

Successful Interviewing for Graduate Study in Psychology

- Written application materials designed expressly to get you to the interview stage
- Interview presents a “clean slate”
- Three types of interviews:
 - telephone
 - personal
 - group (or open house)
- The following material applies to all three contexts; then comments specific to each context



Successful Interviewing for Graduate Study in Psychology

- Relax- take stock of where you are in the process
 - moved up from a 10% chance
 - virtually all of the interviewees at any one school will receive offers from other schools, as well
- The program already believes that they would like to offer you a position
- Your goal is to convey interest and determine your own goodness of fit

Successful Interviewing

- But, rule of thumb: only say what you mean and mean what you say
-do not tell faculty that you are more interested in them than you are, that you are more interested in research than you are, or anything else that misrepresents you, your experience, or your interests

Successful Interviewing

- Now, your primary objective in the interview should be what? Well, think about it; they already have all the info on you- so it will not primarily be to tell them more about yourself
- Rather, the interview is designed to assess what kind of person you would be like to work closely with for four or five years
- They are looking for likeable person, a personable person. So, be personable!

Successful Self-Presentation

- Consider adopting the “Triple I” attitude
 - Interested
 - Informed
 - Inquisitive

- Interested-

- don't assume they know how interested you are

- clearly state or imply interest with statements like, "I could easily imagine myself being at...", or "I would love to have the opportunity to do my graduate work at...."



Successful Interviewing

- Informed

- know the program
- take time to have reviewed the faculty and their research
- take time to talk with one or more faculty and two or more graduate students in the program



Successful Interviewing

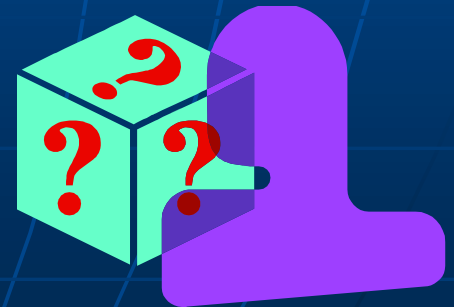
■ Inquisitive

- graduate programs expect you to ask questions about their program. It indicates interest and maturity.
- the failure to ask questions is linked to unsuccessful interviewing
- the interview is a two-way street in search of traffic. You get a feel for them not only from what they tell you, but from the kinds of questions they ask you. The same is true for them.



Successful Interviewing for Graduate Study in Psychology

- Common questions you may be asked
- Potential questions you may want to ask
- Questions to avoid asking



Questions You May be Asked

- General

- why do you want to be a psychologist?
- why do you want to pursue a Ph.D.?
 - what attracts you to our program?
 - what do you see yourself doing after graduation?



Questions You May be Asked

- Clinical
 - describe any social service experience you may have had, and what you liked about it
 - what kinds of people or issues are particularly difficult for you to work with?
 - describe any supervisory or employer-employee relationship that you have had and what you have liked and disliked about it
 - what features or characteristics about yourself do you think would enable you to become an effective clinician?

Questions You May be Asked

■ Research

- what research interests do you have?
 - who on our faculty could you see yourself working with?
 - describe a successful research project you have completed so far
 - what is the most challenging or frustrating thing about research to you?
- describe your research skills- methods, statistics, computer skills

Questions You May be Asked

■ Personal

- what do you see as your strengths and weaknesses (attribute strengths to others' comments; reframe weaknesses)
- examples of strengths: "I've been told that I have excellent organizational and leadership skills; I enjoy people and I enjoy working with them to accomplish goals"
- avoid boasting or providing a long litany of positive features; don't "oversell" yourself; remain humble and personable

Questions You May be Asked

- Personal (continued)
 - examples of weaknesses: reframe weaknesses as **positives e.g.** "One of the **downsides** to my productivity is that I tend to over-commit, so I am always trying to re-asses what I can reasonably **accomplish, rather than what I want to do.**"
"Sometimes I have a tendency to get ahead of myself, rather than slowing down to pace myself **according to them**". "I'm learning to take less responsibility myself and delegate more", etc.
 - "I have been challenged by learning to deal with anger and direct confrontation - I'm gradually learning to take things seriously without taking them **personally.**"
-**NOT** things like, "I'm prone to anger, intolerant, easily frustrated, not interested in people, tend to be self-centered, have a hard time being myself or **letting go of center stage**", etc.
 - Personal past times, hobbies, interests, etc.

