

Trying to practice every possible question you might be asked in an interview may feel productive in the beginning, but quickly gets overwhelming because it is impossible to do!

Instead of practicing individual questions, we recommend preparing larger stories to tell. You can draw from these stories to answer any realistic questions the interviewer might have. By approaching your interview preparation this way, you are able to:

- Build a collection of stories that are unique to you and can address multiple questions
- Measure your progress toward a specific and achievable goal (e.g. have 7-10 stories)
- Get the most out of your interview preparation time so that you are being efficient

How to Use This Guide

The prompts in this guide are designed to help you reflect on things you should be keeping in mind, whether or not you actually write out full responses. Here are some ways different people use this resource:

- Write full responses in the spaces given;
- Just think about the prompts;
- Practice responding out loud;
- Voice record responses and listen back; and/or
- Anything else that helps brainstorm, practice, and remember the stories.

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This guide walks you through the process of preparing for interview questions. Further optional resources about interviewing are provided in the Appendix.

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1. Your Professional Accomplishments

This activity will prepare you to answer questions about your experience with the job's specific requirements and qualifications. In the spaces provided on pages 2-3, jot down two stories about impressive professional accomplishments you have.

Story 1a: Reflect on your greatest professional accomplishment.

What was happening that led to this accomplishment? How and when did it happen? What was the impact?

What did you take away from the experience?

Check the Story:

- Do you have all the details you need to talk about it in terms of the [Situation, Task, Action, and Result?](#)
- Can you clearly connect it to the position you are interviewing for?

Next Step: Write a short summary (1-2 lines) of this story in the notebook you'll use to take notes during the interview to help you remember it.

Story 1b: Reflect on a professional accomplishment that is similar to what you'll be doing in the job.

What was happening that led to this accomplishment? How and when did it happen? What was the impact?

What does this story say about what you can do for them?

Check the Story:

- Do you have all the details you need to talk about it in terms of the Situation, Task, Action, and Result?
- Can you clearly connect it to the position you are interviewing for?

Next Step: Write a short summary (1-2 lines) of this story in the notebook you'll use to take notes during the interview to help you remember it.

Examples of questions these stories can help you answer:

- This position will lead a research group that uses cellular biology and immunology techniques to study inflammatory pathways that contribute to cancer pathogenesis. Tell me about your experience with cellular biology and immunology techniques.
- A large part of this role is communicating complex scientific concepts to audiences with a wide variety of scientific backgrounds. Give me an example of a time when you had to communicate a complex topic to someone who was not in your field. How did you know you were successful?

2. Why You Want to Work for the Organization

This activity will prepare you to answer questions about your motivations for joining or what you can offer the organization. In the space provided below, jot down one story about why you want to work for them.

Story 2: Reflect on why you want to work for the organization you are interviewing with.

How and when did you find out about them? What about the organization makes you want to work there?

What do you hope to accomplish (for yourself and for them) by joining their organization?

Check the Story:

- Make sure your story is specific enough to this organization that you couldn't say it about another similar organization.

Next Step: Write a short summary (1-2 lines) of this story in the notebook you'll use to take notes during the interview to help you remember it.

Examples of questions these stories can help you answer:

- Here at [organization], our core values are X, Y, Z. Can you tell us how you will contribute to at least one of those values?
- Why are you leaving your current position?

3. A Time You Made a Mistake

This activity will prepare you to answer questions about your weaknesses, areas of growth, or your approach to learning.* In the spaces provided on pages 5-6, jot down two stories about a time you did something wrong or took a less-than-ideal approach to a situation.

Story 3a: Reflect on a time you made a mistake, underperformed, or otherwise didn't do as well as you hoped.

What were you trying to accomplish? How and when did the error happen? What were the consequences? What did you learn?

What do you now know that will prevent similar errors from happening in the future?

Check the Story:

- Do you have all the details you need to talk about it in terms of the Situation, Task, Action, and Result?
- Can you clearly talk about what you would do differently based on what you learned?

Next Step: Write a short summary (1-2 lines) of this story in the notebook you'll use to take notes during the interview to help you remember it.

**This can be one of the hardest things to talk about in an interview. For more advice on how to approach this, see ["In an interview, how do I talk about a mistake I made."](#)*

Story 3b: Reflect on another time you made a mistake, underperformed, or otherwise didn't do as well as you hoped. You'll want a second story in case your first one makes it sound like you would be too much of a risk to bring into the job. This story should be different enough that you'll always have one to use.

What were you trying to accomplish? How and when did the error happen? What were the consequences? What did you learn?

What do you now know that will prevent similar errors from happening in the future?

Check the Story:

- Do you have all the details you need to talk about it in terms of the Situation, Task, Action, and Result?
- Can you clearly talk about what you would do differently based on what you learned?

Next Step: Write a short summary (1-2 lines) of this story in the notebook you'll use to take notes during the interview to help you remember it.

Examples of questions these stories can help you answer:

- Give me an example of a time when you were unable to meet a goal or deadline. What did you do?
- Tell me about a time where you've had to handle criticism, opposition, or rejection. How did you respond?

