

Five Habits Of A Strong Answer

~23,00

applicants a cycle

~10,00

shortlisted for interview

2

tutors, testing **how** you think,
not what you know

1 • Look past the obvious framing

- Interview questions are dressed in everyday language, but your subject decides what a strong answer draws on.
- A question that sounds like an ethics debate is often asking for theory from your discipline, not a moral opinion.
- Before answering, ask: what does my subject give me here that a bystander wouldn't reach for?

EXAMPLE — ECONOMICS & MANAGEMENT

Asked whether bankers deserve their pay, the strong answer sets fairness aside and asks whether the banking labour market is genuinely competitive, and whether high profits reflect uncompetitiveness rather than injustice.

2 • Think big, go lateral

- Broad courses ask broad questions on purpose, to see how many angles you bring to one problem quickly.
- Nerves push people toward short, narrow answers; consciously resist that and range across every relevant idea.
- Bring in an overarching theory, not just the first factor that comes to mind.

EXAMPLE — PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS & ECONOMICS

Asked why income per head is 50 to 100 times higher in the US than in Burundi or Malawi, the strongest answers ranged across technology, capital, education, infrastructure, trade and the rule of law, rather than settling on one cause, that allows you to evaluate and compare causes.

Comparing > Listing

3 • Apply what you know, in a new setting

- Many questions need no knowledge beyond A-level; they need you to connect things you've learned in an unfamiliar context.
- The skill being tested is making the connection yourself, following it through with the tutor's guidance.
- No source of knowledge is off limits: syllabus, wider reading, or something noticed outside the classroom.

EXAMPLE — BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES

Asked why sugar in urine can indicate diabetes, every fact needed, filtration, reabsorption, carrier proteins, was already covered at school. The task was connecting them into a clinical explanation, one guided step at a time. Being able to think critically to apply that knowledge is that they're looking for.

Nerves Are Normal

The adrenaline that makes your heart race also sharpens recall and speeds up processing, the same response that helps people think clearly under real pressure elsewhere.

- Notice the urge to give a quick, short, safe answer, then deliberately widen it
- Being interviewed already means you have the ability to pass; treat the room as an conversation, not a test you might fail

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Continued

Habits five and six, then the single skill that ties all six together: showing your reasoning, not just your conclusion. None of these belong to one subject; a strong candidate in any discipline shows all six.

4. Take the hint, use it

- Interviewers give hints to help you progress. They are clues, not answers. Use them to unlock the next step.
- Using a hint shows mathematical maturity. It demonstrates you can read structure, recognise what is useful, and move forward efficiently.
- Ask for clarification if needed. If a hint is unclear, ask. It shows you are engaging actively and thinking carefully.

PHYSICS / ENGINEERING

A ruler is balanced at the 30 cm mark. Where should a second support go so the ruler balances at its centre of mass?

Hint: Consider moments about the 30 cm mark.

5. Persist through iteration

- Hard problems require multiple attempts. Testing ideas, spotting flaws, and trying again is how real understanding develops.
- Iteration shows resilience and depth. It demonstrates you can work through complexity rather than giving up early.
- Refine, don't restart. Build on what you have, adjust your approach, and improve your attempts.

EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

The average score on a test is 72. Two-thirds of the average score is added to every result. What is the new average?

Hint: Think about how the average changes under adding a constant.

The Skill Underneath All Six: Thinking Out Loud

Working silently, then giving a final answer, gives a tutor nothing to respond to. Narrating your reasoning as you go gives them something to steer, which is the entire point of the exercise.

- Say what the question seems to be asking, in your own words, before you attempt it.
- Name the closest thing you already know, even if it's not a full answer.
- Say the wrong thing out loud rather than the right thing silently.

What it sounds like

"I'd start from mass equals density times volume. Water's around 1 gram per cubic centimetre, so if I estimate the volume, I can get a rough mass, then adjust for anything that changes the density."

"My instinct is that this depends on how you define the term, so let me take the stricter reading first and see where it leads, then test it against the looser one."

Weak vs Strong: The Same Unfamiliar Question

WEAK

- Sits in silence, then says 'I don't know' and stops
- Rushes to a confident answer with no reasoning shown
- Defends the first idea, even after a hint says otherwise

STRONG

- Restates the question, names what's closest to known ground
- Reasons forward from there, out loud, in real time
- Adjusts immediately and visibly once a tutor offers a steer

One Set Of Habits, Every Subject

It's tempting to read the examples above and assume each habit 'belongs' to a subject, that scientists take hints, humanities students trust instinct, and so on. That's not how it works. Every strong candidate, in every subject, draws on all six habits in the same interview, often within the same answer.

- Subjects differ in surface style, how formal the language is, whether there's a calculation involved, not in which habits of thinking actually matter
- Rehearse all six regardless of what you're applying for; narrowing your focus to one or two is the mistake worth avoiding

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Habits, Then Logistics

Five reflexes to carry into the room, followed by the practical details, briefly, because they matter far less than the six habits above.

Five Reflexes For The Room

- 1 **Pause, Think Aloud** – Take a breath. Structure your thinking out loud.
- 2 **Follow The Logic** – Make every step explicit, even the obvious ones.
- 3 **Engage Actively** – Ask clarifying questions. Build on what's been said.
- 4 **Embrace Uncertainty** – It's normal not to know. Show how you'd explore it.
- 5 **Stay Curious** – Let interest and joy in the subject come through.

Two Questions Worth Rehearsing In Depth

Why this subject?

Go beyond I've always loved it. Share the moment something clicked, a topic that fascinates you, or a problem you're eager to understand better. Link your interest to how you explore ideas on your own.

Why Oxford?

Name specific tutors, courses, or resources. Connect them to your academic goals and how Oxford's environment will help you contribute, not just what you'll take from it.

What Not To Do

-  Don't memorise answers. It shows.
-  Don't guess wildly. Reason it through.
-  Don't dominate. Collaboration beats monologue.
-  Don't panic in silence. Say what you're thinking.

Practical Essentials

Setup

- Stable internet, quiet space, good lighting
- Test audio and video beforehand
- Keep paper and pen ready
- Close distractions, mute notifications

On The Day

- Log in 10 minutes early
- Bring ID if requested
- Have water nearby
- Dress comfortably and professionally

Every question is an opportunity to show how you think, not what you think. Chase the reasoning, not the right answer, and the rest tends to follow.

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