

# Interviewing for Health



# Professions Programs



## INTRO

The secret to a successful interview is preparation. The interview is your chance to market yourself, as well as gather information about the school. Remember, you're also deciding if this is the right place for you.

## BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

- Know the graduate school thoroughly, as well as “yourself as a candidate”. Be clear about how your interests and experience relate to the program.
- Prepare answers to common interview questions – even if these questions aren't asked, this helps you analyze what you have to offer. Write out your answers so you can review them right before the interview.
- Prepare questions to ask the interviewer. This will show your interest.
- Consider developing a portfolio to highlight your accomplishments.
- Participate in a mock interview with your Career Counselor.
- Get your interview outfit ready.
- Do a “practice” drive to see how long it will take at that time of day.
- Prepare a Cheat Sheet for the interview. Include name, title, and department of everyone you're meeting.
- Keep records of applications you've sent out.



## WHAT TO BRING

- Binder to keep you organized
- Copies of qualifications/certificates/transcripts
- Multiple copies of your resume and reference list
- Portfolio with samples of your work
- Appointment book/calendar
- Pen and notepad
- Questions to ask
- Interview Cheat Sheet



## HOW IMPORTANT IS THE INTERVIEW?

Very important! It is important to recognize that each school has its own evaluation system leading to an interview and then to acceptance. Although admissions committees strive to be as equitable and objective as possible, it is not a perfect world and therefore, there is no perfect system. Applicants will be confronted with different types of interviews and these interviews will be weighted differently in the overall evaluation by each school. Most schools will use the interview evaluation in their final admissions decisions.

Getting to the interview stage is definitely a good sign. It usually means that the committee is interested in learning more information about you. But students should not take it too lightly. This is the only aspect of the application that is still within the applicant's control. Applicants cannot change their MCATs or their GPA, but they can be well-prepared for the interview and make a positive impression.

## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW?

In general, the purpose of the interview is to assess the applicant's personal characteristics. The most common characteristics that they are looking for are listed below:

Motivation for/commitment to medicine  
Interpersonal skills  
Character  
Maturity  
Evidence of extracurricular activities  
Communication skills  
Empathy

Social awareness  
Self-awareness  
Knowledge of Medical field  
Open-mindedness  
Leadership  
Logical thought/Problem Solving  
Ability to create rapport

## SCHEDULING THE INTERVIEW:

Applicants can be invited to interview anytime from September through April. Applicants may be invited by phone mail or email. Therefore applicants should maintain a consistent address so that they can be certain to receive notifications. Applicants should also be sure to have a professional sounding voice mail on their phone. Music or silly messages should be erased for the time being. Additionally, applicants should make sure that if they have roommates who are also answering the phone that they answer courteously and take detailed messages.

Health professional schools may assign applicants a particular date or give them a choice of dates. Applicants should try to adhere to the choices and try to schedule their interview earlier rather than later. Remember that most schools are on a rolling admissions process, and therefore, earlier is better.

While most health professional schools discourage students from requesting interviews, in special circumstances it may be appropriate for an applicant to request one. If an applicant is traveling to a distant city for another interview it is appropriate for the applicant to bring this to the attention of the other schools in that city to which s/he has applied and ask if it is possible to be considered for an interview during the time when s/he will be in town. The more advance notice an applicant can provide the better. Many schools will try to accommodate applicants in this situation especially if it is on the opposite coast; however, it is not always possible due to timing of file review, et cetera.

**Re-scheduling interviews** is discouraged but if an emergency occurs and applicants need to reschedule or cancel an interview, they should communicate with the school courteously. Applicants should contact the school as much in advance as they can so that another candidate may fill the space (this could be another candidate from Columbia!). Those who call a school to change an interview or withdraw from one should, follow-up in writing to confirm this change. This type of communication should not occur via email. Remember

that your behavior not only reflects on you as an individual but on Columbia as a whole. Please be professional and courteous.

