**So you’re choosing a PhD. Help!**

Part 1. What do you want? = Introduction to the rest

Part 2. So you got an interview with a researcher. Now what?

Part 3. Related resources

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**Part 1. What do you want?**

**Know what you want**

Before all else, you need to think about what you want most. In general, here are the different things you need to take into consideration:

1. the PhD project
2. the advisor(s)
3. the research group and the institute/lab
4. the city/country

Imagine that, for each of these categories, there is a scale from 0 (crap) to 10 (amazeballs). What is a 0 for you? What is a 10 for you?

**Know what you can afford**

Do you want a PhD right now or can you afford to be pickier? Everybody is different, everybody has a different situation, and you may have more or less choices at a given moment. **But you need to know about what you will compromise and about what you will not compromise.**

In the scale example, set your limits: what is the minimum score you will accept in each category? **The following document will help you determine if each PhD subject falls within your limits**: you will find different *general* considerations. It’s up to you to see whether they matter or not, whether you can afford to take them into consideration or not. But be aware of what the *possible* consequences will be for you, your work and your life.

**Part 2. So you got an interview with a researcher. Now what?**

This is general advice that will work for most interviews.

**An interview goes both ways**

The short version of it:

1. **They interview you:** The researcher wants to assess your quality as a scientist, your motivation, your thirst for knowledge and your ability to learn. Prove to them you are THE student for the job.
2. **You interview them:** You want to assess
   1. whether the project is as good as it looks.
   2. if the supervisor would be a good supervisor **FOR YOU.**
   3. whether the lab is a good working environment (aka good science, good people, and good feel).

Of the three last points, you will probably not get the best possible for all three at the same time (if you do, kill all other candidates and grab the job).

**The goal is not only to make an impression, but to determine how the PhD ‘scores’ in each of your categories!**

So **be well prepared.** More specifically:

**They interview you**

1. **Why do you want to do a PhD?**

Think about why you want to do a PhD. You should have thought about it already. If you have not, for Whoever You Want’s sake, do it! But more than that, you should be able to explain it to your potential supervisor (and cover letter, and competition jury). If the answer does not seem mature enough, think more.

Be aware of what a PhD means. It is no going to be dreamy every day. I don’t know of one PhD student who does not recognized themselves in at least a couple of PhD Comics strips (<http://phdcomics.com/comics.php>**). A potential supervisor want to make sure that you know what you are signing up for and are ready for it, the goldy *and* the gory aspects.**

**2. Prove to them you will be a good scientist**

Prepare to show that you are a good scientist (and will be an even greater one). So be ready to talk about your projects. Be ready to explain what you did in one sentence, two minutes, ten minutes or half an hour. Have some slides ready about your different projects. Have your master thesis ready to give or send. Show them you did good science during your project, thought critically about it, and were able to acquire new skills by yourself. Be ready to discuss any of your results in detail with them (especially if the subject is relevant for them). You may have a cool science discussion with them.

Remember, different researchers might have different expectations about students, especially in terms of independence and number of past research projects.

**You interview them**

Each of these sections has three parts:

* Context
* Specific questions to ask / things to do
* Red flags. If you have one or several red flags, try to know more and be careful (be aware of what it means and how it will impact you*, it does not necessarily mean* “don’t go”)

1. **The PhD project**

Think about the subject. Whether they send you a half page or a ten pages proposal, whether it is precise or not, think about it A LOT. Note all the questions you have. Read a couple of articles. Think about some experiments that can be done. List all the questions you NEED to ask about the subject, the context, the potential. The more you think about whatever they gave you, the richer the discussion will be. If the first interview goes well, you are probably going to discuss more, and you can always ask questions later about the subject. But remember, you are here to see whether it is a good subject **for you**! You need to think about the gory details, the worst case scenario.

Questions that you HAVE to ask:

* Do you have **money** for the experiment? If not, when are you applying? What are your chances of getting the money? When will we know? What if we don’t get any, what will I be able to do, with whose money?
* Do you have the **samples** for the experiments? When will we get them, do we have money and authorizations to get them? Is it part of my job to get them (obviously, that depends on your subject, this line of question might be trivial or not)? Do I depend on anybody’s good will to get them?
* Are there competent people in the group/lab or collaborations collaboration on technics/organism/method? In other words, who can I go for help and discussion?
* Think about the **critical experiments/requirements** for your PhD project and ask about the worst: the experiment fails; you cannot get the sample, or the money: what happens?
* Ask about B, C, D and up to Z plans!

Basically, it is an absolute necessity that you think about it for yourself. And in my opinion, a supervisor should appreciate that a future student is able to think critically, and plan, and identify pitfalls in a subject. If they don’t like this line of questions, you need to be **very** careful and figure out why. It could be that the project is risky. Whether you want to go for it or not while knowing of the potential risks is your decision. Just remember that some of the planned things **will go wrong** anyway.

