

Applying to Graduate School: The Interview Process

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The first step in obtaining a graduate degree in psychology is to get into graduate school – no small feat, even for the best students. To get into graduate school, you need to figure out which schools match your interests, then write a successful application (for advice on how to write a compelling personal statement, see Bottoms & Nysse-Carris, 1999). If you are well-qualified and well-matched to a program, you might be invited to visit the campus for an interview. Not all schools require students to interview, but most do. In any case, the interview is nearly always crucial. It can sometimes make or break your chances of gaining an offer. It is your golden opportunity for demonstrating your interest and skills in person, and for learning about a program and whether it is right for you. The latter will be particularly important if you are lucky enough to be admitted to more than one program.

In this article we provide a set of guidelines for how to interview successfully and improve your chances of being admitted to a graduate program in psychology. We break the interview process into 3 parts: (a) before the interview, (b) during the interview, and (c) after the interview.²

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² Where do we get our expertise? The first author endured seven interviews herself last year and emerged with several responses. The second author has been interviewing prospective students for her graduate program for fifteen years. She also had a few graduate school interviews herself long ago.

Before the Interview

Others have written about various aspects of applying to graduate school (e.g., American Psychological Association, 1993; Bottoms & Nysse, 1999; Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000). Although we are focusing on the interview, the importance of applying to multiple programs is worth repeating. Why? Because there are many good students who want to go to graduate school and only a limited number of seats available. So, even students who are exceptionally qualified for graduate school might not be admitted to a program for a number of reasons. For example, the faculty member matching the applicant's interests might not be accepting students that particular year, or the university's budget might have been cut and fewer students than normal are being admitted that year, or the applicant might have scored 20 points below the GRE score being used as a cut-off by the department that year. By applying to multiple programs, you increase your chances of being invited for an interview to at least one program, hopefully more.

Before being invited for an interview, you might be contacted by phone or e-mail by the faculty member who is most interested in having you attend the program: your potential adviser. He or she will use the phone conversation to discuss your application and decide if you might be a good match for the program generally and for his or her lab specifically. If so, you will then be invited for an interview. So, this phone call is your first interview, and it should not catch you off guard. Expect that phone call and have a plan to answer it. The second author has made a lot of these calls over the years, and surprisingly few students are ready. You need to cogently summarize why you want to go to graduate school³, why you are interested in that particular program and that particular faculty member's research, and your qualifications. You need to express interest, enthusiasm, confidence, and curiosity about the program and the faculty members in the program. If you cannot talk when the call comes, either because you are stunned

³ The second author's favorite answer to this question so far is "Because I like true crime novels."

and need time to prepare or you're otherwise occupied, politely ask to reschedule the call to a better time later that day or the next. Do not sound like a deer in the headlights – do your homework and call back soon. For example, do not say to one of the most famous people in the field, “Uh, what was your name again and what do you do?”⁴

If you pass the phone call test, then you will probably be invited for an interview. Unless you know that you have absolutely no interest in going to that program (meaning you already have an offer somewhere else), go to the interview if you can possibly afford it. (Sometimes the program will pay for your entire trip, sometimes only part, and sometimes none of it.) You might be lucky enough to have received an offer before the visit, but often the offer is contingent on your interview performance.

Above all else, prepare well before going on your interview. Start by reading the program's website and any additional information you have. You should have read the website before you applied to the program, but take the time to read it again. Also, when you are invited for an interview, you are often sent additional information about the program, the university, and even the city where the university is located. Reading this information ahead of time will allow you to ask thoughtful, meaningful questions during the interview and save you from asking embarrassing questions. If the program doesn't send you such information, ask for it, or seek it out yourself – illustrate your problem-solving skills.

Perhaps of most importance, learn a great deal about your potential advisor(s) and other faculty in the program. Ask for a list of faculty members whom you will be meeting before going on the interview. Most schools will send an itinerary ahead of time, but if not, you should feel

⁴ The second author recently confessed to a luminary in her field, Dr. Gary Melton, that she had done exactly that when he called a very naïve version of her in 1986. Why she did this, when he had forgotten it long ago, is a good question. The first author was well prepared and avoided these pitfalls. She is now a happy graduate student at the University of Virginia, pausing to tell you all how to be just as successful.

comfortable asking for it. Then, go online and look up the research interests of each person. Do not feel like you have to memorize everything, but do get the gist of what each person studies. Write down some notes about each faculty member's research and what you find interesting about it. Refer to these notes during the interview (no, you will not look dumb for consulting your notes). Prepare a couple of questions to ask each person you meet (see Appendix A for a few examples). This is a great way to demonstrate that you are interested in the program and motivated to learn more about it. Prepare even more to say to your potential advisor. E-mail or call to ask him or her to send you recent papers that you can read before the interview. Prepare to discuss some of that research and to demonstrate your ability to generate related questions and future research ideas.

