

The College Interview

The Basics

A college interview is a chance to show that you're more than just test scores and grades. And it's an exchange of information — you learn about the college and the college learns about you. Not every college requires an interview: it may be mandatory, optional or not offered at all.

The interview is just one of many factors in the admission decision and it is rarely the deciding one. Still, if a borderline student turns out to be impressive, the interviewer has the authority to write a letter supporting admission.

Types of Interviews

Interviews vary depending on the college, student and particular situation. You could find yourself interviewing with an admission officer, a student or an alumnus. Most of these interviews last between 30 and 60 minutes.

There are also other, less formal, interview situations. You may have the opportunity to participate in a group information session with admission staff members and current students. Many high schools hold college fairs, where you can meet with representatives on an individual basis.

If you intend to attend a music, drama or dance institute, you should plan on performing an audition or submitting a portfolio, in addition to taking part in any necessary interview.

Why Interview?

Most colleges don't require an interview; however, there are many benefits to meeting face-to-face with an admission officer. Interviews give you the chance to:

- Show that you are seriously interested in attending.
- Convey what you can bring to a campus community.
- Learn more about a college's programs.
- Explain variations in your record — for example, changes in your grades.

Be Your Own Best Advocate

The admission officers learn about you from a group of documents: your transcript, test scores and application. While your essay and recommendations can offer an impression of who you are, words on paper can reveal only so much. The interview is your chance to be your own advocate by talking positively about your interests and enthusiasms, to show your personality, and to boost your chance of admission.

Discuss Special Circumstances

The interview is a good time to explain anything unusual in your transcript or discuss any personal circumstances that affected your studies. Any problems that you may find difficult to write about in the application are often easier to discuss with a sympathetic admission counselor. For example:

You may not be the best math student, but it never stopped you from taking AP[®] Calculus — tell the interviewer why you persisted despite such difficulties.

During sophomore year, your parents divorced and your academic work took a downturn.

You have a learning disability and need to make an extra effort with every assignment.

Making Your Interview a Positive Experience

You can't pass or fail, so don't be nervous. As long as you've prepared and practiced, you can probably make a good impression. Here are some other tips:

- Accept a college's offer of an interview.
- Be on time.
- Go into the interview alone, without your parents.

- Be polite to everyone you meet.
- Act naturally.
- Respond conversationally — don't memorize a speech.
- Use appropriate language and avoid slang.
- Be confident but not arrogant.
- Tell the truth.
- Express interest in the college and its programs.
- Ask questions not covered by the college catalog or website.
- Avoid eating or drinking during the interview.
- Dress neatly and cleanly; don't wear T-shirts or other casual clothing.

Be Sure to Ask Questions

Asking questions shows that you're interested in the college and what the admission officer has to say. You should try to ask questions that indicate you've done some research about the college and know why you consider it a good fit for you. Also, asking questions can help you discover characteristics that colleges can't convey in a catalog.

Know the basics. Scour the school's brochures and Web site. Learn as much about the institution as possible before you go in. You don't want to ask the dean of admissions about their MBA program only to find out that they don't have an MBA program.

Review your application materials. The interviewers may use your application materials to strike up a conversation with you. **Review your application essay** so it's fresh in your mind when you interview. Practice some generic questions. **There are a few basic questions you can probably count on hearing: Why do you want to go to this college? What do you expect to gain from college? What do you plan to major in and why?** You don't need to memorize your answers, but think through the issues ahead of time so you'll have some ideas to discuss. Practice some specific questions. **You'll also want to prepare for questions that ask you to identify key topics or experiences that are important to you.** Think in advance about some of your favorite experiences, activities or plans. If you've identified your own "hit list," you'll find them easier to recall when asked. **Prepare some questions to ask.** Show your interest in the school by asking specific questions, such as How would you describe the student body? What are the most popular majors (and why)? What are the school's strengths? Where does the school need to improve? **Don't ask questions that can be answered by reading the school's brochure.** "You wouldn't want to ask if the college has fraternities and sororities, since their literature will tell you that," Johnson says. "But you might want to ask whether it's important to belong."

Send a thank-you note shortly after the interview. "The more interest you show in them and their institution, the more interest they may show in you," Hamilton says.

A few of the most common interview questions college admissions officers will ask you are:

- Why do you want to attend this university?
- What is your strongest/weakest point?
- What have you done to prepare for college?
- What has been your greatest experience in high school?
- Tell me about yourself (focus on three things).
- Tell me about your involvement in extracurricular activities.
- What do you want to do in the future?
- If you could meet any important figure in the past or present, who would it be and what would you talk about?
- What accomplishments are you most proud of?