

**I Just Got an Interview for a  
Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program  
What do I do?!**

More Uncensored Advice from Mitch!

with terrific contributions from some of my current graduate students:

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Thanks are due to many undergraduate students and recently admitted graduate students for their exceptionally useful feedback on this document, and their endless supply of excellent questions that I have attempted to address. Good luck to everyone!

-Mitch Prinstein, Ph.D.  
see other Uncensored Advice at [this link](#)

## I Just Got an Interview for a Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program What do I do?!

Congratulations! You just received an interview for the most competitive application process in the entire graduate education system within the United States! A smaller percentage of applicants gain admission to clinical psychology doctoral (Ph.D.) programs than to law school, medical school, or any other type of advanced graduate degree program, and your interview brings you one enormous step closer to gaining admission!

At most universities, about 3-6 applicants are invited for an interview for every one admissions slot available. Suddenly, the odds are looking pretty good for you! The 200-600 applications received by most doctoral level clinical psychology graduate programs have been narrowed to just a few dozen, and for the lab you are most interested in, just a small handful of folks will be coming for an interview. However, referring to this next stage of the process as an “Interview” incorrectly portrays the experience as a process by which faculty are exclusively selecting students. In reality, a large proportion of interview-invited applicants have more than one site to visit, which means that students are evaluating and selecting programs as much as vice versa. You have a lot of “power” in this situation, and a lot of information to gather to make one of the most important professional decisions of your life. Let’s get prepared for a very fun, and somewhat stressful, interview season!

### *Scheduling the Interviews*

Sometime in January, and maybe even December for early bird programs, you will start receiving invitations to come for an interview! Get ready to accrue some frequent flyer miles! Although occasionally a program may be able to help defray the costs of your interview travel, it is most likely the case that you will need to pay for all travel expenses on your own. Once you hear about an interview, you will probably get some details from the program about ways that they can help you make your travel as easy as possible. Many programs will have someone take you to/from the airport, and most all will give you the opportunity to stay with a graduate student to eliminate hotel expenses. Helpful hint: flights are commonly delayed in Winter, and luggage is lost frequently! Plan to wear a suit on your interview, and consider packing it in your overhead bag!

One of the first questions that arises when applicants begin hearing about interviews pertains to inevitable dilemmas in scheduling. Most interviews occur in the months of January, February, and March (although this process seems to be moving earlier and earlier each year). With just a few possible weekends to organize a day for applicant interviews, it is quite likely that you will experience a scheduling conflict between two schools that have extended invitations. Sadly, there is no easy solution to this dilemma. Some schools may offer multiple dates for you to visit; others will not. Sometimes you can arrange your own informal visit on a date that is convenient for you; however, the depth of information and number of people who will meet you likely will be reduced as compared to the experience you would have on the formal “Interview Day.” In some cases, you may learn of an impending conflict between a site that has extended an interview vs. another site that has not yet, but might soon extend an invitation for the same date. It is perfectly OK to call a site and ask when their interview dates may be, but of course, be sure not to assume that you are getting an interview, or sound presumptuous in your request for info.

When dealing with such scheduling conflicts, please be extremely sensitive to the difficulties involved for the program in coordinating a large interview day for its applicants. A tremendous amount of planning and expense is dedicated to these days; be sure to request exceptions only with great care and consideration for how much work is involved among your hosts. Also, if wrestling with a scheduling conflict, make sure your communication with a program clearly expresses your interest level in the site accurately. If you must cancel, rearrange, or decline an interview invitation, be sure that the faculty understand whether this is a reflection of your interest in their program.

Thanks to modern technology, sometimes it is possible to be at two places at once. If you have the capability to communicate by Skype or phone from one site to another, you may find that the day's schedules are not altogether impossible to reconcile. For instance, if you request early morning interviews at one site, you may be able to schedule late afternoon interviews by another, and conduct one set over your laptop. Although this is certainly not a perfect solution, and could require some flexibility and understanding among your sites, it may be a workable solution in today's technology age that helps you resolve a conflict. If a site invited you for an interview, they know that you're great, and should not be surprised to learn that you have gotten other interview offers as well.

