

## The Situation Room: Specific Types of Interviews and Interview Questions

*Not all job interview questions are created equal. To determine your suitability for a position, interviewers will ask you deliberately designed questions and subject you to specifically chosen types of interviews based on a number of factors. Before an interview, it's important to prepare for different styles of questions and questioning just as it's necessary to plan for different topics of conversation. In every case, it's important to consider what your interviewer really wants to know.*

### Types of Interview Questions

- Behavioural-Based
- Case
- Situational/Hypothetical
- Classic/Conventional
- Skill Testing
- Unconventional
- Problem Solving

### Behaviour-Based Questions

Sometimes referred to as “behavioural” questions, these prompts are increasingly popular in job interviews as they offer interviewers valuable predicative information about real-world “on-the-job” performance. The principle behind behaviour-based questions is that past behaviour is an effective indicator of future behaviour. Interviewers tend to select and develop behaviour-based questions with concern for the traits and skills they consider necessary for succeeding in their organization.

#### Identifying prompts:

- Tell me about a time when ...
- Describe a situation in which ...
- Recall an instance when ...
- Provide an example of ...

#### How to prepare:

Take an inventory of your own experiences before sitting down for an interview. Consider work, academic, and extracurricular positions you've held, as well as your life experience more broadly. In particular, try to develop a list of a handful of moments when you've achieved measurable success, overcome difficult circumstances, or had a valuable learning experience. Also, develop a list of the core competencies associated with the position for which you are interviewing. Normally, the most relevant skills and aptitudes associated with the role will be included in the job posting. Can you find a way to relate the personal experiences you've catalogued to these important qualities?

#### The STAR method:

A useful way to deliver stories about your career is to structure them in the **STAR** format:

- *Situation:* Briefly describe the specific situation you encountered.
- *Task:* Clearly state the goal you worked toward.
- *Action:* Outline the actions you took in working towards the task at hand. Express your actions in terms of choices whenever possible. For example, if you booked a venue for a successful fundraiser, why did you choose it as opposed to the alternatives?
- *Result:* Follow up with a description of how the situation turned out. If it didn't turn out well, be sure to express what you learned and what you would do differently next time.

#### Commonly targeted topics:

- Time management
- Communication
- Managing difficult work relationships
- Problem solving
- Accountability
- Disagreeing with a policy/person
- Creativity
- Group work

- Ethical decision making
- Flexibility
- Stress management
- Working independently
- Leadership
- Taking initiative

**Example questions:**

- Tell me about a time when you had a conflict with a coworker.
- Tell me about a time when you had to complete multiple projects or assignments with similar deadlines.
- Give me an example of a time when you had to persuade someone.
- Give me an example of a report or proposal that you wrote that was well received.
- Talk about a time when you anticipated potential problems and developed preventative measures.
- Tell me about a situation where you had to deal with an upset client.

**Situational/Hypothetical Questions**

Like behaviour-based questions, situational or hypothetical questions are designed to evaluate how an interviewee would perform in real-world workplace situations. Rather than look to the past for evidence of future performance, these questions place candidates for jobs “on the spot” and ask them to imagine what they would do in invented (but plausible) scenarios.

**How to prepare:**

In order to anticipate situational/hypothetical questions an interviewer might ask, it’s useful to understand the day-to-day requirements of a job as well as possible. Interviewers normally pose hypothetical questions that describe realistic situations that occur in their workplaces. Fully read the job posting, and use your professional network (including LinkedIn) to speak to people you know who work at the company for which you’re interviewing or who work in similar roles elsewhere. As above, consider impressive experiences from your own history; you will likely have the opportunity to support your answers with evidence from your past.

Remember that your goal is to demonstrate your ability to think logically and work through the situation at hand. In order to demonstrate this to an employer, internalize the following five-step process:

1. Identify any problems or details that need to be considered with regards to the situation. If a problem exists, explain why the situation is problematic and, more broadly, how you determine if a situation is problematic.
2. Respond by first explaining how you would gather the data and facts necessary to properly analyze the situation and propose solutions.
3. Utilizing the data gathered, recognize any aspects of the situation that need to be considered and determine the root cause or heart of any problem that exists in order to develop strategies to resolve it.
4. Explain in detail how you would approach or resolve the situation, demonstrating how you transform ideas into realistic solutions. Be sure to include in risk assessments or financial matters that have to be considered.
5. When using an example from your own experience, explain what you learned, strategies that worked, or anything you would do differently if faced with a similar situation in the future.

