

# Acing Behavioral Interviews

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**a.k.a. competency-based interviews**

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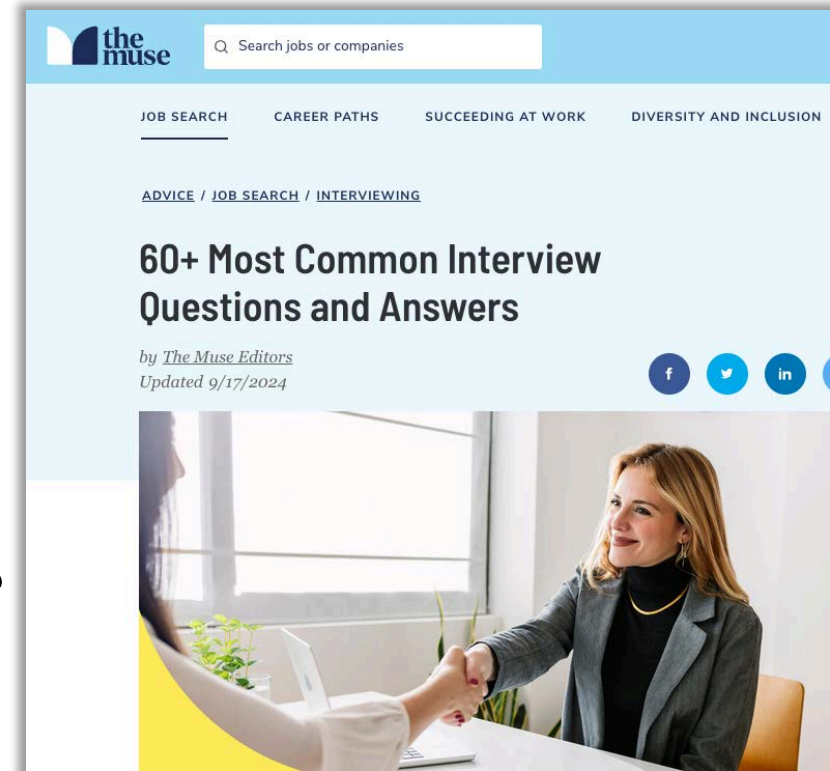


# Topics

- Overview of behavioral interviews
- Strategy for answering behavioral questions
- Video example & discussion
- Try it out
- Tips for preparing for behavioral interviews

# Classic interview questions (be ready to answer these too!)

- Tell me about yourself.
- Walk me through your resume.
- Why do you want to work here?
- Why are you leaving your current job?
- What did you enjoy most about your last job?
- What are your top 3 strengths?
- What would colleagues say is your greatest weaknesses?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years? 10 years?
- Why should we hire you?
- What are your salary requirements?



<https://www.themuse.com/advice/interview-questions-and-answers>

# Behavioral interview questions

- ***Tell me about a time when*** you had to rely on someone else to get things done.
- ***Give me an example of*** a problem you solved in a creative way.
- ***Describe a situation*** when you received feedback critical of your work.
- ***What have you done*** to calm a colleague who was stressed out about a deadline?

# Behavioral interview questions

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- ***Describe a situation*** when you received feedback critical of your work.
- ***What have you done*** to calm a colleague who was stressed out about a deadline?

Based on the theory  
that your past  
behavior is the best  
predictor of your  
*future* behavior

Open-  
ended

Can't answer  
with a simple  
yes/no.

# Behavioral interview questions

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**“Prompts” to tell stories about your previous experiences.**

# Strategy to answer behavioral questions: **S/T.A.R. method**

**1**

**S/T = Situation or Task**

Background or context to “set the scene”

**2**

**A = Action**

What did you do?



**3**

**R = Result**

What was the outcome?

# Example (video clip from B school at The Ohio State)

**Question:** Tell me about a time where you set a goal and you thought you did everything possible to achieve that goal, but it still fell short? (2:14-5:11)



- Candidate describes his internship experience at an investment bank.
- Don't let this context throw you – this question could just as easily be asked of a scientist!



# Example (video clip from B school at The Ohio State)

**Question:** Tell me about a time where you set a goal and you thought you did everything possible to achieve that goal, but it still fell short? (2:14-5:11)



- Take notes on the Handout, Page 1.
- Listen for: Situation/task (S/T), Action (A), Result (R)
- What is your impression of the candidate? What positive qualities does his answer convey?

