



How To Run Successful Interviews: Essential Vocabulary And Tips

HR Expert Series Part 2 | By Tom Wells

If you're a non-native speaker working in HR, the chances are you have a secret fear:

The fear of making mistakes in front of native speakers.

But you're not alone. In fact, many of our corporate learners share this fear. But it's frustrating how every language guide out there is aimed at candidates. We decided to change this and created the HR Expert Series.

Using real-life challenges from our learners, we have created a powerful guide with awesome vocabulary and real-life examples, just for HR professionals! This guide will boost your language confidence in no time.

If you missed part one, it helps you to [write compelling job descriptions](#), so check it out!

Part two of this series is all about *interviewing candidates*.

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Questions and challenges from our HR learners

"I am scared of making grammar mistakes in front of native speakers."

This guide will show you a few simple techniques and phrases to boost your fluency when interviewing.

The next challenge we often hear is this:

"I am fine with my prepared questions but when a candidate asks me something, I get nervous about answering correctly."

Preparing your questions ahead of time is one thing. But what happens when you have to go off-script? For example, a candidate asks a question and you have to respond in the moment. Or you need to clarify or pose a follow-up question?

This edition will deal with spontaneously responding to candidate questions with confidence, as well as clarifying candidate responses with great follow-up questions.

Let's start with boosting fluency and reducing grammar errors.

7 easy ways to reduce language mistakes



Firstly, it's important to remember that no one is perfect. Even native speakers make some grammar mistakes from time to time. These tips can help you to improve your fluency, even if you are not 100% confident during the interview.

1. Prepare by speaking your questions out loud

Of course, you prepare your questions and potentially follow-up questions ahead of time. But do you practice reading them out loud? Most people tend to write them down on paper and only run through them mentally.

Try this: **Go through your questions out loud with a colleague.** If you are interviewing candidates via Skype, or over the phone, practice using a Skype or phone call ahead of time. This helps you to get used to the lower sound quality. If you have already read your questions out loud a few times, it will seem much more natural during the interview.

2. Use these phrases to correct yourself

If you notice that you made a mistake, politely correct yourself and move on. Use these phrases to swiftly correct yourself:

- Sorry, I meant to say...
- Actually, what I meant to say was that...
- My mistake,
- I misspoke slightly,
- Just to clarify,
- Just be clear,

Examples:

- **Sorry, I meant to say** that you will be reporting to the VP of both sales and marketing.
- **Just to clarify**, we offer all candidates extensive onboarding.
- **I misspoke slightly**. The standard package includes 28 days' vacation.

3. Recycle phrases you know already

You've already made a script with questions and possible follow-up questions. But that doesn't mean you can't reuse it.

If you are unsure about a certain construction or phrase, then try to modify a question or answer that you already know is correct.

Usually, by changing just one or two words you can generate a completely new question.

Example:

- How do you deal with pressure or stressful environments?
- How do you deal with new challenges?

- Describe your biggest challenge in your last position as project manager
- Describe your biggest challenge as Head of Marketing.

4. Improve fluency with fillers

Fillers are phrases that don't really carry specific meaning. But native speakers use them all the time. Why? They link two thoughts or ideas together in an idiomatic way. They also give you valuable time to think of what you want to say next. This is great if a candidate hits you with a question unexpectedly.

- I would have to say that...
- Let me see,
- Actually,
- For me,
- Let me see, I would have to say that...

Example:

Interviewer: *Could you describe your biggest challenge as a project leader at your last company?*

Candidate: *Sure, for me, it was keeping everyone on the same page. I found that most teams were using different project management tools. Marketing would use Trello and the developers would use Jira. So keeping track of cross-team progress was a little tricky. How is it at Numbers Ltd - do you all use one project tool?*

Interviewer: Let me see, actually most teams here are using Wrike. So it's pretty uniform.

Try using fillers to link your phrases. You can also combine fillers with each other. But don't overdo it.

5. Use indirect question forms and diminutives

In general, it is better to use the “would” “could” and “can” forms rather than direct imperative forms. Why? It ensures that each question is phrased politely. **In English, politeness is important** in an interview situation. Politeness is often achieved by making a question less direct:

Examples:

- Direct: Describe your last role.
- Indirect: **Could** you describe your last role?

