

Organizational Effectiveness & Staff Development

# YALE UNIVERSITY: GUIDE TO INTERVIEWING WITH CONFIDENCE

# Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	2
Introduction & Objectives.....	3
Interview Preparation.....	4
Post-Interview Follow Up.....	7
Appendix.....	8
Story Idea Generators.....	9
Developing Strong Accomplishment Stories Worksheet.....	10
Preparing For a Behavioral Interview: S-A-R Worksheet.....	11
Sample Interview Questions.....	13
The Most Dreaded Interview Question: Weakness/Area of Development...16	
Questions To Ask The Interviewer.....	19

# Introduction & Objectives

## Introduction

While all parts of the job application process are important, the interview represents the optimal opportunity to distinguish yourself from other candidates. Answering questions with engaging context and specific examples can elevate your candidacy from good to great! The suggested approaches, preparation strategies, and tools provided in this workshop and guide will help you build a strong interviewing skill set.

Typically, the anatomy of a behavioral interview is as follows:

1. Interest questions – interviewers are trying to gauge your interest in the role, passion for the opportunity, and fit with the department. These are typically the first questions you will get in an interview.
2. Behavioral questions – meant to gauge your behavior in past situations to assess your skills, judgment, professional maturity, and fit for a particular role. The majority of your interview will consist of behavioral questions. All behavioral questions require specific answers with thoughtful, detailed examples of how you have behaved in past situations.
3. Questions for the interviewer – your chance to ask the interviewer questions. This is an opportunity to demonstrate your interest in the role, knowledge of the department, and any research you have done on the interviewer. This can also help you capture information to further determine cultural fit.

Once the interview is completed, it is important to write a strong, thoughtful and personal thank you note. This is an essential part of the interview process and can help reinforce a strong first impression.

## Objectives

This guide will help provide you the tools to prepare for the interview and practice what you have learned. We encourage you to read through the guide and use the worksheets provided. As questions arise, you can always reach out to us.

# Interview Preparation

## Interest Questions

*Overview:* Interviewers are trying to gauge your interest in the role, passion for the opportunity, and fit with the organization. These are typically the first questions you'll get in an interview.

*Examples:*

- Walk me through your resume.
- Why are you interested in this organization?
- What excites you about this role?
- What are your long term goals?

*Groundwork:* Know your story and emphasize the experience, skills, and education that relate directly to the role for which you are interviewing. Be able to articulate how this role fits into your long term career trajectory.

*Preparation Tools in Appendix:*

- Story Idea Generators
- Creating Your Story – Peer Feedback Form (Content)
- Creating Your Story – Peer Feedback Form (Delivery)

## Behavioral Questions

*Overview:* Behavioral questions are meant to gauge your behavior in past or hypothetical situations to assess your soft and hard skills, judgment, professional maturity, and fit for a particular role. The majority of your interview will consist of behavioral questions. All behavioral questions require specific answers with thoughtful, detailed examples of how you've behaved in past situations.

*Examples:*

- What would you do if you were part of a difficult team and you knew department objectives weren't being met?
- Tell me about a situation where you were able to find a new and better way of doing something.
- How do you handle obstacles?
- Describe your leadership style.

### *Groundwork:*

Use **Situation – Action – Result** framework to communicate **Accomplishment Stories**

- **Situation:** Give a brief description of the situation
- **Action:** Explain the action you took to address it, including analysis, decision making, resources employed, and steps taken
- **Result:** Describe results obtained. Be as specific and quantitative as possible, though results can also be qualitative

Consult the job description before your interview and make a list of role requirements. Some common themes are leadership, teamwork, problem solving, communication skills, conflict management, and drive for results. For each requirement, develop at least two “Accomplishment Stories” using the S–A–R framework. Having at least two stories for each allows you to use different examples in the instance of multiple interviews with different interviewers; when interviewers compare notes at the end of the day, they won’t hear the same story repeated. Use the list of sample behavioral questions in this guide to practice answering questions with Accomplishment Stories.

