

TELL ME *about* YOURSELF

How To Answer The First
Interview Question



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My Transformation

I was pacing in my living room for about 10 minutes. My mind was in the state of flow. I was thinking about interview questions and preparing the answers I wanted to give. The interview was going to happen in 30 minutes and I wanted to be ready.

The interview was with Amazon.

It happened on a whim. Working for Amazon always sounded like an amazing experience and I never really thought I would even get a look in.

When I applied, I didn't expect to hear anything, but I got a call for a screening chat.

Not only did I pass the screening interview, I was scheduled to have the second interview within a few days.

The call was with a high-ranking Amazon manager, so I was preparing hard to make sure I would get to the next step.

When the phone rang, I picked up and said hello. The interviewer introduced herself and gave me a brief description of the role and how the interview was going to happen.

Then she asked me the first interview question: "Tell me about yourself."

I started with my love of computers. When I was in elementary school, I got my first computer. It was a Commodore 64 like system that used cassette tapes to load programs. When I moved to Canada, I got a 386 machine and the first thing I did was delete a bunch of files in the Windows directory to see what happens.....

Blah, Blah, Blah....

Five minutes later, I finished telling my life story.

I don't know what she thought of as I was answering this question, but when I asked her for feedback after the interview, she simply said: "You seemed prepared, but you lack clarity in your answers. Clear communication is what's required at Amazon."

I didn't get that job, but her feedback changed my future.

I had to change something. I had to learn how to be a clear communicator.

The first step was to learn how to answer the first interview question: "Tell me about yourself."

What I learned in my journey to become a clear communicator led me to develop a Two-Minute pitch formula that I've used successfully at dozens of interviews.

Let's get into it.

MOST PEOPLE ANSWER LIKE THIS

The Common Answer

The Common Answer

Tell me about yourself is the first question in interviews, yet few people know how to answer it correctly.

The main reason is simple. The question is too broad. The question invites you to explore your whole life and weave a story together that will show in your best light.

When I used to get this question, I always started my answer at the beginning of my computer programming journey. I wanted to show how much experience and passion I had for software development.

There was a little bit of vanity there.

I've read stories of Bill Gates and Steve Jobs as kids. How they spent their time building software or hardware as teenagers. How they participated in clubs and invented all sorts of cool stuff. I did those things too, so I wanted to show that off.

Many people follow this line of thinking.

Tell me about yourself literally translates into "Tell me your story." But this is a tricky thing because your story spans decades, but hiring managers only have an hour to learn if you're a good fit.

The hiring managers have no time for these long-winded answers.

WHAT MANAGERS WANT TO KNOW

The Answer They
Are Looking For

The Desired Answer

Put yourself in the shoes of the hiring manager.

You have a problem: too much work and not enough time to get it done. So you go to your boss and convince her to give you a bit of budget to hire someone.

You craft a job description that will help you find the right person and you put it into the world.

After a few weeks, you spend a few days reviewing people's resumes and settle on a few candidates. You call them and schedule preliminary interviews.

What is your objective in every interview?

To find the person whose experience closely matches the job description and who could be a great fit for your team.

So when a hiring manager asks the "Tell me about yourself" question, the question she is really asking is: "Are you the right fit for this role?"

More specifically, the hiring manager wants to know:

- What makes you stand out?
- What value can you create?
- What problems can you solve?
- Are you someone I can work with?

In essence:

"What do you bring to the table?"

The hiring manager wants a specific and easy to understand answer that will help her decide if you're the right candidate.

Important: Your answer has to be easy to understand

Doubly Important: Your answer to be specific to the role

This is where a Two-Minute Pitch formula will make the difference.



**WHAT DO YOU BRING
TO THE TABLE?**

THE TWO-MINUTE PITCH FORMULA

Show Them Your
Best Side

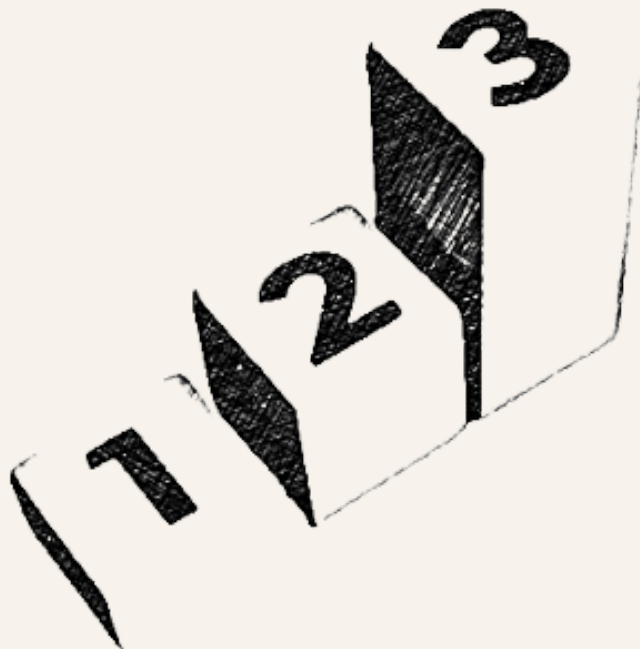
The Two-Minute Pitch

To answer “Tell me about yourself” effectively, you need to share enough information to show off your best self to the hiring manager.

