A NEW LEAF GUIDE

Ready for the Room

Common interview questions, what lies behind them and answers that work, whether you are returning to work or walking into the boardroom.

This guide is designed to sit alongside your New Leaf printable. Your story gives you the facts and the evidence, and these pages help you say them out loud, in your own voice, to the person sitting across the table from you. Every example answer is fictional. Each one is there to show you the shape of a strong answer, so please borrow the structure and make the words your own rather than reciting them.

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Six Things That Change Everything

Most interviews are decided long before the first question is asked, in the quality of the preparation and in whether the person who walks into the room feels like themselves. These six ideas run through every page of this guide, and they are worth reading slowly.

1. Prepare Rather Than Improvise

Confidence in the room is built in the days before it. Say your answers out loud, more than once, until they sound like you speaking rather than notes being read. The aim is never a script. It is to know your facts so well that you can relax, listen and simply talk.

2. Be Yourself on a Good Day

Interviewers are trying to meet the colleague they will sit beside next month. Show them the real you, organised and at your best, rather than a persona you imagine they want. The real you is easier to sustain for an hour and far more convincing.

3. Give Every Answer Its "So What"

For any example, describe the situation briefly, explain what you did and then say what was different because you were there. A number helps enormously. The so what is the sentence an interviewer remembers when they compare candidates at the end of a long day.

4. A Gap Is Simply Another Chapter

Time away from paid work deserves to be described like any other productive period: what you did, what it gave you and why it has prepared you for this role. A move can be mentioned in passing, if at all. Keep the story yours and tell it in the first person.

5. Read the Room

Every interviewer listens for something slightly different. Notice whether the person opposite you is warm and relational, lively and talkative, precise and analytical or brisk and testing, and meet them where they are without ever ceasing to be yourself. The next section explores this a little further.

6. Know What You Never Have to Share

The law protects you from being judged on pregnancy, children, marriage or family plans, so interviewers shouldn't ask about them. Be careful about volunteering them, because once said they can quietly colour a decision. Whether your time away came from raising children, a military posting or a long search, talk about what you did with the time rather than why it happened. One calm, honest line is enough, and the Elephant in the Room page a little further on shows exactly how.

On interview styles. The idea of reading the interviewer, and much of the spirit of points 1, 2 and 5, comes from Anna Papalia's book *Interviewology: The New Science of Interviewing* (HarperCollins, 2023), which describes four interview personalities and how to prepare for each. It is well worth reading in full, and you can find it on Amazon UK and Amazon US. The summary that follows is our own short interpretation and is not a substitute for the book.

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Meeting Different Interviewers

The Warm, Relational Interviewer

This interviewer values trust and wants to understand how you work alongside other people. Choose examples about colleagues, communities and the people you helped, and allow your warmth to show.

The Lively, Talkative Interviewer

This interviewer enjoys energy and conversation. Match their pace and keep your stories vivid, while gently steering the conversation back to your evidence so that it never drifts too far.

The Precise, Analytical Interviewer

This interviewer wants detail and proof. Lead with the number, explain how you arrived at it and never be afraid of a thoughtful pause while you consider your answer.

The Brisk, Testing Interviewer

This interviewer pushes a little to see how you respond under pressure. Stay calm, answer directly and treat each challenge as a sign of interest rather than hostility.

COME PREPARED

Nine Answers To Have Pre-Prepared

A handful of questions appear in almost every interview, at every level and in every sector. They are not there by accident. Each one gives the interviewer a particular kind of evidence, and your answer quietly tells them a great deal about how well you would suit the role. Prepare these nine with care and say your answers aloud at least twice, and you will walk in with much of the interview already in hand.

Three stories will carry you a long way. Choose three real stories, each with a so what and a number: one about results, one about people and one about something that went wrong and how you recovered. With small adjustments, those three stories will answer most of the questions in this guide, and knowing them well will free you to listen properly in the room.

01 Tell Me About Yourself

QUESTION 1

WHAT IT DOES FOR THEM Many people expect it first, but it often comes in the middle or at the very end, after you have discussed your CV at length. Wherever it comes, it is not a request for your life story. It is a chance to sum up your career and the behaviours that make you a good fit for this role.

WHAT YOUR ANSWER REVEALS Whether you understand what the role needs and can summarise your professional value clearly and concisely. A focused, relevant answer signals good judgement and strong communication, while a rambling life story suggests the opposite.

02 Why Do You Want This Role, and Why Us?

QUESTION 3

WHAT IT DOES FOR THEM It tests your motivation and whether you have done your homework, which helps the interviewer judge how committed you are likely to be and how long you might stay.

