
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 and this volume). 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 many 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 what a program offers 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 (for guidance if you should be so lucky, see Burke & Bottoms, in press, this volume).

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.³

Before the Interview

Others have written about applying successfully to graduate school (e.g., Bottoms & Carris, 2017, this volume; Kracen & Wallace, 2008; Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000), and the American Psychological Association has resources online

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³ Where do we get our expertise? The first author endured seven interviews herself and emerged with several offers. She went on to become a happy graduate student at the University of Virginia, where she completed her Ph.D. in 2011. The second author has been interviewing prospective students for the UIC graduate program for over 20 years. She also had a few graduate school interviews herself once a very long time ago.
Although we are focusing on the interview rather than the application process, 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 5% below the GRE score being used as a cut-off by the department that year, etc. By applying to multiple programs, you increase your chances of being invited for an interview to at least one program, hopefully more, so that you can have choice.

Before being invited for an interview, you will probably be contacted by phone or e-mail by the faculty member who is most interested in having you attend the program: your potential advisor. 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. Do not let it catch you off guard, and do not treat it informally. More and more, these calls are actually done by Skype, so they closely approximate a formal interview. Expect that phone call or Skype session, and have a plan for what you will say. 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 school; your qualifications, including prior research experiences; and why you are interested in that particular program and that particular faculty member’s research. We must pause to underscore this point: The latter is the most important question, both for this interview and the on-campus interview. Yet it is the one test that probably 75% of all applicants fail, sometimes miserably, as if they haven’t even skimmed the potential advisor’s abstracts, much less read his or her recent publications. 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 too stunned 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?”

If you pass the phone/Skype 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 entire website (including detailed documents such as the graduate handbook), then move to reading about the university and even the city where the university is located. You should have read the website before you applied to the program, but take the time to read it

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4 The second author’s favorite answer to this question so far is “Because I like true crime novels.”
5 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.
again. Reading this information ahead of time will allow you to ask thoughtful, meaningful questions during the interview and save you from asking embarrassing questions.

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 comfortable asking for it (but not demanding 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 – you will look far more impressive than other students who have not brought notes). Prepare a couple of questions to ask each person you meet (see the Appendix 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. Find and read his or her recent publications or other materials, such as grant applications), and e-mail or call him or her to determine which ones would be most important for you to prioritize. Prepare to discuss some of that research and to demonstrate your ability to generate related questions and, most importantly, future research ideas. The latter is, essentially, the key test during your interview.

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 advisor. You might be asked to stay an additional day 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. Also, 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. So relax and enjoy yourself among many talented people, while keeping in mind that even if you do not attend this program, you will very likely 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, broad

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6 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.
curiosity, humor, grace, experience, confidence (without arrogance), and humility. It is also important to exhibit a sense of stamina and common sense. Avoid statements such as “I am too tired to ask any more questions” 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.”). Also, 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. Be prepared to describe your past research and answer questions – about theory, methods, results, and big-picture implications. (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 listen to your interviewer, try to turn the interview into a discussion that showcases your knowledge and curiosity by using the questions and strategies we mentioned above (see Appendix). 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. Do this for every faculty member in the program, not only those with whom you want to work. When you are meeting with your potential advisor, 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 advisor’s 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, ask the same questions to different people throughout the interview. You will probably get slightly different perspectives from each person. Never, ever walk into someone’s office and declare that all your questions have already been answered. Also, although you should bring forth your knowledge in the conversation, don’t arrogantly presume yourself to be more knowledgeable about a subject than the expert sitting in front of you.

In addition to asking a lot of questions, you will also 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. 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. In general, when interacting with many students and faculty members, you are likely to encounter a few uncomfortable or inappropriate questions or comments. Do your best to brush it off and move the conversation back to relevant topics.

