



Ready Reference G-5 Tough Questions and Answers

In reviewing these responses, remember that these are sample answers. Please do not rehearse them verbatim or adopt them as your own. They are meant to get you thinking about how to properly answer the broad range of questions you will face. Don't be too canned in your responses. Prepare your answers, but respond naturally. Take a few seconds to think through your answer before you begin speaking. Be confident, but not arrogant. Know yourself and know the company.

The Questions

- 1. Tell me about yourself.** This is the most common opening question. Research the company and the position, and be able to talk about how you can contribute. Work up a two-minute summary of your past experiences (successes) and challenges (faced and met) and be able to frame your answer within the needs of the company. Example: "My background to date has been centered around preparing myself to become the very best _____ I can become. Let me tell you specifically how I've prepared myself..." Talk about your experience, qualifications, and accomplishments – not your childhood, family, or hobbies.
- 2. Why do you want to work as a _____? /Why do you want to work for us?** Talk about the interesting details of the job and why they fascinate you. Discuss the skills that you have that the job requires.
- 3. What qualifications do you have?** Use your fingers to count them off. Name a skill, list your qualifications, and move on to the next skill.
- 4. Where do you think you will fit in best?** This is designed, in part, to see how much you know about the organization. Thanks to your prior research, you may know of places that need strengthening, areas in which the company is expanding, etc., and can base your response on that information. But, unless you are interviewing for a specific job in a specific department, keep your response general by indicating several areas in which you'd be excited to work.
- 5. Tell me about your education./How has your education prepared you for your career?** Explain your education or training and your skills. Example: "As you can see from my resume, I have skills or previous experience in _____. I have taken courses in _____. My senior design class project involved developing _____, which is similar to what might be used within your company. Let me tell you more about it."
- 6. How did you hear/learn about our organization?** Let the interviewer know that the company was not just a random choice. The key is to demonstrate a real interest in the organization. You are not just applying because you happened to see a poster on the bulletin board. Cite any contact you have had with employees, customers,

products, etc. that have given you a positive impression. You may have visited with a recruiter at a career fair, or you may have visited the company's website to learn about the organization.

7. **What are your strengths?** Don't list more than three, as some recruiters may ask you to list the same number of weaknesses. Cite one or two really strong areas, then one that is not as strong.
8. **What are your weaknesses?** There are several ways to handle this question. You can use something that can be seen as both a positive and a negative, such as the statement that you work too much. Be careful though, as these tend to be overused. This answer also sends the wrong message. Either you are lying, or you are telling the truth, in which case you define working too much as a weakness and really don't want to work hard. If you use this approach, try to think of something unique, and be sure to examine all the ways in which the point could be interpreted. Or, try to think of a point or two that would not be basic to the job. Mention the item, then sit quietly. Some interviewers love to sit in silence after you answer, hoping you'll feel nervous and spout more negatives. Or, think of something and you are working to improve. Example: "I would say my greatest weakness has been my lack of proper planning in the past. I would over-commit myself with too many variant tasks, then not be able to fully accomplish each as I would like. However, since I've come to recognize that weakness, I've taken steps to correct it. For example, I now carry a planner so I can schedule and prioritize my appointments and 'to do' items."
9. **Did you ever have a disagreement/conflict with a boss? Why? Why not?** Answer "yes" and you are a troublemaker, "no" and you're a wimp. Find the middle ground: "Sure we disagreed. But we worked well together. For example we...." Or, "Yes, my boss had asked me to do something which did not appear totally ethical. I asked to speak with him after work when we could have a private conversation. I was able to share my personal dilemma about the situation. Thankfully, he had not realized all the implications and quickly made appropriate adjustments. We were both very happy about the outcome. I was able to be true to my values, and we developed an even more productive working relationship."
10. **What kinds of people rub you the wrong way?** Danger. You shouldn't admit much here. It would be safe, however, to say something like, "People who claim they are going to do something, then fail to produce" or "people who have a preconceived notion that a task can only be done a certain way".
11. **What course did you find most difficult and why?** The interviewer wants to know if you have perseverance. "I got a D in my first term in _____. My study skills were wrong. I joined a study group/got a tutor. When I took the course again, I pulled the grade up to a B. I learned valuable study skills that I was able to use in other courses."
12. **What is your greatest failure? What did you learn from it?** Admitting to failure shows maturity. Avoid examples that might reflect on your ability to do the job. Or, use an example like the one given in the previous question.
13. **Do you work best in a team environment or independently?** Respond to this question in light of the requirements of the position while being true to your nature: "Although I thoroughly enjoy group projects and teamwork, working independently to solve complex problems is equally satisfying to me. Let me give you an example."

- 14. Are you a team player?** “Yes, I’m very much a team player. In fact, I’ve had many opportunities in both athletics and academics to develop my skills as a team player. I’ve been involved in intramural sports, and have worked on several group projects, serving as both a member and a team leader. I’ve seen the value of working together as a team to achieve a greater goal that any of us could have achieved individually. As an example...”
- 15. Would you rather be in charge of a project or work as part of the team?** Different situations call for different types of involvement. Therefore, it is important to demonstrate to the interviewer that you know when it is appropriate to lead and when it is better to follow: “I am happy to follow the leadership of someone else. In fact, some of the best learning experiences have come in that manner. I must be honest, though, to say that it was very encouraging when the group decided that I would be the best person to lead the project. I’m honestly very happy in either role.”
- 16. What is your long-range objective? Where do you want to be in 5, 10, or 15 years?/ What do you plan to be doing 5 years from today?** You should do some self-examination prior to the interview, and have some goals in mind for yourself. Figure the promotions you should get if you work hard for this company over the next five years. Tell the manager you plan to be working for him or her in that position. Or “Although it’s certainly difficult to predict things far into the future, I know what direction I want to develop toward. Within the next five years, I would like to become the very best ___ your company has. I will work toward becoming the expert that others rely on. And in doing so, I feel I will be fully prepared to take on any greater responsibilities that might be presented in the long term.”
- 17. Give me an example of a time when ____.** This is a behavioral question. The interviewer is trying to determine how you would handle situations in the workplace by looking at previous behavior. Remember STAR, and have a brief example. Tell about a situation or task. Explain the action you took. Most people drop the ball at this point, by neglecting to finish the story with the result. Tell what the result was of the action. If you can give a work-related example, it will carry more weight than a school-related example.
- 18. What motivates you?** Money is not necessarily the best answer. A better answer is something like, “having responsibilities and being acknowledged when the job is done well”.
- 19. What kind of salary are you looking for today?** You should know what a fair rate of pay is for the position, but do not offer a figure. Quoting a figure that is too low may get you an offer that is too low, or may communicate that your qualifications are not up to par. A number that is higher than the employer has in mind, will knock you out of the running. Give an answer that you expect to be compensated fairly for the education, skills, and qualifications that you bring to the job. “While finding the right opportunity is more important than money, I have looked at salary comparisons and the cost of living in the area, and I would expect to receive compensation at a fair value for my skills and qualifications.” Bounce the question (politely) back to the interviewer. “While I am aware of the general salary range in the industry, I have no set salary. What salary is usually offered to someone with my qualifications?” If the interviewer persists, respond that your market research shows that salaries fall in the range of ___ to ___.

20. Do you have any questions? Yes, thank you, I do have a few questions. See the list of suggested questions and have a few in mind. Use caution. When employers have supplied you with literature about the organization before the interview, they expect you to read it, study it, and formulate your questions from it. Asking questions that could have been answered by reading the brochures or attending the information session wastes the interviewer's time and does not speak well of you. See Ready Reference G-6 for additional suggestions.

