

# The Case Interview Flow: Structure, Clarifying Questions, and First Moves

A case interview is not a test of whether you know the "right" framework. It is a test of how you think, out loud, in front of a stranger, under time pressure. Most candidates lose marks in the first ninety seconds — not because they cannot do the math later, but because they rush past the part where they understand the problem. Learning the flow of a case interview, and rehearsing it until it feels natural, is what separates a candidate who sounds structured from one who is actually structured.

## The five stages of a typical case

While every interviewer has their own style, most live cases move through the same five stages:

- **The prompt.** The interviewer describes a business situation — a client losing market share, a company deciding whether to enter a new market, a factory whose margins are shrinking.
- **Clarification.** You ask questions to understand the objective, the client, and any constraints before you propose how to tackle it.
- **Structuring.** You lay out, out loud or on paper, the areas you would investigate and why — your roadmap for the rest of the conversation.
- **Analysis.** You work through data, exhibits, or estimates the interviewer provides, drawing conclusions as you go.
- **Synthesis and recommendation.** You pull the threads together into a clear answer, a rationale, and — where relevant — next steps or risks.

Candidates who structure their prep around these five stages, rather than around memorising frameworks, tend to sound far more natural in the room. The framework is a tool you reach for during the structuring stage — it is not the whole performance.

## Why clarifying questions matter more than candidates think

It is tempting to treat the prompt as a starting gun and launch straight into a framework. Resist that instinct. A good set of clarifying questions does three things at once: it narrows an ambiguous prompt into a solvable problem, it signals to the interviewer that you think before you act, and it buys you a few extra seconds to organise your thoughts.

Useful clarifying questions usually fall into a small number of categories:

- **Objective.** What does success look like for the client — revenue growth, cost reduction, a yes/no decision, a number?
- **Scope.** Are we looking at one product, one region, or the whole business? Over what time horizon?
- **Context.** Why is this question being asked now? Has something changed — a new competitor, a regulatory shift, a board mandate?
- **Constraints.** Is there a budget, a deadline, or a "no-go" option already ruled out by the client?

Two or three sharp questions are usually enough. A long interrogation reads as stalling rather than thinking — the goal is precision, not volume.

## Framing your approach before you dive in

Once the objective is clear, take a brief, visible moment to organise your thinking — many candidates ask for thirty to sixty seconds to jot down a structure. What you say next should sound like a roadmap, not a brainstorm: "To answer this, I'd want to look at three things: first, how the market itself is evolving; second, how the client is positioned relative to competitors; and third, whether the client has the internal capabilities to act on what we find. I'll start with the market."

That single statement does a lot of work. It shows the interviewer where the conversation is going, it gives you a structure to fall back on if you get stuck, and it lets the interviewer redirect you early if you are heading down the wrong path — which is far better than discovering that ten minutes in.

## Common mistakes in the opening minutes

- **Jumping to a memorised framework.** Profitability trees and 4Ps are useful starting

points, but reciting one without adapting it to the specific prompt sounds rehearsed rather than reasoned.

- **Treating clarification as a formality.** Asking "is there anything else I should know?" and moving on misses the chance to actually shape the problem in your favour.
- **Going silent while structuring.** Interviewers are assessing how you think, not just what you conclude — narrate your reasoning as you organise it.
- **Overbuilding the structure.** Five or six branches with sub-branches sounds thorough but is hard to execute under time pressure. Two or three well-chosen areas, explored properly, beat five explored shallowly.

## Building the habit through repetition

The case interview flow is a habit, not a fact you memorise once. The way to build it is the same way athletes build muscle memory: short, repeated reps under realistic conditions — practising the opening minute of a case, out loud, with a timer running and a partner who can play the interviewer. After a few dozen reps, the rhythm of "clarify, frame, signal, proceed" stops feeling like a script and starts feeling like how you naturally approach an ambiguous problem — which, after all, is exactly what the interview is designed to find out.

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