

How to Prepare and Ace Any Interview

For a school place, a university offer, or a first job

In a hurry? Read only the lines in bold. Together they are the whole guide in short. The smaller text below each one gives the detail and an example.

First, the right mindset

An interview is not a one-way test. It is a two-way meeting: they choose you, and you also choose them, so you can relax.

Most students treat an interview as a test they must survive. See it instead as a mutual fit. While they decide whether you belong with them, you are deciding whether they belong with you. Would you thrive here? Are these the teachers and classmates you want to think alongside? You are not begging for a place. You are an equal, there to find out whether two good things fit. Sit in that seat, and the nerves settle. Whatever the result, you leave knowing more than you did before.

Before you walk in

Arrive about fifteen minutes early. Being late is the one mistake you cannot explain away.

Getting there early lets you settle your breathing and read the room.

Dress smart and simple. If you are not sure what to wear, ask about the dress code before the day.

One thing to think about: your own school uniform is usually fine, but do not wear one school's uniform to a rival school. You want them picturing you in their colours.

Bring a spare copy of anything you have made, a pen and notebook, and the address and a phone number.

A portfolio, an essay, a project you are proud of. Small readiness quietly tells them you are serious.

1

"Tell us about yourself."

Prepare a thirty-second answer about who you are and what you love. Practise it with a timer.

Build it in layers and rehearse each: thirty seconds first, then one, two and five minutes. The thirty second version is one vivid sentence. Passion you can prove through what you have actually done will land. Passion described in the abstract will not.

A STUDENT MIGHT SAY

"I am the kind of person who stays behind after class to keep arguing about the book we just read. Last year I started a lunchtime reading group; it began with three of us, and more than twenty come now."

2

"Why should we choose you over everyone else?"

Know your one strong edge, and prove it with something you have actually done.

A hard question, and a useful one: it makes you find your edge. Name it honestly, and back it with an example rather than a claim.

A STUDENT MIGHT SAY

"Plenty of people enjoy debating. After my team lost a round badly, I rewrote our whole argument and coached two younger students until they won theirs. My edge is that I turn a setback into a plan."

3

"What are your weaknesses?"

Give a real weakness, then show how you have worked to improve it.

Saying you have none sounds untrustworthy. A fake weakness like "I am a perfectionist" sounds evasive. Choose something true, turn on the word **but**, and show how far you have come. A real weakness plus visible growth shows the thing every interviewer wants, which is **the will to grow**.

A STUDENT MIGHT SAY

"In group work I used to give my own view before I had really listened. I made myself ask one question first, and by this year my classmates had started coming to me when they wanted to be heard."

4

"Why us? What do you know about us?"

Study them first, then name two or three specific things you like about them.

Nothing sinks an interview more quietly than not knowing the place you applied to. Being specific always beats being flattering.

A STUDENT MIGHT SAY

"Most schools told me about their exam results. Yours was the only one whose students run a philosophy journal, and I had read three issues before I applied. That is the kind of place I want to think in."

5

The harder, thinking questions Top schools & universities

Do not answer yes or no straight away. Show your thinking step by step, then give your view.

These are the probing questions at selective schools and at places like Oxbridge. Walk them through the different sides and the details that complicate it, and only then your verdict. Thinking out loud in a calm, mature way is what they are really marking.

A STUDENT MIGHT SAY

"Before I say whether social media does more harm than good, let me separate three things: what it does to our attention, to our friendships, and to democracy. I lean one way on the first and the other way on the second, so my answer depends on which weighs most."

6

"Do you have any questions for us?"

Always ask a question, and let one of them show how you could contribute to what they do.

Prepare three to five and ask one or two. A question like "what do your students go on to do that surprises even you?" already shows real interest. Even better: having studied their programme and followed its latest news, ask how your own skill could add to something specific of theirs, and let your excitement show. If you play an instrument, ask about their orchestra; if you write, ask about their school magazine.