### *S–A–R Framework and Accomplishment Story Example*

*Interview Question:* Tell me about a time you used your leadership skills to champion change in your organization/department?

*Answer:* **(Situation)** My leadership style tends to be transformational, not transactional. I like to get team buy-in and do brainstorming sessions. When I took the job at ABC, the person I was replacing had been there for 15 years before leaving. It was hard to come in and make change happen. I needed to bring the team on board, ask for ideas and feedback often, and learn about what was important to each individual team member. For example, we were asked by the President to have a different departmental assessment each year where we were constantly getting feedback from the students and improving our functions. **(Action)** I communicated this directive to the team and had a brainstorming session where we all contributed ideas on a topic in which we could gain feedback from the student body to improve our offerings. **(Result)** As a result of this brainstorming session, the team was engaged and we all agreed on one area to move forward with for that year (and even had agreed upon what we would assess the following year).

### *Preparation Tools in Appendix:*

- Developing Strong Accomplishment Stories Worksheet
- The Most Dreaded Interview Question: What is Your Greatest Weakness/Area of Development
- Preparing for a Behavioral Interview: S-A-R Worksheet
- Sample Interview Questions

## Questions for the Interviewer

*Overview:* Questions for your interviewer demonstrate interest in the role, knowledge of the department and function, and can help you capture information to further determine cultural fit. They fall into five categories:

- 1) About role
- 2) About department
- 3) About manager
- 4) About team
- 5) About feedback and next steps

*Examples:*

- Where have successful employees previously in this position progressed to within the department/organization?
- What are some of the obstacles that the department anticipates in meeting its goals?
- How would you describe your management style? What things do you value in people who report to you?
- What kind of processes are in place to help teams work collaboratively?

*Groundwork:* Plan 3 – 4 questions for *each* interviewer you meet, though you may not get to ask them all. The best questions are customized and specific based on your knowledge of the role, function, department, and interviewer. The samples provided in this guide, while generic, can be tailored effectively for most interview situations. Also, be sure to ask questions about next steps in the process at the end of your interview.

*Preparation Tools in Appendix:*

- Questions to Ask the Interviewer

## Post-Interview Follow-up

### Thank You Notes

*Overview:* Thank you notes are an essential part of the interview process. They help reinforce a strong first impression and strengthen your relationship with the interviewer. It also gives you an opportunity to speak to any points not covered in the interview.

*Groundwork:* Here are a few important tips to keep in mind:

- Send note in a timely manner after the interview, preferably within 24 hours
- Thank individual for their time and consideration
- Craft a note that is personal and tailored to your discussion
- Reiterate your interest in the department, the key components of your candidacy, and briefly restate how your qualifications match the position's needs
- Email is the best form of communication—it's quickest and can easily be attached to any electronic files on your candidacy
- If you were interviewed by more than one person, send a personalized note to each interviewer; use key phrases to let them know you remember this particular meeting

*Example:*

Dear Ms. Nolan,

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today to consider my candidacy. While I didn't get the chance to speak with you individually, I could tell how strong the team is. Ron shared with me the need for your particular skill set in the department and he seemed very thankful to have added you in a leadership role.

I left even more excited about this position and my ability to succeed in it. My experience across industries is a valuable asset. I am used to working across departments to move initiatives forward and I would thrive on the chance to dive deep into students' academic and extracurricular goals. I have strong communication skills and am ready to get out in the field and make a difference for Yale.

I look forward to hearing from you in the coming weeks. As you continue on your pizza-tasting mission, try Olde World and Ely's in Hamden!

Best Regards,

Megan Smith

# Appendix



## Story Idea Generators – 2 Minute Story

1. WHO are you (name, current department/job at Yale University)?
2. WHERE have you worked in the past (relevant background and experience)?
3. WHAT do you do and who do you do it for/what population do you serve?
4. WHY do you do it? What is your mission and what impact do you hope to have?
5. WHAT skills and abilities make you stand out? What are you known for? What difference do you make?
6. WHAT are you passionate about? Where did that passion come from?
7. WHY are you interested in this role and department?

