

THE CAMPUS AND NATIONAL INTERVIEWS

This guide is intended for students who are interviewing for the Rhodes, Marshall, Mitchell, Gates, Luce and English Speaking Union. However, most of the scholarships for study and research abroad administered by the ORC have, at some stage, an interview. Sometimes these interviews are just on campus, (such as the Fulbright), sometimes they are both campus and at the national level, and some just have national. The intent of this handout is to provide applicants with some general advice on preparing for interviews.

It is quite a long document but we hope that it will help students understand their role in preparing for interviews and the role of interviews in the scholarship process

“You are what you are and you ain’t what you ain’t”

- John Prine

“You can’t put in what God left out”

- A character in the film “Chariots of Fire

We feel these two quotes can help set the scene for this handout. You shouldn’t try to change who you are just because you are applying for an award and you should accept your strengths and weaknesses.

PURPOSE

The purpose of an interview is pretty straightforward. At its most basic, the interview is an important part (some would say *the* important part) in determining your success. You probably cannot succeed in these awards if you have a bad interview (and certainly not a bad final interview—we know applicants who have had less than stellar campus or first round interviews but have learned from them and been successful at the final stage). It may be that you have the best interview of your life (golfers would say it is the equivalent of “playing like God on a good day”) and still not get the award.

But what else should you keep in mind?

Many scholarships have a certain “ambassadorial” aspect. Committees are looking for applicants who will reflect well on the institution and the award (and in some cases as representatives of the U.S. overseas). The interview gives the committee a chance to relate you to what you wrote in your application.

The interview provides a chance for the committee to get a sense of what motivates you, as well as the kind of preparation you have brought to the application process.

Campus level interviews serve a number of purposes:

- It allows the committee to evaluate your application, in the context of the written materials
- It allows the committee to provide some feedback to you (where appropriate)
- It gives you a sense of what the interview process can be like; it serves as a learning experience
- It provides some important information to include in the campus endorsement letters and evaluations

However:

It is a serious process and you do need to consider how to approach interviews at the campus level. Do not see them as a footnote to your written application but as an integral part of the way in which Stanford will decide whether to endorse your application and the manner of the endorsement.

STRENGTHS YOU BRING

The interview does not begin when you sit down and the committee asks you the first question. It begins before that. You should enter the interview room with a clear sense of your qualities and reason for applying.

- You have made a thoughtful decision as to whether or not you have the qualities that will make a strong application
- You bring to the process a sense of having “done good while doing well”
- You have demonstrated intellectual curiosity and accomplishments
- Your academic record is excellent
- Your references are supportive
- Your outside interests demonstrate focus and commitment and not dabbling. Understand these amazing accomplishments
- You have spent time putting together a strong application
- You understand the purpose of the award
- You’ve spoken with alums of the awards or with advisors who work with these awards
- You have a good grasp of world and domestic issues
- You are serious about the academic opportunities the award offers you
- You have considered how the opportunity offered by the award fits into your life goals

HOW TO PREPARE (Failure to prepare is preparation to fail)

Re-read your application

- Know what you wrote and ask yourself, as well as friends and advisors, to go through your application with you to highlight anything that might result in a question or something that is unclear
- Know what you did in every course you took

Focus on who you are

Micro to macro

- Many students forget to connect what they are doing in research or in class to broader national or global issues. Committees are very good at asking these types of questions
- Prepare yourself mentally by considering the sorts of questions you are likely to be asked
- Be ready to explain your choice of program
- Be aware of the larger world

Convey your knowledge of the host country

- Show you’ve done research into the academic program
- Show your ability to be to be an informed ambassador
- Be prepared to show your confidence in the host language (this is not relevant to all awards)
- Know about issues in the country where you wish to study. Don’t feel you need to know everything about the country. But you are going to be spending a length of time there, so the committee is likely to expect you will know something. This is especially true if you have spent time in the country or if your area of interest has an obvious parallel. Think about what you do know about current issues in the country

Think about what matters to you and why

This can be academic, social, political or personal but the interview is a chance for you to discuss your passions. As the interview is not too long, you need to do some preparation in this area before the interview.

Know something about the award (s) for which you are applying

- Who was Rhodes, Marshall, Mitchell, Fulbright etc.
- When did the award begin and why?
- You do not need to know lots of details but you should have an idea about the award's origin, history and purpose
- Those interviewing you may have been recipients of the award and a candidate who seems unaware of the history and purpose and seem to care more for the prestige of the award than the opportunity it provides will not impress them

RELATING TO THE COMMITTEE

- Do not assume you have to shake the hand of each committee member. Assume you do not until the committee does otherwise.
- This is tough but try and remember that the interview is to help the Panel choose you!
- The Interview is a conversation, NOT an oral exam. However, some scholarship interviews can be very demanding and confrontational. You will hear from scholars of very tough moment in their interviews (but you will also hear how they handled these tough moments). Be prepared for the time in the interview when things are not going well. There is also the need to remember the difference between showing conviction and sounding like a debater.
- Remember that the committees have very hard decisions to make; many candidates have impressive written applications, so the interview is as important to the committee as it is to you. BUT it is their interview to conduct and lead.
- The objective is not to convince the committee of anything but to get them to understand who you are and how you would meet the qualities sought by the award.
- The interviews are not trivial pursuits—many questions do not have answers—what needs to come across are your principles and passions.
- It is OK to say you don't know or to take a slight pause before answering.
- Accept that some questions that may be asked are indeed too hard: maybe there is no answer. These types of questions are an opportunity for you to give a response that recognizes the complexity of the question and that your opinion is not the only one.
- No one has a perfect interview and the committee understands this. The committee will be interested in how you respond when the interview is not going well and how you battle through topics that make you uncomfortable and take you out of your comfort zone.
- Involve the committee in your answers: maintain eye contact.
- Try to bring your life story into your interview—where appropriate. If possible, connect your answers to your own experiences and to the goals of the award.
- Know when to stop in your answers. Most interviews last no longer than 30 minutes, so answers need to be precise and concise. If the committee wants to know more it will ask. Although an interview that begins badly can be saved it is difficult so be focused from the beginning.
- Your opinions are important and the committee wants to know them. But you need to be able to show that your opinions have been arrived at through a thoughtful process. Keep in mind that the committee is often a very experienced bunch. They may, in fact, know more about a topic that you do
- Do not be afraid of standing your ground. But be respectful. Do not give the impression that anyone who disagrees with you is uneducated

