

Columbia GSB Prep Interview Questions

40 Common Interview Questions and Answer Strategies

Question 1: Tell me about yourself. This is usually the first question asked because it is a good ice-breaker. You shouldn't use this open-ended question to offer useless information about your hobbies and home life. Many people will make the mistake of saying, "I'm 32 years old, married, and mother of three children aged 5, 7 and 9. My hobbies are knitting and bike riding . . . blah blah blah." This is not a good answer.

A good answer to this question is about two minutes long and focuses on work-related skills and accomplishments. Tell the interviewer why you think your work-related skills and accomplishments would be an asset to the company. Describe your education and work history (be brief). Then mention one or two personal character traits and tell the interviewer how the traits helped you accomplish a task at school or work. Do not describe yourself with tired old clichés such as "I am a team player," "I have excellent communication skills," unless you can prove it with an illustration. For example: "I would describe myself as a self-starter. At Acme Corporation, there was a problem with . . . so I created a new inventory system (give details) that reduced expenses 30 percent."

For example, someone with a new degree in an IT field might answer this question as follows: "I have enjoyed working with computers since I was nine years old and have always been adept at using them. Throughout junior high and high school, friends and relatives were always asking me for help with their computer problems, so no one was surprised when I chose to major in computers." His answer could go on to explain how in college, he discovered he wanted to concentrate his studies on a specific IT field; how his internships or work experience influenced him or led him in a certain direction; and how he has come to decide that he wants to work for this particular company and why he would be an asset to this company.

Question 2: Why should we hire you? Take several minutes to answer this question, incorporating your personality traits, strengths, and experience in to the job you're applying for. A good answer is to focus on how you can benefit the company. You can best do this by researching a company before the interview and be ready with examples of how your skills, talents, etc., can benefit the problems and concerns of that particular company.

Question 3: What are your greatest strength (or strengths)? State one or two strengths that are work-related and tell the interviewer the story about when that strength helped you accomplish a task at work (or school). For example: "I have the ability to train and motivate people. At Acme Co., employee turnover was very high, so I . . ." (give details of what you did to decrease turnover, train and motivate employees, etc.).

Question 4: What is your greatest weakness (or weaknesses)? Don't answer by claiming that you have no weaknesses. Confess a real weakness that you have, but choose one that isn't particularly relevant to the job you're seeking. Do not answer with phony weaknesses such as "I'm a slave to my job" or "I'm a workaholic." Just state the weakness, tell the interviewer how it has harmed you in your work life, and what steps you have taken to improve it. A good step one can take to improve a weakness is to read self-help books on the subject. You might offer the title of a book you've read that helped you improve your anger, shyness, impatience, etc.

Question 5: Why do you want to leave your present employer? You could state that you want a more challenging position, higher salary, or more responsibility. Don't mention personal conflicts with your present boss or bad-mouth your current employer or co-workers as this will harm your chances of being offered the job. Keep in mind that interviewers love people who are looking for more challenging positions or responsibility because it shows drive, ambition and motivation.

Question 6: Why do you want to work for this company? Don't answer this question with, "Because you advertised for an X at monster.com." Your answer should offer what you think are the most interesting aspects of the company, for example, "because it is on the cutting edge of technology" or "because you are the industry leader". The research you do on the company in order to prepare for the interview should give you an answer to this question.

Question 7: What do you know about our company? Those who answer this question with, "Not much," will probably not be offered the job. You should always research a company before the interview. Learn about their products / services, size, future plans, current events, etc. If you cannot find information about a particular company, call their offices and ask the receptionist to send you information about the company in the form of a brochure, etc..

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You should also research the industry in which the company operates so you are up on what's happening. You can find links to research sites by [clicking here](#).

Question 8: Why do you want this position? Your answer should offer what you think are the most interesting aspects of the position. More responsibility and opportunity, including a higher salary, are acceptable answers, but state them in a way that isn't blunt. For example, "because it pays more" is not a good answer. But, stating that, "The position offers more responsibility, challenges and interesting opportunities, as well as a higher salary," is a good answer.