**Example questions:**

- Imagine you have met your project deadlines, but your direct supervisor is unavailable. Describe how you would remain busy for the rest of the workday.

- You are the manager of a small software-testing team, and one individual employee is continually late for work. This same employee regularly takes longer breaks than is permitted. How would you approach the issue?
- During construction, a contractor unexpectedly finds a very large object in one of the trenches where he is required to dig. He requests that you instruct him how to proceed. How do you deal with this unexpected situation?
- You have planned a workshop intended to teach newcomers to Canada how to use word-processing software. Unfortunately, only four people are registered, and you are required to have a class of ten. You genuinely believe that the training is important, but you are worried about the financial cost of holding an under-attended session. The workshop is five days away. What do you do?
- You have a conflict with an employee at your company who is senior to you but not your supervisor. Describe how you would handle it.

## Skill-Testing Questions

These questions give you the opportunity to prove that you have the technical skills and practical reasoning ability to successfully do the job for which you are interviewing. Skill-testing questions are most common in technical, scientific, and industrial or manufacturing fields. In some cases, they may involve direct hands-on work, like programming on a computer terminal, or solving a complex math problem on the spot. Some employers also require job candidates to complete questions that select for logical reasoning ability, similar to questions on standardized exams like the LSAT.

### How to prepare:

The best way to prepare for skill-testing questions is to ensure that you have a strong understanding of your discipline. While this sort of knowledge is difficult to develop in advance of a job interview, we recommend brushing up on course notes, re-reading previous exams, and generally “studying” as if you were preparing to take an exam in your discipline. Keep in mind that you should never lie or pretend to have more knowledge than you do when you’re posed a question you cannot answer. Pre-prepare a short statement about how there may be some small gaps in your knowledge base, but you’re well equipped and motivated to learn more about your field as you develop as a professional. If possible, find a way to indicate that you do know something else that may compensate for this lack of knowledge (e.g. “I am not familiar with that programming language, specifically, but I do have several years’ experience with ...”)

### Example questions:

- Explain in as much detail as you can the difference between server-side and client-side scripting.
- Provide a brief description of a diode.
- Explain the theory of elasticity.
- What is a comma splice?

## Problem-Solving/Brainteaser Questions

Problem-solving questions or brainteasers require interviewees to process new information quickly, apply logical thinking skills, and creatively solve problems. Unlike with skill-testing questions, employers ask these questions to evaluate candidates’ thought processes rather than to search for appropriate conclusions. Problem solving questions are designed to assess your ability to think analytically and quickly in complex or unusual situations.

### How to prepare:

The nature of these types of questions make them difficult to plan for, but interviewers are looking for you to tweeze out the important information in the question and use logic to develop an organized response.

Remember, arriving at the “right” answer is not as important as showing your ability to use reasoning skills and think creatively. Don’t focus on the answer itself, but rather how you are going to divide up the problem. You don’t necessarily have enough information to solve the problem, but you can show how you process information in an organized and methodical way. Walk them through your brainstorming process in a step-by-step manner. Identify ways that you would gather needed information and test your hypotheses. Acknowledge problems and risks that you might face during the process.

### Example questions:

- How many lightbulbs are in this building?
- How would you get an elephant into a refrigerator?
- How many cows are there in Canada?
- Describe the internet to someone who just woke up from a 30-year coma.
- In a small room you have a refrigerator. If you left the door of the fridge open, would the temperature in the room fall or would the temperature in the fridge rise?
- Why is a manhole cover round?

## Case Questions

Case questions are created to evaluate the logical thought process a candidate used to derive an answer. Greater emphasis is placed on the approach used to reach a solution rather than the actual solution itself.

In a case interview, a candidate for a job is presented with a realistic business situation (or “case”) and asked to resolve the situation to the best of his or her ability. In many cases, the scenario will be an actual business case that the interviewer has encountered in real life.

Case interviews are commonly used by consulting firms and investment banking companies. They are designed to determine whether or not a candidate has the qualifications necessary for success in a real-world work environment.

Case interviews have much in common with problem-solving questions, as described in the previous section. However, case interviewers are often looking for real, workable solutions as well as logical thought process. Many case interviews will involve multiple questions.

