

# Successful Interviewing:

## How to answer difficult questions



KATIE STOBER, PH.D.  
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, GRADUATE STUDENT SERVICES  
[KSTOBER@TAMU.EDU](mailto:KSTOBER@TAMU.EDU)

979-845-5139

KOLDUS 209



**CAREER CENTER**  
TEXAS A & M UNIVERSITY

# First Impressions



- Arrive 5-10 minutes early (time is a very important commodity in American culture).
- Dress appropriately (interview usually = suit).
- Keep in mind: Recruiters are extremely hygiene-conscious (your nails, hair, etc should all be clean and trimmed). Wear deodorant, but no perfume or cologne—you should smell neutral—like nothing.
- Any makeup or jewelry should be minimal, natural, and conservatively applied.
- Remember eye contact, handshake, and open body language.
- Be genuine and sincere.
- Relax and be (the best version of) yourself.

# Common Interview Questions



- Why do you want to work here?/ Why did you apply for this job?
- Why should we hire you?/Why are you the best candidate?
- Tell me a bit about yourself. (→ elevator pitch!)
- Where do you see yourself in X years?
- Why did you choose this major/degree?
- What's your greatest strength? What's your greatest weakness?
- What's your proudest accomplishment?
- What's your greatest failure?
- Have you ever been fired from a job? Why?
- Why are you leaving your current position?
- What are your salary expectations for this position?
- Who are our biggest competitors? What's our greatest challenge?
- Where do you envision our company in X years?
- Tell me about a time when you...../ Describe a situation where....

# Basic Premise of Behavioral Interview Questions

Past Performance → predicts → Future Performance

- Anticipate these types of questions
- Prepare mental stockpile of stories/ examples to discuss
- Be prepared to “brag” about your skills and accomplishments and to argue why you are the most qualified candidate—this type of self-promotion is expected.
- “Tell me about a time when...” “Describe a situation where...”  
“Give me an example of....”
- Even though it feels like the question is about YOU. Make sure you eventually tie your skills back into the company’s success.

# The STAR method



- **STAR**

- Describe the **Situation** you were in.
- Describe the **Task** you performed.
- What was your **Approach** to the situation?
- What were the **Results** of your actions? And what did you LEARN from this experience?

Be prepared for interviewer to ask for more specific details.

Connect past success (or lessons learned from past mistakes) to future success at their company.

# How to Prepare



- Recall recent situations that show favorable behaviors, or actions, especially involving leadership, teamwork, adaptability, initiative, planning, delegation, innovation, communications, and service.
- Prepare short (2-3 min) descriptions of each situation and be ready to give details if asked.
- Be prepared to provide examples of negative situations. Your skill in handling failure as well as success will be examined.

## How to Prepare (cont.)



- Be sure the outcome reflects positively on you. Even if the result itself was not favorable—what did you learn from this experience that has helped you improve your performance since the failure?
- Avoid placing all the blame on others (or inanimate objects). Accept responsibility for things YOU could have done differently. (And, hopefully, WILL do differently in the future.)
- Prepare 6-7 examples you can tweak to suit any question. Don't memorize, adapt.

## How to Prepare (cont.)



- Be specific. Don't generalize; give a detailed account of one event. Note: If you don't have any personal experience with something, provide a specific hypothetical example of what you *would* do.
- Know the organization's mission, philosophy and goals as thoroughly as possible. The most successful answers will subtly reflect these.
- If you have multiple examples available, and aren't sure which is best, ASK them. (e.g. "I have overcome several obstacles...would you like to hear about the greatest obstacle, even though it is not work related, or would you rather I describe my greatest professional obstacle?")

# Are you Positive or Pompous?



## Positive

- Acknowledges team effort and others' contributions
- Recognizes weaknesses and gaps in skillset, but still posits self as best FIT for the company's needs
- Emphasizes importance of effort, perseverance, endurance, passion, etc.

## Pompous

- Takes sole credit for every success
- Has no weaknesses, is superior to all other candidates in every way
- Emphasizes brain power rather than effort, says things like “winning 1<sup>st</sup> place was easy...I barely had to try”

# Negative Behavioral Questions



- “Tell me about the last time you failed.” “Tell me about a disagreement you had with your supervisor.” “Describe a time when you missed a deadline.”
- Use **STAR** method.
- Avoid blaming others for your failures. (This demonstrates you are not self-aware and have no intention to learn from your mistakes.)
- End on a positive note. When discussing **Results**, state what you learned from this experience and how you would do/are doing things differently now.

# “What’s your greatest weakness?”



- **Be honest. Everyone has one.**
- **Select an example that:**
  - Is professional, but won’t interfere with this position (e.g. a data analyst who has social phobia and has to exert extra effort when speaking to strangers)
  - Is temporary (e.g. a necessary skill you are currently learning; English fluency not as good as you’d like it to be, but getting better every day)
  - You are aware of, and taking steps to correct (e.g. “My instinct is to procrastinate, and I used to miss deadlines or turn in mediocre work because of it. But the rigors of graduate school have led me to be more aware of this now, so whenever I feel overwhelmed with a project and want to put it off until tomorrow, here’s what I do:…….”)
- **End positively=Reduce your risk. Increase your ROI.**

# Hostile Questions



- “You know this position only requires a Master’s degree. Aren’t you overqualified?”
- “I only see X years of experience in Y on your resume. Why is that?”
- “How do you explain this gap in your employment history?”
- “I see you only have classroom/campus research experience. What makes you think you’re qualified for an industry job?”
- “What makes you think you’re ready to run a lab/be a PI?”
- “Your degree is in Chemistry, but I’m looking for physics and mechanical engineering majors. Why should I consider you?”