## Developing Strong Accomplishment Stories Worksheet

Think about a specific experience or accomplishment. Create a story that relates to any of the job themes for the role you are targeting. A few examples of common job themes are teamwork, problem solving, communication skills, and conflict management. Reference the job description for the role in which you are applying in order to select a relevant theme. Using the Situation, Action, Result (SAR) framework, complete the worksheet below.

Context	
<b>Situation</b> Summarize the nature of the problem you faced or the goal you sought to accomplish.	

Your Role	
<b>Action</b> Describe the action taken. What did you do? What skills, knowledge and expertise did you demonstrate? Include analysis of the opportunity, the planning and preparation, and the resources involved. Use action words and avoid passive constructions such as “participated in”.	

Impact	
<b>Result</b> What resulted from your effort? What impact did your actions lead to?	

Draft one accomplishment story using the SAR framework

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## Preparing for a Behavioral Interview: S-A-R Worksheet

The following table shows several examples of skills that will likely be probed in the behavioral interviewing process. As discussed in the workshop, you will want to think about how you can use your S-A-R stories to convey what you have accomplished. It is a good practice to think about having two examples (or stories) for each skill. The answers you fill in on this worksheet are not something you need to memorize, but it is great to have prepared these in advance so that you have an arsenal of accomplishment stories that you can pull from.

Here is an example. Let's say you are asked the following question "What role do you typically take on a team?" You answer: "I have always been a natural leader. In high school, I was Captain of the basketball team and through my time as an undergrad I was always taking leadership positions in clubs and other activities. This has continued to my professional life. Even though I do not officially lead/supervise a team, I often take the lead role. For example, for the last few weeks we have been having an ongoing discussion in our weekly staff meetings where no one was agreeing on the way to approach a process that wasn't working. I took the initiative to research new ways to go about the process and came to the last meeting with three suggestions. I walked everyone through the options and presented my recommendation. My boss ended up voting that we take my recommendation and the process has been working great since that meeting."

In this example, our candidate does a great job of showing how she can take a leadership role, even though she is not a team lead/supervisor. She also shows an example that would work if asked about problem solving, taking initiative, researching potential solutions, coming to the team/leadership with recommendations, and influence. As you can see, one example can be applied in many ways. If she uses this S-A-R story when asked about "leadership", she may need a *different* S-A-R story to talk about problem solving, taking initiative, etc. This is why it is a great practice to have at least two examples/S-A-R stories for every skill.

Skills to be Probed by Behavioral Questions	S-A-R Stories: Examples of How You Have Demonstrated Skill
Communication	1. 2.
Interpersonal	1. 2.
Leadership	1. 2.
Teamwork	1. 2.

Problem solving	1. 2.
Inspiring trust	1. 2.
Project management	1. 2.
Creativity	1. 2.
Analytical	1. 2.
Decisiveness	1. 2.
Resourcefulness	1. 2.
Perseverance	1. 2.
Conflict management	1. 2.
Client service	1. 2.
Relationship management	1. 2.
Innovation	1. 2.
Initiative	1. 2.
Difficult teams/colleagues	1. 2.
Challenging situations	1. 2.
Embracing feedback	1. 2.
Influence	1. 2.
Managing up	1. 2.
Multitasking	1. 2.
Flexibility	1. 2.

## Sample Interview Questions

The following list gives several examples of typical interview questions that are often asked in first round and behavioral interviews.

### Interest Questions:

- 1) Tell me about yourself. / Walk me through your resume.
- 2) Why are you looking to leave your current job?
- 3) What matters to you most in your next position? / What is your ideal job? Why?
- 4) Who is your ideal boss? Why?
- 5) What responsibilities do you enjoy most in your current position?
- 6) Why are you interested in this job/industry/function?
- 7) How do you stay abreast of industry/functional news?

