

Preparing for interview

It is well known that Oxford and Cambridge interview selected candidates, but nowadays many other universities invite applicants to interview, depending on the course. In some cases, these are post-offer interviews, which are as much about selling the university to you as they are about you impressing the university. If you are called for interview before you have heard whether you have an offer, you need to be prepared.

There are many things that you can control:

What you wear

It is likely that you will be given guidelines on what to wear in your interview invitation. Generally, you need to feel comfortable, but don't wear jeans, trainers, caps or sportswear. 'Smart casual' is always a good, safe option. You need to look as though you are taking the interview seriously, but you do not want to be overdressed.

Planning your travel

The last thing you want is to be stressed about arriving on time. Check on the best mode of transport to get to your interview, buy tickets beforehand if you are travelling by public transport and allow time to find the correct faculty/department/building. Some university campuses are stretched out over a large site and it can take time to locate the precise place you are supposed to be. Make a note of the department's telephone number so that you can call if you are delayed.

Course research

You need to be prepared to engage in discussions about the course you are applying for. Do your research beforehand by looking closely at the syllabus and course details on the university website: check the modules outlined for each year of the course. Also research the lecturers and tutors and read up on their areas of specialism, noting whether they have written any books or papers of particular note. This is particularly important if you are called for interview at a highly competitive university, like Cambridge, Oxford, Imperial, St Andrews, Durham. Also read over your personal statement, making sure that you can expand on anything you have included as you may well be asked about what you have written and why you included it in your statement.

The first impressions

It may sound cliché but first impressions really do count. Look confident, smile, shake hands firmly and if your interviewer asks some casual questions, like 'How was your journey?' to break the ice, avoid monosyllabic answers by giving a bit of detail.

Other aspects of the interview are less within your control, but how you respond could be the key to your success:

Likely questions

It won't be surprising if you are asked about the subject and why you have applied for a place to study it at their university. If you have done your research, you should be able to handle these questions easily. It's a chance to demonstrate your interest in the subject, your

knowledge of key texts and current affairs and of how the course is taught and assessed. The same applies to any questions you may be asked based on the content of your personal statement.

Other possible questions are:

Why do you want to come to this university?

What are your strengths and weaknesses?

What is your greatest challenge?

More generally – “tell me about yourself”. In answering this, stick to information that relates to your interest in the course, your studies to date and any relevant extra work you have done/experiences you have had.

Any questions?

Finally go prepared with some questions of your own, because you could get asked if you have any. To express interest in the course, you could ask about contact hours, flexibility in the choice of modules, class sizes, what level of support you get from teaching staff outside of lectures and seminars. You could even ask about the interviewer’s background, or what it is like to live in the city/town/campus. Try to avoid asking questions which are easily answered by reading the prospectus!

Curveballs

Most of the time, the interviewers want you to be relaxed so that they can find out more about you and how suitable you are for the course. However, on occasion, you may be thrown a curveball. If you are asked a subject-related question but have not studied the topic, then say so. There is no embarrassment in not knowing something. Famously, Oxbridge candidates can get asked totally unexpected questions, like ‘Tell me about a banana’. Such questions are designed to get you thinking on your feet and to see how you respond. If you have no idea where to start, there is no harm in saying that you need time to think, or to ask for clarification of what a question means.

Tips on how to answer the questions well

You will find it much easier to answer any question, if you learn *how* to answer them effectively.

The first thing is to **listen** and answer the question you have been asked. It can be tempting to answer the question you would like to have been asked and to talk about what you know, topics you have prepared. However, if this does not answer the question, you can come across as a weak candidate. Once you have answered the question asked, you can then steer the conversation to topics that you know well.

If the interviewer uses terminology you don’t understand, then **ask** for clarification. This is a sign of confidence and humility which interviews will regard positively. If you are working through a complex question, the interviewer may help by giving hints at how you can arrive at the correct answer. If they say something you think is especially clever and relevant, then try to incorporate it into your answer. Try, too, to make the interview as interactive as you can, by asking questions and engaging in conversation rather than giving a short answer and just waiting for the next question.

If the interviewer asks you a question to which you just don't know the answer, then **be honest** and say so. The interviewer will respect you more for your honesty than if you take a stab in the dark. Sometimes you are asked questions to which there is no right or wrong answer – the interviewer will be trying to learn how you think, how methodical or creative you are, how you might work under pressure.

When answering questions, an ability to think logically, analyse problems, be concise and provide rational arguments will impress your interviewer. Demonstrate enthusiasm but not over-confidence and if you get the opportunity, generate new ideas. Provided your ideas or solutions are based on facts or a logical argument, it is not essential that they are correct – you will not know everything (no-one does), but it is great to use what you do know in a creative and original way. It is more about potential than about being too polished.

So, what are the interviewers really looking for?

In short, interviewers are looking for:

- **Potential:** how much can you improve, learn and make the most of the academic opportunities offered? At interview it is more important to show that you can engage in an argument/discussion than to pretend that you know everything.
- **Motivation:** how much do you want to study the subject? This is best demonstrated through wider reading and independent research.
- **Teachability:** the interviewer will want to know that you have an inquisitive mind, are hungry to learn and will turn up to lectures and tutorials. Asking questions at interview will give an indication of how interesting you are to teach.
- **Personality:** at interview, you'll probably be nervous and it may be difficult to show the interviewer the 'real you'. Try to show that you are an interesting and interested person and that you will be engaging to be with in tutorials and seminars.
- **Knowledge:** strange as it may sound, this is not the most important thing to demonstrate at interview. An interview is not an exam, and applicants will have been taught differently, so it would be unfair of the interviewer to judge you on your knowledge alone. Obviously you are expected to have some knowledge of the subject but what is important is to show how you can use the knowledge base you do have to engage in discussion and solve any problems you are presented with.