

How to answer: 'So, tell me about yourself'

You're in an interview, you've been through the introductions, and now the question comes: 'So, tell me about yourself'. Is it a simple warm-up question, or is it something more?

Many [job interviews](#) start with some form of this question. And when you're going for a role, you may be tempted to dismiss this as an icebreaker before the 'real' questions begin. But there's more to it than that.

How you answer this question can tell a recruiter or hiring manager a lot about who you are and why you're interested in the position.

So how can you prepare for the question and answer it well? In this guide, career and interview coach Leah Lambart, of Relaunch Me, shares her advice on how to do just that.

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Why interviewers ask this question

Lambart says the question 'Tell me about yourself' isn't just used to ease someone into the interview – it's a way for the employer to assess your communication and interpersonal skills.

The interviewer is trying to get a sense of your organisational skills, and get some clarity around why you're interested in the role and the organisation. That's why it's so important to be prepared and organised in your response, and use a formula to create your answer.

"The 'tell me about yourself' question is a great opportunity to let the interviewer know why they should pick you, highlighting from the outset your most relevant experience, [transferable skills](#) and key achievements that ensure you stand out from your competition," Lambart says. Keep in mind that your answer could influence the direction of the interview and form the foundation of any [follow-up questions](#).

"You don't know what questions will be asked afterwards, so this may be your only chance to demonstrate why you're the best candidate for the job." Lambart says research shows that an

interviewer will often make up their mind whether you're the right candidate in the first few minutes. "Therefore, you need to make this first response really count."

What not to say

- **Don't tell them your entire career history, or life story**

It might seem to make sense to start from the beginning and walk the interviewer through your career history, but Lambart advises against this. "Employers don't want to hear your life story, and they're not interested in every job you've ever had."

"They want to hear a snapshot of your career history, highlighting any specific career changes that need some explanation, focusing on the most relevant or recent roles, key skills that you have developed, as well as some standout achievements that are a testament to the great work that you've done."

- **Don't complain about the job search, or your boss**

Even when [you've faced hurdles finding a job](#), which can be the case especially [when the job market is competitive](#), it's best not to highlight how hard it has been, Lambart explains. "You will be much more attractive as a candidate if you have a positive outlook and don't focus on the negatives associated with your job search," she says.

The same goes for any problems you're having with your current manager or [if you have a job you hate](#). "Discussing problems that you're having with your boss or your team will only raise red flags to future employers," Lambart says.

- **Don't get too personal, or bring up risky topics**

While you want to inject some personality into your answer, 'Tell me about yourself' isn't an invitation to discuss your personal life in depth. "When responding to this question, always focus on your professional self rather than providing detailed personal information," Lambart says.

"If you want to provide a small amount of detail about your interests and hobbies outside of work to build rapport, think carefully about what you want to share, as there is always the risk that the interviewer may not have the same interests or views."

A formula for shaping your answer

Now that you know what to avoid in your answer, you can focus on thinking through the kind of response that will leave a good impression with your interviewer. As we mentioned before, you want to show clarity in your thinking, and organising your response is a great way to achieve that.

Structuring your answer around this simple formula can help you answer clearly and in enough

detail:

- **Present:** Talk about your current role or situation
- **Past:** Discuss your previous roles or experience, focusing on what's relevant to the role you're applying for
- **Future:** Share your [career goals](#) and why this role would help you achieve them.

With this formula, you're trying to share the basics of who, why and what. Who you are, why you're qualified for the role, and what interests you about the company and the role. And, of course, what makes you stand out.

You want to leave no doubt in the interviewer's mind that you're the right person for the job. So first, you need to really understand what the job is. Get really familiar with the role—go over the job description closely, and research the company. Know who you're applying to and what you're applying for.

Consider how your values align with the organisation or business. Look at their website to get a greater understanding of the company and what about it interests you and makes you want to work there.

5 tips on how to answer: 'Tell me about yourself'

1. **Keep your answer concise**

Lambart says people often have a tendency to start from the beginning. "In other words, after they left school or university—and then walk the interviewer chronologically through each career move they have ever made. Sometimes candidates get on a roll and it actually makes it really difficult for the recruiter to stop you when you're only five years into a 20-year career."

Your response needs to be succinct and concise. "Aim for it to be anywhere from two to three minutes long. Too much longer and you will start to lose the interviewer's interest. Too short and you'll be missing a great opportunity to get the interviewer excited about what you have to offer."

