

What is an interview?

We go through our lives interviewing and being interviewed every day. An interview is basically an encounter in which two people who may not know anything about each other, are consciously working to form an impression of the other. Thus many of your daily interactions and conversations could be considered ‘interviews’. If you can begin seeing some of these moments as mini-interviews, you will begin to gain greater insight into the way you portray yourself, and therefore greater control over the way you are perceived. When you are in a conversation, try and imagine how the other person is seeing you and what it is you can and cannot do to influence that perspective. Observe your friends when you talk to them – what are they doing or saying that could give a stranger a negative impression of them, or simply a wrong one?

A successful interview is therefore one where you have made conscious and thoughtful choices about how you to present yourself to others, and succeed in doing so. Thinking about how this process works will also help you to better explore and evaluate all of your personal, social and professional relationships. After all, if you can understand more about how others view you and how you can influence that view, then you can also begin to grasp a little more about why you see other people (or even judge them!) – friends, relatives, teachers, strangers – in the way you do.

Why do colleges do interviews?

As with every aspect of the application process, keep in mind that most American colleges use a holistic evaluation of your candidacy – considering not only your grades and scores but also looking for intellectual depth, social maturity and civic concern. The interview is yet another chance for you to add more such evidence to your application. Having presented yourself to the admissions officers in your essays and having had teachers describe you in their letters of recommendation, the interview is the chance to step up one more time and advocate for yourself. You may be offered an interview by a college either before applying or, in the case of the most selective schools, after you have submitted an application. Many schools will still offer some number of interviews on campus, but most will now give you the opportunity to interview with an alumnus in your home city. Whatever the location or circumstances, seek out and accept any opportunity for an interview that you can get!

How to prepare for the interview?

Whether you will be interviewed by an alumnus or an admissions staff person, he or she will ask questions meant to elicit an impression of you in relation to that college – is this

student the kind we want at our college; is this student a good fit for our institution; is this student likely one day to become a good representative alumnus?

But an interview is by definition a dance between at least two people – in other words, you have as much of a role to play as the interviewer does. Prepare for that role! Do not go into it thinking that all you have to do is answer the interviewer’s questions honestly. That is a great start, but probably not enough! After all, when you have a conversation with another person, there is a give and take in which you are not just a passive bystander, but also an equal participant. Similarly, an interviewer will ask questions to form an impression of you, and your role is in turn to shape and control that impression while also eliciting information about the college. In short, do not go into the interview feeling like the proverbial lamb being led to the slaughter! Whether or not this conversation will be fun and interesting will depend just as much on you as on the interviewer.

Preparing for the “dance” means being ready both to ask and answer questions. At the very least, an interview is meant to be informational and give you a chance to find answers to some burning concerns you may have about a college. And let’s be honest, asking questions is often a great way to help cover those awkward silences that occur in conversations between strangers!

But asking questions is even more important than this. Of the following five behaviors that candidates exhibit in interviews, which one do you think recruiters find most unforgivable?

1. Poor personal appearance
2. Overemphasis on social aspect of college
3. Failure to look at interviewer while interviewing
4. Doesn’t ask questions
5. Late to interview

Well, yes – any of these five behaviors can be deadly – but the answer, according to professionals, is #4. So prepare yourself with some (not too many! not too few!) well-considered questions. That way, you can gain some control over the flow of the dialogue, as well as demonstrate your knowledge of and interest in the college. You can add to what you have tried to say about yourself in your essay, and you can reassure the interviewer that you do know what you are getting yourself into if you are selected by the college. Of course, *do avoid the other four pitfalls too!*

What to do in your interview?

Having prepared some questions for your interviewer and having done the research to answer his or her questions, enter the interview with confidence. During the ensuing conversation, keep in mind the attributes and qualifications that the interviewer is looking for, so that you can demonstrate that you have those by reflecting on your own experiences and by offering thoughtful questions and informed answers. A college interviewer is looking for:

- Commitment/interest in the college – neither gush with exaggerated enthusiasm nor leave any doubts about your interest in the college.