### How to prepare:

There are many examples on the internet of case interview questions. Your ideal preparation depends on your unique field of work. We recommend searching for sample cases that are relevant to your area of study, and working through as many problems as time allows. Our advice for problem-solving and skill-testing questions also applies.

## Classic/Conventional Questions

Many employers still rely on a series of time-tested, standard interview questions. See our resources “Quick Tips for Impressing Your Future Employer” and “Approaches to Common Interview and Application Questions” for significantly more information on this topic.

### How to prepare:

Prepare thorough but natural-sounding answers to as many classic questions as possible. If you can, practice your answers in a mock-interview or with a friend or family member.

Before your interview, take an inventory of your existing skills and experiences. During your interview, pay close attention to your interviewer’s language and verbal cues (i.e. what he or she says and how he or she

emphasizes certain words). Your interviewer will likely volunteer important information about the position and organization. For example, an interviewer may note parenthetically in a question that his or her workplace is a fast-paced environment. If you're paying close attention, you should remember to mention your multitasking skills and ability to meet tight deadlines in your answer. Be honest, but customize your responses to your advantage.

Remember, it's okay to ask for clarification when you believe a question could be interpreted in multiple ways.

### **Example questions:**

- Tell me about yourself.
- What are your short-term goals and how are you preparing to achieve them? Where do you see yourself in two and five years?
- What are your greatest strengths/weaknesses?
- If I asked a former co-worker to describe you, what would they say?
- Why did you apply to our organization and what do you know about us? What do you think are advantages/disadvantages of joining our organization?
- What would you say is your vision or mission statement?
- What do you think you will be looking for in the job following this position?
- Why do you feel you will be successful in this line of work?
- Have you applied to other positions? What other types of work are you looking for in addition to this role?
- What supervisory roles or leadership experience have you had?
- In your own opinion, what are some advantages and disadvantages of working in a team environment?
- What have been your most satisfying/disappointing experiences?
- What did you like/dislike about your last job?
- What motivates you to do a good job?
- How do you reduce stress and try to achieve balance in your life?
- How did you handle a request to do something contrary to your moral code or business ethics?
- What was the result the last time you tried to sell your idea to others?
- What is the most important thing you are looking for in an employer?
- What were some of the common characteristics of your past supervisors?
- What characteristics do you think a person needs to work effectively in our company/department?
- What courses in school did you like best and least? Why?
- What did you learn or gain from your part-time/summer/co-op/internship experiences?
- Why were your grades low in your final semester?
- How do you typically spend your spare time?
- What frustrates you the most?
- When did you last have a disagreement with someone at work, and what was the outcome?
- What is the toughest decision you have had to make in the last year? Why was it difficult?
- Why haven't you found a job yet?
- How will you be successful in this job, given your lack of experience in this particular field?
- Why should I hire you?

### **Unconventional Questions**

Unconventional or oddball interview questions are often assessing your character and ability to think on your feet. They are typically less concerned with your actual answer, but instead want to see the logical process that leads to you saying what you are saying. Your response is meant to give them insight into who you are as a person.

### How to prepare:

Think about your personal characteristics and values and what you want the interviewer to know about you as a person. What qualities and attributes do you possess that would make you a good fit for their workplace? This is your opportunity to show your creativity. Provide your answer and explain why you chose it based on your background.

### Example questions:

- If a book was published about you, what would the title of the book be?
- What kitchen utensil would you be?
- If you had 1000 bricks and 1 hour, what would you build?
- If you were written about in the newspaper, what would the headline be?
- What was the last book you read?
- If you could meet one famous person, dead or alive, who would you choose and why?

## Interview Formats

- *Screening*
- *Telephone/Skype*
- *Panel/Committee*
- *Unstructured*
- *Serial*
- *Group*
- *Structured*
- *Meal*

## Panel/Committee Interviews

Panel interviews involve multiple company representatives (typically three or four) interviewing one job candidate. Often, each panellist represents a unique part of the hiring company's organizational structure. Many employers favour this interview format as it allows them to gain several perspectives on a potential hire in the same time it takes to conduct a conventional one-on-one interview.

