Interviews

Preparation for performing well when answering competency or strength based questions in interview.

Got an interview coming up? Boost your chances of success by following this advice on interview techniques.

For more support visit Careers in The Base on Alexandra Square

Drop-in and receive support with your interview questions - no appointment needed (Mon, Tue, Thu, Fri – 10:00-12:00, 14:00-16:00)

Visit TARGETconnect to book an Interview Workshop or contact careers@lancaster.ac.uk to request a mock interview

careers@lancaster.ac.uk
01524592767
**Interview technique cheat sheet**

Most interview questions are variations on these common themes.

Think about examples you could give to answer each question before you go ahead with an interview, and remember that the Careers Service can help you by providing mock interviews to help you practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tell me about yourself!</strong></td>
<td>Think about your story in terms of what makes you unique and employable.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Why have you applied?</strong></td>
<td>Do you understand what the role entails? What are the main responsibilities?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What can you bring to the company?</strong></td>
<td>What will they be getting from investing in you?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Where do you see yourself in five years time?</strong></td>
<td>Can you commit to the company in the long term?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What are your strengths?</strong></td>
<td>Avoid adjectives; use data, examples, and follow the STAR technique.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What are your weaknesses?</strong></td>
<td>What skills can you develop within this role? Are you committed to learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How do you deal with stressful situations?</strong></td>
<td>Give examples and explain your approaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How would your colleagues describe you?</strong></td>
<td>Use testimonials, rather than a list of adjectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tell me about a time you worked as part of a team!</strong></td>
<td>Can you work well with others? Give examples.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What’s your preferred management style?</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How would you approach managing other people?</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Previous achievements?</strong></td>
<td>Discuss examples using the STAR technique.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Show me your creativity!</strong></td>
<td>Can you ‘think outside the box’? Give examples of creative problem solving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expected Salary</strong></td>
<td>Research the salary on offer; be realistic but don’t undersell yourself.</td>
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Competency Interviews

Competency-based questions are common on both application forms and at interview. These questions are looking for evidence of skills that are used in the job. It’s not enough to just say what you can offer. You must also provide evidence. Interviewers are less interested in what you've done than they are in how you've done it. Competency interviews work on the basis that past performance is the best indicator of future success.

The interviewer will therefore be seeking examples of past behaviour that provide them with concrete evidence that you have the necessary competencies, or transferable skills, to succeed in the job.

What competencies is the interviewer looking for?

This will vary according to the job but important competencies to many recruiters of new and recent graduates include:

- Decision Making.
- Problem Solving.
- Planning and Organisation.
- Leadership.
- Managing Upwards.
- Numeracy.
- Self-awareness.
- Communication.
- Negotiation.
- Persuasiveness.
- Teamwork.
- Commercial Awareness.
- Cultural Sensitivity.
- Interpretational Skills.

Questions will normally be asked in the format "Describe a situation where you showed persuasiveness" or “Tell me about a time when your communication skills were essential in achieving a successful outcome”.

How can I tell if I will have a competency-based interview or a traditional interview?

The application form may give you a clue. Many employers will design the application form to include a number of questions in this format. At the interview, the examples you give may be probed in more detail and further examples sought of the behaviour/competences in question.

Although you can't always predict in advance what type of interview an employer will use, time spent preparing answers to competency questions will never be wasted. Even if the interview follows a traditional format, you will have thought about the competencies the employer needs and be able to back up your answers with concrete examples, which always makes a more positive impression.

Preparing for a competency-based interview:

Preparation is key if you want to be able to answer all questions thrown at you without having to think too much on the spot on the day of the interview; it requires several steps:

- Make sure that you understand which skills and competencies will be tested. It sounds obvious, but some person specifications can be a little vague and you will need to do some thinking in order to ensure that the examples that you will be using, hit the spot. For example, the person specification
may say that you need to have "good communication skills in dealing with third parties".
For someone who works in customer service and is expected to handle complaints all day long, this
will most likely involve a mix of empathy/understanding as well as an ability to be assertive in a nice
way whenever required; however for someone applying for a commercial law post, this will most
likely involve an ability to explain complex matters in a simple way, and not so much empathy.

Understanding the requirements for the post, whether they are stated explicitly or not in the person
specification, is therefore crucial.

Identify examples from your past experience which you can use to demonstrate that you possess
the skills and competencies that you are being asked to demonstrate. You do not have to find really
complicated examples; in particular the outcome of the story does not have to be extraordinary;
what matters most are the skills you demonstrate.

**STAR Technique:**

The acronym STAR stands for: **Situation, Task, Action, Result.**

It is a widely recognised technique designed to enable you to provide a meaningful and complete
answer to questions asking for examples. At the same time, it has the advantage of being simple
enough to be applied easily.

