



INTERVIEW SKILLS

Skills Descriptors and Answer Prompts

TU Dublin Career Development Centre

Table of Contents

Analytical Thinking	2
Creativity/Innovation	4
Decision-making	5
Commercial Awareness	6
Interpersonal	7
Leadership	8
Motivation and Drive	9
Adaptability and Flexibility	10
Planning and Organising	11
Problem-Solving	12
Teamwork	13
Written Communication	14

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Analytical Thinking

‘Strong analytical skills’ frequently appears as a key requirement in graduate adverts and in job and person specifications. The future success of any organisation is dependent on having accurate data which is used to influence and guide current/future decisions, solve or anticipate problems and provide direction to others.

So, what is meant by “Analytical Thinking”?

Analytical thinking is the ability to work with data – that is, to see patterns, trends and things of note and to draw meaningful conclusions from them (all types of data/information, not just statistics).

Sample Competency-Based Questions:

- Please give me an example of a piece of work that required you to analyse a significant amount of information. How did you approach this?
- Describe a time when you had to solve a problem but didn’t have all necessary information about it available. What did you do?
- Talk to me about a time when you discovered a more efficient method to carry out a particular work/project-related task.
- Do you recall a problem you analysed that required a quick and easy solution?
- Tell me about a time you had to manage a conflict between two team members you were leading. What factors did you consider in resolving this?
- Can you recall a situation where your analytical outcome was incorrect? What did you learn from it?

When answering an interview question, use some of the prompts below to show that you understand the key aspects of analytical thinking. You should draw on examples (stories) from all areas of your education (academic studies/extra-curricular), work experience (paid/voluntary), personal interests and achievements etc. Provide evidence of:

- Using critical thinking to interpret/evaluate information and draw conclusions
- Researching/gathering data from various sources
- Linking information and looking beyond what’s immediately apparent, not rushing to decision, asking follow-up questions
- Making effective evidence-based judgements and decisions
- Finding a solution to a problem through examining information
- Anticipating potential issues by using data, thereby diminishing the impact
- Weighing up pros and cons, choosing between options/courses of action
- Prioritising most important information, ignoring irrelevant information

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- Using accurate data to convince or persuade others of a particular course of action
- Clearly communicating complex data to others to influence and provide direction
- Identifying patterns/trends
- Explaining your thought process/approach

Creativity/Innovation

Many hiring managers highlight creativity and innovation are some of the most important skills that they look for in new graduate hires. This is because the future success of their organisations is dependent on these graduates coming up with and implementing new ideas to meet the needs of clients and society.

So, what is meant by “Creativity and Innovation”?

Creativity and Innovation are closely aligned but are not the same. Creativity relates to imagining or conceiving something new or improved (a new or improved product or way of doing things), while innovation tends to refer to the implementation of that new idea. Both can be closely linked to skills/qualities such as problem solving, adaptability, curiosity, vision and entrepreneurship.

Sample Competency-Based Questions:

- Give me an example of a time when you took a creative approach to solving a problem.
- Tell me about a project or situation where you felt that the conventional approach would not be suitable. How did you derive and manage a new approach? Which challenges did you face and how did you address them?
- Please give an example of a time when you have come up with an innovative solution to a problem. How successful was your solution?
- Tell me about a time when you had to convince a colleague that change was necessary. What made you think that your new approach would be better suited?
- Tell me about a time when you have thought of an innovative solution to a problem you were facing. What was innovative about your solution and how did you implement it?

When answering an interview question, use some of the prompts below to show you understand the key aspects of creativity and innovation. You should draw on examples (stories) from all areas of your education (academic studies/extra-curricular), work experience (paid/voluntary), personal interests and achievements etc. Provide evidence of:

- Seeking imaginative, out-of-the box approaches to overcoming challenges
- Being open to many different points of view, perspectives
- Not being afraid to take on ambitious goals or to go after more complex solutions
- Doing things differently that have not been done before. Open to taking risks
- Showing adaptability, flexibility, resourcefulness in dealing with unexpected situations
- Challenging the status quo, not accepting the ‘norm’ when solving a problem
- Demonstrating great passion, perhaps leading with heart, not head
- Showing real stamina, commitment, and resilience to persevere with a task/project
- Being curious, inquisitive, spontaneous and enthusiastic to learn/try new thing/skills
- Being self-motivated and working independently without much input from others as well as being able to work with a team towards a shared goal

Decision-making

We all make hundreds of decisions every day, some very automatic and others which require more thought. Employers require employees to be able to make decisions and implement actions that bring benefit to the business and its customers. The ability to make informed decisions is a critical skill in today's graduate market.