**Advice:** Please see our advice elsewhere in this document, as much of it applies to panel interviews. We also have a few specific pointers that relate specifically to this interview format:

- Know your interviewers beforehand, if possible. It's acceptable to ask recruiters, hiring managers, or secretaries which employees will be on your interview panel. The more you know about each individual panellist, the better you can tailor your responses to everybody on the panel. We also encourage you to ask tailored questions to the panellists.
- Maintain eye contact with the panellist asking you a question as he or she asks it, but address your answer to the entire room.
- After the interview, thank all panellists with individual emails.

## Group/Mass Interviews

Some employers choose to interview several job candidates at the same time, in the same room. These interviews ostensibly force applicants to compete against others in "real time." In this setting, interviewers pay close attention to how the candidates respond to and interact with each other. Sometimes, interviewers will pose questions to the group and instruct all candidates to work together to arrive at an answer. In general,

group interviews are considered an effective way to evaluate candidates for interpersonal and problem solving skills and teamwork. How will you function in a stressful situation that requires you to collaborate with coworkers?

**Advice:**

- You are under observation as soon as you enter the room. Introduce yourself to your fellow candidates as you would in a professional setting.
- Remember to involve your competitors; self-centredness is not an enviable trait in the working world. In many cases, employers will hold group interviews when they need to hire several new employees in the same role; you do not necessarily need to “defeat” everybody else in the room to succeed.
- Try to strike the right balance between observing and contributing. Although you don’t want to monopolize the discussion or speak over fellow applicants, you also don’t want to sit silently in the background.
- Note valuable contributions from others during the course of the interview. In particular, acknowledge and add to points made by others when you feel you can extend their ideas. This demonstrates that you’ve been paying attention and you can think collaboratively and synthetically.
- Don’t interrupt another candidate, and never, ever resort to *ad hominem* or personal criticisms when discussing another candidate’s suggestion. When you have valid criticisms to deliver, try to soften them by combining them with minor compliments, as a strong manager would.

### Screening Interviews

Screening interviews are diagnostic interviews intended to determine whether or not a candidate possesses certain necessary qualifications. In most cases, this is the first step in a hiring process. Generally, screening interviews are conducted by recruiters or hiring managers rather than the direct manager under whom you will work if you win the position. Successfully passing the screening assessment is a prerequisite for moving on to the next “round” of the interview process.

**Advice:**

- If you’ve applied to a job for which you’re well qualified, there’s little reason to be apprehensive ahead of a screening interview. Re-read the job posting closely, prepare as you would for a traditional interview, and make sure you have a thorough understanding of every detail you’ve listed in your resume or application package.

### Telephone/Skype Interviews

Companies interview applicants over the phone or via the internet in order to a) schedule a large volume of interviews in a relatively short amount of time, and b) consider applicants who live far away but are willing to relocate. Phone interviews can be an excellent way to evaluate potential employees for oral communication skills and gather information in what seems like a lower-pressure environment. In many cases, phone interviews double as screening interviews.

**Advice:**

- It’s fairly easy to forget that a phone or internet interview is still a very consequential part of the job seeking process. Prepare thoroughly, set aside a generous block of time, and find a quiet, private space. Remember to sit up straight, enunciate clearly, and smile when you speak. See our resource “Answer the Call: How to Ace Your Telephone Interview” for several more tips and recommendations on this topic.

### Structured Interviews

A structured interview is one in which the interviewer reads a series of prewritten, prearranged questions. Hiring and admissions committees use structured interviews to ensure complete fairness. Generally, the same questions are presented in the same order to each candidate. In some cases, the interviewer will record your answers and score them against a standardized rubric.

**Advice:**

- Structured interviews can be intimidating. Try to relax, and remember that you can only affect your own performance. While every interview is different, structured interviews tend to focus most closely on your past accomplishments and specific credentials and assets. Don't stress out about anticipating exactly what questions you will be asked. Research from medical school entrance interviews shows that students rarely perform differently when they know a question in advance.

### Unstructured Interviews

Compared to structured interviews, unstructured interviews are more conversational in style. While some questions may still be prepared in advance, this non-directive format allows for spontaneity and for questions to develop during the course of the interview. As a general rule, unstructured interviews are a good tool for evaluating candidates for personality types and fit within a company culture.