### Behavioral Questions:

- 8) Give me an example of a time when you successfully worked within a team. What was your role? What was the outcome?
- 9) Describe a time when you were part of a particularly difficult team. What was the situation? What role did you play? How did you handle it? And, what was the outcome?
- 10) What have been your major successes and accomplishments? How did you achieve those?
- 11) What kind of leader are you?
- 12) Give me an example of a leadership role you have played in an event, meeting, presentation, or project. How did you handle it? What was the outcome? What did you learn from this experience?
- 13) Tell me how you build, motivate and lead teams?
- 14) Tell me about the last time you had to take the initiative to move a project forward. What happened?
- 15) How do you work under pressure? Give me an example.
- 16) Describe a time when you have had to influence the actions or decisions of more senior people, yet did not have the authority to dictate the behavior. How did you handle it? What was the outcome?
- 17) Give me an example of a problem you solved that showcased your analytical skills.
- 18) Tell me about a time when you have successfully resolved a conflict. What was your role in the situation? How did you handle it?

- 19) Give me an example where you sought out a problem to solve because it represented a challenge for you.
- 20) What motivates you?
- 21) Have you ever had to reorganize your team or lead a team through a time of change?
- 22) Give me an example of a creative or innovative idea you have had recently. What was the context? What made your idea innovative? What did you do with this idea? Where does it stand today?
- 23) How would you describe your communication style? Give me an example.
- 24) Describe a project in which you went beyond what was expected of you.
- 25) Tell me about a time when you were particularly effective at prioritizing tasks and completing a project on schedule.
- 26) Tell me about a time when you were able to establish rapport with a particularly difficult colleague. How did you go about it? What were the results?
- 27) Give me an example of a time when you sensed that a client/employee was upset – even though nothing specific was said. What cues did you use to make that judgment? What did you do? What were the results?
- 28) Walk me through a time you were unclear about the directions given to you. What did you do to clarify the directions and what was the final outcome?
- 29) Tell me about a challenging situation you faced.

**Career-focused Questions:**

- 30) What are your short and long term career goals?
- 31) Where do you see yourself in 5 years? 10 years?
- 32) What things have you done or are doing to improve yourself?
- 33) Are you satisfied with your career progress?
- 34) If you could begin your career over again, what would you do differently?
- 35) Tell me about your biggest accomplishment.
- 36) What are you most proud of in your career?

**Additional Questions/Opportunities to Sell Yourself:**

- 37) How will you make an impact in the first 30/60/90 days of this role?
- 38) Tell me something I can't learn from your resume.
- 39) What did you learn from your last job?
- 40) Why should I/we hire you? There are tons of great candidates out there, what differentiates you?
- 41) What can you contribute to this role that someone else couldn't?
- 42) Is there anything else you would like to tell me about yourself?

**Tough Questions:**

- 43) Do you think that you might be overqualified for this position?
- 44) What kind of person is/was your current/former boss?
- 45) Tell me about a frustrating situation at work.
- 46) Has your work ever been criticized? What was said?
- 47) Tell me how you reacted to feedback on one of your projects/responsibilities that wasn't going as well as others had expected. Who was providing the feedback?
- 48) What is your major weakness (or an area of development)? Another one?
- 49) Tell me about a time when you missed an obvious solution to a problem at work.
- 50) Discuss a major setback that you have had to overcome.
- 51) What was the most difficult decision you've ever had to make?
- 52) What is the hardest job you have ever performed?
- 53) What is your worst nightmare?
- 54) What would your current manager say are your greatest strengths and greatest areas of development?
- 55) What is your biggest failure?
- 56) Tell me your biggest regret.
- 57) What has been the greatest disappointment in your career?
- 58) Tell me about a deadline you didn't meet.
- 59) Tell me about a time when you didn't have the required resources to meet a deadline. What was the problem and how did you solve it?

## The Most Dreaded Interview Question: What is Your Greatest Weakness/Area of Development?

Interviewers often ask candidates to share their greatest weakness. This question is sometimes a means of applying pressure, but more often it helps provide additional insight and a new perspective on the applicant's fit for the job. Instead of dreading the moment, seize the weakness question as an opportunity to demonstrate self-awareness and a commitment to self-improvement. Remember, the nature of the weakness itself is less important than how you frame your response, demonstrating your awareness of it and how you are working to improve it.