**Travel:** When applicants are scheduling their travel, they should plan enough time before and after interview in order to explore the surrounding area and still be on time. If possible, applicants should plan to arrive the night before so that they have an opportunity to relax and get to know the area. Applicants may consider spending the night with a student host to save money. These student hosts will also be able to give applicants a good perspective on student life and what to expect for the interview. This is usually a great opportunity for applicants to learn more about the school.

**Costs:** Interviewing is expensive. Applicants need to budget for travel, possibly hotel, rental car, a nice suit etc. For travel discounts applicants may call the Health Professions Travel Desk at 800-944-9923.

**Dress:** Applicants should dress conservatively and comfortably. A solid suit – knee length skirt for women is usually best, as well as shoes that applicants can comfortably walk in. Be careful of excessive jewelry, which can be distracting

## TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

### **Interview Day:**

Each school handles their interview process somewhat differently, but in general, applicants can expect a whole or half day of events accompanying their interview. Applicants may meet students, get a tour of the campus and/or clinical facilities, sit in on a class, eat lunch etc. Applicants will be a part of a larger group of applicants who are also being interviewed that day.

### **Interview Formats:**

The interview day may include one or a series of interviews by different individuals. About two-thirds of medical schools have applicants do one interview, about one-third require two interviews and a small number require 3 or more. On average, an interview usually lasts about 45 minutes. It is to applicants' advantage to find out as much about the interview process before the event as possible. Applicants should speak to their premedical advisors, students at the school, and admissions staff about the format and schedule. Applicants will be more prepared and relaxed if they know what to expect.

- **Traditional interview.** This is a one-on-one interview, and is the most common and often involves behavioral questions asking you to describe past experiences.
- **Social activity interview.** Interviewers conduct this type of interview to see how you act in a less formal setting. This could include a dinner, lunch, tour, sporting activity, etc, most likely with a current student. You should still remain professional throughout. If necessary, ask what attire would be appropriate.
- **Panel interview.** Try to engage everyone and keep them interested. If one of the interviewers is quiet, draw them out by addressing a couple questions their way. Also, start and end your answers by directing your attention to the person who asked the question and include others during the body of the answer.
- **Group interview.** This is when a graduate school brings in several candidates to interview at the same time in a competition-based environment. It is a way to see how applicants interact with each other, so be respectful of everyone.
- **Closed File Interview.** In this type of interview, the interviewer knows nothing about the applicant beforehand other than his/her name. The idea here is to remove bias based on information in the file. In this type of interview applicants need to be prepared to talk about themselves and establish rapport. This person

has not read the personal statement, so applicants will not be able to refer to it. This interview format is usually more open-ended and applicants should not be surprised if you hear “Tell me about yourself.”

- **Open File Interview.** In this type of interview, the interviewer has access to the entire application file during and/or before the interview. With an open file interview, applicants should be prepared to talk about any weaknesses in their application (that C in Organic Chem), their extracurricular experiences and whatever they wrote in their personal statement.

## FEELING NERVOUS?

- Maintain poise and naturalness despite anxiety. Anxiety signals your body to create adrenaline – this results in a more rapid heartbeat, change in breathing rate, increased perspiration, shakiness in your hands and knees, and trembling of your voice. The reason for this is a heightened awareness of self. The key to calmness is to not exaggerate the importance of yourself or the interview.
- Maintaining your poise can be accomplished by the following:
  - Thoroughly prepare, and practice aloud.
  - Give special attention to your introduction as it will get you off to a great start. Try asking a question to start – this can take the focus off of you.
  - Involve your interviewer(s) by asking appropriate questions throughout the interview.
  - Inspire yourself – repeat a powerful phrase, listen to a great song, recall a situation when you were extremely confident.
  - Pretend that close friends or relatives are there to support you.
  - Picture a successful interview – this technique is effectively used with athletes.
  - Pretend that you are already admitted, and you are just there to learn more about the program.
  - Purge your mind of your worries – find a quiet mental place.
  - Induce relaxation by exhaling through your left nostril 25-30 times.
  - Imagine a part of your body is becoming heavy, then repeat with another part.

## PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

### Know Thyself

The purpose of preparation is not to prepare “canned” responses to questions that might be asked but rather to do some serious self-reflection. Applicants should think about themselves and how they relate to their chosen career. They should ask themselves what has brought them to this point and why are they are pursuing this application. They should delve into their past and try to understand all the factors that influenced their decisions and goals. How were their attitudes shaped by their experiences? Applicants should be honest with themselves. They should think about their strengths and weaknesses. They should think about how to present these in the most positive light. The purpose of this self-reflection is for applicants to really learn about themselves, to better understand their opinions, motivations and character. They should have a strong sense of who they are and how they differ from the rest of the pack. As applicants begin to think about themselves they should have a pad and pen handy. Writing ideas down will help to organize thoughts and formulate good responses.

### Know About a Medical Career and the Required Training

From volunteer and other health-related experiences applicants should have a working knowledge of the field of health and medicine. They should know both the positives and negatives of this career and lifestyle. They should also know what to expect in health professional school and residency training. They should know about the current issues and policy debates affecting the field. Applicants should read relevant journals,

newsmagazines, and newspapers, and attend lectures and conferences to increase their knowledge. The more knowledge applicants are able to demonstrate about medicine, the more committed they will seem to the field.

### **Know School-Specific Information**

It is absolutely essential that applicants read and reread all the material that they can find about the school at which they are interviewing. They should peruse Web pages, request catalogs, and know the curriculum and unique programs of schools. It is important that applicants do not ask questions that were clearly stated in the school's brochures.

### **Prepare Your Questions**

It is important to prepare questions to ask interviewers. These should be questions that are not answered in their written materials. Ask your questions in a way that expresses enthusiasm for the positive answer. Ask straightforward and open-ended questions.

### **The Night Before**

Reread all application materials that were sent to this school

Reread all of the information about the school

Review questions to ask the interviews

Get a good night's sleep!

### **The Day of the Interview**

Don't drink too much coffee – a bathroom may not be around when you need it!

Don't smoke – many physicians have a great sense of smell!

Eat something – growling stomachs are distracting!

## **Q & A TIPS**

- **In relation.** If you are not sure what the interviewer is looking for in a particular question, tack on “in relation to this program” to the end of their question.
- **Show, don't tell.** If you just tell an employer that you're dedicated, they won't get a full understanding of what “dedicated” means to you. Show them by first determining the focus of your answer, and then give a supporting example to illustrate your qualifications. For example: “My greatest strength is my dedication. This can be seen through...”
- **Avoid long rambling responses.** Some people tend to keep talking until they think they've convinced the interviewer. Unfortunately, the interviewer gets lost in the confusion, because they can only remember so many things. A clear and concise answer allows the interviewer to focus on what is truly important.
- **STAR.** Situation or Task-Action-Result. Interviewers are typically looking for these three components in your answers. The situation or task, the action you took, and the results you achieved. This method is critical to answering behavioral questions that focus on past experiences, such as “Describe a time when...”
- **Always focus on the positive.** Talking badly about a previous job or boss reflects poorly on you as an applicant.
- **Know what they're looking for and market your qualifications.** Hopefully you've researched the program, and you already know what they're looking for. Use this, and what you learn during the interview, to market your strengths to their particular needs. You can do this by asking purposeful questions (What qualities do your most successful students possess?). And if you don't completely understand a question, ask for it to be explained. You can also ask if you've answered the question properly (Is that what you were looking for?).

- **Critique yourself.** The way you feel about your answer is probably the same way the interviewer feels. So you can tell what you're doing right/wrong. If you're not comfortable with your answer, look for ways to make improvements.

