



# HOW TO ANSWER **COMPETENCY** BASED QUESTIONS

(A step by step guide)

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# WHAT IS A COMPETENCY BASED QUESTION?

**It almost goes without saying that in all interview scenarios, your prospective employer will want you to demonstrate that you can perform the job you're interviewing for effectively.**

You firstly have to understand the question and then demonstrate you have the right balance of the three C's "Capability, Competence and Compatibility". This involves demonstrating your knowledge, skills and attitude to your work as well as things like motivation, self-confidence and ethics.

You can reliably predict the questions you will be asked based on the job description and many of these questions will be competency based. These type of questions are mainly behavioural that will test your ability to perform the job you have applied for by providing examples of previous experiences.

**These questions require a structured approach that will take you time to prepare. This preparation starts with you identifying what competencies you will be measured against in the interview.**

***CAN YOU  
GIVE ME AN  
EXAMPLE OF  
HOW YOU...***

**OR**

***DESCRIBE A  
SITUATION  
WHERE YOU  
HAD TO...***



# COMPETENCIES IN MORE DETAIL

A competency can be divided into two distinct parts.

**FUNCTIONAL COMPETENCIES** - the actual technical knowledge or skills you need to successfully complete the job or task.

**BEHAVIOURAL COMPETENCIES** - the personal qualities or characteristics that influence how successful someone will be in a certain role.

Behavioural competencies are mainly transferable, meaning you can move to a completely new job role but your behavioural competencies will still be present, they will just manifest themselves in a different way for the different role you will be doing.

These competencies are looking at the way you deliver a goal rather than what the goal actually is.



**It's probable the competencies that you will assessed against will be based around the following core characteristics:**

- 1 Managerial competencies including: planning and organising, leadership, decision-making, strategic thinking and maybe even mentoring and coaching.
- 2 Interpersonal communications and collaborative project and team work.
- 3 Motivation and resilience in certain situations.
- 4 Analytical skills and the ability to process large amounts of data and form conclusions based on the data sets provided.

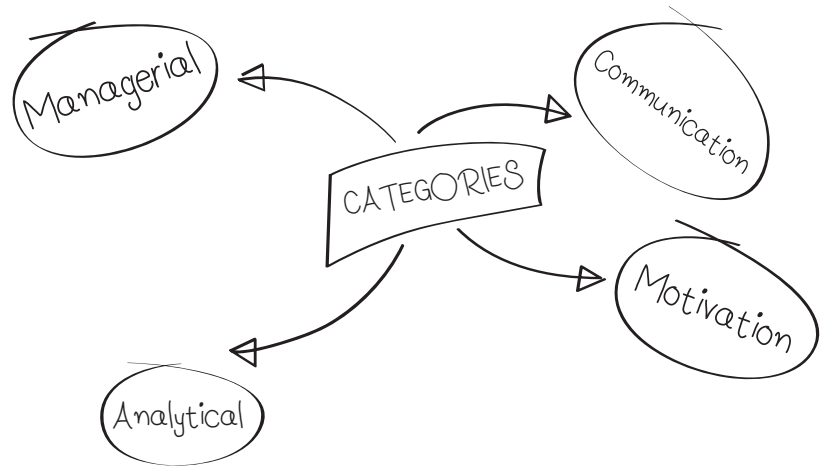
However, not all competencies will be required in every job role. It's your job to work out what they will be looking for and prepare answers based on the competencies you think they are looking for.

For any one of these, your answer needs to demonstrate that you have the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help you to excel in the role.

Giving your best answer for such a question requires a structured approach.

The aim of this guide is not to tell you what to give as an answer, but rather a framework so you can shape how your answers will make the greatest impact.

We'd like to share our years of recruitment experience to advise you on this increasingly popular interview technique, so you can make the best possible impression on the big day.



# EXAMPLES OF A COMPETENCY BASED QUESTIONS SCENARIO

As already mentioned you will be able to identify a competency based question by the way they are worded...

