Challenging Interview Questions and How You Should Answer Them

🔹 What is your biggest weakness?

What your interviewer is really trying to do with this question—beyond identifying any major red flags—is to gauge your self-awareness and honesty. So, “I can’t meet a deadline to save my life” is not an option—but neither is “Nothing! I’m perfect!” Strike a balance by thinking of something that you struggle with but that you’re working to improve. For example, maybe you’ve never been strong at public speaking, but you’ve recently volunteered to run meetings to help you be more comfortable when addressing a crowd.

🔹 What are your salary requirements?

If the employer asks you about salary, it’s best to postpone the discussion. By naming a salary too soon, you could disqualify yourself by asking for too much or shortchange yourself by asking for too little. Instead, try to find out the intended range for the position. Or use one of the following deflection statements:

- “Before we discuss salary I’d like to learn more about the position and benefits and have the chance to share my qualifications with you.”
- “Can you tell me what the range is for this position?”
- “I’m sure we can agree on compensation that is fair, based on the market and my experience, but I would prefer to have that conversation if I am offered the position.”

It is also recommended to do your research on what you should be paid beforehand by using sites like Payscale and Glassdoor. You’ll likely come up with a range, and we recommend stating the highest number in that range that applies, based on your experience, education, and skills. Then, make sure the hiring manager knows that you’re flexible. You’re communicating that you know your skills are valuable, but that you want the job and are willing to negotiate.

Check out our resources on Salary Negotiation

🔹 Why are you leaving your current job?

This is a toughie, but one you can be sure you’ll be asked. Definitely keep things positive—you have nothing to gain by being negative about your past employers. Instead, frame things in a way that shows that you’re eager to take on new opportunities and that the role you’re interviewing for is a better fit for you than your current or last position. For example, “I’d really love to be part of product development from beginning to end, and I know I’d have that opportunity here.” And if you were let go? Keep it simple: “Unfortunately, I was let go,” is a totally OK answer.

🔹 Why is there a gap in your employment?

If you were unemployed for a period of time, be direct and to the point about what you’ve been up to (and hopefully, that’s a litany of impressive volunteer and other mind-enriching activities, like blogging or taking classes). Then, steer the conversation toward how you will do the job and
contribute to the organization: “I decided to take a break at the time, but today I’m ready to contribute to this organization in the following ways.”

🔗 Can you explain why you changed career paths?

Don't be thrown off by this question—just take a deep breath and explain to the hiring manager why you've made the career decisions you have. More importantly, give a few examples of how your past experience is transferrable to the new role. This doesn’t have to be a direct connection; in fact, it’s often more impressive when a candidate can make seemingly irrelevant experience seem very relevant to the role.

🔗 How many tennis balls can you fit into a limousine?

1,000? 10,000? 100,000? Seriously?

Well, seriously, you might get asked brainteaser questions like these, especially in quantitative jobs. But remember that the interviewer doesn’t necessarily want an exact number—he wants to make sure that you understand what’s being asked of you, and that you can set into motion a systematic and logical way to respond. So, just take a deep breath, and start thinking through the math. (Yes, it’s OK to ask for a pen and paper!)

🔗 Are you planning on having children?

Questions about your family status, gender (“How would you handle managing a team of all men?”), nationality (“Where were you born?”), religion, or age, are illegal—but they still get asked (and frequently). Of course, not always with ill intent—the interviewer might just be trying to make conversation—but you should definitely tie any questions about your personal life (or anything else you think might be inappropriate) back to the job at hand. For this question, think: “You know, I’m not quite there yet. But I am very interested in the career paths at your company. Can you tell me more about that?”

🔗 If you were an animal, which one would you want to be?

Seemingly random personality-test type questions like these come up in interviews generally because hiring managers want to see how you can think on your feet. There’s no wrong answer here, but you’ll immediately gain bonus points if your answer helps you share your strengths or personality or connect with the hiring manager. Pro tip: Come up with a stalling tactic to buy yourself some thinking time, such as saying, “Now, that is a great question. I think I would have to say...”

🔗 What do you think we could do better or differently?

This is a common one at startups (and one of our personal favorites here at The Muse). Hiring managers want to know that you not only have some background on the company, but that you're able to think critically about it and come to the table with new ideas. So, come with new ideas! What new features would you love to see? How could the company increase conversions?
How could customer service be improved? You don’t need to have the company’s four-year strategy figured out, but do share your thoughts, and more importantly, show how your interests and expertise would lend themselves to the job.

Adapted from themuse.com

**TIP:** Be prepared for questions you hope no one asks because they usually touch on a **perceived weakness or shortcoming** in your application that an employer will want to ask you about. Your answers to these questions should focus on addressing the issue in a truthful, albeit matter-of-fact way, and then turning it back to a positive.

**Example:** *Maybe you were laid off for non-performance reasons.*

“I was one of 180 people laid off last September when XYZ Inc. went through a major downsizing.”

**Example:** *Perhaps you were fired.*

“I just didn’t fit into the organization. Finally, my supervisor and I decided it was best for me to leave. This was difficult, but it showed me the importance of finding a good match for my next position.”

These examples show straightforward answers that **reflect well on you,** demonstrate that you are **resilient** and that you have **learned from any mistakes** or setbacks.