CRAs at all experience levels find themselves in an extremely competitive job market. While the hard skills associated with the Clinical Research Associate position are easier to quantify in an interview, it is our opinion that being able to successfully express strong soft skills in an interview is actually more important.

I am sure many will disagree with me…but this gift is for those of you who do understand that having excellent soft skills will make you an incredible CRA.

We have compiled a list of questions that can be used by job seeker and hiring manager alike when it comes to assessing the soft skills of CRAs at any level. Note that many of these questions will fit multiple categories…and your responses may answer multiple questions. The point of this prep sheet is to enable you to think of these scenarios ahead of your interview in order to have a more effective conversation with the interviewer.

# **Time Management and Organizational Skills**

Having strong time management and organizational skills is critical in every role, but particularly crucial when it comes to being an effective CRA.

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| **Entry Level and Experienced CRA Questions** | **Tips and Insights** |
| Tell me about a time when you had a big project, including how you structured it in order to complete it on time.  | Most hiring managers are going to be looking for your skill in breaking down larger projects into more manageable, bite-sized tasks. **Entry Level or Junior CRAs:** Even if you are fresh out of college you should be able to come up with a scenario to describe your time management and organizational capabilities. Hiring managers will learn a lot just by listening to how you were able to break down that large project into manageable tasks. It is also important to show how you prioritized those tasks in order to perform the duties needed to meet your timeline. **Experienced CRAs:** Consider discussing how you organize yourself when it comes to being assigned to a new study. In other words, how do you take a large, multi-site study and organize yourself in order to successfully execute your monitoring responsibilities?  |
| Tell me about a time where you missed a deadline.  | And before you start thinking too hard on this one, let me state that **everyone** has missed a deadline. **Everyone.** You have forgotten your mother’s (your brother’s, your sister’s, you father’s) birthday. You were late to a doctor’s appointment. You hit the snooze too many times and overslept. You got stuck in traffic and didn’t arrive somewhere on time. The point of the question isn’t to necessarily describe a serious situation where you caused the earth to stop spinning. The point of the question is to exhibit your professionalism such as:* How you communicated (hopefully proactively) that you were going to be late (to the appointment, on meeting an objective, or turning in a deliverable).
* How you **re**prioritized your workload in order to address the most urgent or most important tasks.
* Or – if you were overwhelmed with tasks and all of them were urgent or important, how you asked for help or delegated to someone else.
* And – the most important point is to explain what you learned from the missed deadline. Said differently, what have you put into place to ensure you don’t make the same mistake again?

While the entry level candidate may not have a specific work-related example, anyone with work experience should be prepared with a **real** work-related example rather than a personal one. **A side note from Ang:** When someone tells me they have never missed a deadline, it leaves me with the impression that either they don’t commit, they don’t worry about missing a commitment, or they don’t self-assess. Everyone has missed a deadline (everyone).  |
| How do you determine priorities when scheduling your time? Give examples. | While similar to the first question on how you organize a big project, this one is different in that it focuses on time management rather than organizational skills. **A side note from Ang:** It is absolutely appropriate to discuss how you prioritize in a balanced way…family, personal, and work priorities.  |
| Describe a time when you had too many projects or assignments due at the same time. How did you handle it?  | As with some of the other questions, the interviewer is going to be looking at your abilities in the following areas:* How you **re**prioritize on the fly.
* How you ask for help in identifying the most urgent tasks if you feel all of the tasks are urgent and you know you can’t get to them all.
* How you ask for help.

**A side note from Ang:** The best answer isn’t that you just worked more. Pulling all-nighters may work in college, but it isn’t going to sustain you as a professional for long. Think of problem solving, delegating, and working smarter rather than just working longer hours.  |
| **Junior or Senior Level CRA Questions** | **Tips and Insights** |
| What do you do to prepare for a visit? | Hiring managers are going to want to feel confident that you have a methodology…a standard step-by-step process that you employ every time you are preparing to conduct a visit. **A side note from Ang:** You may use a different methodology for remote visits vs onsite visits. Consider pointing any differences out during this discussion.  |
| Please provide a real example of when you prepared to conduct a visit, but once you started the visit (whether remote or onsite), you realize there had been a crisis that wasn’t dealt with properly (drug not refrigerated, SAE or AE not reported, etc).  | [Behavioral](https://craresources.com/blog/recruiting-tips-simple-rules-behavioral-interviewing/) questions are telling, and many candidates fail when answering ‘tell me about a time’ circumstance questions because they answer in hypotheticals. Meaning, a weak answer would simply be a statement on how you think you would handle the situation rather than describing a specific situation. Instead, consider answering this question in this way:* Describe a specific situation where you experienced this scenario.
* Detail your behavior or the actions you took to resolve the situation.
* Share the outcome or the results of the situation.
* Be sure to use terms like “I” instead of “We” because you want to be clear of **your** personal role in the resolution of the issue.