So, what is meant by “Decision-making”?

Decision-making is essentially the act of choosing between two or more options or solutions to a particular problem. A good decision-making process involves brainstorming a list of potential solutions to the problem; gathering relevant and up to date information; weighing up the pros and cons as well as being aware of the risks and consequences of the various options; acknowledging the impact of the decision on yourself and others. It is also important to be aware of the role values, personal or group values, play in decision making.

Sample Competency-Based Questions:

- Tell me about a time when you had to make a choice between several options. How did you arrive at your final decision?
- Talk about a time you made a poor decision. Looking back, what did you learn from it?
- Tell me about a difficult decision you made. What factors influenced your final decision?
- Tell me about a time where you sought the help of others to make a decision.
- Describe a time when you had to make a very quick decision.

When answering an interview question, use some of the prompts below to show that you understand the key aspects of decision-making. You should draw on examples (stories) from all areas of your education (academic studies/extra-curricular), work experience (paid/voluntary), personal interests and achievements etc. Provide evidence of:

- Breaking issues down into component parts
- Generating a range of possible options or solutions
- Gathering information from reliable sources (including other people; experts; online sources etc.)
- Analysing the risks and consequences of options (including doing nothing)
- Looking at the impact on yourself and others
- Using a decision-making method such as pros/cons; SWOT analysis; forcefield analysis
- Acknowledging, where appropriate, the role of values in decisions made

Commercial Awareness

Commercial awareness is so important to employers – having it demonstrates commitment, professionalism and general intelligence. Additionally, it shows the interviewer that you are keen on the opportunity. For graduates, being commercially aware demonstrates that you are ready to work in a professional environment.

So, what is meant by “Commercial Awareness”?

It means being able to demonstrate an insight into how organisations operate, the various organisational departments, their culture, and the issues they face. Understanding the wider business environment - competitors, customers, as well as industry trends and pressures. Being informed about the various jobs roles in the industry. Having informed opinions on factors that affect a company’s revenue stream.

Sample Commercial Awareness-related Questions:

- What do you know about our company?
- What are the biggest issues facing the industry today?
- Give an example of a time when you achieved a challenging financial outcome and the actions you took to achieve it.
- Give an example of how you have developed your commercial awareness in a specific sector and how you went about it?
- How do external factors affect our business, in your opinion?
- Who are our competitors and what is our USP?

When answering an interview question, use some of the prompts below to show that you understand the key aspects of commercial awareness. You should draw on examples (stories) from all areas of your education (academic studies/extra-curricular), work experience (paid/voluntary), personal interests and achievements etc. Provide evidence of:

- Understanding how businesses and organisations operate
- Being familiar with a business or organisations’ products/services/ethos/culture/competitors
- Being aware of the key issues facing businesses/organisations
- Knowing how to carry out in-depth research on an industry
- Having an interest in business and an understanding of the wider environment in which an organisation operates
- Understanding the key factors that contribute to an organisation’s success
- Having knowledge of the industries related to your field of study
- Understanding how the wider economy can affect an organisation
- Possessing knowledge of the commercial realities of businesses related to your discipline
- Being aware of the current trends in industries related to your discipline
- Understanding economic factors that affect a business and its competitors

Interpersonal

Interpersonal skills are considered a major indicator of success in the workplace because they enable you to communicate effectively with colleagues and customers, help your team solve problems, and improve office relationships. A shortfall in these skills can lead to workplace conflict with colleagues, customers and management. Thus, it is one of the most sought-after soft skills by graduate employers.

So, what is meant by “Interpersonal”?

It is the ability to express yourself clearly, confidently and in an organised and coherent way. This includes the capacity to develop rapport, demonstrating sensitivity and empathy, listening to and considering others’ viewpoints, recognising and interpreting the verbal and nonverbal behaviour of others.

