



# Nailing the Admissions Interview

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**Interviews are an important element of the admissions process. These tips will help you prepare for the interview so that you can demonstrate your abilities, show your enthusiasm for a college, and share your sparkling personality. With a bit of solid information, combined with some forethought and research, you'll be able to nail the admissions interview.**

## Why Colleges Offer Interviews

Colleges have three motivations for offering interviews for prospective students. First, they want to gain more information about you as an applicant, and to assess your suitability for admission. Second, they want to give you more information about the college, and ensure that you leave with a favorable impression. In other words, interviews are as much a marketing strategy as an evaluation tool. Third, they want to gauge your interest in their college. Admissions officers want students who have a particular desire to attend their institution, and the interview is a way to learn how their school ranks on the student's list of choices.

Regardless of the motivations, you want to take the opportunity to present yourself as a candidate for admission. The interview is a chance for you to humanize your application, and for a representative of the college to learn more about you beyond your grades and test scores. It's also a great way to learn more about the college from someone who knows quite a bit about it. An interview—even a relatively bad one—rarely hurts your application. A good interview could help your candidacy considerably. So if an interview is offered, take it.

Why don't all colleges offer interviews? Generally, the issue is volume of applications: schools like New York University just have too many applicants to make interviews practicable. Highly selective schools with a very high volume of applications—including the Ivy League universities—never schedule on-campus interviews, but will offer alumni interviews to those who have completed their applications. State universities have too many applicants or have admissions procedures that are designed for efficiency. Generally the smaller colleges and more selective universities are the ones that will offer interviews as a way to get to know their applicants better, and as a way to offer a more personal touch in the admissions process.

## Types of Interviews

Most colleges will be clear about what sort of interviews they offer. We generally find three different kinds of interviews.

- **Evaluative:** Usually offered by admissions officers or highly trained current students, these are generally the most formal interviews.

- Informational or Non-Evaluative: These are offered as ways for prospective students to get to know a college better, and at the same time to give the student the opportunity to share information that may not be easily conveyed in the application.
- Alumni: Selective colleges may offer alumni interviews to applicants after they have submitted their applications.

## The Interviewers

Your interview experience will depend, in large part, upon the type of interview, as well as the person doing the interview. If a university offers an interview, the interviewer will either be a professional member of the admissions staff, an alumnus or alumna of the university, or a current student specially trained by the admissions office. This table summarizes how the different types of interviewers affect the structure, formality, and outcomes of the interview.

	Admissions Officer	Alumnus/Alumna	Student
<b>Formality of Interview</b>	High	Medium	Low
<b>Ability to Influence Admissions Decision</b>	High	Low	Medium
<b>Sensitivity to Appearance and Language</b>	Medium	High	Low
<b>Prior Knowledge of You</b>	Very high (if application already submitted), but could also be very low if interviewing early in the admissions process	Almost none; usually just name, contact information, and name of high school	Almost none; usually name, contact information, and maybe a few details if application is submitted
<b>Knowledge of School</b>	"Official" knowledge of the student body, majors offered, strengths of departments, housing options, etc.	Little beyond his or her own experience (which may not be very recent)	"Official" knowledge (because students are usually trained) as well as "unofficial" knowledge about quality of food, social options, dorm life, etc.

Adapted from Richard Montauk and Krista Klein, *How to Get Into the Top Colleges* (Prentice Hall Press, 2006)

## Your Objectives

Regardless of the type of interview or who the interviewer might be, you have to keep your own objective in mind. Your aims are as follows:

- Demonstrate your interest in and knowledge of the college.
- Convey your academic abilities, interests, and curiosity.
- Showcase your sparkling personality.
- Make a memorable impression.
- Speak with enthusiasm about your various activities and interests.
- Provide context for various choices you have made (dropping a class, adding a sport).

**Be yourself:**

Don't try to answer questions based on what you think the interviewer wants to hear.

## Do Your Homework

In order to demonstrate your interest in a college, you have to do your research. You need to know why you want to attend, what makes the place special, and the sorts of academic programs and extracurricular activities you'd enjoy pursuing. Many interviews are more a test of fit: do you understand whether you'd fit at this college, and can you convince the interviewer of this conviction? Here are some ways to prepare.

- Consider the activities you most enjoy both in and out of school now. Are similar activities offered at the college or university? What can you learn about them? Investigate those pages of the website, and know the names of the particular clubs and organizations on that campus.
- Think about your academic interests now, and investigate how those academic subjects are presented at the university. Check out the course catalog (sometimes call a "bulletin") and look at the requirements for particular majors you may be interested in pursuing. Even if you are undecided about your major, you can investigate a couple of departments that pique your curiosity: "I have no idea what I might major in at this school, but I noticed that there is a Latin American Studies major that looks interesting to me, because it combines my interests in Spanish, geography, and history."
- Know the basic admissions requirements, the demographics of the student body, the range of majors, and the basic organizational structure of the college.

**Prepare:**

Do practice interviews with friends or family. Take turns asking questions.