- “Describe a situation where you had to...”
- “Give me an example of how you...”

The idea of a competency-based question is that it will assess your abilities thoroughly; in answering these questions in the detail required, you will naturally provide a lot of information that the interviewer can ask you to focus or expand on if they find it interesting. **FOR EXAMPLE:**

## **Q. TELL US ABOUT A TIME WHEN YOU HAVE HAD TO PERSUADE SOMEONE TO YOUR WAY OF THINKING.**

A. In my job at [place], we followed a process each year where we had to manually pack and send several thousand paper documents. But these were increasingly available online, and I realised that we could save a lot of time and money if we went paperless. The team was reluctant to change from a method that they were used to.



## **Q. SO WHAT WAS THE MOST DIFFICULT OF THESE THINGS?**

A. I'd say it was getting the support of some of the more established team members. I vetted the idea with my peers and they mostly seemed keen for change, but naturally it can be challenging to present a new idea if people feel the existing system works well.



### **Q. INTERESTING. SO WHAT STRATEGY DID YOU DEVISE TO PERSUADE THEM?**

So I did some further research and presented my calculations to my team leader and company director – putting my claims into provable figures.

They could see the strength of my belief in this, as well as the obvious financial benefits. Knowing that I wasn't the only person who was eager to work in this way gave me a boost, and also sent a message to the wider team that new ideas would be listened to.

We started the new process on a trial method, and it was soon a great success.

As you can see the interviewer has used subsequent questions to extract more information out of the interviewee about their persuasion techniques. **There are several approaches you could take to answer a competency based question.**

### **UNPLANNED RESPONSES**

If you do try and “wing” it or tell a false story, your interviewer will be able to tell within seconds. So it's vital that you think about some examples from your working history that you are likely to be asked about, so you can prepare your answers to the best of your ability.

### **MODEL ANSWERS**

Similarly, it might be tempting to look up a “model” answer to some of these questions, but the fact remains that you can't provide any specific examples based on the contents of your CV or personal history if you follow this method.

# THE STAR AND SOARA METHODS

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**So how can you give all of the information required for a competency based question, but in a way that is clear and concise?**

The best way is to use the **STAR METHOD** or its similar counterpart, the **SOARA METHOD** – two techniques to help ensure you cover all of the necessary points.

Either method will allow your answer to be unique but also grounded in fact and easily communicated to your interviewer.







## IN EITHER CASE THOUGH, IT'S IMPORTANT THAT YOUR ANSWERS:

- Show you have the capability to perform the role
- Demonstrate your commitment to the role and the organisation
- Show your compatibility with the workplace's beliefs and culture

**The next sections will cover each of the methods – and the competencies they are suited to – in more detail including examples to help you understand how to use these methods.**

# THE STAR METHOD

As the slightly simpler technique of the two, the **STAR METHOD** is perhaps preferable if you're a recent graduate or trainee, or if you otherwise have little experience of management roles. It's also a good method to use if you're branching out into a new area of your work, that you've not yet had much experience in.

STAR is a simple, four-stage process which will enable you to clearly identify and explain the situations where you demonstrated particular competencies.

**Below is what the letters stand for:**



## S

### Situation

This is the recent situation or challenge in which you demonstrated the required competency.



## T

### Task

This is what you had to achieve or complete in the situation.



## A

### Action

What you did to achieve the outcome, with brief reasons for your actions – and why you went with them rather than the alternatives.



## R

### Results

The end achievement; was it the desired one? Would you change anything if you had to do it again? In either case, why?

# AN EXAMPLE OF HOW TO USE THE STAR METHOD

Fred is a graduate who wants to get a job as an Audiologist in the private sector. He has no experience besides his placements at University and work he has done in his holidays.

