

Q: Do we need to bring anything with us to the interview?

A: You should ask before arriving but the answer is likely to be no. However, unofficial transcripts and résumés are helpful to some interviewers — while others won't so much as glance at them. It's also helpful for your child to review this information before the interview. You'd be surprised by how many students freeze when asked what courses they took last term. It's useful, too, if your child knows his or her standardized test scores, GPA and, if available, class rank.

Art aspirants often appear with bulky portfolios but most interviewers are hardly critics and unless your child is applying to an art school or art program where a portfolio has been specifically requested, don't expect more than a fast flip-through. Consider bringing only one or two "master pieces" instead. The only thing your child shouldn't leave home without is the "College Bible," a good place to record questions, answers, and impressions. (But while you've got the packing list out, don't forget rain gear — especially an umbrella — and comfortable walking shoes, if you're planning to take a tour.)

What to Expect and How to Prepare

One young woman recalls getting stuck with an interviewer who had recently spent some quality time in South America. "What do you think of Chile?" was the first question he asked her. "I'm a vegetarian," she replied, confused. "I won't eat it if it's made with meat."

Fortunately, interviewers rarely ask such questions, nor any that resemble science or social studies quizzes. Nonetheless, an interviewer may want to see if your child is aware of the world beyond the high school. Keeping abreast of what's going on in the world is a sound pre-interview strategy.

Interview formats will vary. Some are quite open-ended. The interviewer may begin by saying, "Tell me about yourself," and then expect the student to take it from there. Others might have a more specific list of queries, some quite straightforward (What schools have you attended?); some more provocative ("What character from a book would you most like to be?"). Don't worry, though, the former type far outweighs the latter, and your child isn't expected to come off sounding like Barbara Walters or Billy Crystal.

Commonly, questions arise from student comments, just like they would in a casual conversation. If your daughter says she's on the track team, the interviewer is apt to ask what events she does, how she fared last season, or perhaps what aspects of the training are most demanding. Here are some other typical interview questions:

- **What classes have you enjoyed most?** Your child should be ready to show enthusiasm for *something* (and it should be a recent course, not seventh-grade wood shop). Another spin on this is "What do you like best (or least) about your high school?" or "Who is your favorite teacher and why?"
- **What do you do outside of class?** Whether your child's passion is soccer or ceramics, community service or a part-time job, showing interest in—and a commitment to—an activity is far more important than *what* that interest actually is—unless the activity is watching MTV or playing laser tag at the arcade.
- **What do you do during the summer?** Some teenagers have the luxury of studying overseas while others have to work long hours. As above, interviewers expect your child

to be doing something constructive. When planning ahead, make sure that your child does have meaningful summer activities scheduled, not only because they “look good” on applications and in interviews, but because summer choices can be an important part of an overall education.

- **What books have you found enjoyable but challenging?** This is an applicant’s chance to show off academic acumen. Let’s face it, Jane Austen will make a stronger impression than Danielle Steele; Stephen Crane surpasses Stephen King. Your child may have favorite books that were great for the beach, while others demand more intellectual exertion. The emphasis should be on the latter. Another pre-interview strategy: suggest that your child review recent favorite titles.
- **Whom do you admire?** Your child should be prepared to say why and to go easy on the soap-opera stars.
- **What are your post-college plans?** It’s fine to be unsure, but a student should be prepared to discuss some options or interests. Rather than simply saying “I dunno,” your child might continue, “I like art and computers, and graphic design seems to combine both, but I want to study Japanese and economics too, so maybe I’ll end up in international business.” (That covers quite a few bases, doesn’t it?)
- **What are you looking for in a college and/or what brings you to this one?** Again, an academic emphasis is important. It’s also fine to say, “I have a friend from home who loves it here,” but applicants should add why a school seems right for *them* (size, location, majors, and extracurricular offerings may all be legitimate factors). Sometimes, however, the honest answer is, “My mother (or father) went here (or wants me to go here) and is bugging me.” Our advice? A student can admit to admission personnel that someone else is behind this choice, but it should be stated—not whined—and applicants ought to cheerfully agree to keep an open mind until the interview and visit are over and the experience sinks in.
- **What will you contribute to this college?** Students may be asked this explicitly. If not it’s certainly something they should impart before they depart.

Interview Hints

Many high school students have never been interviewed before. They’re bound to be nervous and unsure of how much to sell themselves and just what to say. In addition to anticipating common questions, as above (and mulling over answers ahead of time), help your child relax and get ready by offering these suggestions from the pros:

- **Prepare.** Before every interview, an applicant should jot down the key points he or she wants to get across and then end the interview by adding, “There’s something else I’d like you to know about me--.” This may be the only way that the admission office learns about a summer art scholarship or a role in an upcoming musical.
- **Explain.** One critical function of the interview is to enable admission staff to read between the lines of a transcript. Although the application will tell them about grades and other activities, it’s bound to be an incomplete picture. For instance, a “C” in calculus may not wow them, but do they realize that no one in the class did better? Or that Junior had been out of school for three weeks due to an illness and had to keep up

on his own? He may have only pulled a “B-” in biology, but the teacher praised his term paper as the best she’s read in years. Admission officers won’t know that from a transcript. It’s up to the *applicant* to tell them.

