Application Mentor
YOUR STORY STARTS HERE

College Admissions Interview Prep Guide

A practical guide for applicants and the families who support them

Start here: an interview is a conversation

Many students feel nervous about the college interview, and that is understandable. It helps to know what the interview is meant to be. Admissions experts describe it as a two-way conversation that helps both sides decide whether the school is a good fit. It is not an interrogation, and there are no trick questions. The interviewer is usually a volunteer or staff member who wants to learn about you and answer your questions about the school.

This guide helps you walk in prepared, be yourself, and leave a good impression. Preparation does not mean memorizing answers. It means knowing your own story well enough to tell it naturally.

The three principles behind everything in this guide

Be authentic, be prepared, and be curious. Interviewers consistently say they remember students who are genuine and interested in the school, not students who sound rehearsed.

Know which type of interview you have

Formats vary by school, so check each college's admissions website or the invitation email. Two terms are worth knowing. An **evaluative** interview is written up and becomes part of your file. An **informational** interview is mainly for you to learn about the school, and the college may treat it as a courtesy.

Format	Who you meet	What to expect
Alumni interview	A graduate who volunteers for the college, usually in your area	Often held in a public place or by video. The alum sends a short report to the admissions office afterward. Early applicants are commonly

		contacted in the fall, frequently around November.
Admissions officer or student interview	Staff member or trained current student, often on campus	Can be more structured. Staff may combine the interview with a tour or information session, so treat the whole visit as part of the evaluation.
Virtual interview	Any of the above, held over Zoom or a similar platform	Same questions as in person, with added attention to technology, lighting and on-screen presence. See the virtual section below.

How much does the interview matter?

Honest answer: it is usually one small piece of a holistic review. Many alumni programs exist mainly to keep graduates connected to the college, and several highly selective schools list the interview as a factor that is considered rather than required. Not every applicant is offered an interview, and not receiving one does not count against you. A thoughtful interview can add personality and context to your application, and a stiff one rarely sinks a strong file. Prepare seriously, then keep it in perspective.

Prepare your story

1. **Research the college.** Read the website, the department pages for your intended major, and recent news. Note two or three specific programs, courses, professors, clubs or traditions that appeal to you and be ready to say why. If you visited or spoke with students, recall what stood out.
2. **Choose your talking points.** Pick four or five experiences you can discuss in depth: a class that engaged you, a project, an activity where you took responsibility, a challenge you worked through. Interviewers want details that are not already on your application, so do not just repeat your activity list.
3. **Bring a résumé.** A one-page résumé is useful to hand over and to glance at if you blank on a detail.
4. **Practice out loud.** Rehearse with a teacher, counselor, advisor or friend who is not a family member if possible. Aim for answers of 30 to 90 seconds, then stop and let the conversation continue.
5. **Prepare for a few follow-ups.** Strong answers invite "tell me more," so know the story behind each talking point.

A simple structure for story answers

When a question asks for an example, the STAR method keeps you organized:

- **Situation:** the context in one or two sentences.
- **Task:** what you were responsible for or trying to achieve.
- **Action:** what you did, in specific terms.
- **Result:** what happened and what you learned.

Common questions and how to approach them

Use these for practice. Do not script word-for-word answers.

Question	How to approach it
Tell me about yourself.	Skip the biography. Describe your interests and strengths, mention an academic area or activity you care about, and share an accomplishment you are proud of. Give the interviewer something to ask about next.
Why do you want to attend this college?	The most important question to prepare. Connect specific features of the school to your interests, strengths and goals. Avoid rankings, reputation or location as your main reasons.
What do you want to study, and why?	Trace the interest to a real experience: a course, a book, a problem you wanted to solve. It is fine to be undecided; explain what you are exploring and why.
Which class or teacher has influenced you most?	Choose recent, specific coursework that engaged you, such as a novel you debated or a lab you designed. Explain what made it stick.
What do you do outside of class?	Pick one or two activities and describe your role, what you contributed and what you learned. Depth is more convincing than a long list.
Describe a challenge or setback.	Use STAR. Choose a real challenge, spend most of your time on what you did and learned, and avoid blaming others.
What would you add to our campus community?	Name concrete things you would do: a club you would join or start, a perspective you bring, a way you

	collaborate.
What are your strengths and what are you working on?	Be honest, then frame a weakness as something you are actively improving, with an example of progress.
What are you curious about right now?	A book, a podcast, a question from class, a personal project. Genuine curiosity is memorable.
Is there anything else you would like us to know?	Always say yes. Have one point ready that has not come up yet, such as an experience, a goal, or a reason you are excited about the school.

Questions to ask your interviewer

Prepare five or six questions and keep them on a notepad. Good questions show that you did your homework, and the interview is also your chance to learn what the school is really like. Ask things you could not easily find on the website.

- What was your experience at the college, and what surprised you?
- What do students do on weekends and between classes?
- What research, internship or study-abroad opportunities have you seen students use well?
- How has the college changed since you graduated?
- What do you wish you had known as a first-year student?
- What makes this college different from others you know?
- Could a first-year student join a research lab or audition for a theater production? (Swap in a question that reflects your own interests.)

Avoid: questions answered on the homepage, questions about your chances of admission, and questions about money or grades that put the interviewer on the spot.