Sample Questions You May Ask

- Three Tips:
 - #1 Your questions send signals. You will be evaluated in relation to the questions that you ask as well as the answers you give;
 - don't focus exclusively on clinical or research domains
 - save questions regarding recreation, weather and location for students
 - #2 Phrase questions in positive or neutral, rather than negative or critical ways e.g., "Can you tell me a bit about the theoretical orientations of your faculty", rather than, "You are mostly cognitive/behavioral/systemic aren't you?"; "What kinds of contexts or settings do you have for clinical training", rather than, "you don't do all of your training in an in-house clinic, do you", or "can I get experience in a hospital setting" (what if the answer is "no"?)
 - #3. Use the name of the program e.g. "at the University of Florida"

Sample Questions You May Ask

- Clinical
- Research
- Funding
- Student/Faculty Relationships
- Outcomes

Questions You May Ask

- Clinical

- how would you describe your **program's major theoretical orientation(s)**?- how does supervision work?

- describe the contexts in which clinical training takes place, and kinds of presenting problems and therapies used

Questions You May Ask

■ Research

- how do advisors get assigned?
 - do students have opportunities to do research beyond their theses and dissertations?
 - any available support for presenting research papers?
 - how many students go to regional or national research meetings each year?
- on average, how well-published are students by the time they graduate?

Sample Questions You May Ask

- Funding (but don't focus on funding; details will come with offer and program may not yet know what funding you would receive)
 - How do students typically support themselves?- loans, T.A., R.A. fellowships, etc.-
 - How about tuition waivers?
 - What percentage of students receive support,
 - Do you have an average graduate student stipend, or a typical range in that regard?

Sample Questions You May Ask

- Student/Faculty Relationships
 - how would you characterize the student-faculty relationships?
- Do students work largely with one professor, or with several?
- Do students have formal input in the program, department, graduate school?
- Are there departmental colloquia, and do students attend them?
- Tell me about any forms of interaction that students have with faculty or other students in the program

Questions You May Ask

- Outcomes
 - Where do students do internship? How successful are they in getting their top choices? APA-approved?
 - Do students tend to publish their theses and dissertations?
 - What kinds of jobs do graduates take-academic, private practice, CMHC, VAMC?

Questions to Avoid Asking

- Can I go part-time?
- How long does it take to get through the program?
- Are students allowed to work outside of the program/department?
- How many hours per week, on average, **do student's work?**
- Any antagonistic questions regarding program limitations- e.g. limited diversity, low stipends, theoretical orientations, geographical limitations

Questions You Should Not be Asked

- Race
- Religion
- Marital Status
- Disability Status
- Sexual Orientation
- You may offer information about these, but you cannot be asked to divulge this information. If uncomfortable, say so **directly, "I'm a little uncomfortable talking about that, but it might be easier for me if you can tell me how that relates to my consideration for your program"**

Individual Interviews

- Most common structure is a series of 15-30-minute interviews with several different faculty
- Significant repetition among interviews
- Opportunity for you to ask any questions you may have
- Bring additional copies of your vita; feel free to ask for copies of any recent work the faculty may have completed



Group Interviews: Tips

- Your relationship with other interviewees is important- be pleasant and collaborative
- Bring extra copies of your vita
- Contact students in the program prior to visiting
- Be friendly and interactive with everyone
- Remember that you are NEVER “offstage”



Telephone Interviews

- Never allow yourself to be “surprise interviewed”. If you are not prepared say, “I’d love to talk to you at the earliest opportunity. I can be free anytime after _____; is there a time and number at which I can reach you?”
- Prepare “telephone cards” for each program



Telephone Cards

- Name of program
- Setting
- Director of Training
- Interesting faculty/areas
- Names of articles that you have read
- Any special notes about the program of interest to you
- Specific questions you want to ask about the program

