



---

## BEHAVIORAL-BASED INTERVIEWING: TIPS FROM AN EXPERT

Scott Weighart

For almost 15 years, I have helped thousands of Northeastern University co-op students strategize in preparation for interviews. One major change over that time has been the increasing emphasis that employers have placed on behavioral-based interviewing (BBI). When I started here in 1995, none of our employers asked BBI questions. Within a few years, though, we started seeing some major firms adopt this approach.

All of these years later, many more organizations ask at least some BBI questions in an interview. Many, though, still don't ask any such questions. Regardless, I now require my students to prepare five behavioral-based "stories" to use as part of their work in my co-op preparation class. I tell them that while it's important to be ready for a possible BBI question, it's even more critical to understand that BBI stories can be used in *any* job interview to great advantage.

Why is this the case? Let's say an interviewer starts off with the typical "tell me about yourself" question. The candidate needs to answer this vague, fuzzy question with a sharp, specific answer in which she highlights her strengths as they relate to that employer's need for the job at hand. But what if the next question is another open-ended question—perhaps asking the candidates to identify strengths. Consider a rather sarcastically positioned answer to that question: "From your job description, I see that you are seeking a quick learner who can multitask and work at a fast pace. By amazing coincidence, those happen to be my biggest strengths! Voila, here I am, the perfect job candidate!"

In contrast, a vivid, specific behavioral-based story can highlight that you *really* have a competency that the employer seeks. You would have to be a pathological liar to be able to fabricate a detailed story packed with your emotions, thoughts, and actions throughout a specific chain of events. And if you think through your range of experiences in advance, you can weigh which of your stories is going to show you at your best. So let's consider the principles of what makes for a good BBI story.

### Choosing Your Best Experiences

It's important to understand how to develop a small arsenal of stories to use in your interviews. Here are some key principles to bear in mind as you sift through the possibilities.

1. *Pick out a specific day or week or incident to focus on... and watch out for the warning signs that indicate you're failing to do that.* If you find yourself repeatedly using words like *always, usually, generally, and sometimes*, there's a good chance that your story is too general. If you're asked a BBI question in an interview, and you respond with a general overview of a job or classroom experience, the interviewer often will follow up by saying, "Okay, but can you tell me about a *specific* time when you [had to handle conflict, overcome adversity in a team, etc.]" Often the interviewer will keep pushing until you do.... Or they will give up if you can't deliver what they want within a reasonable amount of time.

Here are some good questions to ask yourself when attempting to come up with the best possible stories:

- What was my very best day in that job? What was hardest day or week?
- What was my most challenging task?
- What was the biggest crisis I faced? What “moment of truth” did I face?

2. *Make sure to walk us through the story step by step.* After you’ve identified a pretty specific day or week or job task, then walk us through it step by step:

- A. Give us a quick, brief overview of the job or situation.
- B. Pick a specific moment in time when something caused a problem or conflict.
- C. Walk us through the situation step by step: What did you do in response? What were you thinking as you dealt with it? What were you feeling? What was the final outcome?

That’s a good rule of thumb if you feel like your stories lack depth or meat. Remember the ABC rule of BBI stories. You want your stories to have affective, behavioral, and cognitive details. So dig deeper into describing your emotions (affective), actions (behavioral), and thoughts (cognitive) to help us understand HOW you got through this situation. All too often, job candidates focus too much on the actions without getting us inside of their heads by incorporating their thoughts and emotions. Some interviewers will pull your thoughts and feelings and specific actions out of you, but it’s much easier if you can just lay them out without being asked.

3. *Focus on YOUR role in the situation.* There’s an old cliché that “There is no ‘I’ in TEAM.” Well, the letter “I” appears THREE times in the phrase “behavioral-based interviewing”! When you’re telling a story about a work or school team, make sure to describe YOUR individual role on the team—not just the team as a collective. There are many ways to contribute to a team: describe what KIND of team player you are by spelling out roles in a team situation.

You don’t have to be the leader of the team. Maybe you were the “glue” of the team—someone who was a peacemaker or liaison between two conflicting teammates. Perhaps you were more of the outstanding individual contributor—the person who tirelessly worked to make the project error-free. That’s good, right? So be sure to avoid excessive use of the word “we” in your BBI stories; make sure you use “I” and highlight your role on the team—whatever it was.