2. **Make your answer interesting and relevant**

When the interviewer says 'Tell me about yourself,' there's a good chance they have your [resume in front of them](#), but they want to hear the highlights. So think about what would be most interesting and relevant for them to hear more about.

"The best way to answer this question is to tell the recruiter important information that they can't decipher from your resume," Lambart says. "It's a waste of time regurgitating everything that they have already read."

“Your response is an opportunity to explain your motivation for moving from one role to another, the relevant skills and expertise that you developed in each role, and what you enjoyed most about your most recent positions. What energised you most? What did you learn?” When you talk about things that excite you, you’ll naturally have a [more passionate tone in your voice](#), which will appeal to the interviewer.

3. **Structure your answer correctly**

Follow that [golden formula](#) above! Begin with where you are now, “summarising your current or most recent experience at a high level’,” Lambart recommends.

For the past part of the formula “explain the different chapters or key roles in your career, with a focus on the last five to 10 years.”

“Focus on what you learned that would be relevant to the position you’re applying for. What was the objective of this role? What were the key accountabilities? What were your biggest achievements? Why did you then transition to the next key chapter or role?”

“You can also briefly explain any unusual career moves or job changes that may not be obvious,” Lambart adds. “This is important to potential employers, particularly if the tenure was on the shorter side.”

Then, finish with the future. “Explain what you’re looking for in your next move and why the role they’re offering is such a good fit for your skills and experience.” And be sure to discuss how the company is aligned with [your core values](#).

4. **Keep your answer positive**

Lambart explains that job searching can be tough, but that it’s important to set that aside when you’re speaking with your interviewer.

“If you have been job searching for a while and haven’t been getting offers, then this is not the time to speak negatively about other companies, their poor recruitment practices or the fact that they haven’t seen your true potential.”

The same applies [if you're currently employed, but feeling stuck](#) or unhappy. “If there are some personality clashes in your current role then, again, keep this to yourself,” adds Lambart.

“Ensure that you have a positive and upbeat tone when responding to this question and focus on what you have enjoyed in your previous roles, the great skills that you have developed and your career goals for the future. Never talk negatively about previous companies or bosses, as this will be an immediate red flag.”

5. Practise your answer

Don't wait until the big day to deliver your answer. "Once you've worked out what you're going to say, document the main points and practise saying it over and over again. Don't learn it word for word, or you will sound like a robot. Instead, practise using just the key points," advises Lambart.

You might want to try recording yourself with an app on your phone, or by leaving yourself a voicemail, so you can hear what your answer sounds like. Or you could say it to a friend or family member. "If you don't get it perfect that's okay, it's better than sounding too rehearsed."

Sample answers to 'Tell me about yourself'

Here are some examples that put all of this advice into action.

• Example 1

Right now, I work as the manager at X restaurant, and I've been there for five years. I started out as a waitress and realised pretty quickly that I'm really passionate about both customer service and management processes.

As I developed my skills in those areas, I was given more responsibility, and I worked my way up to assistant manager and then manager. I've really enjoyed working with the team there and updating a lot of their processes.

The restaurant has gone from barely breaking even to being one of the most popular in the area, and we consistently get great reviews. Now I'm looking to further develop my management skills in a different restaurant environment.

I am interested in your restaurant specifically as it has an excellent reputation for food and service, and it has a great atmosphere.

• Example 2

I'm currently one of the lead project managers at X agency, where I've been since 2013. I've worked in marketing and advertising for around seven years, mostly in content and production roles

I actually began my career as an administrative assistant at a finance company, but then I got interested in marketing and advertising during a company-wide presentation there, so I made the switch after completing my marketing diploma in 2012. That qualification and some volunteer work for a non-profit organisation got me in the door at X agency, where I started as a marketing coordinator and worked my way up to project manager.

I've worked on a number of award-winning campaigns including this and that, but I've started to miss the non-profit work. Which is why I'm so excited to be talking to you today—your non-profit is doing exactly the kind of work that I'm really passionate about. I'd love to use my marketing expertise to make a difference there.

Conclusion

If you're heading into a job interview, it's highly likely you'll be asked 'Tell me about yourself' in some form.

By formulating your unique response to this [common job interview question](#) and answering well, you'll show that you're confident, able to recognise what the employer is looking for in an employee, and you'll find you get a better response from your interviewers.

Remember to focus on the structure and keep it relevant and concise, and you'll be sure to shine in your next interview.

Read more:

- [5 ways to ease your interview anxiety](#)
- [How to answer the top 10 interview questions](#)
- [Practice interview builder](#)