

4 THINGS NOT TO SAY IN YOUR JOB INTERVIEW



Alison Napolitano April 7, 2016

It's the question we all dread in a job interview: "What's your biggest weakness?" Though you know it is coming, you may not be as prepared as you think.

There are a variety of options available when it comes to answering this important question, but they may not necessarily help you land the position you're hoping for. In a [recent article](#) for MBA@UNC, UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School's [online MBA program](#), Mary Ryan associate director of Career & Leadership Services for Working Professionals, offers insight into an approach that will help you shine your best light—as well as four things you shouldn't say when asked, "What's your biggest weakness?"

Understanding the Question

Interview questions typically have [specific purposes](#), such as brainteasers to see how well you can think on your feet or situational questions to evaluate your problem-solving abilities. Ryan says that interviewers use the weakness question as a quick assessment of your self-awareness and ability to thoughtfully articulate areas in which you need to grow. In addition, she notes it's a great way to see if you have a glaring issue that would make you an unsuitable candidate for the job.

"Your answer is also an easy way to determine if you can give a genuine answer to an uncomfortable question or have a weakness that would be a deal-breaker for the job at hand," Ryan says.

In the [public sector](#), such interviews are used as an assessment tool to help make hiring decisions and to rank candidates and inform promotions. They're specifically geared toward making the most of these types of structured interview questions, which help to provide consistency in assessing whether applicants would be a good fit.

What You Shouldn't Say

When asked about your greatest weakness, Ryan says there are specific things you definitely should not say, including these four:

1. *A negative that's actually a positive.* Although this is [recommended by some](#) as a discreet technique, she definitely advises against it: “Interviewers easily spot this tactic and it makes you seem like you are avoiding the question and lack depth.”
2. *A weakness that's a core competency of the job you want.* Ryan says she once interviewed someone for a call center position who said he hated talking to people on the phone. “You do not want your interviewer wondering why you are wasting their time interviewing for the job.”
3. *A weakness that's irrelevant or too personal.* You might feel the need to talk about your emotional wounds, but this is definitely not the place to do it. As Ryan says, “This is not what the interviewer was going for, and answering this way will make everyone present uncomfortable.”
4. *“I don't know.”* When you know the question will be asked, you need to show that you've prepped better than that. As Ryan notes, “This makes you seem unprepared for the interview and like you lack introspection.”

What You Should Say Instead

The good news is that you can make this difficult question a turning point in the interview—if you handle it well. Here are a couple of strategies that Ryan recommends:

- Clearly identify where you struggle, and the steps you're taking to address it: “The *most common* way I've seen this question answered well is by giving a genuine weakness and explaining how you have started working on it.”
- **Explain why this job is the perfect fit for you—and compare it to another that isn't. Ryan refers to this as “Why I would rock out *this* job, but not *that* job,” using the contrast between the two to frame your strengths and weaknesses.**

Even if you know it's coming, this difficult question can trip up even the most prepared applicant in an important interview. By having a specific strategy to deal with it, you'll give yourself the best shot at landing the dream job you're hoping for.