



What You Need to Know About College Interviews

College interviews carry relatively little if any weight in the admissions process, but occasionally they can make a difference. They are most likely to help your chances when they are given by an actual admissions officer or by a student at the college who is working in the admissions office and has been trained for the task.

To obtain an interview with an admissions officer or current student, you'll need to take the initiative once you find out from the school's website that such an option is available. Many of these interviews occur during the summer prior to your senior year because the admissions officers tend to be on the road in the fall, visiting the high schools in their region. While they're in your area, some will also offer interviews in your community, generally at a Starbucks or some other public eatery.

Many schools, including most of the Ivies, rely entirely on alumni to interview the applicants from their area. After you submit your application, an alumnus or alumna will contact you to set up a meeting. Even though colleges sometimes seem to use these interviews less to aid in the selection process than to keep alumni involved with the institution (so they'll be more likely to make donations), it's always wise to accept the offer and put your best foot forward.

Alumni interviewers will not have access to your application with your grades or test scores, and in most cases will be told nothing about you prior to the meeting other than your intended major. For this reason, if you have a resume, you should bring a copy with you. A quick perusal of the resume will help the interviewer ask appropriate questions, and it will also serve to jog his or her memory when producing a write-up for the admissions office.

There's no need to dress formally for an interview, but you should dress nicely to demonstrate respect for the process. Shake hands, make eye contact, and leave your parents either home or in the other room. Occasionally admissions officers will invite parents in at the conclusion of an interview with the student. This is a courtesy to the parents in case they have questions of their own. Nothing they say will enhance your chances of gaining admittance to the school.

Whoever is interviewing you, you may expect a few questions that are almost always asked, and you should be prepared for a range of others that are asked with varying degrees of frequency.

You will almost certainly be asked why you are interested in this particular school. Be prepared to answer that question very specifically, demonstrating knowledge of unique features. You may want to talk about the location, which is fine, but make sure you talk about the school too. If you know people who have attended and spoken highly of this college, say so and talk about what they told you. It's fine to talk about things like school spirit and social life, but try to speak about academics first.

You will be asked about your interests, both academic and extracurricular, and you should be ready to speak expansively about these, conveying your enthusiasm. Every school wants students who will bring excitement and passion to their campus. Tell about experiences in and out of school that have enabled you to discover your interests. Good interviewers will always ask follow-up questions, engaging you in a conversation. Sometimes they'll want to know about a particularly challenging situation you may have encountered and how you dealt with it. It's perfectly okay to talk about mistakes you may have made before explaining what you learned from the experience.

You may be asked about your current school, what it's like and what you do and don't like about it. Try to give an accurate impression, but keep your focus as positive as possible. Be prepared to talk about your best class or best academic experience and explain what you liked about it. You may be asked about experiences working in a group. Be advised that many colleges have made it their mission to train team players after hearing from employers that this is increasingly what's needed, especially in Business and Engineering fields. Finally, if you believe your high school has prepared you well for college, you can say that and explain what makes you think so.

You may also be asked about your leisure pursuits, including what books you've read recently. You may be asked how your friends and/or teachers would describe you. You may be asked about your personal goals for the future and what you consider to be the most challenging problems confronting your generation. You may be asked if you had a year to do anything you wanted, what it would be. Clearly, there are no right or wrong answers to these questions, but they will help the interviewer (and consequently the admissions office) have a better sense of your personality, your values, and the way you think.

Eventually you will be asked if you have any questions you'd like to ask the interviewer. Be prepared with some, and make sure they aren't ones you can easily find answered on the college's website. If your interviewer is a student at or graduate of the school, you can ask what he or she liked best about it. You can also ask in-depth questions about specific opportunities you read of on the website or about extra-curricular activities you think you'd like to pursue.

The interview is most often a pleasant experience rather than an uncomfortable one, but occasionally students are asked questions they'd rather not answer. The most common of these is, "Where else are you applying?" You should be prepared to name a few other schools, but it's not necessary to provide an exhaustive list. You don't want the interviewer to get the idea that this is just your safety, your last choice school, so identify one or more others that are somewhat comparable. If it's a highly selective, prestigious school and you're applying to many other similarly prestigious places, don't list too many of them. They're all seeking students who are excited by their unique attributes, not merely their prestige.

The main reason to review all the above questions prior to interviewing is so you won't be caught off guard and become flustered. If you are presented with a question you never considered and don't have an immediate answer for, it's fine to say, "I have to think about that," pause, and take some time before answering.

On very rare occasions students have been asked questions that were really inappropriate. (Note, this never happens with professional interviewers, only with amateurs.) For instance, an alumnus asked an applicant about his political views and then challenged them, and a student interviewer asked an applicant what was the most embarrassing thing she ever did that she never told anyone about. The answers to such questions should be completely irrelevant to the admissions process, and the consensus in the counseling community is that in the unlikely event that you encounter such a question, you should respond politely, "I'd rather not answer that, but I have some questions of my own," and take it from there.

Following the interview, send a letter or email thanking the interviewer for giving you the opportunity to learn more about the school and reiterating why you would be happy to attend.