

Interview Tips Series: Part 4 – Other Interview Considerations

Steven Kheloussi, PharmD, MBA, FAMCP

By now, hopefully you have read Parts 1, 2, and 3 of the Interview Tips Series and feel comfortable structuring your responses to many of the most common interview questions. Part 4 is going to cover some of the miscellaneous remaining considerations related to interviewing to help you round out your interview preparation.

How Long Should Your Responses Be?

When structuring your responses using the STAR, STALL, or any other method you would like to use, it is very easy to get stuck trying to fit your response to the framework and lose track of how much information you are truly providing. Giving too many details can diminish the message you are trying to get across and can detract from the quality of your answer. Even the best answers that you provide during an interview can get lost if you ramble.

The best *initial* responses land within 2-to-3 minutes (see Box 1). I emphasized that 2-3 minutes is perfect for an *initial* response to a question from the interviewer, specifically, because this allows time for follow-up conversation (see Part 3 of the Interview Tips Series).

You know certain questions are definitely coming (see Part 1 of the Interview Tips Series). Rehearse (but don't over-rehearse) your answers to these common questions and make sure they land within that 2-to-3-minute range.

Box 1. Additional Information on Length of Responses

Too short? Anything less than 2-3 minutes makes it a bit uncomfortable for the interviewer, who may feel obliged to ask you follow-up questions to get you to speak more. Generally speaking, if you provide too short of an answer to a given question and the interviewer has to ask you follow-up to get more substance from your response, you may not be sharing enough detail and may want to revise your strategy for future questions or interviews.

Follow-up questions from interviewers that suggest you may not be sharing enough detail:

- "What happened afterward?" or "What was the outcome?"
- "What would you have done differently?" or "What lessons did you learn?"

Too long? On the other hand, anything longer than 3 minutes starts to drag and can potentially lose the interviewer. Attention spans are short, particularly when the interviewer is asking the same questions to multiple candidates over days or weeks. So, try to keep your responses interesting and engaging and 3 minutes will feel short to the interviewer.

Signs you may be rambling:

- Interviewer's eye contact is repeatedly broken and for increasing periods of time.
- Interviewer stops taking notes or starts doodling
- Interviewer repeatedly yawns

Try to read the room! If you have a particularly interesting story to tell and can craft it in a way that keeps the interviewer engaged, feel free to extend your answer a bit, if needed.

It is important to note that this is certainly an oversimplification and does not necessarily apply to all interviews or even all questions during a single interview. Straightforward, simple questions may not need a full 2-to-3-minute response. Complex, multi-part questions may require more than 3 minutes to provide a full answer. Remember to:

- **Answer only the question at hand** – Stay focused and don't provide extra information when it is not what is being requested.
- **Provide as much detail as necessary** – Think very closely about how much detail is truly needed and leave out anything that is not going to impact your response.

Take a Pause If You Need One

Hopefully after you have read through Parts 1 and 2 of this Interview Tip Series, you should not have any problem responding to most interview questions. You will have thought of numerous stories that can fit multiple situations and mapped those stories to particular people, places, or things to help you remember them on-the-spot.

But the occasional question will come up that you are not ready for. That's okay! Take a moment to collect your thoughts and jot down a couple quick notes if needed. When you're ready, jump back in and give a focused, structured response.

Two points of caution with pausing:

- 1) **Don't pause for too long.** After too long of a pause, things start to feel uncomfortable and that is going to overshadow the quality of your response. But 5-10 seconds is perfectly okay!
- 2) **Don't use this time to look up the story you want to tell or research your answer.** The pause is only okay if it's used to gather your thoughts so you can respond in an organized manner. It is not to be used make up for not being prepared for the interview.

Discuss Recent Experience

This one is brief – the older the story, the less relevant it is. Try to have your anecdotes come from the past few years, at most. For instance, if you're applying for residency immediately after pharmacy school, your stories should ideally come from P3 or P4 year. If you need to occasionally reach back further, that's okay, but it's not preferred.

Always Include a Conclusion to Your Stories

Everyone loves a cliffhanger, but not in an interview. When you tell a story, make sure to include the outcome of the story to demonstrate the value of the project you completed or, at a minimum, to hint to the interviewer that your story is over.

For example, let's say you want to tell a story about how you developed a medication guide for

patients taking warfarin during a rotation at an anticoagulation clinic. Great! But if you end your thought there without a conclusion, the impact of your intervention is left unknown. If, however, you end your story by sharing that the guide that you created was provided to 45 new-starts to therapy over the span of the final 3 weeks of your rotation, the interviewer can get a sense of how large an impact that project really had.

Maybe your project didn't have the impact you were hoping for. You can still share it, but talk about the lessons learned or what you could have done differently to make a bigger impact next time. Don't be embarrassed by the impact you made if it didn't meet your expectations. But if you are embarrassed because your intervention had limited value...why are you telling that story in the first place? Are you sure you don't have something more meaningful to talk about?

Stay Positive

In Part 3 of the Interview Tip Series, I presented an example of the STAR method that involved a teammate who stopped responding to all forms of communication during a group project. You probably experienced something like this in your life and, unless you were the colleague who stopped responding, that example probably elicited some negative emotions. Sorry about that!

It's okay to bring stories like this up in an interview, but you have to do it with tact. The easy thing to do is to point blame, share your resentment, and craft an answer around how you would never do something like that. The problem is that the part of your response where you shared that you would never dream of letting your team down is overshadowed by the negativity and disdain you also showcase when framing an answer like that.

Instead, think about the traits that an employer would want to see – someone who is empathetic, understanding, can resolve conflict, and can keep a cool head when things are going wrong. Even if you are harboring those negative feelings about that situation and it has spoiled your view of group projects, structure your response in positive way that highlights characteristics the interviewer is looking for. See Box 2 for a list of soft skills you should try to exemplify during an interview.

Box 2. Soft Skills Interviewers Look for During an Interview

Personality
Fit
Teachability
Independence
Ambition
Teamwork
Dependability
Communication
Confidence
Adaptability
Critical Thinking

Positivity Loyalty Problem-Solving
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Don't Let Your Guard Down

A very common mistake made in interviews is when candidates become too comfortable and begin to overshare. This often happens when the candidate puts their guard down in what feels like a social setting – dinner after the interview or lunch with people who are around their age. Remember, you are interviewing the whole time, even when it does not feel like it! So, be friendly, share stories, and ask questions – but try not to fall into the trap where you share the wrong kinds of stories (e.g., something that happened at a college party) or ask the wrong questions (e.g., inappropriate questions that you should only ask a friend).

Self-Reflect After Each Interview

One of the most important things you can do after an interview is think about how it went. Most people do this inherently – we think about every word we said and ask ourselves repeatedly if we said the right thing based on the interviewer's reaction. But many times, we miss the point of self-reflecting, which is to continually improve our performance.

When self-reflecting, remember that **every interview is practice for the next one**. If you are asked about your weaknesses and you stumble with your response – prepare for this question the next time around and be ready. Human beings also tend to focus on the negatives, but the positives are just as important! So, if you give, in your opinion, the perfect response to a question about why you are seeking a career in the field you're applying to – jot down some notes about what you said and that's one less question you need to prepare for next time!

Conclusion

As you go through your interview journey, remembering all these miscellaneous points can seem daunting. With enough practice these considerations will become second nature. If you haven't already, make sure to check out the rest of the Interview Tips Series!