Question 9: Do you work better alone or as part of a team? If the position you're applying for requires you to spend lots of time alone, then of course, you should state that you like to work alone and vice versa. Never sound too extreme one way or another. Don't say that you hate people and would "die if you had to work with others" and don't state that you "will go crazy if you're left alone for five minutes". A healthy balance between the two is always the best choice. If you have previous experience illustrating the fact that you can work alone or with others, then offer it. For example, you might state that in your previous job you spent a significant amount of time alone while traveling, or that you have learned how to get along well with people in the workplace by working on numerous team projects.

Question 10: What did your last supervisor criticize most about your performance? A good way to answer this question is to offer a criticism you received that is not very important or not directly related to the position you're applying for. For example, telling the interviewer that you were constantly criticized for coming to work an hour late is not a good idea. But revealing a minor criticism and telling the interviewer what steps you took to improve yourself is a good way to answer this question. In fact, if you can state that you have already solved the problem and received a higher mark on a subsequent performance review, then say so.

Question 11: Where do you see yourself in five years? Assume that you will be promoted two or three times in five years, so your answer should state that you see yourself working at whatever job is two or three levels above the job in which you are applying. Do not claim that you will be "running the company" in five years. You might want to add that you understand your promotions will be earned through hard work and that you don't assume you will be promoted just because you stayed with the company.

Question 12: Why have you changed jobs so frequently? Reasons for job hopping should always be based on your past employers' failure to challenge you or fail to give you enough opportunity for advancement, and not on the fact that your past employers were incompetent, dumb, or unfair. Make sure you point out any jobs you did hold for a long time. Mention that your current goal is long-term employment and back that up with any proof you have to want job stability such as a new baby, new marriage, new home, etc. If the job you're applying for offers you the challenges and environment you were always looking for, then say so.

Question 13: Are you willing to relocate? If relocating wasn't an issue the interviewer wouldn't be asking the question. Therefore, the only acceptable answer is "Yes." If you answer in the negative you will not get the job. If you really don't want to relocate, then perhaps you shouldn't accept the job if it is subsequently offered to you. If you aren't sure, then ask questions about relocation, such as when it is likely to occur, where you will relocate to, and would it involve a promotion.

Question 14: Are you willing to travel? If traveling wasn't part of the job, the interviewer wouldn't be asking this question. Therefore, the only acceptable answer is "yes". If you are willing to travel, answer yes and give some illustrations of work travel you have done. But if you do not want to travel, you should find out more about this aspect of the job before accepting the position, such as how much travel will be involved, where will you be traveling to and for how long.

Question 15: Are you willing to work overtime? If this wasn't an aspect of the job, the interviewer wouldn't be asking this question. Therefore, the only acceptable answer is "yes" if you want to be considered for the job. If your past jobs involved overtime, now would be the time to tell this to the interviewer.

Question 16: Have you ever been fired or asked to resign? When answering this question, keep in mind that the interviewer knows that almost everyone has been fired at least once and it is almost always due to a personality conflict with the boss or coworkers. So, answer this question honestly, but without attacking your former boss or employer, and without sounding defensive or bitter. Do not mention that you have been fired many times unless asked specifically, "How many times have you been fired?" Have a sense of humor when discussing your firings so that the

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interviewer doesn't get the idea you are a nut who might come back to the workplace with an assault rifle if you're fired. Tell the interviewer what you learned from being fired. If you have been fired many times, mention what steps you have taken to improve yourself (i.e., I have read self-help books about . . . getting along with others . . . improving my time management . . . improving knowledge, work habits, etc.). Also, point out any past jobs you held when you got along well with your boss and coworkers or received good performance reviews or a promotion.

Question 17: How long have you been searching for a job? Why haven't you received a job offer? Why have you been unemployed for so long? It is always better to answer this question with "I just started looking" but this is not always possible, particularly if your resume indicates you've been unemployed for the last six months. If you can't hide the fact that your job search has been taking awhile, then state you're being selective about whom you will work for. Of course, stating this might prompt the interviewer to ask, "What offers have you turned down?" which could land you in hot water if you haven't actually received any job offers. (It isn't a good idea to lie in answering this latter question.)

