

Hypotheticals

In this lesson, we'll learn all about hypothetical questions and how to best answer them.

We'll cover the following



- Introduction
- Parsing hypothetical questions
- Question
- Response
- Question
 - Response 1
 - Response 2
- Why interviewers ask hypotheticals

Introduction

Hypotheticals, or “what if” questions, challenge you to demonstrate creativity and confidence; they also allow interviewers to assess your instinctive responses. These scenarios may be realistic, fantastical, or both.

Being ready for hypothetical questions can help you get past personal bias that may affect your interview performance. For example, if you are someone who prefers realism, you may be thrown by questions that ask you to imagine unrealistic scenarios. However, if you know that hypotheticals are coming, preparing for them will ensure that you won't be caught off guard and respond poorly.

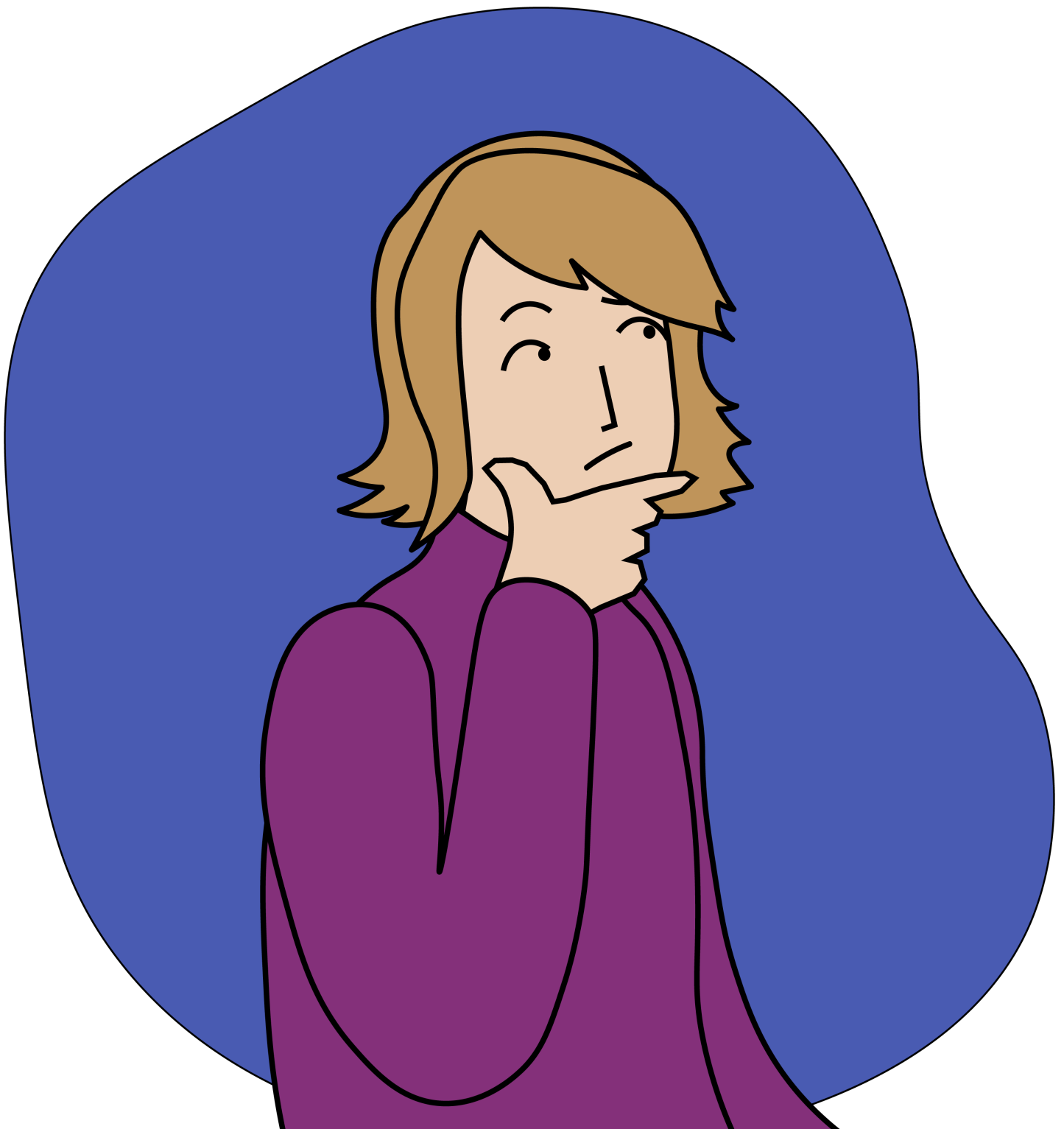
Parsing hypothetical questions

Hypothetical questions will begin with phrases like:

- “Imagine...”
- “If...”
- “Put yourself in the position of...”

