

VAULT GUIDE TO

BEHAVIORAL

INTERVIEWS

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO PREPARING FOR AND ACING BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

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Vault Guide to Behavioral Interviews

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Behavioral Interviews and How to Use This Guide

What are behavioral interviews?

Behavioral interviews are opportunities for hiring teams to see if you have the skills they need for a role in their organization. Interviewers determine if you have the necessary skills for the job by asking you questions about your previous experiences. Questions like “Tell me about a time when you led a project” and “When have you completed a detailed analysis?” are classified as behavioral interview questions. The idea is that the behaviors you demonstrated in the past will provide a strong indication of how you’ll behave in the future. So, to do well in behavioral interviews, you need to deliver answers highlighting behaviors that align with the skills the hiring team is seeking. This guide will walk you through how to do that.

When are behavioral interviews conducted?

Most of the time, behavioral interviews are arranged after you apply for a role. The employer will email or call you to set up a time. The behavioral interview could precede or follow a case or technical interview (more on these types of interviews can be found later in this guide). Although an interview might be labeled “behavioral,” it’s common to receive other interview questions during the “behavioral” time as well. For that reason, there’s a chapter in this guide covering the other types of questions often asked during behavioral interviews.

On occasion, a behavioral interview can happen before you apply for a role. Although rare, an informational meeting can turn into a behavioral interview. The person you meet with for the informational meeting could find you to be a very compelling candidate for a job and decide to quickly assess your skills.

Which types of questions are asked during behavioral interviews?

If you’ve ever interviewed someone for a job that required project management skills, you probably asked something like, “Will you please tell me about a time when you led a long-term project?” Or, if you’ve been interviewed for a project manager role, you might’ve been asked, “Will you please share a time when you worked with a team outside of your department?” Questions like these are commonly called behavioral interview questions.

Interviewers often ask multiple behavioral questions during an interview. Sometimes the questions are asked one right after the other. Sometimes they’re connected. For instance, an interviewer might ask, “Will you please tell me about a time when you analyzed data and found a problem?” and then, “Will you please tell me about another time when you presented a detailed analysis?” Sometimes, the questions are not directly connected. You might hear an interviewer ask a question like, “Can you tell me about a moment when you had a conflict with a coworker?” and then, “What would you consider to be your greatest accomplishment?”

Later in this guide, you’ll receive a list of common behavioral interview questions and be able to create a custom list for the roles you’re pursuing.

How long do behavioral interviews last?

Employers often set aside interview time—around 15 to 45 minutes—specifically for a behavioral interview. Some employers conduct multiple strings of behavioral interviews with different interviewers. On those occasions, you might be asked the same question by three different people, or you could receive a different question from each interviewer in the same day. If you're pursuing a role that has multiple rounds of interviews, it's likely you'll need to respond to behavioral interview questions during each round.

What is the history of behavioral interviewing?

Okay, so maybe this isn't one of the questions on the top of your mind. However, knowing the history of behavioral interviews can help you see why behavioral interviews have become such a popular aspect of the hiring process.

Behavioral interviews have evolved from employers' efforts to find the best candidates for roles. Of course, those efforts have been largely shaped by how people have secured work. Before the 1900s, there was next to no need for job interviews. As the 1900s progressed, the need for workers of all skills levels grew rapidly. Employers were eager to capitalize on the opportunities generated by the industrial revolution. Human resource roles and departments became increasingly common. Many leading thinkers and institutions of the time began considering how the hiring process could be efficient and successful. After all, a bad hire was expensive, even back then. Formal hiring assessments to better determine the likelihood a candidate would be successful in an organization/role began to circulate through the academic and business worlds. The assessments contained questions that tested a candidate's knowledge of a job function as well as of the broader organization and industry. However, some questions were aimed at assessing a candidate's broader knowledge about historical figures, so there was certainly room for improvement. Today, few of us would believe that "Who was the third president of the United States?" is an impactful question to ask someone interviewing for an accountant role. (Perhaps an exception could be made for an accounting role for the television show *Jeopardy!*, as it could show alignment with the organization's values.) Thankfully, experts across disciplines developed new procedures and techniques throughout the 20th century to improve hiring outcomes.

In the 1980s, human resource experts and industrial psychologists were exploring how they could better gauge job candidates' skills. One of those experts, Dr. Tom Janz, led studies comparing how well different types of evaluations assessed viable candidates for jobs. He found that asking how candidates demonstrated key skills in their previous work was one of the best ways to assess if a candidate would perform well on the job. Since then, behavioral interviewing has become a common hiring practice.

Why prepare for behavioral interviews? Why not just go into the room and be yourself?

"Be yourself" is a common phrase you'll hear as you seek advice for interviewing. You'll hear it phrased like this: "At the end of the day, you just need to be yourself and let the interviewers decide if they can see the value you will add or not." You'll also hear it like this: "Wouldn't you rather be accepted as who you are rather than who they want you to be?" Sure, you have inherent value. And yes, honesty is important. However, going into an interview room with the idea that simply being your unprepared self will secure a

job is highly unlikely. Lazy preparation and advice will not help you land a job with an employer seeking a smart and hard worker. If you had a child who wanted to try out for the local basketball team but wanted your help to prepare, would you sit them down and say it's really about being yourself? No, you'd likely help them with their shooting form, run a few dribbling drills, and play one-on-one to better understand what they need to do to showcase their potential. You want to take the same approach to interviewing. You want to spend time reflecting on your experiences, strengths, weaknesses, and values, and find people who can help you showcase yourself in the best way.

How to use this guide

The advice and content of this guide is based on research, expert insights, and years of experience training individuals for behavioral interviewing with elite employers. The guide is designed to help you deliver A+ answers in behavioral interviews. The goal of this guide is to give you the best chance at receiving offers for even the most competitive jobs. You'll find this guide dives deep into the details of what it takes to become excellent at behavioral interviewing. If you ever feel overwhelmed while reading the guide, remember that your ultimate goal in behavioral interviewing is to share previous experiences that feature the skills the interviewer is seeking.

To get more specific, this guide will help you:

- Think through behavioral questions interviewers will likely ask you
- Discover your skills that employers want to hear about
- Deliver answers interviewers can easily understand and remember
- Enhance your answers with nonverbal communication
- Show confidence when responding to questions
- Make the most of behavioral mock interviews
- Navigate the nuances of virtual behavioral interviews
- Manage the complexities of cross-cultural communication
- Curate questions to ask at the end of behavioral interviews.

Interact with the content

This guide is designed to build upon your knowledge of interpersonal communication and human behavior. It might challenge your preconceptions as well. You'll find questions at the end of chapters to reflect on the content and apply it to your situation. You'll also find structures and activities to accelerate your preparation and optimize your efforts. To get the most out of this guide, keep a notepad nearby so you can respond to the questions and apply the content.

Purpose is to develop competency, not confine

The direction and structures offered in this guide are meant to help you develop your behavioral interviewing skills. Preparing for interviews is not unlike constructing a tall building or planting a young fruit tree. Some scaffolding is necessary at first to make sure everything is stable, but eventually you'll remove the scaffolding because the tree or building is strong enough to stand on its own. This guide will help you build behavioral interview competency, but the goal is not to confine you. You'll need to wisely judge how to apply the content to your situation and experiences.

Chapter 2: Behavioral Case Studies to Get You Thinking

Now that you know the purpose of behavioral interviewing, read the following cases of behavioral interviewing. The cases are designed to ignite your critical thinking about behavioral interviews. Pay attention to what each interviewer and candidate says. Observe how they deliver their message. Consider the broader situational and interpersonal aspects that impact the interview. After you read each case study, answer the reflection questions. Those questions will help you know which concepts you need to learn about behavioral interviewing and which ideas you might want to reconsider.

Case study #1

“Hi...Mark?”

Mark quickly lifted his head from the *Bloomberg Businessweek* magazine he was reading as he waited in the lounge. He caught eyes with the recruiter. A smile bloomed across his face. He stood up.

“Yes, I’m Mark! Pleasure to meet you,” Mark’s voice was clear and steady. He extended his hand and shook the recruiter’s hand.

There was something about Mark that made the recruiter feel relaxed and interested to learn more about his abilities, knowledge, and personality.

“Nice to meet you as well, Mark. My name is Stacia. Our interview room is right around the corner. Is there anything you need before we begin?”

“No, thanks. I’m all set.”

“Sounds good. Right this way.”

As they walked to the interview room, Stacia asked, “So, how’s your day going so far, Mark?” Though she didn’t declare that the interview had started, Mark’s response would begin to inform her if his personality was a good fit for a product marketing role at the technology company she represented.

Mark said, “My day’s going well. The weather was perfect for an energizing run this morning, and now I’m excited for this opportunity to interview with you. How’s your day going so far?”

Mark was very comfortable engaging others in small talk like this. He’s been a very social person throughout his life. Mark had a reputation for being very charismatic. He seemed to win nearly every leadership role he ever pursued in school and at work. Previous mentors told Mark over the years that he was exceptionally skilled at leveraging his raw intelligence and his refined emotional intelligence to quickly build trust with others. Mark knew the interview had begun and was excited to showcase his ability to leverage small talk to quickly build relationships.

“My day’s going well,” Stacia said. “Wish I could say I went for a run this morning. I opted to stay in bed a bit longer than usual. I struggled to get moving after arriving late to my hotel due to a delayed flight. But, after some extra sleep and a few cups of coffee, I’m ready to go!”

“Sorry to hear about the delayed flight,” Mark said. “I’ve passed on morning runs when I’ve had delayed flights as well. I’m glad to hear you’re feeling ready for the day. Should we refuel on coffee before we begin?” Mark smiled, looking like he was ready to jump into a search for the nearest café.

Stacia laughed. “No, that’s alright. If I have more coffee, I don’t think I’ll be able to sit still for the next few interviews.” Stacia then shifted the conversation. “Well, let’s make the most of our time and jump into a few questions to learn more about you. Sound good?”

After the few beginning minutes of dialogue with Mark, Stacia already had a feeling that Mark would be a good personality fit for her tech company. The company is large and innovative. They need employees who’ll be pleasant to work with as they stay late into the night during the final stages of new product launches. However, Stacia wanted to learn more about Mark. His personality might be a good fit, but she also needed to see if he has the knowledge, skills, and abilities to be successful in the product marketing role.

“Let’s do it. I’m ready to go.” Mark adjusted his suit jacket in a perfunctory gesture of preparedness.

Stacia grinned and said, “Alright, well, why don’t we start with learning a little more about you? Will you please tell me about yourself?”

“Of course! Well, I was born in Sacramento, though I pretty much grew up in Orlando. I’m currently wrapping up my degree, and one day I’d like to become a CEO. I think that desire comes from my passion for leading others. In my second internship, I had the chance to deliver a project summary to the director, and I had fun connecting it to the broader organizational goals. The director said the company would hire me full time if I didn’t have to return to school. I think I took that internship because I used the companies’ equipment nearly every day as a student athlete. That’s also something I should mention. I’ve played lacrosse since I was eight years old. My mom asked me to pick any sport, and lacrosse is the one I chose.” Mark continued, giving a five-minute answer detailing life decisions, hobbies, and a smidgen about previous work responsibilities.

“Thanks for sharing that,” Stacia said.

Stacia typically jots down notes to help her remember candidates. The notes often help her thoughtfully complete her company’s standard interview evaluation form immediately after the interview. However, the notes are especially helpful when the standard evaluation suggests several candidates possess the knowledge and abilities to succeed in the role. And, Stacia finds that happens frequently. Many high-quality candidates are interested in working at her organization, which has a long history of impacting the world through innovative technology. As a result, Stacia’s notes are crucial in helping her discern why one person’s personality might be a better fit than another when skills and abilities seem equal. To recall candidates’ personalities, Stacia relies heavily on her recollection of how each candidate made her feel throughout her interactions and the notes she took when each candidate responded to “tell me about yourself.”

Stacia listened closely to Mark’s response to “tell me about yourself.” Mark was undoubtedly charming in his demeanor, but Stacia struggled to follow Mark’s verbal collage of his life. Her notes said, “Wants to be a CEO. Student athlete. Difficult to follow, though lively.” She hoped her next few questions would be met with responses that were easier to follow so that she could thoroughly evaluate Mark’s skills and abilities. Looking over Mark’s resume, Stacia saw that he was promoted twice during his six years of marketing work at a well-known consumer goods company. She was eager to learn more about his desire to move away from a marketing role in retail.

Stacia said, “Mark, I see you’ve done well in the consumer goods world as a marketer for a well-regarded soda company. What makes you want to make a pivot into the technology sector?”

“In my previous role, I did a lot of work around new market entry. When I’d share my recommendations, I often created visualizations. My directors loved the visualizations, but it took me forever to create them. That was until I discovered this great tool that dramatically reduced the time it took me to produce those visualizations. At that moment, I saw how technological innovation isn’t just something that happened in the past, but something that’s changing the way people work today. That’s why I want to work in technology.”

“So, it seems you want to work in technology because it impacts the way people work. Is that right?” Stacia felt like Mark’s answer was authentic. She was convinced what Mark said was really what he believed. She appreciated his openness, but his passion was unclear and didn’t feel as substantial compared to what she heard from other candidates. Stacia wanted to give Mark a chance to clarify.

Mark said, “Right, ever since I saw how tech was changing how I worked, I wanted to join a tech company that was making an impact.”

“Thanks for affirming that, Mark. Now, I’m sure you’re aware that the company I represent is not currently focused on developing products that are widely used in the workplace. So, what makes you want to work for us?” Stacia recognized that the question could cause Mark to sweat a little. Although Stacia tries hard to draw out the best in interviewees, she also needs to make sure employees know the organization they are attempting to woo. She was consistently surprised how people come into interviews knowing little about a company where they’re saying they want to spend the next three or more years of their lives. Plus, a follow-up question like this is hardly stressful compared to the questions someone in the prospective role would receive as they managed the development of products across departments.

Mark paused. His head flooded with painful doubts that he just ruined his chance with a company he liked. He hadn’t considered whether or not the company focused on products targeted to the workplace. Mark neglected to do much research on the company in general. He thought talking about his background in marketing for a famous company would be enough to secure an offer with a similarly respected company. Mark applied for the role after hearing one of his classmates mention that they worked there for a few years. The classmate mentioned that the people in the company were great and helped her navigate a clear path to leadership within the technology sector. That indirect endorsement along with the company’s name brand made Mark believe the company was a good next step for this career. Plus, his uncle said it was a good company since it was a pretty good performer in his investment portfolio.

Mark said, “I would love to share about why I want to work at World Digital. I think it really comes down to the people. One of my classmates used to work for World Digital and said the people at the company helped mentor her as a young leader. I think working at a place that has people willing to invest in junior-level employees would be meaningful.” Mark leaned forward and quickly looked to the side as though he was about to tell a secret. “I think that likely contributes to the company’s solid stock performance over the years. To be honest, I have always felt more motivated in my day-to-day work when the company culture emphasizes mentorship.”

Mark sat back in his chair. Feeling confident in his recovery, he waited for Stacia’s next question.

“Glad to hear you had a chance to talk with your classmate about her experience at World Digital. Mentorship is an important aspect of our culture.” Stacia transitioned, saying, “Given your experience in marketing roles, I’d love to know more about your ability to manage projects. Can you tell me about a time when you led a long-term project?”

“Of course. I’ve led many long-term projects,” Mark said. “So, it was few years into my role as an analyst, and we were talking about the launch of another marketing campaign during the bi-weekly marketing meeting. I was quite frustrated since we faced serious communication errors in our last two campaigns. In one situation, the customers who signed up for our coupon app received a coupon worth four times the amount they were supposed to receive. In another situation, they receive three push notifications in an hour for a coupon that discounted a \$3 product by 5 cents. Our app rating took a huge hit after that. After the meeting, I talked with my director and expressed my concern. He agreed we needed to pause the campaign development until we found what was causing the incorrect information on our app. I talked with the tech team to figure out the issue. I suspected it was an issue with the application management system, but it turned out that their system was getting bad data from our team. I went back to my team and shared the issue. After some discussion, I proposed we use a new data management system that increased transparency and communication to reduce errors. My boss agreed and said I was going to lead the initiative.”

Mark took a breath and noticed Stacia was closely listening. He felt like he was doing well now. This was one of his most interesting stories. Stacia was eager to hear more about Mark’s ability to manage projects.

Mark continued. “I had a lot of different responsibilities as a part of that project. I presented a proposal to the directors in order to get funding for a new data management system. I also had to get each director’s buy-in since any department with a connection to a campaign would need to use the new system. And I did a lot of comparative analyses to find a system that would work better than the previous system.” Mark held up a finger for each action he mentioned.

“I’m still shocked by how many data management systems exist. Oh, I should mention that, after completing the presentation, one of the directors from another team walked up to me and said my delivery and thorough analysis were impressive and that he would love to have me join his team someday. That project lasted nearly six months. The tech team was the hardest to get on board. They were rightfully concerned about security and increased access to our customers’ information. I leveraged my relationship building skills and attention to detail to make sure they felt their concerns were heard and addressed. That is a time when I led a long-term project.”

Stacia finished writing her note and then said, “Thanks, Mark.”

Reflection questions

1. What is Mark doing well in his interview?
2. What could Mark do better?
3. How would you describe Mark’s confidence?
4. Would you say Mark gave sincere responses? What caused your conclusion?
5. Do you think Mark provided answers that were logical and easy to follow?
6. Were Mark’s responses relevant to the interviewer’s questions? What examples from the story support your idea?
7. How would you describe Stacia? How would you feel interviewing with someone like her?

Case study #2

“Karen’s next,” Howard said, looking up from his interviewing sheet. “Who here goes by Karen?” Howard scanned the room from left to right. The room was full of people. Howard was not a fan of crowds.

Karen thought she heard her name called but wasn’t sure. She waited.

“Karen, are you here today?” Howard said.

Karen’s heart raced. She jumped to her feet and headed straight to Howard.

“Oh, hi, I’m Karen,” she said quietly. She clutched her bag and stood in front of Howard.

“Karen, nice to meet you. I’m Howard. I’ll be interviewing you today.” Howard took his job as an interviewer seriously. His evaluation played an important role in the success of the broader organization. He stuck out his hand for the obligatory greeting. Karen shook his hand with a limp wrist. Howard’s eyebrows furrowed. “Right this way, Karen.” Howard led Karen to the assigned interview room.

Karen was thrown off by the lack of gentility in Howard’s voice. She decided to hold off engaging in small talk as they made their way to their seats. The idea of saying something that might further irritate a seemingly irritable person didn’t seem like a good move.

“So, how are you today, Karen?” Howard asked. Small talk was not Howard’s strength, but he was surprised by the silence on the way to the room. Typically, candidates kick off the small talk for him.

Karen’s voice stumble as she said, “I’m well. How are you?”

“I’m well, thank you,” Howard said without much expression. “Are you doing well today?”

“Yes,” Karen said, then quickly cleared her throat.

“Glad to know that, Karen. I’d like to jump right into the questions I want to ask you to see if you’re a good fit for the MBA summer internship at Rosenberg Auto Company. I’ll save some time at the end of the interview for you to ask me questions to help you see if Rosenberg is a good fit for you. Sound good?”

“Yes, that sounds good,” Karen said quietly. The volume of her voice sounded like it was just one level above mute.

“Great,” Howard replied. “Let’s get started then. Will you please start off by walking me through your resume?”

Karen came prepared. She snatched two copies of her resume from her bag. She slid one copy across the table to Howard. She nodded and smiled. “I’d be happy to.” Howard raised his eyebrows and grabbed his reading glasses. He had a copy of her resume in his folder, but he enjoyed her effort to come prepared.

Karen said, “I studied mechanical engineering as an undergrad at South American University. I graduated with a 3.7 GPA.” Karen moved to her first job. “After graduating, I worked as an assistant engineer at Holcom Manufacturing. That company makes drivetrains for 40 percent of the global RV industry. I was responsible for creating and maintaining drawings for new product developments. I also had the opportunity to troubleshoot issues with pilot productions. I searched for ways to reduce production cost as well. After working in that role for two years, I joined a food delivery start-up where I was in charge of operations

and business development. The company grew very fast. I built relationships with restaurants, oversaw delivery schedules, worked with the tech team to refine delivery tracking, and influenced local government transportation policies.”

“That’s interesting,” Howard said. “You were a mechanical engineer who made an early career pivot to operations and business development. Can you please share an example of how you led without direct authority in your role at the start-up?”

Karen was startled by the interruption. She did her best to smile and said, “Sure, I can share a time when I led without direct authority in that role.” The room was silent as Karen searched her memory for a story to share.

“A time I led without direct authority...” Karen said, continuing to search her memory until recalling a story she had prepared, “In my previous role working for a start-up, I had to lead many operations projects. One project was transitioning from a scheduling system that was managed by our headquarters to scheduling systems managed independently by partnering restaurants. To manage the change, the first thing I did was demonstrate the need for urgency.” Karen’s tone was flat and steady. “Then I built a team to set the vision and help manage the change. After that I focused on stakeholder buy-in. I created short-term wins to move toward the change. I stayed on top of the implementation of the change until it was successful.”

“Mmmhmm,” Howard said. He recognized Karen clearly knew the steps of change management, but he still wished to know about her ability to lead teams when she doesn’t have direct authority. He also didn’t quite believe Karen’s response was true. He thought another question might give him a clearer idea.

“Karen, will you please tell me about your greatest professional accomplishment?”

“My greatest professional accomplishment was building relationships with over 80 restaurants during my time at the start-up.”

“Great, can you please share how you did that?”

“I did that by identifying win-wins, exceeding expectations, and seeking feedback.”

Howard couldn’t gather much from Karen’s response. She gave the “right” answer, but he felt like she was reading from a textbook rather than interacting with a person.

“Will you please tell me one of your weaknesses and share an example of how it has impacted your work in the past?” Howard hoped Karen would offer a convincingly honest story that revealed previous demonstrations of her abilities.

“My greatest weakness is perfectionism,” Karen declared.

Howard’s eyes closed in disappointment.

Karen didn’t notice Howard’s reaction and carried on. “In my previous role at Holcom Manufacturing, I would work late to make sure my drawings were accurate. My boss would tell me I shouldn’t stay so late making sure everything was perfect. Although I received the highest possible ratings in my yearly performance review, I also consistently received ‘take on less work’ as an area for improvement.”

Howard acknowledged the response included examples of how Karen’s weakness impacted her work, but the answer didn’t sit well with him.

Howard asked his last question. “Karen, I noticed in your additional information section of your resume that you wrote that you enjoy hiking. Now, I’ve never hiked, but if I wanted to begin hiking, how would you recommend that I start?”

Karen froze. Her eyes widened. “You want to know how to begin hiking?” she asked.

“Exactly.” Howard stared at Karen.

“Ummm...you can probably find some good websites to learn more about areas to hike near you.” Karen had no clue why Howard was asking her this question.

Howard jumped to his concluding remarks. He let Karen know that she answered all of the questions he had for her and that she should hear back about any next steps within a few days. He caught himself as he stood up to say goodbye. “Sorry, do you have any questions for me before we wrap up?”

“Yes. Can you describe the company culture?” Karen asked.

“Honest, but caring,” Howard said, as he showed Karen to the door.

Reflection questions

1. What is Karen doing well in her interview?
2. What could Karen do better?
3. How would you describe Karen’s confidence?
4. Would you say Karen gave sincere responses? What caused your conclusion?
5. Do you think Karen provided answers that were logical and easy to follow?
6. Were Karen’s responses relevant to the interviewer’s questions? What examples from the story support your idea?
7. How would you describe Howard? How would you feel interviewing with someone like him?

Case study #3

“Good afternoon, Lynn! I’m Mary. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Good afternoon, Mary!” Lynn replied as she shook Mary’s hand.

“We’ll meet in my office down the hall. Pardon me.” Mary turned to the front desk attendant. “Excuse me, Alex.” Alex looked up from his computer and gave Mary his full attention. “I’d really like some coffee, but my schedule is quite full today. Would you please send some coffee to my office when you have a moment?” She turned to Lynn. “Would you like some coffee as well, Lynn?”

“Sure, that would be great,” Lynn said. “Thank you.”

“Alright. Two coffees, please, Alex.” Mary grinned.

“Got it. I’ll get those to you in a few minutes,” Alex said. He grabbed his office ID card and stood up.

“Thanks.” Mary said warmly. She turned to Lynn. “Okay, right this way.” Mary gestured towards her office and began walking alongside Lynn. “I’m glad I’m not the only one who could use a little caffeine this afternoon. How’s your day going so far, Lynn?”

“It’s been going well. I was a little concerned I was going to be late this morning. I think the rain caused a subway delay—”

“Oh yes,” Mary interjected, “The rain was terrible this morning. It can cause the subways to flood every now and then. I read that the city is supposed to start reconstruction on the frequently flooded sections this spring, but we’ll see if that happens....”

Lynn nodded and pressed her lips together attempting to show she understood disbelief in the subway reconstruction project even though this was her first time in the city.

“But we’re not here to talk about the woes of city management, are we?” Mary said. “We’re here to learn more about you and your interest in working here.”

Lynn smiled and was going to respond but Mary continued. “I suppose I should share a little bit about myself before I ask you to do the same. I’ve been working here for 15 years now. Originally, I thought I wanted to be a physician, but as I was wrapping up med school, I decided I was better suited for health care management. I took a role in sales for a pharma company before switching to a marketing position. We made a pretty popular commercial in 2011. Did you ever see the commercial for A+ Pharma’s diphenhydramine line?” Mary paused and slightly turned her ear towards Lynn.

Lynn slowly shook her head and said, “No, I don’t recall that commercial.”

“Oh, well, it was the one with a family in the minivan. Kids are screaming and crying in the backseat. The father is complaining about his sinus headache before sneezing and covering the windshield with what was formerly stuffed in his nose. It was gross but very popular and good for company sales. So, after that, I went back to school and pivoted to a career in management consulting and have been enjoying working here for the last eight years. Anyway, we’re a lean boutique firm, so this internship plays an important role in our talent pipeline. I know you met with LouAnn earlier today. She mentioned that you were a middle school vice principal and have some experience influencing policy.”

Alex stood by the door with the coffee. Mary welcomed him in. He set the coffees down. Mary thanked him, he nodded, then he left the room.

“Yes,” Lynn said. “The first five years of my career were in education administration. I started as a teacher and was promoted to a vice principal role after two years of teaching. When I became a vice principal, I noticed our school’s challenges were connected to government policy, so I began working with officials to make some state level changes to how schools were evaluated and funded. That experience made me decide to get my MBA. Now I’m looking to leverage my experience and education to solve global business challenges.”

“Yes, that’s what I heard.” Mary sipped her coffee. “Hopefully you’ve heard our interns get an opportunity to interface with clients over the summer. That’s not something that happens in many firms, but we’ve found that to be a mutually beneficial approach as long as we hire the right person. Now, can you tell me more about your client-facing experience?”

Lynn was a bit unsure what to say. She never worked with a client, per se. However, she knew she shouldn't tell Mary she didn't have an answer for that question.

Mary knew Lynn didn't have client-facing experience. She was interested in Lynn's ability to perform under pressure and quickly summarize and organize information.

"What sort of client-facing experience would you like to hear about?" Lynn asked as she quietly gulped.

"I'd love to know about a time you had to communicate bad news to a client, please."

