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# How to Answer “What Are Your Strengths and Weaknesses?”

by Joel Schwartzberg

Summary. Don’t take common interview questions lightly just because they’re predictable. Underpreparing for them can make the difference between moving ahead and moving on. One question that often comes up: What are your strengths and weaknesses? In this article, the author outlines clear steps for how to describe your strengths and weaknesses along with sample language to use as a guide.

Some questions come up again and again in job interviews. At the top of the list: “Tell me about yourself,” “Why do you want to work here?” and “What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?”

The strengths-and-weaknesses question may seem like the easiest of the bunch for job seekers to answer, given the classic responses associated with each:

My strengths? Creativity! Problem-solving! Collaboration!

My weaknesses? Perfectionism! I work too hard! I care too much!

Though these answers may be true, they may also come across as trite and unoriginal, even scheming. That reaction may be perilous because job #1 in a job interview is standing out and job #2 is sounding honest.

Below are tips and examples to tackle this popular interview question in a way that leaves an original, authentic, and meaningful positive impression. It’s best to prepare two answers for each question, even though you’ll probably only use one.

## How to Describe Your Strengths

When you share your personal strengths in an interview, the conversation is still as much about their needs as your abilities, so follow these rules to ensure your skills come across as not only impressive, but relevant, distinct, and proven.

### 1. Focus on a strength that is listed in the job description.

There’s no need to guess what superstar qualities they’re looking for — it’s all there in black and white. Look for the attributes listed under the “preferred qualifications” or “required skills” section of the job description.

### 2. Reframe the skill to make your response as specific as possible.

Here are a few examples of generic strengths with their more descriptive counterparts:

* Communication skills → Public speaking and presentation skills
* People skills → Team management skills
* Video skills → Video production and editing skills

### 3. Once you pick your strength, practice expressing it in four parts.

1. The strength
2. A real-life example of that strength
3. An impact of that strength
4. How much you enjoy leveraging that strength

Try to incorporate most or all of those elements within your answer so you’re not just saying a word — you’re making a point.

When you put it all together, it should sound like this:

Sample Answer #1:

“I know a lot of people are afraid of public speaking but I really like it, and often use my speaking experience to support team projects. For example, last week, I presented our new customer-service portal to a prospective client, and they signed up immediately. I also get a lot of personal fulfillment from helping my colleagues with their presentations.”

Sample Answer #2:

“I love project management, because I enjoy solving problems in an organized and collaborative way. For example, I recently managed the planning, testing, and launch of a new product line, which came in on time and under budget. I love helping teams manage all the moving parts and multiple deadlines of a big project so they can focus on their deliverables.”

Sample Answer #3:

“I think my greatest strength is team management. I really enjoy working as a team and leveraging everyone’s unique skills and perspectives on a project, while at the same time having fun and maintaining a manageable work/life balance. One of my proudest moments was winning a team appreciation award earlier this year, and honestly, I really enjoy doing my part to help everyone do their best work.”

## How to Describe Your Weaknesses

The key to sharing your greatest weaknesses in an interview is to be authentic but not self-sabotaging. An interviewer may remember your weakness and hold it against you — even subconsciously — so you need to limit and mitigate any potentially harmful impressions.

These tips can help you respond both responsibly and protectively:

### 1. Reimagine “weakness” as a “challenge,” even replacing the word “weakness” with “challenge” in your answer.

This removes some of the injurious sting of “weakness” and makes shortcomings seem more fixable because a weakness implies more permanence than a challenge.

### 2. Choose skills that are easily correctable through training or commitment.

Work skills like data analysis, presentation skills, or software expertise are typically learnable, and interviewers understand that. But behavior challenges like being impatient, disorganized, or insecure may seem like personality flaws that are harder to overcome.

### 3. Avoid clichés.

Stay away from overdone examples like “perfectionism” and “being a workaholic,” as well as weaknesses that are just strengths in disguise (“Sometimes, I work too hard/research too much/consider too many ideas”).

### 4. Choose a challenge that is not core to the job’s responsibilities.

While your strengths should match skills highlighted in the job description, your challenges should steer clear of those skills. Simply put, you don’t want to be weak where the job needs you to be strong.

### 5. Once you pick a challenge, practice expressing it in three parts.

1. The weakness
2. Minor consequences of the weakness
3. Your eagerness to address the weakness

As with your strength, try to incorporate all of these elements within your answer, but this time keep the consequences short, simple, and minor so you can focus on overcoming the challenge more than on the challenge itself.

When you put it together, it should sound like this:

Sample Answer #1:

“One of my challenges is my lack of professional experience with presentation tools like PowerPoint and Canva. In the past, I’ve had specialists design these materials for me, but they don’t always know the content as well as I do. So, one of my goals this year is to learn these applications to create my own presentations and continually improve that skill.”

Sample Answer #2:

“One of my challenges is effectively proofreading my own work, especially in a fast-paced environment. I take a little longer, but often there’s not enough time, and I don’t want to let errors go through. One of my solutions has been relying on other writers and editors on staff to review my work, but I’m also looking at taking writing classes to help me elevate my editing skills to be more productive and efficient.”

Sample Answer #3:

“One of my challenges is learning new workplace technologies, like cloud filing platforms, database tools, and content management systems. It just takes me longer to learn complicated technology tools. But once I do, I enjoy using them, and like to help new colleagues learn them as well. I really appreciate it when a company offers classes and resources to help people become confident using the tools.”

## Examples of Strengths and Weaknesses

Here’s a quick summary of the examples discussed above along with a few more to choose from:

### Strengths

* Public speaking and presenting
* Team management
* Video production and editing
* Project management
* Proofreading
* Database management
* Attention to detail
* Taking ownership
* Brainstorming
* Graphic design

### Weaknesses

Reminder: Don’t choose a weakness connected to a necessary job skill.

* Being unfamiliar with certain software
* Needing more experience in data analysis, financial forecasting, etc.
* Fear of public speaking
* Feeling uncomfortable giving developmental feedback
* Needing more time to learn new systems
* Asking for help
* Time management
* Goal-setting
* Meeting facilitation
* Delegating

At the end of the day (or, at least, the interview), what the recruiters, potential colleagues, and supervisors you met most want to know isn’t your biggest strength and weakness. They want to know what kind of person you are and how you can contribute to the operation. “What are your strengths and weaknesses?” = “Are you the kind of person who can enhance the team and its work, be honest about your abilities, and take advantage of opportunities to improve and grow?”

As you practice your strength-and-weakness responses, remember these influential factors so your interviewers ultimately see you as not merely the sum of your skills, but someone they can trust — both during the interview and well beyond.

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