

Preparing for Graduate School Admissions: Interview Day

Introduction:

Interview Day is a vitally important last step in the process of applying to graduate school. If you have made it to the interview, you have one final chance to impress your prospective school. It's the time to prove that you are interested and intelligent, to distinguish yourself from other applicants, and is your last opportunity to explain any less-than-perfect GRE scores or that less-than-stellar GPA.

Because of its importance, preparing for your interview can be very stressful. You should practice answers to common interview questions (such as "Tell me about your research") and formulate a few questions of your own to ask your interviewer. Every second of your interview is closely watched – you come off as a more prepared, intellectual candidate if you can answer questions quickly and without hesitation.

Different schools have different methods of conducting interviews. As part of the research you should be doing for your school, check to see their policy for interviews. The UNLV website (http://psychology.unlv.edu/html/experimental_program.html) gives the following information:

"A personal interview with members of the program faculty is required for finalists in the selection process. Typically, applicants are notified if they are finalists by late February or early March. If a personal interview is not feasible, a telephone interview may be substituted."

Also, UNLV has a small "welcoming party" for all applying graduate students. This is also part of the interview, and will be discussed in detail later on.

Another benefit of interview day (aside from helping you get accepted into the program) is that it allows you to meet the faculty and explore the campus. This allows you to ask questions, and make decisions about the program. You may find that you don't like the campus, or aren't impressed with the program itself – this is helpful to figure out before spending thousands of dollars and moving all of your possessions.

Dos and Don'ts of Interview Day

Source: <http://gradschool.about.com/od/interviews/a/interviewdodont.htm>

Most students find the prospect of Interview Day slightly intimidating, to say the least. Tara Kuther, Ph. D. has prepared a convenient list of tips for the pre-, during, and post-interview process.

"If you have been asked to come in for an interview, then congratulations on getting one step closer to being accepted into the program. The interview is the final evaluation stage in the graduate school application process. Thus, it is essential that you come prepared and leave a lasting impression on the interviewers. The purpose of the interview is to get to know the applicant more personally than what is displayed on paper. This is your chance to distinguish yourself from the other applicants and show the interviewer what makes you a better candidate than the other applicants. In other words, why should you be accepted into the program.

Additionally, being granted an interview provides you with the opportunity to explore the campus and its facilities, meet professors and other faculty members, ask questions, and evaluate the program. During the interview process, you are not the only one being evaluated but you too are given the opportunity to evaluate the school and the program before you make a decision.

Because the interview is often viewed as a stressful experience and many students walk in unprepared and do not follow the proper etiquette involved in an interview, it is highly advised that you read through the following do's and don'ts on an interview in order to have a better interview experience.

Do:

Pre-Interview:

- Be prepared (prepare a copy of your resume or CV, papers, and/or presentations).
- Make a list of strengths, achievements, and recognitions received.
- Know who your audience will be.
- Conduct research on the school, graduate program, and faculty before the interview.
- Find a list of common interview questions.
- Practice answering questions with friends, family, and graduate school advisors.
- Rehearse Answers.
- Expect the unexpected questions.
- Be ready to answer personal and thought-provoking questions.
- Have enough rest the night before.

The Day of the Interview:

- Arrive early (at least 15 minutes early).
- Dress appropriately – Look neat and professional. (No Jeans, T-shirts, shorts, etc.).
- Bring copies of your resume (or CV), papers, and/or presentations.
- Relax.
- Be yourself.
- Be honest.
- Be confident.
- Be friendly.
- Be polite. Shake hands with the interviewer or anyone else you meet during your visit.
- Address the interviewer by their title and name (e.g. Dr. Smith).
- Make eye-contact.
- Be respectful and courteous.
- Be alert and attentive.
- Remember to have an appropriate body posture. Body language can express a lot of different moods so make sure you look interested.

- Express your ideas and thoughts in a clear, intelligent, and straightforward manner.
- Demonstrate your interest in the school and program in a passionate and enthusiastic manner. Let the interviewer know that you are really interested in attending their school without stating it directly.
- Discuss your achievements.
- Discuss your goals (career and graduate school goals).
- Discuss flaws that exist on your academic record (without making excuses).
- Be consistent in your answers. (Additionally, make sure your answers on the application are consistent with your interview answers.)
- Ask intelligent questions. Knowledgeable and specific questions that show you have done your homework are a plus (e.g. questions about the school, program, or faculty).
- Ask for clarification if you don't understand the questions.
- Sell yourself.

Post-Interview

- Relax.
- Remember to send a thank-you note/letter or email after the interview.
- Stay Optimistic.
- Use each interview experience to prepare for future interviews.

Don't:

Pre-Interview:

- Don't forget to do your research on the school, program and faculty.
- Don't forget to prepare and rehearse answers.
- Don't reschedule the interview unless if it is extremely necessary.