Lynn decided to try out a story from her time as a vice principal. "One year my middle school had to extend the school year due to cancellations. The cancellations happened in the winter because of two terrible blizzards. To meet the state standards, we had to add an entire week of school in June. I knew teachers, students, and parents would be upset about the changes. I knew that change would delay vacations for at least two teachers. To make matters worse, whenever something like this would happen, parents would call teachers to complain. That would amplify teachers' frustrations and then they'd come to me with hellfire and brimstone to voice their anger and other bottled disappointments about the administration. Some teachers would even voice their frustrations to their classes. That's when things would get really nasty because students would then share that frustration with their parents, and I'd receive their swirling fury. So, I needed to reduce the negative impact of the news about a longer school year. I thought earlier communication would lessen the probability that the school year extension would impact individuals' summer plans. We were a Title 1 school, so reaching parents was very challenging. We didn't have emails for many families, but thankfully we were a 1:1 school and a number of influential parents in the community used the LMS, so I decided to first post the schedule change there. Then I worked with our ELL teachers to manage alternative messaging. I encouraged parents to contact me directly. I set up a morning meeting with teachers the next day. In that meeting, teachers suggested things like flipping the classroom to achieve our learning objectives in an accelerated fashion. I explained that the reason for extending the days was more connected to state policies. I reminded everyone my door was open for additional conversations. At the end, the schedule change resulted in fewer broader complications than I expected. I think it helped that later that week I shared news that the state won in the second round of Race to the Top. I worked closely on that state initiative, which brought \$4 million to our LEA."

Mary said, "Wow, it sounds like you faced many issues as a vice principal! Now, is this your first time in New York?"

"Oh, I actually used to visit my aunt here growing up, so I'm somewhat familiar with the city," Lynn said.

"That's nice you had that opportunity. I hope you can spend some time enjoying the city today. My apologies, but I will need to wrap up earlier than I expected today. My schedule is packed. I'll walk you to the elevator." Mary stood up, then Lynn stood up. Mary guided Lynn toward the elevator.

While standing at the elevator, Mary asked Lynn, "Have you heard of Supreme Ed consulting firm?"

"No, I haven't," Lynn said.

"Oh, well they're a similar boutique firm based in the city," Mary said. "I think you might like them. They do a lot of work around policy."

"Okay, that's good to know," Lynn said, trying to hide her confusion. "I'll look them up."

Lynn stepped into the elevator. Mary quickly waved good-bye.

Reflection questions

1. What is Lynn doing well in her interview?
2. What could Lynn do better?
3. How would you describe Lynn's confidence?
4. Would you say Lynn gave sincere responses? What caused your conclusion?
5. Do you think Lynn provided answers that were logical and easy to follow?
6. Were Lynn's responses relevant to the interviewer's questions? What examples from the story support your idea?
7. How would you describe Mary? How would you feel interviewing with someone like her?

Chapter 3: Learning How to Give Excellent Answers

At its core, behavioral interviewing is a communication exercise. Interviewers walk into a behavioral interview with a desire to hear a candidate communicate certain behaviors. If a candidate doesn't communicate those behaviors, interviewers assume a candidate doesn't possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities their organization desires. Most people know this but still find themselves unable to consistently perform well in behavioral interviews. In other words, they find that they're not communicating well.

So how does someone prepare to successfully communicate in a behavioral interview? Well, that's what this guide is designed to help you with. And if the guide could be summarized into one sentence, it would be: *You must be understandable and believable if you want to perform well during a behavioral interview.*

The success factors of being understandable and believable will be unpacked throughout this guide, but let's quickly roll out a definition of those terms.

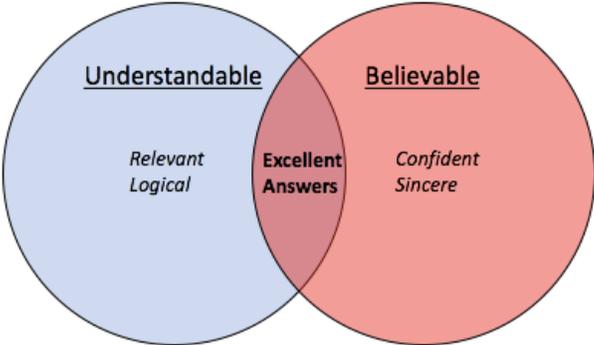
Understandable

Being understandable is about delivering logical, undoubtedly relevant responses every time you're asked a question. When you're understandable you make it easy for interviewers to connect what you've achieved in the past to what they're seeking. There are two primary ways you can make your answers understandable. First, you want to develop a thorough understanding of the behaviors your target employers are seeking. That makes sure you deliver relevant content. Second, you want to follow communication best practices so your target audience (interviewers) can easily listen and remember your responses.

Believable

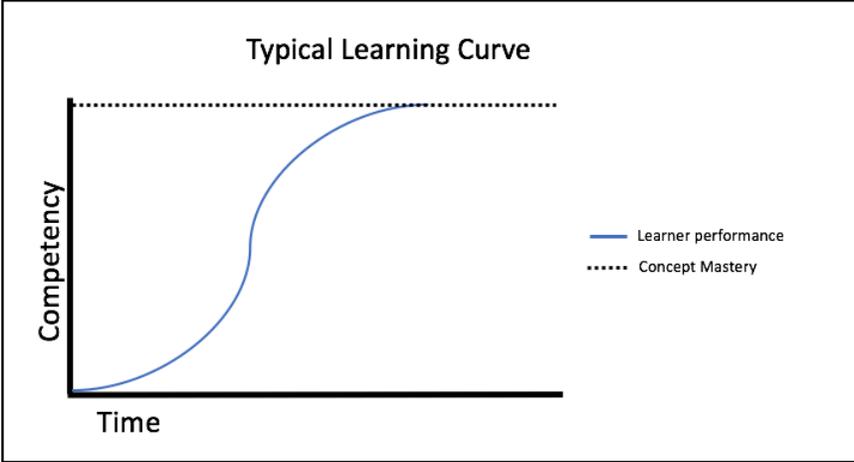
Believability is about delivering answers with confidence and sincerity throughout the behavioral interview. Someone who delivers an answer that is 80 percent understandable but 100 percent believable will beat

someone who is 100 percent understandable and 80 percent believable every time. To make your answers believable, you need to give personal examples in your responses. You also need to deliver those responses with passion and charisma by leveraging insights from behavioral science.



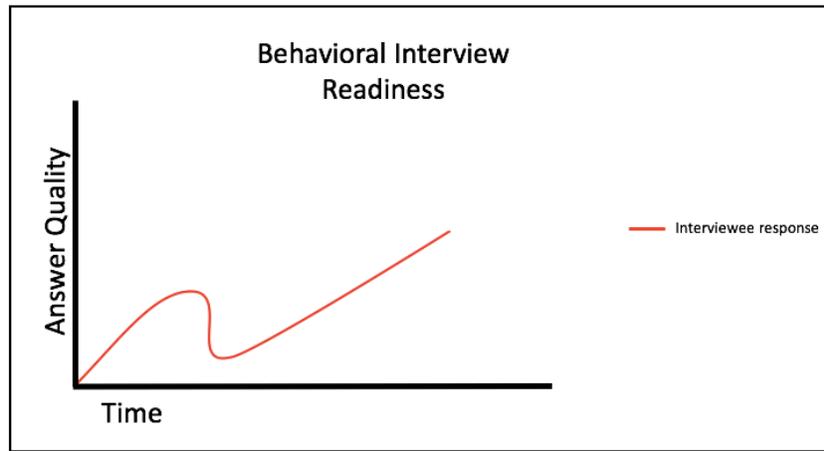
Stay on the track to success

All learning endeavors require time and effort. The typical learning curve for a course reflects that notion. As you increase your effort in learning the concepts, you build proficiency in the subject. You start off with a slow beginning. This is the time the information feels overwhelming and you're unsure of how all the new information connects. Then you enter a steep slope in which your learning begins to accelerate as you use one newly acquired idea to build on another. Eventually you plateau, which is typically the conclusion of a course.



The behavioral interview skill development process is not the same as a typical learning curve. That can be very deceiving and lead to negative outcomes, as in not receiving offers for the jobs you want.

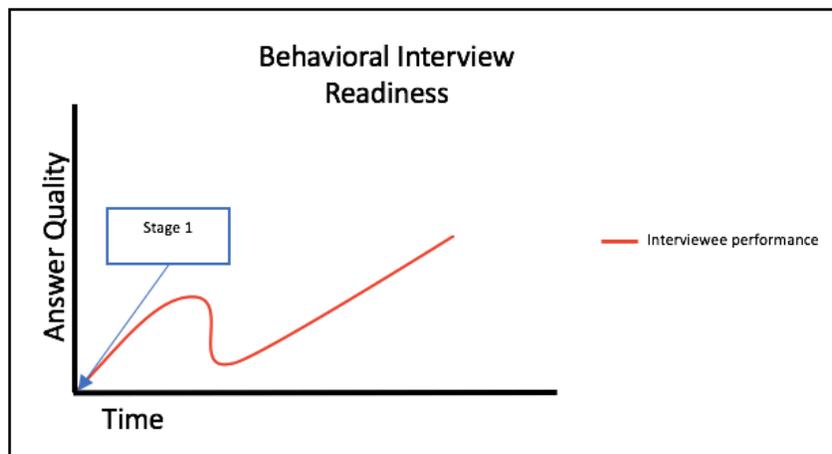
It takes time and effort to deliver an interview answer that's understandable and believable. Below is a sketch of the typical behavioral interview preparation timeline. This timeline is based on years of guiding and evaluating many job seekers' behavioral interviewing progress. Most job seekers' experience rises and falls in their answer quality. Those rises and falls are necessary to being prepared to give excellent responses to behavioral interview questions. The challenge is that the early rise can delay your development.



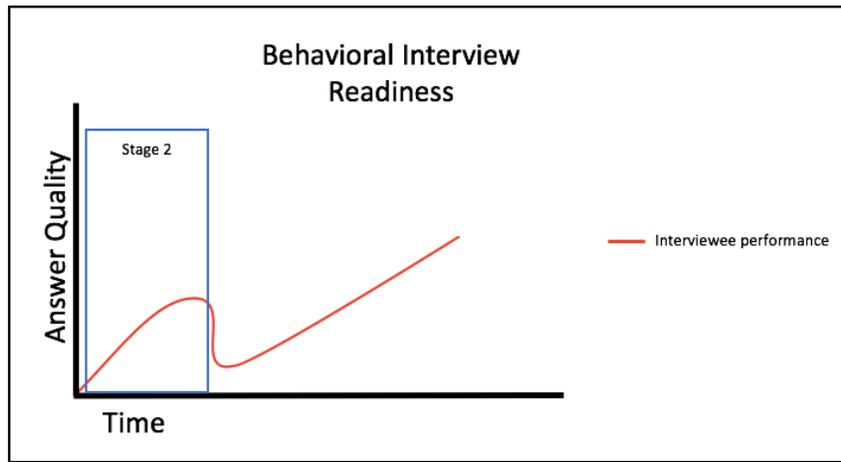
Stage 1: No knowledge + limited training

In the first stage of your behavioral interviewing development, you know little about your target industry, organization, and role. You have some idea how to interview based on your previous success of securing job offers. You're full of energy fueled by hopes and dreams, yet you're unsure where to aim that energy. This is the time when you should discover what you'd like to do with the next stage of your career. Interviewing should be in the back of your mind. At the front of your mind should be identifying your professional strengths and career goals. You should develop a few hypotheses about industries and roles that might be a good fit for you. Then test out those hypotheses by meeting people in those industries and roles. Ask them questions. Learn about industry trends. Get their advice and insights. A little online research about industries and roles is helpful as well. If you don't spend time identifying and testing a few career hypotheses, your interview development will be delayed, and you'll fail to reach the same level of interview preparedness as other candidates.

On the Behavioral Interview chart, you would be at the bottom corner.

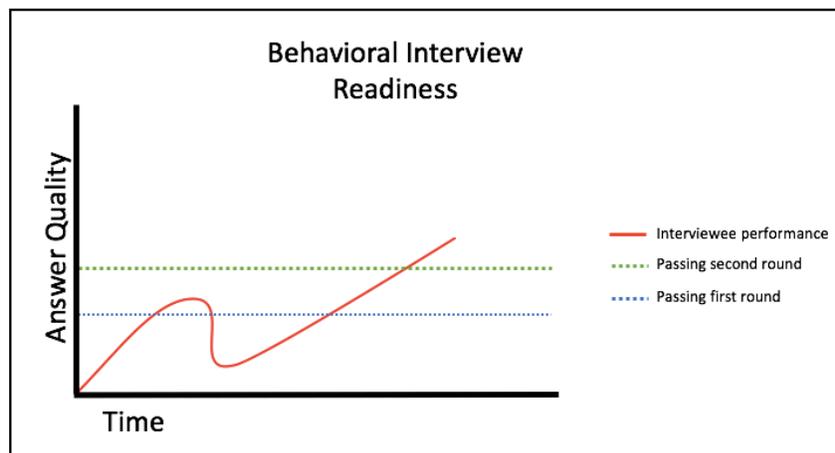


Stage 2: Believable but not understandable



In the second stage, you've narrowed down the roles and industries where you'd like to work. You've collected great advice and insights on what it takes to be successful in the role. All of your recently acquired knowledge has you beaming with excitement and passion. You might even follow this guide's advice to think about which questions you might receive during a behavioral interview. If you were to enter a behavioral interview at this stage, your answers would be believable. Interviewers would see you are sincere and confident in your desire to work for their organization. Yet, your answers would be roughly constructed on previous experience and lessons in interpersonal communication (if you had any interpersonal communications classes at all). In light of the other candidates, the logic of your answers would likely be difficult to follow. It's also likely you'd share many irrelevant details in your responses. You'd be believable but not very understandable.

Depending on the preparation level of other candidates, you could pass the first round of interviews and receive an offer to participate in a second round. Believable responses often make interviewers want to learn more about a candidate. Sadly, those sincere and confident answers will rarely be enough to earn an offer. The candidates in the first round might have delivered answers that were understandable and less believable than yours. But if you want to win the second round, you'll need to deliver responses that are more believable and understandable than the other final candidates.

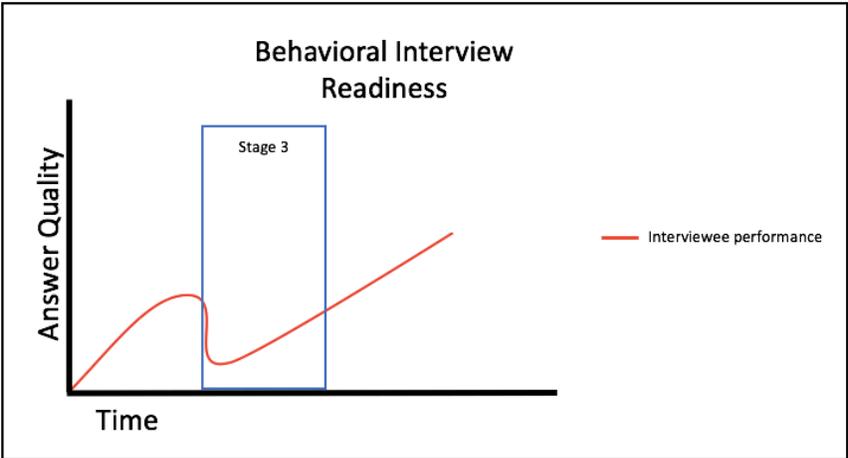


Stage 3: Understandable but not believable

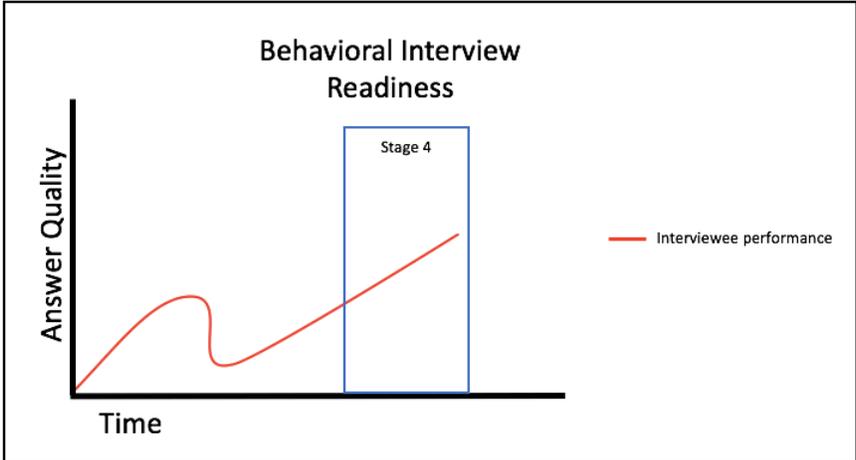
Whenever people choose to exchange a familiar method with a new one, they'll become worse before they become better. Many Americans travel to East Asia with no idea how to use chopsticks. The first time many attempt to use chopsticks, they apply their knowledge of fork mechanics. With no other eating utensils available, they use chopsticks to spear their food. That works well enough for skewering chunks of meat,

but it's nearly impossible to pick up rice, noodles, and many vegetables with that method. That becomes a problem at business dinners. When you teach those individuals how to properly hold and manipulate chopsticks, they take a very long time to eat their next few meals. Eventually they adapt and gracefully pick up their morsels of food rather than hunt it like it's going to run away from them. Stage 3 is a similar process of getting worse before you get better.

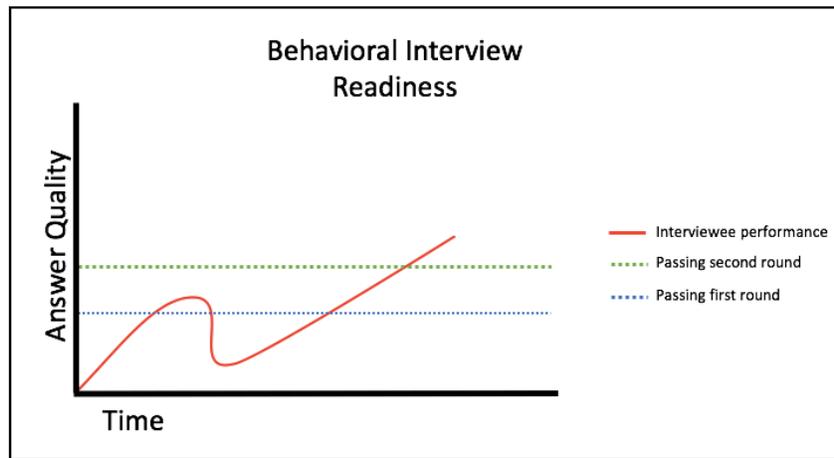
Stage 3 can make you feel as though you've been scammed. You hear you need to be understandable, so you implement structures to respond to common questions with relevant stories. After making those adjustments, you find your answers aren't immediately better. It's likely that you'll hear your interview answers sound much worse than they did before you focused on being more understandable. At this stage, people will understand your responses but struggle to believe what you share. They might say you don't seem very confident in your answers. Don't be surprised if people also share that your answers sound robotic, not genuine. That's completely normal and a necessary part of learning. Just like an American learning how to use chopsticks in East Asia, your proficiency will improve with more thoughtful practice.



Stage 4: Increasingly understandable and believable



The final stage of behavioral interview readiness starts when you return to the answer quality level you were at before you implemented methods to become more understandable. From there, you become increasingly understandable and believable, causing your answer quality to increase as well. At this stage your responses will set you up for the highest likelihood of success in the behavioral interview. This is the level of skill you need to make it to the final rounds and receive offers for competitive roles at great employers.



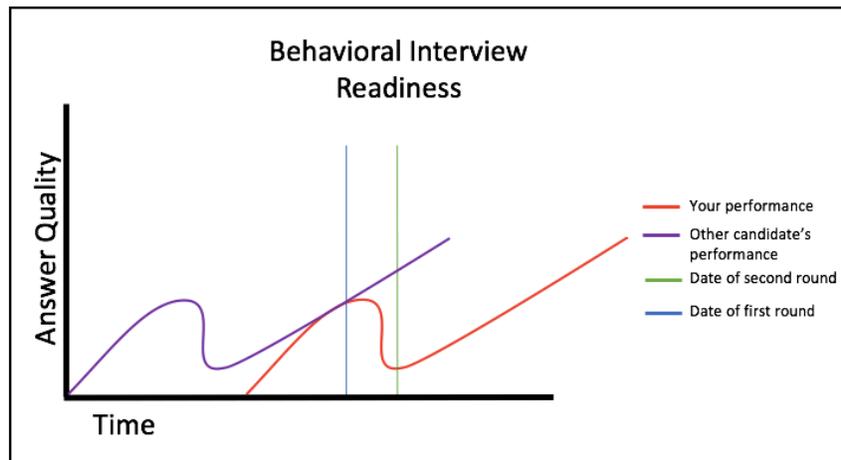
The challenge of stage 4 is knowing when to dial back on behavioral interview preparation. Hopefully you know that, the more competition for a role, the higher the bar you must reach to get the offer. That can lead to a feeling that you can never stop practicing. This guide will give you tips for good and bad answers, which you can use to judge your own. That can help you gain a sense of when you're sufficiently prepared. Eventually, each person must decide when they have reached a level of "good enough." A job offer doesn't depend on a behavioral interview alone. Behavioral interviews are one part of your job search skill portfolio. The reality is that the time you spend on behavioral interviewing will be regulated by the time you've based on the development of your broader job search skill portfolio. Your job search portfolio should also contain small talk, case/technical interviewing, and written communication skills (resume, cover letters, outreach emails, etc.).

To neglect one of these skills for the other is not a good idea. For instance, say you work very hard on your interviewing skills, but you don't spend time building relationships within a target employer, IBC. And say a fellow interviewee named Charlie also thoroughly prepares for interviewing but also chats with an IBC employee for 30 minutes three weeks before applying. You're lucky and land an opportunity to interview without much networking. Charlie also receives an opportunity to interview for the same position. After the final round of interviews, you and Charlie are left as the top two choices. Next, the IBC hiring team will look at other resources to make their decision. They find nearly everything is equal. Then, one member of the hiring team says they (or their colleague) had a great coffee chat with Charlie a while ago. That person says they think Charlie would make a great addition to the organization. When the hiring manager looks around the room and asks if anyone met you before the interview and no one speaks up, Charlie gets the offer, and you get to find another opportunity. You need more than great interviewing skills to get a great job. You must spend your time building all of your job search skills to have the best chance at receiving the job offers you want.

The temptation of mediocrity

You might think you can save time and pass with a believable answer the first round and then make your answers more understandable before the second round. That is a bad gamble for two reasons. The first reason is that, even if you receive an offer to interview for a second round, you won't have enough time to boost your skills to the level of the other candidates. You'll likely have less than two weeks between the first round and second round of interviews. And it takes longer than two weeks to rebuild your responses to foreseeable questions and deliver them in a way that still feels genuine and communicates confidence to listeners. It's very likely you won't perform much better than in the first round when you were less understandable but more believable. Maybe you'll get lucky and the prospective employer will surprise you with a month

delay between the first and second round of interviews. That might give you enough time to become clearly understandable and believable. But a month break will also allow other interviewees more time to continue increasing the gap between their behavioral interviewing skills and yours.



Secondly, for most jobs, you only need one or two people to perform better than you to miss out on an opportunity. And if the job is coveted by many people, you'll likely have a larger pool of candidates who are equally qualified and prepared to deliver understandable and believable answers. In those cases, a candidate who doesn't deliver clearly relevant and logical answers will usually not make it past the first round. So, you could take the approach of skating by on believability in the first round if you're looking at less competitive jobs. But if you're reading this guide, you're probably aiming to land a great job at a great employer.

This guide will give you the skills to efficiently develop your behavioral interviewing skills so you can continue developing the rest of your job search skill portfolio. You'll learn how to clearly answer questions that are asked and showcase the behaviors interviewers are looking for. Before you reach that point, you should first know what to consider a wrong response and a high-risk response to questions.

Wrong responses

You might have heard this advice before: *There's no wrong response to behavioral interview questions.* That is bad advice. There are several wrong answers. The first wrong response is not giving an answer. "I don't know" or "I can't think of a time that I've done that" are wrong answers. Interviewers are selecting questions to determine if you can successfully function in the vacant role within the organization. To say you don't have an answer is to say you don't have the experience the hiring team thinks is necessary for someone to be successful in the role. You should always give an answer to the question asked. The "Tell Stories to Be Memorable" chapter of this guide covers that in detail.

Another wrong move is giving a response that doesn't completely answer the question. That might seem obvious but is a common issue. Part of the issue is that many people don't pay close attention when the interviewer asks a question. They listen for key words that match their prepared answers without considering the other details the interviewer mentioned. An interviewer might say, "Tell me about a time you had a conflict with a team member," and the interviewee will pull the key words "conflict" and "team" to tell a story about a time there was a conflict on the team when working on a large project. The issue is that the interviewer included the word "you" to know how the interviewee handles conflict. In the end, the interviewer might have received some insights on the candidate's project management skills but ultimately did not get the

information they were seeking about conflict. That makes the answer wrong, and the interviewee's listening skills don't look good.

Risky responses

Then there are other general types of responses to behavioral questions that might "pass" as an adequate answer for some interviewers, while other interviewers would say the response doesn't answer the question. These risky types of responses are those that feature indirect communication as well as those that directly answer the question as a footnote in a longer response.

Responses with indirect communication will most often be classified as nonanswers. Indirect responses are those that allow the interviewer to connect exactly how your response answers their question. If a partner or family member asked, "What would you like to eat for dinner?" an indirect communication would be, "Well, it was a long day. I had a big sandwich for lunch, and I'm already over my ideal weight." A direct response would be, "Let's pick up some salads. I'm tired from the workday so I don't feel like cooking. Plus, I'm trying to lose weight." People usually give indirect responses because that's a normal part of their home culture or because their educational background taught them to bury the lede. When interviewers are listening to dozens of responses in a day, you don't want them to spend their limited mental energy on searching for how your response answers their question. If you deliver an indirect answer, the interviewer will likely not spend the energy thinking through how it could apply to their question. Instead, they'll see the high-context answer as incoherent. They're likely to question your ability to summarize and organize information, too. You want their energy spent on remembering your answers, not connecting your logic. Deliver direct responses. Serve up your answers as chicken nuggets, not a whole raw chicken.

Directly answering a question as a footnote in a longer response is also risky. It risks being taken as a wrong answer. Sometimes interviewees will hear, "Tell me about a time you used data to solve a problem," and then share a response that spends one minute and 55 seconds highlighting a problem and how they worked with a team to solve it, and only use five seconds at the end to directly answer how they used data to solve the problem. Delivering a response like that could cause you to lose the interviewer's attention before you get to tie back to the question at the end. Although you might "answer" the question, your answer is not received. Even if you maintain the interviewer's attention, spending a few seconds at the end of your response to answer the question makes it very difficult to sufficiently describe the behaviors the interviewer was seeking with their question. The interview then becomes a charade of two people interacting without successfully communicating.

Correct responses are those that clearly answer the interviewer's question. Correct responses showcase the behaviors that help the interviewer understand you have the competency they're evaluating. Those answers are made increasingly better when delivered in a confident and sincere manner. To begin creating excellent answers, you need to take the perspective of the interviewer.

Conclusion

Focus on being understandable and believable to deliver excellent interview answers. It will take time to develop excellent answers, and your answers will likely become worse before they become better. But if you begin preparing for interviews before receiving your first invite, you can give yourself enough time to make sure your behavioral interviewing skills are more advanced than those of less-diligent candidates.

Reflection questions

1. What are the two most important aspects to performing well in a behavioral interview?
2. How will you remind yourself that your behavioral interviewing skills usually get worse before they get better? How will you remain motivated when you enter Stage 3?
3. When will you begin preparing for behavioral interviews to make sure you reach Stage 4 before your first interview?
4. Which types of answers do you want to avoid?
5. What is the risk of giving an indirect response?

Chapter 4: Mind Over Matter

Prepare your mind for success

Taking a holistic perspective of interviewing before you begin diving into other details of preparation can save you time and unnecessary stress. As you prepare for behavioral interviewing, there are two psychological factors you need to consider. The first is your mindset of interviewing, and the second is your strategy for managing fatigue.

Mindset

What you believe shapes the way you act. That means your beliefs about interviewing will influence how well you prepare for and perform in the interview room.