- Knowledge about the university's expectations and unique offerings – do you know what the college has to offer you that is unique and a good fit for you, or are you applying simply because others told you to do so?
- Your interest in being part of a community of very diverse people – have you been a good member of a team and do you work well with others?
- Leadership experience – can you lead and organize well?
- Will you, both as a student and subsequently as an alumnus or alumna, be a good representative of that college in the wider world?

What can you do to help answer these questions in the interviewer's mind?

- Show social grace by smiling, shaking hands when meeting, sitting straight and not slouching, saying thank you, waiting for an older person to take his or her seat before you do, not interrupting, and being respectful without being obsequious (look it up – it is good SAT practice!).
- It is fine to let the interviewer know you are nervous – it shows that you care and gives the interviewer a sense of your ability to handle stress.
- Be sure to talk about how your goals and philosophy blend and are strengthened by the goals and philosophy of the college/university, and back it up with examples and details ... this is where that earlier preparation comes in!
- Ask the interviewer about his or her own course of study as a way of introducing the academic aspects of the university that interest you – perhaps a particular program you like, a researcher you read about or a professor whose book you use in school? A college is above all **an academic institution**.
- You need not hash out all of your courses, grades or activities – the admission office will see these in your application – but it can be good to refer to them in passing as a way of making the point that you are a good fit for that institution and that you have a contribution to make – as a team member, as a leader, as a good citizen. Be a person, not a transcript or a list of activities! What's interesting about you?

What to avoid in your interview?

But there are also behaviors that should be avoided, and some are so obvious that they are easily overlooked!

- **TURN OFF YOUR PHONE AND DO NOT ANSWER IT OR CHECK YOUR TEXT MESSAGES DURING AN INTERVIEW! EVER!**
- Watch your language! This does not mean simply avoiding vulgar or off-colour words and phrases, but also the linguistic mannerisms that teenagers like and adults often despise! Excessive use of the word "like," for example!
- Avoid familiarity! You are not applying to become the interviewer's best buddy, but for admission to a university. Moreover, wait until you are invited to address a person by their first name before you use it – older interviewers may be particularly sensitive to this.
- Listen! Alumni and admissions interviewers will share with you their own ideas about their institution and what is most significant about the place. To learn what that those ideas are, you have to pay attention. You need not agree with everything, but you do need to show a respectful interest.

- Finally, parents, accept and understand this is your child's moment. No matter how keen you are to chat with the interviewer, no matter how strongly you feel about your child's achievements, you cannot and should not join in the conversation. Under any circumstances! The interviewer may understandably come to doubt your child's ability to cope as an independent adult on a college campus.

Make sure you get the interviewer's email so that you can write a note soon after the interview, as an expression of both gratitude and good manners. There is often a perception amongst students that these interviews do not matter. They do! No college will spend resources to set these up if they did not matter. The fact that they are often conducted by alumni is simply because admission officers are already overburdened, and in order to be fair to those many students who cannot travel to campuses for interviews. Some schools will tell you that you that interviews are strictly informational, which means that they serve only as an opportunity for you to ask questions. For many others, however, interviews are evaluative.

Of course, a 30 minute conversation when you are on your best behavior will certainly not trump what you did, or failed to do, in your classroom over several years, nor should it. But it will give you the chance to "inhabit" your application some more, and another chance to argue that you are a good fit with a college. Bad interview reports are few and far between, and are usually the result of specific behaviors – arriving late, refusing to meet the interviewer's eye, an inability to say more than yes or no, apathy or indifference, lying! Most interviewers are willing to give students the benefit of the doubt and really enjoy the rare chance of chatting with a bright and interesting young person. Some may even believe that your interest in their alma mater is already evidence of your good judgment! Relax, have fun, and build on that goodwill!