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# COMMONLY ASKED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS & STRATEGIES TO ANSWER THEM

Office of Career & Professional Development  
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The following are examples of the most common interview questions. Speak with a career counselor about the best ways to answer these and other questions. Remember:

- **Keep it short:** Your answers should be between 15-30 seconds each.
- Every question is really, “**Why should we hire you?**” So continue to answer that question in every question the employer asks.
- **Tell a Story:** Every answer should highlight your skills and be backed up by a story.
- **Be Passionate/Excited:** Your energy and tone count for as much as your actual words.
- **Relax and have fun:** If you get the job, you will be spending a lot of time with these people, so let them see your true (professional) personality.

## “TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF”

- Keep it brief. Keep your answer short and relevant to the job.
- Tell a story that highlights skills you bring to the job. Talk about your background and experience. Relate your background /experience to this job (as opposed to more generally).
- Start with something interesting about your background, but tie it to your interest in this employer, this work, this location, or law school, etc. Quickly.

## “WHAT ARE YOUR STRENGTHS?”

- Pick a **job-related skill** (not something you do for fun.)
- Strengths for litigation could include oral advocacy, ability to think on your feet, work under pressure, negotiate effectively and advocate confidently and assertively.
- Strengths for transactional law could include detail-orientation, writing, analytical ability, and negotiating.
- Strengths for direct services could include people skills, interviewing, negotiating, and demonstrated commitment to the mission.

## “WHAT ARE YOUR WEAKNESSES?”

- Answer the question. We all have flaws. Answering well shows self-awareness.
- Talk about a weakness you have remedied or are in the process of correcting.
- Or, come up with a weakness that is actually a strength in this job.
- Most weaknesses in moderation are strengths. For example, a perfectionist in moderation is someone who is detail oriented. Spin your weakness into a strength by discussing how you are moderating your behavior.

- **Keep it job-related!** If you pick a personality trait, you run the risk of not fitting in with the employer or their clients.

#### **“CAN YOU EXPLAIN YOUR GRADES?”**

- This is a pressure question. So relax and answer with confidence.
- Address the question, but get to the positive quickly. You can admit that your grades are not what you’d hoped, but continue with something positive, like work performance, awards, etc.
- If your grades improved over time, point that out. If your grades in relevant courses were high, mention how well you did in those courses. The implication may be that if you have poor grades, you would not perform well in this job. Rebut that premise! Show you can do the job.

#### **“WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF FIVE YEARS FROM NOW?”**

- Demonstrate that you are committed to the kind of work for which you are applying.
- The employer wants to know you will stick around. Employers want to know if they invest in you for the summer, you’ll be around later.
- Show that you are interested in the work the employer does, committed to staying in the area, and looking for career growth.

#### **“WHAT SETS YOU APART FROM OTHERS WE ARE INTERVIEWING?”**

- This is an ideal opportunity to market yourself!
- Decide which of your top skills and attributes fit this position and present them to the interviewer. Tell stories to back up your skills.
- For example, a small business litigation firm looks for a self-starter with good client skills and strong communication skills. Give examples of how you have developed these skills.

#### **“WHAT CAN YOU BRING TO THIS ORGANIZATION?”**

- Show you know both the organization and how your skills fit that organization’s needs.
- For a public interest law job, the DA, and PD offices, the interviewer is interested in your history of commitment to the cause as well as your lawyering skills.
- For a big firm, focus on your skills that best match the organization, and promote your academic achievements.

#### **“WHY ARE YOU INTERESTED IN OUR ORGANIZATION?”**

- **Do your homework!** Check out information in Martindale-Hubbell, NALP forms, on-line searches, newspapers, recent cases, summer surveys, etc.
- Talk to people who know about the organization or who worked there before (like 3Ls who just summered there or Hastings alums who work for the employer.)
- Then, figure out why you want to work there and why you would be an asset to them.
- **Things to think about:** reputation of the organization, practice area, size of the employer, geographic location, prominent partners or associates at the firm, interesting cases you might be involved with, the nature of the clientele, etc.

- **Show your enthusiasm for the organization and the position!** An interviewer is looking for genuine excitement about this opportunity. Let your body language, facial expression and tone of voice demonstrate your interest.

**“IF WE WERE TO CALL YOUR REFERENCES, WHAT WOULD THEY SAY?”**

- Highlight your positive job-related skills.
- If possible, ask your references so you know exactly what they will say about you.
- Back up your claims with actual incidents for which you were praised.