Destructive mindsets

Many job seekers think of interviewing as examinations. They take the perspective that interviews are like police interrogations. People with that mindset think the interviewer is in the room to discover the candidate's shortcomings. Worse yet, some people subconsciously see the interview as an evaluation of their value as a person. The anxiety caused by those mindsets makes it difficult for interviewees to process information and show confidence in the interview room. Those mindsets cause people to miss opportunities. Of course, those mindsets are largely incorrect!

Behavioral interviews are your moment to shine

Interviews are designed to evaluate the best candidate for a role. Interviewers are evaluating candidates, but they're more interested in finding the value a candidate can add than seeking a candidate's flaws. In reality, behavioral interviewing is less like sitting through an interrogation and more like an opportunity to be interviewed by a late-night television show host. The interviewer is there to hear about how you've done things right in your career and how you've learned from mistakes—not to find a fault and lock you up. The majority of behavioral interviews are designed to be more of a conversation than a verbal exam.

Behavioral interviewers are your future colleagues

Many interviewees find it helpful to think of the interviewer as a colleague they've worked with for a few years already. That "colleague perspective" helps interviewees enter the room with the appropriate degree of

confidence and professionalism. One of the overarching questions in each interviewer's mind is, "Can I see myself working with this person?" When you interact with them in a collegial manner, they can make a more accurate (and likely preferable) assessment. As a part of the "colleague perspective," you should interact with the interviewer in a degree of professionalism that balances their seniority with your authority. That can vary from country to country, so if you're interviewing cross-culturally, you'll want to pay close attention to the chapter on cross-cultural communication.

Behavioral interviews do not determine your value

Career coaches everywhere are troubled when they see a job seeker despair after not receiving several offers. The cause of the despair following rejection can usually be tied back to the mindset that the interview determined the person did not have value. The outcome of a behavioral interview (or any interview for that matter) does not determine your value as a person. Behavioral interviews do not determine whether you can add value to an organization or not. Behavioral interviews determine which candidate seems to have the most value to add. Not receiving a job offer due to a behavioral interview could mean several things. One could be that another candidate communicated the value they could add, and the hiring team believed that candidate could add value in a way you could not. The other possibility for not receiving a job offer is that you did not clearly communicate the value you could add. Tuck that into the back of your mind to recall after you do not receive a job offer. Remember, you have value to add to organizations, you just need to communicate that value clearly.

Growth mindsets win behavioral interviewing

A growth mindset will make interview preparation and performance easier for you. A growth mindset is one that focuses more on learning what you can do to improve rather than what you're doing wrong. People with a growth mindset place their energy on progress instead of wallowing or preserving ego. During preparation, someone with a growth mindset will spend time refining their communication skills rather than just relying on the communication skills that helped them so far. They'll practice behavioral interviewing and seek out critical feedback so they know what they can improve.

During interviews, people with growth mindsets don't count an interview as a loss because they fumble through one answer. They acknowledge their internal disappointment and focus on delivering a great answer to the next question. Interviewers with growth mindsets take the perspective that they're candidates for jobs until hiring teams inform them otherwise. When they receive that rejection email, they seek feedback, then move on to find another opportunity. People with growth mindsets focus on the process rather than the outcomes.

Prepare for fatigue

Preparing for behavioral interviews is tiring. You'll need to think about what employers are seeking, how you can fulfill what they're seeking, and how to communicate that in a way that's understandable and believable. Participating in a behavioral interview is also tiring. You'll have adrenaline pumping through your body like you're in a parkour competition (even though you're sitting still). You'll expend energy articulating your work experience and how you have the skills the employer desires. It would be far from unusual if you were paying attention to the interviewers every micro expression. One interview is tiring, but you'll probably have several interviews in one day for a single role—sometimes lasting more than four hours. The whole behavioral interviewing process will take a toll on you, as it requires a lot of directed attention. You need to prepare for Directive Attention Fatigue.

Directive Attention Fatigue (DAF) is essentially when your brain's processing speed slows down. Your brain is a muscle, and if it works out too long without refreshing, it will get a cramp. Directing your attention for extended periods of time can cause your brain to cramp. When your brain cramps, you might not experience a headache. Instead, you might find yourself at a loss for words. Or, you might find that you're sharing things you wish you wouldn't say out loud. You could also hear people ask you something but not comprehend what they're saying. When you're preparing for behavioral interviews, those symptoms lead to inefficiency when you're pressed for time. If you experience symptoms of Directive Attention Fatigue in an interview room, miscommunications are bound to occur. So how do you reduce the likelihood of Directive Attention Fatigue during a time when you are hyperfocused?

You can reduce the likelihood of DAF with a little preparation. The first thing to do is pick an activity that refreshes you and schedule it as a part of your interview preparation. Walking in nature, meditating, and listening and singing along to music have been shown to be some of the best ways to give your brain a break. Try to partake in your ideal refreshing activity the morning of your interview instead of cramming a few more rounds of practice. You'll perform better. During back-to-back interviews, accept offers for a restroom break or glass of water. The few minutes it will take to complete one of those actions will give you time to take a few deep breaths. Oxygenating your brain lessens the impact of fatigue and makes sure you're fresh for another round of interview questions.

Conclusion

Make sure your mindset is setting you up for efficient preparation and interview success. Think of behavioral interviews as your moment to have a conversation with a colleague who wants to hear about your greatest achievements. Focus on the process instead of the outcomes. And no matter the outcome, interviews don't determine your value as much as if your value was clearly communicated. Adopt a growth mindset. Give your brain time to refresh as you prepare and deliver responses to behavioral interview questions; you will perform better.

Reflection questions

1. How will you choose to perceive behavioral interviewing so you can perform at your best?
2. What is a phrase you can write down now to revisit if/when you don't receive an offer for one of your target jobs?
3. What will be your strategy for reducing the impact of fatigue as you prepare for behavioral interviews? What will be your strategy for interview days?

Chapter 5: Know Your Target to Land an Offer

Start your preparation by identifying what your target industry, organization, and role values. After you identify good resources and collect key data points, synthesize your insights to find skills your interviewers will likely evaluate.

Studying your audience is worth your time

Say you're working on building relationships with individuals outside of work. To do so, you decide to take a somewhat old school approach that has worked for centuries to build relationships: you invite a few people

over for dinner. At the same time, one of your friends decides to join you in the endeavor and hosts a dinner party as well.

As a 21st-century socialite and high achiever, your friend recognizes she does not have a smartphone to make dumb choices, so she quickly does a Google search on how to be a good host before texting her contacts. After reading a few decent articles, she discovers great hosts ask their guests if they have any dietary restrictions or preferences before they head to the grocery store. The friend assumes you have taken a similar approach.

You decide to follow your intuition and prepare a meal you think everyone will love. When dinner starts, one of your guest seems to be avoiding his silverware. You wonder what is going on, and after a hushed conversation with his partner you learn he's not fasting for routine bloodwork but severely allergic to gluten. You tilt back from the conversation to survey the meal, which might as well have been a celebration of the local wheat harvest. Not only is it uncomfortable that you contributed to a semi-hazardous situation, but the time it took you to prepare an Instagram-worthy meal feels wasted. Although the relationship might not be lost, your gluten-free guest will likely sign up for your friend's dinner party over yours next time.

Just like a quick investigation of your target audience can help you prepare for a successful dinner party, it can help you be successful in behavioral interviews. Since behavioral interviewing is designed for employers to assess if you have what they're looking for, it's wise to have a good idea of what exactly they are looking for.

Start with knowing what your target industry, organization, and role values

You could begin your preparation for behavioral interviewing by reflecting on your past. That approach makes some sense given that the entire behavioral interview is about how you performed in your previous positions. You'll need to develop a strong recollection of your past work and how it will make you a great employee for your target company. After all, individuals who enter a behavioral interview without reflecting on their pasts are very likely to give answers that are too short or meandering. But simply reflecting on your past from your perspective can lead to wasted time.

When people follow their intuition in search of good previous experiences to share, they often focus on aspects of their experience that are irrelevant to their target audience and waste precious time. It's like seeking a treasure without a map. To make your behavioral interview prep efficient, begin by knowing what your audience wishes to find. Start with what your target industry and organization believe is valuable to the role.

Many people will use a job description to map out what an employer and industry values in a candidate for a role. If all job descriptions were comprehensive and written by the hiring manager in coordination with the team that holds the vacant position, using the job description as the single reference would make sense. But good luck finding a job description that highlights the values and expectations that all stakeholders in the hiring process see as valuable. Many human resource teams care more about filtering out candidates than making it easy for you to access all of the information to be successful. Filtering is efficient for them. The process of finding additional information on the industry and organization is indicative of the effort you would give as an employee. Entry-level job descriptions might contain the majority information you need to deliver relevant interview responses. But if you're seeking anything beyond entry level, or if you want to work at a selective employer, you'll need more information than the job description provides to stand out from the other candidates.

Instead of seeing the reconnaissance work of identifying what industry and organizations value as hassle, try seeing it as an opportunity for you to positively differentiate yourself. There are dozens of other candidates

seeking the same opportunity as you. Many of them will have impressive backgrounds. Many of them will showcase the technical skills necessary for the vacant role. But not all of them will take the time to know what matters most to their target industry and organization. That will make their interview answers decent at best. By taking time to do a little reconnaissance work, you can match your knowledge, skills, and abilities in a way that aligns with stakeholders' desires, causing them to say, "Wow, we need to hire this person."

There are two steps to identifying what your target industry and organization believe is valuable to the role. The first is finding the raw information. The second step is synthesizing all the available information. We'll start with where to find the raw information.

Finding the raw information

Ideally your identification of what industry values begins long before you receive an opportunity to interview. It's most efficient to develop an understanding of what an industry values as you take time to discern your career path. Simply applying and interviewing for open roles without reflection typically yields poor results. For the very few who land jobs without discerning their career path, they usually regret accepting a job and continue working miserably or quickly search for another job. Hopefully you have taken time to discern good industries for you before receiving an opportunity to interview. If not, take time to do that now.

Build your industry and function knowledge

Knowing which industries and functions (roles) appeal to you the most saves you a lot of time and unnecessary stress. In case you landed an opportunity to interview for a function or industry you don't know as well as your primary targets, below is a quick review of how to gather intel on what's valuable to an industry and function.

1. Search for industry guides on places like Vault.com to find curated information. Vault.com has guides to many different industries and functions. You can find guides on consulting, finance, and general management, to name a few. In the back of this guide, you'll find a list of the various guides you can find on Vault.com.
2. Gather your thoughts on your target industry and function. You can do that by searching for articles and blogs on the topic. If you have time, it's better to reach out to someone working in one of your target functions/industry and ask them for insights. Check out Steve Dalton's *The 2-Hour Job Search: Using Technology to Get the Right Job Faster* for a detailed explanation on how to efficiently conduct your search and manage informational meetings.

As you read through those resources and interact with individuals, you'll want to keep a few questions in mind to make sure you're collecting the most valuable information. Below are a few questions to consider as you assess your target industry:

1. What does the industry contribute to society? What value does it add?
2. Which skills are valued across the industry?
3. Which adjectives are commonly used to describe the industry?
4. Which employers across the industry excite you?
5. What are some common challenges the industry faces?
6. What do you find most interesting about the industry?

Build your organization knowledge

As you get an idea of what your target industry values, you will also want to know what skills your target organization believes is most important. Below are some resources to help you learn more about your target organizations:

Vault “Top 50” Guides. Vault.com has guides to the top 50 employers in several major industries.

Notes from informational meetings. As mentioned before, hopefully you conducted informational meetings as you identified your target industry and employers. Review notes from those meetings to recall what your contacts said was important to your target organization.

Target organizations’ websites. Some organizations’ websites will be easier to navigate than others. Read the company vision/mission usually found on an “about us” page. If available, the investor relations pages and annual reports can provide a wealth of valuable information on what is important to the organization.

Databases. Job posting databases often contain blurbs about organizations and sometimes employee reviews. Glassdoor.com, Indeed.com, Crunchbase.com, and Pitchbook.com are a few of the more popular sites with information on organizations. If you are currently enrolled as a student, your library probably pays for other services like Marketline.com, which are helpful, too.

Job descriptions. Some employers’ job descriptions are more robust than others. Either way, you should know what the job description says is important to the organization and role.

Presentations. Some organizations host informational presentations at universities and job fairs. If you like an employer, pay attention to when they might visit your school or a nearby job fair so you can receive insights directly from recruiters.

As you collect information on the organization, think about the following questions. They will help you to save brain space for only what is most important to your interview preparation:

1. What makes the organization different than others within the same industry?
2. What value does the organization add to society? What does the organization do?
3. Which products or services does the organization say are most important?
4. Which adjectives are commonly used to describe the organization?
5. How does the company describe its people?
6. Which qualities or skills does the company say they like to see in their employees?
7. What recently made the organization more money? What saved time?

Synthesize into skills

The previous steps will help you collect the raw material you need to deliver relevant answers. Next, you will need to synthesize all of that data for the interview. You can do that by considering the skills. If you ask the question, “How does the company describe its people?” and you find the company says its people are relentless innovators, then innovation is a skill you want to write down. If you ask, “What are some of the common challenges the industry faces?” and you find the industry faces challenges in customers’ rapidly changing needs, then identifying customer needs is a skill you’ll want to write down. The following table features a few examples of how you could synthesize information into skills based on your research and interactions:

	Skills of high value among sources
Industry	Problem Solving Innovation Entrepreneurship
Organization	Identifying customer needs Initiative Ability to manage ambiguity
Role	Making complex financial info easy to understand Leading cross-functional teams Integrity

Conclusion

Congratulations on completing your reconnaissance mission! You should now have a good idea about what your interviewers care about most. That will help you design exceptionally believable and understandable answers. The next step is identifying potential questions you'll receive during your behavioral interview.

Reflection questions

1. What are your target industries, organizations, and roles?
2. If you haven't yet identified which principles and skills your target industries and organizations value, when will you begin that process?
3. How will you synthesize and record the many skills your industries, organizations, and roles value?

Chapter 6: Think Critically about Potential Questions

It's time to think through which questions you'll likely receive in your behavioral interview. There are many approaches you can take to brainstorm the questions you might be asked during a behavioral interview. Whichever approach you decide to take, you'll want to keep your insights regarding skills and principles at the front of your mind. Your goals at this stage are to: 1) identify questions likely to be asked based on what's important to your target industry, organization, and role; 2) explore the variety of ways someone might phrase a question; and 3) categorize the variety of question phrasings into core questions to make preparation easier.

Take the role of the hiring manager

One of the best ways to begin thinking critically about potential interview questions is to take the role of the hiring manager or interviewer. This approach is most effective when you have experience interviewing others, but that's not a prerequisite to getting value out of the exercise. A good understanding of your target industry, organization, and role combined with a good imagination and some empathy can go a long way. Ultimately, the magic of taking the interviewer's perspective is that it makes you think critically about interview questions. It gets you into the mind of the interviewer and prepares you to meet their desires and expectations. Set aside 40 minutes for this brainstorming activity.

Industry

Think of yourself as the hiring manager for the role you're applying to. Spend 10 minutes thinking about questions you'd ask to determine if someone would be a good fit for your industry. Which principles and skills are valuable across your target industry? How would you phrase a question to see if a person possesses that skill? How would you word the question so they can prove they've successfully acted or behaved in a manner that showcases that skill? For instance, if you're interviewing someone to work in consulting, you probably want to ask questions to assess their problem-solving skills. You could ask something like, "Can you please tell me about a time when you identified an overlooked problem?"

Organization

After you spend 10 minutes sketching questions you'd ask to assess skills that are important across your target industry, shift to questions aimed at organizational principles and skills. Based on your organizational research, which skills are valued in your organization regardless of roles? For instance, if you're interviewing someone to work for Amazon, you'll assess how they've shown the company's 14 leadership principles. You might ask a question like, "Will you please tell me how you have shown customer obsession in the past?" Or you might ask, "When have you focused on customer needs above all else in the past?"

Role

Once you brainstorm questions for skills important to your target industry and organization, take a few sips of your favorite beverage. You're setting yourself up for success. Your third step is to think about the questions you'd ask a potential candidate to determine if they could be successful in the target role within your organization. Focus on the skills the candidate would need to prove they have. Drill into the soft skills, since technical/hard skills are usually evaluated with technical and case interviews. Say you're seeking a corporate finance manager. You probably need that person to communicate financial information to a variety of roles within departments. To do that successfully, a corporate finance manager needs to communicate that financial information in a way that people not close to the details can easily understand. So how would you evaluate if someone has that ability? You would want an example of how they did that in the past. But what if they didn't work in a corporate finance role in the past? Then, you'd want to phrase the question in a way that would still allow the candidate to showcase the skills necessary to simply communicate financial information. You could ask them a question like, "Will you please share a time when you communicated complex information in a simple way?" Or you could say, "Will you share a bit about a time when you presented a detailed analysis?"

Resume examination

Spend the last 10 minutes examining your resume like you're the interviewer. What questions would you ask based on the resume? Concentrate on the bullet points in your work experience. What might interest an interviewer because it aligns with a skill they value within the industry or their organization? If you're applying for a global strategy role and one of your resume bullet points highlights that you re-strategized international supply chains, there's a good chance you'll be asked to share more about it. Look at your resume for what's missing, too. Which skills are not apparent on your resume that were listed as preferred skills on the job description? Maybe you're applying for a global strategy role and you've detailed your strategic planning accomplishments in your resume, but you're missing global business experience. If you were an interviewer, which questions would you ask to learn about global business skills?

Get a second opinion

If you have time, it can be worthwhile to conduct this activity with a family friend or peer. It can be even better when that person has some knowledge of your target industry, organization, or role. Just expect them to share some opinions about the most important skills. Remember to weigh their opinions as a single data point in your broader set. Asking for which questions they'd ask based on the skills/principles you've identified as valuable will likely yield better input than if you merely asked people, "Any advice as I prepare for interviews?"

Many individuals don't consider attempting this activity, even though it's simple and sensible. It's amazing how the stress of interview preparation alongside a flurry of other activities can throw off normal intuition. When job seekers become aware of this heuristic activity, they usually find it not only accelerates their preparedness for interview questions more than many other approaches but also discover it notches up their confidence. Below is a table and examples of how you could organize the information you collect in this activity.

Perspective	Skills	Potential Questions
Industry: <i>Health Care</i>	Problem solving	1) Can you tell me about a time when you identified an overlooked problem?
		2) When have you used data to solve a problem?
		3)
		1)
		2)
		3)
Organization: <i>Super Health</i>	Teamwork	1) Could you please share a time when you led without direct authority?
		2) How would you describe your role on a team? Please provide an example.
		3)
	Creative thinking	1) Please share a time when you developed a creative solution.
		2)
		3)

Perspective	Skills	Potential Questions
Role: <i>Finance Intern</i>	Project management	1) Can you describe a time you led a long-term project?
		2)
		3)
	Adaptability	1) Can you tell me about a time when you had to change a project plan?
		2)
		3)
Resume Review	Management	1) Could you tell about a time when you had to “manage up”?
		2) Tell me about a time you had to manage a cross-functional team...
		3)
		1)
		2)
		3)
Advice	Initiative	1) Can you describe a moment when you went above and beyond your regular duties?
		2)

Other ways to collect questions

In addition to creating your own list of questions you might be asked, you can also curate questions from online lists and sometimes “question banks.” If you decide to take either of these approaches, continue to think critically about what questions make the most sense to ask for your target role, organization, and industry.

Review list of most common interview questions

A quick online search will provide a list of common interview questions. Many job seekers will look at the first list they find or receive from a friend and base their entire interview prep from one opinionated person’s

experience interviewing with two or three employers. Look for summative lists created by a career services expert or human resources professional. Then cross-reference that list with one or two more. You'll notice the list of common questions will often contain a mix behavioral questions alongside other questions assessing motivations and cultural fit. For efficient preparation, catalog behavioral questions like "Tell me about a time..." or "When have you..." separately from questions assessing fit or motivation like "Why are you interested in..." and "Tell me about yourself." Vault.com has collected lists of common interview questions from many top employers. To save you some time, this guide contains many samples from those lists of questions.

Question banks

If you're attending a school where campus interviewing is prevalent, you might find "question banks" floating around your student groups. Question banks are collections of questions that students were asked when they interviewed with an employer for a particular role. The specification and connection of questions to employers can help you set general expectations for your behavioral interview. However, it's not a great idea to enter into an interview room only prepared for the questions you read on the interview bank for your target employer. Interviewers might have a standard list of questions to ask that year, or they might change up the questions based on the candidate.

Simple question lists can be a helpful starting point for identifying potential questions you could receive during an interview, but basing your behavioral interview preparation on a question list alone poses several risks. One risk is programming yourself to only be prepared to answer the questions the way they are worded on the list. Too many job seekers enter interview rooms and freeze when they hear a question that was not on the list. To mitigate that risk, some compile lists containing over 50 interview questions. Then they try to come up with a unique and substantial answer for each question. People do that. It is not a good idea. Limited time is spent on quantity over quality.

Identifying core questions

So how do you prepare for the diversity of questions without wasting time? You refine your ability to identify the core question. The core question is the question that points to the skill the interviewer is attempting to assess. Questions can be asked many ways, but they're all designed to evaluate if you possess the skills necessary to succeed in the role and organization. As you create your own question list and look at curated lists, sort the list by skill and core question being asked to make it easier to quickly identify what an interviewer is assessing. It also lessens your preparation time, as it reduces the set of answers you'll need to prepare to cover the majority of questions the interviewer is likely to ask. Most job seekers find there are 10 to 15 core questions asked for their target industry/organization/role. Below is a sample of what that list could look like. Spaces are left blank so you can consider how you might phrase a question that would align with the core question example.

Stated Question	Core Question
Please tell me about a data-based decision you've made.	Tell me about a time when you used data to make a decision.
Tell me about a time when you presented a recommendation based on data.	
When have you used data to solve a problem?	
What's your experience using data?	

Stated Question	Core Question
Can you tell me about a time you proactively solved a problem?	Tell me about a time when you took initiative.
When is a moment when you did more than what was expected?	
Can you tell me about a time you capitalized on an overlooked opportunity?	
Can you tell about a time when you improved something without being asked?	
When have you changed someone's opinion?	Tell me about a time when you influenced others.
Tell me about a time when you led without direct authority.	
When have you convinced others to follow your plan?	
Tell me about a time you sold an idea.	
Can you tell me about a time you disagreed with a team member?	Tell me about a time when you resolved a conflict.
Tell me about a time when you worked with an upset client.	
When have you dealt with a difficult team member?	
Can you share a time when you told your boss they were wrong?	
Will you please share your experiences coaching others?	Tell me about a time you helped someone else succeed.
When have you sought to bring out the best in others?	
Tell me how you have mentored others.	
Can you share more about how you've dedicated time to developing others in the past?	

Stated Question	Core Question
When have you managed a change that impacted an entire organization?	Tell me about a time you led a change.
How have you guided an organizational change?	
Tell me about a time when you implemented a new idea.	
Can you please tell me about an initiative you executed that positively disrupted the status quo?	
Can you tell me about a time you made a decision but were unsure of the outcomes?	Tell me about a time you took a risk.
Please share a time when you made a risky choice.	
Tell me about a time when you struggled to make a decision.	
Can you share a moment when you took a bold action and owned it?	
Can you share an experience about diving deep to find a solution?	Tell me about a time you had to find information to get things done.
Will you tell me about a time when you overcame obstacles to get information you needed?	
Please share an example of when you had to work across multiple teams and departments to get information you needed.	
In the past, when you did not have the information you needed to make a decision, what would you do to find it?	
Can you share a time when you led a team to achieve something important?	Tell me about a time you led a project.
Tell me about a time you led a long-term project.	
What is a cross-functional project you managed in the past?	
When have you guided a project from beginning to end?	

Conclusion

Take the role of the hiring manager to think of questions you might be asked. Then, check out curated behavioral question lists with a critical eye. You want to develop the ability to quickly identify the core questions you need to answer. Once you can do that, you'll be able to discern which skill your interviewer is assessing regardless of how their question is worded.

Now that you're thinking critically about behavioral interview questions, you're ready for perhaps the most important step of behavioral interviewing preparation. It's time to identify behaviors that demonstrate you have the skills the employer is seeking.

Reflection questions

1. Which skills/principles are important to your target role, organization, and industry? Which questions would you ask to assess those skills/principles in a candidate?
2. What will you choose as the core question for each skill?

Chapter 7: Know What Interviewers Are Assessing

Start with knowing your audience

There are two ways to approach behavioral interviewing preparation. You could start with thinking about the experiences you want to share during an interview and connect them back to what employers are assessing. Or you start with identifying what interviewers are assessing and then match your experiences. Matt Abrahams, author and Stanford GSB Lecturer in Organizational Behavior, has popularized the idea that great communicators think about what their audience wants to hear, not what the communicator wants to share. This guide builds on that notion. In other words, begin with identifying what interviewers are seeking before including your personal experiences.

Identify behaviors that show the desired skills

Early in this guide, you thought through the skills that would be important to success in your target role, organization, and industry. Then, you wrote down the questions you might ask someone to evaluate those skills. Now you need to consider which behaviors (or actions) will prove you possess the skills the interviewer is seeking. This is one of the most important steps to great behavioral interview responses. There are a couple of ways you could work on identifying the behaviors employers are seeking to prove you'll be successful in the role, organization, and industry you seek.

Think like the interviewer

The first method is to pretend you're the interviewer again. If you were already working for your target employer and interviewing someone for the role, which behaviors or actions would convince you a candidate

possesses each competency required for the role? What would those behaviors or actions look like if shared in a sequential order?

Teach yourself

You can also take the approach of a teacher. If you were teaching someone a competency, what are three actions (behaviors) they would need to take to demonstrate that competency? As you take these perspectives, you'll recall best practices from your formal and informal education. But what if you don't recall any best practices or behaviors that demonstrate competency in an area?

Search for steps

If you find yourself struggling to identify sequential actions that demonstrate skills, do a quick search online. There are many websites that provide direction on "steps to leading a team" or "best practices for presenting to executives." You can also use handbooks, blogs found on Vault.com, and guides like Harvard Business Review's "20-Minute Manager" series for highly curated ideas.

Whichever approach you take, add your behavior insights to the table you designed in the last chapter. Connecting the data points will help you develop the intuition necessary to answer any behavioral question interviewers throw at you. Start with writing out the top 10 skills and associated behaviors you think will be evaluated during your interview. Your goal is to program your brain to quickly determine the skill being assessed by each question, and then consider three behaviors that demonstrate that skill. Building that competency will give you the ability to quickly decipher the core questions so you can showcase the behaviors interviewers are seeking in competent candidates. Use the table below to start programming your brain!

Combing the previous chapters, this is the process you want your brain to follow:



If you're still struggling to identify the associated behaviors after those brainstorming methods, the table below should help you. The following table is a list of questions you might hear during your behavioral interview. Alongside the questions, you'll see the core question and underlying competency the question is evaluating. Then, you'll find a set of three sequential behaviors next to each competency. You might find a question, competency, or behavior missing in the list. Way to think critically! Whether you add, remove, or substitute, adjust the list as you see necessary. The list is designed to spur your critical thinking about the behaviors your target employer wants to hear.

