Common Interview Questions

To help you prepare for your interview, we have provided you with 20 common questions and some tips for answering them. This is not an all-inclusive list, but by reviewing and practicing your answers, you will begin to understand what the questions are looking for and how you can formulate your answers.

1. Did you have any trouble finding us?

What the question is looking for: There are no “throw-away” questions. You are “on” the minute you pull into the company’s parking lot. This question is designed to allow you to get a little comfortable, but it is also an attitude check.

Tips to answering the question: Maintain a positive attitude and be pleasant, no matter how horrendous getting to the interview may have actually been. You might say something like, “No problem at all! I made sure I had 20 extra minutes to get here over and above normal. You just never know when a traffic jam or bad GPS directions might force Plan B. I’m a Plan B kind of gal!” (You’ve just demonstrated foresight, strategy, and great planning and attitude.)

2. Tell me about yourself.

What the question is looking for: This is simply an opportunity to summarize your related experience and skills from your professional career, volunteer work and education. It’s the perfect time to reinforce that you bring to the hiring table exactly what the employer needs. This is NOT the time to share your life story or any information that is not relevant to the open position.

Tips to answering the question: Build on your Summary on your résumé. Make sure you highlight the key points that are related to the specific position for which you are applying. Keep your answer relevant and brief (about 45-60 seconds).

3. Why do you want to work here?

What the question is looking for: In a nutshell, the recruiter wants to know what you know about the employer. Did you take the time to understand what the employer is about and whether you really want to work here? Can you make that connection between what you bring to the employer and why that matters? Your research on the company will help you discuss and demonstrate the relationship between you and the employer.

Tips to answering the question: Of course you simply want a job, but try to identify values and cultural distinctions about the company that appeal to you and share these. Maybe the company is advanced in its research, or maybe it’s a top employer in the community, or maybe you know someone who works there already and understand that the employer is committed to a lower-than-average patient-to-nurse ratio and this aligns with your patient-care philosophy. Find those connections and demonstrate how and why you are aligned with them.
4. **Tell me what you know about our company.**

*What the question is looking for:* Again, the recruiter wants to know if you have taken time to understand the employer as much as the recruiter and company is taking time to get to know you. A bad hire is costly and if you have demonstrated that you know what the company does, the core values it embraces, and other information about the company, then you’ll be less likely to “suddenly” realize that you don’t like the company and then leave after the company has invested in hiring you. This question also helps the company understand whether you’re interested in working for it, or just trying to find any job.

*Tips to answering the question:* Spend time reviewing the “About Us” section of the company’s website. Ask around to see if anyone knows anything about the company (you can also discover a lot of information in an informational interview). Visit LinkedIn and look up the company on the Company page. Google the company on the Internet and through the News option. As a result of all of this, you’ll gain insight about the company’s reputation as an employer, its financial strength and whether there is any bad news or concerns about which to be aware.

5. **What made you decide to be a nurse?**

*What the question is looking for:* What an employer does not want to discover is that you became a nurse strictly for the money. That means that the first higher paying job that comes along means you’ll be out the door. It may also mean that your priorities are aligned with patient care or conscientiousness. Each of these might be a red flag about your personal character.

*Tips to answering the question:* Think about your personal story. Did you start thinking about becoming a nurse because you knew you would have a long-term career opportunity because of the aging baby boomers? Did you have a grandmother who had an extended illness and you enjoyed participating in her care? Do you have a natural empathy for helping people and their families? Understand your motivation and then share that personal story. People connect with stories.

6. **Briefly describe your experience as it relates to this position.**

*What the question is looking for:* Here the recruiter is trying to understand your learning curve for the position. Do you have related experience, lessening your learning curve? Maybe you have some transferable skills where you understand the basics of caring for children in a daycare situation, but now you simply need to transfer those caring skills to elderly patients in a nursing home. Maybe you have no experience and the recruiter needs to understand this.

*Tips to answering the question:* Think about all of your past experience, including your clinical experiences, any relevant volunteer experience, or even experience gained by caring for family members. Write out the specifics of that experience and then practice discussing it as part of an
interview. The more detail and examples you can provide, the better. Remember, facts tell, but stories sell.

7. Can you tell me about a time when you were really stressed out or upset? What happened and how did you handle it?

*What the question is looking for:* Questions such as these, also called behavioral questions, are not designed to get you to admit failings as much as to identify how you conquer or manage the weakness. We all been stressed, but how we handle it separates the good hire from the bad hire, or the professional from the liability.

*Tips to answering the question:* Be matter of fact in stating your example and emphasize what you did to handle it or manage the situation so that it had a positive, non-harmful outcome. Your goal is to demonstrate what processes or self-management you implemented to help you learn to manage or eliminate stress going forward.