#### *What Will Happen During These Interviews?*

Most applicants return from interviews quite surprised at how little they were interviewed! In other words, most expect to be asked many questions, but in fact, find that they are doing most of the asking during these visits. This is an extremely important reality that will help you prepare for the interview in a way that's different from what you may have expected.

No faculty member will quiz you on statistics, the details of their own recent publications, or the names of historical figures in psychology. Preparing for the interview should not feel like studying for a Psychology midterm. Rather, you should create a list of many, many questions that you would like to ask while on the interview. In my own opinion, I would suggest that you never run out of questions! Asking questions is a great way to get answers, but for interviewing purposes, it also is a terrific way to convey that you know what you are getting into, you understand what graduate training will involve, you are enthusiastic about this opportunity, and you are conscientious enough to have done your homework about the program and its training opportunities.

But how do you know what type of questions to ask? Unfortunately, most all graduate programs in clinical psychology sound very similar on paper, or on the web. It's hard to get a sense of the factors that programs vary on until you've seen a few. This will not be a problem when you arrive at your fourth interview, but how will you know what to ask on your initial interviews?

One recommendation is to download the clinical program handbook from 2-3 graduate programs; it does not matter if they are programs you applied to. Any handbooks will do. Skim through them, and you will start to notice differences. Some may mention multiple practicum opportunities; others will have a standardized training sequence. Some may give students many choices in coursework; some may provide more structure in students' schedules. Some programs offer TAs and RAs; others may offer fellowships too. Some have a Comps, a Quals, an Area Paper, or none! Some require students to complete a Masters thesis, some don't. As you look through Handbooks, you may notice a few factors that are especially important to you, and this

will give you some ideas of what things to ask when meeting with folks.

I asked my current graduate students and a few faculty friends to send along some questions that they found helpful to ask different sites as they went through the admissions process. Here's what they suggested:

*Questions to ask potential advisors:*

- What is your mentoring style?
- How does one earn authorship in this lab?
- How do students select research topics for their own thesis/dissertation, and what role do you play in this process?
- What role do you see me having in this lab if I come here? Is there a grant on which I could work?
- Are there opportunities for summer funding?
- What opportunities are there to get involved in research collaborations with other labs?
- To what extent can my interests as a student be incorporated into the broader interests of your lab, vs. how much would I be expected to carry out an existing line of research?
- What supports exist in the department for students wishing to write their own grants?
- What are the current projects in this lab, and in what directions do you expect the lab research to go over the next five years?
- How many classes are typically offered to graduate students in (statistics, methods, therapeutic techniques, etc.) each semester/year?
- What practicum opportunities are offered?
- Do most students finish their dissertation before internship or during the internship year?
- What types of statistical consultation are available on campus?
- What type of collaboration (if any) occurs among the clinical faculty (or between the clinical and other faculty if a student has a strong interest in another area)?
- Is it possible and/or typical for students to work with more than one faculty member? How does this work?
- What are faculty/student relations like? What's the general climate of the clinical division and department (a good question to ask other graduate students).
- What type of internship placements do students get?
- What type of jobs have graduating students from the program received in the past few years.

*Questions to ask other students:*

- Is it possible to live comfortably on the stipend salary in this town?
- What areas are best for grad students to live?
- Timeline questions (what are the expectations and norms for completion of various program milestones - e.g., Master's, comps, dissertation, etc.)
- What is it like to work with the advisor that you are applying to work with (e.g., how often does your advisor meet with you? Do you feel like your advisor is either unavailable, or a micromanager?).
- If single and hoping to get into a relationship.... What is life like here for single students? Is this an easy place to meet other people our age? If LGBTQ, what is the scene here for LGBTQ individuals? How supportive is the community?
- What kinds of resources/supports are available to minority students at this university/program?

- How competitive vs. cooperative are grad students in this program?
- To what extent does the training in this program focus on students' development as researchers vs. clinicians vs. teachers?
- What sorts of teaching opportunities exist here for graduate students? Is there training for new teachers as part of the program?
- Is funding guaranteed for the time I am here? For how long is it guaranteed?