### Framing your response:

- Focus on areas for growth where improvement is possible, rather than permanent liabilities that will continue to pose problems in the long run.
- Select an attribute that does not have a major impact on your ability to do the job in question.
- Present your weakness with a potentially positive spin or upside.
- Discuss the measures you have taken to address or remedy the weakness.
- Plan ahead, be prepared, and avoid rambling.
- Brainstorm more than one answer in case your interviewer asks for multiple examples.
- Stay positive, be calm, and remain confident.
- Be honest.

Often an interviewer is more interested in how you handle the question than the answer itself. Your ability to remain calm under pressure in the interview predicts how you will do in the future.

### Things to remember:

#### ***Weaknesses can sometimes be assets.***

- For example, empathy might be considered a weakness because it can cause a manager to be "soft." However, empathy can also be useful when trying to extract important information from others or to build trust among the team.
- Demonstrate awareness of when your weakness is a hindrance and when you can use it to your advantage, especially in relation to the position in question.

#### ***Weaknesses you are aware of can be addressed and diminished.***

- If you are working on a weakness, give concrete examples of your approach to fixing the problem, the progress you have made, and goals for further improvement.



***Weakness with regard to a certain skill can provide a learning objective.***

- If a job description includes a skill you do not yet possess, you can devise a strategy to develop it. Have a plan for how you will learn what you need to know (i.e., take a class, seek out a mentor, etc.).

***A former weakness can be revealed through a lesson learned or feedback received.***

- Rather than citing a general weakness, give an example of a situation that you could have handled better, what you learned, and how you would handle similar situations differently in the future.
- You can also give a piece of feedback that you received from a former boss or colleague, and elaborate on how you have been working on it since the discussion. Offer up an example, “ The best piece of feedback I ever received was from my last manager who told me...” – This shows that you learned from the experience and that you handle feedback well (a desirable quality to all managers).

***Weaknesses are safer when they are not related to the job or career path in question.***

- Refer to a weakness that is not directly related to the responsibilities of the position for which you are applying.
- For example, you can safely acknowledge that you would like to improve your public speaking skills if the role does not involve making presentations.
- Be sure you are familiar enough with the job description to know what is and is not expected of a person in that role.
- As a precaution, do not give a weakness that is completely unrelated to a professional job. For example, do not say that you never learned to play a musical instrument.

**How to brainstorm weaknesses:**

- What parts of your job do you not enjoy? What things do you not like doing?
- What do you procrastinate on or put off doing?
- What skill would you love to build or get formal training to improve?
- What feedback have you recently received that you are genuinely working to improve?

**Examples of weaknesses:**

- ***Impatience*** – I like to get things done as quickly as possible and I get frustrated when bureaucracy or things outside my control slow me down. I have found it helpful to set up a timeline in advance so that I don’t feel so pressured on each individual task. This also helps to understand what tasks can be accomplished in the interim while I wait for others to get back to me.
- ***Taking things personally*** - In the past, when mistakes were brought to my attention or I was given suggestions for improvement, I would feel criticized and take it a bit personally. However, over time I have learned that the best way to improve and grow is not only to be responsive to constructive criticism, but to solicit feedback. Being proactive and asking how I can improve has been invaluable for my professional development.

- **Detail oriented** - I am very detail oriented. While sometimes this can be good, it can also slow me down. If I miss the big picture and get pulled into the specifics, I take a step back, check in with a colleague, and pull myself out to get a more clear view of the whole situation before moving forward.
- **Leadership style** – My approach to leadership is typically to empower the people working for me and really let them own the projects they are working on. My boss tends to be a more hands on manager. He has given me feedback that I need to be more involved in the details of what my team is working on. I am striving to find a balance with understanding which employees *need* to be followed up with and who I can rely on more to get their work done so that I am not overbearing. I think the positive to this area of development is that I have really learned to flex my style to different managers.