**A side note from Ang:** For more information on how to prepare for Behavioral Interviews including several examples that will help with your preparation, check out this [resource](https://craresources.com/blog/recruiting-tips-preparing-behavioral-interview/).  |

# **Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills**

It is important for CRAs to be able to ask probing questions, analyze the responses, and then make strong decisions based on the data. To be effective as a Clinical Research Associate, you must exhibit critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Even candidates with limited work experience can provide evidence of being a critical thinker and problem solver. For those of you who are CRAs, consider describing examples from current or recent projects.

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| **Entry Level and Experienced CRA Questions** | **Tips and Insights** |
| Tell me about a time when you were working on a project and an unexpected problem occurred.  | The interviewer is looking for how you initially reacted, how you proceeded to handle the problem, and what the final outcome was. Even if the hiring manager doesn’t ask this question, preparing for it will make you a much stronger interviewer because it will enable you to have examples which will articulate the following skills:* How you handle difficult situations.
* How you prioritize or **re**prioritize on the fly.
* How you solve problems in spite of the situation presented.
* How you communicate and escalate.
* How you delegate or ask for help.
* And in some cases, how you learn. Meaning, is there anything you will be able to proactively do on future projects to avoid a similar situation?
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| Tell me about a difficult decision you’ve made this year.  | I like this question because it helps me to understand what my candidate considers ‘difficult’. Be prepared to discuss how you came to the decision, how you communicated the decision, and what the ultimate outcome was. |
| Explain the most difficult project you have ever worked on.  | Be sure to describe what made it difficult. I would also state that it is important to understand the intention of the question. Is the interviewer looking for your competency (i.e., what is the most complex protocol you have worked on), or a general question (i.e., the project team or project circumstances are what made the project difficult)? When I worked with IBM, I was interviewing interns for an upcoming Hardware Engineering program. The program was intended for Senior level students within Computer and Electrical Engineering university programs. Some of the responses I received to this question were phenomenal. Folks had built robots for competitions, set up intranets in school settings…they knocked my socks off. One candidate, however, answered that his most difficult project had been setting up his sister’s home computer. In the whole scheme of things, his ‘difficult project’ just didn’t seem to measure up when compared to other students’ examples.Maybe what made this project difficult to him was working with his sister. The problem was that he didn’t articulate that to me…and at the time, I was a novice interviewer and didn’t think to ask. **A side note from Ang:** Always (always always) explain what made the project difficult and how you tackled it anyway.  |

# **Communication and Conflict Resolution Skills**

While the interviewer’s perception of your communication skills can be partly determined by how well you listen and respond throughout the interview, the interviewer will also understand you are on your best behavior. Meaning, you will be guarded during that interview.

Individuals who become successful CRAs know how difficult the clinical research environment can be. Being able to show that you have the ability to deal with tough situations will translate into your ability to maneuver high touch sites, missing-in-action investigators or key stakeholders, and demanding sponsors.