- Direct: Tell me about your past work experience.
- Indirect: **Would** you tell me about your past work experience?

Another great way to keep your questions polite is to use these diminutive forms:

- A little
- A bit (synonymous with a little)
- A little bit more

These words keep your questions polite and keep the candidate at ease. They make direct questions a lot friendlier:

- Tell me **a little** about yourself.

Diminutives also work well with indirect questions:

- Could you tell me **a little** about yourself?

Use “a little bit more” when you want more detail from the candidate:

- Could you explain that **a little bit** more?
- Could be **a little bit** more specific?

The combination of indirect questions and diminutives will help keep your questions both polite and approachable.

6. Keep it personal when talking about the company

Use the “we,” “us,” and “our” forms when talking about your company. Avoid using third-person phrases. These tend to sound rather impersonal. Instead, replace these phrases with a “we” phrase.

Example:

- Impersonal: The company is great at organizing social events.
- Personal: **We** love to organize social events.

7. Remember to relax

Finally, try and be as relaxed as possible. Relaxing helps improve language use. Warming your voice up before the interview is a great way to relax and prepare your voice. [This video](#) has some tips to warm up your voice. You may feel silly, but it totally helps relax your vocal cords. Speaking at a slower pace can also help you to control your nerves.

Going off-script: How to deal with candidate questions and responses

Time to answer the second learner challenge: dealing with non-scripted candidate questions and responses. First, let’s look at how to deal with candidate questions.

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How to answer candidate questions with confidence



Candidate questions are likely to fall into one of three categories:

1. You understand the question perfectly and are confident you can answer
2. You understand the question but are unsure how to answer
3. You don't fully understand the question

In case number 1, you are able to respond fluently. Hopefully, the majority of questions land in this category. But how should you deal with cases 2 and 3?

In case number 2, when you understand their question but are unsure how to answer, try creating a variation on a phrase you already know as in tip number 3 above. You can further improve your responses by combining this simple variation with a general phrase:

Example:

Candidate question: *How do you allocate free learning time to candidates?*

If you know the phrase “to offer candidates” you can use this as the basis for the answer. Now using one of the generic questions answering phrases below you can make your answer seem completely fresh.

Response: *Our approach to learning and development is to offer 2 hours a week of paid training courses.*

Helpful phrases for answering questions:

- Our approach to [marketing] is to...
- Our company culture is a mix of...
- Here at [company name], we like to...
- Well, let me tell you a little about...

Combine these phrases with phrases you already know to create great responses.

In [part 1 of this guide](#) we put together an awesome list of action verbs, adjectives and phrases so check it out!

How to answer candidate questions that you don't understand

What about case number 3, when you don't fully understand the response?

Let's look at an example:

Candidate: *Could you tell me a little more about your scrutiny processes?*

“Scrutiny” may be an unfamiliar word. But you can still get around this by asking the candidate for more detail. Often asking someone to be more specific causes them to use a synonym of the tricky word. Synonyms increase your chance of understanding.

Interviewer: *Could you be a little more specific?*

Candidate: *Sure, I wondered how your team assesses the quality of the computer code.*

Specification questions:

- Could you be a little more specific?
- Could you provide a little more detail on that?
- What is it you would like to know exactly?
- Which type of [scrutiny process] would you like to know more about?

Use these specification questions when you don't fully understand the meaning of a candidate's question.

How to recognize questions that aren't questions

Native speakers often pose questions without question words. Let's take the example from above to see this in action:

Sure, I wondered how your team assesses the quality of the computer code.

The key is the intonation. Rising intonation indicates a question even if it is just a normal sentence. But this is not always easy to recognize.

There is another way. Try looking out for these phrases that often signify that the candidate would like more information.

Question signifiers:

- I was wondering about the company culture...
- I am interested about the...
- I would love to know about the...

How to deal with candidate responses

In an ideal world, all candidate responses would be both comprehensive and easy to understand. But this is not always the case.

1. The candidate's answer is not clear or detailed enough
2. You don't understand their answer

For both cases we recommend using specification questions. In case number 1, you will need to query a particular part of their answer. One great framework for doing this is shown below in the advanced strategy. In case number 2, you can use general specification questions to elicit a synonym from the candidate.