- Think about body posture. This can have a serious effect on your interview. This involves eye contact, facial expressions and gestures.
- Answer each question as it comes. Don't wonder about why a question was asked or question its relevancy to your application or experience. And don't second-guess how you answered the previous question and therefore spend the rest of the interview trying to answer it again.
- If a question may need a technical answer using the language of your subject remember that you are trying to do two things at once. You are trying to convince a committee that you are confident and comfortable in the language of your subject but you are also trying to give your answer to a lay audience.
- The committee understands you will be nervous but they want to see how you react in such situations. Try and keep calm even if the questions are asked in what appears to be a hostile manner. Don't get emotionally involved in the discussion.
- Speak clearly, concisely and don't use slang. How you speak is as important as what you are saying. The awards are for further academic work so focus on the tone of your responses. Speak in full sentences. If you ramble the committee will probably interrupt.
- Committee members are experienced and it is not possible to "snow them." So don't try! And don't tell the committee "that's a good question."
- At the conclusion of the interview don't delay your exit. If a committee asks you if you have any questions see this as a way to thank them for the opportunity to meet them. Don't see it as a way to extend your interview.

HOW TO MAKE A GOOD IMPRESSION

- Remember that impressions can center on
 - Body language - how you carry yourself
 - Tone of voice - pace, enunciation
 - Actual words - content of what you say
- Firm handshake (if appropriate)
- Smile! Remember that committees want to enjoy the experience of meeting you
- Make eye contact
- Practice good posture (don't be stiff)
- Be an active listener - ensure that the committee knows you have listened to their questions with respect
- Show enthusiasm
- Be confident (without being defensive)
- Clasp your hands in your lap (don't fidget). Be aware of your mannerisms and any nervous habits
- Think before you speak - consider all questions carefully and avoid off the cuff answers
- Be outgoing
- Show a sense of humor
- Be polite
- Be humble
- Do not be too aggressive
- Listen (don't dominate - let others talk)
- Be yourself
- Ensure you have read your application recently

WHAT TO WEAR

You don't need a lot of clothes to dress well for an interview, but what you have should be of good quality, properly fitted, clean, well-pressed, and in good taste

(Career Development Center: Stanford)

Campus Interview –

- Informal but not too casual
- Leave your backpack at the desk
- Dress “business casual” or nicer
- You need to feel comfortable

Regional, State or National Interviews

- More formal clothes. Some awards have dinners or receptions, which can form part of the interview and should be taken seriously and this includes attire. Information on receptions/dinners will be provided.
- It is better to dress up than dress down
- Do not take a notebook into the interview. AND never, ever, ever a cell phone

TIPS TO REMEMBER

Before the Interview

- Re-read your application
- Clarify the skills, abilities and experiences you have
- Get there early (and leave cell phones outside! We thought we better mention this again)

During the Interview

- Ask for clarification if needed
- Be prepared to respond in the foreign language at anytime
- Thank the committee at the end

HOW CAN I IMPROVE MY INTERVIEW SKILLS?

- Practice - in an interview setting
- Talk to advisors in the ORC at the I-Center about the purpose of the interviews
- Take advantage of the CDC's offerings on Interviewing Workshops, and individual counseling on interviews
- Visit the Center for Teaching & Learning - watch yourself on tape
- Work with the ORC on “mock interviews”
- Talk with past winners about their experiences
- The CDC offers advice on the **STAR** preparation for interviews. You can use this technique to help prepare for questions that might be asked in an interview
 - **Situation or Task:** describe a task or project for which you had responsibility
 - **Action:** discuss the approach you took to deal with the situation
 - **Result:** discuss the outcome of your action--mentioning accomplishments of improvements resulting from your action
- Don't feel that you have to change who you are. There is no personality trait that fits these awards: enthusiasm, dedication, and a seriousness of purpose are elements that committees look for.
- Be yourself: don't try too hard to impress

- Keep some perspective. These awards are very competitive and our experience has been that it helps you as an applicant if you have plans for what you will do if you don't get the award. You should try and leave the committee with the feeling that it is the award's loss if you are not named a winner. Your life will go on just fine. "The lucky few of the worthy many."

And finally if we could sum it all up...

"Wear your best suit, but no fountain pen or fancy handkerchief peeping coyly out of the jacket pocket. Look them straight in the eye, but not so fixedly that you embarrass them. Be slightly more deferential than you feel; they're the ones with the job on offer. If you don't know an answer, say so, don't waffle. And don't worry if you're nervous, they prefer that to overconfidence, but show them that you've got the guts to cope with nervousness. Call them 'sir' or 'madam' and thank them briefly before you leave. And for God's sake, boy, sit up straight."

Advice given to a student by a headmaster in [The Skull Beneath The Skin](#),
by P.D. James