**“WHY DON’T YOU HAVE A JOB ALREADY?” or “WHY DIDN’T YOUR LAST EMPLOYER EXTEND AN OFFER OF EMPLOYMENT?”**

- This is a stress question and an invitation to get defensive. Instead, be positive but most of all – don’t blame or say anything negative about the employer. Take responsibility for your actions.
- If you did not receive an offer of permanent employment from your summer employer, explain why in a tactful way.
- **State the facts.** If you worked as a corporate summer associate, it is understandable that in today’s market the firm may not be hiring corporate associates because they don’t have the work load for those attorneys.
- Your tone and confidence matter most in these answers. Employers want to see you composed and confident.

**“WHY DO YOU WANT TO WORK IN THIS CITY?”**

**Point out your ties**, commitment, or interest in the particular geographic location. Ties could be

- family or relatives,
- hometown; grew up in the area,
- high school, undergraduate or post-graduate ties,
- business or community ties,
- or you love the area because of its lifestyle, atmosphere, proximity to nature or hobbies you pursue, etc.

If you never have lived in the area,

- call people you know in that area to learn about it.
- Read about the area online and in books and local newspapers.
- Tell the interviewer about this background research. Let the interviewer know that you are committed to moving, have explored areas to live and have looked into the lifestyle. Bring up aspects of the area you find interesting.

**“IF YOU WERE AN ANIMAL WHAT WOULD YOU BE?” “WHAT FIVE PEOPLE WOULD YOU INVITE TO A DINNER PARTY?” “WHO IS YOUR HERO/HEROINE?” “IF YOU WERE A TREE, WHAT WOULD YOU BE?”**

- There is no right answer, or wrong answer, except no answer at all.
- This is a test of your ability to think on your feet and to play with new ideas.

- Better answers will include traits that you have or want to have that work well in a professional environment.
- Whatever your answer, explain *why* you have chosen that particular person, book, animal, tree.

**“WHAT IS THE LATEST MOVIE YOU’VE SEEN (OR BOOK YOU’VE READ)?”**

- This is to get a sense of who you are as a person.
- If you can’t think of an interesting one you’ve experienced recently, slightly reframe the question by saying, “I can’t immediately recall the last book I read but I can tell you what my favorite book is. “

**ADDITIONAL COMMONLY ASKED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

**“SELF” QUESTIONS**

- Why did you go to law school?
- How do you spend your free time?
- What constitutes “success” to you?
- In what environment do you work best?
- What two accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction and why?
- How do you work under pressure?
- What’s the biggest mistake you’ve ever made?
- What qualities do you think a good lawyer should have?
- What type of people do you work best with, and why?
- Describe how you would handle a disagreement between you and your supervisor about the direction a case should take.

**CAREER GOAL QUESTIONS**

- Why do you want to be a lawyer?
- What is your ultimate career goal? How does this job fit into those goals?
- What are you looking for in your first law job?
- What areas of practice are you interested in?

**EDUCATION QUESTIONS**

- Have you enjoyed law school?
- What courses did you enjoy most/least, and why?
- Why did you choose Hastings?
- What have you learned from participation on a journal or in a clinical program?
- What professors did you like most/least?

## **WORK EXPERIENCE**

- Did you get an offer from your last/summer employer? If not, why not?
- What didn't you like about your previous job?
- How did you like \_\_\_\_\_ job?
- What did you learn at \_\_\_\_\_ job that will help you in this position?

## **THIS EMPLOYER**

- What do you know about our organization?
- Why are you interested in working here?
- Why should we hire you?
- What kind of salary are you looking for?
- What do you think will be the hardest part of this job for you?
- Do you have any questions for me/us?

## **BEHAVIORAL BASED QUESTIONS**

"Tell me about a time when..."

These questions are designed on the premise that past performance predicts future performance. Have a story ready to go about a time when you handled a challenging work or client situation successfully, and be sure to tie the experience back into how you would perform well in the job at hand.

## **SAMPLE QUESTIONS YOU COULD ASK THE EMPLOYER**

The appropriateness of the following questions depends on the interviewer/employer. This is not an exhaustive list, just some suggestions to help you organize your thoughts.

- Who assigns the work load? How is work assigned? Who will oversee/supervise my work?
- Are new attorneys assigned to a specific partner or to a department?
- How are new attorneys trained?
- What kinds of professional development activities are encouraged at this organization/firm?
- Are new attorneys encouraged to attend outside conferences or training seminars?
- How quickly can I expect to have direct client contact?
- How many attorneys, in general, work on each case?
- What are the criteria for advancement?
- What made you decide to work for this organization/firm?
- What keeps you at this organization/firm?
- What projects are you working on right now?
- Why do you enjoy this practice area?

- What skills does your organization/firm look for in new associates?
- What is this office's relationship to the head office? (If you are interviewing at a branch office)
- In what areas do you project growth? (Good question for the call-back interview.)
- By when do you expect to make a decision? (Always good to ask at the end of an interview to show you are interested in the position.)