# Debrief

**Question:** Tell me about a time where you set a goal and you thought you did everything possible to achieve that goal, but it still fell short? (2:14-5:11)



- What was the **situation/task**? (S/T)
- What was the **action**? (A)
- What was the **result**? (R)

# Debrief

**Question:** Tell me about a time where you set a goal and you thought you did everything possible to achieve that goal, but it still fell short? (2:14-5:11)



- What is your impression of the candidate?
- What positive qualities does his answer convey?

# Features of his effective answer

- He used the S.T.A.R. approach, so his story was easy to follow.
- His answer was focused on a specific project, with lots of detail.
- Story was about something he did.
- He shared lessons learned.



Your turn

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Write an answer to one of these behavioral questions.

1. Tell me about a time when you had to manage competing priorities. How did you decide what to work on first?
2. Give me an example of an improvement you made at work (current or former position).



# Practice together

- Choose someone to be the:
  - Interviewer
  - Candidate
  - Timekeeper (for groups of three or more)
- Interviewer: read the candidate's selected question aloud.
- Candidate: respond using the S/T.A.R. format. (aim for < 2 minutes)
- Interviewer & timekeeper: listen for candidate's S/T.A.R. Use handout for notes.
- When candidate finishes, discuss the answer. Did the candidate touch on every element of S/TAR? Was it under two minutes?
- Swap roles, time permitting.

# Debrief

**1**

**S/T = Situation or Task**

Background or context to “set the scene”

**2**

**A = Action**

What did you do?

S/T

A

R

**3**

**R = Result**

What was the outcome?





# Making the S/T. A. R.s twinkle

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*Tips for effectiveness*

# 1. Situation/Task (S/T)

- “Set the scene” by summarizing the specific situation and providing relevant background information.
- Should address *where* and *when* your story occurred, and *who* was involved
- Use recent (past 1-2 years) and relevant examples; ok to draw upon the full range of your experiences
  - PhD or postdoc research experience
  - Paid work experience, internships, leadership, service roles, teaching, volunteer work, etc.
- Aim to summarize the S/T in 30 seconds or less

## 2. Action

- The heart of your story – it shows employers how you approach your work and handle challenges.
- Should answer *what* did you do, *why* did you do it, *how* did you do it?
- May want to include some of the alternative approaches you considered.
- Describe the steps **you** took in the situation: use mostly “I” instead of “we”
  - Behavioral interviewers want to know YOUR specific contribution, but at the same time...
  - Acknowledge others' contributions where appropriate.

### 3. Results

- The resolution to the story.
- What happened? What was accomplished? What difference did your actions make? What did you learn?
- Doesn't always have to be a "happy ending" if you can relay an important lesson or skill you learned in the process
- Quantify your results whenever possible, especially in terms of time, cost, or quality.

# Practice being concise.

- Aim for <3 minutes, ***focusing mainly on the A.R.***
  - 30 seconds to explain the situation (S/T)
  - 2-3 minutes to explain what you did (A) and what the result was (R)
- Practice with a friend and ask for feedback.
  - Is your story coherent?
  - Does the story convey the qualities you intend?

# Behavioral interview “no-no’s”

- **Actions that start with, “We.”**  
*We ran the experiments as soon as we could.*
- **Opinions** without examples to back them up.  
*I am the most organized member of the team.*
- **Vague statements** that provide no specifics about what you actually did.  
*I always take time to figure out what my PI really needs.*
- **Theoretical statements** that tell what you *would* do but not what you actually did do. (Stay out of the *would’s*.)  
*If it had been my experiment, I would have double-checked the protocol.*

Try to anticipate the questions you will be asked.

What **competencies** are required to succeed in the job you're applying for?



# Competencies

- **Knowledge, skills, abilities and personal attributes** needed to do a job well.
- Behavioral interview questions are designed to address the specific competencies a job requires.
- There are three broad categories of competencies.



# Three broad categories of competencies

## 1 Dealing with people

Persuasiveness  
Collaboration  
Motivating others  
Teamwork

## 2 Dealing with “business”

Analytical thinking  
Project management  
Results-oriented  
Technical knowledge

## 3 Self-management

Adaptability  
Attention to detail  
Initiative  
Optimism

# Which competency(s) does this question relate to?

Tell me about a time you had to manage competing priorities. How did you decide what to work on first?

