

Tell me about yourself

This question, usually the opener, tops the list of common interview questions. It's incredibly important, as you can provide the interviewer with a great first impression. Preparation is key, but your answer mustn't sound rehearsed. **Focus on your skills, characteristics and successes, and how they make you a strong candidate in terms of the job description.**

Keep your answer to below five minutes. Generally, you should begin with an overview of your highest qualification and greatest achievements, before running through your work experience and giving examples of the skills that you've developed. If you've little work history, focus on the areas of academia that you've most enjoyed and how this relates to the job.

Why do you want this job?

Demonstrate that you've researched the role by discussing the skills and interests that led you to apply. Draw upon what you enjoy; use examples from your academic, professional or extra-curricular life that suggest you're strongly motivated for the role and can relate closely to the organisation. Tell the interviewer what particular aspect of the job advertisement enticed you.

Similar questions that you may be asked include:

- What do you know about the company?
- What motivates you?

What are your strengths?

Pick three or four attributes desired by the employer in the person specification; teamwork, leadership, initiative and lateral thinking are common examples. Whichever strengths you pick, ensure that you can evidence them with examples.

Similar questions that you may be asked include:

- How would a friend describe you?
- How would you describe your personality?
- What are three positive things your last boss would say about you?

What are your weaknesses?

You can positively frame your answer by picking characteristics that you've taken steps to improve. For example, self-confidence issues could have previously led to difficulty accepting criticism; but tell the interviewer that you've learned to embrace constructive feedback as it allows self-improvement. Alternatively, discuss how you overcame a potential downside of your greatest strength; for example, you might have had to learn how to cope with conflict if you're a great teamworker.

Never say that you have no weaknesses, that you're a perfectionist, or that you work too hard. These are clichéd responses that portray you as arrogant, dishonest or lacking in self-awareness.

Similar questions that you may be asked include:

- How do you respond to criticism?
- How would your worst enemy describe you?

Can you give an example of a time when you had to cope with a difficult situation?

This question is one of the most popular performance-based interview questions. It allows the employer to assess how calm and reliable you are under pressure. **Outline an instance where you've coped with an unexpected problem, discussing how you reorganised and managed your time.** Think about times where you've had to meet tight deadlines or handle difficult people.

Similar questions that you may be asked include:

- Give an example of a time when you had to cope under pressure.
- Give an example of a time when you've handled a major crisis.
- How do you manage your time and prioritise tasks?
- How do you respond to stress and pressure?

What has been your greatest achievement?

Ideally, your answer should evidence skills relevant to the job; teamwork, initiative, communication, determination and organisation, for example. For inspiration, think about a time when you've received an award, organised an event, learned something new or overcome a major fear. Always prepare several examples.

Avoid the achievement of graduating from university; this won't distinguish you, unless you've had to deal with major difficulties such as illness or personal problems.

A similar question that you may be asked is: 'What are you most proud of in your working life?'

Do you have any questions?

Anything that you ask should cover the work itself or career development. Prepare questions in advance; if all your queries have been answered, mention that the interviewer has covered everything you need to know. Remember to ask questions if the moment naturally arises during the actual interview.

Good interview questions to ask the employer include:

- How could I impress you in the first three months?
- How often is a graduate's performance appraised?

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- Is there anything that you would like to improve in your department?
- What are the travel requirements of this job?
- What development plans does the organisation have?
- What is a typical career path in this job?
- What training and development is provided?
- What's the proposed start date for the role?
- What's your personal experience of working for this organisation?