

Interview Tips Series: Part 3 – Structuring Your Responses

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After reading Part 1 and Part 2 of our Interview Tips Series, you should now have a good idea of the types of questions that can come your way during an interview. Even if you get a question that wasn't in Part 1 or Part 2 of the Series, at least you will have seen enough examples that you can think on your feet. Now it's time to talk about how to structure your responses to interview questions in such a way that you leave your interviewer with a positive, lasting impression.

Structuring Your Responses

One of the ways interviewers can tell who is prepared for an interview and who is not is in how a candidate structures their responses. If you talk off-the-cuff, you may get through the interview, but you may not necessarily stand out. There are a few different formulas that are suggested, with **STAR** being the most common.

The STAR method stands for Situation, Task, Action, Result (see Table 1).¹ This simple method for responding to interview questions allows you to focus on the structure of your response. Better yet, if you get lost because you are providing too many details when answering, you can easily get back on track by moving to the next letter in the acronym. The STAR method helps you keep your responses succinct and to-the-point.

Table 1. Shortened Examples of the STAR method

Example 1	
Situation	“During my third professional year of pharmacy school, I was placed into a group with three of my classmates for a project within an elective course on Public Health.”
Task	“We were asked to deliver a 20-minute presentation on a Public Health topic of our choice, and ended up selecting drug take-back programs.”
Action	“We initially agreed on how to split up the presentation, but unfortunately one team member stopped responding to our emails and text messages. After I tried to speak with him several times over a span of about a week leading up to the presentation, I spoke with my professor a few days before the project was due and shared my concerns.”
Result	“The faculty member followed up with the student individually and found out that there were some personal circumstances that were taking him away from the project. So, my teammates and I worked together to fill in the missing pieces and we were able to deliver an excellent presentation.”
Example 2	
Situation	“On my ambulatory care rotation, I was responsible for speaking with 8 patients each day.”
Task	“I recognized that a lot of patients were cancelling their appointments, particularly on rainy days.”

Action	"I worked with my preceptor to develop alternative plans for days with a lot of no-shows. This included reaching out to patients over the phone, working up extra patients, and doing additional topic discussions and drug information questions."
Result	"As a result, even though there were a few days that had fewer patient interactions than expected, I was able to still use the time effectively and gained a lot from that rotation!"

One additional method is the **STALL** method, though it has nothing to do with stalling. STALL stands for **S**ituation; **T**ypical Approach; **A**ctual Approach; **L**essons **L**earned. With this response format, the interviewee shares:

- **The situation** – "On my internal medicine rotation, I was asked to discuss a patient's medication list with them."
- **How they would typically approach that situation** – "Normally, I would prepare by reviewing all of the patient's medications ahead of time, so I could be ready for any questions that came my way."
- **How they actually approached this particular situation** – "In this case, because of some competing priorities, I did not have time to review the medication list ahead of time and was caught off guard with a question about the patient's antidepressant medication regimen. I was able to look the question up and get back to the patient later that afternoon."
- **Finally, what was learned from the situation** – "Although it took me out of my comfort zone, it was very helpful for me to recognize that I don't always have all of the answers and that getting back to patients, or preceptors, or whoever is asking a question, is okay."

This method is helpful when sharing stories about situations you did not necessarily handle in the best way. This comes up commonly with 'negatively-phrased' questions (e.g., Tell me about a time you made a mistake.).

Have a Conversation

The best interviews are the ones that feel natural. Unless you have somehow managed to avoid society throughout your life so far, you have had conversations and therefore, have already started practicing. But when you're placed in an interview setting, you will likely feel stressed and have your guard up, making it hard to have a conversation because you are so focused on giving the "correct" answers. Giving "correct" answers only gets you so far. That's because interviewers are not just looking for someone that can do the job, but someone they enjoy working with and can get along with. If they have to mentor you, they want to like you, and most interviewers will probably like you more if they find it easy to have a conversation with you. Here are a few tips to having a great conversation during your interview.