WHAT YOUR ANSWER REVEALS How carefully you prepare, how genuine your interest is and whether your ambitions sit comfortably with what the organisation can offer. Specific detail about them reads as real interest; general praise reads as a stock answer.

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03 Why Should We Hire You?

QUESTION 13

WHAT IT DOES FOR THEM It hands you the chance to make the interviewer's decision easier, and many use it to see whether you can sum up your own case with quiet confidence.

WHAT YOUR ANSWER REVEALS Whether you have understood their most pressing need and can connect your evidence to it without overselling or underselling yourself.

04 The Time Between Roles, or Why You Left

QUESTIONS 2 AND 14

WHAT IT DOES FOR THEM It checks for anything that might affect your reliability or commitment. Very often it is asked simply because the CV raises a natural question that the interviewer would like answered.

WHAT YOUR ANSWER REVEALS Your composure, your honesty and the way you frame change. A calm, forward-looking answer reassures them, whereas a long explanation or an apology can create doubt where none existed.

05 A Strength and a Weakness

QUESTIONS 4 AND 5

WHAT IT DOES FOR THEM Together these show the interviewer how well you know yourself. The strength question asks what you would bring that others might not, and the weakness question asks whether you can reflect honestly and keep improving.

WHAT YOUR ANSWER REVEALS Self-awareness, maturity and a willingness to grow. A real weakness, handled thoughtfully, builds far more trust than a polished non-answer.

06 A Time It Went Wrong

QUESTION 15

WHAT IT DOES FOR THEM It shows how you behave when things do not go to plan, which every role eventually demands of everyone.

WHAT YOUR ANSWER REVEALS Accountability, resilience and your capacity to learn. Interviewers listen closely for whether you own the mistake, what you did next and what you now do differently as a result.

07 A Disagreement

QUESTION 16

WHAT IT DOES FOR THEM It reveals how you handle tension with colleagues or managers, and whether you can challenge an idea constructively.

WHAT YOUR ANSWER REVEALS Your emotional intelligence and your ability to lead with evidence rather than ego. They want to hear that you can disagree respectfully and still keep the working relationship strong.

08 Your Salary Expectations

QUESTION 17

WHAT IT DOES FOR THEM It establishes early on whether the two of you are in the same range, which saves time and disappointment for everyone.

WHAT YOUR ANSWER REVEALS How well you know the market and how you value your own work. A calm, researched range shows professionalism and a healthy self-respect.

09 Your Questions for Them

QUESTION 10

WHAT IT DOES FOR THEM It closes the interview and gives the interviewer a final, lasting view of how you think.

WHAT YOUR ANSWER REVEALS Your curiosity, your preparation and how seriously you are weighing the role. Thoughtful questions suggest a candidate who is choosing as carefully as they are being chosen.

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When the Honest Reason Is Personal

Many careful candidates find themselves caught by three pieces of advice at once. Never explain a gap with your partner's career. Never explain it negatively, as though there simply wasn't any work. And never volunteer your family situation, because information you offer freely can colour a decision that it should never touch. It is a narrow path to walk, whether your time away came from a posting, a pregnancy, raising children or a hard job market.

What the law says. In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 protects you from being treated less favourably because of pregnancy, maternity, sex or marriage, and US federal law protects against pregnancy discrimination. A good interviewer won't ask about your family, but bias does not always follow the law. That is why the choice of what to share is always yours, and keeping it private is perfectly legitimate.

Four Principles for Walking the Line

1. You Owe Nobody a Reason

An interviewer needs to know what you can do, not why you stepped away. One calm, honest sentence about the time is enough, followed straight away by what you did with it.

2. Decide Before the Day

Choose how much you are comfortable sharing while you are calm at home, not in the chair. Write your line down, say it aloud and keep to it, however friendly the conversation becomes.

3. Answer the Worry Underneath

Questions about gaps are almost always about one thing: whether you are ready and committed now. Speak to that directly, and the reason behind the gap matters far less.

4. Never Apologise for a Circumstance

A posting, a family or a difficult market is something that happened to you, not a flaw in you. Describe the chapter with the same dignity you would give any other.

Lines That Walk It Well

After Time With Family

"I took a planned break from paid work, and in that time I chaired a parents' association of two hundred families and completed a project management qualification. I'm ready for a role like this one now."

After a Posting Overseas

"I spent three years living abroad, where my right to work was limited. I used the time to run a volunteer programme for new arrivals and to learn Dutch to a working level."

After a Long Search

"I've been selective about my next role, because I want the right fit. While searching, I've completed a data analytics course and supported a local charity with its reporting."