Sample Competency-Based Questions

- Give an example of a time where you had to deal with a conflict with a client or customer.
- Tell us about a time where you have needed to show empathy in a given situation.
- Give an example of a time when your listening skills were crucial to an outcome.
- Describe a time when you had to win someone over who was reluctant or unresponsive.

When answering an interview question, use some of the prompts below to show that you understand the key aspects of interpersonal skills. You should draw on examples (stories) from all areas of your education (academic studies/extra-curricular), work experience (paid/voluntary), personal interests and achievements etc. Provide evidence of:

- Thinking things through before speaking
- Tailoring your communication to suit the person(s) you’re talking to
- Listening to what other people have to say without interrupting
- Making eye contact with people when talking to them
- Being confident when talking to people
- Getting your point across in a clear, concise manner
- Concentrating on what others are saying without losing focus
- Speaking up only when you have something valuable to contribute to the conversation
- Making conversation easily with people you don't know
- Being aware of the impact of what you say on others
- Reading body language of others effectively
- Empathising with others
- Encouraging quieter people in the group to contribute

Leadership

Leadership is often listed by employers as one of the most highly sought skills they look for in new graduates. They seek candidates who not only have the skills necessary to succeed in an initial graduate role, but who also demonstrate the ‘leadership potential’ necessary to take on more senior roles in the future. Many graduate roles are also project-based, requiring graduates to show leadership qualities in managing projects.

So, what is meant by “Leadership”?

Simply put, leadership is the art of motivating a group of people to act toward achieving a common goal. Leaders set vision; managers get things done. Leadership always includes responsibility for management, but the opposite is not always the case. A good leader demonstrates a broad range of skills as well as a high level of emotional intelligence.

Sample Competency-Based Questions:

- Can you tell me about a time when you demonstrated leadership skills to overcome a significant challenge?
- Give me an example of a time when you had to collaborate with others and accept new ideas?
- Tell me about a time when you had to motivate others to achieve objectives even when these seemed difficult to achieve?
- Tell me about a time you recognised potential conflict and acted to defuse it?
- Describe a situation when you had to make unpopular decisions to get the task done?
- Have you set up processes/plans to make a team more effective? What did you do?

When answering an interview question, use some of the prompts below to show you understand the key aspects of leadership. You should draw on examples (stories) from all areas of your education (academic studies/extra-curricular), work experience (paid/voluntary), personal interests and achievements etc. Provide evidence of:

- Creating, planning and/or implementing new visions, opportunities, aims and strategies
- Deciding structures, hierarchies and workgroups, and organizing people and delegating tasks within these structures.
- Improving productivity and efficiency of the team/organisation
- Anticipating and/or solving problems
- Inspiring, influencing, empowering, motivating and encouraging others
- Developing the team/organisation and/or developing people
- Deciding what needs measuring/evaluating and/or monitoring this performance
- Setting and/or applying rules and policies

Motivation and Drive

There is a saying that you train for aptitude (skills and knowledge) but you recruit for attitude. When candidates have similar qualifications and ability, those who demonstrate motivation and drive are more likely to get the job. Employers want people who are motivated, enthusiastic and driven to achieve the goals of the business.

So, what is meant to by “Motivation and Drive?”

Motivation is essentially the desire to do or achieve something. Drive is the energy, enthusiasm, determination and positive attitude to act on that motivation. Drive and proactive behaviours are key to turning the thinking of motivation into actions and results.

Sample Competency-Based Questions:

- Tell me about a time when you went over and above the call of duty.
- Tell me about a good day in work and what made it so good.
- Describe a time where you overcame adversity.
- Tell me about a time when you felt at your best. What tasks were you doing?
- Tell me about a time where you really strove for excellence.
- Given an example of how you reacted positively to a failure.
- Tell me about a time when you took the initiative and brought others on board.

