How to build better interview answers with STAR

Technical knowledge matters in accountancy. But when an employer is choosing between people with similar qualifications and experience, it's often the other skills you bring that help you stand out.

How do you solve problems? Communicate with different people? Respond when things change? Learn something new? Take responsibility? Build trust?

Your interview is your chance to make sure all these things come across.

But with the average job interview only lasting between 30 minutes and one hour, every answer you give has to work hard to demonstrate your range of skills and experiences.

That's where the STAR technique comes in, offering a simple way to turn your real-world experiences into clear, relevant examples.

In this guide we'll explore exactly what the STAR technique involves and why it's so effective, as well as helping you identify the experiences that demonstrate your strongest skills, turn them into STAR answers and build a bank of examples you can adapt to different interview questions.

Let's get started.

What is the STAR interview technique?

"Tell me about a time when..."

STAR is a simple way to structure your answers to competency-based interview questions.

Rather than giving a vague or general answer, STAR helps you tell a really clear story that shows what you did, how you approached it and what happened as a result.

S – Situation

Set the scene. What was happening and where were you? Make sure you give the interviewer enough context to understand your example.

T – Task

Explain what you needed to do or achieve. What problem did you need to solve?

A – Action

Describe what you did and how you did it. Be specific about the decisions you made and the skills you used.

R – Result

Share what happened as a result and what you achieved or learned.

Remember: your examples don't have to come from a previous accountancy role. You can draw on part-time jobs, study, volunteering, placements, projects or other experiences that demonstrate the skills the employer is looking for.

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What this looks like

Example 1

Interview question:

“Tell me about a time you spotted a mistake or problem before it became more serious.”

Situation

During a work placement in a small finance team, I was helping to check supplier invoices before they were entered into the accounting system.

Task

I noticed that one supplier invoice was much higher than usual, so I needed to check whether the amount was correct before it was processed.

Action

I compared the invoice with the original purchase order and found that the same item had been charged twice. I double-checked the figures, then raised it with my supervisor and explained what I had found. With their agreement, I contacted the supplier to query the invoice.

Result

The supplier confirmed that it was an error and issued a corrected invoice. It prevented the business from overpaying by £850 and reinforced for me how important it is to question something when the figures don’t look right.

Example 2

Interview question:

“Tell me about a time you had to explain something complicated to someone.”

Situation

In a previous role, I helped prepare monthly budget reports for different teams. One manager was regularly going over budget but was finding the finance reports difficult to understand.

Task

I wanted to help them understand where the overspend was coming from so they could make better decisions for the following month.

Action

Instead of simply sending the report again, I arranged a short meeting and talked through the figures using straightforward language. I broke the costs down into a few key categories and highlighted the areas where spending had changed most. I also asked questions to understand what was happening within their team rather than making assumptions based on the numbers alone.

Result

The manager left with a much clearer picture of their budget and identified two areas where costs could be reduced. Their spending was back within budget the following month, and we continued having short monthly check-ins to help them stay on track.

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Building your own STAR answers

As you prep for interviews you should aim to have five to seven strong examples that show different sides of what you can offer.

These could include:

Communication **Problem solving** **Adaptability** **Working with others** **Initiative** **Judgement**

Leadership **Willingness to learn** **Accuracy and attention to detail** **Customer or client focus**

You don't need a separate story for every skill. The best examples will demonstrate a variety of skills.

Start with your strengths

What do you want people to remember about you once you've left the room? Are you the person who makes complicated things easier to understand?

Do you stay calm in a crisis? Maybe you spot problems early or build relationships quickly?

Which of these sound like you?

- I explain things clearly
- I enjoy solving problems
- I'm good at spotting detail
- I stay calm under pressure
- I adapt quickly
- I build relationships easily
- I'm curious and ask questions
- I take ownership
- I like improving things
- I'm good at organising people or tasks
- I support others
- I'm confident making decisions
- I'm comfortable with change
- I'm always looking to learn

Anything else?

Choose three strengths you'd particularly like an interviewer to see

Strength 1	
Strength 2	
Strength 3	

Keep these in mind as you work through the rest of the workbook.

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Find your evidence

Good interview examples don’t always come from big promotions, huge projects or dramatic achievements.

Often, the most useful stories are about how you handled something.

Think across your whole experience; current and past roles, your studies, volunteering and personal projects.

