

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

One of the most effective preparation techniques for interviewing is to practice with sample questions. Below are some sample questions to help you prepare, as well as tips on how to approach some of the most common interview questions.

Common interview questions

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why are you interested in this organization?
- What prompted you to enter this field? Why?
- Why did you choose your major/specialty?
- Why do you want to work for our organization?
- What strengths would you bring to this organization? What would you consider a weakness?
- What exposure have you had to this field?
- Discuss your experiences as it relates to this field.
- What are current issues/trends/challenges in this field?
- What are your short term and long term career goals?
- Describe your greatest accomplishment. What are you most proud of?
- Why should we hire you over other applicants?
- What, in your opinion, are the key ingredients in guiding and maintaining successful professional relationships?
- What motivates you?
- How would a friend or professor describe you?
- In what ways do you think you could contribute to our organization?

Practice behavioral-based interview questions

- Describe the most significant written document, report or presentation which you had to complete.
- Describe the project or situation which best demonstrates your analytical abilities. What was your role?
- Give a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- Tell us about a time when you were particularly effective on prioritizing tasks to complete a project on schedule.
- Tell me about a time where you played a leadership role on a team project.
- Tell me about a time when you worked with a difficult co-worker, collaborator, student, etc.
- Tell me about a time where you took initiative beyond what was expected.
- Tell me about a time where you were faced with multiple conflicting priorities. How do you organize your work?
- Tell me about a time when you worked effectively as part of a team.
- Give me an example of something you've done that demonstrates your creativity.
- Tell me about a time where you know you had communicated effectively.
- Tell me about a job or setting where great precision to detail was required to complete a task. How did you handle that situation?

How to approach types of interview questions

Behavioral based questions ("Tell me about a time," "Give me an example"):

These are the most common type of questions asked in an interview. Employers believe that past behavior predicts future performance, therefore they will ask you questions about the skills they are seeking and want to hear specific examples from your past that demonstrate these skills. Examples may come from work experience, internships, academic experiences, extra-curricular activities or volunteer work. The STAR (describe the Situation/Task...Action...Result) technique described below is useful for structuring your answers to ensure you are telling a detailed story. Before your interview write down several stories that demonstrate the skills the employer is seeking using the STAR technique, then practice telling these stories.

Situation/Task: description of specific situation, project or task related to the skill sought

Action: description of specific steps you took

Result: outcome resulting from the action taken (be as specific as possible, how did you know you were successful?)

Technical questions:

For science and engineering positions, it is common to be asked technical questions to gauge your abilities and problem solving skills. To best prepare for these questions review the job description, if you are asked technical questions they most likely will be related to the skills listed (for example, if they are seeking C++ experience they may ask you to solve a programming problem). When asked a technical question, the most important thing is to demonstrate your analytical and communication skills. If you don't know the answer (sometimes there isn't a right answer), be honest and describe how you would approach the problem.

Case interview questions:

These questions are most commonly asked by consulting companies to gauge your problem solving skills. An example is, "How many jellybeans can fit in a jumbo jet?" To answer these types of questions, talk through what information you would need to know to solve the problem, ask questions, and communicate the steps you would take to find the solution. More important than solving the problem is demonstrating your logical approach.

How to approach commonly asked interview questions

"Tell me about yourself"

Employers ask this question to learn more about you, specifically your academic background, and what your experience is related to their position and organization. In your response include:

- Your student status—such as major, year in school, courses in progress, interests related to academics, research, and industry.
- Your related experience—internships, student organizations, research, work experience, course projects, and leadership positions (assume they have not read your resume).
- What qualities and skills you have that make you a good fit for the position and the organization (use the job description and the company research you conduct to inform your response).

"What are your strengths?"

Use the job description and the company research you conduct to inform you of the skills and qualities the employer is seeking, and then identify which of these are your personal strengths. When asked "what are your strengths?", name a few related to the position and give detailed examples of how you've demonstrated these strengths in the past—remember employers are looking for proof in your answer!

"What are your weaknesses?"

Employers want you to be honest about your weaknesses. Talk about one of your weaknesses and then give an example of how you are working to turn that weakness into a strength. Be specific about the steps you've taken to cope with this weakness.

Why do you want to work for this organization?

State why you want to work for the company, demonstrating your knowledge about the organization (for example, the mission of the company, the new product they are creating, etc.—be specific!) Emphasize how your past experiences and skills have prepared you to contribute successfully to the organization.

Why did you choose your major/career/scientific specialty?

Answering this question gives you the opportunity to demonstrate why you are passionate about your field. Be specific about why you chose your major, what motivates you to be successful in your program of study, and what you have enjoyed most about your academic program (such as: courses, projects, research, a certain specialization in your field). Explain to the interviewer how your major has helped prepare you for a position with their company.

What are your short-term and long-term career goals?

Relate your immediate career goals to the company. It is okay to be somewhat vague about your long-term career goals, however indicate some possibilities for your future based on the company and industry research you conduct. Be sure to demonstrate that you have a commitment to your field and that you want to develop and grow as a professional.

Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Often this question is asked at the end of an interview, your response should include any information you have not yet been able to share with the interviewer that would be important for them to know regarding your key qualifications and a statement about your interest in the position and the company.

Why should we hire you?

This gives you the opportunity to summarize why you are the best candidate for the position and what makes you stand out from other applicants. Most likely the interviewer is not going to remember everything you said from your interview, so when this question is asked reiterate your qualifications. Be sure to include your unique strengths, skills, and experiences relevant to the position and organization. Leave the interviewer with a positive lasting impression.

Individual career coaching and mock interview training is available to all UNC postdocs thru the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs

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