



IB Interview Guide, Sample Excerpt: “Strengths and Weaknesses” in Interviews

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Selecting Your 3 Strengths and 3 Weaknesses

Once you’ve prepared your 3 short stories, you have to select your **strengths and weaknesses**.

You need to think about these questions separately because you **can’t** necessarily give good answers based solely on your 1-2-minute story.

Your story presents your work experience, personal qualities, and long-term goals; you’re *not* going to discuss your biggest weaknesses there.

In fact, you probably won’t even discuss your strengths since you only have 1-2 minutes.

As a result, you need to plan out your strengths and weaknesses separately.

It’s easier to pick your strengths, we’ll start there.

You should pick qualities that bankers are looking for and that you can demonstrate directly with your 3 short stories.

For example:

- **Your Quantitative or Analytical Abilities** – You could cite this as a strength and then use any of the 3 example stories above to support it.
- **Your Client Management Skills** – You could cite this as a strength and use the second or third stories above to support it.
- **Your Ability to Work in or Lead a Team** – You could use the second or third stories to support this one. Even though the second story is a “failure,” you still *achieved some success* because you helped your clients get better outcomes.



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- **Your Attention to Detail** – You could cite the first story to support this point and explain how you found small details in the company’s financial reporting that others missed, which saved the company time and money.
- **Your Work Ethic and Ability to Work Long, Stressful Hours** – You could cite the third story to support this point and explain how you had to meet a tight reporting deadline, which was critical since the company was public.
- **Your Interest and Knowledge of Finance** – You could point to the third story and explain how your knowledge of the company’s accounting systems and internal budgeting process resulted in a successful outcome.

These strengths are all common, and that’s OK.

Bankers care more about **the stories you use to support your strengths** than your “creativity.”

The biggest mistakes with your strengths are:

- 1) **Failing to support your strengths** with a quick story from your work or academic experience.
- 2) **Trying to be “creative” and citing a strength that bankers don’t care about**, such as your creative writing skills, your basket-weaving abilities, or your wrestling ability.

In *some* cases, you can cite a “creative” strength *if the group needs someone with a certain, specific skill*.

For example, if the group needs a fluent Arabic speaker because it has many clients in the Middle East and North Africa, and you’re a native speaker, you can cite that as a strength.

But, otherwise, stick to the “boring” strengths and make them memorable by supporting them with your unique stories.

Now to your weaknesses.

In over a decade of conducting mock interviews, **I’ve never once heard a good initial response to the “greatest weaknesses” question.**

That’s not entirely your fault; the truth is, there are no *great* answers.

Bankers know that, but they also know that there *are* some terrible answers.

Any weakness that you cite in an interview should:



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- 1) **Be Real, But Not TOO Real** – If you say that you hate using Excel or PowerPoint or that you can't work long hours, the interview is over. **You have to pick something that is a real weakness, but which is *not* a "deal-breaker" weakness.**

For example, you could say that you sometimes hesitate too much when making decisions, which makes tasks take more time. This weakness could affect your performance in IB, but it won't *kill you* like a lack of Excel or PowerPoint proficiency will.

- 2) **Be a Real Answer and Not a Cliché** – Don't even think about "I work too hard!" or "I'm too much of a perfectionist."
- 3) **Not Be Inappropriate or Overly Personal** – Don't talk about your health problems, family issues, religious or political struggles, etc.
- 4) **Be Something That You Could Potentially Fix or Improve** – So, don't talk about your height, the fact that English is not your first language, or your non-target school.

There are so many horrible answers to this question that it might be more useful to explain what **NOT** to say first.

Here's what you should NOT cite as a weakness in investment banking interviews:

- "I work too hard!" (Non-answer)
- "I'm a perfectionist and expect too much of others." (Non-answer)
- "I go to a non-target school. / I'm not a finance major." (How can you fix this *now*?)
- "I have chronic back pain or other physical problems." (TMI)
- "I can't multi-task well." (Too real! You can rephrase this one more effectively)
- "I'm not good with numbers." (Too real!)
- "I'm too shy." (Too personal, and there are better ways to express the same idea)
- "I have no weaknesses!" (Non-answer)



