



Interview Questions Decoded

Or, “What are you really asking me?”

“Tell me about yourself.” “What is your greatest weakness?” You’ve probably heard of these and other common interview questions. They sound straightforward enough—but don’t be fooled. How you respond to these seemingly simple questions will speak volumes about your reasoning abilities, behavioral skills, confidence, and fit. So recognize what the recruiter is *really* looking for and deliver a response that is less about *you* and more about what you bring to the employer’s table. Here are four basic interview questions deciphered.

Q: Tell me about yourself.

Translation: Tell me why you think *you’re* the right candidate for our organization.

What they’re looking for: How you view yourself, summarize yourself professionally, and handle open-ended, conversational-style questions.

How to answer: Don’t give a blow-by-blow bio from cradle to now. Don’t ask, “What do you want to know?” Your response will set the tone for the rest of your interview, so prepare a thoughtful response *beforehand*. Be aware, the recruiter is interested in how your background led you to the company’s doorstep, so select details that relate to the position at hand and help convince the interviewer to hire you. Focus only about 10% on your personal history and 90% on your work history. Limited work experience? Talk about relevant class or community activities. Stress key strengths, accomplishments, applicable experience, and professional goals, and tie them back to the job you’re interviewing for.

Q: Why are you interested in this position?

Translation: Are you really interested in our company and what we do? Or is this just “a job” to you?

What they’re looking for: Insight into how your background and knowledge fit the job; did you invest time to understand what the company does.

How to answer: Focus on addressing specific tasks of the role, as well as the broader company mission. Be enthusiastic about what you would contribute.

Q: What are your salary expectations?

Translation: Can we afford you? Do you know your worth?

What they’re looking for: Do you have a salary history that meets their expectations?

How to answer: In salary negotiations, it is always best to have the other party answer first. If you’re pressed, provide a researched and realistic range of what you would be willing to accept, and express flexibility.

Q: What motivates you?

Translation: What are your goals and professional principles?

What they’re looking for: Insight into your professional values. An interviewer who is your potential supervisor wants to understand if her management style matches your working personality.

How to answer: Keep your answer broad and honest. Focus on how you can help the company achieve its goals, not on what’s in it for you.

Q: What is your biggest weakness?

Translation: Do you know how to answer difficult questions?

What they’re looking for: Did you prepare an effective response to a tricky question? Are you self-aware and open to improvement?

How to answer: Provide an example that is either an incidental weakness or a strength in disguise. Don’t spotlight flaws that could raise alarms. State the problem, then a solution. For example “I’ve always tried to help others out. At times it resulted in my putting too much work on my plate. So I learned to prioritize and set limits. I’m now less stressed and I achieve better results.”



i n a nutshell:

Interviews are for the employer’s benefit, so read between the lines when asked even the most basic interview questions:

- **Always answer the question**
- **Keep your responses related to the open position; don’t ramble or include irrelevant minutia**
- **Focus on meeting the employer’s needs**
- **View each response as an opportunity to market yourself**
- **No generic answers; these questions require thought**
- **Don’t point out shortcomings that could raise red flags**

Be aware, be prepared, and be authentic. Don’t be caught off guard with a frequently asked interview question or you’ll screen yourself right out of a job offer.