For each of the strengths you identified previously, think about the examples you have that demonstrate the strength.

Strength 1

Strength 2

Strength 3

Turn your strengths into STAR answers

Now you’ve identified some of the strengths you want an interviewer to remember and the experiences that prove them, it’s time to turn those examples into answers.

Start with one of your three strengths and choose the strongest example you have for it.

Don’t worry about making it sound perfectly polished. First, get the important details down.

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Strength 1:

My example:

What happened?
Where were you?
Who was involved?

Situation

Set the scene. What does the interviewer need to know to understand your example?

Task

What did you need to do, achieve, fix or change?

Action

What did **you** do?

Think about the decisions you made, the steps you took and the skills you used.

Result

What happened because of your actions?

Think about:

- what changed
- what you achieved
- any positive feedback
- time or money saved
- mistakes or problems avoided
- what you learned

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Now, work through your other strengths in the same way.

Strength 2:

My example:

Situation

Task

Action

Result

Strength 3:

My example:

Situation

Task

Action

Result

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Questions worth preparing for

You can't predict exactly what an interviewer will ask, but you can prepare for the kinds of skills employers commonly want to explore.

Typical questions include:

- **Tell me about a time you had to explain something complicated to someone.**
- **Tell me about a time you had to solve a difficult problem.**
- **Give me an example of when something didn't go to plan. What did you do?**
- **Tell me about a time your attention to detail made a difference.**
- **Tell me about a time you had to manage a large amount of information.**
- **Tell me about a time you worked with others to achieve something.**
- **Describe a time you worked with someone who approached things differently from you.**
- **Tell me about a time you had to adapt quickly.**
- **Give me an example of when you had to learn a new way of doing something.**
- **Give me an example of when you took responsibility for getting something done.**
- **Describe a time you improved a process or way of working.**
- **Give me an example of when you received feedback and acted on it.**
- **Tell me about a time you had competing deadlines.**
- **Give me an example of when you dealt with a difficult customer, client or stakeholder.**
- **Tell me about a time you built trust with someone.**

One example, different questions

You don't need to prepare a different STAR answer for every possible interview question.

One strong example can show that you can solve problems, communicate well, take ownership and work with other people.

The key is being able to recognise what an interviewer is really asking and adjust which parts of your example you emphasise accordingly.

For example, imagine you spotted a problem with a process, spoke to colleagues to understand what was going wrong and suggested a better way of working.

That same example could potentially help you answer:

- "Tell me about a time you solved a problem."
- "Give me an example of when you used your initiative."
- "Tell me about a time you improved the way something was done."
- "Describe a time you had to work with other people to get a result."
- "Tell me about a time you took responsibility for something."

You wouldn't necessarily give exactly the same answer each time. You'd focus in on the most relevant parts of the story.

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Put your examples to the test

Look back at the three STAR examples you've just created.

What questions could each one help you answer?

Example 1 could work for:	Example 2 could work for:	Example 3 could work for:

Making your STAR answers stronger

Use this checklist to review each of your answers.

Situation: have I given enough context?

- I've explained the situation clearly.
- I've included the details the interviewer needs to understand the example.
- I haven't spent too long setting the scene.

Tip: The Situation should usually be one of the shortest parts of your answer. Get the interviewer into the story, then move on.

Task: is it clear what needed to happen?

- I've explained what I was responsible for.
- The interviewer can understand the problem, goal or challenge.
- I've made my own role clear.

Action: have *I* shown what I did?

- I've talked about my own actions rather than only saying what "we" did.
- I've explained **how** I approached the situation.
- I've included the decisions I made.
- My answer demonstrates the skills I want the interviewer to notice.
- I've included enough detail to show what I actually contributed.

Tip: This is usually where the interviewer learns the most about you, so give the Action section plenty of space.

Result: have I finished the story?

- I've explained what happened.
- I've included a specific outcome where possible.
- I've used numbers or other evidence where they add something.
- I've mentioned what I learned if that is relevant.
- The result connects back to the question I was asked.

Next steps

You've now built your first three STAR answers. Use the answer-bank pages at the end to keep going until you have five to seven examples you feel confident using.

Good luck with your next interview

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My interview answer bank

My STAR example	Main strength it shows	Other skills it demonstrates	Questions I could use it for	Key result or evidence

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