4. *Don’t “use up” a job in just one story!* Another problem with the more general stories is that you can use up a job in just one story... and you may need more stories later in the interview. If it’s a job you’ve done well, there should be MANY stories from various days, customers, tasks, projects, and so forth. Odds are that these stories can be used to highlight many, many transferable skills: ability to work under pressure; organization skills; ability to overcome adversity, and so on.

5. *Pick stories that show you at your best.* One common mistake is to write a story as follows: “I was in a team in my Finance class at school, and we were procrastinating and not getting work done. I finally said, ‘Hey, guys, we have to get this done.’ And then we started working and ended up doing a good job.”

While this is not a TERRIBLE story, it's pretty mediocre. Try to think about the experiences in your life that make you really proud when you consider how you overcame adversity, earned praise and recognition, or improbably exceeded expectations. A few years ago, a Fortune 100 interviewer asked our students this question: "Tell me about a specific time when you failed at something and how you responded to that failure." A couple of students talked about getting a D or F on a first paper and then responding by working harder and getting, say, a C+ in the course. Yawn.... Not impressive!

In contrast, another candidate talked about failing accounting despite going to office hours, getting tutoring, working harder, and so on. The interviewers were impressed because it was obvious to them how much this failure upset him. They were even more impressed when he talked about taking his accounting textbook to work every day the following summer so he could study during breaks. He wrapped up by telling them that he finally retook the class and got a B+. That was a great story: He showed that he DOES care about his grades, and he also showed the soft skills of persistence, initiative, overcoming adversity.

### **Great Student Examples of Successful Stories**

Here are some great examples of stories from students I have worked with over the last few years. My hope is that reading these stories will show you a couple of things: First, you can see that it's possible to come up with great stories despite lacking sophisticated professional experience. Second, notice how these individuals always get into specifics. One good sign in these stories is when you don't see *usually* and *always* and instead see "I remember one day when..." or "The toughest customer I ever had came in one Monday..." or other tipoffs that were talking about something that REALLY happened at one "moment of truth."

When I give a BBI assignment, I ask my students to list at least THREE transferable skills that each BBI story can demonstrate. The goal is to understand that any rich, vivid story can be plugged in to prove any number of transferable skills, and it's important to capitalize on the versatility of these stories. I will comment on each story below so you can see how these individuals could use these stories to prove many different great qualities or soft skills in a real interview.

1. Here's a story that one student used in an attempt to *prove* that he has strong organizational skills:

"As the day lagged on at Widget Systems, I thought about how it was already 3:30 p.m., and that I only had an hour and a half left to finish up the logs. Just then the phone rang. I picked it up to hear the lovely voice of one of our sales reps on the west coast. She started off by saying, "You're going to hate me," so I knew that something challenging was coming. She continued, "I need you to get a mailing out to about five counties in Texas, by tonight, I didn't realize until now." I thought to myself about how difficult this would be, but I told her it wouldn't be a problem and I would gladly get it done.

"I started my work. First, I had to pull the names of all the directors from these counties that she wanted me to mail information to. The final list came to about 441 people. Next I had to print all the labels. In the meantime, I used two copy machines to make sure the first page or two of the press releases for the mailing were on letterhead. Then I had to make sure that

the following pages were correlated appropriately. Finally, I had to fill each envelope, stamp them, and label them. Needless to say, although I had intended to leave at 5:00pm, I did not step out of the office until 8:00pm. The sense of accomplishment for completing the job provided me with much more satisfaction than I had originally anticipated.”

Here the student attempts to prove that he has strong organizational skills, and he succeeds. However, a good story always ends up showing much more than one skill or quality! Nat could use this story to show many other valued traits: positive attitude, dedication, willingness to go above and beyond... maybe even customer-service skills if we think of the salesperson as an internal customer.

2. With her story, Rachel Wilkes needed to show Deloitte and Touche that she has demonstrated leadership skills. Here’s what she used:

“Throughout my four years of high school I was the Class President. Along with this title came many responsibilities such as fund raising and planning our sophomore semi dance, our senior prom, and homecoming dances, along with budgeting the money we raised for graduation caps and gowns, yearbooks, and much more.