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- “I voted for [Name] / I’m [Religion Name] religion” (TMI)
- “I have a horrible sense of direction.” (How is this relevant for banking?)
- “I’m bad at interviewing because I tend to sell myself short.” (Not amusing)
- “I’m too short and skinny, which makes it harder to win clients.” (Too personal)
- “I’m not good at staying in touch with my family.” (Too personal)
- “English is not my first language.” (How can you fix this *now*?)
- “I don’t speak a second language.” (This point doesn’t matter in the U.S., while it’s ‘Too Real’ in Europe, Asia, and other regions)
- “I haven’t worked at a big company, so I don’t have a wide professional network.” (How can you fix this *now*?)
- “I don’t have an MBA degree.” (Since when do you need an MBA to do IB?)
- “I’m young and haven’t experienced a major recession or global market crash, unlike older candidates.” (How can you fix this *now*?)

I could keep going, but you get the idea: There are *dozens* of bad responses to this question.

There are not *that* many “good” responses, so you should stick to the list below. And if you have any doubts, **ask us** before you say something stupid.

Here are reasonable weaknesses you could cite in investment banking interviews:

- **“I’m not always good at delegating tasks, so sometimes the workload isn’t divided evenly among team members.”**

Why It’s Acceptable: This is a real weakness, but as an Analyst (or even Associate), *you* won’t be delegating that many tasks on the job. Also, you don’t say that you’re too much of a perfectionist or that *you* do too much of the work.

- **“I sometimes take too much time to make decisions, or I second-guess myself, which makes it take longer to complete tasks.”**



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Why It's Acceptable: This is a real weakness that could hurt you in banking, but bankers still want you to make the *correct* decisions and do the work *correctly* above all else.

- **“Sometimes I don't speak up even when I'm sure that someone else on the team or a superior has made a mistake or overlooked something.”**

Why It's Acceptable: This one is good because it's not a *universal* weakness – it depends on the context. In some cases, you have to shut up, and in other cases, you have to speak up, so you can spin it any way you want.

- **“I don't always manage my time well, and sometimes I focus more on finishing urgent tasks than making long-term plans.”**

Why It's Acceptable: This is a variation of “I focus too much on details and don't always see the bigger picture,” but it's more specific and less of a cliché. You could also back it up by pointing to a long-term project that didn't go well because you were busy with day-to-day emergencies.

- **“Sometimes I have trouble saying ‘no’ to requests from co-workers and classmates, which makes it harder to complete my own work.”**

Why It's Acceptable: This *can* be a real weakness in certain situations (e.g., it's 3 AM, and you need to finish a pitch book by 7 AM), but it's not necessarily a deal-breaker. Bankers *do* want you to help other teams and respond to requests from others.

- **“I submit my projects and work on time, but sometimes I forget to follow up and check to see what I need to change or improve.”**

Why It's Acceptable: This is a legitimate weakness that could hurt you in IB, but it's not that serious a weakness... since you still get your work done. Also, in most cases, it's up to the senior bankers to respond and *tell you* what to fix or improve.

- **“In team settings, I find it tough to balance doing the work itself and also managing others and answering their questions.”**



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Why It's Acceptable: This one is a weakness/challenge that every manager experiences, so it is legitimate, but *it won't affect you as a junior banker* that much since you'll mostly be doing the work.

- **“Sometimes I’m too ‘soft’ evaluating others and giving them useful feedback, which makes it harder for a team to function well.”**

Why It's Acceptable: The supporting example is critical because this one sounds vague if you present it as is. A good supporting story might be: “I’m a teaching assistant, and, as a student myself, I feel guilty grading other students too harshly. But I’ve been working with my professor to refine the process and become more critical.”

Besides the examples above, there are a few others that are “borderline” – they’re not terrible or outright stupid, but they’re also not *ideal*:

- **“I’m very structured and process-driven, but I’m not the most creative person.”**

Why This is Borderline: Creativity is not an important skill in junior-level investment banking roles. Following orders, completing tasks on time, and avoiding mistakes are far more important. You can use this weakness for variations on traditional strength/weakness questions (see below), but it’s not ideal for a standalone question.

- **“I’m not good at presentations or public speaking.”**

Why This is Borderline: You *sometimes* use these skills in junior-level IB roles, but as with creativity, they’re less relevant than everything else above. Some interviewers may also challenge this response by saying, “OK, but who cares? You won’t do much public speaking anyway.”

