

Have some stories ready for interview

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Some interview questions can be answered briefly, with little detail. Easy examples? How about when the interviewer asks, "When did you leave your last job?" or "What was your major in college?" Unless you have a very good reason to elaborate, these questions should be answered in just a word or two.

But some questions just beg for longer, more detailed answers. In particular, those starting with "Tell me about..." or "Describe..." will require you to paint a picture with your words. Unlike standard questions, such as "What's your greatest weakness?" these situational or behavior-based questions can't be easily anticipated. You just don't know for sure what an interviewer is going to ask along these lines.

That doesn't mean you can't try to prepare yourself. In this case, instead of creating answers to specific questions, you can develop a few stories about different work events in your life so that when an interviewer asks a question that would best be answered with a story, you already have one or two in mind.

A word of warning is in order, however. **Just like good jokes, good stories must be practiced.** Some of the most common story-telling errors can be avoided this way – including taking too long to get to the point, having no point, giving irrelevant detail and trailing off at the end instead of concluding well.

One way to avoid those errors and create a structure for your stories is to use an outline. A business model commonly called the **STAR** method is helpful. The acronym stands for Situation, Task, Action and Result.

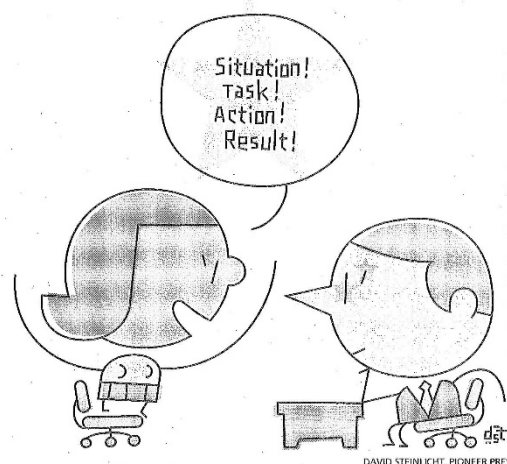
Here's what each part stands for, in terms of storytelling:

Situation: What is/was the situation that you're planning to describe?

Task: What problem or challenge did the situation present for you?

Action: What did you do?

Result: What was the outcome of your actions?



The question: Tell me about a time you made a mistake at work, and what you did about it.

The answer:

- **Situation:** I was running a large copy job on a very tight deadline, and I accidentally used the wrong paper for the project. Unfortunately, the paper choice mattered, because they needed the lightest weight paper so the packets could be mailed more cheaply.
- **Task:** I needed to correct my mistake quickly, and with the least cost to the internal copy center.
- **Action:** I stayed late to rerun the job on the correct paper and hand-delivered the boxes to the department that needed them. Then I spoke with the department head about the extra

copies on heavier paper that now existed.

- **Result:** The department head decided to use the higher-quality copies for samples to mail individually to his special customers, and to bring to meetings with his superiors. Overall, it would have been better not to have made the mistake, but I made the best of the situation by finding a new way to use the extra copies rather than shredding them and absorbing the cost at the copy center. I was able to charge the department head for the extra copies, and he was able to distribute his project more widely than he had planned.

because no matter how much you practice, you can just bet that you'll get a question that you haven't prepared a story for. If you can remember the acronym, you'll be able to construct a story off the cuff.

See how it's done? Now imagine that you needed to tell that story, but hadn't practiced. It would be easy to blurt out details that you didn't mean to share, or forget some of the points about how you took responsibility for the situation. It's the practice, including perhaps writing your stories down, that makes a good interview answer.

To try this yourself, imagine a variety of questions that could come up and then prepare a story for each one. Here's a starter list of sample questions:

- What has been the most/least rewarding project you've had so far?
- What accomplishment are you proudest of, and why?
- How do you deal with a difficult customer/co-worker/boss?
- Have you ever been given an assignment that was over your head? What did you do?
- What work situation do you wish you were better at?

You get the drift. Once you've practiced writing out the answers for a few of these, you'll see that the Situation-Task-Action-Result pattern starts coming to mind readily. That's good,