Red flags:

* No money for experiments
* No back-up ideas
* Supervisor wants to try new techniques that no one in the lab knows (you better have good collaborations)

**2. Your potential advisor(s)**

They are here to judge you, granted, but **you** are also here to judge **them**! They will have a strong influence on your life in the next three to five years. It can be a good one (on average) or a bad one.

Be aware that there are different kinds of supervising, which correspond to some different types of students, and you should know what **you** **want/need** and cannot stand from a supervisor. What is good or bad depends on you. Think carefully about what your expectations of a good supervisor are, and use the interview and contact with other people from the lab to assess whether your potential supervisor meets your expectations.

And they are a couple of bad supervisors, who are bad for everybody, and that you need to avoid at all costs...

Specific things you HAVE to do:

* Get in contact with people: Ask in your network if people worked with them. Get contact of former PhD and master students of them (through your contacts, or website, or articles author list). Ask to meet students during your visit. Ask for names and email contacts of former students and see whether they correspond to what you found. Ask to talk with the students alone for some time. Talk to other members of the group (especially students from other supervisors, who might feel freer to be honest about your potential supervisor).
* Find out what kind of supervising they do (you might ask them directly): how often they meet their students, how independent you will be etc.
* Ask them whether they teach, have a lot of responsibilities, how many PhD students they have. This will help you to know how much supervising experience they have, and **how much time they will have for you**. If they are teaching a lot, or are head of the institute, you will not see them much. Do not hesitate to ask for a co-supervisor if you think they will have limited time for you.
* In case of co-supervision, ask them if they are used to working together, whether they co-supervised students before. Try to identify whether they are complementary, whether they get along well. Co-supervisors will have different opinions during the PhD at some point. How it will affect you depends on whether they are used to it and how you manage them.

Remember, you will have to manage your supervisor as much as they will manage you…

Red flags

* Supervisor does lots of teaching, is involved in the organization of teaching
* Supervisor is head of the department/institute
* Supervisor is so good everybody wants to meet them and they spend their time jet setting
* Supervisor has a lot of PhD students already (relative to the local norm!)
* Several supervised PhD students dropped out of their PhD or left science just after it
* Supervisor on bad terms with rest of the lab
* Co-supervisors disagreeing on ideas already during the interview
* Co-supervisor B was Co-supervisor A’s PhD student, or is a more junior faculty member that clearly defers to them. You will have a power imbalance between your supervisors.
* Co-supervisors have the same negative traits (both are impatient/tactless/blindly optimistic/slow responders/…). They will amplify, not balance, each other.

**3. The research group and the institute/lab**

Things you SHOULD do:

* Ask to meet other people in the research group. They are people you will meet every day. Are they welcoming, friendly, cool, …?
* Visit the lab. Do they have money for stuff? Are they lots of interesting people? Are there regular seminars (once a week?)? Do they go for drinks? Do they have fun? Is it a good place to work and learn and live for three+ years?

Red flags

* Isolated lab, with few visitors

**4. The city/country**

It may or may not be helpful/appropriate to ask your supervisor questions about the city or country, such as:

* What is the housing situation like?
* Is my salary enough to have a comfortable life?
* Can I bike to work?
* etc.

**Part 3. Related resources**

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/10-truths-a-phd-supervisor-will-never-tell-you/1/2005513.article>

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg19726442.500-the-phd-journey-how-to-choose-a-good-supervisor.html>

<http://www.postgrad.com/editorial/advice/exams/examinations_examiners_supervisors/get_the_most_from_your_postgraduate_supervisor/>

<http://www.postgrad.com/editorial/advice/phd/interview_dos_and_donts/>

<http://blogs.egu.eu/network/bar/2014/03/03/phd-interview-preparation/>

<https://marialuisaaliotta.wordpress.com/2011/12/05/supervisor/>

As you can see, a couple of points always come back…

**Part 4. Advice by country**

France (Mathilde & Eva)

The advice above is relevant to the situation of meeting the researchers for the first time to talk about a project they advertised, not the doctoral school oral competition. We also assume that you contacted this person for good reasons.  
    In [Mathilde’s] experience, the tone of the interview is not too formal. You may meet one person or several. They are here to judge you but they know that you are here to judge them as well. They will have questions for you, and you will have questions for them. Do your best to get a real dialogue going, especially about science: you are here because you want to do science with them for three years at least.

How the interview is going to be organized depends on them, but chances are that they are going to ask about you first. If you are lucky, they might fetch you outside the lab, or bring you to the coffee room, and you will have a couple of minutes to break ice before the beginning of the real discussion. You might also have a meal with them or people from the lab. It will be part of the “**informal interview**”, a good moment to exchange with a little bit less pressure, and a good moment to gauge each other.

In France, they do not expect you to have done two years of undergraduate research. If you did, of course, it is nice. But if you did not (as most French students), it is fine.

The ‘local norm’ for a normal number of PhD students for a supervisor to have is around 2. If the supervisor already has two or more PhD students (whom they actually supervise, not students actually supervised by someone else), they may not have so much time for you.

Remember that in France, a PhD is about three years. It is extremely short. There is very little time to flail around if things go wrong.