The Formula:

- Your Most Relevant Results
- Your Biggest Strength
- Your One Ask

Let’s break it down.



1

Your Most Relevant Results

When I used to answer this question, I would ramble on about all the things I did that were related to the job.

If the job was for a software engineer, I would talk about all the code I've written, the apps I built, the open source projects I contributed to.

While this is all relevant information, technically, it is not the most relevant.

To make a great impression, you must connect your experience to their job description.

Study the description and pick out one or two things they are looking for. Connect an outcome you've achieved to the results they are looking for.



Your Most Relevant Results

I have been... *your role and how long.*

I specialize in... *your specialty.*

In the last X years, ... *most recent projects.*

Recently, I've ... *most recent outcome.*

This helped ... *how it helped the company.*

This is what I am passionate about.

I also have a list of projects I've worked on.

Your Most Relevant Results

I have been a software developer for the past 10 years. **I specialize in** building front-end applications in React and AngularJS.

In the last three years, I have worked on 3 large applications that served 50,000 users daily.

Recently, I've reduced the loading times by 50% for the checkout process for the Kibbles and Bits online pet store.

This helped increase revenue by 10% in the last three months.

This is what I am passionate about.
I also have a list of projects I've worked on.



2

Your Biggest Strength

The first part of the pitch is designed to show the hiring manager that you can deliver. If you have connected your outcome to their desired results from the job description, you will also show that you can start contributing right away.

The second part of the pitch is designed to make you stand out from the rest of the candidates.

There are other candidates. And your job is to create enough of a bond between you and the hiring managers that the other candidates will look like ghosts in comparison.

Your biggest strength answer is about connecting your skill to their biggest challenge. Usually, their biggest challenge will be listed towards the top of the description bullet points. Connect your strength to one of those points and you will stand out from the crowd.



template

Your Biggest Strength

My main strength is... *your biggest strength.*

I like to... *what do you like to do that
is above expectations.*

Your Biggest Strength

My main strength is my ability to understand the inner workings of the frontend software frameworks.

I like to keep my code simple and easy to understand so that future engineers can quickly pick up where I leave off.



3

Your One Ask

This is the final part that should put you over the top.

Most people will end their story after they've described who they are and what they've done. This sounds like an easy place to finish and to hand off the conversation baton to the interviewer. But if you do this, you miss an opportunity to connect with the hiring manager and describe yourself on a deeper level.

Your one ask is designed to help you uncover if this company is going to be a good fit for you.

Your one ask is a description of the type of team you want to work with and the values that you are looking for in your manager and colleagues. When share your one ask, your job to pay attention to the words and the body language of the hiring manager.

This is your chance to spot any initial red flags about the people you'll be working with.



template

Your Biggest Strength

I am looking for...

*describe your ideal team
environment and values.*

(Optional)

Does this sound like a good fit for this role?

Your One Ask

I am looking for a company where I can add value to the software development process and join a high performing culture of software engineers.

Does this sound like a good fit for this role?



THE TWO-MINUTE PITCH TEMPLATE



The Full Template

The Two Minute Pitch Template

I have been ...

For the last four years, ...

Recently, I ...

My work helped ...

This is what I am passionate about. I also have a list of projects I've worked on in the past 5 years.

My main strengths are ...

I like to ...

I am looking to ...

Does this sound like a good fit for this role?

Practice

The first time I gave the answer using this formula, I stumbled. I felt a little bit stupid, a little bit embarrassed, but the interviewer didn't bat an eye. Instead he was impressed because I nailed all of the points and showed him exactly how I could be of value.

The more I practiced, the more confident I became. The Two-Minute Pitch rolled off my tongue. It was smooth and convincing and it helped me make a great first impression.

So write out your pitch and practice it. It will become your:

- Elevator pitch
- Unique selling proposition
- "Why should I care" speech

Let's look at some examples next.

THE TWO-MINUTE PITCH EXAMPLES

Five Practical
Examples

1: New Graduate

A candidate graduating from college.

Answer covers:

- Interest in the industry
- The study subject
- Volunteering experience
- Impactful result

Finishing with:

- Main strengths
- One ask.

I have been interested in civil aviation since I was a little kid. I am especially curious about how planes are built and what makes them fly.

For the last four years, I've studied mechanical engineering at the University of Oxford. I took several aviation engineering courses to pursue my passion.

Recently, I volunteered at the local airport, helping aircraft mechanics service light aircraft: Cessnas and Pipers. I was tasked with helping document aircraft issues and lending a hand during routine maintenance tasks.

My work helped reduce the time mechanics spent completing paperwork, allowing them to focus on ensuring the aircraft were airworthy.

This is what I am passionate about.

My main strengths are my attention to detail and my desire to learn how aircraft fly.