Stated Question	Core Question	Skill	Behaviors
Please tell me about a data-based decision you've made.	Tell me about a time when you used data to make a decision.	Data-Based Decision Making	Identified core problem/question
Tell me about a time when you presented a recommendation based on data.			Collected and analyzed data
When have you used data to solve a problem?			Summarized and organized insights before sharing/presenting
What's your experience using data?			
Can you tell me about a time you proactively solved a problem?	Tell me about a time when you took initiative.	Initiative	Considered important factors of project/team/organization success
Can you tell me about a moment when you did more than what was expected?			Strategized opportunity that would have significant impact
Can you tell me about a time you capitalized on an overlooked opportunity?			Acted on opportunity with supporting evidence
Can you tell me about a time when you improved something without being asked?			
When have you changed someone's opinion?	Tell me about a time when you influenced others.	Influential Leadership	Studied the target audiences' desires
Tell me about a time when you led without direct authority.			Researched and gathered information to gauge feasibility of idea
When have you convinced others to follow your plan?			Communicated idea as a solution to target audiences' desires
Tell me about a time you sold an idea.			
Tell me about a time you disagreed with a team member.	Tell me about a time when you resolved a conflict.	Conflict Management	Listened to and acknowledged other's feelings
Tell me about a time when you worked with an upset client.			Demonstrated understanding of the issue
When have you dealt with a difficult team member?			Shared a solution that is a win-win
Can you share a time when you told your boss they were wrong?			

Stated Question	Core Question	Skill	Behaviors
Will you please share your experiences coaching others?	Tell me about a time you helped someone else succeed.	Mentorship	Discussed the person's goals
When have you sought to bring out the best in others?			Listened to the challenges they faced
Tell me how you have mentored others.			Shared advice and asked key questions to lead the person to success
Can you share more about how you have dedicated time to developing others in the past?			
When have you managed a change that impacted an entire organization?	Tell me about a time you led a change.	Change Management	Shared reasons for the change and the strategic vision with stakeholders
How have you guided an organizational change?			Identified and removed barriers to change
Tell me about a time when you implemented a new idea.			Implemented change
Can you please tell me about an initiative you executed that positively disrupted the status quo?			
Will you please share a time when you thought of a new way to do things?	Tell me about a time you created a better way to do something.	Creative Thinking	Explored how others handled similar situations
Tell me about a time you had an innovative idea.			Sketched and tested an alternative solution
Can you share a story about a time you improved a process?			Circulated idea for input and approval
Tell me about a time you saw a better way to approach a problem.			

Stated Question	Core Question	Skill	Behaviors
Tell me about a time you made a decision but were unsure of the outcomes.	Tell me about a time you took a risk.	Risk Assessment	Identified options
Please share a time when you made a risky choice.			Assessed risk (pros and cons)
Tell me about a time when you struggled to make a decision.			Implemented and took ownership of outcomes
Can you share a moment when you took a bold action and owned it?			
Can you share an experience about diving deep to find a solution?	Tell me about a time you had to find information to get things done.	Information Finding	Identified core problem/question
Will you tell me about a time when you overcame obstacles to get information you needed?			Found trustworthy resources (people, data, etc.)
Please share an example of when you had to work across multiple teams and departments to get information you needed.			Compared and compiled input from resources to gain accurate information
In the past, when you did not have the information you needed to make a decision, what would you do to find it?			
Can you share about a time when you led a team to achieve something important?	Tell me about a time you led a project.	Project Management	Clarified project goals
Tell me about a time you led a long-term project.			Communicated the project goals, tasks, and overall importance with the team
What is a cross-functional project you managed in the past?			Launched project and tracked team progress
When have you guided a project from beginning to end?			

Wild card questions

Some questions are not aimed to assess a specific skill but left open for you to decide which skill you want to showcase. Still, it’s important to consider skills and behaviors that are relevant to the industry/organization/role. Below are examples of these types of “wild card” questions you could be asked.

1. Tell me about your greatest accomplishment.
2. What is a professional achievement you are proud of?

3. Tell me about a time when you were performing at your best.
4. Can you share a time you made a big impact?
5. Tell me a story about your previous work.

Conclusion

Know what your audience wants to hear before deciding what you'll share. Thinking through the skills and associated behaviors before your behavioral interview will help you provide understandable and believable answers. Memorizing every associated behavior is not as important as developing the skill to quickly discern the core question, skill, and associated behaviors from the stated question. Once you refine that ability, you'll be ready to deliver great answers to any behavioral interview question an employer could ask you. The next step is integrating the behaviors into your personal experience.

Reflection questions

1. Which skills are important to your target industry, organization, and role?
2. Which behaviors would show someone you possess those skills?
3. How will you record the associated skills and behaviors to reference later?

Chapter 8: Share Your Greatest Moments

Highlight your greatest accomplishments

Interviewing is a competition. There are many people interviewing and only a few open positions (often only one). If you want or need a job, you need to impress during interviews so you can stand out from other candidates. You can impress interviewers by showcasing your greatest professional moments when you deliver answers. This can be uncomfortable for people who prefer humbly speaking about themselves (or not speaking about themselves much at all). Humility is an admirable quality, but it's not helpful to anyone in the interview room. Employers need to know what it looks like for you to be performing at your best in order to make a fully informed decision.

So, to find the best content for your behavioral interview answers, you'll want to recall your greatest accomplishments. Think of this as your best plays highlight reel if you're a sports fan. If you're LeBron James, this is when you want to reflect on your NBA basketball championships and the Most Valuable Player awards you won and how you received them. Maybe food and cooking is a more meaningful reference for you. If that's the case, if you're David Chang, think of the interview room as your time to talk about how you won two Michelin stars, a few James Beard Awards, and starred in a Netflix food series. You might not have achieved the same as global celebrities, but you've done things employers will find valuable.

Your goal is to write down 10 accomplishments. If that idea sounds easy for you, then go ahead and begin writing until you reach 10 accomplishments. If that idea sounds difficult, you're far from alone. Many people struggle to identify their accomplishments. If that's the case for you, there are several ways you can quickly dig up the great things you have done.

Review your resume

Your resume should be the first stop to refresh your memory of your greatest accomplishments. Your resume bullet points in your professional experience section should be accomplishment statements. If your resume still contains responsibility statements, you need to schedule time to revise it. Responsibility statements are bullet points that contain phrases like “managed supply chain for the Midwest region.” Below are what accomplishment statements could look like:

- Led a five-person team to complete a five-year business plan, develop prototypes, and present to investors, receiving \$30k in capital within one year.
- Designed and executed an oral cancer diagnosis skills’ training project (\$500k investment) for 100+ dentists, increasing the statewide early identification rate by 10% in one year.

Reflect on previous work

If you haven’t created accomplishment statements on your resume, you might wonder what to consider an accomplishment. If that’s the case, think about the following questions to help you draft ideas. Reviewing old project lists, skimming performance reviews, or even grabbing a coffee with an old colleague can be helpful as you jog your memory for professional accomplishments.

1. What were the major projects you led or managed in your last role? And the role before that?
2. Which events come to mind when you think of your previous role?
3. What did you need to do to make sure the projects or events were a success?
4. What was the positive impact of the projects or events? Did the projects or events cause an increase in revenue or satisfaction? Did they reduce anything like time or money?
5. If they didn’t directly cause a seemingly significant increase or decrease, how did they contribute to a larger goal?

Nonprofessional accomplishments

Maybe you have a nonprofessional accomplishment that makes you proud, like winning a soccer championship or becoming the youngest person in your city’s orchestra. Maybe you created a successful YouTube channel, which won you a trip to New York to learn from YouTube experts. Those accomplishments are worth noting, especially if you don’t have a lot of work experience. Here are some examples if you don’t have much work experience:

- Initiated revisions of residence hall policies based on self-created survey assessing residents’ satisfaction and lifestyle needs, winning peer leader award.
- Managed 30 peers and coordinated with three staff members as stage manager of a university play lasting three months, resulting in sold-out showings and zero injuries.
- Discovered cost-saving opportunity while managing diversity club budget, allowing first-ever scholarship to global diversity conference.
- Wrote a short story that won third place in national competition that included 600 submissions. Achieved this while managing 19 credit hours and working part-time.

Match the accomplishments to desired skills

After you think about your accomplishments, revisit what your prospective employer/industry is looking for in a candidate. Use their desired skills as the lens through which you review your previous accomplishments.

If you know the target industry cares about detailed analysis, and you once found a miscalculation in a client’s data that saved them a lot of money, you should prepare to talk about that accomplishment. Each accomplishment is likely to require several skills. That is ideal. Using a table like the one below will help you track the skills featured in each accomplishment:

Skills/ Accomplishments	Solved town water shortage	Designed bridge, improving logistics	Led concert to raise funds	Developed program for young engineers	Increased village internet connectivity
Problem Solving	x		x	x	x
Teamwork		x	x	x	
Creative Thinking	x	x			x
Project Management	x		x	x	x
Adaptability	x		x		
Managing Others	x	x	x	x	
Initiative				x	x

A recipe for preparedness and confidence

Listing your accomplishments on a matrix can help you in two ways. First, it boosts your confidence for interviewing because you see you have the skills your target employer desires. Second, it prepares you to have an answer for each skill the employer is seeking. Ideally, each skill will be connected to two or more of your greatest accomplishments. But what do you do if that isn’t the case? What if you list all of the target industry/organization/role skills and find one skill is not connected to any of your accomplishments?

Missing a skill

Identifying 10 accomplishments is designed to help you explore beyond your first thoughts without becoming overwhelming. But sometimes even 10 accomplishments don’t hit all of the skills. If you’re missing a skill in your set of 10 accomplishments, think of a time when you did show that skill. Then identify what that skill helped you achieve. Sometimes you also need to shift your perspective to see how you’ve demonstrated that skill in the past.

Frequently, accomplishments are a matter of perspective. Some folks struggle to see all of the things they’ve accomplished in their lives. Rarely is an accomplishment missing as much as it’s buried in negative perception. Say your target organization likes all of its employees to “own projects,” but you feel like you can’t recall a time you’ve “owned a project.” You might think the only time you’ve ever owned any project was when you made sure rooms were clean as a part of the cleaning business you started in undergrad. You might initially feel like your business was not as impressive as your friend who was making \$100,000 as an Instagram influencer their freshman year of college. Don’t deceive yourself. You might think, “So, I cleaned some rooms in undergrad.” What if LeBron James decided to quit basketball and interview for an organization that highly valued leadership? You would be shocked if you heard him say, “I guess I could mention I helped my team win some games, but it’s not like I discovered DNA and won a Nobel Prize.” Awards and big numbers are nice to have, but what’s most important is connecting your target employer’s desired skills to your previous experiences.

Conclusion

Thoughtfully curate your greatest accomplishments so you can impress interviewers with your answers to their behavioral questions. Begin by looking through your resume and reflecting on your past projects. Nonprofessional accomplishments make sense as long as they contain skills your target employers are seeking. You can always add an accomplishment to make sure you have all the skills covered, but you could also look at another accomplishment from a different perspective.

Reflection questions

1. What are your top 10 greatest accomplishments?
2. Which skills were required to achieve your top 10 accomplishments?
3. How do those skills align with your target employers' desires?

Chapter 9: Tell Stories to Be Memorable

Way to go! You now know how to decode interviewers' questions. You're now ready to share answers that highlight the skills and behaviors that interviewers hope to hear. That ability will make you far better equipped for behavioral interviews than most candidates. But don't dance into an interview room just yet. You're roughly half way to being ready for a behavioral interview. The next stage in your preparation is building your answers. First you need to figure out how to deliver a well-structured story.

Has this ever happened to you? You go to a party to celebrate a friend's recent accomplishment. At the party, you see some friends you haven't talked to in a while, and you meet some new people. As you're admiring the display of hors d'oeuvres, you bump into one of the new people and decide to introduce yourself. He says his name is Tony. You and Tony ask each other a series of small talk questions. He mentions he recently moved from Ohio and is studying prosthodontics at the local university. Someone else joins the conversation and you slip away to refill your drink.

An hour or so later, you're driving home with your partner, and she asks you who the new person was you were talking to by the hors d'oeuvres. She says it seemed like you were chatting with that person for a while. You say, "Oh, he recently moved here from somewhere ... maybe it was the Midwest. He's studying something science-related at the university. Actually, I can't remember much more than that." Obviously, your partner was interested in the name of the person you met, but all you can recall is a little bit of his life story. That situation happens often enough—"what's-their-name" is a widely used substitute for names of the new people we meet in passing.

If you're like the vast majority of people on planet Earth, facts like someone's name can be difficult to recall. This struggle to recall some facts is directly connected to our capacity to receive and store information. Throughout the day, your brain is managing large stacks of data at once. That data management requires prioritization, so data that supports personal survival tends to receive more bandwidth than remembering the name of the person you met at your friend's party. But that's an extreme comparison. Remembering the name of the wine your friend told you to try will often take a higher priority than retaining a new acquaintance's name. Or, for the more socially anxious, wondering how a new acquaintance is perceiving you will block the bandwidth you need to download their name.

Interviewers are humans who experience the same processing and memory challenges your brain faces. Before they begin interviewing you, their brains have done a significant amount of work. They coordinated logistics to get to the building and correct room on time. They attempted to quickly review the questions they want to ask you. Some might even take a moment to quickly make sure they call you by the right name (was his cover letter signed “Dave” or “David”?). They’re doing all of that while a reminder keeps going off in their heads to pick up some trash bags before they head home. Then, as they walk out to greet you, their brains are fine-tuning their algorithm for carrying coffee down the hall without spilling it on their shirts. By the time your interviewers say “hello” to you, their brains have already established limited bandwidth for your interaction.

So, how do you make the most of the limited attention and storage the interviewers can offer you during your behavioral interview? You make your information easy to receive and store in their memories. How do you make sure the interviewers can easily receive and remember your responses to their questions? You tell stories.

Stories are fascinating. They are fascinating as a concept, and they fascinate others. Conceptually, stories transmit information like compressed files. A single story contains so much more information than a paragraph of facts. Plus, stories are more memorable than facts. Of course, stories convey information in the form of what’s shared. But, that’s not all. What you decide to exclude from a story also contains insights about the content and storyteller. Even more, how you share stories connotes your communication skills and how you perceive the world around you. You might have learned the value of storytelling in a creative writing, literature, or marketing class in the past. So, you might know that stories are the best tools to communicate a lot of information at once. You also likely learned the basics of constructing a good story in those classes. Or maybe you slept through those classes and you picked up your storytelling skills by entertaining friends at happy hours with humorous tales about your childhood. Either way, no matter how confident you are in your storytelling knowledge and skills, it’s important to consider how to best tell stories in an interview setting.

Stories have structure

Great storytellers use structures that make their stories easy for listeners to follow and understand. When it comes to behavioral interviewing, being understandable is about sharing relevant and logical information. It should be noted that different cultures have different perceptions of what’s the most logical way to share a story. If you’re an American interviewing outside the U.S, or if you’re interviewing in the U.S. and it’s not your home country, you’ll want to review this guide’s notes on cross-cultural interviewing. The following is advice on the best structures to use for a western audience similar to the U.S.

You might have learned a few storytelling structures in your formal education (or in your quasi-secret online searching on how to become a stand-up comedian). Some aspects of those structures will work better than others for behavioral interviewing. But behavioral interviewing is more about clearly communicating your professional skills than entertaining your interviewers. Thankfully, there’s no need to engineer a new structure for your stories to optimize for the need to communicate your skills and abilities. Several structures for behavioral interviewing already exist and have proven their value after decades of implementation. As you read through the following structures, think about which one you’re most comfortable applying.

STAR framework

Phase	Definition	Example
Situation	The characters and setting of entire project	I participated in a student consulting practicum for a local nonprofit that needed to refine its fundraising management.
Task	Your specific role in the situation	My role was to help reduce its fund collection time.
Action	The specific steps you took to solve the problem	I took the main steps to accomplish this. First, I analyzed existing fundraising processes and the company's historical approaches to identify best practices.
Result	The outcome that proves your actions were good ones; quantify when possible	By adopting my recommended changes, the client was projected to reduce fund collection time by 20% by the end of Year 1, enabling it to more securely increase staff and expand its services.

Pros	Potential Cons
Situation and Task steps make your story unique.	Situation and Task steps can lead users to overcomplicate the beginning of the story and lose listeners' attention.
It's been used for many years, and candidates continue to find it easy to use and impactful.	Without a summarized answer at the beginning, users risk delivering an indirect, high-context response that causes the interviewers to feel their question was not clearly answered.
Interviewers are the most familiar with this framework, and some structure their behavioral interview notes with S.T.A.R.	

CAR

Phase	Definition	Example
Challenge	The challenge you had to overcome to achieve a goal	I wanted to invest in a new IT platform to streamline our financial reporting, but my manager didn't agree. I needed to convince her that it was the right move.
Action	The specific steps you took to solve the problem	The first thing I did was speak with my manager to make sure I understood.
Result	The outcome that proves your actions were good ones; quantify when possible	Ultimately, she agreed, and we implemented the new tool. As a result, we were able to reduce the time we spent finalizing our monthly financial reports by 43%.

Pros	Potential Cons
Structure is simple and easy to follow compared to other models.	Without a summarized answer at the beginning, users risk delivering an indirect, high-context response that causes the interviewers to feel their question was not clearly answered.
Starting with a challenge piques listeners' curiosity.	Without a summarized answer at the beginning, users risk delivering an indirect, high-context response that causes the interviewers to feel their question was not clearly answered.
It quickly moves to the actions, which is the most important phase to interviewers.	

CARL

Phase	Definition	Example
Challenge	The challenge you had to overcome to achieve a goal	I wanted to start a new university initiative to expand campus-wide Wi-Fi, but the director of campus technology did not believe it was necessary. I needed to convince him that it was the right move.
Action	The specific steps you took to solve the problem	The first thing I did was arrange time to speak with the director to make sure I understood...
Result	The outcome that proves your actions were good ones; quantify when possible	Ultimately, he agreed, and within the next year the campus Wi-Fi expanded. As a result, busy athletes could more easily work on homework from the practice field.
Learning	The lesson you gained from the experience	This experience taught me new ideas or conflicting points will most likely be supported when there's a demonstrated need that relates to the organization's purpose.

Pros	Potential Cons
Learning stage shows personal development throughout career.	Constantly providing lessons gained from each experience at the end of each story could detract from the more relevant pieces or cause the candidate to look like she didn't have an experience she was fully prepared to handle.
Same as CAR framework	Same as CAR framework

PART

Phase	Definition	Example
Problem	The problem you had to solve to achieve a goal	I wanted to invest in a new IT platform to streamline our financial reporting, but my manager didn't agree. I needed to convince her that it was the right move.
Action	The specific steps you took to solve the problem	The first thing I did was speak with my manager to make sure I understood.
Result	The outcome that proves your actions were good ones; quantify when possible	Ultimately, she agreed, and we implemented the new tool. As a result, we were able to reduce the time we spent finalizing our monthly financial reports by 43%.
Takeaway	The key insight you want interviewers to remember from your story	I think this story shows that I handle interpersonal conflicts by looking for a win-win and focusing on what's best for the entire team.

Pros	Potential Cons
Starting with a challenge piques listeners' curiosity.	Without a summarized answer at the beginning, users risk delivering an indirect, high-context response that causes the interviewers to feel their question was not clearly answered.
Takeaway stage allows candidate to explicitly address the skill interviewers are attempting to assess in behaviors.	Users risk losing trust of interviewer with the hard sell of the Takeaway stage.
Actions and Results toggling generates intrigue.	

Stepping Stones by David Ohrvall

Phase	Definition	Example
Answer First	Data (\$, #, %), facts, main point	When I was at J&J, I created a new pricing model that increased revenue by \$1.2 million in one year.
Actions	What did I see, hear, think, say, do?	It all started when I notice the model was missing out on...
Tension	How did you respond?	I gathered the data and ran an analysis before sharing the idea with my director.
Resolution	Lasting change	The executive team loved my initiative and implemented the model.

Pros	Potential Cons
Makes sure you answer the interviewer's question by leading with the main point.	Toggling between Actions and Tensions introduces complexity that requires increased time/effort to master summarization and avoid confusion
Actions and Tensions toggling highlights decision-making process.	
Actions and Tensions toggling generates intrigue.	

PARADE method by Victor Cheng

Phase	Definition	Example
Problem	The problem you had to solve to achieve a goal	When I was running my food delivery service in Indonesia, I ran into a logistics issue as the company expanded: sandwiches were not staying cold during longer deliveries.
Anticipated Consequence	The consequence your organization would face if you did not solve the problem	If I did not solve the issue, I'd lose customers and damage the organization's reputation for healthy, fresh food.
Role	The part you played in solving the problem	I had to find an alternative method for storing the sandwiches.
Action	The actions you took to solve the problem	First, I identified the core issue. The delivery trucks were heating up as they sat in traffic.
Decision-Making Rationale	An explanation of why you chose those actions over other options	I decided to rent out refrigeration space at key points along the longer delivery routes. The other options cost more and did not hold temperatures long enough for very hot days.
End Result	The outcome of your efforts	After solving the storage and logistics issue, the company successfully expanded to five new cities, increasing our revenue by 300%.

Pros	Potential Cons
Starting with a problem piques listeners' curiosity	Having many stages increases the risk of delivering answers that are long and lose the interviewer's attention.
Creates intrigue early by setting the stakes with the Anticipated Consequence stage	Story development could take longer since there are comparatively more stages to note for each story.
Ensures interviewees showcase critical-thinking skills with Decision-Making Rationale stage	

Concerns about frameworks

You might be tempted to ignore these structures to deliver a story presented in a new, unexpected way to wow your interviewers. You might think you will not sound as unique if you use these structures. The interview room is not the Sundance Film Festival. You are far, far less likely to receive applause for your avant-garde approach than you would a “thanks, but no thanks” note after the interview because they could not clearly see your skills and abilities through your abstract storytelling. Worse, you could give the impression that you’re the type of person who doesn’t properly assess risks before deciding to take a new and expensive approach. Interviewers are expecting you to use a story structure that closely resembles those listed in this guide. Predictability is not always bad. When you order a steak, you like the predictability that it will be served on something resembling a plate. You would be severely disappointed if the server tossed you a steak in a used grocery bag because they wanted to use your dinner as an opportunity to show their artistic side. Be predictable in your structure so interviewers can catch the unique value you would add through the nuances of your content.

Building your story

After you select the structure that works best for you, revisit your accomplishment and skill matrix. Use the structure to think through how you’d tell the story behind each accomplishment. The examples listed with each structure should help you see how you could build your story. The matrix reduces your need to recall a different project/accomplishment for every story. But your next step is to make sure your actions in your stories match the behaviors employers are seeking in their questions.

Conclusion

Applying one of the behavioral interview frameworks will help you deliver excellent stories. For years, interviewees have found the frameworks that help them deliver stories that are easy to understand. Now that you’ve reviewed different structures for delivering answers in story form, you’ll need to choose one to use for building your stories. After that, you’re ready to think through your content. Where is the best place to begin curating content for your stories? The best place to begin is to think about when you performed at your best. It’s time to think about your greatest accomplishments!

Reflection questions

1. Which framework appeals to you?
2. How will you make sure your stories are not too long?
3. Which experiences might require translation for your target industry/organization/role?

Chapter 10: Refine Your Stories

You've selected your storytelling structure and explored how you can use a group of accomplishments to answer many questions. Now you'll want to refine your stories to overcome some of the most common behavioral interviewing pitfalls.

Summarize and organize to maintain attention and increase retention

It's better to leave the interviewer with a desire to ask follow-up questions, wanting to hear more, than with a desire to hit the mute button. To make the beginning and ending of your stories fit the recommended time frame, you'll need to master the ability to summarize information. Summarizing for behavioral interview questions is about knowing which details to include, what to emphasize, and how to organize your content.

Each story should be less than two minutes

Listening to someone tell a story can feel like an endurance sport. Surely you've interacted with someone who finds a way to make a long story longer. Those individuals struggle with letting their subconscious take control of their mouth and use storytelling as moments to fill up on the personal attention their ego naturally craves. You walk away from those interactions wanting to encourage the person to adopt a dog, find better friends, or a hire therapist since they're clearly craving attention. Don't quickly assume you're not susceptible to talking too long. It's very easy to become inebriated by someone closely listening to your accomplishments and cause behavioral interviewers to fantasize about a mute button they could use in live situations. Be conscious of your interviewer's time and ability to focus when you tell stories in behavioral interviews. That means the stories you share as responses to behavioral interviewing questions should be short.

You must protect yourself from excessively detailing the beginning and end of your story. Wordy beginnings about the finer points of your story's problem make you appear cluttered, not detailed. Plus, you max out the listener's ability to retain content before getting to the most important information. Lengthy conclusions cause listeners to forget what was shared before the end. Furthermore, it is annoying when you expect someone's story to end and it continues for another paragraph. You become the person at karaoke who at the end of the night picks the seven-minute song no one else knows. Do you not hate it when that happens, when someone seems to drag on and on? The sentences keep coming one after another. Hopefully the irony comes through in written form and drives the point home.

How short exactly? A few career advisors will say less than one minute. Some say just pay attention to the interviewer and if they appear to be listening. Most career advisors will tell you that your response should last no longer than two minutes. Two minutes gives you enough time to share a story that engages the listener and fully answers their question. Some feel as though their story has too many facets to share in two minutes. Remember, great communicators focus on what their audiences need/want to hear, not what they themselves want to share.

Connect to the question early

To make sure you're answering the question the interviewer asks, make verbal connections to the question in your first few sentences. If you're asked to tell about a time you mentored someone, you want to start your

story with, “A time I mentored someone was when...” You could also say, “When I was working at ___ I mentored one of the ___ and they were recently promoted to assistant regional manager.” You don’t want to be asked a question about mentorship and neglect to mention “mentor” until you’re halfway through your story. Not clearly addressing the question early will prolong anticipation, test your interviewer’s patience, and risk losing their attention. Don’t make your interviewer feel like they’re waiting 45 minutes for a dinner table after skipping lunch.

Provide the BLUF

Only one of the structures explicitly recommends providing the bottom line up front (BLUF). In other words, answering the question in one sentence before jumping into the story. Ohrvall’s Stepping Stones includes an “Answer First” stage. The STAR, CAR, and PAR frameworks don’t feature that stage, but many interview experts have coached job seekers to add a BLUF to make sure job seekers clearly answer the question. BLUFs ensure you provide a minimum viable answer to the interviewer’s question. You can deliver a very understandable and believable story, yet interviewers can still get distracted and wonder if you answered the question. Most interviewers’ attention peaks in the first few seconds of your response, so capitalize on that moment with a one-sentence answer to their questions, a BLUF. As you think of each potential behavioral question, try to write out the BLUF you would provide in your response.

Connect the end to the beginning

The results of each story should be connected to the initial challenge. Ohrvall’s Stepping Stones model contains a “Resolution” stage at the end to remind you of the importance of connecting the end of the story to the beginning. If you’re asked to tell about a time you used data to solve a problem, the results at the end should at least bring a conclusion to the story with something like, “I resolved the problem.” “Tell me about a time you mentored someone” should have a conclusion like, “It was very rewarding to hear my assistant say that my mentorship helped them see and fulfill their potential.” From there, you can expand the impact of your actions. In response to “tell me about a time you used data to solve a problem,” you could say something like, “I resolved the problem two days ahead of time. The client was so happy with the results that they hired my organization for many more projects, becoming one of our primary clients. The company instituted my new approach to the problem as a best practice because it was so efficient.” Jumping from your last action to “the company instituted my new approach...” not only requires the listener to fill-in gaps in your story but also skips points that showcase how impactful you can be.

Provide linear progression

People have preferences on how the order of events in a story should typically happen. Adjusting to those preferences will help interviewers understand your story and maintain their attention. Preferences on the ordering of stories is heavily influenced by culture. There are more details on the cultural differences of storytelling order in the chapter on cross-cultural interviewing. If you’re interviewing with Americans, it’s very important to deliver stories in a linear fashion.

A linear fashion means not returning to a stage of the story. If you use the PAR framework, you should cover the problem of your story at the beginning, then move on to the first action you took to resolve that problem, then the next action, and continue the rest of the PAR structure. You shouldn’t move from the problem to the action, back to a detail of the problem, then to the next action, and then return to mention a detail of the first action. Some interviewees jump back and forth between framework stages because they didn’t spend enough time thinking about their story before they entered the interview room.