8. Tell me about your patient care philosophy.

*What the question is looking for:* Patient care, as well as specific nursing skills, are a core competency related to any nursing job. Here the recruiter wants to understand if your philosophy aligns with the company’s core values. This will help demonstrate "fit," as well as determine your success with the company.

*Tips to answering the question:* Take some time to think about this question and commit to memory exactly what is important to you in terms of taking care of patients. Be able to talk about this naturally. Have one or two examples to share that reinforce your patient-care philosophy so you can help the recruiter paint a picture of you in action.

9. Have you ever made a mistake? What happened?

*What the question is looking for:* Just like the stress question above, we have all made mistakes. Again, to indicate you have never made a mistake would be ridiculous. Nobody is perfect. What the recruiter wants to see here is your thought process behind recognizing the mistake and what you did to correct it.

*Tips to answering the question:* Mistakes do happen, but they can be deadly in the healthcare environment. Think about any time you’ve made a mistake and what you did to address and correct your mistake. What skills did you use to recognize your error. What was the outcome of this mistake and, more importantly, your correction of your mistake? Discuss how, in the process of correcting your error, you learned from the process and learned how to prevent it or something similar from happening in the future.

10. Have you ever regretted a decision you made at work? What happened and why?
What the question is looking for: In addition to understanding your thought process here, the recruiter is doing an attitude check. Do you play the blame game or take responsibility for your actions? How do you talk about the company or others in your explanation of the bad decision? What the recruiter wants to see is someone who takes responsibility for his or her role in a decision and doesn’t put the blame for a bad decision on a poorly-written policy or someone else’s actions, whether that is the case or not.

Tips to answering the question: As you will with the weakness and mistake questions, think about any scenario where you may have made a bad decision. Maybe you don’t have a specific work example, but you have one from school or a personal scenario. Set up the context of the example, explain it, and then explain what happened and what you would do differently now or did do differently when the situation came up again.

11. If you could change one thing about the profession of nursing, what would it be?

What the question is looking for: Even if you’re new to the profession, you have likely formulated some opinions about your profession. We rarely like everything about our chosen career. This question is part attitude check and part creative thinking assessment. It’s also an opportunity for the recruiter to identify if you really understand your chosen profession and the ripple effect of change within the profession. If you understand your career and have done research on it, you know where there might be areas for improvement.

Tips to answering the question: Think about some opportunities for improvement in the professional of nursing (maybe new specialization certifications based on emerging areas of healthcare, or new procedures in patient care, etc. based on your journal reading) and discuss these. Clearly demonstrate that you recognize what this change would mean in terms of changing how education is delivered, or a protocol will change, etc. This will demonstrate your holistic thinking process.

12. Do you prefer to work independently or as part of a team?

What the question is looking for: Initially, this may seem like a no-win answer, since saying you prefer to work alone sounds like you won’t be a team player and saying you prefer to work as part of a team sounds like you can’t handle a more solitary job. What the recruiter is trying to understand here is your preferred work environment and style, as well as your ability to fit in.

Tips to answering the question: First, think about the job for which you’re interviewing. What is the likely “day in the life of” this job? There will be parts where you will be working independently, but you will be part of a larger team responsible for patient care. Understanding the general requirements of the job will help you frame your answer. Share when you work best alone (taking vital signs, measuring and passing medications, charting, etc.) and when you work best within a team (strategizing the care regimen of a patient, etc.). Demonstrate that you can be flexible as needed and try to share specific examples.
13. Describe a strength.

*What the question is looking for:* Too often, we answer with broad, overused examples such as “good communication,” or “dependable.” We’ve been taught to answer this question with succinct descriptors that everyone use. What the recruiter really wants, though, is not only a strength, but how you use it to the benefit of performing your job or giving your employer a competitive advantage.

*Tips to answering the question:* Think of what other people have said about you in the past (You’re such a great ________) and then think about specific times you’ve used that strength. For example, maybe someone has told you before that you excel at solving problems. An example of this strength is that when you find a problem, you continue to work at it and look at it from every conceivable angle until you figure out what is causing it (you get to the root, not just the symptom) so you can correct it and keep it from happening again.

14. Describe a weakness.

*What the question is looking for:* Again, we all have weaknesses. This question is not designed to disqualify you for being human (unless your weakness is helping yourself to the cashbox), but to understand the process you go through to recognize and correct your weakness.

*Tips to answering the question:* Be careful about stating those over-used weaknesses that everyone uses as a fall back or generic answer, such as “I tend to have a messy desk.” Ho hum. Think about a weakness you actually have and what you do to manage it. For example, you might say, “I tend to be very direct in my communication style. Sometimes, situations call for that style; however, sometimes a direct communication style may hurt someone’s feelings and then it becomes a weakness. I try to understand peoples’ preferred communication styles before I start communicating with them and once I understand their threshold for direct communication, then I work very hard to vary my style, such as engaging in more warm and personal communication before jumping into what I really need to talk about.”