Many interviewers will have been trained in using the STAR structure. Even if they have not, they
will recognise its value when they see it. The information will be given to them in a structured
manner and, as a result, they will become more receptive to the messages you are trying to
communicate.

**Situation: 10-15% of your answer:**

Describe the situation that you were confronted with or the task that needed to be accomplished.
Set the context. Make it concise and informative, concentrating solely on what is useful to the story.
Don’t give unnecessary detail.

**Task: 10-15% of your answer:**

Drill down. What were you responsible for? Be really specific. Make sure the task links back to the
skill you are evidencing.

**Action: 60% of your answer:**

This is the most important section of the STAR approach as it is where you demonstrate your skills
in actions.

Be personal, talk about you, not the rest of the team. Avoid saying “we” even in a teamwork
example. This is about you and not the rest of the team.

Go into detail. Do not assume that the interviewers will guess what you mean. Steer clear of technical
information, unless it is crucial to your story.

Explain **what** you did, **how** you did it, and **why** you did it.
For example:

When discussing a situation where you had to deal with conflict, many candidates would simply say: “I told my colleague to calm down and explained to him what the problem was”. However, this would not provide a good idea of what drove you to act in this manner. How did you ask him to calm down? How did you explain the nature of the problem? By highlighting the reasons behind your action, you would make a greater impact.

You can say:

I could sense that my colleague was irritated and I asked him gently to tell me what he felt the problem was. By allowing him to vent his feelings and his anger, I gave him the opportunity to calm down. I then explained to him my own point of view on the matter, emphasising how important it was that we found a solution that suited us both.

This revised answer helps the interviewers understand what drove your actions and reinforces the feeling that you are calculating the consequences of your actions, thus retaining full control of the situation. It provides much more information about you as an individual and is another reason why the STAR approach is so useful.

Portray yourself as the driver of a successful outcome. Avoid saying “I had to….” This sounds as if you were acting under duress when you should be demonstrating your initiative.

Ensure that you are giving the interviewers an insight into your logical approach.

**Result: 15%-20%:**

Explain what happened as a result of the action that you took. You can also use the opportunity to describe what you accomplished and what you learnt in that situation but this shouldn’t be the main focus of your answer.

**In brief, it’s really, really simple:**

- List the competencies for the specific job;
- Trawl your CV for two examples for each competency **(NB: if this becomes really hard or impossible, the chances are that the job may not suit you);**
- For each example, write a bullet point for each of the **STAR** headings above;
- Practise your answers with a critical friend;
- Enjoy the interview because **you have prepared**;

**Extra support:**

- For feedback and support preparing for interviews or completing application forms use your careers team. The Lancaster University careers team offer an application checking service that can be accessed either through TARGETconnect or by attending a drop in session in The Base: (Mon, Tue, Thu, Fri – 10-12, 2-4pm)
- You can also book an appointment for a mock interview [https://lancaster.targetconnect.net/leap/appointments.html](https://lancaster.targetconnect.net/leap/appointments.html)
Strengths-Based Interviews

What is Strengths Based Interviewing?

A Strengths based interview focuses on your strengths and what you enjoy doing, rather than a competency based interview that focuses on asking you to give examples of what you can do based on your experiences so far. Everyone has strengths whereas not everyone has the necessary previous experiences to draw upon to answer competency questions. Strengths based interviewing is regarded to be a fairer and more inclusive method, allowing candidates to be selected as a result of their natural talents and interests. Many employers are using strengths based questions as part of their recruitment process e.g. EY, Barclays, Aviva, Nestle, BAE Systems, Cisco, Royal Mail, Unilever and Standard Chartered.

What can you do to prepare?

As strengths based questions are not asking for examples it is less easy to pre-prepare answers. However, there are a few things you can do:

Before the interview:

ﳉ REFLECT on your own strengths and weaknesses – know yourself and what motivates you. Strengths are things you enjoy, pick up quickly or look forward to using. You can assess your own strengths on GraduatesFirst. Ask yourself questions such as:

- ‘What do I do well?’
- ‘When am I performing at my best?’
- ‘What activities get me energised and why?’

You could also take one of the many online tests that can help you identify your strengths e.g. https://icould.com/buzz/

ﳉ REVIEW the job description and RESEARCH the strengths or values the company is looking for. Check their website, job description, person specification and collate any knowledge you have from speaking with their representatives.

.gameserver Become familiar with the format of strengths based questions and practice your responses whilst looking in the mirror, or by video, remembering that interviewers will also be looking at your body language.