When answering an interview question, use some of the prompts below to show that you understand the key aspects of motivation and drive. You should draw on examples (stories) from all areas of your education (academic studies/extra-curricular), work experience (paid/voluntary), personal interests and achievements etc. Provide evidence of:

- Showing a positive can-do attitude
- Remaining optimistic when everything was not working out as planned
- Outlining the reasons why you wanted to get something done
- Taking responsibility to ensure the work got done
- Supporting colleagues in their work
- Setting high standards and working to achieve them
- Demonstrating what actions you took to overcome challenges

Adaptability and Flexibility

A high proportion of hiring managers say adaptability is one of the most important soft skills that they screen for. To stay competitive today, their company needs to be able to adapt to a changing economy and business needs, which means they also need to hire graduates who are able to adapt as well.

So, what is meant by “Adaptability and Flexibility”?

These skills include the ability to adapt and be responsive to change in any given situation or work environment, or in response to the needs, wishes or demands of others.

Sample Competency-Based Questions:

- Tell me about a time when you were asked to do something you had never done before. How did you react? What did you learn?
- Describe a situation in which you embraced a new system, process, technology, or idea that was a major departure from the old way of doing things.
- Recall a time when you were assigned a task outside of your job description. How did you handle the situation? What was the outcome?
- Tell me about the biggest change that you have had to deal with. How did you adapt to that change?
- Tell me about a time when you had to adjust to a team member’s working style in order to complete a project or achieve your objectives.

When answering an interview question, use some of the prompts below to show that you understand the key aspects of adaptability and flexibility skills. You should draw on examples (stories) from all areas of your education (academic studies/extra-curricular), work experience (paid/voluntary), personal interests and achievements etc. Provide evidence of:

- Being able to change a procedure or approach to suit different situations
- Being prepared to accommodate the needs of others
- Dealing positively with unforeseen circumstances, including academic changes
- Taking action when opportunities arise
- Adapting successfully to changing situations and environments
- Planning ahead
- Making sure there is a plan B if plan A fails
- Finding it easy to respond to sudden changes in circumstances
- Bouncing back from setbacks and maintaining a positive attitude
- Looking for ways to make changes work rather than identifying why change won’t work
- Keeping calm and persisting in the face of difficulties

Planning and Organising

As the famous saying goes, “failing to plan is planning to fail”. In the eyes of companies and recruiters, planning and organising skills are essential. They are key skills that you are likely to be quizzed on at interview.

So, what is meant by “Planning and Organising”?

Working in a methodical manner, prioritising work to manage time and other resources effectively and accomplish assigned tasks. This includes setting objectives, considering contingencies, monitoring and evaluating progress against objectives, coordinating with others as well as anticipating difficulties.

Sample Competency-Based Questions:

- Give an example of when you had to work to a tight deadline.
- Describe a time when you had to plan a project.
- Describe a time when you had to consider existing/conflicting workloads when planning a task/event/project
- Give an example of a time when you have had to change your plans.

When answering an interview question, use some of the prompts below to show that you understand the key aspects of planning and organising skills. You should draw on examples (stories) from all areas of your education (academic studies/extra-curricular), work experience (paid/voluntary), personal interests and achievements etc. Provide evidence of:

- Managing your time effectively
- Seeing a task through to completion
- Capable of being flexible and adaptable in dealing with unexpected changes in circumstances
- Meeting all coursework deadlines
- Using a diary (paper or online) to keep you on track
- Being able to complete tasks on time
- Prioritising your workload effectively
- Being able to work effectively when under pressure
- Capable of juggling the demands of college with other priorities
- Breaking down and identifying the steps needed to achieve goals
- Setting realistic goals

Problem-Solving

Good problem-solving skills are often sought by employers when recruiting graduates. Employers like to see good problem-solving skills because it also helps to show them you have a range of other competencies such as logic, creativity, resilience, imagination, lateral thinking and determination.

So, what is meant by “Problem-Solving”?

A problem is any challenge faced which has to be resolved to achieve a particular outcome or goal. Problem-solving skills refers to our ability to solve problems in an appropriate, effective and timely manner. It involves being able to identify and define the problem, generating alternative solutions, evaluating and selecting the best alternative, and implementing the chosen solution. Obtaining feedback and reflecting on methods and outcomes is also an essential aspect of problem-solving.

Sample Competency-Based Questions:

- Describe a situation when you came up with a solution to a problem.
- Give me an example of a situation at work where you've found a better way of doing things.
- Explain how you have introduced changes to product/processes/services in your team/department.
- Describe an occasion when you solved a problem with an unconventional solution.