Here are some alternative specification questions:

- Could you explain that in a little more detail?
- I'm sorry that is still a little unclear. Would you mind being a little more specific?
- Would you mind describing that in more detail?
- Can you provide me with a little more information?

Advanced strategy: Reverse engineer the STAR technique

The STAR technique is a helpful framework for understanding and clarifying candidate responses. This framework is often used by candidates to structure their response. By using this as a recruiter, you can easily segment which part of the candidate response you want to clarify.

STAR? Situation > Task > Action > Result

Question: *Could you describe how you increased the number of new leads in 2017?*

Candidate response:

Situation: *At Letters Inc, the number of new leads was decreasing throughout 2016.*

Task: *My task was to find new sources for leads.*

Action: *So I performed a detailed competitor analysis and identified gaps in our marketing strategy.*

Result: *I proposed a 3-month action plan to get more leads and we increased our numbers.*

By dividing candidate responses into the four categories of the STAR framework, you can use specific vocabulary to get more detailed information.

Situation phrases:

Candidates will often begin their response by describing the general situation. The situation phase of an answer is all about identifying key challenges and adding background information.

- What challenges were involved with this project?
- What hurdles did you have to overcome?
- Could you provide a little background on this particular project?

Task phrases:

In the task phases of the response, the candidate will attempt to outline their key areas of responsibility. This could involve an explanation of their position and the tasks they were expected to perform.

- What was your role exactly?
- What were your key responsibilities?
- You mentioned you were working on project XYZ, did that include managerial responsibilities?
- Did you have a team to manage?
- Who were you reporting into?

Action phrases:

In the action phase, the candidate will describe what actions they performed to overcome the challenge they outline in the situation phase.

- What specific action did you take?
- What was your solution to the problem?
- What was your approach to this problem/task?
- How did you overcome the hurdles
- What was your strategy?
- What measures did you take?
- Could you explain why you decided to take that action?

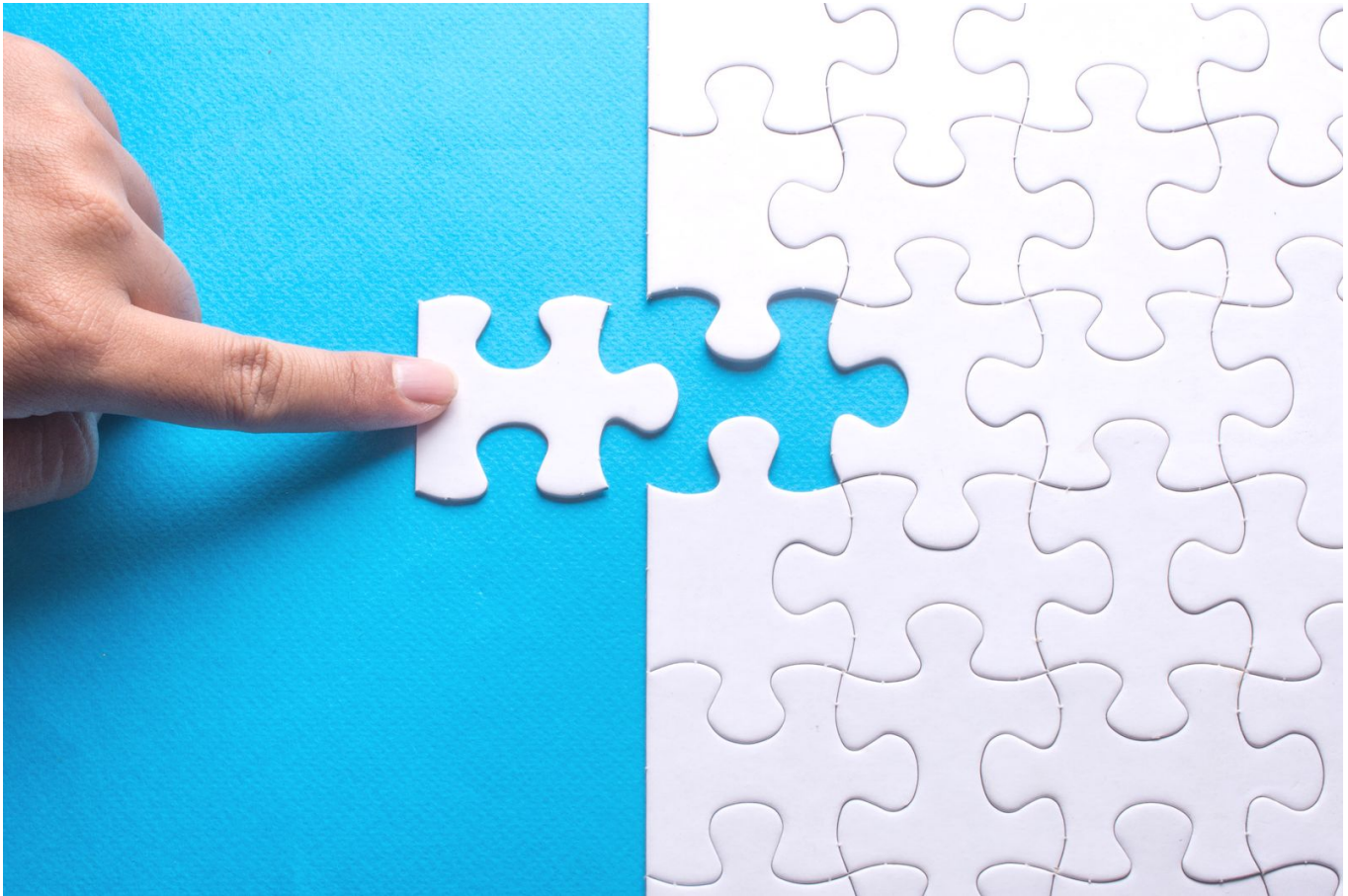
Result phrases:

The result phases summaries the overall outcome, the results of the action taken. A candidate will often use figures or data to quantify results.

- What were the results?
- Did you achieve the goal?
- What was the outcome of your project?
- Did you meet your KPIs?
- Did you hit your targets?
- Did you meet your objective?

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Putting it all together: Example interview and responses



Interviewer: *Welcome to Numbers Inc. We are excited to learn more about your profile. Could you start off by telling us a little about your last role?*

Candidate: *Thanks for inviting me! **(Situation)** Sure, so I was recruited to Letters Inc in 2016. They were looking to boost sales figures. **(Task)** I entered the company as an enterprise sales rep. **(Action)** I would regularly close high-value contracts. **(Result)** I was the top-performing sales rep for the last two quarters of my time there.*

Interviewer: ***(S)** Could you provide a little more background on your first few months at the company? Were sales figures decreasing?*

Candidate: *Actually, they were hiring following positive forecasts. The new sales reps were part of their expansion plan. Presumably, it's a similar story here at Numbers inc.*

Interviewer: ***(T)** Well, actually, our hiring process is following a very successful 2018. So you mentioned you were a sales rep. Who were you reporting into?*

Candidate: *I was reporting into a divisional head of sales.*

Interviewer: *(T) So you didn't have a team to manage?*

Candidate: *Not at that time. But after my first year, I was actually offered a more senior position and in that capacity, five junior sales reps reported into me.*

Interviewer: *(A) Ok great. Could you describe your sales approach? What was your strategy?*

Candidate: *(A) Sure. In general, I would research a company in great detail. And then based on their interactions in our CRM, come up with a tailored strategy and nurture them at each stage of awareness. This could involve sending them links to webinars, providing product brochures to explaining specific features and our product roadmap.*

Interviewer: *(R) Thanks for the clarification. Finally, you stated you were a top-performing sales rep. Could you provide a little more detail on that?*

Candidate: *Sure, so I was the top-performing sales rep for Q3 and Q4 of 2017 based on the absolute figures for new business deals. I focused mainly on enterprise customers.*

The interviewer was able to use clarification questions from the STAR framework to get a lot of detail from the candidate. By being specific with the questions asked, it also kept the conversation very fluent. This combined with fillers really improved the level of fluency.

We hope, this guide will help boost your language confidence when interviewing candidates.

Be sure to subscribe to get all chapters straight to your inbox. Coming up next in chapter 3, we will look at negotiating salary and benefits.

Contact us on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) or [LinkedIn](#) for more information or [book a free demo now](#).

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