If They Ask Anyway

"I'm fully committed to this role and to being here for the long term. Shall I tell you how I'd approach the first six months?" Then move on warmly, with no need to explain further.

When nerves get the better of you. *Tame Those Mind Monkeys* has a page on this exact dilemma, with skills such as STOPP and Wise Mind. These example lines are fictional.

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Ten Questions, Three Ways

Each question below sets out what the interviewer is really asking and a simple shape for your answer. It also shows two kinds of answer to avoid: those that count against you and those that are simply too clichéd to be remembered. Three example answers follow, written for someone returning to work or early in their career, for someone in mid-career and for a senior leader. Borrow the shape of each answer, then fill it with your own words and examples.

1. Tell Me About Yourself.

REALLY ASKING Despite the wording, this question is not really about you as a person. It is your opportunity to recap what you do professionally and to show how your experience and skills fit this particular role.

SHAPE Offer a tidy professional summary with a bow on top: what you do, one or two results that prove it, the skills you will bring and why they add up to this role. Keep it under two minutes. Your New Leaf elevator pitch is an excellent place to start.

DON'T SAY "Well, I grew up in Yorkshire, married young and we've moved six times with my husband's job." Personal history and a partner's career draw attention away from what you offer professionally.

TOO CLICHÉ "I'm a hard-working people person who loves a challenge." Almost every candidate says something similar, and nothing in it can be checked or remembered.

RETURNING OR EARLY CAREER	*"I'm an organiser at heart. For the last six years I've run a busy household through three moves and set up a playgroup that grew to forty families, and last year I completed a Level 3 in Business Administration. I'm looking for an office coordinator role where that kind of organisation keeps a team running smoothly."*
MID-CAREER	*"I'm a senior copywriter with twelve years in agencies, and what I'm best at is making complicated things clear. A bank campaign I wrote lifted applications by 18%. More recently I completed an MA researching tone of voice in AI-generated content, so I'm now looking to move into content strategy, where both of those come together."*
SENIOR LEADER	*"I lead operations teams through change. Most recently I ran a 200-person service operation where we cut resolution times by a third while satisfaction rose. Over the last two years overseas I've advised two charities on their operating models. I'm here because your growth plans need exactly that combination of scale and steadiness."*

> **When it comes later on.** If they ask this after you have already discussed your CV, they do not want your life story or your CV again. Give a short summary of the behaviours that make you good at this work and why they make you right for this role.

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2. Talk Me Through the Time Between Your Last Two Roles.

REALLY ASKING The interviewer wants reassurance that you are still sharp and that you are fully committed now.

SHAPE Open with what you did rather than why you stopped. Describe one or two concrete things, explain what they gave you and build a bridge straight to this role. Keep your tone calm and brief, and never apologise for a chapter of your life.

DON'T SAY "Sorry, I know it looks bad. I was only at home, so there isn't much to say." An apology invites doubt, and the word "only" shrinks real work that deserves to be counted.

TOO CLICHÉ "It was a chance to recharge and find myself." It sounds pleasant enough, but it tells them nothing about what you did or why it has made you ready.

RETURNING OR EARLY CAREER	*"Those years were busier than any job I've had. I taught my two children at home for three years, designing the curriculum and tracking their progress, and both went back to school ahead of their year group. It's made me very good at planning, patience and explaining things clearly, which is a big part of why I'd like to train as a teaching assistant."*
MID-CAREER	*"They were two of the most productive years of my career. I completed an MA with distinction and covered around 120 days as a supply teacher, which sharpened how I explain ideas to any audience. I came back closer to the problems content teams face today."*
SENIOR LEADER	*"I spent two years overseas and used them deliberately: an executive programme in digital transformation and two advisory roles with charities, one of which doubled its volunteer base under the model we designed. I'm returning with a wider view and a clear sense of the kind of organisation I want to lead."*

Questions you do not have to answer. In the UK and the US, interviewers should not ask about your marriage, your children, your plans for a family or whether a partner might be posted again. If such a question does come up, you can steer the conversation kindly and confidently: "I'm fully committed to this role and to being here for the long term. Shall I tell you how I would approach the first six months?"

When vetting or references ask about gaps. For roles that need security clearance, and sometimes during referencing, you may be asked to account for every gap, including where you physically were. It can feel intrusive, but it is routine. The vetting team simply needs to confirm your whereabouts, for example that you were claiming Jobseeker's Allowance or unemployment benefit, or to see an explanation or a reference that covers the time. If you are a military spouse, the support organisation at your duty station, such as the European Joint Support Element or your National Military Representative, can usually provide a letter confirming where you were living. Ask for it early, and keep a simple timeline of your addresses and dates ready.

