

OVERVIEW

What is an interview at its core? In an organizational or academic setting, the interview is ultimately a gauge of fit: does the candidate seem like 1) they fundamentally understand the institution's or organization's needs and how they can successfully apply their skills and expertise to meet them, 2) they will work well with others (colleagues, faculty, students, or teams) within that environment, and 3) they genuinely possess the knowledge, skills, and experience claimed in their application materials, whether that's a CV, personal statement, research portfolio, or resume. This third point matters because interviews are one of the few moments where a candidate must demonstrate real-time command of what they've written down (i.e., explaining a research methodology, defending a project outcome, or walking through a specific accomplishment in their own words, rather than simply having it summarized on paper).

The interview offers the institution the opportunity to hear how someone thinks through ideas, problems, and their own educational and professional history in real time. It is, in some ways, a chance to "measure" a candidate's ability to communicate effectively and to verify that the accomplishments and expertise on the page hold up under closer questioning.

The interview is not a one-way street: candidates should also be gauging whether the organization or academic institution is the right fit for them. They should go into interviews with curiosity and discernment, prepared not only to answer questions and substantiate their materials, but also to ask thoughtful, precise questions of their own.

TOP TIPS FROM HoC BASKIN-SOMMERS AND DEAN MATT

Tell me about yourself: This question is not an invitation to recite your résumé. Don't just say, "I'm a junior at Yale. I like computer science." That's a title, not a story, and it won't give the interviewer any real sense of who you are. Instead, build a narrative around a core trait or characteristic: identify something genuine about yourself (e.g., a curiosity, a value, a way you approach problems) and show how it has threaded through your life, decisions, and experiences. For example, instead of "I like computer science," try, "I've always been someone who loves puzzles...as a kid, I'd take apart old radios just to see how they worked." From there, trace the trait forward, showing how it evolved into your current work, major, or extracurriculars ("That love of puzzles turned into a fascination with systems, which is why I'm majoring in computer science now, and why I spend my weekends building small apps just to see if I can"), and finally connect it back to why you're a fit for the specific role or organization. Ultimately, a good answer to "tell me about yourself" should read like a short story with a clear throughline, not a list of facts; it should feel like you, not a summary of your résumé.

Length of answers: Keep the whole answer tight. No more than two minutes. Think about the structure as if you are writing a paper abstract: topic sentence, meat of information, repeat main point. This structure works because it mirrors how people actually retain information: they remember the beginning and the end far more than the middle. Bookending your answer with the main point ensures the interviewer walks away with a clear takeaway, even if some of the supporting detail fades. It also keeps you disciplined; if you know you have to circle back to a

topic sentence, you're less likely to wander into a tangent that eats up your two minutes without going anywhere.

The weaknesses question: Don't disguise a strength as a weakness, answers like "I work too hard" or "I'm a perfectionist" are transparent dodges that interviewers have heard a thousand times, and they signal an unwillingness to engage honestly with the question. Instead, identify a real, specific weakness (something you've genuinely struggled with) and then walk through the concrete steps you've taken to actively work on it. The weakness itself matters less than what you show about your self-awareness and growth: pick something true but not disqualifying for the role, briefly acknowledge how it has shown up in your work or life, and spend the bulk of your answer on the deliberate action you took to improve, along with the progress you've made. This shows the interviewer you can honestly assess yourself and take initiative to grow, which is far more compelling than a fake weakness ever could be. Another way to approach the question is to think about where you've consistently needed to build in extra support or systems to perform well. These are the spots you compensate for proactively, rather than ones that catch you off guard.

How you talk about other people: When asked about a difficult supervisor or a tough interpersonal situation at work, answer honestly, but resist the urge to put the other person down. Speaking negatively about a former boss, coworker, or colleague, even if the criticism is fair, tends to reflect poorly on you rather than them, since interviewers are often left wondering how you'd talk about them in a similar situation down the line. Instead, describe the situation factually and with a measured tone, focus on the specific behavior or dynamic rather than character judgments, and pivot quickly to what you did to navigate it: how you communicated, adapted, sought clarity, or found common ground. The goal is to show maturity, emotional intelligence, and professionalism under friction.

"Any questions for us?": This is an opportunity for you to hear more about the role and the organization, but you don't want to ask something that's already answered elsewhere (the job ad, the organizational portfolio/mission, etc.). Instead, ask your interviewers to speak to their hopes for the hiring process, the organization as a whole, or its work in the coming year. You could, for example, ask them how either the organization measures its success or how the hire might track their own success. You could also ask them to speak more fully to the organization's collaborative ethos. We also recommend that the candidate mention something specific (and positive/complimentary) that they've researched about the interviewer or someone else at the organization that they think highly of or can envision working closely with or learning from if offered the job. It's a great way to further demonstrate with specificity how you see yourself fitting in at an organization and most people remember a compliment or positive comment, especially one that's sincere!

Getting some "space" from a tough question: If you get a curveball or otherwise don't feel like you're quite ready to offer a cogent response to a particular question, give yourself some "space". A few tactics (combinable):

- 1) Take a breath; you don't have to jump in right on the heels of the question, and taking time when you need it speaks to thoughtfulness.
- 2) Comment on the question, e.g., "That's a really good question."
- 3) Name the need. "I'd like to take a moment to consider this."

Top 3s:

Great

1. Specific, story-driven answers over generic claims (back every claim with an example!)
 2. Genuine curiosity paired with demonstrated fit (it feels like a conversation)
 3. Self-awareness, honesty, and trustworthiness
- (an *added bonus*: it is better to overdress than underdress [if traveling for an interview, bring extras of anything you may wear and pack a granola bar in your bag!])

Not so great

1. Rambling without structure, or reciting a résumé instead of a story
2. Appearing disinterested or arrogant
3. Speaking poorly about past employers or colleagues

USEFUL RESOURCES

- <https://ocs.yale.edu/channels/interview-preparation/>
- <https://capd.mit.edu/channels/interview/>
- <https://capd.mit.edu/resources/graduate-school-interviews/>
- <https://jobs.sciencecareers.org/article/to-ace-your-ph-d-program-interviews-prepare-to-a-answer-and-ask-these-key-questions>
- <https://www.yaelcourtney.com/resources-and-guides/phd-interview-tips-that-actually-help>