I like to read about aircraft history and learn as much as I can about the internals of aircraft engines.

I am looking to join a company where I can further my education in the field and help keep the fleet in airworthy condition.



2: Experienced Candidate

A candidate in the digital marketing industry.

Answer covers:

- Years of experience
- Most recent work
- Impactful result

Finishing with:

- Main strengths
- One ask.

I have been in the digital marketing industry for 10 years. I specialize in digital marketing for small real estate agencies.

For the last two years, I have worked with Jon Smith Realty Inc. in Denver, running monthly digital marketing campaigns and coordinating all social media activities.

Recently, I created and managed a digital marketing campaign targeting local residents. The campaign generated 500+ new leads and had a 10% conversion rate.

This helped our company double the number of clients we serve and increased the number of our houses on the market by 30%.

This is what I am passionate about. I also have a list of other projects I've worked on in the past 5 years.

My main strength is creating content and running marketing campaigns on LinkedIn.

I like to combine my interest in copywriting to produce eye-catching LinkedIn posts that draw in readers and convert them to followers.

I am looking for a team that values a get-it-done attitude and embraces continuous learning and improvement.

Does this sound like a good fit for this role?



example

3: Switching Careers

A candidate looking to change industries.

Answer covers:

- Prior industry experience
- Recent exploration of a new industry
- Impactful result

Finishing with:

- Transferable strength
- One ask.

I have been in the technology industry for 15 years, leading teams that built enterprise software used by hundreds of thousands.

In the last three years, I have switched my focus to the strategic planning and operations side of the business. I've developed long-term digital transformation strategies for three enterprise clients.

Recently, I completed a project to map out a system modernization of a multi-billion dollar operation that underpins 70% of business for one of my clients.

This helped us identify operational inefficiencies that saved the company over \$40M a year in lost revenue.

This is what I am passionate about. I also have a list of similar strategic planning projects I've worked on in the past 5 years.

My main strength is understanding how systems work and communicating it to stakeholders.

I like to combine my interest in strategy and my knowledge of technology to help companies use technology to their advantage, reduce unnecessary work, and increase profit.

I am looking for a team that values a get-it-done attitude and embraces continuous learning.

Does this sound like a good fit for this role?



4: After layoffs

A candidate looking to get hired after being laid off for a while, but working as a consultant in the meantime.

Answer covers:

- Prior work experience
- Recent side projects and learnings
- An impactful outcome

Finishing with:

- Main strength
- One ask.

I have been in the automotive industry for 20 years, starting on the assembly line and working my way up to the line supervisor, in the high-volume facility.

In the last three years at the job, I have worked as an inspector checking the manufacturing process to ensure it meets internal product quality standards. I developed and implemented processes to help spot and correct defects across all manufacturing lines at the factory.

Recently, I was part of the company layoffs. During this time, I started a consulting firm helping small shops identify bottlenecks and optimize their production processes. I helped a bottle manufacturing company reduce wasteful activities by 37%.

This helped the client save over \$2M annually and invest that money into new products.

This is what I am passionate about. I also have a list of my industrial consulting projects.

My main strength is understanding how systems work and communicating it to stakeholders.

I like to combine my interest in systems improvement and my knowledge of manufacturing to help companies use technology to their advantage.

I am looking for a team that values a get-it-done attitude and embraces continuous learning.



5: Long Work Gap

A candidate looking to get hired after a long work gap, raising kids.

Answer covers:

- Prior work experience
- A reason for the long gap
- Recent side projects and learnings
- An impactful outcome

Finishing with:

- Main strength
- One ask.

I have been in the marketing industry for about 10 years. I started as an intern and worked my way up to the Senior Marketing Manager, specializing in direct marketing.

For the past 5 years, I've been out of the workforce. After having my third child, I've decided that I'd love to spend the early years with my kids and raise them at home. It has been a rewarding experience, but I've missed the workplace and especially the marketing industry.

To get my back into the game, recently, I volunteered at a friend's landscaping business, helping him with his local marketing campaign. My skill as a direct marketer came back almost instantly. We created a mailing campaign to his existing customers and got a 20% response rate in our first batch of letters.

This helped the business increase average LTV of existing customers by 10%, bringing in an additional \$100k in annual revenue.

This is what I am passionate about.

My main strength is in copywriting, with a focus on creating benefit bullets for the copy.

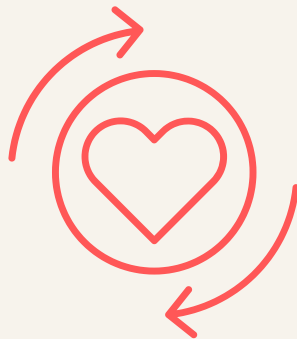
I like to combine my interest in advertising and psychology to create eye-catching and persuasive copy that makes people want to buy the product on the spot.



I am looking for a place where I can use my creative ideas freely, express my opinions without fears of being judged and a place where I can learn from those ahead of me in their career.

Does this sound like a good fit for this role?





Thank You

Good luck on your next interview.

TERRY DANYLAK