Once you have identified your strengths and those the company is looking for, you then need to think about what approach you would take to show these in an interview situation.
During the interview:

- **RATIONALE**: Remember there are no specific wrong or right answers. For questions such as, ‘Do you prefer starting or finishing projects?’ either ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ could be a perfectly valid answer - as long as you support your answer with sensible reasons for your preference. e.g. that you find it energising to start a project because you like to be involved from the beginning to help shape the project, or that you get a sense of satisfaction when something finishes because you’ve been involved in completing something successfully.

- **REVISIT** your CV and prior experience. It may be appropriate to draw on examples from your past. However, this certainly shouldn’t be the focus of your answers. For example the interviewer may ask ‘Do you enjoy working in a team?’ If your answer to this is yes, you should firstly respond with why you enjoy working in a team and then back this up with an example of a time you have enjoyed doing so.

- **REFRAME**: Although the focus of a strengths based interview will be your strengths, it’s not uncommon to be asked a question about your weaknesses. If you are, remember to be honest about your ‘weakness’ (no one is perfect!) but you should also talk about what steps you are taking to address/mitigate this.

- **REMEMBER**, if you have an interview coming up, you can book an hour-long practice interview with a careers consultant, or a careers and employment adviser, at Careers.

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**Do you have any more examples of strength-based questions? Yes we do!**

- How do you know your strengths and weaknesses?
- How do you feel when you are presented with a problem?
- Do you prefer working on your own or in a team?
- Have you ever wanted to quit something?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
- What motivates you?
- Have you ever put the needs of your team before your own?
- Have you ever done something differently second time round?
- What do you love to do in your spare time?
- How would a lecturer describe you?
- What are you most proud of?
- What do you feel you are good at?
Video Interviews

With remote interviewing becoming more common, this guide provides top tips to help you prepare effectively.

What is a Video interview?

Slightly different to a Skype interview, a video interview is often pre-recorded. Usually all candidates are sent the same video to complete in their own time. Recruiters are using video interviews more frequently as it is a very cost effective way of screening candidates, and they can choose to replay an answer and rate them online.

The employer will be ensuring you match the job requirements, and will likely assess:

✧ Your personal qualities, qualifications, skills and abilities;
✧ Motivation and enthusiasm to succeed in the role;
✧ How you communicate and your interpersonal skills.

Preparing for a video interview:

LOCATION:
✧ Choose a location where you feel comfortable.
✧ Avoid filming outdoors as you will have less control over noise or light levels.
✧ Ensure it is in a quiet area, close your windows and doors, turn off any equipment that may distract during the video process e.g. phone, TV, radio etc.
✧ Consider placing a ‘DO NOT DISTURB’ on your door.
✧ Check your surroundings behind you on your webcam, take down any distractions.
✧ Sit at a table (avoid an office/ computer style chair if you might be prone to ‘swinging’ if nervous!)

LIGHTING:
✧ Ensure the lighting is bright (more than just your computer screen as a light source) and that the light source comes from the same direction as the camera. This will light your face evenly and avoid unwanted shadows.
✧ Try not to record under harsh artificial overhead lighting.
✧ Avoid being back lit as this will make you appear silhouetted.

PRESENTATION:
✧ Dress appropriately – as if you were attending this interview in person.
✧ Align the webcam with your face and shoulders; ensure you are looking straight ahead at the camera not down so they don’t get a view up your nose!
✧ Think about your body language, look enthusiastic, motivated and avoid slouching

RECORDING:
✧ The general format is 30 seconds to read the question followed by two minutes to answer.
✧ Have a glass of water available.
✧ Ensure any prompts (post-its or notes) are within the eyesight of your computer so you do not lose eye contact by looking down at notes.
✧ Have your application form available.
✧ Relax and speak slowly.
✧ Focus on the camera and smile.
PRACTISE:
- A tutorial can often be sent in advance together with a FAQ section, and can often be run by an external company.
- Ensure that you have tested your equipment: microphone (try not to wear headphones) and webcam etc. in advance. Check the calibration of sound and image that there is no delay or crackling noises.
- Also check in advance that the technology is compatible with your device, so don’t leave it until the last day!
- Book a mock video interview with the Careers team – who can give you feedback before your big day

RESEARCH:
- The questions you will be asked are aimed at identifying your suitability for the role, so ensure you know your CV, application form and the job description/person specification.
- Prepare responses that highlight your skills and experience
- Research the company and know why you want to work there.

KEEPING CALM AND MANAGING NERVES:
- Understand all candidates will have an element of being nervous. If you don’t it may mean you aren’t too keen for the role.
- Try taking calming breaths before the interview.
- Use visualisation to help you remain confident, for example, imagine completing the interview successfully.
- Practise and prepare as much as possible.

Ultimately, a video interview should be treated and prepared for just like any other interview. To help you prepare for the interview also see our leaflets focusing on Competency Interviews and Strengths Based Interviews.

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