“It was hard to get other people besides class officers to help and dedicate their time for the class. As our junior and senior year approached, we had many tasks to take care of and we needed as much help as we could get from class officers and other representatives of the class. Our vice president for the class is a very good friend of mine. However, he didn’t put more effort towards our projects than regular representatives of the class did. This left me with much more work to do, and other people in the class angry that he was getting this Vice President title, yet they cared more about doing the work than he did.

“I was confused about what to do. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but I had to tell him to step it up, and try to work harder. During the fall of our senior year, when we were trying to figure out a few fund raisers that we were holding, our homecoming dance, our prom, and graduation, we needed everyone’s hard work and effort to get all of it done. I was completely stressed out, trying to get college applications out, do my school work, and focus on the class’s activities. A few weeks before the fall homecoming dance I took Will, our vice president, aside and told him that I didn’t mean to hurt his feelings, but I thought he could put much more effort into helping us and that I needed him to step it up as a class officer. Luckily, he didn’t take it to heart, and really stepped it up to help out our other class officers, representatives, and myself especially. I had always felt like I was the only one in charge, where he should’ve dealt with some of the responsibility as well. I was glad to have solved this problem, which made my life—along with many others—much easier.”

This story is different from Nat’s but also very successful. Rachel chooses to give a little more overview to the situation before she gets to the “moment of truth” in which she has to confront a friend about his shortcomings. Does she show good leadership skills? Absolutely—much more than she would have by simply mentioning that she was class president and leaving at that. What other transferable skills could Rachel prove with this story? One is definitely problem-solving skills, which happens to be ANOTHER soft skill Deloitte and Touche wants to see! So that’s a nice double-dip story. Additionally, this story

could be used to show an orientation towards results, the ability to handle conflict, and interpersonal skills. I'd be surprised if she doesn't use this story in an interview this semester—whether or not she has a Behavioral-Based Interview! When you have good stories, you look for opportunities to bring them up in any interview.

3. Applying for a job with EF Education, Alison Parkin needed a story to support her “Tell Me About Yourself” answer—in particular her communication skills. Here's what she came up with:

“At the summer camp I worked at, communication was key. As a bunk counselor, it was my responsibility to form a good relationship with my campers, so that they were able to feel comfortable telling me their accomplishments as well as problems. It was also my responsibility to communicate with my supervisors on a daily basis about how each one of my campers was doing, and if there was any problems in the bunk. I was constantly working very closely with my co-counselors to make sure everything was running smoothly.

“Not too far into the summer I started to notice that one of my campers was not eating properly. She was only 11 years old, which is not a common age for girls to develop eating disorders. I watched her for a few meals, and then realized that there was definitely a problem. I arranged a time when I could discuss the problem with my direct supervisor, and I explained what I had been seeing. She was very concerned about the health of this camper, so we decided together that I should talk to the nurses to find out the best way to handle this situation. It was a very difficult situation because at overnight camp parents are not around. As her counselor, I was responsible for ensuring her health and safety, which is a huge responsibility. I worked with the nurses and they explained to me how to go about talking to the camper.

My co-counselor and I took the information we learned and sat down with the camper for a while to discuss the problems she was having. She told us how she was feeling, and why she was choosing to eat very little. We kept in constant communication with her, the supervisor, and the nurses, to make sure she was living a health lifestyle while at camp. Although it was my supervisor's and the nurses' job to keep in contact with her parents, it was my job to ensure she was eating properly, and relay her feelings and concerns to the nurses. This required me to be able to effectively communicate with my camper so she would feel comfortable talking to me about her problems, as well as communicating with the supervisor and nurses to make sure everyone was aware of the situation at all times.”

In addition to highlighting communication skills, this story also indicates that Alison has excellent customer focus and attention to detail—two other soft skills that EF is seeking in the Regional Account Coordinator position. In other interviews, she could use this story to show responsibility and interpersonal sensitivity in action.

4. Jared Yee's story below proves a useful point: Many first-time job seekers take their retail experiences for granted. If you reflect on them, you're bound to come up with an impressive incident. Note how he jumps right in the phrase “One time...”—a good hint that we're about to get a story of one especially challenging or interesting day or incident.

“One time at BJ’s Wholesale club where I worked, it was incredibly busy. All the lines at the registers were filled almost to the middle of the store. My supervisors were busy helping customers and the managers were too busy to assist customers. My supervisor told me to take over some of her responsibilities. She told me one of the freezers with dairy products was broken and that I needed to find one of the managers to fix the problem. She told me afterwards to help a customer with a problem she was having. I went to the produce section but the manager was busy. He told me to get another manager to handle the situation. This manager however, was unavailable to fix the freezer.