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

7 If you think a day of talking with smart people about interesting things is hard, try digging ditches.
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. If you are lucky enough to stay with a student from your potential advisor’s lab, you might ask for more information about the atmosphere and structure of the lab. Do senior graduate students often mentor incoming students? How often do students collaborate on projects? Is there a lab coordinator, and does this tend to be a funded position or a position filled by undergraduates or graduate students? Finally, 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. 8

After the Interview

After your interview, send a little thank-you note by e-mail to those with whom you interviewed, especially to your potential advisor(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. (In fact, we recommend giving him or her a tiny hostess gift upon arrival.) It’s also appropriate to follow-up with an inquiry about when you should expect to hear about the admission decision, but beyond that, do not pester the university or your potential advisor 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 or will be accepted. Often a 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 (which is why you should have applied to many programs). 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 and legal concerns 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 advisor, followed by a formal acceptance letter. 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, but not always.

You only need one acceptance, but it would be very nice to get more than one. Then you have choice. Always keep in mind that you must eventually choose only one. It is important to

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8 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 we’ve seen over the years.
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 immediately 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. (For
specific advice on making that choice, see Burke & Bottoms, in press, this volume.) 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/or
teaching/research 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 and collect all the information you can. If you get accepted,
use all that information to decide if graduate school in psychology at a particular university is the
right path for your future. And importantly, if you don’t get accepted anywhere, do not panic.
Seek the advice of a trusted professor at your baccalaureate institution to understand why you
didn’t get accepted. If you still believe this path is for you, you might consider going to a good
master’s degree program first, addressing your weaknesses and building your knowledge,
curriculum vitae, and skills. Or you might decide you want to do something else entirely. Either
way, you will be fine. There are many paths to success in life, and you will find another one.
Good luck!
References


Appendix

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 positive information, not in a suspicious manner that suggests that you expect to uncover problems. And remember that you will also have a chance to ask some questions after you receive an offer of admission. As discussed by Burke and Bottoms (in press, this volume), it’s important to think carefully about the message your questions convey. Recently, the second author was asked by a prospective student, “What areas of weakness as an advisor will you be working on to improve?” This conveys surprising arrogance. She has also been asked: “I’ll get to do research on other topics, right? Or do I have to work only on your research?” This wording belies a lack of enthusiasm for the advisor’s research, which signals a mismatch between the prospective student and the program. And once you hear an answer, remember to smile and nod and express appreciation for what you are hearing. (And if you don’t like what you are hearing, you can still smile and nod, then politely let the program know you are not interested after you get back home.) Here are some questions you might want to choose from (but we are certainly not suggesting that you grill your interviewer with all of them!):

\[\ldots\] for potential advisors and other faculty:

- What are your current research projects? What stages are these projects in? Which might I get a chance to work on? How and when would I start work on my own related, projects such as my master’s thesis project?
- Please describe the main milestones in the program (e.g., master’s thesis, pre-dissertation thesis, preliminary or comprehensive exams, dissertation)? \(\text{(Note: Often the basic information will be online in the form of a graduate handbook.)}\)
- What are departmental or university resources for graduate student research (e.g., can students apply for research funds)? Are graduate students typically successful in applying for outside funding (e.g., from psychological societies such as Psi Chi, the American Psychology/Law Society, etc., or from larger funders such as the National Science Foundation or National Institutes of Health)?
- Tell me about the opportunities to present at conferences, co-author publications, and participate in other professional development, such as statistical trainings.
- 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?
- Does your research tend to be conducted at the university, or in the community? Do you do any community-based participatory research? If yes, what are examples of collaborations you have formed with community agencies?
- 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 the projects we will be doing? How often do you submit grants? Are there opportunities to co-author grants? Is there any formal training in grant writing?
• 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?
• How much coursework is required, and which courses?
• Is there any formal training in teaching? How many classes do students tend to teach (or be a teaching assistant for) per semester? Are there summer teaching opportunities? Are there opportunities to develop and teach one’s own course?
• 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 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 of clients (e.g., children, students, adults, etc.)? Are the clients required to be there (e.g., by court order) 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 current graduate students at the program (in addition to many already listed above):
• What do you like best about this program?
• Are there any things you don’t like about this program?
• Is there anything 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? Are students friendly with each other outside of school?
• 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? How long does it take to receive feedback, usually? 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? Or is the atmosphere collaborative? What is the social climate among graduate students?
• Are there opportunities for students to share ideas with one another and collaborate across labs?
• Have you had the opportunity to mentor undergraduate research?