you handle conflict at an appropriate level. If you are a manager or executive, for example, pick a reflective example.

Response: Consider offering a specific example to demonstrate how you resolve conflict.

Question: [Tell me about yourself.](#)

Intent: *Such an innocent-sounding question, but it is a bit of a trap. The interviewer wants to see how you present yourself, but this is not an offer to recite your resume.*

Context: *This question, which when asked always occurs at the beginning of the interview, is a predictable opportunity to craft an engaging, intriguing executive summary of who you are professionally and why you are there. While there is no hard-and-fast rule as to how long it should be, let's say it should last up to a minute. If you are given this opportunity, turn it to your advantage to establish momentum.*

Response: *The stronger the connection you can make between your background, knowledge and interests, and the job at hand, the more compelling you will be as a candidate. If there is something notable about your personal life that adds to your candidacy or helps explain your career trajectory, add it. Otherwise, leave personal details out at this stage unless invited to do so.*

Question: How would you describe your work style?

Intent: *This is a fairly open-ended question. At a basic level, the interviewer is interested in hearing how you both understand and articulate how you work. However, there may be a requirement for someone highly organized, or the team may have a specific way of working, and the interviewer wants to see if you fit.*

Context: *You may not have thought about this too carefully before. How do you best operate? What's the optimum work situation for you? There are two sides to this: How you work and in what kinds of work environments you work best. Are you highly structured? Do you focus on one thing and get it done, or move multiple projects forward concurrently? On the environment side, do you do best in fairly structured workplaces, or do you thrive in chaos?*

Response: *Like any other answer, being specific and backing up your answer with a brief example works best. You could use the past week as an illustrative example.*

Question: [Why are you interested in this job/our organization?](#)

Intent: *Fair question. Why are you? The interviewer knows you are looking for a new opportunity, and at a basic level, a job. Why else? A candidate with good reasons why is going to be more interesting.*

Context: *This is not about telling them what they want to hear. Your reasons could involve opportunity, career fit, cultural fit, interest in their business, personal value proposition fit and your ability to be successful in the job. It's also a great opportunity to illustrate the homework you've done on the company.*

Response: *You want to present your reason as a benefit to the employer. If it is the first interview, you might not have all the answers or will have not made up your mind yet. In this case, use a statement like, "From what I have seen so far...."*

[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.]