



Graduate School Interviewing Tips

Do all graduate programs interview?

No, but most PhD programs in the life sciences do and more PhD programs in other disciplines are starting to opt for interviewing students prior to admission.

Who is selected for interviews?

Interviews are by invitation only. So you should feel great if you are offered an interview. Only applicants who have made the preliminary list of finalists for admission are invited to interviews.

What is the purpose of the interview?

Interviews are conducted for the purpose of meeting you in-person to determine your fit for the program and whether or not you have what it takes to be successful in graduate school. Sometimes applicants look great on paper, but do not represent themselves well in-person. Most of all they are looking to see how enthusiastic you are, how you handle yourself, your maturity level, preparedness and how well you communicate and interact with others.

This is also your chance to check them out. You are there to make a good impression, but also to determine if this is a good match for you. Is this a place where you can see yourself spending the next several years?

What is the format of the interview?

Every program determines the format of their interview. Some have you visit for a day, some for a weekend, so the length of time you spend there can vary. Some programs have you meeting with faculty one-on-one, others have group interactions with faculty, staff, other applicants and graduate students together. During your visit you will tour program facilities and labs. You will likely talk with several faculty members as well as current students. This is a chance for you to ask questions.

During discussion times and meetings, do not talk over others or dominate the conversation. Ask questions and allow others to respond. Show that you are able to listen actively and respond appropriately. Be respectful and confident in your background and experience, but not cocky or arrogant. Remember, you have something they are looking for, so you have earned the right to be there!

Who pays travel costs?

This varies as well, some programs pay all expenses, and others expect you to pay your own expenses. If you are invited for an interview, it is critical that you try to attend even if you are expected to pay your own expenses. If you do not attend, it can send the message that you are not interested in the program. It can sometimes be difficult to attend all of the interviews for which you are invited since the dates will often overlap. In these instances, you will initially need to choose which ones to attend. For those you are unable to attend, it is wise to ask if they offer an alternate date or if you can schedule an individualized visit.

How to best prepare

You should be provided with an itinerary for your interview prior to arrival. If you do not receive one, you should politely ask for one since you will want to prepare as much as possible for your time there, especially if you will have the opportunity to meet with faculty.

You should already know some basic information on the program since it's one you chose to apply to. Make sure you have a general understanding of the structure of the program and the main research areas they focus on. Try to learn as much as you can about the faculty (particularly the ones you will be meeting with) – you can look up one or two papers they have written or projects they are working on as away to bring up their work during meetings or discussions with them.

Be prepared to discuss your interests, goals and qualifications. Why should they admit you? What do you bring to the table? What do you hope to get out of this program?

Prepare a list of questions you want to ask faculty and the graduate students during your visit.

Talk with the faculty and graduate students at your institution and get their best advice.

During the Interview you should...

- Show your enthusiasm/passion for the program, faculty, research and your academic discipline. This alone can set the tone for the entire visit and can make a huge impression on those who will make final admission decisions.
- Be authentic, respectful and positive at all times.
- Be mindful of your goals for the interview. You are there to show your interest and that you are a great fit for the program. That said, do not forget that you are interviewing them too.
- Do not underestimate the influence of graduate students and administrative staff on admission decisions. After all, they will have to work with you too. Some admission committees have official graduate student and staff representation. Others, ask the graduate students and administrative staff for their impressions and weigh those when making final admission decisions.
- Try to find out from graduate students their honest views of their faculty advisors – what is the culture like in their group, what type of mentorship to they receive, etc. Graduate students are often a wealth of knowledge and are interested in helping you make the right decision for you since they recently went through the very same process. You can also ask them questions about the institution itself.
- You will likely participate in meals during your visit. If you are ordering at a restaurant, follow the lead of the host. If they do not order an appetizer or dessert, neither should you. Do not order the most expensive item on the menu – keep your menu selections conservative. Try not to order messy foods.
- Strictly limit your consumption of alcohol and absolutely no consumption of illegal/other intoxicating substances – I cannot stress this enough! Even if everyone else is, you should not. Never forget that you are being interviewed and are under evaluation at all times (even though at times it may not seem like it).
- Wear appropriate attire. Unless otherwise noted, business casual attire is expected. No jeans, t-shirts, sweatshirts, sandals, or revealing clothing. If you have a suit jacket/blazer, bring it with you for possible evening or more formal activities. Wear comfortable shoes as you will likely do a lot of walking and may be on your feet quite a bit.

When will I receive my admission decision?

In some cases you will receive a verbal offer at the end of the visit. In other cases, all applicants are notified after the visit has concluded and the admissions committee has a chance to reconvene. If you are offered admission verbally, do not commit to anything. You need to wait until you have your offer in writing to see the terms. Additionally, you want to have received all of your offers before making your final decision as to where you will enroll.

It should not be too long after your interview when you receive official word.