

Applying to Graduate School: The Interview Process

By Barbara A. Oudekerk and Bette L. Bottoms¹

The first step in obtaining a graduate degree in psychology is to get into graduate school — no small feat, even for the best students. If you are well-qualified and well-matched to a particular program, you might be invited to visit the campus for an interview. The interview is your golden opportunity to demonstrate your interests and skills and to learn whether a program is right for you. It can make or break your chances of gaining an offer. In this article, we provide a set of guidelines for how to interview successfully and improve your chances of being admitted to a graduate program in psychology.²

Before the Interview

Others have written about various aspects of applying to graduate school (e.g., American Psychological Association, 1993; Bottoms & Nysse, 1999; Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000). The importance of applying to multiple programs is worth repeating, because there are many excellent students who want to go to graduate school and only a limited number of seats available. You need to increase your chances of being invited for an interview to at least one program (but hopefully more).

Before being invited for an interview, you might be contacted by phone or e-mail by the faculty member who is most interested in having you attend the program: your potential adviser. This phone call is your first interview, and it should not catch you off guard. You need to cogently summarize your qualifications, why you want to go to graduate school,³ and why you are interested in that particular program and that particular faculty member's research. You need to express interest, enthusiasm, confidence, and curiosity about the program and the faculty members in the program. If you cannot talk when the call comes, politely ask to reschedule the call to a better time later that day.

If you pass the phone-call test and you are invited for an interview, go (unless you have absolutely no interest in that program and you already have an offer somewhere else). Above all else, prepare well so that you can ask thoughtful, meaningful questions. Read the program's website and any additional information you can get about the program, the university, and its location. Learn everything you can about your potential advisor(s) and other faculty members in the program. Most schools will send an itinerary ahead of time, but if they do not, ask for a list of faculty members with whom you will be meeting. Look up their research interests. Write notes about each faculty member's research and what you find interesting. Refer often to these notes during the interview. Prepare questions to ask each person you meet (see sidebar for examples). Ask your potential advisor to send you recent papers before the interview. Prepare to discuss that research and to demonstrate your ability to generate related questions and future research ideas.

During the Interview

Interviews usually take place over a weekend, and the actual interview day is often Friday or

Monday. You will meet with faculty members and graduate students, and you might participate in activities such as a campus tour, graduate student party, dinner, or other events. How should you look? Academics are freewheeling individuals who don't give a rat's behind about fashion, right? Wrong. Dress professionally for your interview. A suit is definitely appropriate or, at the very least, classic pants, shirts, and tops.⁴ No jeans. Also, be mindful of climate. Don't come to Chicago in February without a coat. Finally, cover up: This is a professional interview, not a nightclub.

Now that you're dressed, the interview will not necessarily be easy, but it also shouldn't be too onerous. You need to relax and enjoy yourself while interacting with many talented people, keeping in mind that even if you do not attend this program, you may well come into contact with these people again at future conferences, etc. Although it is important to be yourself, know that faculty will be looking for certain personal characteristics. If you have made it this far, you probably already have these qualities: maturity, interest, diligence, flexibility, curiosity, humor, grace, experience, confidence (without arrogance), and humility. Demonstrate that you are a smart, pleasant person with whom others, especially your potential advisor, will enjoy working closely with for half a decade. Also, exhibit a sense of stamina and common sense — avoid statements such as “Sorry I'm late, I couldn't figure out how to get here from the airport,” or “I'm too tired to ask any more questions.”⁵

When meeting with faculty members, it is important to talk elegantly about research — both the professors' research and yours. Describe your past research and answer basic questions. Don't just passively listen to your interviewer — try to turn the interview into a discussion that showcases your knowledge and curiosity. Talk about the parts of each faculty member's research that are interesting to you, the implications of the research, and other variables that might be interesting to explore. When meeting with your potential adviser, you should inquire about roles that you could play in his or her current research program. Ask the questions that you prepared ahead of time, and do not hesitate to ask different people the same questions throughout the interview.

Remember, you need to learn enough about each program during your interview to make the most informed decision possible if you gain acceptance to more than one program. If you are attending many interviews, write down a few sentences about your perceptions of what it would be like to be in each program and to work with each potential advisor. These perceptions in particular will be very important when deciding which university is right for you — your advisor will be the most key person in your graduate school life. You need to work with someone who is a good match with your research interests and your personality.

