

The STAR Method: The Secret to Aceing Your Next Job Interview

by
KAT BOOGAARD



You're in a job interview, and things are going well. You didn't get lost on your way to the office, you made some friendly [small talk](#) with the hiring manager, and you're nailing your answers to the questions you're being asked.

Just when you start thinking you have this in the bag, you hear the interviewer say, "[Tell me about a time when...](#)"

Your stomach drops. You rack your brain for something—*anything!*—you can use as an example. You grasp at straws and finally stumble your way through an anecdote that only *sort of* satisfies the prompt.

First of all, take comfort in the fact that we've all been there. These types of [interview questions](#) are tough to answer. But, here's the good news: There's a strategy you can use to come up with way more impressive answers to these dreaded questions: the STAR interview method.

What Is the STAR Interview Method?

The STAR interview technique offers a straightforward format you can use to answer [behavioral interview questions](#)—those prompts that ask you to provide a real-life example of how you handled a certain kind of situation at work in the past.

Don't worry—these questions are easy to recognize. They often have telltale openings like:

- Tell me about a time when...
- What do you do when...
- Have you ever...
- Give me an example of...
- Describe a...

Thinking of a fitting example for your response is just the beginning. Then you also need to share the details in a compelling and easy-to-understand way—without endless rambling.

That's exactly what the STAR interview method enables you to do. "It's helpful because it provides a simple framework for helping a candidate tell

a meaningful story about a previous work experience,” says Al Dea, the founder of [CareerSchooled](#) and a [career and leadership coach](#).

So, let’s break down that framework. STAR is an acronym that stands for:

Situation: Set the scene and give the necessary details of your example.

Task: Describe what your responsibility was in that situation.

Action: Explain exactly what steps you took to address it.

Result: Share what outcomes your actions achieved.

By using these four components to shape your anecdote, it’s much easier to share a focused answer, providing the interviewer with “a digestible but compelling narrative of what a candidate did,” says Dea. “They can follow along, but also determine based on the answer how well that candidate might fit with the job.”

Answering Interview Questions Using STAR

Knowing what the acronym stands for is only the first step—you need to know how to *use* it. Follow this step-by-step process to give the best STAR interview answers.

1. Find a Suitable Example

The STAR interview method won’t be helpful to you if you use it to structure an answer using a totally irrelevant anecdote. That’s why the crucial starting point is to find an appropriate scenario from your professional history that you can expand on.

There’s no way for you to know ahead of time exactly what the interviewer will ask you (although our list of [behavioral interview questions](#) can help

you make some educated predictions). With that in mind, it's smart to have a few [stories](#) and examples ready to go that you can tweak and adapt for different questions.

“Brainstorm a few examples of particular success in your previous job, and think through how to discuss that success using the STAR framework,” says [Lydia Bowers](#), a human resources professional. Repeat that exercise for a few types of questions.

If you're struggling during your interview to come up with an example that fits, don't be afraid to ask to take a minute. “I'm always impressed when a candidate asks for a moment to think so that they can provide a good answer,” says [Emma Flowers](#), a career coach here at The Muse. “It's OK to take a few seconds.”

2. Lay Out the Situation

With your anecdote selected, it's time to set the scene. It's tempting to include all sorts of unnecessary details—particularly when your nerves get the best of you. But if the interview asks you to tell them about a time you didn't meet a client's expectations, for example, they don't necessarily need to know the story of how you recruited the client three years earlier or the entire history of the project.

Your goal here is to paint a clear picture of the situation you were in and emphasize its complexities, so that the result you touch on later seems that much more profound. Keep things concise and focus on what's undeniably relevant to your story.

“The STAR method is meant to be simple,” explains Flowers. “Sometimes people provide too much detail and their answers are too long. Focus on just one or two sentences for each letter of the acronym.”

For example, imagine that the interviewer just said, “Tell me about a time when you achieved a goal that you initially thought was out of reach.”

Your Response (Situation): *“In my previous digital marketing role, my company made the decision to focus primarily on email marketing and was looking to increase their list of email subscribers pretty aggressively.”*

3. Highlight the Task

You’re telling this story for a reason—because you had some sort of core involvement in it. This is the part of your answer when you make the interviewer understand exactly where you fit in.

This can easily get confused with the “action” portion of the response. However, this piece is dedicated to giving the specifics of what your responsibilities were in that particular scenario, as well as any objective that was set for you, *before* you dive into what you actually did.

Your Response (Task): *“As the email marketing manager, my target was to increase our email list by at least 50% in just one quarter.”*

4. Share How You Took Action

Now that you’ve given the interviewer a sense of what your role was, it’s time to explain what you did. What steps did you take to reach that goal or solve that problem?

Resist the urge to give a vague or glossed-over answer like, “So, I worked hard on it...” or “I did some research...”

This is your chance to really showcase your contribution, and it's worthy of some specifics. Dig in deep and make sure that you give enough information about exactly what you did. Did you work with a certain team? Use a particular piece of software? Form a detailed plan? Those are the things your interviewer wants to know.

Your Response (Action): *“I started by going back through our old blog posts and adding in content upgrades that incentivized email subscriptions—which immediately gave our list a boost. Next, I worked with the rest of the marketing team to plan and host a webinar that required an email address to register, which funneled more interested users into our list.”*

5. Dish Out the Result

Here it is—your time to shine and explain how you made a positive difference. The final portion of your response should share the results of the action you took. Of course, the result better be positive—otherwise this isn't a story you should be telling. No interviewer will be dazzled with an answer that ends with, “And then I got fired.”

Does that mean you can't tell stories about problems or challenges? Absolutely not. But, even if you're talking about a [time you failed](#) or made a mistake, make sure you end on a high note by talking about what you learned or the steps you took to improve.

Bowers warns that too many candidates skip over this crucial, final part of their response. “They don't make it clear how their action made an impact—the result,” she says. “That's the most important part of the answer!”

Remember, interviewers don't only care about what you did—they also want to know why it mattered. So make sure you hammer home the point

about any results you achieved and quantify them when you can. Numbers are always impactful.

Your Response (Result): *“As a result of those additions to our email strategy, I was able to increase our subscriber list from 25,000 subscribers to 40,000 subscribers in three months—which exceeded our goal by 20%.”*

Putting it All Together

It’s making sense now, isn’t it? Here’s one more question-and-answer example for some added clarity.

The Interviewer Says: *“Tell me about a time when you had to be very strategic in order to meet all of your top priorities.”*

Your Response:

Situation: *“In my previous sales role, I was put in charge of the transfer to an entirely new customer relationship management (CRM) system—on top of handling my daily sales calls and responsibilities.”*

Task: *“The goal was to have the migration to the new CRM database completed by Q3, without letting any of my own sales numbers slip below my targets.”*

Action: *“In order to do that, I had to be very careful about how I managed all of my time. So, I blocked off an hour each day on my calendar to dedicate solely to the CRM migration. During that time, I worked on transferring the data, as well as cleaning out old contacts and updating outdated information. Doing this gave me enough time to chip away at that project, while still handling my normal tasks.”*

Result: *“As a result, the transfer was completed two weeks ahead of deadline and I finished the quarter 10% ahead of my sales goal.”*

The STAR interview process for answering behavioral interview questions might seem a little overwhelming at first. But it will become second nature with a little practice. And make no mistake, [practicing](#) is *definitely* something you should do.

“Whether it’s in a mock interview or just practicing your answer in the mirror, talk through your response so that it feels natural and comfortable when you’re actually in the interview,” Flowers says.

With just a little preparation and strategy, you’ll soon view behavioral interview questions as less of a burden—and more of an opportunity to emphasize your awesome qualifications.