Admission personnel can get pretty jaded. They’ve seen more than their share of cultural exchange programs, regional orchestras, and debate awards. What makes your child special? Did she get a chance to go to China because Grandpa wrote a check, or did she have to submit an essay and be selected from hundreds of candidates? Was she the youngest flutist from her school to perform a solo with the state symphony or the first debater to make the national tournament?

Furthermore, although interviewers are not therapists, they are accustomed to confidential information and don’ts hock easily. If health or family difficulties have affected your child, they should be explained succinctly during an interview. Your child shouldn’t go overboard with details but shouldn’t be mysterious, either. This information is an important part of who an applicant is and may affect how a candidate is evaluated.

Problems, both academic and personal, *can* be sources of strength and self-knowledge. If your child doesn’t feel comfortable discussing these in an interview but would like admission officials to know about them, consider a supplemental letter.

- **Boast.** Most of us have been taught not to, but at a college interview a bit of bragging is in order, and admission counselors welcome it. For example, if asked about a chemistry class, it’s fine to say, “I was proud of the fact that I got the highest grade on the mid-term” or “the teacher picked me to help with a special research project.” If your child founded the environmental club and didn’t merely join it, he or she should say so.
- **Expound.** Interviewers hate to pull teeth. They expect applicants to do much of the talking. Good interviewers usually ask open-ended questions like, “What did you like most about your trip to Japan?” In any case, your child should offer detailed information.

On the other hand, as impossible as it sometimes seems, teenagers need to know when to say when. Especially when they’re nervous, kids tend to rattle on about extraneous details. In particular, they should focus on events that occurred during high school. Unless they’re extraordinary, fourth grade trials and triumphs are not appropriate.

- **Question.** An interviewer is sure to ask if your child has questions. Even those who have memorized the catalog and spent a week on campus are bound to have some. An interviewer may construe a lack of questions as a lack of interest, but your child shouldn’t feel compelled to fabricate queries (“How many books are in the library?”) to impress the interviewer.

Questions say a lot about the person behind them. The student who inquires about research opportunities in physics is bound to be viewed differently than the one who wonders if the dorms have cable television. Questions should also indicate that the candidate has done his or her homework. “What do students seem to like best about the geology department?” is a legitimate question. “Do you have a geology department?” is not. In general, good interview questions are any that do demand information that applicants genuinely want to know and that don’t depict them as

dingbats. The list of possibilities is almost endless. Some questions to ask during an interview include:

- Will my choice of major affect my admission?
- If I'm accepted into one department, how easy is it to transfer to another if I change my mind?
- What is the average class size (especially in my field of study)?
- How large are "introductory" classes?
- How easy is it to take classes in other fields or are there some departments that are too crowded to accommodate non-majors or underclassmen?
- What are your internship options?
- Where can I study or take classes off-campus?
- How competitive is admission to your study-abroad programs (or other special programs)?
- Will my financial aid "travel" with me?
- Are there research opportunities for undergraduates?
- Tell me about your career guidance office.
- What are the pros and cons of different housing options?
- Does this school have a stereotype? How accurate is it?
- What happens here on weekends?
- Do fraternities and sororities dominate the social scene?
- Who are the "minority" students here and are they comfortable?
- How does this college's religious orientation (where appropriate) affect campus life?
- Do students of other faiths fit in?
- What political and campus issues concern students most?
- What do students like best and least about this school?
- What do you like about living and working here? (This is a good catch-all question that turns the tables on the interviewer and bails out the tongue- tied.)

Questions to Ask Current Students

Classes

- What is the average size of your classes?
- Do professors know your name?
- Are professors easily available outside of class?
- How are advisors assigned/selected?
- Do they really advise you?
- Is it hard to get into popular courses?
- What's the workload like?
- What's most stressful here?
- Are students competitive or supportive?
- Do many students apply to graduate school and are they accepted?

Campus Life

- Would you call this a friendly campus?
- Is crime an issue?
- What's the social life like?
- Are drinking or drugs prevalent?
- Are there fraternities, sororities, or other social clubs?
- What happens on weekends?
- What are the most popular extracurricular activities?
- Where do cultural events fit in?
- What's dorm life like?
- How's the food?
- What are the strong points of the town/city where the college is located?
- Where do students hang out on- and off-campus?

Student Body

- Would you say the student body is diverse?
- Is there a stereotype here?
- What is the political climate?
- Who are the minority groups here and how are they treated?

Questions for Faculty

- How many students are assigned to each advisor?
- What is your average class size?
- Is the format lecture discussion or other?
- Do students question or participate often?
- How frequently do you meet with students outside of class?
- Do non-majors take your classes?
- How many classes do you teach per term?

- Who corrects and grades papers and exams?
- Do you offer special independent study or research opportunities?
- What can a student do if she or he needs extra help?
- How do you use technology in your classroom?
- May see a syllabus from one of your classes?
- What are some of your former students doing now?

Remember, whether you're talking with professors or students, alumni or administrators, counselors or coaches, the manner in which they respond to your questions can be as telling as what they actually say. Are they amiable or aloof? Enthusiastic or apathetic? Well-spoken? Well-informed?

After all, a college is its people, as much as it is its catalog, classes, and campus, and without a visit to your target schools, it's difficult to determine just how your child will fit in.

Source: *Peterson's Panicked Parents' Guide to College Admissions, 3rd Edition.*