



Graduate School

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. 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 succeed in graduate school. Sometimes applicants look great on paper, but do not represent themselves well in person. Most of all, they want 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. Can you see yourself spending the next several years there?

What is the format of the interview?

Every program determines the format of their interview. Some have you visit for a day, others 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. During your visit, you will tour program facilities and labs. You will likely talk with faculty members and 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 can 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 attend even if you are expected to pay your own expenses. Not attending can signal a lack of interest 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 need to prioritize which ones to attend. For the ones 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 the one you chose to apply to. Make sure you have a general understanding of the structure of the program and the main research areas. 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 a way to bring up their work during meetings or discussions with them.

Questions to Expect:

Be prepared to discuss your interests, goals, and qualifications. Questions you may expect to be asked include:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Discuss your research.
- Describe a project or initiative that you consider particularly successful.
- What motivates you to be in this program?
- Why should they admit you into this program?
- What do you hope to achieve?
- How will you contribute to the program and its community?
- Discuss your preparation for graduate study.
- What is your work style?
- How do you plan and organize a major project? How do you manage competing priorities?
- What did you enjoy most or least about your experience at _____?
- What experience do you have working in a team?
- What extracurricular activities do you enjoy?
- What other questions do you anticipate?

Questions to Ask:

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

Talk with the faculty and graduate students at your institution and get their advice on questions you may ask:

- What are you looking for in a graduate student?
- What kind of training is provided to join your team?
- How would you describe the lab/program culture?
- Can you describe living in the local community?
- How common is it for faculty to co-publish with students?
- What conferences do students attend?
- How are students typically funded? How long is this funding guaranteed?
- How many students have research assistantships?
- How many semesters do students TA and/or teach classes independently?
- What inspired you to go into this field?
- What do you like about what you do?
- What other questions might you ask?

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 make a huge impression on those who make 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 demonstrate 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 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 culture is like in their group, what type of mentorship do they receive, etc. Graduate students have a wealth of knowledge and are interested in helping you make the right decision 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 if 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. 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 must wait until you have your offer in writing to see the terms.

Additionally, you should review all your offers before making your decision as to where you will enroll.

It should not be too long after your interview when you receive official word. April 15th is the first day that most institutions in the US will begin asking you to decide where you will matriculate.