- **“I’m overly competitive, and I hate losing.”**

Why This is Borderline: This one also falls into the “Not that relevant” category. You will lose pitches and deals all the time, and you have to accept the outcome, so in that sense, this weakness could hurt you. But it doesn’t matter that much: Senior bankers have far more to lose since they get paid based on closed deals.

Should You Explain How You’re Working to Fix Your Weaknesses?



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Yes, you can give a sentence or two to explain how you're working to fix or improve your weaknesses.

But don't take this concept *too far*.

For example, if you give three weaknesses from the list above, don't say, "I'm improving my time management skills by taking a class and working with a coach. To fix my other two weaknesses, I'm using Approaches B and C" at the end.

Make it more casual and say, "I've been working to improve my time management skills, and I'm using feedback from my bosses to change my schedule and work style."

If the interviewer wants more details, let him/her ask for them.

Do **NOT** ramble or turn your "weakness" answer into a 5-minute soliloquy.

You can give a longer answer if you're asked for a single weakness or "your greatest weakness," but you have to be concise if you're asked for both strengths and weaknesses or multiple weaknesses.

Variations of Your Strengths and Weaknesses

There are dozens of variations on these questions.

You don't need to "prepare" different stories or responses, but you should be aware of the other questions that also ask about your strengths and weaknesses:

- "Why should we hire you?" (Combined strengths and work experience question)
- "How would your best friend describe you in three words?" (You can use more 'casual' strengths)
- "What's your biggest failure?" (Combined weakness and work experience question)
- "What feedback did you receive from your most recent internship or job?" (Combined strengths and weaknesses question)
- "How would a former co-worker describe you?" (Combined strengths and weaknesses question)
- "What peer feedback have you received in group exercises at your business school?" (Combined strengths and weaknesses question)



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- “If you worked in a group with only multiple you’s, what would happen?” (Combined strengths and weaknesses question)

We’ll explain all these questions – and more – [in the section on Strengths and Weaknesses Questions & Answers](#).

For now, just be aware that you may need to spin your strengths and weaknesses to fit slightly different questions.

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Strengths and Weaknesses Questions & Answers

All these questions should be easy **if you spent time selecting your 3 strengths and 3 weaknesses**, [as we recommended above](#).

The main challenge with these questions is *adapting* your responses to the many variations they could ask.

In some cases, you might have to combine your strengths and weaknesses with your three “short stories,” your main “story,” or your answers to other questions.

1. What are your strengths and weaknesses?

You should present 2-3 strengths and 2-3 weaknesses and then give a short example – probably one of your “short stories” – to support them.

If you don’t have one story that illustrates everything, you can use one story for your strengths and another story for your weaknesses, but you have to make them **CONCISE**.

You don’t need to explain how you’re improving or “fixing” your weaknesses because it will be almost impossible to do all of that in less than 150 words.

Sample “Good” Answer: “My main strengths are my work ethic, ability to meet tight deadlines under pressure, and my quantitative skills.

I used those strengths in my last corporate finance internship when I had to work with different departments to complete a quarterly report on a last-minute deadline when the more senior



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team members in my group were gone. I had to make sense of unfamiliar reports and transactions quickly and submit accurate work.

My weaknesses are that I sometimes take too long to make decisions and that I sometimes have trouble speaking up in group situations even when I know something is going wrong.

In one recent M&A case study at business school, I could tell that one team member wasn't doing the required work, but I waited too long to approach him, and he hurt our team's efforts. We could have avoided problems if I had spoken up earlier."

2. What's your greatest strength?

For this question, pick one strength and use one of your "short stories" to support it. This is a "softball question" that tests your preparation more than anything else.

Sample "Good" Answer: "My greatest strength is my communication ability. I work well with team members from different backgrounds, and I make sure everyone is on the same page so there are no misunderstandings.

For example, in my operational consulting internship, I worked in a 10-person marketing team, and the initial work we produced wasn't great. No one wanted to blame the others, but I knew that several team members didn't completely understand the tasks.

I spoke with everyone and figured out that several team members had science and engineering backgrounds and didn't know much about marketing, so I explained the concepts to them and then divided up the work so that they could focus on the numbers and analysis instead.

The client ended up liking our campaigns and hiring the firm again."