Be honest and stay positive

Honesty matters in every interview. That does not mean you should highlight your weaknesses, share every family difficulty, or criticize your current school, even if that environment is part of why you are applying elsewhere. Instead, put the focus on growth and fit.

- A weakness becomes something you are working to overcome.
- A family or personal challenge, if you choose to mention it, is told through what you learned and how you responded.
- A current school that is not the right match becomes a school whose programs do not fit your particular interests, while the college you are applying to does.

Virtual interview checklist

Virtual interviews are now common, especially for alumni interviews and for students who live far from campus. A few details make a real difference.

- **Space:** Choose a tidy, quiet room with a plain, uncluttered background. Put a "do not disturb" sign on the door and plan around pets, deliveries, landscaping noise and siblings.
- **Lighting:** Face a window or lamp so your face is lit. Avoid sitting with a bright window behind you. A ring light helps if the room is dim.
- **Camera:** Raise your laptop on books or boxes so the camera is at eye level. Look at the camera when speaking so you appear to be making eye contact.
- **Technology:** Find out which platform the school uses and practice on it with a friend. Use a laptop or desktop rather than a phone, wear headphones if sound is a problem, check the time zone, and log in early in case of technical issues.
- **Personal touch:** If you want to showcase a hobby, you may use a simple custom background or a visible item such as artwork or a trophy. It can start a good conversation, but keep it tasteful and keep the focus on you.
- **On-screen presence:** Practice projecting a clear voice. Record a practice session if you can and watch for fidgeting, excessive gesturing or looking away at a second screen.
- **Distractions:** Silence your phone and notifications, keep snacks out of sight, and keep a glass of water nearby, but nothing more. Take care of personal needs before the call begins.
- **Notes:** Keep your short list of questions and a pen within reach. Jot down interesting points as the conversation goes, which also helps with your thank-you note.

Interview day

- **Dress:** Business casual is a safe choice, in person or on camera. Choose something comfortable that respects the occasion and, if the school has stated expectations, follow them.
- **Arrive early:** Aim for 10 to 15 minutes before an in-person meeting, or log in a few minutes early for a virtual one.
- **Greet warmly:** Make eye contact, offer a handshake or friendly hello, and thank the interviewer for their time.
- **Listen:** If you are unsure what was asked, ask for clarification. It is fine to pause and think before you answer.
- **Be yourself:** You do not need to be an extrovert or connect instantly with every interviewer. Courteous, curious and sincere is enough.

The role of parents

Families play an important supporting role before the interview, and a smaller one during it. Parents can help by running practice sessions, talking through the college's website with their student, and sorting out logistics such as transportation or a technology check. At the interview itself, the interviewer wants to meet the applicant. For college interviews, parents should generally not sit in. For a virtual interview, a parent can be available for initial tech troubleshooting, then step away so the student has space once the conversation begins. If a

school invites parents to join part of a visit, decide in advance who will do the talking and let the student lead.

After the interview

1. **Write down what you remember** as soon as you finish: topics discussed, advice offered, and anything you want to follow up on.
2. **Send a thank-you note within a day or two.** Email is usually fine. A handwritten note can leave a lasting impression, especially if the interviewer seems to prefer traditional courtesies. If the interviewer works remotely, a thoughtful email or short video message works well.
3. **Make it personal.** Mention one specific detail from your conversation, restate your interest in the college, and keep it brief and sincere. Proofread it carefully.
4. **Follow up on resources.** If your interviewer suggested a book, program or contact, take a look and mention it.
5. **Reflect.** Note what went well and what you would do differently so the next interview is stronger.

Thank-you note template

Dear [Mr./Ms./Dr. Last Name],

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me [today / on DATE]. I enjoyed hearing about [specific detail, such as your experience in a program, club or city], and I appreciated your advice about [topic].

Our conversation made me even more excited about [College Name], especially [a specific program, class or opportunity]. [Optional: I plan to look up the book or documentary you mentioned.]

Thank you again for volunteering your time.

Sincerely,
[Your full name]

Preparation timeline

When	What to do
When you get the invitation	Reply promptly and politely. Confirm date, time, place or platform, and the interviewer's name. Add it to your calendar.
One to two weeks before	Research the college, choose talking points, draft your questions, update your résumé, and do a first practice interview.
Two to three days before	Hold a second mock interview with someone unfamiliar to you. For a virtual interview, test the platform, lighting, sound and camera angle.
Day before	Choose your outfit, pack your résumé, notepad and pen, confirm travel time or tech setup, and get a full night of sleep.
Day of	Arrive or log in early, silence your phone, take a breath, and let the conversation happen.
Within 24 to 48 hours after	Send your thank-you note and record your reflections.

My interview worksheet

Fill this in for each college before your interview.

College and interview date	
Interviewer and format	
Three specific reasons I want to attend	
My top stories (with the lesson in each)	

My questions for the interviewer	
Notes after the interview	

Sources and further reading

- College Board BigFuture, "College Interviews: The Basics" (bigfuture.collegeboard.org)
- Harvard College, "What to Expect at Your College Interview" (college.harvard.edu)
- Parents' Press, *Guide to Private Schools*: "Interview Preparation" and "Get Noticed in a Virtual Admissions Interview" (adapted here for college applicants)