

How To Win The Interview

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You've hit the dreaded "submit" button on the Common App, but as you very well know, your work is far from complete. Before you can sit back, relax, and spend a few months in suspense, you've got to make it through the college interview. Not all schools hold interviews, but many do—so here's how to prepare yourself if you do find that email in your inbox from an alumnus looking to get to know you better.

Know the school.

This is your chance to show how much you know about the school you're interviewing for, so make sure you take advantage of it. Spend time researching it beforehand, so you know plenty about the programs you're interested in, living arrangements, student life, and extracurriculars. Your interviewer will be impressed if you ask him or her specific questions on these topics, because it shows you were interested enough in the college to learn as much as possible about it before applying. One of the biggest reasons why colleges hold interviews is to gauge your interest, so make sure you're an informed and curious applicant!

Dress accordingly.

In the vast majority of interview settings, you are not expected to wear a full suit and tie, but you are expected to look neat, presentable, and professional. Dress as if you were giving a presentation at school; there's no need to be over-the-top formal, but make sure you make a good first impression. Avoid anything too flashy, bright, or distracting; you want the interviewer to focus on you, not your outfit. Your attire is an important way to show how much you care about your interview and the school; looking sloppy or shabby can be a huge deterrent.

Ask questions.

Thoughtful questions about the school's specifics will really impress your interviewer, so be sure to come prepared with a few. Often they'll invite you to ask them whatever you want; this will be beneficial for you, too, because you've got the chance to talk to someone who actually attended the school. Take advantage of it! Make sure these questions have substance; by asking something too general that you could have easily researched yourself online, you'll give your interviewer reason to doubt your interest. Avoid questions like "How big is your school?" or "Do you have a major in Economics?" because these are things you should already know going into the interview. Instead, try asking questions about the specifics behind the school's career services for undergraduates, the process for designing your own plan of study if it isn't on the school's list of majors, or what the student body is truly like. There are so many questions to ask that alumni are better equipped to answer than anyone else, so if you take the time to prepare some beforehand, you'll be set when the time comes to ask them.

"Why do you want to attend this school?"

Know your answer to this question, because without a doubt you will not leave your interview without facing it. Whatever you do, steer clear from an answer having to do with prestige or ranking; they want you to be excited about what the school itself has to offer, not just its name brand. Bring up things that make this school unique; maybe they've got spectacular study abroad opportunities that you're looking forward to taking advantage of. Maybe they've got a program of study perfectly tailored to your interests that you can't find anywhere else. Maybe its location is very important to you; perhaps it's near a big city that provide you with tons of internship opportunities, or maybe it's in the middle of a picturesque countryside perfect for a nature-lover like you. Maybe when you visited campus you just got that "it" feeling, a feeling of comfort that no other campus gave you. Be sincere, passionate, and truthful, and your answer to this question could go a long way when it comes to success in your interview.

Be yourself.

It sounds cliché, but most of these interviewers have been doing this for a long time; they can tell who's a phony and who's not. Be yourself; don't try to change your persona to fit what you think a student of this school should be like, or what you think your interviewer is looking to see. Talk honestly about your interests and goals, and allow your own personality to shine through. Don't prepare word-for-word answers as if this interview were scripted; it's supposed to be a conversation more than anything. Your interviewer is there to get to know you, so be comfortable and confident in your own skin!

Follow up.

A simple thank-you email following your interview could go a long way. Let your interviewer know you're grateful for his time, and you enjoyed the discussion; a little something like this can make you a bit more memorable when it comes time for the interviewer to write up your recommendation. They'll appreciate your efforts!