3. What's your greatest weakness?

You could pick any of your weaknesses for this one, but the one that's **least damaging** for the role is best.

For example, if you're applying to Associate or VP-level roles, **don't** say that you have trouble delegating tasks since you'll have to delegate tasks all the time.

You could say that you're structured and not too creative if you're applying to a startup or tech company, but it's **not** a great weakness for IB roles since they don't require much creativity.



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Once you've picked the best weakness, back it up with one of your "short stories" and briefly explain how you're working to improve it.

Sample "Good" Answer: "My greatest weakness is that I often take too long to make a decision, even when I've settled on the correct decision."

For example, when I was running my math tutoring business in university, one of the tutors I hired received very 'mixed' feedback from students. Some loved his style, and some hated it.

He wasn't hurting the business, but he wasn't a huge benefit, either, and he was difficult to deal with since he always asked for higher pay.

I knew I should have let him go within the first 2-3 months, but I waited 6 months to do it, which reduced the time I could spend on sales and marketing and limited our growth.

I've been working on this problem by forcing myself to make a certain number of decisions each week, even if they're small, to get into the habit of taking action more quickly."

4. Why should we hire you? (Or "What value can you bring to our firm?")

This one is a combined Strengths and "Work Experience" question, but you shouldn't *just* give your strengths and point to success stories.

At the beginning of your answer, state that companies hire employees to earn more money, save time/money, and improve processes.

And then explain how your strengths tie into these points and how you'd get the company results shortly after you join.

Sample "Good" Answer: "Companies hire people who can help them make more money or save time and money, and I'm confident I could do all of those."

First, I've always added value for management in past internships by saving them time, which is the same as saving them money – I did that in my private equity internship when I improved the sourcing process and made company searches 20% faster.

Second, I've also completed valuation and financial modeling work in my previous internships, so I could immediately save your team members time and let them focus on winning clients and closing deals.



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Finally, I've made teams perform better by helping team members to get along – one example is when I got engineering and technical team members up to speed in my operational consulting internship.

I could use all those skills at your firm and help you earn more and save more.”

5. How would your best friend describe you in three words?

This question is another Strengths one, but you can give more “casual” strengths that relate to your personality more than the skill set required by investment banking.

You can still draw from the same list of strengths, but don't use words like “team player” or “attentive to detail” – who would use those words to describe *a friend*?

Sample “Good” Answer: “Hardworking, careful, and outgoing. I've worked with my best friend on a lot of engineering projects in university, so she knows that I can work long hours and fix problems at the last minute.

She would also say that I'm careful because I take a lot of time to make decisions and I put a lot of thought into details, like the speaking order in group presentations.

Finally, she would describe me as outgoing because I made friends easily when I studied abroad in Spain last year, and I like meeting new people at events and in student groups.”

6. What's your biggest failure?

You can use your “Failure” story here. Just make sure that it *is* a decently big failure or you'll look silly.

For example, don't say that earning a B+ in one class, despite earning A's everywhere else, was your “biggest failure.”

A “good” failure might be a job or internship that didn't go well, a business that failed, or a study-abroad experience that disappointed.

Sample “Good” Answer: “My biggest failure was being forced to shut down my math tutoring business in university. I started the business because I received a lot of requests from other students for help with math assignments, and I had developed good teaching methods.



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Initially, it went well, and I won a few dozen clients who were satisfied. But when I tried to expand the business by hiring more tutors and sales staff, I had a tough time maintaining service quality.

I was spending so much that we began losing money, so I had to shut it down and go back to only a few of my clients.

I was disappointed, but I learned the difficulty of delivering a service and also managing and training others at the same time. If I did this again, I would split up the roles and focus on one or the other.”

7. What feedback did you receive from your most recent internship or job?

This one is a combined Strengths and Weaknesses question, and like all “combined” questions, it’s tough to give supporting stories *and* explain how you’re fixing your weaknesses.

You’ll have to state something brief for the “fix,” or, if you’re using multiple stories to support your points, leave out the “fix” altogether.

You don’t need to give all 3 strengths and all 3 weaknesses; it’s better to give 1-2 so that you have a few “in reserve” in case the person wants more.