## STEP 1

### CREATE A LIST OF ACHIEVEMENTS AND ACTIVITIES

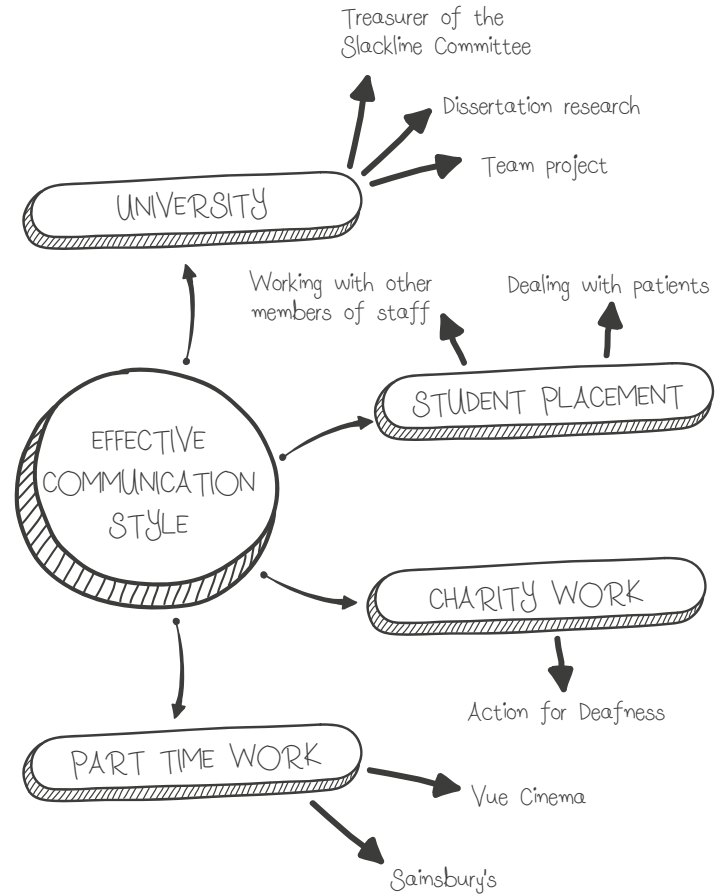
The first thing Fred has to do is list the activities he has been involved in to date:

- Student placement at Cambridge University
- Student placement the Ipswich Hospital
- Charity work at Action for Deafness
- Part time work at Sainsbury's
- Part time work at Vue Cinema
- University treasurer of the Slackline Committee
- Learning how to play guitar

## STEP 2

### CREATE A VISUAL MIND MAP FOR EACH INDIVIDUAL COMPETENCY

A mind map is a visual representation of ideas and concepts. In our example it helps to structure intention around the one key competency you will be analysing. From the job advert and the documents he has about the company he wants to work for, Fred has identified a competence "**effective communication style**" as a key competence he will be asked about.



# STEP 3

## COMPOSE POTENTIAL QUESTIONS FROM COMPETENCIES LISTED BY THE ORGANISATION

### Competency

### Possible competency based question

Exceptional standards of customer care and service

Tell me about a situation when you had to provide exceptional standards of customer care

Commercial sensitivity

Can you give me an example of where you had to show commercial sensitivity?

Action orientated

Tell me how you motivate yourself to complete a certain action / job

Decisive

Can you tell me about a time when you had to be decisive in particular situation?

Strong analytical and judgement ability

Can you demonstrate a situation when you had to use strong analytical skills?

Effective communication style

Can you give me an example of how you had to persuade others to achieve a goal?

Organised and efficient with time

Can you tell me about how you organise your time?

Energy and tenacity

Can you tell me about a situation when you have had to demonstrate tenacity?

# STEP 4

## TAKE A QUESTION AND APPLY THE STAR METHOD

As we have prepared our first situational mind map around the competency “**effective communication style**”, we will take the questions “**Can you give me an example of how you had to persuade others to achieve a goal?**” as an example.

**Situation** I worked at Sainsbury’s during my time at Uni, as it fit well in between my lectures and work I needed to do.

**Task** As a shop assistant I had to fill shelves and was sometimes responsible for our small team when our manager was on their day off.

