Ace the **Scholarship Interview**

ver wonder how certain entertainers, journalists, and politicians seem so poised and well-spoken in television interviews? Well, here's a little secret: For most, it's not because they've got natural on-screen talent exuding from their pores. Rather, it's that they are so familiar with the interview format, and what to say in any given situation, that their performance becomes second nature.

In this article, I'll illustrate some proven strategies and tips that will help you achieve similar results in your scholarship interviews.

You'll discover that an interview need not be a dreaded event. In fact, scholarship interviews can actually be fun.

Interview Preparation

I firmly believe that what you do before you even show up, shake hands with the interviewer, and utter your first words contributes to more than 50 percent of your overall interview performance.

This is because preparation and practice are the keys to feeling comfortable and confident in the interview setting. Preparation and practice give you the ability to relax at the interview, respond effortlessly and naturally to questions, and add some spontaneity with ease.

How do you prepare for a scholarship interview? Try the following nine action steps.



ATTENTION STUDENTS AND PARENTS: This article is designed to work together with Ben Kaplan's Scholarship Starter Kit CD. If you haven't received a CD, contact your college planner or counselor, or let us know at www.ScholarshipCoach.com/needkit

#1: Do Your Homework

An important precursor to performing well in an interview is to understand the perspective of the interviewer. If you understand where the interviewer is coming from, you'll be able to anticipate where he or she will go with questions—allowing you to formulate answers that are likely to be well received by your audience.

To prepare, research the organization or organizations sponsoring, administering, and judging the scholarship program. The Internet, with its powerful search engines, has made this job much easier in recent years. Make sure you clearly understand (and can state in a few sentences) the purpose of the scholarship program, the judging criteria for scholarship selection, and the underlying missions of the organizations involved.

Taking the time to research and understand this also demonstrates something else to your interviewer: The scholarship is important enough to you that you were willing to put in some extra effort.

To the extent possible, find out what you can about the person or people who will be interviewing you.

Are they affiliated with the sponsoring or administering organization? Are they educators? Are they businesspeople? Or are they members of the Fraternal Brotherhood of Fervent Aardvark Lovers? Uncovering snippets of background information gives you the edge.

#2: PREPARE A FEW KEY POINTS

Don't respond only to what an interviewer tosses your way. That's like being on a basketball team that only plays defense.

Instead, play offense as well: Go into an interview prepared to make several key points of your own—selling points based on your application themes that demonstrate you are deserving of the scholarship award. Communicate these points with passion and enthusiasm, and never assume that interviewers have read your application word for word (they probably haven't).

Interviews allow judges to discover more dimensions of you than they can on the written page, so prepare at least one key point that goes beyond anything mentioned in the written application. Use the opportunity of meeting the scholarship judges in person to show them

something fresh, new, and even surprising about yourself that they might not have considered before.

#3: Brainstorm Anecdotes

What's the cure for a dull interview? Quite simply, an anecdote is the antidote. Telling stories and giving examples keeps the interviewer interested and engaged.

Don't just recite a list of your key personal "selling" points. Take the time to communicate interesting anecdotes and stories that illustrate each point. Rather than communicate these points as a laundry list of credentials, approach the process as though you're putting together a descriptive clothing catalog: Take the time to describe the quality of the material, the style of the fit, and the vibrancy of the colors.

For instance, if your application theme centers on community service, don't just summarize all the service activities you've done. Talk about a specific community service project and a particularly memorable occasion when you felt your efforts made a big difference. Tell an interesting story about a person you helped and how that made you feel. In the end, this conveys much more about your service efforts than just reciting a list of credentials or facts.

And when it comes time to make the cut for the scholarship awards, it will likely be your anecdote that a judge remembers—your interesting, humorous, funny, sad, or poignant story that sets you apart and calls attention to your merits.

#4: Anticipate Interview Questions

The specific questions you'll be asked in any given interview are generally no big secret. With a little

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forethought, you can usually predict at least some of them. So take the time to come up with a list of potential questions. Don't just review the questions in your mind; write them down on index cards.

The specific questions, of course, depend on the emphasis of the particular scholarship. You'll be able to anticipate questions by drawing on the research you've done. For instance, in my interview for the U.S. Senate Youth Program Scholarship—an awards program with a focus on government and politics—I anticipated interview questions on current events and my state's political leaders. Sure enough, the questions materialized.

For scholarships aimed at students interested in a certain field of study, expect questions about your career goals and your experience with the subject matter. If the scholarship program is sponsored by an organization that highly values patriotism, expect questions asking about your citizenship duties as an American.