When answering an interview question, use some of the prompts below to show that you understand the key aspects of problem-solving. You should draw on examples (stories) from all areas of your education (academic studies/extra-curricular), work experience (paid/voluntary), personal interests and achievements etc. Provide evidence of:

- Using questions to clarify the nature of a problem
- Investigating several potential solutions to solve a problem
- Being open to someone questioning your assumptions about a problem
- Collaborating with others in order to gain a greater number of ideas to help solve problems
- Breaking a problem down into manageable parts
- Systematically gathering information about the problem
- Working to get to the heart of a problem, not just its symptoms
- Critiquing various information sources relevant to the problem
- Thinking outside the box for creative solutions to a problem
- Setting out an achievable action plan to solve a problem
- Being willing to challenge established practices
- Reviewing progress on the problem solution

Teamwork

Teamwork is high on the wish-list for graduate employers. It is a fundamental skill that employers look for. Effective teamwork is essential for businesses to complete their particular tasks on time and provide an effective service. Employers want to hire team players that are able to work with others.

So, what is meant by “Teamwork”?

These skills include the ability to interact and work collaboratively with a group of people in order to achieve a goal. This involves negotiating to achieve outcomes that benefit everyone concerned, sharing information, helping and supporting others and listening to others. It also involves facilitating dialogue, respecting and valuing contributions made by other team members; resolving conflicts; motivating yourself and others by being positive and enthusiastic.

Sample Competency-Based Questions:

- Give an example of where you had to work as part of a group to achieve a goal.
- Give an example of a difficult people situation that you have had to handle within your team.
- Give an example of when you have contributed to the success of the team.
- Describe a time when you worked as part of a team.
- Describe a time when you have disagreed with the collective decision of a team of which you were a part.

When answering an interview question, use some of the prompts below to show that you understand the key aspects of teamworking. You should draw on examples (stories) from all areas of your education (academic studies/extra-curricular), work experience (paid/voluntary), personal interests and achievements etc. Provide evidence of:

- Creating and establishing good working relations with others in a group setting
- Working in a collaborative manner with a group to achieve desired outcomes
- Compromising when people have different points of view
- Encouraging others to contribute their ideas especially those who may find this difficult
- Communicating effectively with others in a positive way
- Understanding how to gain the attention of others
- Working effectively with others even when they do not hold a similar viewpoint
- Giving constructive feedback to others
- Being aware of the different roles people take on in teams
- Working constructively with others and being sensitive to their feelings
- Trusting others to carry out their tasks properly
- Listening objectively and without interruption

Written Communication

The written word remains powerful after centuries of use and is not something that should solely be associated with journalists and writers. Badly written sales pages, for example, will damage a company's brand reputation terribly. It is one of the top skills sought by graduate employers.

So, what is meant by "Written Communication"?

It refers to any message exchanged between two or more persons that makes use of written words. The effectiveness of written content depends on the correct choice of words, their organisation into correct sentence sequence and the cohesiveness in the sentences.

Sample Competency-Based Questions:

- Tell us about a time when you used written communication to successfully influence someone? How did you go about structuring your writing?
- Describe a time when you had to use your written communication skills to get an important point across.
- Describe a time where you had to write instructions for other people? How did you go about this?
- Tell me about a response you wrote to a customer complaint / a complaint you made yourself.

When answering an interview question, use some of the prompts below to show that you understand the key aspects of written communication. You should draw on examples (stories) from all areas of your education (academic studies/extra-curricular), work experience (paid/voluntary), personal interests and achievements etc. Provide evidence of:

- Having the ability to write different types of documents, e.g. assignments, lab reports, essays, case studies, presentations
- Proofreading communication to ensure it is error free e.g. grammar, spelling and punctuation
- Revising/amending your work
- Using the appropriate referencing style in your writing
- Following the structure appropriate to the writing task
- Creating an outline to help order the points that need to be made
- Looking at good writing examples from others
- Structuring writing in a logical way
- Adapting writing style for different audiences
- Establishing the purpose of communication before starting to write
- Using well thought-out paragraphs and sentences
- Understanding that different media (online, email, social media, reports, case studies) require different writing styles