

# TIPS FOR COLLEGE ADMISSIONS INTERVIEWS

The most important fact about college admissions interviews is that *no two are alike*. Much about the interview depends on the school and the particular person (alumni/admissions rep.) who is interviewing you. While you can prepare answers to many possible questions, there are sometimes questions that arise for which candidates cannot possibly prepare.

The two primary objectives of interviews are for the interviewer to determine whether or not you are a match for the institution and whether or not you are likely to take advantage of the resources that the school offers and for the interviewee to determine whether or not the school is an appropriate fit for him or her.

## **The Beginning: Prepare, prepare and prepare**

- Your interview begins from the first moment of contact. How you present yourself in an e-mail or on a telephone starts the impression the interviewer forms of the candidate. Were you polite? Did you spell words correctly? Did you assume that the interview should be structured around your schedule or the interviewer's? You should always accommodate to the interviewer's schedule unless there are extenuating circumstances (state football championship, regional math/science competition, etc.) that you need to explain. Practices would not be an acceptable excuse.
- Interviews may occur anywhere: coffee shops, libraries, homes (yours or the interviewer's, the interviewer's place of work, etc.)
- Expect to do most of the talking. The interviewer wants to learn more about you. That is the point of the interview. Good interviewers will only talk about 10% of the interview.
- Be yourself. Communicate who you are or what you are all about through your answers.
- Always be prepared with questions to ask the interviewer. The questions you ask in the interview can reveal as much about you as your answers to his or her questions.
- Before going to the interview, re-read your application answers for that school. Have a copy of your transcript and brag sheet available in case you need to discuss anything on them and you need to reference them.
- You are being interviewed, not your parents. Leave mom and/or dad in the car. Sometimes parents want to come along just to help with transportation or to insure safety. Just remember that you are the one who should do the talking, not mom and/or dad. Some interviewers ask to talk with parents and that is fine. Mom and Dad should not "take over" the interview.
- Many students hurt their application chances by not preparing for interviews or by being overconfident about admission. Never assume. A poor interview can put your accepted/wait-listed application to the rejection pile.
- Scheduling: if you can, schedule your top schools last if you have several interviews. Unless you participate in speech and debate, you will need some practice. If you have an interview coming up, ask someone to conduct a mock interview with you and give you feedback. It is better if this person does not know you, so the feedback will be similar to what a real interviewer might assess.
- Use good grammar; know the difference between good/well, may/can, who/whom, different from/different than, objective/subjective case, passive/active voice; pronoun reference errors such as each and their in one sentence; avoid using "I" too much; avoid repetitive language or repetitive answers

## **Dress, Attitude and the Beginning**

- Sometimes this may vary depending on the location. For example, you would be unlikely to wear the three-piece suit at your own home. Most interviewers would expect a professional appearance, as if you were interviewing for a job. "Nice" casual may work depending on the location of the interview. Trendy usually backfires, so opt for a conservative appearance unless you get the green light from a guidance counselor or other person who knows the expectation. Always select clothing that makes you comfortable. If your clothing is new, make sure you remove the price tags!
- Make sure your hair is neat. Your hair needs to be out of your face.
- Ladies: make-up should be light and not overdone. If you never wear make-up, this is not a time to start. Be yourself.
- Ladies: do not wear anything low-cut and go easy on the cologne/perfume.

## **Dress, Attitude and the Beginning (Continued)**

- Arrive early to your interview. Always allow extra time in case traffic is bad or you take a wrong turn. You can always sit in your car and practice questions if you have arrived too early. You should report to the interview around five to ten minutes before it is scheduled to begin.
- You need to project yourself as a college student who will fit into their campus, not a high school student. Maturity is a must.
- Refer to the person as Mr./Ms./Mrs; show respect.
- Turn off cell phones, iPads, etc.
- No gum, candy, cough drops, etc.
- No swearing.
- There is no room for arrogance or presenting yourself as if the school is beneath you. You are most likely competing with many students who are equally strong. Some schools are reach schools for everyone.

## **Speech & Eye/Hand Contact**

- You should speak in an academic tone. You do not need to necessarily use SAT vocabulary, but you should avoid using “cool”, “cuz” and other slang expressions.
- You need to make sure your interviewer can hear you. Sometimes coffee shops can be noisy. If the interviewer is leaning in, you probably need to speak more clearly or louder. You want to avoid talking “over” your interviewer as well.
- Articulation is also important. For example, many people drop the ends of sentences and fail to pronounce words clearly. One of the best tricks for improving articulation is to place an ordinary pencil in one’s mouth and practice saying a paragraph. Once you take the pencil out of your mouth, your lips will be so used to moving more, your speech is improved.
- When you first meet your interviewer, shake hands and smile. You could say something like “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me” or “So pleased to meet you.”
- Be sure to look at the interviewer. Eye contact shows confidence and focus a lack of eye contact does not.

## **On campus interview or Alumni interview?**

- This is a personal choice, but if you have the opportunity to do an on campus interview, do it. This would reinforce the fact that you have visited the school and it conveys strong interest. Additionally, on campus interviews are typically conducted by admissions representatives as opposed to alumni. Many times, on campus interviews are not possible and please understand it is perfectly acceptable to follow the standard process through the admissions office.
- Most local interviewers are alumni of the schools. They may vary in age and occupation. Local interviewers do not read applications and only make recommendations to the admissions offices.
- If you cannot schedule an interview, do not assume that you will be rejected. You should do everything possible to try to have an interview, but sometimes things just do not work out.