The Day of the Interview:

[Don't:]

- Be late.
- Come unprepared (without a copy of your resume or CV, papers, and/or presentations).
- Be nervous or worry. Remember to relax.
- Forget the interviewer's name.
- Talk too much or too little.
- Interrupt the interviewer.
- Forget to smile.
- Lie or exaggerate about your accomplishments.
- Discuss negative information.
- Make excuses for weaknesses.

- Criticize yourself or other individuals.
- Try to be funny.
- Speak in slang.
- Curse.
- Take things personally.
- Become emotional.
- Act immature.
- Talk about controversial or ethical issues (unless asked to).
- Answer your cell phone (Turn it off before the interview or don't bring it at all).
- Answer yes or no only or make your answers too general. Make sure you give descriptive and elaborate answers.
- Let your answers reflect what you think the interviewer wants to hear.
- Forget to thank the interviewer before you leave.

Post-Interview:

- [Don't] Forget to send a thank you note or letter to everyone you met.”

Possible Interview Questions

Source: <http://gradschool.about.com/od/interviews/a/intquest.htm>

It is incredibly important to prepare for your interview by practicing answers to possible questions. Read this list of possible interview questions and then answer at least 4 of the selected questions for the activity on the next page.

- Tell me about yourself.
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- If you're not accepted into graduate school, what are your plans?
- Why did you choose this career?
- What do you know about our program?
- Why did you choose to apply to our program?
- What other schools are you considering?
- In what ways have your previous experience prepared you for graduate study in our program?
- Any questions?
- What do you believe your greatest challenge will be if you are accepted into this program?
- In college, what courses did you enjoy the most? The least? Why?
- Describe any research project you've worked on. What was the purpose of the project and what was your role in the project?
- How would your professors describe you?
- How will you be able to make a contribution to this field?
- What are your hobbies?
- Explain a situation in which you had a conflict and how you resolved it. What would you do differently? Why?
- Describe your greatest accomplishment.
- Tell me about your experience in this field. What was challenging? What was your contribution?
- What are your career goals? How will this program help you achieve your goals?
- How do you intend to finance your education?
- What skills do you bring to the program? How will you help your mentor in his or her research?
- Are you motivated? Explain and provide examples.
- Why should we take you and not someone else?
- What do you plan to specialize in?
- What do you do in your spare time?
- What can be determined about an applicant at an interview?

Activity: Answer at least 4 of the following questions

1. If you're not accepted into graduate school, what are your plans?
2. Why did you choose to apply to our program?
3. What other schools are you considering?
4. Describe any research project you've worked on. What was the purpose of the project and what was your role in the project?
5. Describe your greatest accomplishment.
6. Tell me about your experience in this field. What was challenging? What was your contribution?
7. What can be determined about an applicant at an interview?

What to Ask During a Graduate Admissions Interview

Source: <http://gradschool.about.com/cs/interviews/l/blgradinterview.htm>

While the interview process is meant to determine your fit within an academic department, it is also a great way to check out the school of your choice.

“If you're applying to graduate school, expect an interview. While interviews aren't a required component of all applications, be prepared for the possibility. As admission to graduate school becomes more competitive, admissions interviews become commonplace.

Think about it: if you attend a particular program, you'll work very closely with a faculty member for several years. It's no wonder that faculty want to meet potential students -- and you should meet them for the very same reason. Do you really want to commit to working with someone for the foreseeable future, without meeting him or her beforehand?

[Ask:]

- What are the professors' current research interests?
- What characteristics distinguish this program from others in the same field?
- Where are recent alumni employed? What do most students do after graduation?
- What types of financial aid are offered? What criteria are used for choosing recipients?
- Are there any scholarships or fellowships available? How do I apply?
- Are there teaching opportunities, such as teaching assistantships and adjunct positions, for current students?
- Do most students publish an article or present a paper before graduation?
- What planned practical experiences are included in the program (e.g., internships)? Ask for examples of internship placements.
- What is the relative importance of admissions test scores, undergraduate grades, recommendations, statements on applications, experience, and other requirements?
- Does the department prefer applicants immediately out of undergraduate programs or do they prefer applicants with work experience? If they prefer or require experience, what kind of experience are they looking for?

[Tips for the interview]

Before the Interview

- Do your homework. Learn about the program and faculty. Read recent faculty publications to learn more about their labs.
- Prepare intelligent questions to ask.

During the Interview

- Dress professionally and comfortably.
- Find out what graduate students really think about their advisors and the program
- Try to meet graduate students for a one-on-one conversation so you can find out what they really think
- Don't underestimate the potential influence of current graduate students. Although they might sound like they're speaking off-the-cuff, remember that you're on an interview, regardless of with whom you're speaking. Present your best side because current graduate students may be in a position to help or hurt your application.
- Follow standard rules of interviewing (i.e., eye contact, self confident presentation, conservative dress, etc.)
- Some interviews include social events like parties. Don't drink too much (even if others do). Remember that even though it seems like a party, it's an interview. Assume that you're being evaluated at all times.”