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| **Entry Level and Experienced CRA Questions** | **Tips and Insights** |
| What is your typical way of dealing with conflict? Give me an example.  | Use a real example. I know that I have repeated this statement multiple times…but it is critically important to use real examples.Explain the example first. It could be as simple as an argument that you have had with a family member. Then describe how you dealt with it. Be clear on your role in coming up with the solution, using terms like “I” instead of “We”.  |
| Tell me about a time you disagreed with a friend or colleague on an important topic. How did you approach this person and resolve the dispute? | Slightly different than the first question because not only will the answer to this question exhibit how you handle difficult situations, but it will also show your natural leadership abilities. Also importantly, this response will show how you communicated your concerns. Were you too passive? Too aggressive? Too passive / aggressive (ha)? **A side note from Ang:** This answer will also exhibit your negotiation as well as your critical thinking and problem-solving skills! |
| Give me an example of a time when you were able to successfully communicate with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa). | Several years ago, I was a CAD programmer for a manufacturing company. I seriously disliked my manger. And she disliked me. But I hung in there because I knew that the experience I was gaining in that job would further my career. Provide that type of example. Be sure to discuss how you specifically handled the situation. Note any obstacles or difficulties you had to face and how you dealt with them.  |
| What is your definition of proactive communication and how would you employ this practice in your position as a CRA? | Depending on the interviewer’s role, the term ‘proactive communication’ may mean different things. In general terms, proactive communication is about getting in front of a situation before…well…the situation happens. For example, as a CRA perhaps you notice a certain trend of issues at several of your sites. You may therefore consider proactively communicating your findings to other sites in order to help them avoid the same issue.  |
| Describe a time where you were working with others on a project who disagreed with your approach, solutions, or ideas. | For the experienced CRA, consider using an example where you had to adapt to a Coordinator or Investigator’s personality or working style. CRAs at all levels can also use examples of adapting to your manager’s working or management style. In all cases, the interviewer is looking for you to be thoughtful in your approach. Were you adaptable? Flexible? Did you consider the other team members’ motivations? Or did you take the disagreement personally? Were you able to keep focused on the project including what needed to be done in order to meet the project’s objectives?  |
| Tell me about a time when you had to use your presentation skills to influence someone’s opinion.  | For the experienced CRA, this may be an example where you used the protocol, GCP or ICH guidelines to explain the ‘why’ behind a finding. For the entry level candidate, any situation where you have leveraged facts to help sway someone’s opinion will translate nicely.  |

# **Additional Logistical Thoughts**

We have a wealth of information on [interviewing tips available](https://craresources.com/blog/category/interview-tips/) on our [blog](https://craresources.com/blog/) but I want to call out a couple of very important logistical details all candidates should consider.

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| **Entry Level and Experienced CRA Questions** | **Tips and Insights** |
| For Phone Screens | * Be sure to have [researched the company](https://craresources.com/blog/recruiting-tips-prepare-effective-phone-interview/) prior to your interview.
* Know the typical [Do’s and Don’ts](https://craresources.com/blog/interview-dos-donts/) when it comes to interview etiquette.
* Nervous? [Overcome the fear of interviewing](https://craresources.com/blog/overcoming-fear-interviewing/) by going through the exercises provided in this linked article.
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| For Video Interviews | * Understand how to [make eye contact](https://craresources.com/blog/simplifying-video-interview/) and why it is important (it is tricky with video interviews)
* Ensure your [background is organized](https://craresources.com/blog/simplifying-video-interview/).
* Understand the [limitations of technology](https://craresources.com/blog/prepare-video-conference-interview/) and how to prepare for what could go wrong.
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| For Presentation Interviews | More and more we are seeing clients request candidates to create and deliver a presentation as part of their interview process. Here are some details on [how to prepare](https://craresources.com/blog/tips-to-prepare-for-a-presentation-interview/).  |
| For Face-to-Face Interviews | * Know the [basic expectations](https://craresources.com/blog/recruiting-tips-prepare-face-to-face-interview/) of any Face-to-Face interview.
* Ah…and I love this one…don’t make these [fatal mistakes](https://craresources.com/blog/ten-fatal-interviewing-mistake-part/) during your interview!
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# **My last thought…**

**Be you.** An interview shouldn’t be a dog-and-pony show. Every hiring manager we work with cares about their team members. They care about their company and their company’s mission. They care about this industry.

And don’t you care too? The interview is the perfect opportunity to show your perspective new employer that you love this industry, you have passion, you are ambitious, and that you are super excited to work on their projects.

And if you need us, we are here. Our resources:

* Our CRA page: <https://craresources.com/cras/>
* Our Jobs page: <https://craresources.com/job-listings/>
* Our Blog: <https://craresources.com/blog/>
* Our LinkedIn Group: <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/4539829/>
* Or contact us directly via email: recruiting@craresources.com