A bad economy and a crowded market are good reasons one might have trouble finding a job. However, be aware that many interviewers will hold this against you even if the job market was very bad and many people were having trouble finding employment.

Question 18: What previously held job do you consider to be your favorite and why? This is actually a trick question asked to determine if you enjoy the type of work the position you're applying for involves. Therefore, the answer to this question should be a job that requires the same or similar work that you will be required to perform in the new job. If you do not have a previous job wherein you performed similar tasks, then offer an answer that does not suggest you are ill-suited for the position. For example, if you are applying for a high-stress, demanding job in a chaotic environment, don't tell the interviewer you loved your position with Acme because of the mellow, low stress "work at your own pace" atmosphere.

Question 19: Do you consider yourself to be organized? Do you manage your time well? The interviewer wants to hear about your work skills concerning time and task management, not that you have neatly separated the paperclips in your desk drawer into different trays based on size. A model answer might be "I manage my time very well. I routinely complete tasks ahead of schedule. For example, . . . (offer the interviewer proof of your organizational skills by telling him about a major project that you organized and completed on time or mention the fact that you consistently received an outstanding grade on previous performance reviews regarding your time management). Don't reveal to the interviewer that you are habitually late or that you complete tasks at the very last minute.

Question 20: Would you choose the same career if you could start over again? How you answer this question depends on whether or not you are trying to win a job related to your career history or are trying to enter a new field. No matter how much you despise the career you originally chose, do not admit this fact to the interviewer because it tells him you consider your work to be drudge. If you are trying to enter a new field, of course, tell the interviewer that you would choose the field you're now trying to enter if you had it to do all over again -- that's why you're trying to enter it now!

Question 21: Why have you stayed with the same employer for so long? Just as moving from job to job too frequently can harm you, so can staying with the same employer for too long -- particularly if you've never been promoted and your resume indicates you haven't been intellectually challenged in years. Your answer should state something about your having worked successfully with many people both inside and outside of the organization, including different bosses and co-workers, as well as interacting regularly with various types of organizations and customers.

Question 22: Do you consider yourself to be a risk-taker? How you answer this question depends on the type of company it is. If it is a start-up company or within a highly-competitive industry, then they are probably looking for those more willing to take risks. If you believe the company is this type, then offer an example of a risk you've taken in business. If the company is a well-established industry leader, risk takers are not as highly valued. Of course, no company is looking for employees who are foolish in their risk-taking behavior, so a good rule of thumb is to place yourself somewhere in the middle -- you are neither too foolish nor overly cautious.

Question 23: Would your present employer be surprised to know you're job hunting? Never answer this question with negative information such as "My current boss wouldn't be surprised in the least to hear I'm leaving since he's been trying to shove me out the door for years!" Always tell the interviewer that you are happy with your current

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employer and job, but are simply looking to stretch your wings out and take on a job with more challenge, and yes, more salary and opportunities for advancement.

Question 24: How well do you handle change? The only acceptable answer is one stating you handle change very well. Don't just make this claim, offer an example of how well you coped with a major change that took place in your work environment. A common shakeup occurs when your employer brings in new automation or changes its culture. In any event, tell the interviewer what you did to cope or adapt to a change that occurred with a previous employer -- and this should be a major change, not a minor one.

Question 25: What salary are you expecting? You should do some research before the job interview so that you don't ask for too much or too little. You might be asked to justify why you are worth the salary you are asking, so be prepared with an answer (i.e., tell them how your skills and experience will benefit the company so much that your salary will be a bargain for them.) Links to good salary resources can be found by clicking here. Use these salary resources to justify the compensation you're requesting.

