

College Interviews: The Basics

The college interview is a part of the college application process at many colleges — but not all of them. You may meet in person to talk with someone from the admission office, a current student or a graduate of the college. Alternatively, you may be able to take part in a video interview, often via Skype.

Why Interview?

The interview is rarely the deciding factor in whether the college will accept you, but it can give a representative from the college a chance to get to know you better. The interview gives you a chance to:

- Show your interest in the college.
- Share information about yourself beyond what's listed on your transcript.
- Bring up anything in your record that you'd like to explain, like a temporary drop in your grades.
- Discuss your goals and the reasons you want to attend the college.
- Ask questions about the college.

What to Expect

You'll talk one-on-one with the interviewer. If your parent comes with you, he or she probably won't be in the room during the interview but may get a chance to talk to the interviewer afterward.

An interviewer may ask questions like "Why do you want to go college?" and "Why do you want to attend this college?" He or she may also ask about your high school experiences, your hobbies and your accomplishments.

The interviewer will also ask if you have any questions. Asking questions shows the interviewer that you're interested in the college, and it allows you to get information you can't find on a website or in a brochure. If you're interested in a certain major, ask what the program is like. If you're planning to live on campus, ask about campus life. Just try to avoid asking questions that you can easily find answers to on the college's website. The interview is a great chance to show your interest in a college.

How to Prepare

First, find out whether interviews are required, optional or not offered at all. If the college requires or offers interviews, look on the college's website or contact its admission office to find out what you have to do to set one up. If you have to travel to the college to interview, you may want to schedule a campus tour for the same trip.

After you've scheduled an interview, you can do several things to prepare. One important step is to research the college so you feel ready to talk about why the college is a good fit for you. Another good idea is to do practice interviews with family members and friends.

Just remember that while it's smart to get ready in advance, you shouldn't memorize answers to common interview questions or compose a speech — the interview should be a conversation.

More Interview Tips

You can't pass or fail an interview, but you can make a good impression by doing the following:

- Dress nicely, not in jeans and a T-shirt.
- Arrive early.
- Be polite.
- Avoid using slang or other inappropriate language.
- Be confident but not arrogant.
- Answer questions honestly.
- Send a thank-you note to your interviewer after the interview.

Sample College Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself

This question seems easier than it is. How do you reduce your whole life to a few sentences? And it's hard to avoid commonplace answers like "I'm friendly" or "I'm a good student." Of course you want to demonstrate that you're friendly and studious, but try also to say something memorable here that really makes you different from other college applicants. Can you hold your breath longer than anyone in your school? Do you have a huge collection of Pez dispensers? Do you have unusual cravings for sushi?

2. Why are you interested in our college?

Be specific when answering this, and show that you've done your research. Also, avoid answers like "I want to make a lot of money" or "Graduates of your college get good job placement." You want to highlight your intellectual interests, not your materialistic desires. What specifically about the college distinguishes it from other schools you're considering?

3. What can I tell you about our college?

You can almost guarantee that your interviewer will provide an opportunity for you to ask questions. Make sure you have some, and make sure your questions are

thoughtful and specific to the particular college. Avoid questions like "when is the application deadline?" or "how many majors do you have?" This information is both uninteresting and readily available on the school's webpage. Come up with some probing and focused questions: "What would graduates of your college say was the most valuable thing about their four years here?" "I read that you offer a major in interdisciplinary studies. Could you tell me more about that?"

4. **Who in your life has most influenced you?**

There are other variations of this question: Who's your hero? What historical or fictional character would you most like to be like? This can be an awkward question if you haven't thought about it, so spend a few minutes considering how you would answer. Identify a few real, historical, and fictional characters you admire, and be prepared to articulate WHY you admire them.

5. **Why do you want to major in _____?**

Realize that you don't need to have decided upon a major when you apply to college, and your interviewer will not be disappointed if you say you have many interests and you need to take more classes before choosing a major. However, if you have identified a potential major, be prepared to explain why. Avoid saying that you want to major in something because you'll make a lot of money -- your passion for a subject will make you a good college student, not your greed.