Translate for your interviewers

Most job seekers are looking to start a career or make a professional pivot. If you're starting your career, you'll need to think about how previous experiences showcase skills that are valuable to your target audience. Below are some experiences and how you could translate them:

Question: Tell me about a time when you led a team.		
Previous Experience	Before Translation	After Translation
Class project	In my Introduction to Instructional Design and Curriculum Development class, I was a part of a group that was assigned to present on the instructional design model known as ADDIE...	In one of my courses, I led my group's development of a presentation. After receiving the assignment, I noticed the team was unsure of individual responsibilities and timelines, so the first thing I did...
Volunteer work	During my junior year, through my sorority, I organized a "Build Homes Build the Chapter" event...	During my junior year, I led a community development project for my sorority. I managed peers across two schools to create an event that built relationships between members of our organization and relationships between our organization and the broader community...
Sports involvement	During my senior year on the basketball team, we made it to the NIT tournament. It was the first time in 15 years for our school. We were down our starting point guard and center due to injuries. Team confidence was low, and I knew I had to get the team in the right frame of mind if we had any hope of winning. Although our pick and roll game was cut, I knew we had a great stretch four, so I talked to my coach about running some new plays...	During my senior year on the basketball team, I led the players and coaching team in developing three new strategies or "plays" that compensated for the loss of two injured team members. The first thing I did to lead others through the changes was to...

Professional pivots include moving from one industry, organization, role, or location to another.

Examples include:

- A former middle school teacher pursuing an MBA internship in consulting
- A former military officer from Korea seeking a job as a senior financial analyst in the U.S.
- A chemical engineering Ph.D. with business management experience targeting director roles in environmental sustainability
- A former manager with business-to-business sales experience in a technology company seeking a corporate strategy job at a business-to-consumer technology company

When making a pivot, it's important to translate your previous experience for all of your job search communication, including your interview answers. The more pivots you're making, the more important it is to translate your experience. A lot of the industry/organization/role translations will focus on replacing terms, jargon, titles, and abbreviations with universally understood vocabulary. First, you need to consider how you can describe the beginning (Situation/Challenge/Problem) of your story in a universal manner.

What you share should apply to the setting of your story and the prospective role. Connecting the words from the question to the context of your story is an easy way to do that. Next, you want to make sure your actions are applicable to your target role. The skills and associated behavior list will help you describe your experiences in a transferable manner. Last, you want to make sure your results are easily seen as positive outcomes of your efforts.

Below is an example of three people interviewing for a general management role at a manufacturing company. Each person has very different backgrounds, but they can all translate their experiences in a way that shows they have the skills necessary for their target role.

Question: Tell me about a time when you used data to solve a problem.		
Previous Role	Before Translation	After Translation
Teacher	Sure, as vice principal, I led district-wide STEM program curriculum redesign after seeing our schools were underperforming on NAEPs...	When I was a vice principal, I used insights from exam data to create a new strategy that improved teacher and student performance...
Military	When I was an Operations NCO, a squad carrying ammo was hit by an ATGM on their way to my base. After that happened, I gathered our intelligence analysts...	As an operations manager in the military, I used data to create a plan that improved safety on transportation routes.
Oral Biologist	As an oral biologist, I was curious about how to best study oral cancers. I looked for the most commonly changed genes in head and neck cancers within a public database. I found a gene common for many cancers. Then I compared that gene of 400 letters to see if there were any common changes that didn't seem random. I compared all cancers and head/neck cancers, over 50,000 data points, and found a set of five letters that were changed in the head and neck data set. Next, I changed gene letters in oral, esophageal, and skin stem cells...	As an oral biologist, I used data to reduce the expense of detecting and treating oral cancers. First, I identified the core problem. I needed to know what made oral cancer cells different than other cells. Then, I collected and analyzed over 50,000 data points. I used databases to compare differences in cancer cells and created models to test my idea. In my analysis, I was able to pinpoint and recreate an oral cancer cell. After that, I summarized and organized my information. I shared the insights with other my director before sharing with other health care professionals...

Find the most relevant experience

You'll notice that having all of the exact experiences an employer desires didn't make the short list of success factors. Many people decide to start a job search because they'd like to work in a new role, organization, or industry. Yet, they experience a surge of imposter syndrome when they receive an opportunity to interview. Remember, you receive an opportunity to sit in the interview room after a hiring manager decides you're likely more suited for the role than many other people. The hiring manager usually comes to that conclusion after reviewing your application documents (resume, cover letter, LinkedIn profile, etc.). Unless you

unethically falsified your resume, that hiring manager suspects you have value to add to their organization. They understand that you might not have experienced the exact situations they might discuss. They care more about how your comparatively different situations required you to behave in a way that's transferable to the situations you'd face in the prospective role.

If you come from a data analyst or teaching role, you might be intimidated by the question, "Tell me about a time when you made a client very happy." You might also struggle to find an answer to a question like, "Tell me about a time when you had a conflict with your manager." Remember that interviewers want to see if you have the skills to make a client happy or the skills to resolve a conflict. Find the closest experience that demonstrates the behaviors, showing the interviewer you know the actions to making a client happy or resolving a conflict. A teacher could share how they once led a process change that kept students' and parents' priorities in mind and made them very happy. The data analyst for a bank could share about a time they thought about their clients' upcoming events, delivered the analysis to their boss earlier than requested, and included an actionable summary. Someone without a managerial conflict could say, "I cannot recall a time I had a conflict with a manager, but I can note how I would handle a conflict with a manager and share a time I resolved a conflict with a team member. Would that work for you?" As you think through the behaviors associated with each question, it becomes easy to deliver the content interviewers are seeking.

The same principle applies to those without much work experience. If you're in that situation and an interviewer asks, "Tell me about a time when you presented to executives," you could say something like, "I don't have a time when I've presented to executives at a company per se, but I could share a time when I presented to my university's athletic director. I think it features many of the same skills required for executive presentations. Would that work for you?"

Create memorable—but not unexpected—stories

Many interviewers are eager to create "sticky" (memorable) stories. The frameworks shared in this chapter are designed for optimal stickiness. According to Chip and Dan Heath's book, "Made to Stick" stories in themselves are "sticky." They also add that speaking in simple, concrete, and credible ways makes information sticky. Later in this guide, you'll learn how to use nonverbal communication for emotional messaging, which makes your stories even more memorable. Yet some want to take their "stickiness" to another level. They decide to share what Chip and Dan Heath would call "unexpected." That can be risky in the interview setting, or at least the way many people implement it is risky. Too many interviewees will decide to make their story unexpected by sprinkling in a little scandal or sharing controversial views. To reduce the risk of being remembered for something other than your exceptional qualifications, as a rule of thumb, think critically before sharing anything related to drugs, sex, alcohol, gossip, political/religious views, or violence during interviews. Most of the time, avoiding those topics is best.

Don't memorize every word

It's better to appear as if you're creating your responses on the spot rather than playing a recording from memory. If you want interviewers to believe your answers, you need to be sincere. When you deliver an answer memorized word for word, it can make you appear too calculated and insincere. Many job seekers find it helpful to write down stages of their stories in bullet points to make sure their answer appears fresh each time. Others like to memorize transition points in their stories and think about the rest without focusing on exact wording. Whichever approach you take, your stories should sound slightly different each time you share them.

Actions are the most important content in your story

As mentioned in the introduction of this guide, research has shown that assessing candidates by previous behaviors is one of the most reliable methods to pick the best candidate for a role. That's why behavioral interviewing is so popular. In case you did not notice, the one clear similarity among all of the frameworks is that they each have an action stage. Your actions are synonymous with your previous behaviors. The actions are what behavioral interview questions are assessing more than anything else! The situations, challenges, problems, roles, and tasks are very unlikely to exist in the exact same way in the role you're targeting. However, your actions are transferable. Explaining the actions you chose in a work situation, and why you chose them, gives employers a clear idea as to how you'll perform if you worked for them.

People typically hear that idea and nod their head in agreement. Yet, when they share a behavioral interview story, the actions are difficult to recognize. When a candidate's actions are difficult to recognize, by default, they don't exhibit a history of behaviors that interviewers noted are necessary to succeed in the prospective role. Simply put, candidates are seen as unqualified for the job. You want to share stories with actions that are understandable and believable if you want a chance at getting a job offer. Here is how you do that:

Allocate at least half of your response to actions

You need to prioritize speaking time for the actions as you build your stories. Bad behavioral interview responses spend 45 seconds setting up a story with another 45 seconds spent trying to wrap up the story. That leaves less than one-third of the recommended speaking time to address what the interviewer cares about most, the actions. Spending at least half of the story time on your actions is appropriate for most responses.

Tailor your actions to the question

Earlier in this guide, you developed a list of skills and associated behaviors. That list will make summarizing the actions in your behavioral interview stories very easy. Select a core question from the list. Think of one of your accomplishments that features the skills and behaviors associated with that question. Use the behaviors' summary sentences to start each action stage of your story. Then include one or two sentences to describe what that action looked like in the context of your story. Taking those steps will make it easy for interviewers to see how your previous actions make you a qualified candidate.

You can combine the previous activities to build a robust matrix to connect the actions of your stories to their associated behaviors, skills, and questions. The matrix will turn each accomplishment into a multi-tool for answering questions. Below is an example of what that could look like.

Core Question	Skill	Behaviors	Accomplishment #1: Retained customers by offering future discount
Tell me about a time when you resolved a conflict.	Emotionally intelligent communication	Acknowledged feelings	Not getting discount was frustrating
		Demonstrated understanding of the issue	Affirmed need to offer future discount and fix error
		Shared a solution that is a win-win	Worked w/ processing team and managers to offer future discount

Core Question	Skill	Behaviors	Accomplishment #1: Retained customers by offering future discount
Tell me about a time when you used data to make a decision.	Data-based decision making	Identified core problem/question	How do I reduce risk of losing customers and orders?
		Collected and analyzed data	Used sales data to find loss of customers/revenue; connected other data sets suggesting future discount
		Summarized and organized insights before sharing/presenting	Shared cost comparison of options; earned approval
Tell me about a time you took a risk.	Risk assessment	Identified options	Apologize, or apologize and offer future discount
		Assessed risk	Calculated and compared offering future discount vs. not; future discount seemed worth it
		Implemented and took ownership of outcomes	Discussed with director; guided processing team
Tell me about a time you created a better way to do something.	Creative thinking	Explored how others handled similar situations	Found others fixed error, apologized, offered discount
		Sketched and tested an alternative solution	Thought future discount would retain more customers, calculations suggested worth trying
		Circulated idea for input and approval	Shared w/ director and process team; received approval

Combining all the ingredients

The following responses are examples of how one accomplishment can be used to answer a variety of questions (as highlighted in this chapter’s matrix). In the interview room, you want to avoid using the same story more than once. By identifying 10 accomplishments, and noting the skills featured in each one, you can make sure you have enough stories to cover each skill more than once.

These examples are not perfect. There are no perfect stories, but great stories can be built by combining the insights of this guide with your experiences. So please use the examples to inform your own story development rather than copy them word for word.

Question: Can you tell me about a time when you helped an upset customer?

Response: Sure, a time I helped upset customers was when I was working as an assistant operations manager at ABC Online Travel Booking Company. The company was running a “buy one ticket, get one for 20 percent off” sale leading up to Valentine’s Day. One Friday afternoon, we received a spike of calls and emails from customers saying the checkout screen showed the discounted price, but they were charged the full amount.

First, I acknowledge each customer’s feelings. I mentioned I understood that expecting a discount but being charged full price is frustrating. Next, I demonstrated understanding. I shared that my organization would

need to reimburse them and that I would find the solution to the processing error. That started to diffuse the situation. Then, I shared a win-win solution. I worked with the payment processing team to resolve the system error and received approval from my director to offer a future discount. I responded to the customers thanking them for their patience, assuring them the processing error was resolved, and offered a future discount.

Those actions resulted in retaining all customer orders and generated future orders despite the processing error. I was delighted when one new customer sent me an email saying they would definitely continue using our service after seeing how our organization places the customer first. My management of this situation led to me receiving a customer service award during our corporation's global conference.

Question: Can you tell me about a time you used data to solve a problem?

Response: Sure, a time I used data to solve a problem was when I was working as an assistant operations manager at ABC Online Travel Booking Company. Customers were charged for the full amount of a second ticket when they were supposed to receive 20 percent off. I decided to dive into data to find the best solution to the problem.

First, I identified the core question. The core question was not simply, "How were customers overcharged?" although that was an important question. I worked with the processing team to quickly resolve the system charging error. The core question was, "How do I reduce the risk of losing orders and customers?"

So, next I collected and analyzed data to see how to retain customers. As I analyzed sales data, I found around 10 percent of customers who previously experienced a payment processing error asked for a full refund and stopped using our service. I calculated that it was a loss of roughly \$50k of monthly sales. After that, I calculated that offering future discount could cost \$10k. I also connected other data points inferring that discounts increased customer loyalty.

My last step was to summarize my insights and share them with internal stakeholders. I simply laid out the cost of only reimbursing for the overcharged amount versus reimbursing and offering a future discount. I also shared reasons to believe the future discount would increase retention. They all approved the idea to offer the future discount to overcharged customers and I executed it.

The data-based solution resulted in retaining all customer orders and generated future orders despite the processing error. I was delighted when one new customer sent me an email saying they would definitely continue using our service after seeing how our organization places the customer first. My management of this situation led to me receiving a customer service award during our corporation's global conference.

Question: Can you tell me about a time you took a risk?

Response: Sure, a time I took a risk was when I reimbursed customers and gave them a future discount after they were overcharged. When I was the assistant operations manager at ABC Online Travel Booking Company, a group of customers were supposed to receive 20 percent off a second ticket, but they were charged for the full amount. After fixing the payment system processing error, I needed to develop a response to the overcharge that would help us keep the customers.

I started with identifying my options. I found the typical process was to fix the system error, apologize to the customer, and reimburse the customer for the overcharge. Following that approach would have been seen as completely appropriate. But, I had a risky idea to include a future discount to all impacted customers.

After identifying my options, I assessed if taking the risk was better than following the status quo. I calculated that the organization lost roughly \$50k of monthly sales following the standard process. I also calculated that offering a future discount could cost \$10k. I determined the \$10k expense was worth potentially keeping \$50k in sales. If I were wrong, it would be seen as a \$60k mistake.

Finally, I implemented the risk and communicated ownership of the outcomes. I shared my plan with my director and said I would take full responsibility for any negative outcomes. After her approval, I worked with the payment processing and sales teams to add the future discount to customers' reimbursements.

The risky decision resulted in retaining all customer orders and generated future orders despite the processing error. I was delighted when the VP of operations sent an email to all of our staff saying my actions were a great example of thinking creatively to make sure our organization fulfilled its mission. My management of the situation led to me receiving a customer service award during our corporation's global conference.

Question: Can you tell me about a time when you developed a creative solution?

Response: Yes, I can... I developed a creative solution as I responded to a customer payment processing error. This happened when I was the assistant operations manager at Online Travel Booking Company. Customers were charged for the full amount of a second ticket when they were supposed to receive 20% off. I needed to develop a response to the overcharge that would help us keep the customers.

First, I explored how others handled similar situations in the past. I found the typical process was to fix the system error, apologize to the customer, and reimburse the customer for the overcharge. But, when we took that approach, around 10% of the customers would ask for a full reimbursement and would no longer use our services.

Next, I sketched and tested an alternative solution. I thought offering a future discount to customers would be a way to show my organization's mission of being "a reliable way to travel faster and cheaper." I calculated the cost of losing 10% of the customers compared to giving a future discount. I found offering a future discount to all impacted customers would be better for our business in the long run.

The third thing I did was circulate my idea for input and approval. I shared the additional discount idea with my director, customer service, and payment processing teams. After including their insights on successfully executing the idea, I received approval to implement.

My creative solution of reimbursing and offering a future discount caused us to retain every order and generated future orders despite the payment processing error. I was delighted when the VP of operations sent an email to all of our staff saying my actions were a great example of thinking creatively to make sure our organization fulfilled its mission. My management of this situation also led to me receiving a customer service award during our corporation's global conference.

Conclusion

Time to put it all together. You now know what it takes to build a great behavioral interview answer. Use the matrix in this guide or whatever works best for you to track your preparedness to answer the variety of questions you'll receive.

Reflection questions

1. Why is it important to focus on what the audience wants to hear instead of what you want to share? Why are the actions in your story so important?

2. How will you translate your experiences for your target audience?
3. How will you connect your behaviors to the context of your story?

Chapter 11: Answering Negatively Framed Questions

Negatively framed behavioral questions show up on most “frequently asked interview question lists” from bloggers to the society of human resources management websites. Be ready to answer questions like these:

- Will you please tell me about a time you failed?
- Will you please share your greatest weakness?
- Tell me about a time when you had a conflict.
- Will you please share when you disappointed your boss or client?
- I'd like to hear more about a time you made a mistake.

Don't give nonanswers

There are three primary dangers around these questions. The first danger is responding with a “nonanswer.” That means saying “I don't know” or “I don't think I have a weakness or have failed.” People who say they don't know typically feel dumbfounded because they're unsure how to answer without jeopardizing their candidacy, but it damages the interviewer's trust in your ability to perform under pressure. Responding with “I don't think I have failed” tells interviewers you are at best naïve, at worse arrogant. You have failed. You have weaknesses.

Don't overshare

The second primary danger is oversharing. Many people answer negatively framed questions with an excessive description of the failure. They usually start with partially describing the failure or weakness. Then they pile on self-deprecation until they eventually realize they gave more negative information about themselves than they originally planned. At that point they usually feel a rush of heat hit their faces as they fear they shared too much. That's when things get ugly. In an attempt to save themselves, they start to justify why they failed, noting how they were partially a victim of circumstance. In the worst responses, people throw an aerosol can into their dumpster fire of a response by shifting the responsibility of their failure onto their former teammates or bosses. Planning how you'll answer negatively framed questions will help you avoid terrible responses like that, but only you can prevent dumpster fires.

Don't give a fake answer

The third primary danger of negatively framed questions is giving a fake answer. Hopefully it's not surprising for you to hear that fake answers discredit your honesty and make everything you else you shared less believable. What are fake answers? Fake answers are those that attempt to spin weaknesses as a strength or failures as greatest triumphs. It's very healthy to take negative situations and use them as moments for growth. Yet, when you emphasize that a weakness is more of a strength than a weakness, or that a failure was more of a success than a failure, you're not answering the interviewer's question. An example of this is: “My greatest weakness is that I'm a perfectionist. I have very high standards for myself and others to be the very best. My perfectionistic tendencies cause me to do things like double-check emails for errors and

plan out every detail when working on projects. It's a weakness because my perfectionism leaves me tired at the end of the work week, so I spend my weekends focused on relaxing so I'm refreshed for the next work week."

The reasons for negatively framed questions

Interviewers are encouraged to ask negatively framed questions partially to assess how you handle adversity and partially to see if you're a trustworthy person. They want to know if you're someone who blames others or takes responsibility. They want to know if you're proactive. They want to know you're someone who encounters conflicts and seeks resolution before the discord causes greater issues within their organization. They want to know if you're teachable, meaning you're someone who is humble enough to admit they have more to learn. They also want to know if you're someone who expects others to give them everything to overcome their shortcomings or if you're someone who identifies the best resources to help you improve.

Seize the opportunity

You can use negatively framed questions as opportunities to build trust and feature your ability to handle adversity. You can show you're a proactive problem solver. The behavioral interview frameworks can help you do that, but you should keep a few things in mind as you apply those frameworks.

Quickly and clearly identify the issue and impact

You need call out the negative aspect early, then move on. If you were using the CAR framework and responding to tell me about a time you failed, you want to summarize the failure within the first two sentences of the Challenge. You also need to properly identify the impact. If you share a story about a time you failed, you need to briefly note the negative impact of that failure to make your response believable.

Start with stories from early in your career

The beginning of your career is characteristically a time of learning. You're adjusting to the working world and all it entails. That adjustment period is a time when many people make professional mistakes. Interviewers would expect that you failed early in your career. Leaning into that expectation and sharing a story of a negative experience early in your career will reduce interviewers' concerns that the failure or mistake will negatively impact the potential employer if they decide to hire you. Choosing a story from early in your career also supports another component of a good response to a negatively framed question.

Highlight positive progression

Selecting a story with positive progression demonstrates your ability to address issues so they're less likely to continue causing problems. If you share a story about failure or weakness, use the actions to show your progression. Try not share abstract ideas of how you could improve. Share what you have actually done to improve. If you share a story about conflict, make sure the story's actions highlight the steps you took to resolve the conflict.

Provide resolution

Ohrvall's Stepping Stone framework will cause you to naturally provide resolutions to failure/conflict/weakness questions. Failure stories often contain something you did to reduce the damage of your initial

mistake. The best conflict stories lead to a moment when you successfully work with the person you had a conflict with. The most impressive weakness stories include an example of how you've implemented a plan to work on that weakness and it produced a positive outcome. Sharing a story about your weakness of "being hesitant to speak up in big meetings" should include how you have begun practicing speaking up more often in meetings with peers. That's the content to include in the Results. Don't share a story if you can't identify how you've positively progressed.

Choose stories with indirect relevance to prospective role

In all of your other behavioral responses, you want to feature skills that are very relevant to the target industry, organization, and role. Negatively framed questions are the only time when choosing a skill of indirect relevance is the best option. That being said, you don't want to share a story that's extremely irrelevant. Aim for professionally relevant, but not essential to the job function. If you're interviewing for a corporate finance role at Nike, don't say your greatest failure was burning garlic bread you prepared for your partner on your third date. Though that's a legitimate failure if you were applying to be a chef (or were dating a foodie), it's too far removed from the relevance of your prospective role to be taken seriously. (But please learn how to use your oven timer and watch some YouTube videos on cooking, for goodness sake!) Showing a deficiency in a skill that's not essential answers the question with the least conceivable damage.

Manageable impact

It's also ideal if you can share negative experiences in which the impact of your failure was manageable. For instance, if you're applying for a data analyst role, it would be appropriate to share that you failed when you had to re-strategize a recommendation to your boss because you didn't gather input from all subject matter experts the first time. You should not share that your greatest failure is when you incorrectly completed an analysis, which cost your former company one million dollars. Hopefully you learned a lot from that million-dollar mistake, but it will be hard for your interviewers to see you as the best candidate if you share that story. Choose stories that didn't have massive negative impact.

Below is an example:

Framework	Example #1
Challenge	"A time I failed was when I led a project to increase the number of recycling bins on campus. I failed to consult the facilities management department before placing the bins around campus. As a result, many bins were placed in areas that reduced accessibility and violated building safety codes."
Action	"After learning about the issue, I immediately sent an apology email to the facilities department and asked about the proper location for the bins. Next, I gathered my team members, who helped distribute the bins and shared a plan to quickly relocate the bins during our lunch break. After relocating the bins, I thanked the team and notified the facilities department that the bins were now in safe locations..."
Result	"...the head of the facilities department emailed me saying that she was glad the issue was quickly resolved and respected my proactive leadership. This experience taught me that one of the first steps in project management is to identify all the potential stakeholders and gain their insights before taking action."

Framework	Example #1
Challenge	“A time I failed was during my time as a fundraiser for The United Way. I incorrectly recorded a key donor’s yearly giving amount, causing them to lose some trust in our administration.”
Action	“After learning about the error, I worked with my manager and bank representatives to refund the key donor. I met with my manager to identify the root cause of the error: I didn’t double-check my data inputs because I felt I didn’t have enough time. Realizing it was ultimately a time management and quality control issue, I created a task analysis for my priorities so I would know the time I needed to complete each step. I also created an SOP to make sure I wasn’t relying solely on my memory to complete important steps like running checks on the data input. In addition to apologizing to the donor for the mistake, I explained that we established a new process to prevent future mistakes...”
Result	“...the key donor said they appreciated that I took quick action to refund them and revise our institutional procedures to prevent future errors. Due to the steps to improve my time management and quality control of the fundraising records, I didn’t have any additional errors during my remaining time in the role. Since then, I’ve been a proponent of documenting processes and procedures to ensure things get done correctly and on time.”

Conclusion

Negatively framed questions can be startling, but see them as an opportunity to build trust, show your proactive problem solving, and demonstrate your ability to manage adversity. Avoid giving fake answers and oversharing. Choose moments from earlier in your career and show how you have developed since then.

Reflection questions

1. What are your professional weaknesses, failures, and moments of conflict?
2. How have you worked on overcoming your weaknesses and failures?
3. What is a way you can share those moments but focus more on the positive than the negative?

Chapter 12: Enhance Your Responses with Nonverbal Communication

Delivering believable answers

Say you ask a friend, “How are you doing today?” and she replies, “Fine, thanks, how are you?” but you don’t believe her. What causes your disbelief? You might have asked your friend the same question in the

past and received the same response, but something about her response on this occasion seems different. You find that you're concerned for your friend, so you ignore her programmed question to you, and instead you follow up with, "Are you really fine?" When your friend responds to your second inquiry, she reveals that, no, she's not fine but actually quite sad, as she's recently experienced a minor tragedy.

How many times has a similar scenario happened in your life? When that has happened, how did you know that your friend was not fully transparent? People will often say, "I'm not sure, something just feels off in those moments." Or "My gut said they were giving an artificial response." Those remarks are exactly right, and they tell us about how people listen and assess situations.

In simple terms, when people listen and assess a situation, they use their intellect and their intuition. Intellect traces the logic of what someone is sharing. Intuition follows the pattern of what someone is sharing and compares it to broader patterns from experience. Intellectual assessment tends to be a conscious activity, making conclusions easily justifiable by noting the established standard and how the person did or did not meet it. Justifying conclusions from intuition is much more difficult because the brain is crunching far more data sets to make an assessment. If you needed to justify your intuitive conclusions that a friend might not be genuinely responding, it would require you to reflect on your subconscious data points and connect them in a way that's understandable to others. That would take a lot of effort, self-awareness, and time, so most people just say, "I just had a sense you were not genuinely responding."

Interviewers rely on intuition

Interviewers also filter your responses on intellect and intuition. The "Tell Memorable Stories" chapter in this guide explained how to construct stories in a way that's rational to most interviewers, consequently appealing to their intellect. You built stories with clear logic and relevance for interviewers to see that you possess the skill they desire. Great job, that takes a lot of work. But there's more work you need to do. You see, you could give a technically correct answer but be found lacking because the response didn't pass the interviewer's intuitive assessment. As a result, interviewers will likely express that you seemed great on paper but didn't feel like you were the right fit.

How do you optimize your answers to pass an interviewer's intuitive assessment? As interviewers sit across from you, their intuitions scan your demeanor. Your demeanor is a symphony of your body language and voice. At the minimum, you need your body and voice to match your words. Great interviewees use their body and voice to expand the message they want their interviewers to receive.

Below are two examples of a person answering the same question. In one example, the person is not matching his voice and body language to his words. In the other example, the person is using his voice and body language to expand his message. Although hearing the examples would be more lifelike, the written form helps to describe the slight differences.

Question: Kenan, will you please tell me about a time you took initiative?

Example answer of not matching: "Love to," Kenan said with a straight face. "A time I took initiative was when I led an automation change that maintained quality control while reducing expenses by 85%." Kenan nodded. "It all began when I recognized my team was short-staffed and heading into a very busy season. Team tensions were high from many late nights. I wanted to figure out a way we could reallocate our limited time without reducing our services or their quality." Kenan briefly paused. "The first thing I did was analyze the projects and tasks based on time, effort, and impact. In conducting that analysis, I found there was a project that required a lot of time and basic skills but produced comparatively little impact. After that I..."