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3. Why Do You Want This Role?

REALLY ASKING The interviewer wants to know whether you have done your homework and whether this is a role you genuinely want, rather than simply a job.

SHAPE Name something specific about the organisation, something specific about you and the match between the two.

DON'T SAY "To be honest, I need a job and you're close to home." It may well be true, but it speaks to your needs rather than to what you will bring them.

TOO CLICHÉ "You're a market leader with a great culture." Praise that could apply to any organisation suggests you haven't looked closely at this one.

RETURNING OR EARLY CAREER	*"Your practice is the one people on the base recommend, and you're known for how you treat families. I've spent years being the person who makes everyone feel welcome, and I'd love to do that properly at your front desk."*
MID-CAREER	*"You're rewriting how you speak to customers about money, and you've said publicly that clarity is a priority. That's exactly the work I've done for banks, and my research gives me a way to keep a brand voice consistent as you scale content with AI."*
SENIOR LEADER	*"You're at the point where the operating model that got you here won't get you to the next stage. I've led that transition twice. I'm drawn to your culture of service, and I think I can help you grow without losing it."*

4. What Is Your Greatest Strength?

REALLY ASKING The interviewer wants to know what you would do better than the other candidates and whether you can prove it.

SHAPE Choose one strength that genuinely matters for this role, then bring it to life with a short example and its result.

DON'T SAY "I'm good at pretty much everything, really." Without focus or evidence, a strength quickly becomes a boast.

TOO CLICHÉ "I'm a team player and a fast learner." They will already have heard both phrases many times that day.

RETURNING OR EARLY CAREER	*"Keeping calm when plans change. In one move we had eleven days' notice; I found schools, registered with a doctor and had the house running within a fortnight, and I've been the person new families call ever since."*
MID-CAREER	*"Turning complicated ideas into words that move people to act. My bank campaign is the clearest example: same product, clearer words, 18% more applications."*
SENIOR LEADER	*"Building teams that perform without me in the room. In my last role I grew three managers into heads of department, and the operation kept improving after I left."*

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5. Tell Me About a Weakness.

REALLY ASKING The interviewer is testing your self-awareness and whether you act on what you notice about yourself.

SHAPE Choose a real but modest weakness that is not central to the role, explain what you do about it and share the evidence that your approach is working.

DON'T SAY "I don't really have any weaknesses." It signals a lack of self-awareness, which is a weakness in itself.

TOO CLICHÉ "I'm a perfectionist." It is the most common answer of all, so it sounds rehearsed, and many interviewers quietly hear it as "I miss deadlines and frustrate my team."

RETURNING OR EARLY CAREER	*"I've been away from office software for a while, so I've been working through the Microsoft 365 courses online and I've used them to run the playgroup's bookings and accounts this year."*
MID-CAREER	*"I can hold on to a draft too long because I want it right. I now share earlier versions on purpose, and my last project went out a week ahead of schedule because of it."*
SENIOR LEADER	*"Earlier in my career I stepped in too quickly when things went wrong. I've learned to ask questions first and let the team solve it, and the solutions are usually better than mine would have been."*

6. Tell Me About a Time You Handled a Difficult Situation.

REALLY ASKING The interviewer wants to see how you behave when things become hard.

SHAPE Set the scene in a sentence, describe what you did using "I" and finish with what happened as a result. Keep the drama short and the action long.

DON'T SAY "My manager made a mess of it, and I had to clear up after everyone." Blaming others makes the interviewer wonder how you would describe them one day.

TOO CLICHÉ "I just stay calm under pressure." A claim with no story behind it is impossible to believe or to remember.

RETURNING OR EARLY CAREER	*"Two committee members fell out over the summer event and it nearly collapsed. I met each of them separately, found the one decision they actually disagreed on and put it to a quick vote. The event went ahead and sold out."*
MID-CAREER	*"A client rejected a campaign two days before launch. I asked what had worried them, rewrote the three lines that caused it overnight, and we launched on time. That client gave us their next two campaigns."*
SENIOR LEADER	*"We lost our largest contract with three months' notice. I was open with the team about the numbers, redeployed people to two new accounts rather than making redundancies, and we replaced the revenue within the year."*

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7. Which Result Makes You Proudest?

REALLY ASKING The interviewer is learning what good looks like to you, and whether it matches what they need.

SHAPE Choose one result that echoes the demands of this role, then describe the before, the after and what you personally did to bridge the two.

