

Students

Interviewers' Favorite Questions...and Answers

by [Barbara Mulligan](#)

You're wearing your best interview suit and facing your best friend, who's wearing the most inscrutable hiring-manager face she can muster. You've carefully positioned a video camera to record your every move. All is in place for your mock interview.

"Tell me about yourself," your friend/interviewer intones, adjusting her glasses and gazing steadily into your eyes.

What should you tell her? What would you tell a real recruiter or hiring manager?

"Don't tell me where you were born and raised," says Jonathan Ferguson, assistant director of career services at George Washington University and a veteran of countless mock interviews with students. "Don't tell me that you were a cheerleader. Focus on your academics and experience. Ask yourself, 'what are the top five things I want this person to know about me?'"

Ferguson says that while many recruiters ask questions that are a bit more pointed than "tell me about yourself," it's still likely to come up in many interviews and it's best for students to prepare for it.

What other kinds of questions do recruiters ask? Following are 10 more, plus ideas for how to answer or the kinds of competencies the interviewer is seeking, courtesy of Ferguson and three experienced campus recruiters.

1. What do you see yourself doing five years from now?

"I want to hear something related to retail," says Haley Peoples, college relations manager for JC Penney Co. Inc. in Dallas, Texas. "I don't want to hear 'I want to be an astronaut' or 'I want to win the Academy Award.'"

Peoples says the question is designed to help the interviewer know if the job seeker will be happy in that position, or if he or she wants to work in it only as long as it takes to find something "better."

2. How do you make yourself indispensable to a company?

"We are looking for both technical and interpersonal competence," says Doris J. Smith-Brooks, recruiting and advertising manager for Boeing Co. in Seattle, Washington.

Smith-Brooks explains that students who have interned or completed cooperative education assignments generally answer the question best because they know what working for a company entails.

3. What's your greatest strength?

"Don't just talk about your strength—relate it to the position," Ferguson says. "Let them know you are a qualified candidate."

4. What's your greatest weakness?

"Say something along the lines of, 'I have difficulty with this thing, and these are the strategies I use to get around it,'" Ferguson says. "For example, you could say, 'I'm not the most organized of individuals, so I always answer my e-mails and phone calls right away. I'm aware of the problem and I have strategies to deal with it.'"

5. Tell me about a time when your course load was heavy. How did you complete all your work?

"We generally are looking for an answer like, 'Last semester I was taking 21 credits, so I made sure I had a day planner and mapped out all my assignments,'" says Felix J. Martinez, senior staff recruiter at Abbott Laboratories in Abbott Park, Illinois. "We're looking for a plan-ahead kind of individual, not someone who just flies by the seat of his pants."

Martinez says recruiters at Abbott Laboratories use the STAR method of interviewing, which involves getting the interviewee to describe a situation that includes a task that needed to be accomplished, the action taken to accomplish the task, and the result of that action.

"We actually tell the candidate, so they're aware of what we're looking for," he says, adding that the approach can help candidates focus on their answers.

6. Tell me about a time when you had to accomplish a task with someone who was particularly difficult to get along with.

"I want to hear something that shows the candidate has the ability to be sensitive to the needs of others but can still influence them," Peoples says, adding that he's heard plenty of wrong answers to that question. "Don't say 'I just avoided them' or 'They made me cry.'"

7. How do you accept direction and, at the same time, maintain a critical stance regarding your ideas and values?

Smith-Brooks repeats that internship or co-op experience can give students the experience to answer that question, pointing out that students with good interpersonal skills honed on the job can understand how to walk that fine line.

8. What are some examples of activities and surroundings that motivate you?

"Most of our technical disciplines are teamwork professions and require getting along with and motivating other people," Smith-Brooks says.

9. Tell me how you handled an ethical dilemma.

"Suppose you worked at a bank and a long-time customer wanted a check cashed right away but didn't have the fund balance in his account to cover the check," Martinez says, explaining that if the bank's policy prohibited cashing checks in that manner, the teller would have a choice of violating bank policy or alienating a good customer.

Martinez says the best way to handle such a situation would be to go to a supervisor, explain the situation, and ask for advice. He adds that students who can't offer a situation that they handled correctly the first time can explain how they learned from making mistakes.

"Explain that the next time, this was how you handled it," he says.

10. Tell me about a time when you had to resolve a problem with no rules or guidelines in place.

"I'm looking for a sense of urgency in initiating action," Peoples says, explaining that the question probes a student's ability to overcome obstacles.

For Peoples, students offering the best answers to the question describe a retail-related problem.

"I'm looking for the right thing in terms of customer service," he says.