**What to avoid:**

- Do not deflect the question. The interviewer is asking it in an effort to gain insight and pertinent information, not to see whether or not you can successfully avoid answering.
- Predictable answers are often challenged by interviewers, which can make the interview take an uncomfortable turn. Besides, these stock responses do not tell the interviewer anything unique about you, nor do they add to your story. Some examples of overused answers include:
  - I’m a workaholic/I tend to overcommit and take on too much.
  - I’m a perfectionist.
  - Sometimes I’m too conscientious.
- Do not use a weakness that would qualify as a deal-breaker for the particular job, department and/or culture for which you are interviewing. Know enough in advance about the job and the department to avoid this pitfall.
- Only offer up as many weaknesses as the interviewer requests. If you are asked to provide an example of a weakness, just give one.

**Weakness questions in disguise:**

- What aspects of the day-to-day responsibilities of your current job do you dislike?
- What are some areas for improvement that your previous managers/employers suggested during the annual review process?
- Describe a work experience or project that did not go as well as you had hoped or expected.
- In what area of your work do you think you can be more effective?
- Describe or tell me about your biggest failure.

In the end, it isn't your mistakes and weaknesses that matter most, it's whether you are aware of them and if you are willing to work to improve yourself. Plan the answers to these questions in advance so that you can tackle them confidently in an interview.

## Questions To Ask The Interviewer

Questions for the interviewer should be used to uncover critical information about the position, department, or team. This is your chance to find out more and showcase what you have already researched and learned as well.

### *Questions about the Role*

- What types of skills do you NOT already have on board that you're looking to fill with a new hire?
- Thinking back to the person who you've seen perform most effectively in this role, what made their performance so outstanding?
- What are the opportunities for progression and increased responsibility within the department?
- Where have successful employees previously in this position progressed to within the department/organization?
- In what ways does this position impact the department/organization?
- What traits and qualifications will the successful candidate possess?
- How will you define and measure success in this role?
- What are the most immediate challenges of the position that need to be addressed in the first three months?
- What are the priorities of the first 30/60/90 days?
- What are some of the accomplishments you would expect the successful candidate to make in the first year?

### *Questions about the Department*

- What would you say is the most important aspect of your department's culture?
- What are some of the challenges facing the department?
- How have the department goals changed over the last three to five years?
- What are some of the obstacles that the organization anticipates in meeting its goals?
- What resources are available from the department/school and what must be found elsewhere to reach the objectives?

### *Questions about/for Manager*

- What tangible and intangible qualities attracted you to this department within Yale?
- What excites you about coming into work/this job?
- What do you appreciate the most about your department/team?
- If you could change one thing about this organization or department, what would you change?
- How would you describe your management style? What things do you value in people who report to you?

- Can you explain how you let someone take a project and run with it?
- What are the various ways employees communicate with one another to carry out their work?
- How and by whom will my performance be reviewed? Are there specific criteria upon which I would be evaluated?
- How frequently is formal and informal review given to new employees?
- I spoke with John Smith in your department, and in our informational conversation he mentioned that this is an extremely collaborative department. Almost all of the projects I work on now team-based, and I wanted to get an idea of what types of team projects that are on the horizon for your group.

### ***Questions about Team***

- What are the long- and short-term goals of the department?
- What have been the department's successes in the last couple of years?
- How are teams assembled? How are team members selected? What are the selection criteria?
- How are your teams structured?
- What kinds of processes are in place to help teams work collaboratively?
- How much freedom and support is provided to mentor and consult with colleagues?

### ***Questions about Feedback and Next Steps***

- Is there anything you'd like me to clarify or explain in more detail?
- Do you have any specific concerns about my candidacy I can address?
- Are there any other questions I can answer for you?
- What are the next steps in the interview process?
- Who I should follow up with about next steps?
- When can I expect to hear from you?
- May I contact you if any further questions arise?