During the Interview

Interviews usually take place over a weekend, and often Friday or Monday is the actual interview day. That is, you will spend either Friday or Monday on the university campus where you and other prospective students will interview with faculty members, graduate students, and your potential adviser. Often you will be asked to stay an additional day or two to participate in various activities such as a campus tour, graduate student party, dinner, or other events that provide you with the opportunity to meet many of the current graduate students without the pressure of feeling like you are in an interview.

How should you look during this interview? Academics are freewheeling individuals who don't give a rat's behind about fashion, right? Wrong. Dress professionally for your interview. A suit is definitely appropriate, or at the very least, classic pants, shirts, and tops. No jeans.⁵ Also,

⁵ The second author has a black suit for every day of the week and encourages it to be everyone's first real clothing purchase, but the first author warns that in her experience, every interviewee is going to show up in a black suit, so you might want to add a splash of color.

be mindful of climate. Don't come to Chicago in February without a coat and boots. Finally, cover up. This is a professional interview, not a nightclub.

Ok, so you're dressed, now what? The interview will keep you on your toes, and it will not necessarily be easy, but it also shouldn't be too onerous. You need to relax and be yourself (well, be your professional self) during the interview. You will not set yourself up for success by choosing to attend a university where you cannot be yourself. Moreover, everyone will be able to tell if you are acting fake. So relax and enjoy yourself among many talented people, while keeping in mind that even if you do not attend this program, you may well come into contact with these people again at future conferences, etc.

Although it is important to be yourself during the interview, know that faculty will be looking for certain personal characteristics in you. If you have made it this far, you most likely have the characteristics they are looking for: knowledge, interest, diligence, flexibility, curiosity, humor, grace, experience, confidence (without arrogance), and humility. It is also important to exhibit a sense of stamina and common sense. That is, avoid statements such as "I am too tired to ask any more questions"⁶ or "Sorry I'm two hours late, the shuttle never arrived at the airport," (which translates into "so I just sat there like a lump without investigating alternative transportation options.") Last, demonstrate that you are a pleasant person with whom others, especially your potential advisor, will enjoy working closely for half a decade.

What will you talk about during the interview? When meeting with faculty members, it is important to talk elegantly about research -- the professor's research and yours. That is, be prepared to describe your past research and answer basic questions. (If you are asked something you cannot answer or do not understand, do not pretend to know the answer and spew fluff. Request clarification and/or admit that you don't have an answer.) Also, do not just passively

⁶ If you think a day of talking with smart people about interesting things is hard, try digging ditches.

listen to your interviewer, try to turn the interview into a discussion that showcases your knowledge and curiosity. Talk about the parts of a faculty member's research that are interesting to you, implications of the research, and other variables that might be interesting to explore. When you are meeting with your potential adviser, inquire about and possibly even suggest roles that you could play in his or her current research program. This is your opportunity to demonstrate that you understand your potential adviser' research and that you would be interested in doing something similar. Be sure to ask those questions that you prepared ahead of time, and if you run out of questions, do not hesitate to ask the same questions to different people throughout the interview. You will probably get slightly different perspectives from each person.

So, you'll spend a lot of time answering questions from faculty and graduate students throughout the interview. Most questions will relate to your prior experience with research, training, and your future career goals. These questions should be answered truthfully and thoroughly. But what if students or faculty ask questions about your private life (relationship status, plans for children, etc.)? These are inappropriate questions, but the person asking probably doesn't realize it. Rather than get angry, find a polite way to provide a vague answer and change the subject.

Remember, all of your interactions should provide you with a host of useful information. For example, interactions with your potential advisor (or advisors, as is the case in some programs), and the information you get from his or her graduate students, should give you a sense of his or her personality and mentorship style. Will you enjoy working closely with this person for a long time? Is he or she too aloof for you? Too overbearing? What are you looking for in a mentor? If you are attending many interviews, write down a few sentences about your perceptions of what it would be like to work with each potential advisor. These perceptions will

be very important when deciding which university is right for you – your advisor will be the most important person in your graduate school life. You need to work with someone who is a good match with your interests and your personality.

We also advise you to take the opportunity to stay with a graduate student during your interview if this is offered. This gives you the opportunity to see what life is like as a graduate student at that university, to ask questions that you might not think of asking as you are hustled from one meeting to the next during the day, and to get to know one person well enough so that you feel comfortable asking him or her for advice when deciding whether to attend that particular university. But just like the party or dinner, remember that your time spent at the graduate student's home is also part of the interview, and whatever you do or say will naturally make it back to other students and faculty in the program.⁷

After the Interview

After your interview, send a little thank you note (email is acceptable, even preferable these days) to those with whom you interviewed, especially to your potential adviser(s). Be sure to thank the graduate student with whom you stayed; he or she took time out of a very busy schedule to help you, even while knowing that you might not be accepted or choose to attend that particular university. So, thank you notes are appropriate, as is a follow-up inquiry about when you should expect to hear about the admission decision, but beyond that, do not pester the university or your potential adviser with emails or phone calls regarding the status of your application.