# Hostile Questions (con't.)



- Remain calm. This may be a test of your ability to concentrate under pressure and adapt in stressful situations.
- Acknowledge that they are making a valid point.
- Reiterate your qualifications. Point out areas of equivalency.
- Emphasize how your differences will add value to the company/team.
- End positively. Restate your ability to learn new things quickly, desire for this position, etc.

# Illegal Questions



By law, employers are NOT allowed to ask any questions regarding:

- Marital status, children, family, etc.
- Age
- Nationality/race/country of origin (though they CAN ask about work eligibility)
- Disability (includes pregnancy)
- Gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, etc. (Note: while they cannot ask this, many states—including Texas—do not cover orientation and expression in their anti-discrimination policies.)
- Religion

# How to address an illegal question?



- Politely decline to answer and turn the conversation back on topic. (i.e. “As far as I’m aware, an applicant’s \_\_\_\_\_ will not have any impact on their job performance in area X. I do have 4 years of experience with your software measuring Y.....”)
- Most of these slip-ups are well-intentioned and not malicious. Try to figure out what they’re really asking.
  - Recruiter: “So, are you married? Have any kids?”
  - You: “If you’re asking about my ability to relocate/travel, I understand that this position will require relocation and 25% travel and I am fully able and willing to do that.”

What they can ask: “Will you need any accommodations or allowances in order to perform the duties of this job? If so, what?”

# Unsuccessful Answers



“Uh, um, hm, hum.”

“I have no strengths.”

“I have no weaknesses.”

“I am really smart, and people are intimidated by it.  
That’s my biggest weakness.”

“I’ve never failed/missed a deadline/disagreed with my  
boss, etc.”

“I work too hard.”

“I’m a people person.”

“This is the only place that interviewed me.”

“This is the only job at your company for my major.”

# The Salary Question



- Don't be the first to mention salary.
- If they ask “What are your salary requirements?”, Try to avoid giving specific # if you can:
  - “I will consider any reasonable/competitive offer.”
  - “I understand that this position will offer a Master's level salary. I will consider any reasonable offer in that range.”
- If they press you/require a range, then say:
  - “Based on my research, salaries for similar positions in this city/area appear to be \$X-\$Y”
  - Give a 5k range
  - Research salaries on Salary.com, glassdoor.com, etc. Know what you're worth!!

# Questions to ask them....



- “What do you enjoy best about working at \_\_\_\_?”
- “What expectations do you have for the person in this position in the first 90 days?”
- “Can you please clarify the company structure/hierarchy for me?”
- “Why is this position open? Why did the person in this position leave?”
- “What kind of training can I expect in the first X months?”
- “What has been the career path for others in this position?”
- ANY question that reflects knowledge and enthusiasm!

# General Interviewing Tips



- Demonstrate knowledge of company and enthusiasm and fit for the position—in every answer.
- Relax, be friendly, and *smile*.
- You are *ALWAYS* being evaluated.
- Phone interviews = think LOUD and SLOW, have cheat sheets ready
- Skype interviews = do a dress rehearsal before & wear pants!
- Eye contact is key = demonstrates honesty (#1 trait)
- If you need a few seconds to gather your thoughts (or find the correct words in English), say “Let me think about that...” Don’t fear the silence.
- If you don’t understand a question (or can’t hear them) ask them to repeat it or rephrase it to clarify (“Are you asking if I’ve ever had experience in X?”)
- Send a follow-up thank you email/note within 24 hours.

# The Visa Question.....



- Key factor: **Does your VALUE outweigh your COST?**
- You should clearly state your work eligibility on your resume (i.e. “F-1 Visa; Eligible to work in U.S. for \_\_\_\_ months through Optional Practical Training”)
- Research company before you apply to see if they are “visa-friendly” (GoingGlobal, myvisajobs.com)
- You should not lead with visa questions/concerns, but you should be **HONEST** and **OPEN** about your visa status. Hiding it because you’re worried they won’t consider you only wastes their time...and yours!

# The Visa Question.... (con't)



- Questions they might ask:
  - “Are you eligible to work in the U.S.?”—If you have filed for and been approved for OPT, you may answer YES to this question.
  - “Will you now or in the future require sponsorship?”— Obviously, you must also answer YES to this question too.
- Be knowledgeable of OPT & H1B procedures, deadlines, etc. They may be harboring misconceptions that you have the opportunity to correct. It is YOUR responsibility to be your own advocate!!

# Now What?



- The Career Center offers:
  - Mock interviews and 1:1 appointments (call **979-845-5139**)
  - Virtual Mock Interview Tool (hireaggies.com → Access HireAggies → Log In → Mock Interviews)
  - Walk-In Graduate document review in Koldus 209  
Mon & Fri 8:30-11am; Wed 1:30-4pm  
(or any day 8:30-11am and 1:30-4pm)
  - Career Coffee Chats: Harvest Coffee Bar, Bryan, Sundays 7-9pm
  - Email: **kstober@tamu.edu**