Example answer of expanding: “Love to,” Kenan said. He smiled and straightened his back just a bit more. “A time I took initiative was when I led an automation change that maintained quality control while reducing expenses by 85%.” Kenan said the second half of the sentence with a slightly slower speed and a confident tone. “It all began when I recognized my team was short-staffed and heading into a very busy season.” Kenan extended his palms upward as he shared each challenge. “Team tensions were high from many late nights. I wanted to figure out a way we could reallocate our limited time without reducing our services or their quality.” Kenan spoke and furrowed his brow as though he was thinking. Then he briefly paused. “The first thing I did was analyze the projects and tasks based on time, effort, and impact.” Kenan lifted a finger as he noted the metrics of analysis. “In conducting that analysis, I found there was a project that required a lot of time and basic skills but produced comparatively little impact.” He slowed down his speaking pace before starting his next point. “After that I...”

Reflect on the differences

If you were interviewing Kenan, how would you respond differently to the two answers? You probably found the first answer calm and collected. The second answer probably appeared more passionate and engaging. A study from Stanford suggests that interviewers’ cultural preferences for communication would impact which response they’d prefer. At least in the U.S., more interviewers would prefer to hear the second response in a behavioral interview. Many interviewers are not even aware of how their culture impacts their communication preferences. But if you’re interviewing internationally, you’ll want to consider your target audience’s cultural preferences to make sure your message is understandable and believable.

Which actions made the second answer more passionate and engaging than the first answer? Note the posture differences, changes in speaking pace, and facial expressions.

The rest of this chapter will review some of the voice and body language communication Kenan used in the examples, as well as some other approaches you can use to make your answers easy to believe. If you want to deliver answers that people believe, you’ll need to consider the other patterns interviewers are analyzing.

Expressing the truth

You might be wondering, “Why do I need to work on being believable and appealing to intuition if I’m telling the truth? Won’t telling the truth produce the voice and body language cues that show I’m genuine?” Good questions. First, don’t lie during interviews. Second, you can be seen as truthful yet artificial. Without any guidance or development, your stories will start off as believable but not understandable. As you focus on making your stories easy for listeners to understand and repeat your stories in multiple mock interviews, you can lose your original cues that caused your story to feel genuine and filled with passion.

So, for some people, this chapter is more about re-igniting the believability of stories. Other people struggle to appear genuine and passionate because they have an unexpressive personality. Then there are those who were raised in a culture that values being calm and collected over passionate and expressive during professional interactions. For those individuals, an interpretation of how many people gauge passion and authenticity through voice and body language can be helpful to cross-cultural communication.

Whether you need a reminder or you’ve never considered how your voice and body language can make a story appear more believable, reviewing the aspects of each category can take your behavioral interview interactions to the next level.

Voice

If you don't come from a culture with a tonal language or a performing arts background, you probably haven't spent much time considering how your voice influences your communication. The following is a quick review of each vocal aspect that can impact your communication for better or worse.

Volume

In an interview, you want to make sure you're speaking loud enough for the interviewer to hear you. When your voice is too quiet, interviewers will read that as a lack of confidence. Interview nervousness can snatch your breath, making it difficult to project your voice. If that happens to you, develop a pre-interview routine like deep breathing or mindful meditation to calm your nerves. During interviews, your volume should be at the level it is when you conduct work meetings, showing you're confident and passionate about what you're sharing. Speaking too loudly for interviewers is rarely as much of an issue during interviews.

Actors have used techniques like the following to warm up their voices and prepare to speak clearly at proper volumes. If you find your nerves negatively impacting your volume and pronunciation, you can try these techniques before an interview:

- **Humming while exhaling:** Inhale, then as you exhale, hum until you run out of breath. Repeat several times.
- **Rehearse opening lines:** Practice the very first things you will say, like, "Hi, I'm Dave." Or, "Yes, I'm Dave. Nice you meet you. How are you today?" Saying your first few words at a proper volume will make sure you start off on the right volume and boost your confidence.
- **Say tongue twisters:** Identify tongue twisters that connect to sounds you find hard to pronounce or say quietly due to low confidence. Then practice those tongue twisters before interviewing. Examples include "Sally sells seashells down by the sandy seashore" and "The really wet Wednesday weather was rough yet way better than the really warm weekend weather."

Tone

During interviews, vary your vocal tone. One way to vary your tone for interviews is to connect the emotion of words or a word with the emotion that's associated with them in the story. Make your voice tone rise as you share climatic moments in your story to convey excitement and passion in sharing the story. If one of your stories includes a result like, "I'm excited to say I was promoted to a manager role as a result of my work on that project," you could say the phrase "promoted to a manager role" or "I'm excited" with a different tone than the other words. Or you could choose to rise in tone on "promoted" to emphasize that important moment in your story.

Allow your tone of your voice to fall when you transition to the next stage of your story to help interviewers follow your story. Without the vocal tone falling, interviewers can lose track of your story and give up listening all together.

On the other side, there's a terrible habit among interviewees to let their pitch rise at the ends of sentences. Until very recently, a rise in pitch at the end of a phrase conveyed uncertainty or a question. If you seem to question the certainty of your answer, that will cause interviewers to not trust your answer. If you do that enough, you risk interviewers not believing in you all together.

Including some rises and falls in vocal tone is essential to sounding genuine. Don't dramatically change your tone in every sentence, or you'll sound like a cartoon character or a parent talking to their toddler.

Pace

Your goal in interviews is not to race through answers so that the interviewer can ask you more questions. Your goal is to share information in an understandable and believable way. When you speak too fast, you fail both of those goals. When interviewees speak faster than the average talking pace (100 to 130 words per minute), the interviewers struggle to keep up and walk away without a clear answer to their questions. That struggle is made worse when interviewers and interviewees don't have the same regional accents.

Speaking too fast can also cause your response to sound like a poor recital of a script. That causes interviewers to disbelieve your answer. No matter how many times you practice your story, or how fast you speak in daily life, speak at an average talking pace so your interviewer can grasp everything you're saying.

Speaking too slow is far less of an issue for most job seekers. That being said, if your mock interview partners seem to blink for unusually long time as you respond, you might need to speed up the pace.

Pauses

Pauses aren't bad. Pauses are great. Well-timed pauses before transitioning to another stage of your story can captivate listeners' attention. Pauses can even recapture listeners' attention if you accidentally begin speaking too fast. Pauses give interviewers time to note an important quality you highlight in your story. Pauses even give you a moment to recall your next phrase.

When you don't pause, you cause interviewers' processors to overheat and slow down. When you don't pause, the interview won't capture all of the great content you prepared to share. Not pausing can be seen as a lack of confidence as well. The interviewer might think you ramble to avoid interruptions because there's something you're afraid to discuss or explain in further detail. If you don't pause in any of your responses, there's a high likelihood interviewers won't find you to be genuine.

Strategize how you will use your voice

Once you have a rough idea of how to phrase your stories, spend some time planning how you'll use your voice to make sure your answers are understandable and believable. Then, practice your voice plans the moment you begin mock interviews. A voice plan can feel inauthentic to some people. If that's you, remember that the idea is to simply amplify how you use your voice in day-to-day interactions. That slight amplification meets the slight increase in time someone will be listening to you. It's rare that a person is willing to listen to another person talk about themselves for more than 15 minutes, so do them a favor and make listening easier for them by using your voice well.

If you'd like to deliver an answer that sounds artificial, you'd speak very fast, remove any changes in pitch, never pause, and eliminate all tone. Then, when you remove all body language except for blinking, you'll be dubbed "robotic." You might chuckle at that remark, but an incredible number of qualified job seekers struggle to advance because they neglect the power of their voice and body language.

Body language

Humans have used body language to communicate much longer than they've used words to communicate. That's probably why many interpersonal communications experts emphasize what you say is not nearly as

important as how you say it. What you say will appeal to interviewers' logical side, but how you use your body language to communicate will appeal to their visceral and emotional side. According to Olivia Fox Cabane, author of *The Charisma Myth*, high-stakes situations cause individuals to increase the amount they trust their intuition over their intellect. That can be a problem for interviewees because, most of the time, people aren't conscious of what their physical cues are communicating. This portion of the guide is designed to create awareness of what you're communicating with your body language.

The first goal remains to match your body language to what you're saying with your words. If you don't match the two communication tools, you'll lose your interviewers' trust, and they will struggle to believe your answers to their questions. Once you achieve that first goal, you can begin working on using body language to expand your communication. The following are the most common body language communications that occur during the interview process.

Facial expressions

Humans read faces using their intuition. Even a facial expression that lasts a tenth of a second is analyzed in conversation. People frequently form accurate judgements of how another person is feeling based on their facial expressions and other context such as voice and words. However, the way people communicate with facial expressions varies by culture. Pay attention to how people in your target culture use facial expressions to identify good ways to enhance your communication.

Eye contact

In the Western world, eye contact is a sign you respect another person's presence. Your interviewer will become anxious and doubt your confidence and attention if you don't look them in the eyes. You might have heard that advice, and so you peer into people's eyes when you talk with them. Don't do that. It makes people just as anxious as if you were to not look at them.

Build trust with your interviewer using your eyes by looking them directly in the eyes in three-second bursts. When you look at their eyes, use a warm gaze. That's when your face relaxes and your eyes widen as though you're looking at a peaceful scene. Avoid cold gazes or stares in which your eyes narrow and your brow pulls down. That gaze feels withholding and causes people to feel as though you're examining them. Also, do your best not to consistently look down when you look away from your interviewer's eyes as it can convey uncertainty. In between your three-second bursts of eye contact, try to refocus on another part of your interviewer's face rather than another area of the room. And don't be afraid to blink!

Smiling

Smiling when you meet someone is a sign that you're glad to see them. Smiling occasionally as you talk with someone is a sign you're enjoying the conversation. Smiling as you say goodbye lets the person know you were glad to meet them and wish them well. If you're someone who naturally smiles, keep doing it. If you're an unexpressive person, such a rigorous smiling routine can be exhausting and cause your face muscles to cramp. If you fall into the second category of smilers, plan your smiles and how you smile for maximum impact with minimum effort.

When you first meet someone, make eye contact, then let your smile grow for nearly a full second. Your smile should grow until you feel the corners of your eyes wrinkle. That's how people smile when they see their friends. Greeting a new person like that will accelerate the relationship development and cause them to like you faster. Next, make sure you smile as you begin answering each question. Plus, smile as you

wrap up each of your answers. Listeners tend to be most alert at the beginning and end of conversations, so bookending your responses with smiles will show them you're a congenial person without causing your face muscles to cramp.

Posture

If there's one part of the body prone to subconscious communication, it could very well be the back. Many people are unaware of what emotions their shoulders and spine communicate to others. Interviewers are aware that emotions are contagious, so make sure you're aware of what your back is communicating so you can display the emotions you want others to see.

Walking or sitting with hunched shoulders and a slightly bent back informs others that you want to avoid their detection. That could be due to a feeling of inadequacy or shame (among other feelings). Such a hunched posture is taken as an indication that you lack confidence, and it causes others to dilute their confidence in you.

You can often tell if someone is stressed by their shoulders. If you're talking with someone and their shoulders appear to be pinned to their ears, that person is likely very stressed. The tensing of shoulders toward the ears is typically accompanied by stiff movements. When you have talked with individuals showing signs of stress like tense shoulders and stiff movements, how have you felt? Many people begin to feel stressed themselves. That's because emotions are contagious. If you show signs of extreme stress, your interviewer could begin associating a feeling of stress with you. Furthermore, they could question your ability to handle the stress of the role. Taking a moment to stretch has helped many job seekers relax their shoulders before they greet their interviewers. Others work out the morning of interviews to release some stress. Some find peaceful music and mindfulness meditation reduces stiffness in their body. Find whatever works for you, so you can physically demonstrate your ability to stay cool under pressure and reduce any negative emotional contagions.

Confident people who gain others' trust quickly maintain a straight spine with relaxed shoulders. Amazingly, practicing that posture alone can make you feel more confident, generating a very positive cycle.

Shaking hands

The handshake is a physical communication tool that has developed over time to show we welcome someone. Shaking hands as a greeting started as a sign that one party meant no harm to the other. Right hands were often used to draw swords, so if you extended your right hand, the other party knew you came in peace. Though most people don't shake hands today to show they're not going to draw a weapon, many people do draw conclusions about others by how they shake hands. In the U.S., a firm, quick handshake is seen as a sign of confidence and respect. Some communications experts will tell you that the direction you tilt your hand as you shake subliminally informs the other party about how you see your authority in relation to them.

That said, the recent global pandemic has shifted how we greet each other. If you're reading this during a time of social distancing, switch from extending a hand to one of the following options that can be used in person or virtually: raise your hand to your shoulder height in a slight wave, gently tilt your head forward in a nod, clasp your hands at chest height with a slight shake, or press your hands together in the namaste fashion.

Gesturing

Your hands are a great communication tool. By gesturing, you can keep the listener engaged and make your story easier to remember. Say you were telling a story and wanted to describe how you had to make a tough

decision between two options. You could say, “I had to choose between making the decision without my manager or waiting until my manager returned to get their input.” But if you wanted to draw attention to that moment and have your interviewer more easily remember when you made a tough decision, you could use your hands to distinguish the two opportunities. That could mean raising an upward palm for each answer. Or, you could point your hand to the left as you describe one option and to the right as you highlight the other. There are many different ways you can gesture with your hands to engage the listener and make your story easier to remember.

Gesturing too much can be distracting. You don’t need to mime your stories. Mock interviews are a great time to address concerns about gesturing too much. Just ask your mock interviewer if they found your hand gestures distracting. If they say your gestures were distracting, you can dial back.

When it comes to hand gestures, you want to go big or not at all. What that means is don’t be afraid to take up some space as you gesture. If you want to use a gesture to emphasize the scale of a project, you could place your palms together and then extend them in opposite directions at the same time. Some people use that gesture as though they’re handcuffed and chained to their chair. Their hands don’t move away from their body. That makes the scale seem smaller than the words describe. It also connotes a lack of confidence. Instead, that gesture should include the hands one forearm’s distance in front your body and the hands should end at least two forearms’ distance apart from each other.

Fidgeting

Fidgeting distracts interviewers and can make them uncomfortable. You want to do your best to make sure interviewers are comfortable so they can easily focus your answers to their questions. Fidgeting includes bouncing your leg, constantly shifting your position in your seat, tugging at your clothing/jewelry/hair, and twirling your pen. If you must fidget to focus, make sure it’s out of your interviewer’s view.

Hiding

Hiding can be a micro and macro body language issue. People are most familiar with micro issues like hiding your hands. Hiding your hands gives off unfriendly vibes.

Everyone’s brain is concerned about anything that could impact your survival. Even though interviewers have very little reason to be concerned about safety in interview settings, their brains know hands can produce significant dangers. You will not be seen as a danger if you approach an interviewer with hands stuffed into your pockets, but it will slow down the speed at which interviewers will feel comfortable around you. Interviewers will be more comfortable when your hands are in clear view. Keeping your hands at your sides, on your lap, or resting on the interview table is a good way to reduce unconscious tension. Of course, what is seen as a comfortable or uncomfortable thing to hide is largely dictated by social norms, which can shift over time. In 2019, wearing a facemask as you greet someone in the U.S. would have been unusual and met with some concern, while in 2020 not wearing a facemask as advised could be seen as concerning.

Personal space

Taking up physical space is a sign of confidence. It’s a primal sign you can handle any “attack.” Strategize how you can take up physical space and practice it in a public setting before you enter the interview room. For some people, that means striding into a coffee shop with their chin up, eyes looking forward, and hands

swaying at their sides. It could mean sitting on a bench in a busy area while maintaining a straight back, broad shoulders, and feet body-width apart while others walk past. You don't need to spin around a crowded room with arms splayed. Just make minor adjustments to take up more physical space with your body. It's normal for taking up more physical space to feel uncomfortable. It attracts attention. But, the more comfortable you can be with that attention, the more confident you'll appear in the interview room.

As much as it's important to claim your personal space, you also need to respect the personal space of the interviewer. If interviewers feel uncomfortable when they interact with you, they'll associate you with that feeling of discomfort. That's important to keep in mind when it comes to personal space. If you don't give your interviewers their desired personal space, you'll be seen as an extraordinarily uncomfortable person to be around. That will not help you get the job.

Personal space violations most often occur when you meet your interviewers. Just two seconds of standing too close to them can cause an anchoring bias that you're not someone they want to interact with at work. Although appropriate personal space varies by culture and population density, try to always keep an outstretched arm's distance between you and your interviewers if you are facing them. If you're standing or walking side by side with your interviewers, you should not be able to touch them if you use your arm to create a 90-degree angle with your elbow at your side. If you reach a crowded area when walking, slow down to allow your interviewer to walk in front of you unless they insist otherwise. When seated, continue respecting the arm's length boundary between you and your interviewer.

Mirroring

Mirroring a conversation partner is an outstanding body language tool. The idea is to scan your interviewer's body language and mimic it with minor alterations. So, if your interviewer is sitting with his legs crossed to the right with his hands on his notebook, you could cross your legs to the right with your hands on the arms of the chair. If your interviewer makes a big gesture with his hands, you could make a similar gesture on a slightly smaller scale a few moments later. The result of occasional mirroring is rapid and deep trust development thanks to limbic resonance.

Conclusion

Believability is heavily dependent on your voice and body language. Interviewers will struggle to believe your answer is genuine if your voice and body language don't match your words. You can increase interviewers' trust and engagement by leveraging your voice and body language to emphasize key points in your response.

Reflection questions

1. What positive nonverbal communication actions do you use daily? Are you integrating those into your behavioral interview answers?
2. What newly discovered nonverbal communication will you practice to enhance your behavioral interview stories?
3. What are your negative nonverbal communications tendencies? How will you practice avoiding them?

Chapter 13: Good Practice Develops Excellence

Mock interviews are the best way to practice

So, you've built your stories and strategized how you'll use tone, pace, and body language to provide powerful responses. Hopefully, you feel more prepared to deliver responses to behavioral interview questions that are believable and understandable. Maybe you feel as though you're ready to walk into an interview and earn all the offers you want. Wait. Don't run into an interview room just yet. Practice your answers. You could watch a YouTube video on rock climbing and buy all of the necessary gear, but that don't mean you're ready to safely free solo climb El Capitan during your next visit to Yosemite National Park (USA). Similarly, it would be foolish to spend time gathering recommendations, fine-tuning resumes and cover letters, and completing annoying applications only to crash the behavioral interview because you didn't see the need to test your interview skills. Be good to yourself and honor the work you've done. Practice your answers and practice them in the best way possible: mock interviews.

There are two main reasons mock interviews are the best way to practice your answers. The first is that mock interviews enable you to practice speaking your answers. Even if you're interviewing in your first language, there are extra cognitive operations required to speak. Building comfort verbalizing the words you want to use is essential to delivering understandable answers. Solely imagining how you'd deliver interview answers isn't enough. Neither is reading your written notes aloud. Sharing your story's basic concepts with someone isn't enough either. Although those are sensible actions to take after you construct your stories, they don't replicate the same mental processes that will be required in the actual interview. The best way to ensure you'll speak in a coherent fashion in the actual interview is to swiftly begin practicing your stories in mock interviews.

The second reason mock interviews are the best way to practice is that they allow you to gain external feedback and suggestions for improvement. You've worked hard to build smart responses to probable behavioral interview questions. It's a work of art. For some people, critical feedback on something so personal can be deflating. However, it's better to get that tough feedback before the interview than after.

Practice with a variety of people

You'll be interviewing with a variety of people for every single role. You need your answers to be understandable and believable to each person that interviews you. The frameworks and tips provided throughout this guide are designed to make sure your answers are valued by a broad target audience, but the structures alone aren't enough. You need to see how a variety of people react to your answers. You need to hear what one person finds valuable and what another individual thinks might be missing from your answers. To gain a healthy variety of perspectives, below are a few types of people you could interview with:

Person	Value-Add	Watch-Outs
Job-searching peer	Quick to help since practice is mutually beneficial. Easy to find when in school.	Quality of feedback will vary dramatically as each person will have different levels of interviewing and job search experience. Tendency will be to focus on personal interview success rather than another's success.

Person	Value-Add	Watch-Outs
Peer who is a current or recent employee at target organization*	<p>Can share feedback and suggestions for improvement in light of organization's desire for candidates.</p> <p>Can reveal typical questions asked during interviews.</p>	<p>Availability might be limited if target role is popular.</p> <p>Potentially high stakes if the person is a current employee at the target organization. You might ask for practice, but the employee might reference the experience if/when they're asked to share insights on promising candidates.</p> <p>Can be uncomfortable for person to receive request if person recently unwilling left the role (or did not get a return offer).**</p>
Professional with 15+ years' experience in industry	Insights will likely help you align with industry values and trends.	Tendency to give advice based on personal preference and experience from job searching years ago.
Family member without much knowledge of your target role, organization, or industry	<p>Ability to understand your stories will inform you if you're making complex information easy for any interviewer to understand.</p> <p>Kind family members can provide often needed encouragement to boost confidence.</p>	Suggestions for improvement can be off since they're far removed from the job search process for your target role, organization, and industry.
Career coach	<p>Deliver feedback and improvement suggestions based on summative experience of employer feedback and what many candidates found successful.</p> <p>Low risk of mock interview performance being shared with anyone.</p> <p>Fairly broad availability.</p> <p>Often trained on current best practices for job search communication.</p>	Knowledge of roles, organization, and industry nuances varies by coach.
Recording yourself	<p>Accessible at any time.</p> <p>Does not require vulnerability.</p>	Limited perspective produces limited improvement.
Online simulators	<p>Accessible at any time.</p> <p>Can increase comfort with virtual interviewing dynamics.</p>	Level of advice varies platform to platform. Some are programmed for limited feedback. Others only provide opportunity to receive random questions and watch your response.

*These contacts should be someone who attends the same school you're attending or has generously offered to help you prepare for interviews—maybe someone you know very well. It's socially awkward to reach out

to someone you've never met or barely know only to ask for interview help. Those recipients are unlikely to respond. They might even email the hiring manager to mention the uncomfortable request.

**Choose your words carefully if you make a request to practice with someone without knowing where they stand with the organization. You could say something like:

“Hi <name of contact>, I’m preparing for a <role name> interview with <organization name>. I noticed you have recent experience working at <organization name>. Would you be willing to conduct a 30-minute mock interview and give me feedback on my response?”

If you’re willing and available, I’d greatly appreciate your help!

*Best regards,
<your name>*

Managing feedback during mock interviews

If you’re hearing the same feedback from multiple people, you should definitely listen and make adjustments. If one person makes a strong suggestion that conflicts with other people, ask them to explain their feedback more. You could ask them to provide an example and why they’d recommend taking that approach. From there, you could determine if their reasoning is sound or if they seem to be sharing a fairly unfounded personal opinion that you should ignore. As you practice with each person, you’ll hear differences and conflicts in the feedback they give you compared to the broader feedback you’ll receive. As a result, it can be difficult to know what you add, adjust, and remove from your answers and delivery the more you participate in mock interviews with others.

Furthermore, mock interviewers’ feedback and suggestions can be vague and difficult to apply. Those challenges usually happen for two reasons. The first is that most mock interviewers haven’t spent much time analyzing standards for solid interview answers. As a result, they give you feedback based on their thoughts and feelings in that moment. The second reason they give you subjective feedback is because they’re unaware of your objectives. So, to make the most of your practice time, help others to help you. Provide them your objectives and receive their input on the degree to which they think you met those objectives. Once that’s been shared, collect their subjective feedback and suggestions. That’s how you practice efficiently.

You might be thinking, “It would be wonderful to have a way for people to evaluate me on the extent I’m achieving a well-informed standard in addition to their individual insights, but how do I create that standard?” You don’t need to create that standard! Below is one for you.

Question for Mock Interviewer	
What is a skill that’s important to the interviewee’s target role, organization, or industry?	Data management
What question did you ask to assess how the interviewee used the skill in the past?	Will you please tell me about a time when you used data to solve a problem?

Part I: Recalling response	
When did the interviewee need to use the skill in the past?	
In what ways did the interviewee demonstrate that skill in her story?	
What happened as a result of the interviewee using that skill?	
What else did you learn about the interviewee's personality or broader skill set based on what they shared?	

Part II: Tips for Improvement	
Was the interviewee's answer understandable?	
If not, which of the following actions could she take to improve?	Start response with main point in one sentence Reduce details at beginning, middle, or end Follow a timeline in order of events Reduce jargon Reduce or increase overall response time Other: Other: Other:
Was the interviewee's answer believable?	
If not, which of the following actions could she take to improve?	Don't memorize every word Slow down or speed up Vary tone of voice Increase or decrease eye contact Increase or decrease body language Translate previous industry experience Quantify end results of actions Increase facial expressions of emotion Other: Other:

How to use the rubric

The mock interviewer should look over the rubric before they ask you an interview question. You can provide the skill and question for the interviewer, or you can allow more experienced professionals choose the skill and question for you. After the mock interviewer looks over the list, allow them to ask you one behavioral question. During your first few mock interviews, ask the interviewer to fill out the rubric questions as you deliver your answer. Once you know people can decipher your message, you can begin asking them to fill out the rubric once you've finished answering. Your message must be understandable before it's worth being memorable.

Continuously seek improvement

If the mock interviewers are able to accurately answer the questions in "Part I: Recalling Response," you're doing well! If the mock interviewers are unable to answer the "Recalling Response" questions, or if the interviewers' answers don't match what you wanted them to remember, ask them which tips they think would help you the most. The list provided in the mock interview practice rubric is based on the most common

causes for stories being hard to understand or not believable. Of course, you can also ask interviewers for tips not included on the list.

Keep your behavioral stories fresh

You need to practice interviewing frequently when you're job searching. If you're job seeking, you're likely juggling multiple priorities. You might desire to build out your interview stories and practice a few times before placing them into a mental container in the pantry of your mind. That way you can focus on the other things that are important in life. Warning: Interview answers aren't like kimchi, sauerkraut, or wine; they don't do well when left untouched for a long time. Too many job seekers think they can develop an answer to a question and instantly recall it later when they need it. What ends up happening is that they find themselves not performing to the level when they recently practiced. They hear themselves give an answer and feel embarrassed. That embarrassment causes nonverbal indicators that interviewers see and interpret as a lack of confidence in the response. Interview answers should be refrigerated after opening. Notes and outlines can help keep your answers fresh, but frequent practice makes sure your thoughtful answers are ready for delivery when called.

If you're reading this and seeking an internship, you're especially susceptible to not keeping your answers fresh. Often, internship seekers will work hard to keep their answers fresh until they accept an interview offer. Then they enter the internship, and, before they know it, their internship ends and they need to find another internship or full-time offer. Practicing your answers throughout your entire internship doesn't make sense, but it's wise to set aside time to review and practice your stories before your internship ends and recruiting launches.

Conclusion

Mock interviews are the best way to make sure your stories are ready for the official interview. You'll need to be vulnerable in practicing with different types of people, and open to improving and honing your content and delivery. Think critically about all of the feedback you receive. Make the most of mock interviews by using the rubric to focus feedback. Seek improvement, and keep your answers fresh to be ready whenever the next employer is eager to interview you.

Reflection questions

1. Who will you contact to conduct a mock interview with you?
2. What would you add to the rubric to help mock interviewers assess your responses?
3. What will be your routine for keeping stories fresh when there are long delays between behavioral interview opportunities?

Chapter 14: So Many Questions, So Little Time

Expect more than behavioral questions during “behavioral interviews”

Human resource professionals want to make the most of interview time. Their goal is to determine the best fit for the vacant role as quickly as possible. That means they want interviewers to ask you a variety of questions

to ascertain an accurate assessment of candidates. You should expect to receive a variety of behavioral interview questions to review your skills and anticipate your future behavior. You should also expect a series of other questions to assess how well you fit with the organization's culture as well as your technical and critical-thinking skills.