15. What did you like most and least about your last job?

*What the question is looking for:* This is part attitude check, part learning, and part professionalism check. Exactly how far are you willing to go in talking about your last employer or job? There is a tendency to think if you’ll do it to your last employer, you’ll do it to your new employer. Of course, there may have been very specific things about your last job you did not like and understanding these and identifying if this employer subscribes to these is very important regarding fit - for all parties involved!

*Tips to answering the question:* Be very concise and unemotional in stating what you did not like (constant change that was not communicated to the team to help them understand WHY they were continuing changing protocol might be an example). Don’t whine. Don’t allow non-verbal expressions to enter into your answer that may give a different story than what you’re saying.
Whatever you do, do not mention specific names or speak poorly about your boss. You will look like a gossip or someone who cannot get along with others.

16. What is your ideal work environment?

What the question is looking for: Here the recruiter is trying to find out if you will fit into the culture and environment that exists. It’s rare that a candidate will change an existing culture, so the recruiter needs to find people who will thrive in the existing environment.

Tips to answering the question: Your research about the employer will help you here, as well as knowledge about yourself. When you research a company, include sources that are off the beaten path (such as the corporate website) and try to understand what the customers and employees say about company outside of the marketing-produced hype. List what is important to you in an employer, such as a company that prioritizes hiring from within whenever possible, that provides regular professional development, that makes employee health and wellness a priority by providing monthly classes, etc. Once you know what you want, then your research will tell you whether that company fits your wants. You can then reinforce this as part of your interview answers.

17. If a doctor gave you an order that you could not understand, what would you do?

What the question is looking for: This is a problem-solving, team player, critical thinking oriented question. Will you simply do what the doctor orders? Will you challenge the doctor? Will you ask for clarification in a very specific way or from someone specific? How you answer this question says a lot about your approach to how you do your job and handle stressful or uncertain situations.

Tips to answering the question: This is a behavioral question, so you need to explain your process for responding to a scenario such as this. Be specific in how you would approach this issue and make certain you do not appear to sound like you don’t trust yourself or the doctor, or that you’re being combative. Demonstrate your problem-solving skills.

18. Have you ever disagreed with your boss? Tell me about it.

What the question is looking for: This is very similar to what the recruiter is trying to learn in questions 15 and 17 - how do you interact with others, particularly if you do not understand or agree with them. Again, we have all likely disagreed with someone, whether it was our boss, our teachers, or our friends.

Tips to answering the question: You may not have a specific example related to a boss, but you likely can come up with an example of when you disagreed with someone. What happened? Did you use specific actions to arrive at a resolution, or did you explode and end up walking out? Clearly understand what you did to contribute to the issue (a disagreement with a boss may
have been your fault, too) and to the resolution. In this instance, you may have been at fault, but owning up to that and demonstrating what you did to correct the disagreement may be more powerful than simply admitting that you had a disagreement. Again, your answer needs to reflect your accountability and learning, not whether you were “right.”

19. If I were to talk to your last boss, what would he or she say about you?

What the question is looking for: Here, the recruiter is trying to get you to articulate what might be in your previous boss’s letter of recommendation. When we’re “speaking for” someone else, we tend to be more honest than if we’re talking about ourselves.

Tips to answering the question: Review past performance reviews or even an actual note or letter of recommendation from a past boss and share what the boss said about you. Of course, you want to put your best foot forward here and only share the positive comments, but pepper in some of those “opportunities for growth” comments your past boss said and then also share what you have done to address those opportunities for growth.

20. What makes you the most qualified person for this position?

What the question is looking for: The recruiter will likely have heard a long list of the same skills and characteristics from a lot of other candidates. She is looking for a point or two of differentiation at this time and that point of differentiation may be a soft skill, a personality characteristic, a unique nursing skills or experience - anything that sets you apart from everyone else, but still fills the requirements of the job.

Tips to answering the question: It’s time to think about what truly sets you apart. It may be a unique combination of skills and experiences. Don’t assume the recruiter figured this out from your résumé. Emphasize and reiterate! Use your company research to make a connection. Maybe in the process of your research you learned the company serves a large foreign-speaking population and you’re fluent in that language. Many of the other candidates probably won’t be, so you’ve suddenly increased your marketability. Look for these opportunities to set yourself apart and don’t be afraid to mention them!

Note: There are many other questions you’ll likely be asked in an interview, most of them focusing on how you would handle specific nursing- and healthcare-oriented situations. As you prepare for an interview, review all the unique situations you learned about or experience in clinicals and jot down notes about them. When we’re under pressure we often forget about these examples. If we’ve written them down, we can quickly refer to them or commit them to memory, helping to better prepare for when the question will invariably come up at the interview. GOOD LUCK!