If you're offered the opportunity to stay with a graduate student or attend a graduate student party or dinner during your interview, take it. This gives you the opportunity to see more specifically what life is like as a graduate student at that university. But remember that your time in those settings is also part of the interview, and whatever you do or say will naturally make it back to other students and faculty in the program.⁶

After the Interview

After your interview, send a thank-you note (e-mail is fine) to those with whom you interviewed,

especially your potential adviser(s) and your graduate student host. A follow-up inquiry about when you should expect to hear about the admission decision is acceptable, but don't pester the university or your potential adviser with emails or phone calls regarding the status of your application. Being invited for an interview means you have a very good chance of being accepted to the program, but you might not be, because a program will often invite more students than it can accept. If you are accepted, you will generally receive the formal offer sometime between the interview date and April 1, and you will have until April 15 to accept or decline. Students who are not offered a position immediately might be put on a waiting list (which might extend past April 1), and as applicants turn down offers, other students might then be offered positions. You only need one acceptance, but it would be very nice to get more than one so that you have a choice, albeit a hard one. Get all the details of each offer. Decide how you will compare the different programs and quickly turn down offers that do not interest you. Faculty members won't be offended if you choose to go somewhere else, but they will be annoyed if you hold on to an offer so long that they miss out on other qualified applicants who are next in line after you.

Conclusion

We hope you find our advice useful. Work hard to prepare for your interviews, then enjoy yourself during the visit. Good luck in your quest to get into graduate school!

References

- American Psychological Association. (1993). *Getting in: A step-by-step plan for gaining admission to graduate school in psychology*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Bottoms, B.L., & Nysse, K.L. (1999, December). Applying to graduate school: Writing a compelling personal statement. *Observer*, 12, 24- 26 (Reprinted from *Eye on Psi Chi*, 4, 20-22.
- Keith-Spiegel, P., & Wiederman, M.W. (2000). *The complete guide to graduate school admission: Psychology, counseling, and related professions* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
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Questions for the Questioners

Here are some possible questions for you to ask during interviews. Remember to ask questions in a polite manner that suggests that you are expecting to gain information, not in a suspicious manner that suggests that you expect to uncover problems.

Questions for potential advisors and other faculty members:

- What are your current research projects? What stages are these projects in? Do graduate students work on both your on-going research as well as their own more independent, but related, projects?
- What facilities outside the department or even outside the university would I have access to? Are there many inter- or intra-departmental research collaborations?
- How would you describe your mentoring style and expectations?
- How often, in general, do you meet with your graduate students? How often do the students who make up your lab meet as a group? What are these meetings usually like? How many graduate and undergraduate students are in your laboratory?
- Will I have the opportunity to work on grant-funded research, or is it not needed for this project?

- How are most students funded? For how much money and for how long? Is summer funding available? What departmental resources are available for graduate student research?
- How long does it take for most PhD students in this program to graduate? When students graduate, how many publications and conference presentations do they typically have, and what kinds of jobs do they usually get?
- Is there any formal training in teaching?

Additional questions if interviewing at a clinical program:

- What is the balance like between clinical work, research, and class work?
- When does clinical training begin (2nd year, 3rd year, etc.)? How does the training progress? Is the training program APA accredited?
- How much clinical experience do most students get? Where? With what populations (e.g., children, students, adults, court-ordered participants, etc.)?
- Does the clinical program focus on one type of training (cognitive-behavioral, etc.) more than others, and if so, which type?
- What percent of students match with their top choice for internship? Where do they match/go?

Other questions for graduate students:

- What do you consider to be the best and worst aspects of this program?
- What is one thing you wish you had known or understood better before coming here?
- How hard do students work? (Note: you want the answer to be “nearly all the time” if you want a truly top program.)
- I know most of my time will be spent studying and doing research, but what is the social life like here? Where do people go on Friday nights?
- How much time does [your potential advisor] spend one-on-one with his/her advisees? What is his/her mentorship style – hands off or hands on? How much feedback does he or she give on written work?
- Do most students get along well with each other and with faculty members? Why or why not? Do students work in more than one lab? (Be alert to the fact that some disgruntled students are also not doing well academically.)
- Have you had any problem finding funding? How often have you needed to take out student loans? What’s the cost of living in this area – how much is rent, typically?

Barbara A. Oudekerk is a first-year graduate student in Community Psychology at the University of Virginia. She received her BA from the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), where she worked with Bottoms on social psychological research related to children and the law.

Bette L. Bottoms is professor of psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She received her BA from Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, her MA from the University of Denver, and her PhD in Social Psychology from the State University of New York at Buffalo.

1. Address correspondence to:
Bette L. Bottoms
University of Illinois at Chicago
1007 W. Harrison St. (M/C 285)
Chicago, IL 60607-7137

2. Where do we get our expertise? The first author endured seven interviews herself last year and emerged with several offers. She is now a happy graduate student at the University of Virginia, pausing to tell you how to be just as successful. The second author has been interviewing prospective students from the other side of the fence for 15 years. She also had a few graduate school interviews herself once upon a time.

3. The second author's favorite answer to this question so far is "Because I like true crime novels."

4. The second author has a black suit for every day of the week and encourages it to be everyone's first real clothing purchase, but the first author warns that every interviewee shows up in a black suit, so at least add a splash of color.

5. If you think a day of talking with smart people about interesting things is hard, try digging ditches.

6. Don't be the prospective student who got liquored up, who commandeered the host's bathrobe, who arranged a stay-over visit from her boyfriend, who talked behind other students' backs, or who — well, you get the picture of what the second author has heard over the years.