Case and technical questions

Case interviewing is commonly used to assess your critical-thinking skills. Technical questions are used to assess your technical abilities (surprise!). Unlike behavioral interview questions, the types of case and technical questions vary greatly by industry and role. As a result, you won't find case and technical questions covered in this guide. Instead, you'll find a list of recommended resources for case and technical interviews for a variety of industries and roles at the end of this guide. (In addition, Vault has case and technical interviewing guides by industry, and you can find links to those guides in the appendix of this guide.) The main question regarding technical and case questions we can cover is how to balance your preparation time.

Case and technical interviews are notoriously challenging, and many job seekers frequently cram their behavioral interview preparation a week or two before the interview. That usually results in the job seeker getting rejection feedback that they're clearly qualified but not a good fit for the organization. Make sure you have enough interview preparation time by starting your interview preparation once you identify your target industry and roles. Balance your time by spending 60 percent of your preparation efforts on case/technical interviews and 40 percent of your interview prep on behavioral questions.

The remainder of this chapter will cover how to respond to questions that are designed to assess how you behave and how well you would fit into your target industry, organization, and role.

Tell me about yourself

"So, please tell me about yourself" is a very common question to receive before having to field behavioral questions. This is not a time to provide a verbal autobiography. "Tell me about yourself" is asked so interviewers can get a general idea of your professional experience. Many interviewers do little more than glance at candidates' resumes before interviewing them, so you could use this moment to review the roles and responsibilities throughout your career. That would answer the question, but it wouldn't capitalize on an important moment.

Share, don't sell

"Tell me about yourself" is a great opportunity to reveal your character, develop trust, and set the perspective for the rest of your interview. The best answers to "tell me about yourself" remind interviewers of previous employers and roles, highlighting why you chose to work for those employers in those roles. Your reasons for selecting those roles and employers will reveal your character. However, it's crucial that you provide sincere reasons why you chose to work in each role at each employer. Microexpressions make it easy to tell when you're sharing what you think employers want to hear versus what is the truth.

When you're vulnerable enough to reveal your decision-making process throughout your career, you begin establishing trust with your interviewer. Trust is facilitated by a release of chemical called oxytocin in the brain. That chemical not only leads to the interviewer trusting your response in the moment but also generates what sociologists call "in-group bonding." In-group bonding basically means a sense that someone is safe to welcome into an exclusive social circle. In the context of the interview, it's reasonable to conclude the

exclusive social circle is closely tied to the employer you're interviewing for. And what's better than starting off an interview with a response that increases the likelihood the interviewer will see you as a good fit for the company?

Anchor in trust

If interviewers begin to see you as trustworthy based on your response to “tell me about yourself,” they're more likely to trust everything else you share in your other answers. “Anchoring bias” is when individuals use an initial piece of information to make future decisions. When our brains set an anchoring bias, it's very hard to overthrow. When you begin with a response that's sincere and vulnerable, you set an anchoring bias of trust. That's why it's so advantageous to focus your response to “tell me about yourself” on why you made the decisions you made throughout your career rather than what you did in each role. Career consultant and author Steve Dalton has created an outstanding framework to help you deliver a response to establish trust early. He encourages using a pattern of Favorite part, Insight gained, and Transition made (also known as F.I.T.). Below is an outline of an MBA student's typical application of Dalton's model.

Response structure

1. Name and hometown
2. Common thread or theme in career and education
3. Undergraduate school and degree
 - a. Favorite part
 - b. Insight gained
 - c. Transition desired
4. First post-undergrad role and employer
 - a. Favorite part
 - b. Insight gained
 - c. Transition desired
5. Second post-undergrad role and employer
 - a. Favorite part
 - b. Insight gained
 - c. Transition desired
6. Name of graduate school and program
 - a. Favorite part
 - b. Insight gained
 - c. Transition desired (your target role in your target industry)

A poor response to “Tell me about yourself”

“Sure. My name is Kelly. I'm originally from Chicago, but I lived in Arizona for a few years during high school. In my spare time, I like to travel. I recently went to Hawaii and loved learning how to surf. I found it a great mix of relaxing and exciting. One moment, you're calmly floating on the ocean, and the next, you're hopping on the edge of a huge wave. I think that describes my work style well. I'm a person who calmly scans daily activities for moments when I can make a big impact. I should mention that I studied sociology in undergrad at CNU. Go Red! I met my partner in undergrad and we now have two kids, Eli and

Betsy. I also have a dog named Howard. Umm ... I worked at CSNE as a data analyst for a few years before taking my most recent role as an assistant manager at FedEx. In my job at FedEx, I work with the operations team. In my time there, I have increased order processing efficiency by 15 percent. I received a corporate performance award for that. My director says I'm the most productive person he has worked with. Umm ... when I'm not working or traveling, you can find me volunteering at my churches' food pantry. So yeah ... that's me!"

A better response using the FIT model

"I'd love to share a little bit about myself. My name is Kelly. I was raised in Chicago and Phoenix, so I'm somewhat of an extreme weather expert. Actually, I think growing up in cities with fairly large and diverse populations is what sparked my interest in human behavior as a young kid. I used to love finding windows in the upper floors of buildings so I could get a bird's-eye view of how all the people functioned as individuals within a broader system. I followed that passion for human behavior and studied sociology at CNU.

"After graduating from CNU, I took an opportunity to work as an assistant in the Human Resources office. My favorite part of that role was learning how the concepts from my sociology classes formed policies and procedures. But during my time in that role, I noticed many of our policies and procedures were based on theories that were created decades ago. I wanted to learn how to use recent data to update HR policies and procedures. That's when I decided take a data analyst role at Cambria Consulting.

"My favorite part of my data analyst role was identifying data-based solutions for clients looking to increase employee retention. Although I found that work exciting, I had a desire to step away from the computer and spend time helping people implement ideas. So, when I was offered a job as an assistant manager of operations at FedEx, I jumped at the opportunity.

"Figuring out how to maximize each team member's strengths was my favorite part about being an assistant operations manager. Each year at FedEx, I received opportunities to work on larger projects with more teams. I knew I wanted to continue pursuing that path to higher levels of leadership, but I also knew I needed to expand my financial management and strategic planning knowledge if I wanted to thrive. That's why I decided to pursue my M.B.A. at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business.

"So far at Fuqua, my favorite part of my business school experience has been working with other leaders with unique expertise to develop strategies for local nonprofits. Now I'm looking to continue applying my analytical thinking and team management skills along with my interests in human behavior in a product management internship this summer."

Mapping a great answer

Your responses to "tell me about yourself" should be linear to reduce confusion for most interviewers. Starting with your undergraduate degree and moving forward through internships and full-time roles is a pattern that's easy to follow. Of course, if you started any businesses or volunteered with nonprofits in your career, it would make sense to include those experiences in the timeline. Your professional journey should end with a note regarding your plans for your next professional step. That next step should be to land a job in your target industry or role. Some people want to detail why they're pursuing an industry or role when they answer "tell me about yourself." Detailing "why role" or "why industry" makes your response too long for interviewers to easily retain. By withholding your response to "why role/organization/industry," you'll spur the interviewer to ask that question next, which allows you more time to respond and saves you at least one more difficult question later in the interview.

After you share your professional journey, it's okay to include a few sentences about your hobbies or interests. Stay clear of detailing accomplishments in roles. That can shift the tone from a trust-developing sharing of experience to a selling experience. Save the selling of your accomplishments for your responses to behavioral questions.

How you might hear this type of question phrased

- Will you please tell me about yourself?
- What should I know about you?
- I'd like to know more about you. What would you like to tell me?

Walk me through your resume

“Walk me through your resume” is a similar question to “tell me about yourself.” Some career advisors would say it's the same question as “tell me about yourself.” Those advisors will encourage you to use “walk me through your resume” as an opportunity to build trust by sharing why you've made the career decisions you've made. Other career advisors will suggest that you review where you worked and your responsibilities in each role. The core of this question is to gain an understanding of your work experience. Sharing your roles and responsibilities is a direct answer to the question, but you might not gain as much trust as you would if you sincerely shared what you loved about each role and why you decided to take another opportunity.

How you might hear this type of question phrased

- Will you please walk us through your resume?
- I'd like to hear more about your career journey.
- Will you please review your resume with me?
- I see you started off as an analyst and worked your way to becoming a manager. Can you tell me more about that progression?

Why industry/org/role

You're very likely going to receive questions about why you're interested in your target employer, the broader sector your employer is associated with, and the role you applied to. These questions are used to assess if you're sincerely passionate about the job opportunity (or if you're interviewing just in case your other options do not work out). Don't use this answer to “sell” yourself or try to tell the interviewer what you think they want to hear. Like “Tell me about yourself,” believability is most important in your response to “Why industry/organization/role?” questions.

Show alignment of principles

To deliver a sincerely passionate answer, you must first conduct research on the employer and industry (as mentioned in earlier chapters of this guide). For this question, you must recall what principles are highly valued in your target industry, organization, and role. Then you need to identify which of those principles matter the most to you. Your response should show how your professional principles align with the most valued principles in the industry, organization, and role. The response is made more believable when you provide a brief example of how you've shown that principle in the past or how you learned that principle is something valued in the target industry, organization, or role. Aim to give two to three reasons for why the industry, organization, and role are a good fit for you.

Response structure

Industry/Organization/Role Valued Principle #1:

1. Summary of the principle
2. Brief example of how you've seen that principle in your experience with the industry/organization/role
3. How you see that principle aligning with your principles/values/goals

Industry/Organization/Role Valued Principle #2:

1. Summary of the principle
1. Brief example of how you've seen that principle in your experience with the industry/organization/role
1. How you see that principle aligning with your principles/values/goals

The following are two example responses to “Why do you want to work at Microsoft?” One example is a typical response to this question, while the other applies the advice provided in this section. Consider which response you would find more appealing if you were an interviewer.

Bad response

“I want to work at Microsoft because I'd be proud to tell my friends and family I work there. People recognize the Microsoft brand, and that's important to me.”

Okay response

“I want to work at Microsoft because Microsoft is making an impact on the world. Microsoft has used its position as a global tech company to help humanity advance. I talked with Ali Amari, who told me his favorite part about working at Microsoft was the people. I could totally see that based on my interactions with him. I've always been someone who tries to make an impact on people, too. In fact, I won an award at TUV Tech for being such an inclusive leader. So, I want to work at Microsoft because of the impact and the people.”

Good response

“The first reason I want to work at Microsoft is because Microsoft empowers people. I've experienced that empowerment. Microsoft Excel was crucial to my success as a young entrepreneur. Excel empowered me to discover insights and manage essential data. If I could figure out the right combination of formulas, functions, and macros, I could do nearly anything! I want to make an impact on the world by helping small businesses thrive. Based on my experience and what I've heard from talking with Microsoft employees like Ali Amari, there is no better place to make an impact like that than Microsoft.”

How you might hear this type of question phrased

- So, tell me, why do you want to work for _____?
- What makes you interested in the _____ industry?
- Why this industry?
- There are many _____ firms/companies. What makes you want to work for _____ instead of the others?
- What are your reasons for applying to our internship?

Why you?

You'll hear variations of "Why you?" throughout the interview process. Questions like these are similar to "Why are you interested in this industry/organization/role?" You need to connect the principles you value, your goals, and unique contributions to what is valued in the industry, organization, and role. The primary difference in your response to this question versus "Why industry/organization/role?" is that it should be leading with your values, goals, and unique contributions.

Response structure

Your Principle #1:

Summary of your principle/goal

Brief example of how following that principle has made you successful (resume accomplishment statement)

How you see that principle aligning with the organization and/or role

Your Principle #2:

Summary of your principle/goal

Brief example of how following that principle has made you successful (resume accomplishment statement)

How you see that principle aligning with the organization and/or role

How you might hear this type of question phrased:

- Why are you the best candidate for this role?
- What motivates you?
- What is your 10-year career goal?
- What impact do you want to make on the world?
- Where do you see yourself in five years?

Career goals

When people hear the question "What's your 10-year career goal?" their minds often jump to "What job position do you want to be in 10 years?" You could respond to "What's your 10-year career goal?" by leading with your position goals. If you're pursuing investment banking and your 10-year career goal is to become a very wealthy investment banker, then starting with your position goals makes sense. But if you have position goals that head in a different direction than your target role/organization, or if you're unsure of the position you want in 10 years, leading with the position you want in 10 years is tricky. In those situations, leading with position goals can connote information that could play against you.

For instance, if you're interviewing for a marketing role and you tell them your 10-year career goal is to become a restaurateur, they're likely to ask you why you're not doing that now. That becomes a difficult conversation as you balance honesty with not sinking your candidacy, especially if you're managing a food truck as a weekend side hustle. Responding to this question with leadership goals or principles allows you to answer the question while avoiding details that potentially compromise your candidacy. Discussing leadership goals and principles also increases trust while showing your ability to set a vision and mission. So instead of leading with, "My 10-year career goal is to become a restaurateur," you can say, "I have several 10-year career goals. One goal is to expand my reputation of being a business leader who inspires others to develop

creative solutions. I see this role helping me progress toward that goal by ...” If you get pressed to offer a position in which you could see those goals manifesting, share your idea as a well-informed hypothesis while leaving yourself open to other possibilities. You could say something like, “For a good portion of my life, I’ve seen a role as a restaurateur allowing me to achieve those goals. However, I remain open to learning about other roles that could help me achieve those goals.”

If you’re unsure of your leadership goals, take time now to reflect on the type of leader you want to be. It can be helpful to begin by thinking about leaders you respect and admire. Which leaders do you admire? What do you like about those leaders? How do they conduct themselves in a way that garners your respect? What qualities do you need to develop to become a leader like those individuals? Your answers to those questions will help you identify your leadership goals. Your leadership goals will be a hypothesis you test and reconfigure over time. Try not to stress too much about what they are right now, just identify the goals.

Situational questions

Behavioral questions ask about your past to get a better understanding of how you’re likely to behave in the future. Situational questions ask for what you would do in the future by giving you a hypothetical situation.

You can prepare for situational questions in the same way you’d prepare for behavioral questions. The difference is that you want call out the “best practices behaviors” at the beginning of your response. After calling out those actions, you should share an example of when you implemented them and how it led to positive results. If you’re using the CAR framework for behavioral questions, you could simply flip the order of your content. Below is an example of what that reordered framework would look like.

Response structure

What would you do if you had to sell an idea to a manager?

Phase	Definition	Example
Action	The specific steps you would take to solve the hypothetical challenge	The first thing I would do is speak with my manager to make sure I understood...
Challenge	A similar challenge you had to overcome to achieve a goal	I experienced a similar situation when I wanted to invest in a new IT platform to streamline our financial reporting, but my manager didn’t agree. I needed to convince her that it was the right move.
Result	The outcome that proves your actions were good ones; quantify when possible	I took the actions I mentioned to you. She agreed and we implemented the new tool. As a result, we were able to reduce the time we spent finalizing our monthly financial reports by 43%.

How you might hear this type of question phrased

- What would you do if there were a conflict between two of your team members?
- How would you respond if you found out a client was unhappy with the firm?
- If you found out that a team member shared customer data he was not supposed to share, what would you do?
- Tell me how you evaluate opportunities. I want to know how you decide whether or not to take one.
- I’d like to know what you do to foster a collaborative environment on your teams.

Deep dive

Many behavioral interviews will have a pattern of the interviewer asking you a question, you deliver a complete response, and then the interviewer asks another question about a different topic. On occasion, an interviewer might ask a question to clarify something you shared. And some interviewers like to disrupt that predictability and dive deep into one of your stories.

Consulting firms are known for conducting deep-dive behavioral interviews. Deep-dive interviews start with one behavioral question, then go into follow-up questions as you share your response. After the prompt question, you'll likely receive a mix of behavioral and situational follow-up questions. You should expect the interviewer to interrupt your responses throughout a deep-dive behavioral interview.

The dynamics of deep-dive behavioral interviews provide a bevy of information about you as an interviewee. First off, interrupting allows the interviewers to collect more information in a shorter period of time. Instead of politely waiting for you to finish a full two-minute response, the interviewer verbally digs into aspects of your story that seem more valuable or concerning than others. They also move on to another topic when they have collected the information they need. Do not expect time to be wasted on niceties in deep-dive behavioral interviews. Those constant interruptions (or moments when the interruptions stop) can be very disorienting because it's contrary to social norms. At one moment, you're engaging in small talk; the next moment, you share a little bit about yourself; and then boom—inquisition. See the work of David Ohrvall, Victor Cheng, and Marc Cosentino for deeper insights on consulting interviews.

Assessing what and how

How you respond to the interrupting follow-up questions is important to the interviewers. Interviewers know good candidates prepare content for interview questions by anticipating the questions interviewers ask and thinking through how they might respond. But they want to see how you perform when you're prepared and unprepared. So, they might start on a question you likely prepared for and then ask you questions you might not have expected. Delivering coherent answers to unexpected questions tells interviewers how skilled you are at summarizing and organizing information on the spot. Maintaining a confident composure when a question seems to push back on your rationale informs interviewers how well you perform under pressure. Those skills are very important to some employers and roles.

Preparing for deep-dive behavioral interviews

So how do you prepare for deep-dive interviews? You prepare as you would for a concert or athletic game. Begin by mastering the basics. Work just as you did for other behavioral interviews. Anticipate questions, identify “best practices behaviors,” and think of how your professional stories match them. Set up a few mock interviews to practice responding to questions with a full story. Then set up a few more mock interviews, but this time ask your interviewers to ask follow-up questions.

In a mock deep-dive interview, your interviewer should ask probing questions if they spot any part of the story that seems like you didn't make the best decision. They should also probe if they hear content that seems like it contains more interesting information. Your mock interviewers should also interrupt and shift the topic when they feel like you sufficiently answered their question. Your job in these interviews is to remain understandable and believable as you respond to follow-up questions. Interviewees tend to drown the interviewer in unnecessary details when asked follow-up questions. An excess of details does not prove your point; rather, it makes the interviewer feel like you didn't coherently answer their question. When you're

asked follow-up questions, always provide a one-sentence summary response. You'll also want to continue sharing your response to the initial question.

Conclusion

Expect to receive a variety of questions during an interview even when it's called a "behavioral interview." You'll be asked about your past, present, and future. Although the structure and content of your responses is different from what you would use for behavioral stories, your goal remains the same. You want to deliver responses that are understandable and believable.

Reflection questions

1. How will you prepare for the variety of questions that are often asked in behavioral interviews?
2. Which principles do you find most appealing in your target industries, organizations, and roles?
3. What are your career or leadership goals?
4. How will you respond to the "tell me about yourself" question? How will you respond to the "walk me through your resume" question?

Chapter 15: Small Talk for Interviews

If there's one activity that occurs in nearly every stage of the U.S. job search, it's small talk. Small talk will occur before, during, and after your behavioral interview. Although small talk isn't officially part of the behavioral interview, how you engage in small talk will influence your interviewer's evaluation of the behavioral interview. According to a 2015 study by researchers at Clemson University, Florida State University, and Old Dominion University, the first 15 minutes of interviewers' interaction with you will make up 60 percent of their decision about your candidacy. That means you need to be small talk savvy to succeed in behavioral interviewing.

Small talk can be challenging

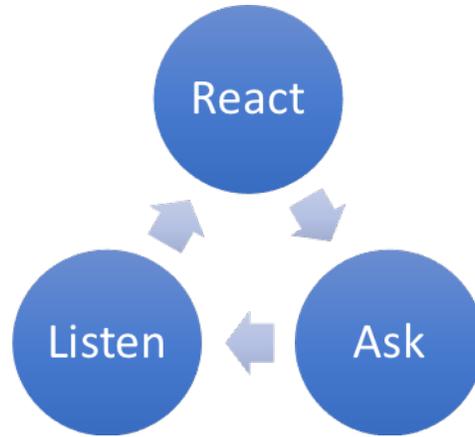
Small talk can be very challenging for job seekers due to the multitude of personality differences and social norms at play. Below are a few of the common small talk actions that can be particularly challenging for people:

- Initiating conversation by posing questions after greeting interviewer
- Following up on responses to questions without being prompted
- Discussing topics you're not familiar with (U.S. football, new city, etc.)
- Avoiding topics considered inappropriate for business (religion, relationship status, politics, etc.)
- Interpreting body language to know whether to keep talking, change the topic, or end the conversation

A framework for small talk

Your small talk goal is to get the other person to like you enough to somewhat trust you. You want your interviewer to believe they would enjoy chatting with you around the coffee machine in the office or sitting next to you during business trips. You also want them to see that you're an individual who'll be kind and honest with them.

Preparing for small talk success begins with familiarizing yourself with the typical structure of small talk. Most small talk conversations have a three-part structure: 1) react, 2) ask, 3) listen.



React

After you greet an interviewer and say “Hello, I’m <name>,” you’re ready to begin small talk. The first step of small talk can be initiated by anyone. It’s a reaction to the initial greeting. A reaction to the initial greeting could be, “It’s nice to meet you, <interviewer name>. Thanks for taking time to talk with me today…” After that, you can jump into the next stage of asking a question.

Eventually you’ll complete a full cycle of asking a question and listening before returning to the React stage. After you listen to your interviewer answer a small talk question, you can determine the best way to react based on what you heard. Sometimes your reaction will be verbal and sometimes nonverbal. If you noticed your interviewer was excited about a topic, ask a follow-up question about that topic. That’s the best option, as follow-up questions have been shown to increase likability by 20 percent. If you’re asked a question, briefly react to the question and then ask a similar question. It’s important to reveal a bit about who you are for your interviewer so they feel comfortable sharing more about themselves. If they shared something you can directly relate to, share two sentences about how you relate to what they shared. Then ask a follow-up question about the same topic, or ask a question about a new topic.

Ask

The Ask stage is when you ask questions to engage your small talk partner. Starting with, “How are you today, <name>?” is a simple and effective ask.

As Steve Dalton, program director for Daytime Career Services at the Fuqua School of Business, has suggested, your partner’s response to “How are you?” is very informative. The content and conduct of your partner’s response can inform you how best to manage the rest of the conversation. If your partner delivers a short response, you know to also deliver a short response. If your partner responds with “Okay,” you know that negative signals could likely be due to that person not feeling their best. A response of “Okay” is also a good indicator that person might not be in the mood for a long dialogue. The emotional information that “How are you?” provides is not something you want miss.

As you engage in rounds of small talk, you’ll need to ask a variety of questions to keep the conversation going—or, even better, follow whatever topic your interviewer seems to show excitement about. You’ll be able to tell what excites them by following the next small talk stage, listening.

Listen

This is the most overlooked step in the small talk process. You can stand out in the interview by actively listening to what interviewers are saying. Although interrupting speakers is common in the U.S., you should avoid interrupting your interviewer. Actively listening means using facial or vocal expressions to demonstrate you understand what the speaker is saying. At the same time, you want to interpret what your interviewer is saying to determine how you'll respond.

As you listen to what interviewers are saying, focus on what excites them. Pay special attention to anything that excites them and that you can directly relate to. If they get excited about traveling to Tokyo, and you studied in Tokyo, you can use that topic to form a response that allows you to connect experiences with them.

Getting savvy

After listening and reacting to your interviewer's answer to "How are you today?" it's ideal to move towards questions that get people talking about things they enjoy. Typically, people like talking about travel, food, entertainment, and weekend plans.

Here's an example of continuing to focus the conversation on topics a person enjoys:

Job seeker: "So, other than interviewing interns this week, what else have you been working on?"

Interviewer: "Well, it's been primarily interviews this week. It's actually a nice change of pace. I'm usually focused on yearly project analyses this time of year. Nevertheless, I'm looking forward to the weekend."

Job seeker: "I'm glad you're enjoying the change of pace. And I'm looking forward to the weekend as well. I'm actually staying in the city for the weekend. What do you like to do around the city when you have a free weekend?"

Interviewer: "Good question. It's been a while since I had a free weekend. My kids' soccer games have been keeping my weekends busy. But for you, I'd recommend checking out Main Street if you haven't already. There are lots of great museums and restaurants down there."

Job seeker: "I'm always up for a good museum. Is there one on Main Street you recommend above the others?"

Interviewer: "It's a tough call. But if you get to the Art Museum around 9 a.m., you should beat the crowd and still be able to make it to the Museum of Natural Sciences before lunch."

Job seeker: "Perfect. Thanks for the tip!"

Interviewer: "Well, I hope you have a great time seeing those museums. Alright, we better jump into some of the more formal questions I need to ask you. Before I do, here's our agenda..."

How do you manage unfamiliar topics in small talk?

Often, people feel like they can't continue a small talk topic if they don't know about it. A simple move to build trust and likability when engaging in unfamiliar topics is to take the role of a learner and ask a few questions. People enjoy teaching others about their favorite subjects. After you've given your interviewer

the opportunity to show off their expertise, bridge the conversation into a topic you're more comfortable discussing.

Here's an example of how you can handle a conversation when the topic is something you know little about:

Job seeker: "What are you looking forward to doing this weekend?"

Interviewer: "I've got tickets to see one of my favorite bands, so I'm looking forward to that."

Job seeker: "Nice! Which band?"

Interviewer: "I'm going to see Death Cab for Cutie. Have you heard of them?"

Job seeker: "Can't say I have. What sort of music do they play?"

Interviewer: "Hmmm...I guess you'd call them alternative rock from the early 2000s."

Job seeker: "I'll have to add them to my Spotify playlist. Any album I should start with?"

Interviewer: "Good question. Maybe try Plans first. 'Soul Meets Body' was a big hit from that album."

Job seeker: "Thanks, I'll start with that. I actually was listening to another band the other day, and they said they were inspired by an early 2000s band called the Postal Service. Have you heard of them?"

Interviewer: "Oh yeah, of course! The Postal Service was a Ben Gibbard side project. He's the lead singer and guitarist of Death Cab!"

The point here is you want to share enough information for your interviewer to feel like you're invested in the conversation while asking a question after you share your response. Remember, unfamiliar topics are a great opportunity to ask questions and allow your interviewer time to talk about something they love. The more they get to talk about what they love, the more they like you.

How do you know when to end small talk?

The short answer is to follow the lead of your interviewer. Interviewers will typically move from small talk to the interview by beginning to share the interview process and asking if you're ready to begin. At other times, they'll signal the interview is starting by saying, "Tell me about yourself." Either way, allow them to take the lead. If you run into a long pause, express appreciation by saying "<name>, I'm so glad to be interviewing with you today," and then allow the interviewer to make the next move.

Conclusion

Sometimes you'll do a great job engaging in small talk. Other times, you'll feel like you could have done a better job at small talk (and sometimes you'll find interviewers could improve their small talk skills). Know that nearly everyone, at times, experiences difficulty with small talk. Your goal is to get the other person to like you enough to somewhat trust you. Ultimately, the people who become small talk savvy are those who continue to practice the stages of react, ask, and listen before entering the interview room.

Reflection questions

1. Why is small talk an important part of behavioral interviews?
2. What is the goal of small talk?
3. What is the most overlooked aspect of small talk?

Chapter 16: Present Your Best Virtual Self

Sooner than later, you'll have a virtual interview

Virtual interviewing is increasing in popularity. Human resource professionals find virtual interviewing makes the hiring process more efficient. They're able to reduce travel costs, increase flexibility, and potentially interview more candidates using virtual interviews. On the other hand, the majority of job seekers don't like virtual interviewing. Those who dislike virtual interviewing feel the format doesn't allow them to judge a job opportunity. Many people who dislike virtual interviewing add that it limits their connection with the interviewer. Whether you like virtual interviews or not, you'll likely participate in one sooner rather than later.

Interviewers use what you share and how you share it to form an opinion about your candidacy. Speaking to someone over the phone and through video adds complexity to your delivery. You should make a few adjustments to be understandable and believable in virtual interviews.

Prioritize setup

How you appear on camera or sound over the phone will impact the interviewer's perception. On a high level, the quality of your appearance and sound will be seen as a reflection of your quality as a candidate. You don't need to spend money on a premium camera and microphone. Just do a little planning the day before your virtual interviews. Set a calendar reminder the day before for the following actions.