“I realized that the freezer would not get fixed for possibly hours. I took matters in to my own hands. I got three carriages from the parking lot, filled them with all the dairy products from the broken freezer, and brought them into the storage section of a nearby freezer. After that solution was resolved, I found the very frustrated customer who was trying to buy a computer and was in a rush because she had to pick up her daughter. The computer she wanted was not on the shelf but she wanted the one on display. I had dealt with a situation like this before but with a supervisor’s help. However, due to the chaos within the store I was told to handle the situation on my own.

I wrote down the codes of the computer she wanted, being unable to look it up on the system’s computer because it was being used. I then went to the storage room and looked for the empty display box with the same code. I found it, went back down to the display shelf, and packed it along with all its parts in the box. I then assisted the customer bringing the computer to my register line, since all the others were filled and she was in a rush. The manager said this was alright to do because she had been waiting for a long time. After ringing up the customer’s computer, she thanked me and said that I had “saved her from a terrible day.”

Jared picked this story because he wanted to show the ability to handle multiple projects at one time—a qualification for a job with Deloitte and Touche. However, Deloitte also seeks an excellent team player, who is highly organized—two other qualities that this story captures. It also could be used to show an ability to work independently, perseverance, and customer service—to name just a few qualities! That’s the power of a rich story—you show so much about yourself.

5. As I mentioned earlier, sometimes you read or hear a BBI story and you think, “So what?” Even if a story is vivid and happens during a specific moment, it’s no good unless it shows you at your best! The author F. Scott Fitzgerald—in writing to an aspiring writer who obviously hadn’t worked hard enough at writing good fiction—admonished her by saying, “Remember, you wouldn’t be interested in a soldier who was just a *little* brave!” With that in mind, read this very powerful, emotional story by Nicholas Padilla:

“I love the feeling of doing volunteer work. During my senior year, my guidance counselor suggested that I contact Make-A-Wish Foundation and ask them if I could volunteer for an upcoming project. I was accepted and was a part of a project to make an 11 year-old girl’s dream to be a princess for a day. The girl, Alex, was diagnosed with leukemia and wasn’t given a lot of time.



“The foundation told us to rush our preparations simply because Alex did not have much time. We were over 30 volunteers working on the project and no one really knew each other, but because we did not have a lot of time we jumped right in to work. The work we did was very fast paced. Everyone did as much as they could with coordinating with a local amusement park as well as coming up with a possible program. The majority of my work was in the program and that was intense. We were ten people in a room expressing ideas about the program. For two weekends we argued, debated, and came up with a great program in which Alex would have the entire park for herself along with her own horse-drawn carriage and Prince Charming, who ended up being me.

“It was a great experience that I would never trade. I’ve done charity work all my life but this was the first time I was completely responsible for the event. I was an important factor in the preparation and that made the event even more satisfying.”

Ostensibly, Nicholas was trying to show he could work in a fast-paced, team-oriented atmosphere, but we see many other great qualities here: willingness to do whatever is needed, caring, and creativity... and you’d better believe that any interviewer who hears this story will repeat it to others because of its emotional power.

### **Final Thoughts**

Many employers claim that interviewees can’t really prepare for a behavioral-based interview. The thinking there is that candidates can only describe what they actually have done, so there is no point in advising an interviewee to worry about preparation. I disagree.

In my experience, about 90 percent of interviewees are not very good at quickly rummaging through their memories to pick the *best possible* experience to use in response to a specific situation. Additionally, most interviewees find that drilling into the affective, behavioral, and cognitive details to a sufficient degree does not come naturally. By preparing an arsenal of five or six stories, my students are often surprised to find they jump on opportunities to slip these great stories into specific interviews—let alone with behavioral interviews. Using these stories can show an employer that you *really* have the qualities that they are seeking in a job candidate.

*Scott Weighart is the author of three books related to cooperative education and internships: Find Your First Professional Job, Exceeding Expectations, and Learning From Experience: A Resource Book By and For Co-op/Internship Professionals. For more information about these books, go to [www.mosaiceyepublishing.com](http://www.mosaiceyepublishing.com).*