So, will you be accepted? Being invited for an interview means you have a very good chance of being accepted to the program, but not necessarily that you *are* accepted. Often a

⁷ Don't be the prospective student who got liquored up, who commandeered the host's bathrobe, who arranged a stay-over visit from her boyfriend, who talked behind other students' backs, or who – well, you get the picture of what the second author has heard over the years.

program will invite more students than it can accept. The number is sometimes limited by the number of students the department can guarantee to fund, but also by the simple fact that it is in no one's best interest to produce too many Ph.D.s in any year. So face it, you might not get accepted. If you are not accepted, you might try to inquire politely about why not, explaining that you hope to learn from the experience. Unfortunately, human nature often keeps us from being straight with each other about things like this, so you may learn nothing. But if you are told of a weakness, accept the criticism with good grace, work on the problem, and move on.

If you are accepted, you will often receive notification from your potential adviser, followed by a formal acceptance letter in the mail. Formal offers are generally extended to a select few sometime between the interview date and April 1, and you have until April 15 to accept or decline. Students who are not offered a position immediately might be put on a waiting list (which might extend past April 1), and as applicants turn down offers, other students might then be offered positions. Thus, if you are not accepted to a program immediately it does not necessarily mean that you have been rejected. A letter should be sent letting you know when all the positions have been filled.

You only need one acceptance, but it would be very nice to get more than one. Then you have a choice. Always keep in mind, however, that you must eventually choose only one. Thus, it is important to be honest and straightforward with everyone during your interview process. If you leave an interview and know immediately that you are not interested in attending that university, even if you do not receive other offers, then inform the faculty member with whom you interviewed. As you start to receive offers, make sure you get all the details of an offer (including all financial details). Decide how you will compare the different programs and quickly turn down offers that do not interest you. Applicants often feel uncomfortable turning down

offers, but remember that there are many qualified applicants, and when you turn down an offer, it might then be extended to someone else. Faculty members won't be offended if you choose to go somewhere else, but they will be annoyed if you hold on to an offer so long that they miss out on other qualified applicants who are next in line after you.

After you survive the interview and get an offer, you have a hard decision to make. Ask yourself these questions: With whom would I feel most comfortable working? Whose research best matches my interests? What seemed to be the biggest advantage and disadvantage of each program? What is the cost of living in each area, and will the financial aid and assistantships be enough to live on? You need to learn enough about each program during your interviews to make the most informed decision possible.

Conclusion

We hope you find our advice useful. If you get an interview, work hard to be prepared, then enjoy yourself during the visit. Good luck in your quest to get into graduate school!

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Appendix A

Here are some possible questions for you to ask during interviews. Remember to ask questions in a polite manner that suggests that you are expecting to gain information, not in a suspicious manner that suggests that you expect to uncover problems.

... for potential advisors and other faculty:

- What are your current research projects? What stages are these projects in? Will I get the opportunity to work on your on-going research as well as my own more independent, but related, projects?
- What are departmental resources for graduate student research?
- What facilities outside the department or even outside the university would I have access to? Are there many inter- or intra-departmental research collaborations?
- How do you collect most of your data? Who, generally, are your research participants?
- How would you describe your mentoring style and expectations?
- How often, in general, do you meet with your graduate students? How often do the students who make up your lab meet as a group? What are these meetings usually like? How many graduate and undergraduate students are in your laboratory?
- Will I have the opportunity to work on grant-funded research, or is it not needed for this project?
- How are most students funded? For how much money and for how long? Is summer funding available?
- How long does it take for most PhD students in this program to graduate?
- Is there any formal training in teaching?
- When students graduate, how many publications and conference presentations do they typically have, and what kinds of jobs do they usually get?

Additional questions if interviewing at a clinical program:

- What is the balance like between clinical work, research, and class work?
- When does clinical training begin (2nd year, 3rd year, etc.)? How does the training progress? Is the training program APA accredited?
- How much clinical experience do most students get? With what populations (e.g., children, students, adults, etc.)? Are the clients required to be there (e.g., by court) or do they choose to attend therapy?
- Does the clinical program focus on one type of training (cognitive-behavioral, etc.) more than others, and if so, which type?
- What % of students match with their top choice for internship? Where do they match/go?

Additional questions for graduate students at these programs (in addition to many already listed above):

- What do you consider to be the best and worst aspects of this program?
- What is one thing you wish you had known or understood better before coming here?
- How hard do students work? (*Note: you want the answer to be “nearly all the time” if you want a truly top program.*)
- I know most of my time will be spent studying and doing research, but what is the social life like here? Where do people go on Friday nights?
- How much time does Dr. X (your advisor) spend one-on-one with his/her advisees? Do you get a lot of feedback on your work? What is his/her mentorship style – hands off or hands on?
- Do most students get along well with the program faculty? Why or why not? (*Be alert to the fact that many disgruntled students are also not doing well academically.*)
- Have you had any problem finding funding? How often have you needed to take out student loans? What’s the cost of living in this area – how much is rent, typically?
- Have you been involved with research in more than one lab?
- Do the graduate students feel like they are constantly competing with one another? Why or why not?