Sample “Good” Answer: “On the last day of my private equity internship last year, my Principal said he admired my ability to work long hours, get up to speed quickly on valuation and financial modeling, and find interesting companies.

In one case, we got an inbound deal a few days before a bank’s bidding deadline, and I had to research the medical imaging industry and figure out how to value the company and assess its competitors, so I stayed in the office for a holiday weekend and pulled an all-nighter to finish it.

For areas to improve on, they said I wasn’t always the best at managing my time and following up on assignments. For example, I’d often find interesting private companies and do the initial research for the full-time team, but I’d spend too much time on new leads rather than following up on companies I had already found.”

8. How would a former co-worker describe you?

This is another combined Strengths and Weaknesses question, and it’s similar to the one about the three words your best friend would use to describe you.



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The difference is that you should be more formal with your response since you're discussing a former co-worker, not your best friend.

You can mention 1-2 strengths and a single weakness for this one.

Sample "Good" Answer: "My former co-worker in Facebook's corporate development team would describe me as enthusiastic and hard-working, but sometimes a bit scattered with my time management and day-to-day tasks.

My role wasn't strictly defined, so I often found myself handling random, last-minute requests. One time, bankers presented a potential M&A deal to us a few days before the first bidding deadline, and I jumped in to help a co-worker value the company and assess its impact on Facebook, so I had to stay late and learn a new sub-industry to do that.

But I didn't always explain to others exactly what I was doing, so there was sometimes confusion over my schedule and how much time I had available for tasks. I've been working to improve that by posting my rough schedule and daily tasks in my cubicle and letting my managers know when I get busy."

9. What peer feedback have you received in group exercises at your business school?

This is yet another combined Strengths and Weaknesses question, but the context is different: School rather than work.

But the same strategy applies: Go back to one of your prepared "short stories," picking one that relates to a student activity, and give 1-2 strengths and a single weakness.

Sample "Good" Answer: "In a recent stock pitch exercise, I worked with a team of four in my investment management class to screen companies and present our thesis. We came in third place out of 50 teams, so we did fairly well overall.

Everyone said I was efficient and had strong analytical skills – I quickly went through dozens of ideas we had brainstormed and came up with quick financial screens to eliminate many companies, which saved us all time. I also built many of the financial models we used.

They said I could improve by not judging other peoples' ideas so harshly. I knew a lot about many of the companies we considered, so I had strong opinions and I wanted to save us time. But I didn't always express my opinions in a restrained way. So, I've been working to tone down my words a bit, even if I have strong opinions."



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10. Why would we NOT give you a job offer today?

This one is also a combined Strengths and Weaknesses question, but you give your strengths *first*, and then admit at the end that you do have 1-2 weaknesses that could hurt your chances.

Also, you can cite something closer to your “real” weaknesses in this response.

Admit that other candidates might have more coursework or internships or *something else*, and then explain why you still don’t see that as a problem.

It would sound a bit silly to say that you might not receive a job offer because of your time management skills or decision-making ability.

Sample “Good” Answer: “I see no reason why you wouldn’t give me an offer because I can add value to your firm and help you earn more and save more.

In past internships, such as my corporate banking one at Bank of America, my managers have said that I made their lives easier by handling analytical and modeling work, improving the screening and approval process for loans, and helping the team function more effectively by training new hires.

If you did not give me an offer today, it might be because I don’t as much investment banking experience as other candidates.

However, I have had corporate banking, private equity, and capital markets experience, and I am confident I could immediately add value to your team.”

11. If you worked in a group with multiple you’s, what would happen?

This one is also a combined Strengths and Weaknesses question, and you can also give more of a “real” weakness.

It may also be OK to use more of a “borderline weakness,” such as a lack of creativity, since this question asks you about a hypothetical situation.

Sample “Good” Answer: “I tend to be very structured in my thinking, and I always like following a set process to get results. I’m also good at getting input from others and working long hours to finish urgent tasks.

So, if I worked with cloned versions of myself, we would be very orderly and we would finish the work on-time and present it effectively.



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But my weakness is that I'm not a particularly creative thinker, and I rarely come up with 'outside the box' ideas.

So, if we were pitching a stock or making an M&A recommendation, we probably wouldn't come up with a crazy idea that stands out and gets a lot of attention.

But our presentation would be supported by a lot of facts and numbers, and it would be well-structured."

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