DON'T SAY "We won an award as a team, so it was great for all of us." They cannot see your part, and your part is precisely what they are hiring.

TOO CLICHÉ "Every day I make a difference." A lovely sentiment, but without a specific result it leaves them nothing memorable.

RETURNING OR EARLY CAREER	*"Setting up our station's welcome group. We went from around sixty families a month coming to events to over a hundred and twenty, with a waiting list for the summer event, and it's still running after I left."*
MID-CAREER	*"Supply teaching across Years 3 to 6. The head asked me back every term because children's lessons kept their momentum, and it taught me more about clear communication than any brief."*
SENIOR LEADER	*"Taking a struggling service from the bottom quarter of our regional rankings to the top within eighteen months, by changing how teams were organised rather than adding headcount."*

8. How Do You Handle Change?

REALLY ASKING The interviewer wants to know whether you will cope, and even thrive, when priorities shift.

SHAPE This is where a squiggly career truly shines. Give a real example of change, describe how you approached it and name the habit it has given you.

DON'T SAY "Honestly, I find change really stressful and prefer things to stay the same." Candour is admirable, but it suggests you may struggle in a role that keeps evolving.

TOO CLICHÉ "I love change and always embrace it." Enthusiasm without an example sounds more like a slogan than a skill.

RETURNING OR EARLY CAREER	*"I've started again in three countries. I've learned to work out quickly who to ask, what matters most in the first month and how to be useful while I learn the rest."*
MID-CAREER	*"When AI tools arrived in our industry, I didn't wait to see what happened; I studied it. My dissertation was about keeping quality high when tools change the work."*
SENIOR LEADER	*"I treat change as a design problem. I explain the why early, involve the people closest to the work, and measure what matters so we know quickly if it is working."*

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9. Where Do You See Yourself in Five Years?

REALLY ASKING The interviewer is gauging whether your ambition fits the organisation and whether you are likely to stay.

SHAPE Speak about growth in skills, responsibility and contribution rather than titles or locations, and tie it to the organisation in front of you.

DON'T SAY "Probably in a different country, depending on where we're posted next." It raises a doubt about your commitment that you have no need to raise.

TOO CLICHÉ "Sitting in your chair." It is meant as a light joke, and it has been made many thousands of times before.

RETURNING OR EARLY CAREER	*"Trusted with more: running the office systems, perhaps training new starters. I'd like to grow here rather than keep starting again."*
MID-CAREER	*"Leading your content strategy, with a team that can produce more without losing the voice that makes your brand recognisable."*
SENIOR LEADER	*"Having built an operation that scales without me holding it together, and having grown the leaders who will run it next."*

10. Do You Have Any Questions for Us?

REALLY ASKING The interviewer is assessing how serious you are about the role and how you think.

SHAPE Always say yes. Prepare two or three questions about the work, the team and what success will look like in the first year.

DON'T SAY "So, what does your company actually do?" It tells them at once that you haven't prepared.

TOO CLICHÉ "No, I think you've covered everything." It is polite, but it ends the interview on a flat note and misses your final chance to shine.

- What would a great first six months look like in this role?
- What is the biggest challenge the team is facing right now?
- How do you support people to grow here?
- Is there anything in my background I could explain further?

> The last question is a quiet superpower. It invites the interviewer to raise any lingering doubt while you are still in the room and able to answer it.

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Nine More Questions Worth Preparing

Some of these questions can sound odd or even a little unfair, yet each one has a perfectly sensible question underneath it. For every one you will find what the interviewer is really asking, how to shape your answer, the two kinds of answer to avoid and a single example that works in most settings. As before, borrow the shape and make the words your own.

11. If You Were an Animal, What Would You Be?

REALLY ASKING The interviewer wants to see whether you can think on your feet and whether you understand what you bring to a team.

SHAPE Choose something quickly, then link one quality of it to the role in a single sentence.

DON'T SAY "A sloth, because I love a lie-in." A joke at your own expense leaves them with exactly the wrong picture.

TOO CLICHÉ "A lion, because I'm a natural leader." The lion is by far the most common answer, and it can sound a little self-important.

AN ANSWER THAT WORKS *"A border collie. Happiest with a job to do and good at keeping a group heading in the same direction. That's what I did with our welcome group, which doubled in size in a year."*

> **The same approach works for any unexpected question,** whether you are asked to be a biscuit, a colour or a kitchen appliance. Give a short, light answer, name one quality and link it to the job. Nobody is marking the animal itself; they are listening to how you think.

12. Describe Yourself in Three Words.

REALLY ASKING The interviewer wants to know what you believe your strengths are and whether you can support them with evidence.