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## **Self-management**

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# Which competency(s) does this question relate to?

Give me an example of an improvement you made at work.

**1**

## **Dealing with people**

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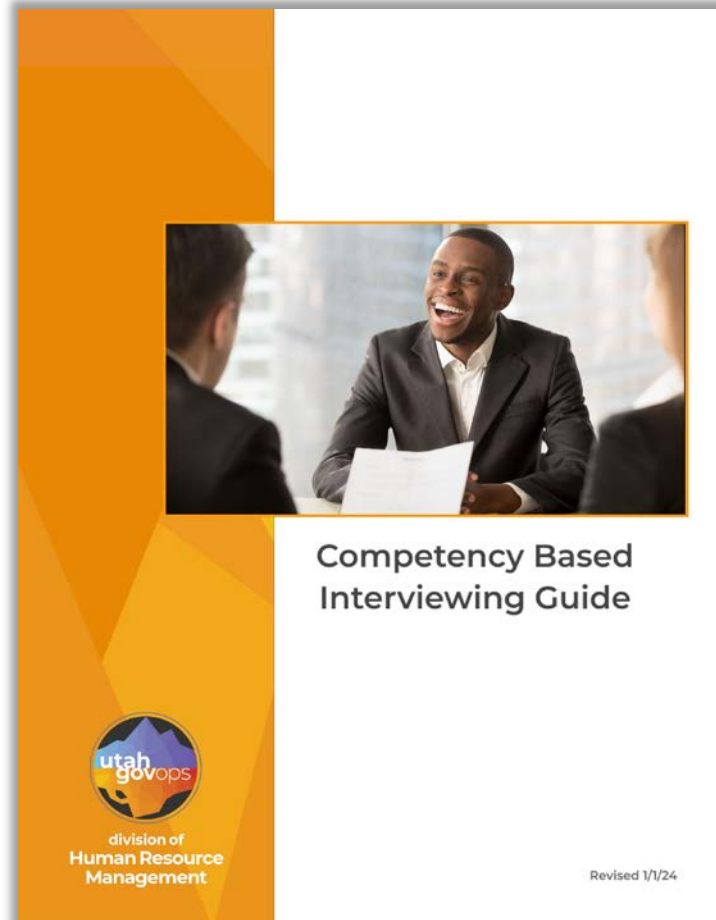
## **Self-management**

Adaptability  
Attention to detail  
Initiative  
Optimism

# Anticipate the relevant competencies

- Read the job description, or ads for similar jobs
- Think about the obvious competencies: *What would you be looking for if you were the hiring manager?*
- Talk to people in similar roles
- Compile lists of competencies from other sources, e.g. professional organizations, trade journals, etc.
- Use lists of commonly assessed competencies to anticipate the competencies that will be important for the job you're applying for

# A whole manual of questions aligned to competencies



<i><b>Interview Questions - Working Document</b></i>	
<i><b>Table of Contents</b></i>	
Select a job-related competency from the list below to view possible interview questions	
Adaptability.....	1
Ambiguity (Tolerance for).....	2
Analytical Thinking.....	3
Analyzes Trends.....	4
Attention to Detail.....	5
Being a Quick Study.....	6
Builds Effective Teams.....	7
Business Acumen.....	8
Business Innovation/Strategic Agility..	9
Change Agent.....	10
Coaching.....	11
Collaboration/Relationship Building...	12
Commitment to Excellence.....	13
Composure.....	14
Confidence.....	15
Conflict Resolution.....	16
Continues Improvement.....	17
Creativity/Innovation.....	18
Customer Commitment.....	19
Decision Making.....	20
Delegation.....	21
Developing Others.....	22
Diversity.....	23
Effective Communicator.....	24
Emotional Intelligence.....	25
Follow-up.....	26
Group Facilitation.....	27
Hiring Talented Staff.....	28
Humor.....	29
Influence.....	30
Initiative.....	31
Integrity/Ethical Standards.....	32
Interpersonal Savvy.....	33
Listening.....	34
Managerial Courage.....	35
Managing Through Systems.....	36
Motivating Others.....	37
Negotiation.....	38
Optimism.....	39
Organizational Ability.....	40
Organizing.....	41
Peer Relationships.....	42
Perseverance.....	43
Personal Accountability.....	44
Personal Effectiveness.....	45
Perspective.....	46
Planning.....	47
Presentation Skills.....	48
Problem Solving.....	49
Process Oriented.....	50
Professionalism.....	51
Project Management.....	52
Providing Direction.....	53
Quality Focus.....	54
Quantitative Analysis.....	55
Recognizing and Rewarding.....	56
Responsive.....	57
Results Oriented.....	58
Risk Taking.....	59
Self Development.....	60
Teamwork.....	61
Technical and Professional Knowledge...	62
Vision and Purpose.....	63
Written Communication.....	64
Work/Life Balance.....	65