Plot out quiet zones

You can have great answers and outstanding delivery over the phone, but if the interviewer can't hear you, your answer won't be worth much. When the interviewer is short on time, it's easier for them to advance the person they could hear over the person that poorly planned for the call. After all, what can they evaluate if all they could hear was your dog barking? Plan for your virtual interviews. Find quiet spaces in buildings where you spend most of your time. Don't find "relatively" quiet places like a less busy hallway.

Test your equipment

Once you find a good location, you'll want to test your equipment. You can be in a quiet room with no visual distractions, but if your camera and microphone malfunction, the great location won't serve you well. If you have a video interview, give yourself two camera options and two microphone options. For most people, that means making sure your computer and phone are well charged or that you're in a location where you can plug in your device. Stash your headphones where they will be within reach. If your headphones don't work the day of the interview, switch to speaking into your phone before using the speakerphone setting. After you prepare and test the hardware, test the software. Employers should notify you which platform they will

use to conduct the interview. Whether you're familiar with the platform or not, test it. You might know how to use the live video platform your interviewers select, but if you don't test it, you could easily find yourself emailing the employer for a few extra minutes before you start so you can download the app updates. Testing a day before will give you time to install the most recent updates and watch user tutorials for any platforms you have not used before.

Position camera to reduce distractions

If you're video interviewing, testing also allows you to make sure your camera position is ideal. Your camera should be placed at your eye level. That will make the interaction feel the most professional to interviewers. Without propping up your laptop, the standard table height will force you to tilt your camera or hunch your back. Interviewers don't want to be looked down upon or look up your nose. If you're using a laptop, find some books or boxes to place under your computer. If you're using the camera on your phone to interview, find a stable location to place your phone at eye height. Don't rely on your arm to remain steady throughout a 15–30 minute video interview. Even if the movements are minor, they will distract the viewers from the message you're trying to share. The camera should focus on the top third of your body. You also want to find a neutral background. The goal here is to avoid any distractions or reveal any details of your personal life you would rather not share. Hopefully you would not conduct a video interview with a keg and empty cups piled in the background, but even something like political campaign buttons can ignite unspoken biases and judgements in interviewers. Look for a plain wall in a smaller room across from a window to the outdoors. Locations like that will minimize noise and visual distractions while offering great lighting.

Plan to deliver shorter responses

During in-person interviews, interviewers' biggest distractions tend to be their thoughts. Thoughts about the next step of their projects or how your voice reminds them of their favorite uncle bounce in and out of their heads. When you're in the same interview room, ignoring thoughts like those is relatively easy for interviewers thanks to social norms and a favorably low level of distractions compared to their ability to focus. When you deliver several responses that last longer than two minutes in person, your interviewer's ability to maintain focus will gradually be compromised. When the interviewer is not in the same room as you, the tendency to be distracted increases. Think about the last time you attended an online lecture or dialed in for a live meeting. You probably placed your microphone on mute as you conducted other activities. Even if your microphone was not muted, your eyes could wander and you could distract yourself with items on your desk as you engaged in conversation with the other person. Your interviewers will be tempted to do the same. That's why it's important to deliver shorter responses to questions in virtual interviews. By giving answers that are no longer than one minute and 30 seconds, you can reduce the likelihood of interviewers' focus succumbing to the extra distractions around them.

Avoid using notes

Prepare to not use notes in your virtual behavioral interview. You might think because interviewers can't see your notes that they don't know you're using any. If you think that, you're wrong. Your eyes and speaking will give it away. If you have your notes nearby, your eyes will be tempted to glance at them for reassurance, even when you don't need them. Interviewers will see your eyes dart away from the screen and notice atypical speech patterns that will inform them you're using notes. That will make you seem unprepared and less believable. Do yourself a favor and keep your notes far from your reach just as you would during an in-person interview.

Prepare to increase voice and facial expressions

Keeping answers shorter than in-person interviews is not the only way you can maintain interviewers' attention. You should also use your voice and facial expressions to be more interesting than the Rubik's cube on their desk. As discussed in the earlier chapters, using body language is a key factor in conveying confidence and sincerity. Since the camera should focus on the top third of your body, you'll lose the ability to leverage many aspects of body language in video interviews. In phone interviews, you'll rely on your voice alone. As you'll have fewer nonverbal communication tools, you need to slightly increase the amount and degree that you use your voice and face to communicate. You don't want to act like a children's television show host, but you do want to increase things like intonation, variations in speaking pace, and the number of times you smile. Yes, you can tell if someone is smiling even if you don't see their face. For video interviews, you want to make sure you're looking into the camera and not at the screen. Then you can use a combination of widening and narrowing your eyes, frowning and raising your brow, as well as thoughtful glances to the side to enhance your believability and keep the viewer engaged. Don't be the candidate who speaks in a monotone with few facial expressions beyond blinking.

Additional tips and checklists

You'll set yourself up for a high-quality virtual interview if you take the steps of prioritizing your setup, shortening your delivery, and increasing voice/facial expressions. Those steps are the most overlooked and impactful when it comes to virtual interviewing. However, there are a few other tips to keep in mind when you're participating in phone or video interviews that require less explanation. Below is a checklist including the steps already recommended and a few additional tips to make sure you perform the best you can during virtual interviews.

Day before the interview

- Find two quiet, private rooms (ideally with natural light)
- Identify two communication devices you'll use (phone/laptop/tablet)
- Download or update and test software if it's a video interview
- Use a professional email and screen name when you create a profile on the interview platform (First name_Last name)

Day of the interview

- Wear the same attire you would for an in-person interview
- Make sure communication devices are charged before interviewing
- Print a hard copy of your resume to reference if needed
- Find a pen and paper to take notes during the interview
- Fill up a water bottle to keep nearby in case your mouth dries out during the interview
- Move any pets to another room
- Position lamp or window diagonal to where you'll sit to make your face easy to see
- Select a plain wall for your background
- Arrange the camera so it's at eye level and hands-free
- Test your camera video and audio functionality
- Place device chargers within arm's reach
- Place a sign outside of the room that says, "Quiet please: Interviewing"
- Close all nonessential apps and programs on your devices

- Turn off call waiting on your phone
- Turn off laptop notification sounds

During the interview

- Avoid using the speakerphone
- Don't eat, chew gum, or sip your water excessively
- Say “pardon me,” mute your microphone, and turn away from the camera if you need to cough, sneeze, or wipe your nose
- Keep answers short (less than 90 seconds)
- Be expressive with your face and voice
- Look into the camera, not at the screen
- Remain calm if there are any technology issues

Arrange mock virtual interviews

Given the nuances of virtual interviewing, it's worth your time to participate in a virtual mock interview. There are many mock virtual interview platforms you can use to practice such as BigInterview and InterviewStream. If you're attending a university, there's a good chance your career center has a subscription for you to access an online interviewing platform. You can also film or record yourself responding to questions and analyzing your performance. Enlisting a career coach with interviewing expertise is a great way to receive customized feedback on your virtual interviewing performance. What's most important is that you practice the nuances to virtual interviewing before participating in your first one with high stakes.

Conclusion

Trends point toward virtual interviews increasing rapidly. You need to be ready for the nuances of behavioral interviewing virtually versus in person. Following the checklist in this chapter and arranging a mock virtual interview will set you up for success.

Reflection questions

1. How does interviewing virtually impact your preparation and delivery?
2. What will you do to make sure you're ready for virtual interviews?

Chapter 17: Prepare to Ask Questions at the End of Your Behavioral Interview

When people think of preparing for an interview, the first thing that typically comes to mind is answering an interviewer's question. Consequently (and rightfully so), people spend hours thinking through questions they might be asked and how they would respond to those questions. Wise job seekers will spend a few hours practicing their responses in a mock interview setting. As a result, they enter an interview and provide understandable and believable answers to nearly every question they're asked. But then, in the final minutes of the interview, the interviewer asks a question the job seeker did not consider or practice: “So, what questions do you have for me?”

Determine if they are a compatible match for you

If you've interviewed for a position in the past, you might recall that question. One obvious reason interviewers ask that question is to allow job seekers to collect any details about the organization. Agreeing to work an employer is to agree to a formal relationship. And it's important for both parties in the relationship to make sure they're compatible. The interview doesn't happen unless a job seeker or employer connects with the other party to express interests. Mutually agreeing to an interview is akin to a first date. During that time, the employer might find you very appealing, but before they move closer to making an agreement to enter into an exclusive relationship with you, they want to make sure you're still interested in them. (Some employers might move slower before entering into a committed relationship, so they'll conduct several rounds of interviews before making any decisions ruling out other potential partners.) They understand questions about compatibility can arise between the time you agree to interview and during the actual interview. Clearing up those questions at the end of the interview is efficient. It reduces the time spent answering questions later. But asking if you have any questions at the end of an interview also gives the employer an indicator of how you view the relationship.

If you were to text a new friend or a partner to ask if they'd like to go to a new restaurant in town, you'd likely read her response in several ways. If she said, "That sounds great! What time and where should we meet?" you'd probably feel at least mildly excited. You might appreciate the friend's focus on logistics compared to your other friend who agreed to go to a concert last weekend but didn't confirm his availability until after tickets were sold out. You'd also likely process the response on a subconscious level. It would go something like: I think it's nice the person is available ... even better she wants to spend that time with me ... this relationship is progressing and could become a reliable source of healthy companionship ... I will move forward with the assumption she's more interested in spending time with me than not. Now, if you texted your friend with a dinner invite, and she said, "No thanks," you would probably question how interested she is in continuing the relationship (of course, what you view as an appropriate answer to this question can vary by culture). Those same reactions occur in the interviewer's mind depending on how you respond to "So, do you have any questions for me?"

If you're interested in working for the employer after interviewing with them, you want to respond to "Do you have any questions for me?" with more than "I do not, thanks." Anticipate the opportunity to ask questions and construct three to five questions to ask the interviewer. Many interviewers will analyze your questions as reflections of your personality and skills. That means some questions are better to ask than others. You need to be thoughtful about which questions you choose to ask. There are a few types of questions to avoid, as well as a few ways to ask questions that showcase your interest in the target role.

Questions to avoid

Questions interviews are not allowed to ask you

There are a variety of topics that interviewers should not ask you about during an interview. Any question to determine your religion, family situation, sexual orientation, and citizenship are all illegal for interviewers to ask in the U.S. Although it might not be illegal for you to ask interviewers questions about those topics, it's certainly inappropriate and won't bode well for your candidacy. That might be obvious to some individuals, but your brain will be very tired at the end of an interview, which can cause you to say very foolish things. Don't allow yourself to ask interviewers questions that would be illegal for interviewers to ask you.

Questions about salary and other benefits

Some individuals are comfortable asking questions about a position's salary and benefits during an interview. One issue with asking about salary or benefits during the interview is that the person interviewing you might not have any idea. That's typically something handled primarily by the human resources team and sometimes the hiring manager. Even if you're interviewing with people who are likely to know the salary and benefits for your target role, asking about those details during the interview can set the wrong tone. They're interviewing you to assess your skills and how your personality would fit into the culture of the organization and work team. Asking about salary when they're assessing your personality could easily cause them to see you as someone less interested in the organization and more interested in making money for personal gain. That could cause them to see you as someone who'd take another offer or leave their organization the moment more money was offered. That starts to point toward you being a higher-risk hire, which is not how you want to be seen when there are plenty of other highly qualified, less risky candidates. Hold off on salary and benefit questions until they give you an offer. That's widely seen as an appropriate time to ask questions and negotiate.

Questions you should know the answers to before entering the interview room

Hiring new employees is costly. A large part of the cost is the time required to interview candidates. Organizations take many measures to cut the time/cost of the hiring process. As mentioned in the introduction, behavioral interviews were designed to more accurately identify the candidates most likely to be successful so that organizations could reduce the cost of bad hires. Don't ask questions that don't use interviewers' time well. Specifically:

1. Don't ask questions that were covered during other interactions with the employer. A large amount of communication with an employer should occur before you enter the interview room. Ideally, you'd have conducted informational meetings with individuals at the employer before you interview. You've also likely received information about the employer in phone calls and emails with human resources team members. The employer's members spent valuable time crafting those messages and answering your questions. To ask about something that was covered elsewhere risks showing yourself as fairly inconsiderate and lacking diligence.
2. Don't ask questions about information that can easily be found online. Instead, pull out your phone after the interview and type your questions into your preferred search engine. Avoiding questions that can be answered through an online search will show you're someone who is skilled at leveraging technology to be efficient (asking shows the opposite). If you're unsure what can be found online, you missed a key step in preparing for behavioral interviews: identifying what an organization values in ideal candidates by researching the organization online.

Asking these sorts of questions might not destroy your candidacy, but they certainly won't help. Show that you respect people's time by thoughtfully selecting questions before the interview.

Questions to Ask

There are many questions that would be appropriate to ask at the end of an interview. Your goal is to show your interest while increasing your understanding of the organization and role. Some questions will more closely hit those goals than others. Regardless, ask open-ended questions that build on the information you've already gathered.

Questions that are open-ended

Open-ended questions increase the amount someone shares in response. Questions that start with “do” yield shorter responses than questions that begin with “what/how/when.” If you ask the interviewer, “Does the organization encourage team building by hosting social events?” you could very well receive a response of “Yes” or “No.” Instead, lead with “What does the organization do to build teams?” and you’ll get far more insights. Here are some other examples:

- What are my next steps in the process?
- What is the broader decision-making timeline, and when do you think I’ll hear about my opportunities to move forward?
- Which skills or attitudes cause people to quickly advance in the organization?
- How do people describe the department or team I would be working with?

Questions that are broad and specific

In Steve Dalton’s book, *The 2-Hour Job Search*, he outlines the type of outreach email that’s most likely going to receive a reply. One point of the six-point outreach email is that the request for information is specific yet broad. He recommends that approach because you’re seeking targeted information while trying not to unintentionally prohibit broader insights. Your interview is also about winning over the interviewer and gaining clarity on the organization and role. So, when you have the opportunity to ask questions at the end of an interview, make sure your questions are specific yet broad. That will allow the person to share insights even if they have limited experience interacting with someone in your target role.

Questions about the interviewer’s experience at the employer

Each person will bring a slightly different perspective to a topic based on their experience. Lean into that diversity of thought by asking interviewers questions about their personal experience. You’ll benefit from the additional data point on a subject, and the interviewer won’t feel the pressure of speaking on behalf of the entire organization. Another benefit of asking for the interviewer’s perspective is that it ends the interaction on a relational note rather than a purely transactional question. Seemingly small adjustments like those will differentiate you from the other qualified candidates. The more likable and 90 percent qualified candidate wins every time versus a 100 percent qualified but less likable candidate. Ask about the interviewer’s perspective and build likability by asking questions similar to the following:

- What would you say is the trend that will significantly impact the organization in the next five years?
- From your perspective, what type of person is a great fit for the organization?
- What’s one of your favorite parts about working at the organization?
- What’s a project you think could positively impact the organization?
- How would you describe the organization’s leadership?

Questions that build on information you’ve already gathered

Asking follow-up questions to what you’ve already learned is an outstanding way to show your diligence and interest in the organization. Starting your question with “I know from reading the company website...” or “In my conversations with Jane I learned that ...” are excellent ways to begin an end-of-interview question.

From there, you choose the topics and ask interviewers for their perspective. You might say something like, “I know from reading the company website that the organization was just recognized as one of the best places to work in Dallas. I read the linked business magazine article connected to the award and saw employees mentioned opportunities for professional development as one of the reasons the organization is a great place to work. What would you say are some the professional development opportunities that employees seem to find the most beneficial?”

What if you don’t have any additional questions?

On occasion, most or all of your planned questions will get answered throughout the interview. The next steps in the process might even be covered. If that happens, and you don’t have the brainpower to think of new questions in the moment, you want to give an answer that conveys your sincere interest in the role. That’s easily done by briefly noting you took initiative to find the answers to many of your questions before the interview:

“Thanks. You answered the questions I planned, and I don’t have any additional questions at this time. I feel my conversations with x and y, as well as our interactions today, have given me enough information to know ___ company is somewhere I could see myself thriving. Thanks for your time. It’s been a pleasure talking with you.”

Conclusion

End-of-interview questions allow you to demonstrate your interest in the employer and clarify if it’s an organization you want to work for. Some questions are better to ask than others. You should always ask about the next steps in the process, but if that’s covered and you don’t have any other questions, make sure you respond in a way that shows sincere interest.

Reflection questions

1. What do you value in an employer and job?
2. Which questions can you ask that clarify if the employer aligns with your values?
3. Which questions can you ask to show sincere interest in the job opportunity?

Chapter 18: Activities and Resources

Activity #1: Re-evaluating behavioral cases

Now you know what it takes to deliver behavioral interview answers that are understandable and believable. Test your recently gained insights by re-reading the behavioral interviewing cases from the introduction. Once again, pay attention to what each interviewer and candidate says. Observe how they deliver their message. Consider the broader situational and interpersonal aspects that impact the interview. After you re-read each case study, answer the reflection questions and determine what you would add to the critiques for each case below.

Case study #1 critique

3 things Mark is doing well	3 things Mark could do better
Mark's nonverbal communication shows confidence and keeps the interviewer engaged.	Research potential questions, skills, and behaviors before the interview.
Mark is taking small talk seriously.	Use behavioral story structures to make responses easier to follow and remember.
Mark is very genuine.	Listen to the question asked and provide relevant actions.

Case study #2 critique

3 things Karen is doing well	3 things Karen could do better
Karen is considering likely questions before the interview.	Develop awareness of nonverbal communication and leverage techniques to show passion and confidence.
Karen delivers relevant responses.	Memorize less.
Karen is well prepared for end-of-interview questions.	Increase critical-thinking ability to discern what an employer is assessing when surprised by a question.

Case study #3 critique

3 things Lynn is doing well	3 things Lynn could do better
Lynn is listening closely during small talk.	Translate experience for her target role/audience.
Lynn provides sincere responses.	Use structure to make story easier to understand.
Lynn interacts with confidence.	Consider skills the interviewer is assessing and share behaviors/actions that align with them.

Activity #2: Skills, behaviors, and accomplishment identification

The following list contains actual recruiter questions curated by Vault.com. Review the questions to identify:

1. What the core question is
2. Which skill(s) the question is assessing
3. Which sequential behaviors would demonstrate the skill(s)
4. Which accomplishment you could use that features the skill and associated behaviors

Don't forget that some questions might be a "wild card," meaning you get to select the skill you want to highlight. You'll also likely find some questions ask about the same skill.

The more comfortable you become quickly identifying the skills, behaviors, and relevant accomplishments, the better you'll be prepared to deliver excellent responses to any question.

Once you complete this activity, try to find someone to ask you more questions through a mock interview to see how you do live. If you'd like to take your interviewing abilities to the next level, the author of this book offers customized mock interview practice and coaching at balancebroughtforward.com.

Question	Core Question	Skill	Behaviors	Accomplishment
Tell me about a time you set a goal in one of your previous positions and the steps you took to achieve it.				
Tell me about a time when you had to manage conflicting priorities and still exceed someone's expectations.				
Tell me about a time you used technology to effectively complete a task or analysis.				
Tell me about a time you had to be a problem solver and the methods you used to solve the issue.				
Tell me about a time you were proactive in soliciting performance feedback from a mentor or client.				
Tell me about a time you enthusiastically led a work team through a major change initiative.				
Tell me about a time you had to influence others' opinions on a project or work situation.				
Tell me about a time you went out of your way to learn.				
Tell me about a time when you had to think on your feet. What was the outcome?				
Tell me about a time when you provided excellent customer service.				
Tell me about a time (or times) you worked on a tight deadline.				
Tell me about a time when you made a mistake and had to fix it.				
Tell me about a time where you had conflicting responsibilities (home, school, work) and how you prioritized and worked through those conflicts.				
Tell me about a time you had a difficult conversation with someone you worked with, and tell me about the result.				
Tell me about a time you faced an extremely challenging situation on the job and what you took away from it.				

Question	Core Question	Skill	Behaviors	Accomplishment
Tell me about a time when you worked with a team to achieve a common goal, including the specific role that you held within the team.				
Tell me about a time when you were faced with a decision and had to research a number of possibilities—how did you approach the situation and ultimately determine a conclusion or outcome?				
Personal ethics is critical to gaining commitment from a team. Tell me about a time you were involved in a team-based situation where the resolution clearly reflected your level of integrity.				
Tell me about a time when your listening skills allowed you to exceed the expectations in the delivery of a task or project.				
Tell me about a time when you were required to complete extensive research for a project, and what was the end result?				
Tell me about a time you handled stress and what you did to help manage the stress.				
Tell me about a time when you had to make a difficult decision in a meeting with a customer or manager.				
Tell me about a time when you were in a group project and had to take initiative.				
Tell me about a time you were on a group project, something wasn't going well, and how you resolved it.				
Please provide an example of constructive criticism that you've received and what you changed going forward as a result.				
Communicating is an important part of our business, so tell us about a time when you had to communicate with a person who was difficult to communicate with.				
Working in teams is a critical part of our job—you have to learn to interact well with a variety of personalities—so give me an example of when you were in a group project and had to interact with a group member that had a conflicting personality.				
In your personal life and during your work experience and education, what time management skills have you developed that have allowed you to find an even balance?				

Question	Core Question	Skill	Behaviors	Accomplishment
The ability to research is critical to our job, so give me an example when you had to research something, including the process you went through and the ultimate outcome.				
Tell me about a time that you received a bad grade on a school assignment and how you dealt with the situation.				
Please describe situations where you had a difficult conversation or hostile environment—how did you deal with the situation and what did you learn from it?				
Describe a significant regret and what you learned from it.				
Tell me about a time when you had to communicate difficult news.				
Tell me about a time you've been disappointed in your performance. What did you do in response?				
Tell me about your process of considering different majors/career paths.				
Describe a time at work or school when you had to modify your communication style or approach based on your audience.				
Tell us about a time in which you stood up to/ corrected a superior.				
Discuss ways you have coached or mentored others, or helped others to accomplish their goals.				
What is your natural role in a group setting? When have you had to step out of that natural role?				
Give me an example of a time when you missed a deadline. How did you handle it?				
Give me an example of a time you received constructive feedback. How did you react?				
Give me an example of a time when you clashed with management.				
Tell me about a time you had to deliver sensitive news and how you handled it.				
Tell me about a time when you help resolved a conflict between two people. What was the conflict and what strategies for resolution did you use?				

Question	Core Question	Skill	Behaviors	Accomplishment
Tell me about a time when you were on a team and the team's performance was coming up short of your expectations. What were your strategies for improving the team's performance? How did your team members respond? Were you successful?				
Tell me about a time when you went above and beyond for a client.				
Tell me about a time when you had to teach a skill to someone else who was having a hard time picking it up. What initial challenges did he or she have? How did your approach to teaching the skill adjust?				
Tell me about a time when you struggled with multiple deadlines and how you effectively managed the situation.				
Tell me about a time when you had to think outside the box.				
Please provide an example of when you took on a leadership role (at school or work or in an extracurricular activity), and it didn't turn out so well.				
Please provide an example of when you didn't think you were up for a challenge and you were really proud of how it turned out. How did you overcome the hurdles/obstacles?				
How do you handle stress? Give me an example of a stressful situation and how you resolved it.				
Give me an example of something in your professional career where you were instrumental to the success of the project.				
What techniques have worked well for you in creating a high-performing team?				
What experiences do you have that would benefit our organization?				
Tell me about a time at work or school when someone asked for your input on the best way to approach a problem.				
Tell me about a time at work when you actively sought out an opportunity to learn about other cultures or global issues.				
What was the worst or hardest customer service experience you've dealt with?				
Share with me a time when you realized you needed to change your communication style to fit the audience.				

Question	Core Question	Skill	Behaviors	Accomplishment
Tell me about a time when you had to learn a new technology to complete a project for school or a job.				
Tell me about a time when you were faced with an impossible deadline. What did you do? What was the outcome?				
Tell me about a time when you had to conduct research or learn a new skill in order to perform a task. How did you go about it? How did you perform?				
What's something you struggled with in school?				

Further reading

The 2-Hour Job Search: Using Technology to Get the Right Job Faster by Steve Dalton. Dalton is regarded as a job search strategy expert among career services professionals and job seekers alike. He also has some great insights on answering a variety of common interview questions.

The Charisma Myth: How Anyone Can Master the Art and Science of Personal Magnetism by Olivia Fox Cabane. If you want the most comprehensive read on how to convey confidence in the interview room, there's no better book than this one. Fox Cabane highlights the many ways to be charismatic and stresses that we all need to find the approach that works best with our personality.

Decode and Conquer: Answers to Product Management Interviews by Lewis Lin. Lewis Lin has several books on interviewing for popular roles in the technology industry. This one is great for people interested in product management.

Interview Logic: Make Your Value Known by David Ohrvall. Ohrvall has been a well-regarded expert for consulting interviews for years (see *Cracking the Case*), but this book shows he also has great insights on behavioral interviewing for everyone. The narrative style makes this a unique and helpful read.

Case Interview Secrets: A Former McKinsey Interviewer Reveals How to Get Multiple Job Offers in Consulting by Victor Cheng. Cheng's book and website provide great information and frameworks for case interviewing. However, he has many ideas that can be helpful in preparing for any interview.

Captivate: The Science of Succeeding with People by Vanessa Van Edwards. This book provides many tactics for body language and communication approaches that gather and maintain positive attention. It's a great read if you find yourself wanting more details on the science behind nonverbal communication.

Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Thrive and Others Die by Chip and Dan Heath. This a great book for additional insights on conveying information in a way that's memorable.

On-Camera Coach: Tools and Techniques for Business Professionals in a Video-Driven World by Karin Reed. You can find many tutorials out there on video communications, but few are as comprehensive as *On-Camera Coach*. The more virtual interviews grow in popularity, the more important it is to check out Reed's guidance.

Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges by Amy Cuddy. This very popular TED Talk speaker is great to watch for her advice on body language. She is also great to read—her experience defending her research can inspire resilience as you interview.

The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business by Erin Meyer. Erin Meyer’s work is essential for anyone interviewing for roles outside of their home country. Her frameworks make the complex topic of cross-cultural communication easy to understand.

The Fine Art of Small Talk: How to Start a Conversation, Keep It Going, Build Networking Skills—and Leave a Positive Impression! by Debra Fine. This book offers many great tips on small talk. The reflections and advice on dealing with small talk criminals (or “talk tyrants”) is especially helpful for engaging with any interviewer.

Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss without Losing Your Humanity by Kim Scott. To get the most out of mock interviews, you’ll need partners who are willing to give constructive feedback. Kim Scott’s book shares great examples on how to deliver constructive feedback so you can make rapid improvements.

Vault Guide to the Case Interview by Laurence Shatkin, Mark Asher, Eric Chung, and the staff of Vault. Included here are more than 50 sample case interviews, guesstimates, brainteasers, and other consulting interview cases as well as advice on questions to ask the interviewer. The guide covers frameworks such as Porter’s Five Forces, the capital asset pricing model (CAPM), the BCG Matrix, the four Ps, the four Cs, and CAGE distance.

Vault Guide to Finance Interviews by Laurence Shatkin, D. Bhatawedekhar, Dan Jacobson, Hussam Hamadeh, and William Jarvis. This guide provides advice on preparing for interviews as well as in-depth sample questions and practice cases to help readers hone their understanding of key financial concepts. Corporate valuation, equities, bonds and interest rates, and mergers and acquisitions are only some of the areas covered here in detail, and presented in sample interview questions and cases with easy-to-follow charts and frameworks.

About the Author

David Solloway is a career consultant, life coach, and cross-cultural training/development specialist. He works as the assistant director for Daytime MBA Career Services at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business and is a co-author of the *Vault Guide to the International MBA Job Search*. Dave has helped thousands prepare for interviews through interactive workshops for job seekers, training programs for career coaches, and mock interviews for individuals. For information on working with him, check out www.balancebroughtforward.com.

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