- “If you could have...”
- “It’s 2050 and...”
- “You’re in charge of x,y,z and...”

Pro Tip: If you are someone who loves details and accuracy, you will be tempted to ask for specifics before answering. **Resist this urge!** This is a hypothetical situation, not a real one. If you need specifics, state them as **your** assumptions. For example, “I will assume that the team is co-located,” or “I will say it’s springtime and temperatures outside are moderate.”



Let's take a look at an example.

Question

If I were your supervisor and asked you to do something that you disagreed with, what would you do?

Response

"If my supervisor asked me to do something I disagreed with I would respectfully push back. I would ask questions about the value of the project/feature/task (etc.) and how it would benefit the greater good of users. It's important to me that I believe in what I'm working on and if I disagree with it, I think that it's important and appropriate to push back against my management for further explanation." –

Dakota

Pro Tip: You can take advantage of hypothetical questions to highlight specific skills that you know will be beneficial to the organization (hence why it is important to do your homework!).

In the example below, you will see two different responses to the same question that highlight different talents.

Question

How would you design a field test for wearable devices used to track dinosaurs in Jurassic Park?

Response 1

What a fun question! I would do an exhaustive pre-test to maximize the testing that can be done in a safe way. I would assemble a team that includes the animal caretakers and experts, someone from park operations and a device testing expert. I would get as much input as possible from the team I curated. I would plan to test the devices on humans first, then take the trial to the zoo to test on animals that are non-threatening. With a series of graduated testing, we could validate our processes for data collection, support, provisioning, and problem management. Lower level testing could verify device operations within humidity and temperature ranges.

This response highlights the candidate's ability to plan and solicit advice from experts.

Pro Tip: It's OK to think out loud when you're answering hypothetical questions. In fact, it's better so that the interviewer can see the way your brain works.

Response 2

I love this question, Jurassic Park is my favorite movie! I would gather all my friends with pets. We would plan a series of three weekly pet playdates at the city park for 2 hours each. The testing team would arrive at the park early to set up all their equipment and outfit the pets. With each weekly iteration, we would deal with problems or miscalculations that we found. Then, I would talk to my father who works at a construction company that is currently building a high-rise downtown. I would ask if we could put devices on the construction workers and some of the equipment for three straight days. The devices should be exposed to the elements as much as possible. After completing the four tests, I would gather, compare, and analyze the test results with the team.

This response highlights the candidate's creativity and ability to succeed with limited resources. These talents would be great to highlight if you are interviewing at a small company or start-up.

Why interviewers ask hypotheticals

Interviewers ask hypothetical questions to learn more about the way you creatively think, process, and react.

Take a look at this question created by [Salifu](#) who is a talent leader at GitHub. He does not answer the question, but instead, he tells you what **he** is listening for as the **interviewer**.

Q: Within a 5-minute time span, the following people come to you asking for help: A V.P. whom you do not regularly interact with, your manager, and a customer. All three say their need is urgent. How do you prioritize them?

Motivation

When I ask this question, I'm less concerned with the candidate's answer and more focused on their thought process. The HOWs and WHYs are the keys for me. Anecdotally, when I've asked this question, the majority of the candidates prioritize in the following order: V.P., manager, then the customer. Candidates rarely dig deeper to find out what the requests are. Instead, they prioritize based on titles alone.

I'm mainly looking for two things in the candidate's response. Thought process and effective communication.

Thought Process

Does the candidate ask for more information to make an informed decision on how to prioritize? What if the issue the V.P. is facing is the inability to connect their bluetooth speaker to their laptop so they can listen to music in their office? Is that truly more important than a customer needing help? After hearing the needs, are they able to correctly prioritize based on the information they've received?

Communication

Do they show that they are they able to communicate with people at different levels? Moreover, are they able to deliver "bad" news to people at different levels? Will they let everyone know how and when they plan to address their needs?

This is my favorite question because you can go in a number of different ways depending on how the interview is going. The other added benefit is that it works with candidates at almost every level.

Let's look at some examples of hypothetical questions next!