**Advice:**

- If you know that your interview will be unstructured, avoid the temptation to take it less seriously. If you are asked a direct question about your skills or strengths, answer it as formally as you would in a structured interview. Often, interviewers will ask broad, probing questions that invite you to give detailed accounts of your experiences. Prepare a small handful of anecdotes from your past that you feel represent you in a very positive light and showcase skills related to the position for which you are interviewing.

### Serial Interviews

In general, serial interviews involve a group of assessors who conduct multiple interviews sequentially. Candidates are “passed” from one interviewer to another throughout the course of the process. Serial interviews can take several different forms. In some situations, candidates must “graduate” or “pass” an interview in order to proceed to the next one. In other cases, each candidate will complete the circuit regardless. The complete process can take minutes, hours, or days.

**Advice:**

- Aim to be consistent in the way you present yourself, but do account for the person interviewing you. For example, you might speak with an HR representative first and a member of the technical staff second. In this case, the interviewer's knowledge of the specific nature of your work would differ, and it might be appropriate to advocate for yourself in slightly different terms.
- Do not assume that your interviewer knows everything that was said in your previous interview. It's appropriate to reuse anecdotes that exemplify your best qualities so long as the interviewer does not signal that he or she has already heard them.

### Meal Interviews

In some selective situations, hiring managers will prefer to conduct a job interview over lunch or dinner. Certain positions require employees to conduct frequent lunch or dinner meetings with clients. In these cases, a meal interview is a logical way to evaluate a candidate's performance in that setting. In other cases, a hiring manager may interview a desirable candidate over a meal in order to impress him or her. In all cases, meal interviews are an excellent way to evaluate candidates in terms of personality and social skills.

**Advice:**

- While meal interviews are more casual than most types of hiring assessments, avoid the temptation to “let your guard down.” In particular, never say anything unflattering/incriminating, and never check your phone.
- Avoid coming on too strong by letting the hiring manager lead the conversation. Some will prefer to wait until after the meal to start the formal interview process. It’s difficult to predict how formal or casual a meal interview will be ahead of time, so take your cues from the interviewer.
- If you are not already familiar with the restaurant in advance, try to learn as much as you can. As an ice breaker, engage your interviewer about the restaurant and why he or she chose it.
- Order a reasonably priced dish that can be easily and neatly eaten with a fork, and be sure to treat the wait staff respectfully.

## Tricky Situations

Interviews can be awkward. While this reality is unavoidable, strong candidates are able to confidently handle unexpected questions and avoid slight stumbling blocks in the interview room. Remember, barriers to employment can often be overcome by focusing on the positive; always follow any negative admission with a “silver lining” of sorts.

Also, keep in mind that practice makes perfect. Try preparing responses to questions that you anticipate might be tricky, and practise them out loud. While your goal is to sound natural and unrehearsed, it’s easy to evaluate the effectiveness of your answers when you’ve sufficiently prepared.

### Salary

If the position did not clearly state the rate of pay or salary, we do not recommend asking about it during or at the end of the interview. Instead, we suggest you wait until you receive an offer, and should you wish to negotiate the salary, do so at that time.

If any employer asks you for your salary expectations, they are curious about how much value you place on your experience, skills, and educational background. It’s important that you have done some research on salary level for your occupation and region and present a fair range (hourly or yearly), that you would expect to earn. If you are new to the working world, remember that your pay will likely be at the lower end of the range.

### Silence

As in any one-on-one conversation, a long period of silence in an interview is uncomfortable. If you answer a question and your interviewer does not continue to speak promptly, you should remain calm and collected; don’t panic. While it’s easy to interpret silence as a negative sign, it may actually signify that your interviewer is taking time to seriously consider and process your answer. Alternatively, some interviewers deliberately insert periods of silence into interviews to gauge how candidates handle stressful or awkward situations.

While you should always resist the opportunity to ramble in order to fill silence, you may ask your interviewer if he or she requires any further details regarding your last response. This tactic shifts responsibility to them and suggests that you are always prepared to defend and provide support for your own speech.

### Being stumped

Even if you’ve prepared thoroughly, you will inevitably encounter interview questions that are difficult to answer. Don’t panic. A large part of navigating these tricky waters has to do with maintaining a positive mindset. First, focus on the question exactly as it was asked. If you’re unsure what the interviewer is asking, it’s appropriate to request clarification. Furthermore, you may pause and politely ask for a few moments to consider your response. This strategy demonstrates thoughtful deliberation and prepares the interviewer for an answer they will expect to be truthful and meaningful. That said, interviews are also tests of performance under pressure; try not to take longer than five or ten seconds.