Give the Interviewer Something to Work With

Interviewers will fondly remember candidates who make it easy for them! The best interviews, from the interviewer's perspective, require little effort to keep the conversation going. On the other hand, interviewers will also remember (not so fondly) when the interviewee gives them nothing back in terms of conversation. Take these two real-world scenarios:

- Scenario 1:
 - o *Interviewer*: How was your drive in today?
 - o *Quiet Candidate*: It was good, thank you!
 - o *Interviewer*: Great! So, can you please tell me a bit about yourself?
- Scenario 2:
 - o *Interviewer*: How was your drive in today?
 - o *Talkative Candidate*: It was good, thank you! I only live about 15 minutes from here, so I'm very familiar with the area!
 - o *Interviewer*: That's great! Are you from here originally?

To be clear, either answer that the candidate provided in the scenarios above is "fine," but one stands out and feels more conversational.

Don't Stop at the Initial Response

When an interviewer responds to your initial answer, make sure you respond too! Keep the conversation going! This is one of those few opportunities during an interview when the candidate has the ability to drive the conversation, so make sure to use this to your advantage.

The following scenarios demonstrate this idea:

- Scenario 1:
 - o *Interviewer*: Tell me about a time you collaborated with someone who had a different work style than yours.
 - o *Quiet Candidate*: *Provides answer*
 - o *Interviewer*: That's so great to hear you were able to work past those differences and still get the project done! *Pauses, awaiting a response ... hearing nothing, decides to continue* Okay, next question...
- Scenario 2:
 - o *Interviewer*: Tell me about a time you collaborated with someone who had a different work style than yours.
 - o *Talkative Candidate*: *Provides answer*
 - o *Interviewer*: That's so great to hear you were able to work past those differences and still get the project done!
 - o *Talkative Candidate*: Absolutely, it was definitely a challenge and I was able to learn a lot from that experience. For instance, ... *Provides a few additional talking points*

Don't Wait Until the End to Ask Your Questions

You'll be asked questions in an interview, but it's okay to flip the script and ask your questions in return as the conversation flows! Remember, you are being interviewed, but you are also seeking information to ensure that the job, residency, etc. is going to be right for you. Usually this happens at the end of the interview (e.g., when the interviewer asks, "What questions do you have for me?"); however, if you can weave in some of your questions to alleviate some of your stress and break up the interview, you should absolutely take those opportunities!

Let's demonstrate this using two scenarios:

- **Scenario 1:**
 - o *Interviewer:* What do you look for in a manager?
 - o *Quiet Candidate:* *Provides answer*
 - o *Interviewer:* Thank you for sharing that! *Immediately moves on to the next question*
- **Scenario 2:**
 - o *Interviewer:* What do you look for in a manager?
 - o *Talkative Candidate:* *Provides answer*. If you don't mind me asking, I'd love to hear about how you would describe your leadership style.
 - o *Interviewer:* Absolutely! I'm a firm believer in ...

Another Reason to Aim for a Conversation...

If the conversation flows, the interviewer may also be able to skip some of their scripted questions, which makes for an easier interview for you! This happens for a couple reasons:

- The interviewer heard what they needed to hear and does not need another question to assess the same skills;
- They are excited by your soft skills (e.g., ability to maintain a conversation) and the additional scripted questions aren't necessarily going to tell them anything that is going to change their minds.

Another way to think of it is the longer you spend in conversation, the fewer scripted questions need to be asked.

Conclusion

If you are prepared for an interview, you will be able to answer anything that comes your way. If you are *very well* prepared, you should be able to form your responses into succinct anecdotes and keep the conversation flowing to leave your interviewer with a positive impression. If you haven't already, make sure to check out the rest of the Interview Tips Series!

References

Stahl A. The 3 key formulas to answer any interview question. Forbes. March 16, 2021. Accessed January 13, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashleystahl/2021/03/16/the-3-key-formulas-to-answer-any-interview-question/?sh=7ff7280970bc>