

# The Best Way to Talk About Your Strengths and Weaknesses in a Job Interview

*by*  
STAV ZIV  
The Muse  
8/26/19

There's a whole lot of talking about yourself that goes on in an interview. One of the most stressful parts might be when a recruiter or prospective boss asks you to tell them about your strengths and weaknesses.

You're bound to hear, "What would you say is one of your weaknesses?" or "What's your greatest strength?" or both in virtually every hiring process you'll ever go through. While that might be frustrating—really, every time?!—it also means that you can anticipate the questions and craft thoughtful answers that will impress the interviewer.

In other words, with just a little bit of preparation, you can master the art of selling your strengths without sounding conceited and talking about your weaknesses without undermining your candidacy.

## Why Do Interviewers Ask These Questions?

Before you get started planning your responses, it's helpful to understand why interviewers are asking these questions in the first place and what they hope to get out of them.

“All interviews are about getting to know somebody,” says Muse career coach [Angela Smith](#), founder of Loft Consulting. “I know some people feel like the interview is trying to trip them up or put them in an awkward position, but at the end of the day it’s really about getting to know the person so that you can make the best decision that you can,” she adds. “When I ask those questions, that’s where I’m coming from.”

In this case, the actual strengths and weaknesses you bring up probably matter less than *how* you talk about them. “I’ve done a ton of interviews over the years and when pressed for it, I can’t really remember the answers,” Smith says. That doesn’t mean the questions aren’t important at all, it’s just that what an interviewer is evaluating likely goes deeper than which specific strength or weakness you cite. They’re trying to understand what kind of employee you’d be and how you’d carry yourself in the role.

“For me it’s: Are they honest? Do they have self-awareness? Can they own their stuff in a professional and mature way? Is this someone that we can have growth and development conversations with? Are they going to hit a wall [when] it comes to giving them feedback?” Smith says. “How they answer that question really tells me the answer to all of those other things—and those are the things that matter.”

## 5 Tips for Talking About Strengths and Weaknesses in an Interview

Okay, that’s all great in theory, but what do you actually need to do to discuss your strengths and weaknesses successfully?

### 1. Be Honest

One of the most important things to get right when talking about your strengths and weaknesses in an interview setting is honesty. It might sound trite, but it’s

also true. An answer that sounds genuine and authentic will impress, while one that sounds generic, calculated, exaggerated, or humblebraggy will do the opposite.

A boss doesn't want to hire someone who can't recognize and own what they bring to the table as well as what they need to work on. You'll be a better employee if you can understand and leverage your strengths and acknowledge and learn from your weaknesses. So you want to show in the interview that you're capable of that kind of self-reflection.

## 2. Tell a Story

Here's another cliché you shouldn't discount: "Show, don't tell." Anyone who's ever taken a writing class—whether in seventh grade or graduate school—has heard it. You should keep it in mind when answering just about any [interview question](#), and it's certainly helpful here.

"Anytime you can have a real-life example or a concrete example, it's a good idea. It just helps to contextualize the response a little bit," Smith says. "We just understand concepts and situations better with a story. So if you can tell a story that supports your thesis, then it's always helpful."

Talk about a time your strength helped you achieve something in a professional setting or when your weakness impeded you. For example, if you're talking about how you're calm under pressure in a fast-paced environment, you might tell the interviewer about that time you delivered a revamped client proposal after a last-minute change of plans. If you're admitting that your weakness is presenting in front of high-level executives, you might start by briefly describing the time you got so nervous presenting your plan for a new marketing strategy that you weren't able to effectively convey your (thorough and pretty brilliant) approach and your boss had to step in and help get the plan approved.

Not only will sharing a real example make your answer stand out, but it'll also make it sound thoughtful and honest and highlight all those other characteristics interviewers are actually looking for.

### **3. Remember to Get to the Insight**

An answer that's genuine and includes an illustrative anecdote is a great start, but it's not complete until you add some insight. This goes for both strengths and weaknesses but looks a little different in each case.

When you're talking about a strength, the last beat of your answer should tie whatever skill or trait you've been discussing to the role and company you're applying for. Tell the interviewer how that strength would be useful in this particular position at this particular company.

So going back to the revamped client proposal example, you might add, "Since things move quickly at [Company], this would allow me to come in and earn a new team's confidence and foster a trusting team culture while also ensuring we're all hitting our goals and delivering high-quality work."

In the case of a weakness, "tell me how they've grown from it or what they've done to accommodate that or what they've learned from it," Smith says. "Really showcase your growth trajectory, your learning curve, what you've done as a result of the awareness of that weakness," she adds. "It gives you an idea like if I hire this person and they're here, this is the kind of problem solving or growth that I can expect to see from them."