from the State of Utah Department of Human Resources Management

[https://docsearch.utah.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Competency-Based-Interviewing-Guide-From-Dora\\_HR.pdf](https://docsearch.utah.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Competency-Based-Interviewing-Guide-From-Dora_HR.pdf)

# What do I talk about?

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*Prepare your S/T.A.R. answers.*

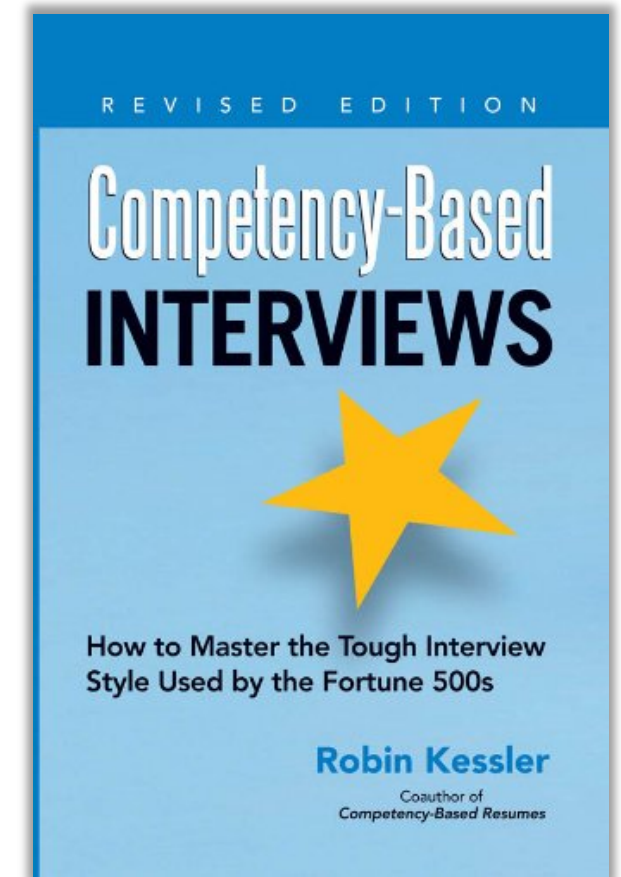
# Have 8-10 work-related stories at your fingertips

- Prepare a mix of positive and negative stories for each job/leadership role.
- Use recent examples; skim your last 6 months of email for ideas.
- Adapt the stories to highlight key competencies. Create a spreadsheet to plan your S/T.A.R.s.

Competency	Situation	Task	Action	Result
Initiative #1				
Initiative #2				
Teamwork #1				
Teamwork #2				
etc.				

# Resources

- YouTube example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKBubKO-798>
- Great article about S.T.A.R. method  
<https://www.themuse.com/advice/star-interview-method>
- Behavioral interviews in the biopharma industry  
<https://www.science.org/content/article/first-encounters-behavioral-interviewing>
- Competencies and questions from the State of Utah  
[https://docsearch.utah.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Competency-Based-Interviewing-Guide-From-Dora\\_HR.pdf](https://docsearch.utah.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Competency-Based-Interviewing-Guide-From-Dora_HR.pdf)
- More practice questions  
<https://www.themuse.com/advice/30-behavioral-interview-questions-you-should-be-ready-to-answer>  
<https://career.ucsf.edu/sites/g/files/tkssra2771/f/wysiwyg/ResearcherBehavioralInterviewQuestions.pdf>  
<https://career.ucsf.edu/sites/g/files/tkssra2771/f/wysiwyg/ResearcherIndustryInterviewQuestions.pdf>





# Questions?

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