### *Talking About Research*

Perhaps most important, your “interviews” for clinical psychology Ph.D. programs will include reciprocal discussions regarding mutual research interests. Because this is such an important part of the interview process, this section offers some special suggestions and tips.

*First, do your homework.* When you initially applied to graduate programs, you likely looked for faculty mentors with whom you shared some research interests. Admittedly, in many cases, your match with that faculty member may have been based on a fairly broad understanding of their work (i.e., from a sentence or two on their webpage) and a fairly large range of your own interests. Now that you have been selected for an interview, it is expected that your interests will have matured and narrowed a tad. Also, it is somewhat expected that your knowledge of this professor’s work has become more thorough and informed. Luckily, there are some very easy tools available to help you do this.

You likely will begin your investigation into a faculty member’s research interests by looking at their website and downloading recent abstracts and articles from PsychInfo. This remains a terrific approach for learning about the faculty member’s work. In addition to reading about the most common themes in their work, as well as understanding the methods s/he typically uses in research (e.g., observational studies, clinical trials, questionnaire-based data collection, etc.), be sure also to note whether faculty seem to be publishing at a reasonable rate (i.e., this can vary from 0-20 within a single year, with a range of 1-5 being quite common) and whether they are publishing with their students as co-authors (or even first-authors). This may give you some insight as to whether there will be publication opportunities while you are working together, and whether you will be given a chance to collaborate on these publications.

Keep in mind, however, that PsychInfo and many faculty members’ websites may give you somewhat “old” information. PsychInfo lists articles currently “in print,” which means they were written at least two years ago, about a study that may have started several years before then. If the faculty member does not keep their website current, the information listed here also may not reflect recent work.

One solution to help you learn about ongoing research is NIH Reporter (formerly CRISP; see <http://projectreporter.nih.gov/reporter.cfm>). If the faculty member has a current grant funded by NIH, you can find out all kinds of terrific information about their current work from this site! Just do a search by name, and you can read an abstract of their grant, read recent publications, and even get a sense of how much more time this grant will last. This will give you a great idea of exactly what the faculty member is working on, and what project you may be involved in should you attend this school. If the faculty member has a grant funded by a private foundation, you may be able to find similar information from the foundation’s website.

If the faculty member listed any publications on his/her website or CV as being “in press” in a specific journal, be sure to check that journal’s website. Many journals currently preview an “in press” article online for months before it is “in print.” This will give you an opportunity to read about research that has recently been accepted for publication.

As you read through the faculty member’s publications and descriptions of the lab’s current projects, read “actively.” Rather than thinking of this person as a “perfect” researcher who is studying exactly what you want to study, try to think about the ideas you might be able to bring to the lab, and take notes! Some faculty members will be interested during the interview in hearing *your* ideas for research (some may ask you to brainstorm on the spot), and most will be interested in seeing how you think about research. Importantly, any research ideas you propose during the interview should fit with the general research interests of the lab. (For example, if you are interviewing with a faculty member who specializes in ADHD in young boys, you might ask whether she has considered studying gender differences in ADHD; you would probably not want to discuss your interest in eating disorders in adolescent girls [unless the researcher has demonstrated a broad range of interests]).

*Second, speak up!* During your visit, you will receive an overwhelming amount of information about ongoing research. Every faculty member and current graduate student will have much to say about their current work and upcoming projects. To succeed during this interview process, make sure you talk about your own research experience and interests in detail – at least inasmuch as it helps you demonstrate how you are a match to this lab! Although some of this information was written in your personal statement, some folks may not have had access to this statement, or may not have read it very recently. In addition, you may be able to share more details in a manner that helps more thoroughly explain your experiences. This is important, particularly when considering what the interview process is like for the faculty member.