6. **What will you contribute to our college campus community?**

You'll want to be specific when answering this question. An answer like "I'm hard-working" is rather bland and generic. Think about what it is that makes you uniquely you. What exactly will you bring to diversify the college's community?

7. **Tell me about a challenge you overcame.**

This question is designed to see what kind of problem solver you are. When confronted with a challenge, how do you handle the situation? College will be full of challenges, so the college wants to make sure they enroll students who can handle them.

8. **What do you do for fun in your free time?**

"Hangin' out and chillin'" is a weak answer for this question. College life obviously isn't all work, so the admissions folks want students who will do interesting and productive things even when they aren't studying. Do you write? Hike? Play tennis? Use a question such as this one to show that you are well-rounded with a variety of interests.

9. **What do you see yourself doing ten years from now?**

You don't need to pretend that you have your life figured out if you get a question like this. Very few students entering college could accurately predict their future professions. However, your interviewer does want to see that you think ahead. If you

can see yourself doing three different things, say so -- honesty and open-mindedness will play in your favor.

10. **Does your high school record accurately reflect your effort and ability?**
In the interview or on your application, you often have an opportunity to explain a bad grade or a bad semester. Be careful with this issue -- you don't want to come across as a whiner or as someone who blames others for a low grade. However, if you really did have extenuating circumstances, let the college know.
11. **Recommend a good book for me.**
The interviewer is trying to accomplish a few things with this question. First, the question asks whether or not you've actually read much. Second, it asks you to apply some critical skills as you articulate *why* a book is worth reading. And finally, your interviewer might get a good book recommendation!
12. **If you could do one thing differently in high school, what would it be?**
A question like this can turn sour if you make the mistake of dwelling on things you regret. Try to put a positive spin on it. Perhaps you've always wondered if you would have enjoyed acting or music. Maybe you would have liked to give the student newspaper a try. Maybe, in retrospect, studying Chinese might have been more in line with your career goals than Spanish. A good answer shows that you didn't have the time in high school to explore everything that is of interest to you.

Top Ten Mistakes of College Interviews

Keep in mind that the college interview probably isn't the most important part of your application, but it can help you if you make a good impression. A bad impression can hurt your chances of getting accepted.

During the interview, **DO NOT...**

1. **Be Late**
Your interviewers are busy people. Alumni interviewers are probably taking time out of their full-time jobs to meet with you, and campus admissions folks often have back-to-back appointments scheduled. Lateness disrupts schedules and shows irresponsibility on your part.
2. **Underdress**
Business casual is your safest bet, but the main thing is to look neat and put-together. You'll look like you don't care if you show up wearing ripped jeans or revealing outfit.

3. Talk too little
Your interviewer wants to get to know you. If you answer every question with a "yes," "no," or a grunt, you're not impressing anyone, and you're not demonstrating that you can contribute to the intellectual life of the campus.
4. Make a prepared speech
You want to sound like yourself during your interview. If you have prepared answers to questions, you might come off sounding artificial and insincere.
5. Chew gum
It's distracting and annoying.
6. Bring your parents
Your interviewer wants to get to know you, not your parents. Also, it's hard to look like you're mature enough for college if Dad is asking all the questions for you.
7. Show Disinterest
This should be a no-brainer, but you'd be surprised what some students will say. A comment like "you're my back-up school" or "I'm here because my parents told me to apply" is an easy way to lose points during the interview.
8. Fail to research the school
If you ask questions that could easily be answered by the college's website, you'll send the message that you don't care enough about the school to do a little research. Ask questions that show you know the place: "I'm interested in your Honors Program; could you tell me more about it?"
9. Lie
This should be obvious, but some students do get themselves in trouble by fabricating half truths or exaggerating during the interview.
10. Be rude
Good manners go a long way. Shake hands. Address your interviewer by name. Say "thank you." Introduce your parents if they are in the waiting area. Say "thank you" again. Send a thank you note.