

How to Answer Interview Questions, Even the Unusual Ones

I've enjoyed more than one interview in my life, quite a few in fact. And some questions, no matter what the position, remain constant. Let's analyze a few of these and figure out what it is that the interviewers are really asking.

1. *Tell us a bit about yourself.* Now is not the time to relate family history, extra-curricular activities or your secret ambition to become a novelist. What the interviewer really wants to hear is something to convince them that you are the right candidate. This question is sometimes asked "Why should we hire you?" or "What do you bring to the table?" Both are looking for you to spell out your relevant education, experience and skills.
2. *Why do you want to work for us?* This is a tricky question. It is not about what you want, really; it is asked to find out what you know about the company. The interviewers are looking for some indication that you have real interest in the company and have conducted a little research. Come prepared with information from the company's website, from local newspaper coverage or from more in-depth research. Prove that your skills are relevant to upcoming challenges, or to positively impacting the bottom line.
3. *Do you prefer working with others or by yourself?* First of all, if you need to work with others, hopefully you haven't applied for a one-person office job. Make sure you fit the needs of the job. Give an example of having contributed to a team effort, and give an example of having completed a project on your own. And then state that although you are fully capable of team work and individual contributions, you prefer - and then, knowing the needs of the position, and your own preference, be honest with your answer.
4. *What are your weaknesses?* My personal all-time least favourite. In fact, I once refused to answer this question. I couldn't think of anything relative and declined. Mainly the interviewers want you to show self-knowledge and to show self-improvement. You might say that you used to procrastinate, and that upon realizing that this was impacting your work, you took a corporate training program (or conducted self-study etc.), and methodically applied what you learned. And now, you tackle projects with method, not scrambling madly at the last minute.
5. *If you were a fruit/vegetable/animal/piece of furniture/famous person, etc.?*

This question brings us to the point of all of the answers. You must put yourself in the interviewers' shoes to determine what it is that they are really looking for. Strategize your answers. In this case, what you choose is not important. It is why you chose it, and how you explain your choice. For example, if I were interviewing for a senior management position, I may say that I would be an eagle. Why? Because the eagle commands respect, and has a bird's eye view which would enhance my abilities to see "the big picture" with all its components. If I were interviewing for a lady's wear retail sales position, I might choose to be magnolia blossom, so like fashion, admired for its beauty, fast fading, and leaving the stage for the next trendy bloom. Get creative! Strategize an answer to these sometimes unnerving odd-ball questions.

I mentioned that in the past I have declined to answer questions now and then. This is perfectly acceptable. Interviewers realize that you may be nervous, and reasonable interviewers won't penalize you for declining. Besides, this would leave you with a wonderful opportunity to send a more meaningful "thank you" email or letter. You could reply to that skipped question, or add to a skimpy answer while sending that very important "thank you."

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