Question 26: How do you resolve disputes with co-workers? How do you handle conflicts in the workplace? Don't claim that you have never had a dispute with a co-worker. The interviewer will know you are lying, since getting along with co-workers is one of the hardest things in the world to do. The best answer to this question tells the interviewer about a dispute you had with a co-worker and how you resolved it so that the outcome was positive. Your answer should tell the interviewer how you resolved it on your own, and hopefully, that you and this other person are now friends, or at least are able to work together productively. Also, concentrate on resolving work-related issues rather than personal feuds. For example, telling the interviewer about your problems getting a co-worker to take your suggestions on a specific project seriously is a much better topic than telling the interviewer about your long-standing feud with a co-worker over a prime parking space in the company parking lot. And don't tell the interviewer that you resolved a dispute by tattling to the boss or trying to get the other person fired. Employers are sick of dealing with employee conflicts and they want a mature person who can resolve conflicts on her own without tattling or complaining to the boss.

Question 27: Who was your favorite boss and why? Who was your least favorite boss and why? These are two of the most difficult interview questions to answer unless you understand what the interviewer wants to hear, and if you realize that you can answer both questions with basically the same answer. Employers are looking for employees who are interested in contributing to the company, improving their job skills, and making a contribution. So, instead of insulting or demeaning your past bosses by telling the interviewer that he was always "hogging all the credit" or was "totally incompetent", state that you wished he had offered you more feedback about your job performance, provided you with more job training, or challenged you more by providing you with more opportunities to show what you can do, etc. You can answer the question, "who was your favorite boss and why?" using the same answer: "John Doe was my favorite boss because he offered me lots of feedback about my job performance, taught me almost everything I know about marketing, and gave me plenty of opportunities to prove myself by giving me very challenging projects to complete." Never put down your past employers or blame them for anything in a demeaning or insulting way, since it makes you come across as petty.

Question 28: What could you have done to improve your relationship with your least favorite boss? Again, refrain from stating negativities about your former boss. Put a positive spin on your answer by telling the interviewer that, if you had it to do all over again, you would have requested more feedback from your boss regarding your performance and requested to be assigned more projects, etc.

Question 29: What book are you currently reading (or what was the last book you read)? What were the last three books that you read? The only correct answer is to offer the title of a nonfiction book, preferably one that is on a subject related to your career or business in general. For example, if you are a sales person, tell the reader you're currently in the middle of, "Selling for Dummies." Or, if that seems too much of a cliché, offer the title of a book on improving your time management, personality, efficiency, etc. Of course, we aren't suggesting that you lie and claim to be reading a book that you aren't really reading. As part of your job search, you will have to start reading one or two acceptable books so that you can intelligently discuss them if the subject is brought up during an interview. The interviewer might ask you how the book is helping you (what you have learned from it), so have an answer ready. Some interviewers will try to determine if you regularly read by asking you for titles of 3, 4 or 5 books you've read this year, so be ready.

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Question 30: What is the last movie that you saw? Replying that you "don't have time to watch movies as you are completely devoted to your job" is not a good answer and will not win you any points, even if the interviewer was dumb enough to believe you. Interviewers are looking for well-rounded people who enjoy healthy activities, such as relaxation and entertainment, and will expect you to state the name of a movie. The movie title that you give in reply to this question should always be one that is popular with the general public, but uncontroversial, meaning that it doesn't have any negative or zealous political or religious overtones. Also, don't reveal the fact that you spend way too much time watching movies by stating you have seen a particular movie 15 times or that you spend too much time watching movies. For example, don't tell the interviewer that you are obsessed with Star Trek movies and regularly attend Star Trek conventions dressed up as Mr. Spock. A well-known uncontroversial movie, popular with the general public, and one that the interviewer is likely to have seen, is always a good choice.

Question 31: Are you considering offers from other employers? It is recommended that you NOT disclose any other offers you have received or discuss the companies with whom you have interviewed. Therefore, a good answer to this question is to state that you do not have offers from other companies. (Of course, if for some reason you believe you would have a better chance of getting the job offer if you disclosed this information, then do so.)