4. How You Work with Others

This activity will prepare you to answer questions about how you handle conflict, how you communicate on a team or across different teams, and your leadership and followership style. In the spaces provided on pages 7-8, jot down two stories about how you best work with other people.

Story 4a: Reflect on a time when you worked with a team (i.e. a group of people or multiple groups of people) to accomplish a shared goal.

What was the team trying to accomplish? What did you do to contribute to the team's success? How did you communicate and collaborate with others on the team in the process?

What does this story say about how you best work with other people?

Check the Story:

- Do you have all the details you need to talk about it in terms of the Situation, Task, Action, and Result?
- Can you clearly connect it to the position you are interviewing for?

Next Step: Write a short summary (1-2 lines) of this story in the notebook you'll use to take notes during the interview to help you remember it.

Story 4b: Reflect on a time when you had a difficulty or conflict while working with a team to accomplish a shared goal.

What was the team trying to accomplish? What was the difficulty and what led to it? What did you do to overcome, resolve, or mitigate the situation?

What does this story say about how you handle difficulties when working with other people? What have you learned to do differently?

Check the Story:

- Do you have all the details you need to talk about it in terms of the Situation, Task, Action, and Result?
- Do you have examples of putting the lesson you learned into practice?
- Can you clearly connect it to the position you are interviewing for?

Next Step: Write a short summary (1-2 lines) of this story in the notebook you'll use to take notes during the interview to help you remember it.

Examples of questions these stories can help you answer:

- Tell me about a situation where you had to be a good team player. Explain your role on the team.
- Tell me about a time when you had to convince someone to do something differently.

5. How You Structure Your Work

This activity will prepare you to answer questions about how you stay organized, prioritize, ensure attention to detail, etc. In the spaces provided on pages 9-10, jot down two stories about how you structure your work.

Story 5a: Reflect on a time when you had to manage a project or multiple projects.

What was the project? How did you decide on what needed to be done? What did you do to make sure those things got done?

What does this story say about how you prefer to structure your work? What systems and tools did you use to stay organized?

Check the Story:

- Do you have all the details you need to talk about it in terms of the Situation, Task, Action, and Result?
- Do you have enough detail that it is easy for someone else to imagine exactly what your preferred workflow looks like?

Next Step: Write a short summary (1-2 lines) of this story in the notebook you'll use to take notes during the interview to help you remember it.

Story 5b: Reflect on another time when you had to manage a project or multiple projects. You'll want a second story to address specific past collaborations working with different types of people they might ask about (e.g. how you communicate with non-specialists, higher ups, etc.)

What was the project? How did you decide on what needed to be done? What did you do to make sure those things got done?

What does this story say about how you prefer to structure your work? What systems and tools did you use to stay organized?

Check the Story:

- Do you have all the details you need to talk about it in terms of the Situation, Task, Action, and Result?
- Do you have enough detail that it is easy for someone else to imagine exactly what your preferred workflow looks like?

Next Step: Write a short summary (1-2 lines) of this story in the notebook you'll use to take notes during the interview to help you remember it.

Examples of questions these stories can help you answer:

- Tell me about a time you had to work with someone with a completely different background from you.
- Tell me about a time you had to influence people with more power than you.
- Give me an example of how you approached a project that was completely new to you.

6. “Tell Me About Yourself”

This activity will prepare you to introduce yourself. You can expect to be asked to introduce yourself at any interview, sometimes more than once. Jot down your story in the space provided below.

Story 6: Reflect on what the interviewer needs to know about you.

*What is your background in **one sentence**? What of your training, skills, and experiences are **relevant to this job**?*

What are you trying to do next in your career? How does this position fit into that?

Check the Story:

- Does it show that you have an accurate understanding the position?
- Can you tell it in 2 minutes or less?

Next Step: Write a short summary (1-2 lines) of this story in the notebook you'll use to take notes during the interview to help you remember it.

Examples of questions (or technically, non-questions) this story can help you answer:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Please introduce yourself.

Appendix: Learn More About Interviewing

Anatomy of an Interview

There are a handful of topics that are likely to be covered in any interview in any format. [“Anatomy of an Interview”](#) walks you through each of those topics, tells you what you can expect, and gives you strategies for how to approach them in an interview.

You can explore the topic(s) that you want to learn more about and in whatever order best supports you!

Ask a Career Consultant Advice Column

Learning from other people's questions can be a great way to prepare for situations you wouldn't have thought about on your own. Read our responses to these questions from graduate students and postdocs about interviewing.

✉ [What do I talk about in a 15-minute interview?](#)

We talk about what a screening interview is and how to approach one.

✉ [I've only worked in academia, how do I answer these interview questions?](#)

We talk about how to approach behavioral questions when you don't have direct experience in the position you are interviewing for.

✉ [How do I talk about my toxic former boss in an interview?](#)

We talk about how to discuss your former work experiences in an interview without being misleading or coming off as negative.

You can browse the [archive of our past columns](#) for more questions from graduate students and postdocs.

Sample Behavioral Interview Questions

Check out our [“Sample Behavioral Interview Questions” webpage](#) to see examples of behavioral questions you could be asked in an interview and an example response to one.