A STUDENT MIGHT SAY

"I saw your orchestra is touring next spring. I have played the cello for eight years, and I would love to know how I could earn a place and contribute."

How to answer "tell me about a time when..."

Use **STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result**. It keeps your story clear and stops you rambling.

- S • Situation** Set the scene in one sentence. Where were you, and what was going on?
- T • Task** What was the problem or goal that fell to you?
- A • Action** What did you actually do? This is the heart of it. Spend most of your time here, and say **I** rather than **we**.
- R • Result** How did it turn out? Give a number or a real outcome where you can, and what you learned.

A worked example, from a fourteen year old

Situation: our class debate team fell apart the week before the regional round. **Task:** I offered to pull it back together in five days. **Action:** I split the motion into three arguments, gave each person the one that suited them, and ran two lunchtime practices where we timed each other. **Result:** we reached the semi final, and I learned that a calm plan beats a big speech.

Speak naturally, not stiffly

Guide the listener with easy, natural phrases. Skip the rigid "firstly, secondly".

These are the little phrases fluent speakers reach for. Learn a handful and your answers will flow and sound like your own.

TO OPEN A POINT

"The first thing that strikes me is..." · "What I keep coming back to is..."

TO WEIGH BOTH SIDES

"On the one hand... and yet..." · "It is tempting to say so, but..." · "There is a case for both, though I lean towards..."

TO LAND YOUR VIEW

"So, on balance..." · "Where I come down is..."

TO ADD ANOTHER

"On top of that..." · "There is also the question of..." · "What is more..."

TO GIVE AN EXAMPLE

"Take, for instance..." · "I saw this for myself when..."

TO WIN A MOMENT TO THINK

"That is a lovely question, let me think it through." · "Let me take that in two parts."

If it is a group discussion

SCHOOL & UNIVERSITY

Do not stay silent, and do not talk too much. Say one or two things that really help the group.

Strong groups need a few roles. The **devil's advocate** points out contradictions politely. The **fresh angle** brings a view nobody else thought of. The **timekeeper** keeps everyone on task. The **listener** sums up what others said, adds to it, and links to the next point. Pick the one or two roles that suit your personality, and play them well. What gets remembered is your power to persuade, not how loudly you speak.

Interviews on a screen

Look at the camera, not the screen. Test your device and internet early.

More interviews now happen online. A Jardine Scholarship interview may flash a question and expect you to answer at once. Some programmes, the John Locke Institute among them, use automated or AI interviews, where you record answers with no person on the other side. The same simple habits carry you through all of them.

- **Light your face.** Sit facing a window or a lamp, never with a bright window behind you.
- **Keep your background quiet and tidy,** or use a clean, plain virtual background.
- **Test everything early:** camera, microphone, internet and the meeting link, at least ten minutes before.
- **Silence your phone,** close every other tab, and keep water within reach.
- **When a question flashes,** take one breath, gather your first point, then begin. A short, calm pause reads as confidence.

After the interview

Send a short thank-you note. If you have another offer, it is fine to mention it politely.

A warm thank you is always welcome and hardly anyone sends one. If you are holding an offer with a deadline, saying so and asking about their timeline shows you are wanted elsewhere and still keen here. Keep it brief and gracious, never pushy.

A "no" is not a judgement of your worth. Often it just means the fit was not right.

Results turn on the size of the year group, the timing and the fit, many things you will never see. Sometimes a no is even a kindness: there is little joy in a place where you would struggle every day and find few people like yourself. The right place is one that both wants you and suits you. Every interview leaves you better prepared for the next.

Smile and be kind to everyone you meet. The interview can start the moment you arrive.

It often begins before the official time, sometimes the instant you walk through the door. So treat everyone with the same warmth you would give the panel: the person who greets you, the one who tidies the room or prints your papers, whoever brings you water, and the person at the front desk. Kindness gets noticed, and it counts for more than people think.