So if you were the candidate with the presentation snafu, you might talk about how you sat down with your boss to make a plan to improve your [public speaking](#) skills, and how the next time you had to present to the execs you knocked it out of the park.

## **4. Keep It Short**

You don't have to devote half the interview to these answers. You can keep your response relatively brief and focused on one or two strengths or weaknesses, depending on how the question was phrased. To add to our list of overused-but-handy phrases: Think quality, not quantity. Don't dive in and rattle off a litany of things you think you're good or bad at without explaining anything. Instead, narrow it down and go into detail.

## **5. Don't Sweat It So Much**

While you definitely want to prepare and do your best to nail your answers, try not to stress too much. "Don't panic," Smith says. "I have never known an employment decision to come down to how someone answers those questions," she adds. "It's just one data point connected with a whole bunch of other ones. So don't give it too much weight."

## **How to Answer "What Are Your Strengths?" in an Interview**

The key to talking about your strengths in an interview is to use the opportunity to demonstrate that you're the best fit for the role, the team, and the company.

Smith recommends reading carefully through the job description and learning as much as you can about what the company is up to and what the culture is like. Read various pages on the organization's website, take a look at its social media accounts, and catch up on some recent announcements and news coverage if applicable. Use what you've learned to identify which of your strengths is most relevant and how it will allow you to contribute. Then make the connection inescapable. "Every answer should position you to help them see how you can solve a problem" and help the company achieve its goals, Smith says.

At the same time, you don't want to go overboard. "It's such a fine line. I always tell people not to worry about bragging, but you also don't want to come across as cocky or too full of yourself," Smith says. Give a confident and honest assessment that does your skills justice, but don't let yourself veer into hyperbole.

## What It Might Sound Like

If you're applying for an operations role at a startup, you might say:

*"I'd say one of my greatest strengths is bringing organization to hectic environments and implementing processes to make everyone's lives easier. In my current role as an executive assistant to a CEO, I created new processes for pretty much everything, from scheduling meetings to planning monthly all hands agendas to selecting and preparing for event appearances. Everyone in the company knew how things worked and how long they would take, and the structures helped alleviate stress and set expectations on all sides. I'd be excited to bring that same approach to an operations manager role at a startup, where everything is new and constantly growing and could use just the right amount of structure to keep things running smoothly."*

**Read More:** [3 Smart Strategies for Answering "What's Your Greatest Strength?"](#)

## How to Answer "What Is Your Greatest Weakness?" in an Interview

While you'll definitely want to tie your strengths to the role and company you're applying for, you should avoid that approach when talking about your weaknesses. "You don't necessarily want them associating a weakness with their company or with what they're looking for," Smith says. For example, if the job description for a sales role lists excellent verbal communication skills, you

shouldn't say one of your weaknesses is thinking on your feet during phone calls, even if you've worked hard to improve and feel more than competent now.

It's the same advice she'd give someone writing a cover letter when applying for a job for which they have most, but not all, of the qualifications. Focus on the requirements you *do* bring to the table, not on the ones you *don't*.

Instead, prepare a couple of standard options to choose from and in each interview, talk about a weakness that doesn't obviously impair your ability to perform the core functions of the role. Make sure you admit the weakness, pivot to the insight, and end on a strong note. "If someone can be honest and have the self-awareness to answer that question, I think that says a lot about their emotional intelligence and their professional maturity," Smith says.

Her last piece of advice? Don't pick a "weakness" like "I'm such a hard worker" or "I'm too much of a perfectionist." Going down that route will backfire, because it comes off as disingenuous, oblivious, or immature—and none of those are qualities that'll get you the job.

## **What It Might Sound Like**

If you're applying for an engineering job, you might say:

*"My greatest weakness would probably be waiting too long to ask questions to clarify the goals of a project and to make sure I'm on the right path. I noticed in one of my first coding jobs out of college that I would get an assignment and, because I assumed I should be able to work independently, I'd waste time going down a particular road that didn't 100% align with the ultimate goal and then would have to spend additional time making changes. After it happened once or twice, I started asking my manager more questions about why we were adding a particular feature, who it was intended for, what about the previous functionality had made for a poor experience, etc. And especially for bigger projects, I would reach out when I needed a gut check to ask follow-up questions*

*as well as to share the work I'd done so far and what I was planning to do next. In the long run, it meant I could finish projects faster and do better work."*



**A longtime word nerd and bookworm, Stav studied history and dance at Stanford and later journalism at Columbia. Before joining The Muse, Stav was a staff writer at *Newsweek*, where she wrote about everything from Nazi hunters to Chinese adoptees to *Good Girls Revolt*, the real story and fictionalized TV show about a 1970 gender discrimination case at the magazine. She prefers sunshine and tolerates winters grudgingly.**