**Action** When the manager was off I had to make sure all the tasks the team has to complete were done and I had to pretty much run the shift. This meant talking to each individual team member and recommunicating our goals. As I was still quite a junior member of the team, I adopted a clear and concise communication style with the other team members so they would take me seriously and carry out the necessary tasks to ensure we achieved our goals.

**Results** Everyone got the jobs that needed to be done completed. If I were to do this again I think I would have gathered everyone together and communicated the goals as a team rather than individually.

If your answer feels like its too long, then it probably is; you should make sure it includes all of the vital points and essential background information, but no more.

They don’t need to know anything that isn’t necessary or relevant to the question. For example, if your attempt at a task was more successful than your predecessor’s, then it is worth mentioning. But going into detail about the events leading to you taking on the task in the first place are not.

This process is – at least initially – time consuming, and you will want to think about your answers carefully. It’s certainly not something to be done the night before an interview!

**Yet it’s worth remembering that once you have an answer planned and prepared, you shouldn’t need to make frequent changes to this information;** you could simply tweak each answer individually as and when you get more relevant experience in a particular area.

# THE SOARA METHOD

If you have a longer working history, or perhaps more management experience, then you may well prefer this method.

The **SOARA METHOD** is a simple, five-stage process which will enable you to clearly identify and explain the situations where you demonstrated particular competencies.

**SOARA is an acronym for the following:**



## S

### **Situation**

The situation in which you demonstrated the competency, furnished with a bit of context.



## O

### **Objective**

The objective you wanted to attain in this situation.



## A

### **Action**

The action you took to achieve your objective, namely the decisions you went with, and why.



## R

### **Results**

The results of your decisions and actions, and whether you achieved the objective you set out to.



## A

### **Aftermath**

What did you learn from the situation, and how has it influenced you since?

In much the same way as the STAR method, when putting SOARA into practice it's best to begin by thinking of the competencies that you're likely to be asked about, so you can furnish them with appropriate examples from your career.

**When using this more advanced method though, it's important to remember that all the examples you give should be recent, and focused on management-level events.**

**Perhaps such as leading a project or even organising an event outside of the workplace.**

In practice though, you should focus on work-based events unless an extracurricular event is particularly relevant.

## **STEP 1**

### **IDENTIFY THE COMPETENCIES TO BE MEASURED**

In this instance we follow Ruth, who is applying for a Senior Optometrist position. She identified the below competencies from the company's website:

- Strong leadership qualities
- High standards of people management
- The ability to demonstrate financial awareness
- The drive to make it happen – a results focus
- The passion to be an ambassador for the companies brand

## STEP 2

### FROM THE COMPETENCIES IDENTIFY POSSIBLE QUESTIONS YOU MAY BE ASKED

Once you have identified the competencies you can start to think about possible questions you may be asked linked to the competencies.

We have decided to pick the competency **“high standard of people management”** and the associated behaviours that your potential employer may expect to be showcased.





## Key behaviour for “high standard of people management”

Demonstrate the ability to empower your team to make decisions

Exhibit key technical skills that you can share with the team

Evidence of good coaching skills

Develop a strategy for your practice and a clear plan for delivery

Help the team prioritise their workload and perform at their best

## Possible competency based question

How have you demonstrated the ability to empower a wider team to make decisions for themselves?

Demonstrate how you have shared your knowledge with a less experienced colleague

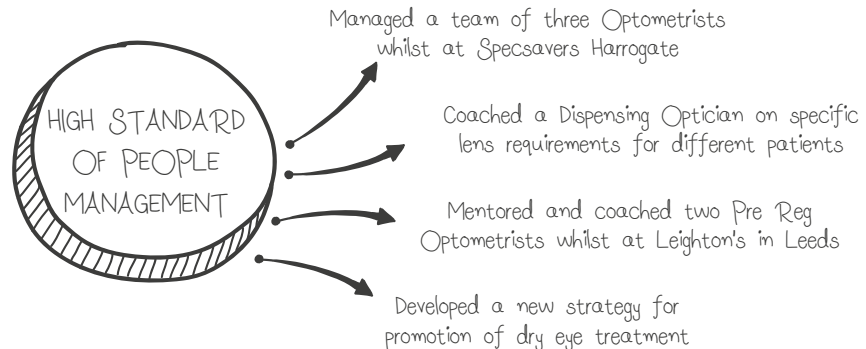
Give me an example of when you have coached a colleague through a difficult situation

Can you tell me of a time you have developed a strategy for particular event/organisation and how you delivered it?