During Telephone Call

- Most calls are 20-30 minutes. They begin generally, and cover clinical, research, and career goals, and invite you to ask questions. You may be asked to allow the call to be taped so that others can hear it.
- Let phone ring a while you take a deep breath
- **Answer comfortably and confidently, "thanks for calling Dr. _____, I'm really excited about the University of _____, so I'm looking forward to talking with you"**
- Find some way to make yourself comfortable at the beginning. Humor, mentioning a person you have in common, or simply taking a slow breath and allowing yourself to relax, can all help
- **Remember the "Triple I" perspective (Interested, Informed and Inquisitive), and allow yourself to be personable; the primary goal is to be personable and to find out information that will help you make your decision.**

Writing a Note of Thanks

- Write a non-demand note of thanks (it will be placed in your file or circulated to faculty)
- **A simple note is fine:** “I just wanted to take a moment to thank you for the time and effort you dedicated to talking with me on the phone/during my visit at _____. On the basis of that contact I continue to be strongly interested in your program, and look forward to hearing from you in due course. In the meantime, thanks again for your interest in me and your **consideration of my application.**”
- Not a time to campaign, to raise substantive points, or to ask further questions—just a polite note demonstrating graciousness and diplomacy



Thanks!

Following Interview

- Wait at least until April 1 for contact- very busy time for faculty
- No news is good news-
- Continue any substantive email contact with faculty, but do not inquire about **admission's status**
- By April 1st you will hear one of three things-
 - acceptance
 - rejection
 - alternate status/waiting list

What to do if Accepted

- Do NOT accept on the phone. Once an offer is extended, it cannot be withdrawn prior to April 15th, so the balance of power is now over to you. There is a saying in graduate programs that “you are everyone’s first choice until they are accepted!”- programs expect to be put on hold

Be polite and say three things:

1. I’m thrilled

2. I don’t expect it will take to until the 15th to decide, but you will be the first to know when I have made my decision- how can I best reach you (phone, email?)

- 3. Will I be receiving a written offer and will it clarify any associated funding offers? What is the protocol at that point, should I FAX it back, call you and respond over the phone, or what?
- Notice that this continues the Triple I approach; Interested, Informed and Inquisitive

If Accepted

- Regardless of how excited you are, or whether this is your top choice, you need to see the formal letter of offer before accepting because it will carry specific terms, including funding. E.g. T.A., G.I., R.A. Fellowship, tuition waivers, number of credits covered, number of years of funding, etc. - This information is too much and too confusing for a phone call and the TD may not know all of the details at that time

If Rejected

- Thank you
- Reappraisal
 - other programs or fields
 - M.S. first
 - post-bach study

If Wait-Listed

- Ask if you can have any idea how their wait-list works, where you are on the list, and whether they can estimate your chances of being extended an offer
- If high on the list (or they typically go deep on their lists), wait until the 14th or 15th- a LOT happens in the closing 48 hours
- Remember, most programs who enroll 10 new students, will have to offer to 15 or more to fill these 10 positions, meaning they go 5 or more deep into their wait-list; many Psy.D. programs wind up offering to 1/3 to 1/2 of their total applicant pool
- **As many people will wind up enrolling in a given graduate program from the waiting list as **from the “top group” in any given year; wait for your top programs to come through before committing so that you do not wind up with “buyer’s remorse”**

Two Final Cautions

- #1 Never decide on the basis of stipend amount
 - can be more than compensated for by cost-of-living differences, by first-year starting salary, by tuition payment differences, etc.
 - plus, loans are relatively low-cost, deferred, and less than a car payment against a professional income five, six, or seven years from now
 - looking back 10 or 15 years from now, you will never think twice about having earned 2 or 3K less on a stipend at your top choice in lieu of accepting your second or third preference, whereas you may always wonder the other way around.
 - get the book, Financing Graduate School: How to Get the Money You Need for Your Graduate School Education (Patricia McWade)

Two Final Cautions

- #2 Try not to hold more than one offer at a time. If you have your programs rank-ordered, release any lower ones after you receive the written offer from a higher program. This prevents gridlock for programs, and overload for you.