#5: OUTLINE YOUR RESPONSES

Once you've come up with a pile of questions on index cards, write out answers to the questions on the reverse side of the cards. Don't bother writing out actual sentences; just jot down a few notes that will remind you what you want to talk about. Never try to memorize actual

responses verbatim. After all, you want to seem relaxed and natural.

The key to preparing your responses is to try to be specific, to focus on personal experiences and perspectives, to take into account the mission and judging criteria of the scholarship, and to avoid genericsounding answers. What you don't want to do is prepare a response that sounds like ones given all too often by beauty pageant contestants—responses that are perceived as little more than lip service to what the judges want to hear. ("My goal for the future is to single-handedly bring about world peace!")

It's perfectly fine to give idealistic, optimistic, and even clichéd answers, but the key is backing up these statements with concrete and specific examples that demonstrate you have thoughtfully considered the statement you are making.

#6: PLAN QUESTIONS TO ASK

During a scholarship interview, you often get the opportunity to pose questions to the interviewer. Your interviewers may ask you directly if you have any questions for them, or a less deliberate moment may arise when the flow of the conversation suggests that you should pose a question. So be prepared for such a moment.

A well-thought-out and articulate question can tell the interviewer a lot about you. Questions are also

an opportunity to convey your knowledge of the sponsoring organization and of subject matter relevant to the scholarship. It's nice to be able to give the interviewer a chance to talk as well.

#7: "Pepper" Yourself

Put your index cards in a box or favorite hat, and draw out random questions to practice your interview responses. If possible, videotape your responses, then review and study those videotapes. Conduct the practice sessions as if they are a rehearsal or a scrimmage.

When you feel comfortable with your responses, do a mock interview with a parent, friend, family member, teacher, or school counselor. Provide them with your list of questions, but also allow them to ad-lib as well.

After the mock interview is complete, get as much feedback as you can. Find out what you did well and what you need to work on. What were the strongest aspects of your interview? What parts of the interview could use a little more practice?

#8: Prepare Work Samples

With certain scholarships, samples and portfolios that illustrate your talents can leave a strong impression with interviewers. Bring copies of your sample work that you can leave behind. The sample work will emphasize your strengths and will remind the interviewer to consider you when it's time to decide who wins the scholarship money.

This strategy is especially important if a focal point of your application is your artistic or writing ability—talents that are best demonstrated through sample work.

ASK THE COACH

What should I do differently in a scholarship interview conducted by phone?



The key to making a long-distance scholarship interview work is to treat it just like an in-person interview, albeit one that has a few extra challenges standing in the way of effective communication.

First, you need to take extra care to know who's on the other end of the line. Jot down the person's name and position, if he or she offers it, as well as any other bits of information you uncover. Listen closely to verbal clues to figure out whether the interviewer is interested in what you are saying (snoring is definitely one of these clues).

Next, pretend that the interviewer is actually in the room with you. Use the same gestures and facial expressions you would for a face-to-face interview. In my experience, it's actually possible to "hear" some of your body language (such as whether or not you are smiling).

You can, however, use the fact that no one can see you to your advantage: Lay out your prepared points and answers to anticipated questions on a table near the phone so you can reference the materials during the interview. Resist the urge, however, to read the notes verbatim over the phone (that sounds stuffy and fake), and instead just use them merely as talking points and conversation reminders.

In addition, try to avoid using a speakerphone, cordless phone, cell phone, or any other phone that can distort your voice, pick up surrounding noise, or make it difficult to hear the question.

Finally, be sure to find a quiet place for the interview, turn off your call-waiting (so you're not distracted by the beep), and alert everyone in the vicinity that you're about to take an important call.

Additionally, it never hurts to bring informative material that was not contained in the written application. If, for example, the written application provided you with only limited space to list and discuss your extracurricular activities, bring expanded listings and descriptions to possibly leave with the interviewer.

#9: Re-Read Your Application

In most instances, you will have submitted a written application before undergoing a scholarship interview. Given the time it takes to evaluate scholarship candidates, your interview may take place weeks or months after you have submitted the written application. Because of

this, it's important to refresh your memory about everything that was contained in the written form. During interviews, judges often ask you specific questions about things you've included on the form. So review your application, and be prepared to talk intelligently about any information you have submitted.

The Main Event

You're all dressed up...your palms are a little sweaty...the butterflies in your stomach are doing the mambo. Finally, it's time for the interview itself.

The following tips are a few tricks that scholarship winners have employed to win interviewers over to their worthy corners. Practice these techniques in your mock interviews until they are second nature.

A HANDSHAKE AND EYE CONTACT

Sure, it's old-fashioned, but it works every time. Keep your hand-shake firm and your eye contact direct, but not creepy. It's the perfect way to begin an interview.