## **Q & A EXAMPLES**

### **Some questions asked of pre-med candidates during past interviews:**

- "Why medicine (or PA, PT, dentistry, etc)?"
- "Why osteopathic medicine?"
- "Where do you see yourself in ten years?"
- "If you had the opportunity to change one thing about our health care system, what would it be?"
- "What experiences have you had in the medical field?"
- "Why did you get a 'C' in Organic Chemistry?"
- "Why do you want to go to medical school?"
- "Why do you want to go to this medical school?"
- "Can you think of some event in your past which may have been pivotal in your decision to pursue medicine as a career?"
- "What type of practice do you anticipate entering?"
- "What prompted you to want to enter a medical career?"
- "What alternative vocation might you choose?"
- "What is your opinion of the rise of private, for profit, hospital corps?"
- "What is your opinion of the animal rights movement?"
- "What is the biggest challenge facing medicine?"
- "Should MDs help patients commit suicide?"
- "How can costs be controlled in the healthcare system?"
- "What do you want to accomplish as a physician?"
- "Tell us about a book from your German Literature Course."
- "Explain your senior thesis."
- "Tell me about yourself: your strengths and weaknesses."
- "What do you picture yourself doing in 10 years? 20 Years?"
- "What are your plans if you're not accepted?"
- "How have your experiences prepared you for this career?"
- "What are some of the negative aspects of medicine?"
- "They will also put you into ethical dilemmas--choose a side and defend it."
- "Tell me about yourself and what you do for fun."
- "Where else are you applying? Have you been rejected at any schools? If so, why do you think they rejected you?"
- "Why will you be a good doctor?"
- "What do you think the future will be like when you are a doctor?"

At the end of the interview: "Anything you want to ask me, or anything to add?"

Check out the Student Doctor Network for feedback on interviews from other medical school applicants:  
[http://www.studentdoctor.net/?page\\_id=43](http://www.studentdoctor.net/?page_id=43)

### **Questions You Ask At the Interview:**

Professional and graduate schools, like individuals, are very different -- in their philosophies, faculties, curricula, and the type of students they attract. Consequently, selecting the "best" school for you can be very challenging. The following set of questions was compiled to help you in evaluating schools you will visit. This list is by no means complete; it was designed to serve as a base for your own questions. Keep in mind that the interview represents a wonderful time for you to learn, so don't be shy about asking anyone your questions.

### ***Curriculum***

- Are there opportunities for students to design, conduct, and publish their own research?
- Is there flexibility in the coursework (the number of electives) and the timing of the courses (accelerating, decelerating, and time off)?
- Has this school, or any of departments, been on probation or had its accreditation revoked?
- How do students from this school perform on licensing exams? How does the school assist students who don't pass?
- What is the faculty to student ratio?
- What's the retention rate?
- What kind of practicum/internship opportunities would I have? When would these begin?

### ***Evaluation***

- How are students evaluated academically?
- Is there a formal mechanism in place for students to evaluate their professors? What changes have been made recently as a result of this feedback?

### ***Counseling/Student Support***

- What kind of academic, personal, financial, and career counseling is available to students? Are these services also offered to their spouses and dependents/children?
- Is there a mentor/advisor system? Who are the advisors -- faculty members, other students, or both?
- How diverse is the student body? Are there support services or organizations for ethnic minorities and women?

### ***Facilities***

- Tell me about the library, laboratory and extracurricular facilities (i.e., housing and athletic/recreational).
- Are there computer facilities available to students? Are they integrated into the curriculum?

### ***Financial Aid/Teaching and Research Assistantships***

- How are research and teaching assistantships assigned?
- What is the current tuition and fees? Is this expected to increase yearly? If so, at what rate?
- Would I be likely to get financial aid in my first year? Will the aid increase or decrease over time?
- Are there stable levels of federal financial aid and substantial amounts of university endowment aid available?
- Are there students who have an "unmet need" factor in their budget? If so, where do these students come up with the extra funds?
- Are spouses and dependents/children covered in a student's budget?
- Is someone available to assist students with budgeting and financial planning?
- Does this school provide guidance to its students, and to its graduates/alumni, on debt management?
- Are there jobs available? Is it possible to work and go to school successfully?

