

Behavior-Based Interview Basics

Many employers are trained in what is called behavioral or focused interviewing. The basic premise is to encourage the candidate to prove him or herself by telling stories of past accomplishments that suggest the probability of future successes. By being prepared to tell your own success stories you will be well positioned to answer many of the questions that are likely to be asked in any interview.

The three components to a good success story are:

Context: Briefly describe the challenge you faced, project you were working on or situation you were in.

Action: In two or three sentences describe what you did in response to the challenge, project or problem.

Result: A brief summary that clearly expresses the positive result of the action(s) you took. (Or, if there was not a positive result, what you learned and will do differently in the future.)

Success stories should relay important information about how your skills, personality and experiences match up with the requirements of the position.

- Does the position description indicate "strong communication skills" as a requirement? If so, one of your **CAR** success stories probably ought to be of an occasion or situation when you exhibited excellent oral or written communication talents.
- Is it a sales position for which you are interviewing? Then, it would be advisable to have at least one story where you exhibited persistence and/or persuasive talents.
- Is the job or internship with a non-profit? In this case you will probably want to develop a **CAR** success story that will draw attention to volunteer or service experiences.

CAR stories do not have to be amazing or fantastic. They merely tell about a success that says something about who you are as a person- and as an employment candidate.

CAR stories are likely to be remembered. Specific examples are more effective and connect you to the skills required by the job in a way that vague or general responses can't. Even if the interviewer has not been trained to ask for specifics, he or she will find you more persuasive when you use the **CAR** model.

Preparing CAR stories-and how to use them in your interview

Consider this one story to illustrate how **CAR** stories in general can work.

Context: *In my first year at St. Thomas, I was trying to do too much and wasn't budgeting my time or setting priorities very well. My second semester grades were the wake up call I needed. I knew that I needed to turn things around, and do it quickly.*

Action: *When school started again the next fall, I formed a study group with a couple of friends who I knew from class. We met twice a week for two hours at a time. I also learned that I didn't have to say 'yes' every time somebody asked if I wanted to go out.*

Result: *Things turned around pretty quickly. By the end of my sophomore year, I'd brought my overall GPA above 3.0, I was on the Dean's list and I was getting a lot more out of my whole college experience.*

CAR stories such as the one above can usually be used to answer more than one question. Consider how this story could assist you in having strong responses to the typical interview questions below:

"Give me an example of an accomplishment that you are proud of."

(You might say, "I think I'm a good problem solver. For instance, in my first year at St. Thomas...")

"What is your greatest strength?"

(You might answer, "I think I'm good at setting and meeting goals. For instance...")

"How would you describe yourself in terms of time management?"

(You might answer, "I learned something about developing those skills in my first year at St. Thomas...")

By being prepared to tell your own success stories you will be well positioned to answer many of the questions that are likely to be asked in any interview.

1. Identify 3-5 skills or experiences required by a position in which you are interested.
2. Using the **CAR** outline, develop and get comfortable with stories that detail your experiences, learning and/or successes in the required areas.
3. Consider how your stories might assist you should you be asked any of the typical interview questions on the following page.

Typical behavioral interview questions

1. Tell me about a high stress situation when it was desirable for you to keep a positive attitude. What happened?
2. What have been your experiences in making presentations or speeches to small or large groups?
3. Tell me about a time when a decision was made that you didn't agree with. What did you do? Were you part of the discussion and decision process? If so, describe your role and what happened.
4. Give me an example of a time when you went above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done? What was the situation? What actions did you take to ensure that the job was completed? What was the outcome?
5. Can you describe a time when you worked with a team member that was reluctant to participate in a group? How did you deal with that?
6. Tell me about an event that really challenged you. How did you meet the challenge? In what way was your approach different from others?
7. Tell me about the last time you took a risk. Was it the right decision? What would you have done differently?
8. Tell me about a time when you were criticized. What was the issue involved, who made the criticism and how did you handle it?
9. Have you ever had to persuade someone to do something they were initially reluctant about?
10. How do you go about making important decisions?

(Note: Using fully developed **CAR** stories can be effective even when the interviewers questions are not phrased in the "tell me about a time" or "give me an example" behavioral style.)