SHAPE Choose three specific words and give each one a few words of proof.

DON'T SAY "Um, nice, normal and fine?" Hesitant, bland words undersell you at the very moment you are invited to shine.

TOO CLICHÉ "Hard-working, passionate, team player." These appear on almost every CV, so they disappear into the background.

AN ANSWER THAT WORKS *"Organised, steady and curious. Organised, because I ran bookings for forty families for three years without a double booking. Steady, because I stay calm when plans change at short notice. Curious, because I taught myself the accounting software when we needed it."*

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13. Why Should We Hire You?

REALLY ASKING The interviewer is inviting you to sum up your case and make their decision easier.

SHAPE Name their biggest need, offer your proof that you can meet it and describe what you would do first.

DON'T SAY "Because I really need this, and I'd be so grateful." Need is not a reason to hire, and gratitude can sound like a lack of confidence.

TOO CLICHÉ "Because I'm the best candidate for the job." An assertion with no evidence simply asks them to take your word for it.

AN ANSWER THAT WORKS *"You need someone who can get your new office running smoothly from day one. I've set up and run operations in three countries at short notice, I'm qualified in business administration and I'd start by mapping how bookings and supplies work today, so nothing falls through the cracks."*

14. Why Did You Leave Your Last Job?

REALLY ASKING The interviewer is checking whether there is a problem that might affect the role.

SHAPE Keep your answer short and forward-looking: what you achieved, then what you are looking for next.

DON'T SAY "My manager was impossible and the place was a shambles." Criticising a former employer makes them wonder what you might one day say about them.

TOO CLICHÉ "I was looking for a new challenge." It is true for almost everyone, so it says nothing about you.

AN ANSWER THAT WORKS *"I'd done what I set out to do. The service was in the top quarter of the region and the team was ready to run without me. It was the right moment to look for a bigger challenge, which is why I'm here."*

15. Tell Me About a Time You Failed.

REALLY ASKING The interviewer wants to know whether you can own a mistake and learn from it.

SHAPE Describe what happened in a sentence, explain what you did about it and close with what you now do differently.

DON'T SAY "It wasn't really my fault; the brief kept changing." Deflecting blame is exactly what this question is designed to uncover.

TOO CLICHÉ "I failed to delegate because I care too much." A failure that is secretly a boast fools no one.

AN ANSWER THAT WORKS *"I launched a volunteer rota without testing it with the people using it, and in the first month a third of shifts went unfilled. I asked the volunteers what wasn't working and rebuilt it around their week. Cover went above 95%, and now I test with the people affected first, every time."*

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16. Tell Me About a Disagreement With a Colleague or Manager.

REALLY ASKING The interviewer wants to see whether you can disagree well and still keep the relationship intact.

SHAPE Explain what you disagreed about, how you made your case with evidence and how you settled it together.

DON'T SAY "I proved them wrong in the end." Winning the argument matters far less to them than how you treated the other person.

TOO CLICHÉ "I get on with everyone, so I never really disagree." It sounds either unlikely or as though you avoid difficult conversations.

AN ANSWER THAT WORKS *"My manager wanted to drop our customer survey to save time. I thought we'd lose an early warning, so I brought three months of complaints it had caught early. We agreed a shorter version that kept the key questions and took half the time."*

17. What Are Your Salary Expectations?

REALLY ASKING The interviewer wants to establish whether the two of you are in the same range.

SHAPE Offer a researched range, say it plainly and leave the door open to discuss the whole package.

DON'T SAY "Whatever you think is fair; I'm just happy to be considered." It undersells you and may anchor the offer lower than it should be.

TOO CLICHÉ "I'm open to negotiation." Without a figure, it simply hands the question back to them.

AN ANSWER THAT WORKS *"From my research, roles like this pay between £30,000 and £34,000, and with my experience I'd expect to be in that range. I'm also interested in the whole package, so I'm happy to talk it through once we both know it's the right fit."*

> **Do your homework first.** Look at similar roles on job boards and in salary surveys for your area and level. If you can, let them name a figure first, and never undersell yourself because you have spent time away from paid work.

18. Tell Me Something That Isn't on Your CV.

REALLY ASKING The interviewer is curious about who you are beyond the page.

SHAPE Share one short story that reveals how you approach things.

DON'T SAY "Well, things at home have been really tough lately." Personal and family difficulties take the conversation somewhere neither of you needs it to go.

TOO CLICHÉ "I like reading, travelling and spending time with friends." A list of hobbies without a story leaves no impression.