### ***Policies***

- Is there a school Honor Code? Is there a grievance process/procedure? Are the students involved?

### ***Career Services***

- How successful are graduates of this program in getting matched with an internship site?

## DRESS FOR SUCCESS

**The Suit.** Single breasted, 2-3 button. Matching jacket and pants. Sleeve length to wrist bone, showing ¼” of shirt sleeve. Best colors grey, black, navy, or brown.

- **Women.** Pant suit or knee length skirted suit.
- **Men.** Pant length should give a slight break at the front of your shoe. ½” of shirt collar showing. Leave the bottom jacket button undone. Cuffs are your preference, but the weight of a cuff helps pleats to hang smoothly.



**Shirts/Blouses.** Thick enough to not see through. Sleeve length to the break of your thumb. Best colors are white, light blue, pale color (women have more choices).

- **Women.** Avoid tight fit, low necklines, and revealing waistlines.
- **Men.** No short-sleeves. Collar (wide or narrow) should contrast your face. Check out [www.shirtstore.com](http://www.shirtstore.com).

**Men’s Ties.** Darker than your shirt. Length should end at your belt. Keep it conservative – your tie should never be funnier than you are. Don’t know how to tie a tie? [www.menswearhouse.com](http://www.menswearhouse.com).

**Shoes.** Comfortable polished leather.

- **Women.** Closed toe, 1”-1½” heel.
- **Men.** Laces are more professional. Best colors are black or burgundy.

**Finishing Touches.** Leather portfolio/briefcase. No book bags. No cologne/perfume. Cover tattoos if possible. Professional haircut/style. No smoking (even when sending applications). Even your pen is part of your image.

**Women’s Accessories.** Stay conservative. No piercings other than earrings. Wear neutral color hose (bring an extra pair). Natural-looking makeup. Clear nail polish (if any). Briefcase/portfolio OR purse. Shoes determine your pant length.

**Men’s Accessories.** Match belt and shoes (color and shine). Calf length socks should match or be slightly darker than pants. One ring per hand and no earrings or other piercings. Professional watch (no sports watches). Shave or neatly trimmed beard.

**How to Buy.** Steal (ideas not clothes) from magazines, TV, movies, and other people (doesn’t mean it’s going to look good on you). Choose quality over quantity – build to your existing wardrobe later instead of constantly replacing. Purchase items together (or bring) to ensure a match. Match your suit by looking at the color of its buttons. Ask an “educated” salesperson and/or bring a friend. When trying on, move around and sit down to see what it will look and feel like. Buy one outfit at a time – if not, mistakes will be duplicated. Wear the same socks when buying shoes. Get your measurements taken.

**Buying on a Budget.** Remember, you get what you pay for. Look at what you have so you buy different colors/styles. Found a great deal and want to buy ten different colors hoping no one will notice - you’re wrong. Only afford one suit - vary your shirts and ties. Mix sport coats and pants. Avoid fads/trends. Borrow if it fits.

**Corporate Survival Kit.** Have handy: lint brush, extra shoelaces, mirror, comb/brush, umbrella, fingernail clippers, breath mints/toothpicks, navy sport coat and two ties (men), and a Tide® to Go™ instant stain remover.

**Links.** SYMS Dress - [www.symsdress.com](http://www.symsdress.com), MBA Style Magazine - <http://members.aol.com/mbastyle>, Men’s Wearhouse - [www.menswearhouse.com](http://www.menswearhouse.com), All About Vision - [www.allaboutvision.com/eyeglasses](http://www.allaboutvision.com/eyeglasses), Ask Andy - [www.askandyaboutclothes.com](http://www.askandyaboutclothes.com), Noubikko - [www.noubikko.com/noubikko-body/tips](http://www.noubikko.com/noubikko-body/tips).