In cases where you are truly stumped, you may ask to defer your answer to the end of the interview. While this approach will potentially give you time to arrive at an ideal response, interviewers often build their lists of questions in a deliberate order; opting out of a question mid-stream may disrupt the proceedings, which will reflect poorly on you.

A third option is to simply admit that you do not know the answer. While this approach may be unattractive, it is possible to be honest with an interviewer in a positive and professional manner.

### Saying “no”

If an interview asks you if you have a skill that you don't, it doesn't pay to lie. However, instead of simply answering in the negative, answer honestly but reaffirm that you have the transferable skills necessary to succeed in the position. Here's an example of a strong answer:

*"While I do have excellent computer skills, I do not have knowledge of that specific software package. That said, I did learn FrontPage, a similar program, on my own and quickly applied the concepts by independently creating a website for a project that received a grade of 90%. I am very confident that my foundational knowledge base and general facility with programming languages would allow me to learn that software package quickly and thoroughly."*

### **Dealing with negative questions**

Interviewers will often ask "negatively phrased" questions to elicit conversation about the qualities you perceive to be weaknesses and strengths. For example:

- *What are your weaknesses as an employee?*
- *Recall a time from your work experience when you made a bad decision or mistake. How did you get beyond it?*
- *Give me an example of a time when you did not meet a project deadline. How did you handle the situation?*

In these situations, be honest. Provide real examples of workplace experiences, but try to focus on a past event that would not negatively impact your performance as it relates to the job for which you are applying. Whenever you introduce a weakness, follow up by explaining the steps you took or are taking to overcome it. Always accompany the negative with the positive in an interview setting.

### **Having little or no recent work experience**

Keep in mind that relevant upper-year coursework, internships, volunteer positions, extracurricular activities, and skill-building workshops are all valuable avenues for acquiring and demonstrating skills. If you're asked about previous experiences, argue that your experiences as a student, both inside and outside of the classroom, have genuinely prepared you to work in your field. Similarly, be sure to indicate if you have joined or participated in associations or societies in your field. Be sure to convey your interest in and enthusiasm for the position.

### **Poor grades**

There are several common reasons for low grades, including a lack of commitment, enrolment in an unsuitable program, or dealing with a traumatic personal event. Explain honestly but briefly why your grades are weak, if this is the case. As with all negative responses, but sure to follow up your explanation by indicating what positive steps you have taken to remedy the situation. For example:

*"While my grades were poor during my third year, I've significantly improved my academic performance this term. I recognized a need for improvement, so I attended a series of study skill workshops, which have made a huge impact. I now know how to manage my time successfully, and I'm confident that I will continue to perform well in this position."*

### **Missing or weak references**

If your references are outdated, they may not be able to provide an accurate picture of your present skills. If it's been a long time since you've contacted your referees, touch base. Send them an up-to-date resume or CV, and confirm that they're still comfortable speaking on your behalf. Make sure you still have their permission to include their contact information on your reference list.

If you left your previous place of employment on bad terms, you likely will not be asking that supervisor if he or she will be a reference for you. If this is the case, be sure that your reference list includes people who can speak about your strengths. If you are asked why you did not provide a reference from a particular place of employment, ensure your answer is professional.

If you need new references, you may need to volunteer, join suitable organizations on campus, or enrol in upper-year courses that provide a strong opportunity for you to make connections with your professor.

**Further reading:**

- [Use the STAR Technique to Ace Your Behavioral Interview](#) (Right Attitudes)
- [Acing the Group Interview | The Ultimate Guide](#) (Big Interview)
- [Ace the Group Interview](#) (Harvard Business Review)
- [How to Prepare for and Succeed at a Panel Job Interview](#) (The Guardian)
- [The Firing Squad: How to Survive a Panel Interview](#) (The Muse)



**CAREER AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES OFFERS A VARIETY OF RESOURCES TO HELP YOU LAUNCH YOUR CAREER:**

Job searching • Career Planning • Work experience • Career preparation workshops  
Personal appointments • Resume critiques • Mock interviews • Interest testing • Job fair  
Networking opportunities • Volunteer Internship Program (VIP)