AN ANSWER THAT WORKS *"Last year I ran a half marathon, having never run before. I built a twelve-week plan and stuck to it. That's how I tackle most things: break it down, keep going and check my progress honestly."*

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19. Sell Me This Pen.

REALLY ASKING The interviewer wants to know whether you listen before you pitch.

SHAPE Ask how they use a pen, listen carefully and then sell the one thing that matters to them.

DON'T SAY "This pen is blue, it clicks and it writes really smoothly." Reciting features before you understand the need is exactly what the exercise is testing.

TOO CLICHÉ "This is the best pen you'll ever own." A superlative with no reason behind it never persuaded anyone.

AN ANSWER THAT WORKS *"Before I tell you about it, when did you last use a pen, and for what? … Signing contracts on the move. Then you need one that writes first time, every time, and doesn't leak in your bag. That's exactly what this one does."*

> This exercise appears most often in sales interviews, but the same principle applies to any role-play: understand the need first, and then answer it.

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WHAT TO AVOID

The Answers They Hear All Day Long

Interviewers hear the same handful of answers from candidate after candidate, and by the end of a long day those answers blur together. Some are simply forgettable, while others quietly count against the person who gives them. The remedy is almost always the same: replace the label with evidence that only you could offer.

Don't Say

These answers can actively damage your chances, often without you realising it at the time.

THE ANSWER	WHY IT COUNTS AGAINST YOU	TRY INSTEAD
~~"I don't really have any weaknesses."~~	It signals a lack of self-awareness, which interviewers treat as a weakness in itself.	*Something you are actively improving, together with the step you have taken.*
~~"Sorry, I know the gap looks bad."~~	An apology invites the very doubt you hoped to avoid, and frames a productive chapter as a problem.	*Open with what you did during that time and what it gave you.*
~~"I was just at home." "It was only volunteering."~~	The words "just" and "only" shrink real work, and interviewers tend to take you at your word.	*Describe it as work: what you ran, organised or delivered, and the outcome.*
~~"We did…" for everything~~	It is modest and well meant, but they cannot hire "we". They need to see your contribution.	*Use "I" for what you did and "we" for the shared result.*
~~"My last manager was awful."~~	However justified, it leaves the interviewer wondering what you might one day say about them.	*What you learned from the experience, or what you are looking for now.*
~~"I really need this job." "It's close to home."~~	These may be true, but they speak to your needs rather than to what you will bring.	*Why this role and organisation, and what you will do for them.*
~~"So, what does your company do?"~~	It tells them at once that you have not done your homework.	*A question that shows you have: "I saw you've just opened in Leeds. How is that changing the team?"*

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Too Cliché

These answers do no harm on their own, but they are so familiar that they leave no impression at all.

THE ANSWER	WHY IT FALLS FLAT	TRY INSTEAD
~~"I'm a perfectionist."~~	It is the most common weakness answer of all, so it sounds rehearsed and sidesteps the question. Many interviewers also hear it as "I miss deadlines and frustrate my team."	*A real, modest weakness, what you do about it and the evidence that it is working.*
~~"I work too hard."~~	A strength dressed up as a weakness. It reads as avoidance rather than honesty.	*Honesty about something small, which earns far more trust than a humblebrag.*
~~"I'm a people person."~~	Everyone says it, and it offers nothing an interviewer can check.	*What you did with people and what changed: "I brought two teams who didn't get on into one rota."*
~~"I'm a team player."~~	It is vague, and it hides your own part in the result.	*Your role in a team success, told in the first person.*
~~"I think outside the box."~~	A cliché about originality is, sadly, still a cliché.	*The unusual idea itself and what it changed.*
~~"I'm passionate about…"~~	Interviewers hear it all day long, and passion without proof is only a word.	*Show it through what you studied, built or did in your own time because you cared.*
~~"I'm a fast learner."~~	Everyone claims it, and it can quietly suggest you do not have the skill yet.	*A time you learned something quickly and put it to use straight away.*
~~"Hard-working, motivated and detail-oriented."~~	A list of adjectives they will have read on every CV that day.	*One strength, one story and one number.*

> **A simple test for any answer.** Ask yourself whether the next candidate could say exactly the same sentence. If they could, it is a cliché. Add the detail that only you can give, whether that is a name, a number or a result, and the answer becomes yours.

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YOUR TURN

Your Prep Pages

Fill these in a day or two before the interview, then read them over on the morning. Your New Leaf printable is a great place to find the raw material.

> **Fill it in your way.** Type straight into the lines in a free PDF app such as Adobe Acrobat Reader, Apple Preview or Microsoft Edge. Or open this guide in GoodNotes or Notability on an iPad and write with your Apple Pencil. Or print these pages and use a pen.