## DURING THE INTERVIEW

Most interviews have a settling-in time of introductions, questions from the interviewer(s), and then a chance for you to ask questions.

- **Treat the interview like a first date.** An interview parallels a first date in many ways. You're nervous, not sure what to expect, don't want to sound desperate, hoping you'll like what you hear, and want the other person to like you. Don't just answer question after question; create a back-and-forth conversation.
- **Start positive and stay positive.** The first few minutes set the tone for the entire interview so have some topics prepared to break the ice. And the first few seconds of each answer set the tone for what you say next.
- **Be on time.** Allow extra time in case you have problems. Use any leftover time to check your appearance. Arrive about 10-15 minutes early.
- **Shake hands.** If the interviewer doesn't offer their hand, offer yours. Make sure your handshake is firm and confident; smile and make eye contact.
- **Wait to be seated.** If the interviewer doesn't offer you a seat, ask where you should sit. Remember to unbutton your jacket when seated if needed.
- **Show your passion.** It's important that you demonstrate your enthusiasm and confidence. Interviewers can teach someone specific skills, but they can't teach someone to be enthusiastic. And if you're not confident in yourself, it will be impossible to convince an interviewer that you're qualified.
- **Be honest.** The interviewer isn't out to get you. They just want someone who will be a good fit for their program, and truly like the it. If you stretch the truth to get accepted, you may find yourself in a position that you don't really want.
- **Be aware of your body language.** Sit back in your chair with good posture, and lean forward to show interest when appropriate. Use good eye contact (be careful not to stare). Don't cross your arms or legs, as that gives off a "closed" image. Also, don't play with your pen, hair, etc.
- **Compliment their accomplishments.** If they feel good about themselves, they'll feel good about you.
- **Don't use slang.** You want to sound articulate, knowledgeable and professional.
- **Keep your cool.** No matter what happens, don't allow yourself to become annoyed or antagonized. If a question seems inappropriate, you can politely ask how the answer pertains to the position.
- **Establish the next step.** Ask the interviewer when they expect a decision to be made, and if there is anything additional you need to do.
- **End on a positive note.** Remain enthusiastic throughout the interview.

## AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- **Send the thank-you letter immediately after the interview.** Thank the interviewer(s) for their time, reemphasize your interest in the position, and restate some of the main reasons why you are the best applicant. If you're not interested anymore, still send a thank-you letter in consideration for their time. A typed letter sent through the mail is traditional, but email is acceptable in most cases. If it is a panel interview, it's appropriate to send one letter to the "interview leader" and ask them to pass on your appreciation to others. Go a step further and send a personalized letter to everyone you met with. Example:

(Date)

(Contact name)

(Contact title)

(Company name)

(Company address)

Dear Mr./Ms. (Contact's last name):

It was a pleasure interviewing with you on (Date) for the (Title) position. After discussing all of the positive attributes about the position, I am even more interested in working at (Company).

Your company is a progressive leader in its industry and I welcome the opportunity to add my skills to your already impressive team. The information you shared with me during the interview reinforces my belief that this is a company I would be proud to work with.

Please contact me at (555) 123-4567 if I can answer any further questions. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

(Your hand-written signature)

(Your typed name)

- **Analyze your performance.** Write down the questions you were asked for future reference, noting which answers you may need to work on. Even if you get into the program, this will improve your interviewing skills for the future.
- **Calling to follow up.** Re-approach the interviewer if the timeframe for a decision has passed. If you aren't hired, ask for feedback and determine what you will do differently next time. Whatever happens, an interview is always a learning experience. If you don't learn anything from a failed attempt, you risk failing again. Don't be discouraged - the issue is matching your skills with their needs.