From the faculty perspective, the Interview Day can be quite confusing and difficult. I rarely have heard a faculty member describe their admissions decisions as easy. Rather, most of us agree that there are an overwhelming number of outstanding students, that the students who arrive for any given Interview Day all are phenomenal and quite likely to be very successful, and that the decision of how to rank-order these uniformly excellent candidates is painstaking, frustrating, and even sometimes idiosyncratic. In short, faculty would like a student who 1) they generally get along with; someone who will be pleasant to interact with nearly every day for the next five years, and then quite frequently for the rest of their careers; 2) someone with initiative, who will be as passionate and committed to the research in the lab as they are, and who will be invested in the research outcomes you are working on together; and 3) someone who is intellectually stimulating – who will bring great ideas to the table, expand the lab in creative and innovative directions, and augment the caliber of intellectual discussions within research meetings.

Sounds intimidating? It’s not, really. Just speak up! Express your interests, your ideas, your enthusiasm, and your natural talents will shine through. If a faculty member describes research you’ve read about, share your opinions or ideas (e.g., “Have you ever thought of studying X within that framework?” “Why did you decide to use this/that approach?” “How do you think this connects with the X theory?” “I’m interested in seeing how that idea may work differently in X population”). It is common for applicants to feel like everyone else in the room is qualified to be there, but they secretly are the imposter who got invited to the interview due to some

computer malfunction. Don't believe this! You have been invited because your experience is terrific, you have much to contribute, and several faculty members wrote glowing letters about your potential! Be sure to speak your mind, and you will help to show the faculty member and graduate students that you can be a terrific member of their lab!

*Third, be specific – maybe.* When discussing their approach to admissions, some faculty indicate that they prefer a “blank slate” (i.e., someone who can be taught from scratch and will be shaped mostly by their experiences in the graduate lab). More commonly, however, faculty are looking for someone who may arrive on campus with their own ideas, experiences, and emerging areas of expertise. This is a tricky balance that you will want to think about before you attend an interview. If you are open to literally anything the faculty member offers as a potential research topic, you may not seem “ready” for graduate school. Some may say that you are more interested in gaining admission than actually doing the work once you get there. On the other hand, if you seem overly fixed on a certain topic or method, despite what you hear during the Interview Day, then some may feel like you are not a match to the research lab, or that you are not interested in integrating old with new experiences.

This is a very personal issue, in that there is no “wrong” answer or approach to the interview process. If you indeed are universally interested in all experiences, then it is certainly preferable to be honest about that, rather than portray your interests inaccurately. Conversely, if you are strongly committed to a specific topic, then you should hold out for experiences that will help you grow in your desired direction. Keep in mind that a “balance” probably is a good approach to match with most potential faculty members. Before you attend an interview, therefore, consider what research topics you are most interested in vs. which are less crucial for your graduate training. Think about what you are most strongly committed to, and how you will represent your research interests when asked. It is quite common for you to be asked you're your future career goals may be, what you do or don't like about the research process, and what your research interests are (you may want to plan a 2-4 minute response for this one). Most important, think about the research that excites you the most, and use the Interview Day to determine whether you think you can get that research done, at the place you are visiting.

### *Other Interviews*

You will not be talking about research in all of your interview meetings. In fact, this may occur mostly with your potential mentor (i.e., the person you requested to work with), yet, there will be other interviews scheduled during the day with other faculty and students. Some of these other folks may have research interests far from your own, and you are not necessarily expected to be knowledgeable about all of their work. So, what will you talk about?

The purpose of these interviews often is two-fold. First, the program would like to get to know you better to determine whether you are a good match to the overall ideology and “vibe” of the program. Are you competitive or collaborative? Do you seem very research-oriented or clinically-focused? Do you seem interested in this program?

Second, these interviews are meant to give you a chance to learn as much as you can about the program and your advisor. Be sure to ask lots of questions to help you learn exactly what it would be like to spend the next 4-5 years in this new environment. When meeting with students, be sure to ask very direct questions about your potential mentor, her/his availability, style, and expectations. Students will give you the most direct and helpful information. Make sure you use

this opportunity to get information very well!

### *Other Factors*

A few other issues to keep in mind during the Interview season!