Give me an example of helping a team / colleague prioritise their workload and deliver their best performance

## STEP 3 DEVELOP A SITUATIONAL MIND MAP TO ILLUSTRATE EACH INDIVIDUAL COMPETENCY

In Ruth’s case we are going to develop a mind map for the competency “**high standard of people management**”.



# STEP 4

## TAKE A QUESTION AND APPLY THE SOARA METHOD

The next step is to take one of the individual questions and develop an answer using the SOARA method.

### DEMONSTRATE HOW YOU HAVE SHARED YOUR KNOWLEDGE WITH A LESS EXPERIENCED COLLEAGUE:

#### Situation

I was given the opportunity to supervise the new Pre Reg Optometrist joining our practice.

#### Objective

My objective was to ensure the Pre Reg in our practice had all the tools and support they needed to develop as an optometrist and also perform well through the assessment process.

#### Action

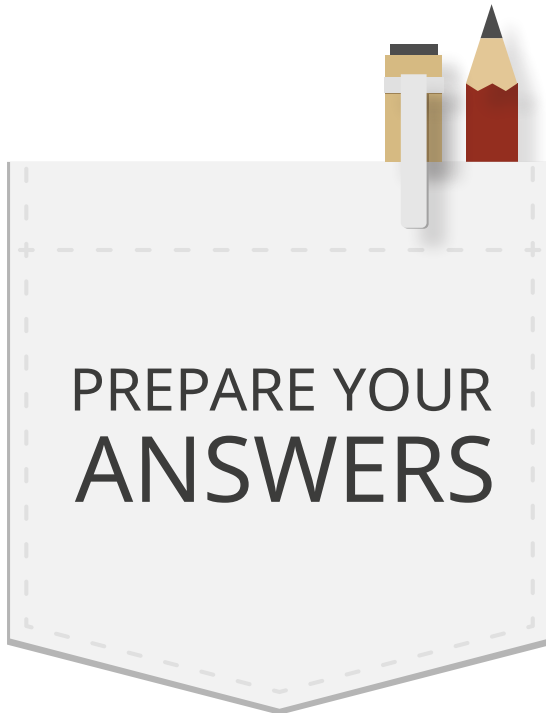
I did the necessary online training from The College of Optometrists before commencing the supervision. I made sure there was a plan of training in place for my new Pre Reg Optometrist and I really took the time to get to know the trainee so I could provide the best level of support for them. I implemented a set of learning objectives, regular catch up's (10 minutes once a day) and plenty of supervised observation sessions.

#### Results

Both myself and the trainee got loads out of the Pre Reg year. My Pre Reg passed her OSCE's the first time round. I felt really proud of this achievement. I felt I gave her the best opportunity to demonstrate how she could stand on her own two feet.

#### Aftermath

I would definitely do this again. The benefits of developing a Pre Reg were two fold. Firstly it gave me the chance to develop my own coaching style and also develop someone else in the profession. Secondly it helped build the reputation of the practice as a centre of knowledge and excellence for Optometry professionals.



**The examples you choose will naturally be up to you, but once you have them in mind you can then prepare your answers, taking care to keep them informative and concise.**

**In summary, to succeed in a competency based interview you need to ensure your answers:**

- Are specific in description and detail
- Highlight your achievements but are concise, and not loaded with unnecessary detail
- Clearly show the structure of your actions
- Convey clearly the maximum achievement in the minimum time
- Show what you have learned and how you've developed as a result of the experience

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