Question 32: When can you start? It is customary for most employees to give at least two weeks notice to their current employer. Those in management positions are expected to give longer notice. You will not earn points if you express disrespect toward your current employer by telling the interviewer that you plan to quit your present job without giving sufficient notice. He will assume you will show his company the same amount of disrespect. It is also a good idea to tell the interviewer you plan to start learning about your new position / employer on your off-hours (i.e., reading employee training manuals, etc.) Telling the interviewer you can't begin work for a few months because you want to take some time-off is not a good idea.

Question 33: Why did you decide to attend X College? Are you happy with your choice? Always state that you are happy with your choice, even if you aren't. Do not state that "it was the only place that would accept you". Do not make negative statements about the school or your professors either. A good reason for choosing a particular school is because you liked the particular program they offered, or it is known for offering a good education in your particular major.

Question 34: What factors did you consider in choosing your major? A great answer is to state you have always wanted to become X since you were a child and picked your major accordingly. If you're changing career fields or applying for a position unrelated to your major, tell the interviewer you were interested in that subject at the time, but circumstances haven't taken you down a new path. Of course, you should put a positive spin on also stating that you have benefited tremendously by changing careers (learned new things, made you more hardworking, etc.).

Question 35: Have you ever fired anyone? The interviewer does not want you to express either too much indifference or too much sympathy for those you have had to fire. Tell the interviewer how you discussed the employee's shortcomings with him several times and tried to help him improve, but as a last resort, you had no choice but to fire the person.

Question 36: How do you motivate employees? There is not a simple way to motivate all people due to the vast number of personality types and situations in which people work. The best answer is one that tells the interviewer that each employee must be uniquely motivated. You should offer several examples of situations where employees were successfully motivated.

Question 37: What is your commitment to this job? Most people would respond with an answer avowing a deep commitment to the company and the job; however, a better answer would be to state that your commitment will grow as you get to know the company and the people in it.

Question 38: Aren't you overqualified for this job? Note that employers don't like to hire overqualified people because they won't stay around long. But since it is probably obvious that you're overqualified, admit that you are, but also emphasize the positive. For example, "I am overqualified in some ways. I have more experience that is required for this job, but you are looking for someone who is an expert in X, and that's me. However, that doesn't mean I'm completely overqualified. I feel that I have much to learn in the area of X, which is a big part of this job and I know it will keep me challenged blah blah blah."

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Question 39: Are you opposed to doing a lot of routine work? Don't answer with, "Oh yes, I will enjoy filing eight hours a day, 40 hours a week, 50 weeks a year!" Instead, try to assure the interviewer you aren't going to go mad doing your boring job. For example, "I know this position requires a lot of routine work, but I don't expect to start at the top. I'm willing to start at the bottom and prove myself. Eventually, I will be assigned tasks that require more brain power."

Question 40: Do you have any questions? This question is usually the last one an interviewer will ask as it is a logical way to end the interview. Never go to an interview without preparing questions to ask beforehand. Avoid asking about salary, vacation time, employee benefits, etc. until you have asked a number of other questions that demonstrate your interest in working for the company. Good questions to ask the interviewer:

Why is this position available?

Is this a new position? How long has this position existed?

How many people have held this position in the last two years?

Who would be my supervisor? To whom would I report?

Whom will I supervise?

With whom will I be working most closely?

What do you like about working for this company?

What are the current plans for expansion or cutbacks?

What kind of turnover rate does the company have?

How financially sound is this company?

What projects and assignments will I be working on?

What happened to the person that held this position before? Was he promoted or fired?

What is this company's culture, (i.e., is it rigid and formal or relaxed and flexible?)

What are the current problems facing the company (or my department)?

What do you like the most about working for this company? The least?

What is the philosophy of the company?

What do you consider to be the company's strengths and weaknesses?

What are the company's long and short term goals?

Describe the work environment.

What attracted you (the interviewer) to this organization?

Why do you enjoy working for this company?

Describe the typical responsibilities of the position.

What are the most challenging aspects of the position?

Describe the opportunities for training and professional development.

Will I receive any formal training?

What is the company's promotional policy?

Are there opportunities for advancement within the organization?

When can I expect to hear from you?

<https://www0.gsb.columbia.edu/students/organizations/mac/images/macinterviewprepquestions2.doc>