My Three Stories

Each story needs a so what and, if you can, a number. Note which questions each one could answer.

A STORY ABOUT RESULTS

What happened, and what I did

The so what, with a number

Questions it could answer

A STORY ABOUT PEOPLE

What happened, and what I did

The so what, with a number

Questions it could answer

A STORY ABOUT SOMETHING THAT WENT WRONG, AND HOW I RECOVERED

What happened, and what I did

The so what, with a number

Questions it could answer

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YOUR TURN

Your Prep Pages, Continued

Tell Me About Yourself

Keep it to about a minute: who you are now, what you have done that matters here and why this role is the natural next step.

Who I am now

What I have done that matters here

Why this role, and why now

The Chapter Between Roles

My calm, confident answer, in under a minute

What They Need Most, and My Matching Story

WHAT THE ROLE NEEDS	MY STORY OR EVIDENCE

Questions I Will Ask Them

My Salary Range

The range I will ask for

The lowest I would accept

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A Short Checklist

Make yourself a cup of tea, put your New Leaf printable on the table and work through the list below. None of it takes long, and all of it will help you walk into the room feeling ready.

- [ ] Read your elevator pitch aloud three times, until it sounds like you talking rather than reading.
- [ ] Choose three stories that each have a so what and a number, and decide which questions each one could answer.
- [ ] Say your answers to the nine questions on the Come Prepared pages out loud.
- [ ] Know your salary range, along with the lowest figure you would be comfortable accepting.
- [ ] Practise your answer about the time between roles until it feels calm and comfortably under a minute.
- [ ] Read the job description once more, underline the three things they need most and match a story to each.
- [ ] Look up the organisation's latest news, and find one thing about them that you genuinely admire.
- [ ] Write down the two or three questions you would like to ask them.
- [ ] Plan your journey or test your video link, and lay out what you intend to wear.
- [ ] Read the closing note on your printable, and then get a good night's sleep.

You've added value. You've gained new skills. You've grown. An interview is simply the chance to say so, in your own words, to someone who is hoping you will be the answer to their problem. Go and tell them.

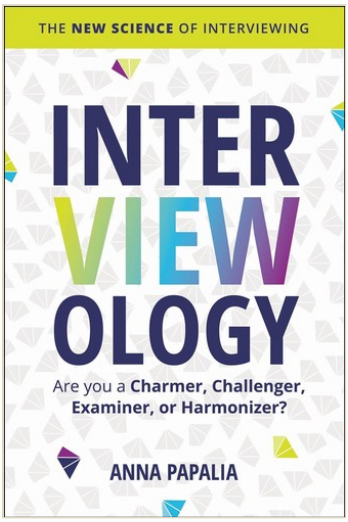
New Leaf is a free vibe coaching tool for job seekers, built with the Armed Forces community in mind and open to anyone with a squiggly career, at andersonco.uk/newleaf. It was created by Elle Anderson. The example answers in this guide are fictional. With thanks to Anna Papalia, whose book *Interviewology* (HarperCollins, 2023) informed our thinking on preparation and interview styles.

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FURTHER READING

Two Books We Love

If this guide has helped, these two books will take you further. One will help you prepare for any interviewer you meet, and the other will help you see your whole career, squiggles and all, as a strength.



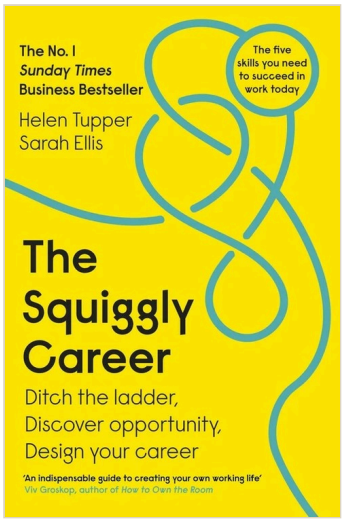
Interviewology

ANNA PAPALIA

A warm, practical guide to the four interview personalities, how to recognise them and how to prepare for each, written by one of the most popular career voices online. (HarperCollins, 2023)

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Find Anna at theinterviewology.com and on Instagram at @annapapalia, where her interview tips are a joy.



The Squiggly Career

HELEN TUPPER AND SARAH ELLIS

The book that gave many of us the language for a career that does not run in a straight line, full of tools for finding your strengths and your next step. (Penguin Business, 2020)

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Find Helen and Sarah at squigglycareers.com, on Instagram at @squigglycareers and on their Squiggly Careers podcast.

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