Make a mental note of the interviewer's name when he or she tells it to you. Burn the name (with the correct pronunciation) into your brain cells.

ACTUALLY LISTEN

No one likes to be ignored. Look attentive when the interviewer is talking to you—even if he's expounding on a subject about as interesting as the history of butter lettuce in the 20th century. Resist the obvious temptation to "tune out" the interviewer in preparation for what you want to say next.

Failing to show attentive listening communicates to interviewers

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that they don't matter. Remember—attentive listening is one of the highest compliments you can pay anyone. Show genuine interest in what an interviewer is saying, and you'll create a strong impression.

Don't Perform a Monologue

It's easy in an interview to start reciting your opinions and accomplishments to the point where the interviewer isn't able to get a word in edgewise.

Resist the urge to start talking and never stop. Be careful to not get lost in the minutiae of every activity so that you wind up giving a tenminute discourse on the finer points of your city dump cleanup project.

To the extent that you can, strive to create a two-way dialogue—a real interactive conversation. If your interviewer comments on something you say by talking about his or her experience and background, ask a follow-up question. Most people enjoy talking about themselves and will appreciate the attention.

FIND COMMON GROUND

Each interviewer will respond to your various activities, experiences, credentials, and goals differently. This is understandable. Interviewers are viewing your life through the eyes of their own life experiences.

For this reason, observe when interviewers are especially interested in something you say (made obvious

by body language and verbal clues). If you notice this, talk about the subject in greater depth. And don't forget to ask them questions about it too.

If you're talking about how much you love painting, for instance, and the interviewer comments, "Oh, I enjoy painting as well," seize the opportunity to ask her a question (such as "What type of painting do you do?").

I know of one student who spent nearly an entire interview conversing with the scholarship interviewer about their shared interest in competitive volleyball—a topic that had nothing to do with the scholarship's judging criteria. What happened as a result? The student took home the scholarship prize.

BE FLUENT IN BODY LANGUAGE

Researchers at UCLA tell us that an astounding 93 percent of communication is nonverbal. So use body language to your advantage. Remember, you're not on trial here. It's not an interrogation. An interview should be a friendly conversation, and you hope an interesting one because, after all, it's all about you.

When you speak, don't hold back: Use natural hand gestures, keep your face animated, and project your voice with energy and enthusiasm. Refrain from slouching the way you probably do when hanging out with your friends or watching

television. By sitting up straight, you communicate confidence and assertiveness.

DON'T FORCE IT

Try to communicate the points and anecdotes you have prepared by working them into your answers. But if you aren't asked about something you wanted to talk about, don't completely digress from the interviewer's questions and attempt to force it into the conversation.

In other words, don't respond like the stereotypical sleazy politician; you should actually answer the question asked.

DON'T BE ANNOYING

We all have our share of annoying habits, but in an interview you want to look composed. Avoid tap-

ping your foot, shaking your leg, or doing any type of fidgeting.

Try to cut down on using "um," "like," and "you know" when you talk. Do not, under any circumstances, ask the interviewer to "pull your finger."

Do HAVE FUN

During the interview, try to be enthusiastic and cheerful. Don't be afraid to show off your pearly whites. A smile puts the interviewer at ease, dissipates the tension inside you, and conveys confidence.

Besides, interviews should actually be enjoyable. If you've practiced enough, all the other points I've mentioned in this article should already be second nature to you, and you'll be able to relax and go with the flow.

WRAP UP WITH STYLE

At the end of the interview, express your gratitude for the opportunity to interview, and communicate how much you enjoyed the discussion. In addition, try to repeat the interviewer's name in your closing remarks. (To the person you are talking to, his or her name is the sweetest sound in the world.)

Your interview duties, however, don't end when you walk out the door. If possible, send your interviewer a handwritten thank-you note to express your gratitude for his time and the chance to meet in person.

The author of this article, Ben Kaplan, is the publisher of ScholarshipCoach.com and the winner of more than two dozen scholarships worth \$90,000—enough to cover virtually the entire cost of his Harvard education.



For more scholarships that feature in-person interviews, see Ben Kaplan's Scholarships That Totally Rock CD-ROM series. This series includes guides for business, law, teaching, and more. www.ScholarshipCoach.com/products/totallyrock

Interview Rehearsal Worksheet

The following are practice questions that are useful in preparing for the typical scholarship interview. For each question, jot down a few notes in the "Answer Summary" box about how you would respond to the question. Next, brainstorm one interesting, insightful, or humorous anecdote or personal story that bolsters your response. You can record some notes about this personal example in the "Anecdote or Example" box.

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