## Scheduling and Logistics

- Check the admissions website well in advance of your desired interview date to see whether the school offers interviews, and if so, of what type. Don't be caught flat-footed thinking it was a non-evaluative interview with a student, when in fact it is an evaluative interview with the admissions representative who will read your application.
- Sign up for the interview according to the procedures explained on the college website. If they ask you to fill out a form, fill out the form. If they ask you to use a web-based scheduling tool, use it. Or if they ask you to email or call, definitely make the call. (Parents: your student should make this call—not you.)
- Allow plenty of extra time to get to the interview. Tardiness detracts from your ability to make a good first impression.
- Try to schedule your first interview at a safety school (but not a school where you know you'd never apply). This will enable you to do a practice run where the stakes are not as high.
- Bring copies of your college resume and transcript. Your interviewer may or may not want to look at them; however, you should always offer them.

## Make a Good Impression

No matter what, remember that you are being judged, in part, on your social skills. So keep the following points in mind.

- Smile.
- Offer a firm (but not bone crushing!) handshake as you meet your interviewer.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Be conscious of your posture; sit up straight.
- Listen actively.
- Show enthusiasm (about yourself, the conversation, and the institution where you're interviewing).
- Watch your grammar and your language. Avoid the pitfalls of "teenspeak" ("like," "you know," "cool," "umm"...)
- Be gracious as the interview ends, and thank your interviewer for his or her time. And reiterate how excited you are about the college.

**Ask questions:**  
Do express your interest in the college.

- Ask for the interviewer's card: you will need the contact information to send the interviewer a personal note of thanks after the interview.

## Dressing and Grooming

- Dress comfortably and dress to make your interviewer comfortable. No need to wear a suit and tie or a dress and pumps. But you do need to step it up a notch above what you might wear to high school. An interview is an informal conversation, but you should remind yourself that your interviewer is taking the occasion seriously.
- Resist any temptation to reveal your midriff, cleavage, or underwear. Dress respectfully so that the interviewer is not distracted by your appearance.
- Avoid heavy perfumes, colognes, or other pungent grooming products. Do you want your interviewer to remember most how you smelled?

## Tips for Success

- Remember that the interview is a conversation. It is not an interrogation. Be ready for the give-and-take of a relaxed chat. Admissions officers like working with young people, and most have become skilled at putting students at ease.
- As you prepare, consider the three or four most important aspects of yourself that you want to communicate in the interview. Consider academics, activities, personal characteristics, and goals for the future.
- Students who can control the direction of the conversation stand out. Again, this is a conversation like one you might have with a teacher or coach. You have ideas you want to communicate, so don't hesitate to guide the conversation toward those aspects of yourself that you want to highlight.
- Answer questions with openness and honesty. If the answer to the question posed is "I don't know," then say "I don't know the answer to that question, but what I can tell you is this." Don't pretend.
- Frame your answers positively. For instance, if asked about your least favorite subject, answer honestly, but try to extract something positive about the teacher, the course material, or something interesting you have learned in the class—despite the fact that it is your least favorite subject.

**Have a conversation:**  
Don't try to memorize a script.

- Have ready two or three specific, informed questions about the college. Here your research is essential. Check out current news from the college, as well as information about specific professors, programs, study abroad opportunities, and research centers. For example, “I noticed that Professor Germ received a big grant from the National Institutes of Health to study the effectiveness of flu vaccines. Will undergraduates have an opportunity to work on his project? In general, how are students selected to contribute to research projects in the science departments?”
- Also, don’t ask questions for which the answers are easily found on the website. For instance, questions like “how many students go this school?” or “do you require the SAT test for admission?” or “how does the core curriculum work here?” reveal that you have not done your homework. You can’t impress the interviewer that you really want to attend if you don’t know the most basic of facts about the school.

## A Word for Parents

College admissions officers generally do not want to speak to parents, aside from a quick hello at the end of the interview. The interview is a chance for the admissions officer to learn more about the student, and you will not be invited to join in the conversation. So be prepared to sit in the waiting area with a book or magazine, or take a walk around campus. Some students may actually prefer that their parents not even accompany them into the admissions office. Take such a request as a positive sign of independence, then treat yourself to a latte at the campus coffee house while you wait.

## After the Interview

When you get home, send a personal note to the interviewer thanking him or her for meeting with you. A handwritten note on a note card (in an envelope with a stamp on it!) will make a much better impression than an email.

You can also make the note specific and more personal by referring to particular things you learned in the interview. For example:

- You learned about a specific program or campus organization in the interview, which you subsequently researched on the website and found to be particularly interesting or exciting.
- You were impressed by visiting a particular facility on campus after your interview.
- You enjoyed learning something interesting about the interviewer (e.g., she majored in a subject you had never even considered, but have since researched on the website; he had done a study abroad program in France, just as you hope to do).
- Refer to one new reason for which you are enthusiastic about this college that you discovered through the interview.

## About Great College Advice

*Since 2006, our company has provided affordable, Great College Advice to hundreds of students from across the United States and around the world. Our mission is to provide students and families the highest standard of assistance in the college selection and admissions process. We assist students in finding the college that best fits their abilities, interests, and aspirations. We guide students as they complete their applications, write their essays, and present themselves in the best light throughout the admissions process.*

*Headquartered in Denver, Colorado, and Westfield, New Jersey, Great College Advice has a national and international reach: fully 25% of our clients come from beyond these two states, and another 25% have come from China, Singapore, Taiwan, the UK, Hong Kong, Mexico, Australia, France, Belarus, and Oman.*

*Whether your next educational goal is college, graduate school, or boarding school, we can help you find the right fit—and get in.*

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