1. Interviews can be exhausting. You may have a day of “chain” interviewing – i.e., each meeting may end with an Introduction to your next interviewer, or you may have just a very brief break between each meeting. Be sure you give yourself a break, if needed. For most folks, it is difficult to be “on” for many hours in a row, and if you need to excuse yourself to use the restroom, take some notes, process the information you just heard, or eat a PowerBar on the run, it is perfectly OK to do so. You may want to plan for this in advance.
2. Bring along a nice leather folio of sorts that you can carry around with you during the interview day. This will give you something to do with your hands. Fill the folio with a few copies of your CV (occasionally, someone may ask for a copy), some notes on the faculty members’ research, and your list of many, many questions. It is perfectly appropriate to open your folder and remind yourself of a few questions in the middle of an interview. No one expects you to have everything memorized. It’s also OK to jot a note or two down while talking. As long as you are able to engage in a comfortable, socially-skilled conversation while you do so, feel free to refer to this folder throughout the interview day, if you think it will help you stay focused and sharp.
3. **Everyone you speak to is part of the admissions process.** The faculty, the students, the staff, all will be part of your graduate program environment and all have valuable information to share with the admissions committee. And they will!
4. If the Interview Day includes an informal time for students and faculty to mill about a room and talk, take the opportunity to talk to with faculty members who may not have been on your schedule. Ideally you will end up at a program where you have a good rapport with many faculty members including your primary advisor; these other faculty members will likely be your professors in classes and you may collaborate with them on research projects. Additionally, many faculty members will have a say in your admissions decision, and if they remember your being a friendly, intelligent, and interesting person, it can help your chances!
5. At many graduate programs, applicants may be invited to an informal reception hosted by graduate students. Although it may look just like a party you attended in college, it is not. Grossly inappropriate behavior at this party would not be appropriate.
6. Most programs will offer the opportunity to stay with a graduate student during your visit to their site. This is a terrific way to get to learn about the program and get to know a student well, but it is not mandatory that you stay with a student. If you do stay with a student in his/her home, remember that anything you tell that student may be reported back to the admissions committee.
7. Thank you notes are not required, and certainly it will make no difference if they are sent by email, snail mail, handwritten, typeset, etc. Most commonly, students send a thank you email to a few of the people they met with during the Interview Day to express gratitude for their visit and to express their level of interest in the site. Although it is not required, it is a good idea to send a

thank you note of some sort to the faculty member you are applying to work with and to the student you stayed with (if applicable), and to reiterate how much you enjoyed your visit and how interested you are in the program.

8. Keep in mind that you are not only interviewing for a graduate school position, you also are creating a professional network. The faculty and students you meet on interview day are the experts in your area of research who will likely be your reviewers when you submit articles and grants, your colleagues and collaborators in future symposia or projects, your search committee when you apply for jobs or post doc positions, and perhaps even your letter-writers when you are reviewed for promotion. This realization has several implications. First, of course, make sure you act as professionally and graciously as you can throughout the application process. Second, be considerate if you find yourself in a position of declining an offer or interview. In other words, don't "burn bridges". If writing a note to decline an opportunity, be sure you express your gratitude and continuing interest in their work more broadly. You may decide that this lab or person's research is not a match for your graduate training, but your paths may indeed cross again.

9. Last, please remember, once interviews have been completed, you will hopefully start to receive offers of admission. A few facts: 1) you should never, ever feel pressured to make a final decision before April 15. No program or individual should tell you otherwise; 2) don't officially accept any offer until you have received the details of the offer in writing (by email or mail). There's no fine print to be worried about, but it is still important to be sure that your offer is guaranteed before you start declining other opportunities; 3) if you do hold multiple offers, it is your responsibility to try and narrow your options as quickly as possible. In other words, try not to hold more than two offers at any one time. Someone out there who is just as nervous about this process as you were is still waiting on an offer, and cannot hear the good news until you have made your decision. If you can narrow your choices down to two, and release any additional offers you may be holding, it will help the system move smoothly for everyone else.

Good luck to everyone!