## **Questions & Response Strategies**

- Expect easier questions that function as ice-breaker questions at the beginning of the interview. The purpose is to set you at ease.
- If you are asked a tough question, never say “I don’t know” or “I didn’t do anything.” You can always buy some time by rephrasing the question or by saying, “let me see . . .” and then proceeding to craft an answer. If you are asked if you have had leadership positions and you have not held any, you can always respond, “not officially, but unofficially, I led X, Y and Z” explaining how you led a food drive or were put in charge of your science team. If you are asked if you have done research and you have not done formal research in a lab or the like, you can always mention the research you may have done via other experiences or independent research at home in your garage or wherever. “None” is never a good answer. You can always say, “I would have to think carefully about my answer to that question. May I call you later with my response?”
- If there are particular traits that you would like to convey, think of different ways you could spin the same information to adapt to possible questions.

### **Questions & Response Strategies (Continued)**

- Ask the interviewer what s/he does for a living? How did his/her education at X School/University help prepare him/her for his/her position?
- Sometimes interviewers may ask questions that they really should not. For example, they may ask where else you are applying, your GPA, class rank, SAT/ACT scores, etc. You can always respond by saying that School X (the one you are interviewing for) is among your top choices and leave it at that. You can also answer the test scores and class rank information broadly by saying you are in the top 1% or 99% or that your scores are competitive. Sometimes these questions may be more about testing your strength as a person and how you handle difficult questions.

### **Closing**

- At the end of the interview, always thank the person for his or her time and insight.
- If you do not have your interviewer's contact information, ask him or her for a business card. This is so you can write a thank you note.

### ***Excellent resource:***

Cohen, Katherine. The Truth About Getting In. (New York: Hyperion, 2002). [See Chapter 10: Acing the Interview]

# Possible Questions

## The college/university

1. Why do you want to attend this school? or Why are you applying to (this school)?
2. Did you visit the campus? If so, what did you like or not like?
3. How did you go about choosing this college for one of your applications?
4. What other colleges are you applying to?
5. Why are you interested in college?

## Your academic background

1. Describe your favorite class (or teacher).
2. What are your academic interests?
3. What do you see yourself majoring in?
4. What classes in high school have been the most difficult for you?
5. What would your teachers say about you?
6. What course would you take just for fun in high school?
7. What was your least favorite class and why?
8. Describe the perfect school (high school or college).
9. Are grades important?

## Your activities

1. What activities have you participated in and do you see yourself participating in any of them in college?
2. How have you spent your summers?
3. What activities are most important to you and why?
4. What do you do for fun?
5. Have you ever held a job?
6. What is a typical day after school like for you?
7. Have you done any volunteer work?

## Your major and/or career plans

1. Where do you see yourself in ten years? (or five years?)
2. Are you a math/science person or a humanities person?
3. Who has been most influential in your decision to pursue this career?
4. Why are you interested in \_\_\_\_\_?
5. At what point in time did you realize that you were interested in \_\_\_\_\_?
6. If you decide not to major in \_\_\_\_\_, what would be your second choice?

## Current Events, Books, People

1. What is your favorite book? (or movie or TV show)
2. What is the last book you read?
3. Who are your heroes/heroines?
4. Who is your favorite author (and why)?
5. Why are the arts important?
6. What is your opinion about \_\_\_\_\_? (Insert any pertinent topic, such as legalization of marijuana, green technologies, arms control, global warming, National deficit,
7. If you could invite anyone to a dinner for an evening, who would you invite and why?
8. If you were on a deserted island, what three books would you bring with you?
9. What is the most significant historical event to happen in your lifetime?
10. Do you read the newspaper? What sections do you always read?
11. How has Facebook changed our world?
12. What is something that you might invent?
13. What is your most significant achievement thus far?

## **Personal Traits**

1. What three adjectives would you use to describe yourself? or How do your friends describe you?
2. When have you been part of a team? When have you led that team?
3. Have you ever failed at something? (or) Tell me about a time that something did not go as expected what did you do?
4. Share an experience (academic or personal) that was difficult for you. How did you handle it?
5. Describe your friends? What characteristics do you look for in a friend?
6. What would a perfect day be like for you? Please describe.
7. Tell me about yourself.
8. What is your greatest weakness? (or strength)
9. What is something that you haven't shared with me that you feel is important to share?
10. What are some of your personal goals?
11. What sets you apart from other applicants?

## **Questions that seem out of left field or borderline inappropriate**

1. What is your class rank? (or GPA, SAT/ACT scores)
2. What political party do you feel does a better job?
3. Tell me something about your family.
4. Why are you applying to (another college/university)?
5. Do you go to church regularly?
6. What makes you angry?
7. How does your family plan to pay for college?

## **Questions to ask the interviewer**

1. Does the university offer many research opportunities for undergraduates?
2. When was the last time you visited (college/university)? How has it changed?
3. What kind of student is most successful at (school/college)?
4. Do many upperclassmen live on campus?
5. What are the summers like on campus?
6. What is this school's greatest strength? (or weakness)
7. How does your school's engineering program measure up with the likes of MIT and Caltech?
8. I am thinking about majoring in \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, or \_\_\_\_\_. Which of these do you feel is the strongest department at (college/university)?
9. When you attended (school/college), what was your largest class?