

## Pure Potential Interview Guide

### Preliminary note

There is no magic formula that will guarantee you a place at your first-choice university. You might therefore think that this guide is mostly common sense; after all, surely a successful interview is only a matter of answering the questions? Well, yes – and no. You should read this guide at least three times before the interview, and really concentrate on what it says. We have drawn on numerous sources of expertise to give you a realistic and detailed idea of to expect in your interview so that you can prepare yourself – both academically and psychologically – as thoroughly as possible.

### Introduction

Most applicants applying will have outstanding exam results and predicted grades. In addition, most school references will be similar, so they are certainly not a deciding factor between students. This means that the interview, in conjunction with the increasing use of admissions tests, is a critical part of the application process. This guide is to help you through that process. It will tell you everything you need to know, including the best way to prepare for interviews; what the interview will be like; how you should respond to questions; how to take the initiative; advice on aspects of personal presentation and body language, together with more general information on what to expect. We hope this will help you to focus your preparation to give yourself the best possible chance of being made an offer.

### Your invitation to interview

Although lots of universities do not send out their interview invitations until quite late, they usually publish the interview period on their website in advance, so you are expected to keep all of this period free.

Your letter may or may not tell you your exact interview times; if not, they will be posted up on one of the notice-boards once you are there. It is a good idea to reply to this letter confirming that you will be able to attend. Some candidates arrive a day early if they are coming some distance - it might be worth considering doing this anyway, because this will give you some time to settle in and collect your thoughts before the others arrive. Whether or not you decide to reply, you should be feeling confident about your application at this stage. Although most applicants are invited to interview, some are not. You have succeeded in getting through Stage One, the screening process whereby those with no chance have been identified and discarded. You are thus considered to have the qualities the tutors are looking for, and whether or not you succeed at the interview, this fact should not be lost.

### Preparation for the interview

Although you cannot prepare for your interview as you would for an exam, there are many other things that you can and should do to maximise your chances of receiving an offer. It is, for example, possible to practice thinking critically and independently, and it is surprising how few people actually do this before their interview. We advise you to try the following:

- Read widely around your subject. If you're not sure where to start, ask your teachers for advice or look for a first-year reading list for your course on the university's website.
- Choose books which (a) you genuinely find interesting (b) are relevant to your subject and (c) you would be willing to discuss at interview. In addition to reading books, you may also find it useful to look at New Scientist, The Economist and even more general sources like the BBC website.
- Think about the obvious questions you might be asked. These may include questions about the appeal of your chosen university, of the course and of university in general. You should also think about what you have to offer the university: what would you contribute to its community? Whilst it is certainly not advisable to learn the answers to such questions by heart, preparing the main points to make in your mind will at least help you

to focus on what you want to communicate, and will allow you to appear motivated and interested in your subject.

- Re-read any submitted written work, your personal statement, and all your information on the course and university. Try to anticipate any questions you may be asked on the work you have submitted and on your personal statement, and revise the subjects and books you mentioned so that they are fresh in your mind in December.
- If possible, have a mock interview / academic discussion with a teacher in your chosen subject (if offered at your school or college). Failing that, at least try to discuss your subject with somebody who knows something about it – even talking to one of your classmates will help!
- Read a broadsheet newspaper regularly in the weeks before the interview and note anything which is relevant to your subject. Many applicants keep any particularly relevant articles so that they can refresh their memory just before the interview. Try to vary the newspapers you read so that you can identify how the same subjects are often reported and analysed in very differing ways according to the political bias of the paper, and note the names of any columnists you particularly enjoy (this is a favourite interview question to test whether you really read the papers!). Reading the Comment and Editorial sections is particularly useful as the journalist presents a case as persuasively as possible. As you are reading these sections, try to identify the main points of the arguments and the supporting evidence the journalist has used, and then see to what extent you agree. You will often notice manipulation of statistics and other information to support the case, and being able to spot these techniques is fantastic practice for considering an argument in your interview.

If you struggle to find the time to read the papers regularly, try *The Week*: this weekly publication summarises the main news from the UK, Europe and the rest of the world and how events have been covered in the press. You can find out more about it at [www.theweek.co.uk](http://www.theweek.co.uk).

### **What to take to your interview**

You should take the following with you when you go to your interview (but not to the interview itself): -

- Copy of your UCAS form
- Copies of all submitted work
- The university prospectus
- Pen and paper (and a calculator if relevant) in case you need to (a) take a test (b) want to take notes or annotate an article you are given to read in preparation for the interview.
- Clothes other than the ones you are preparing to wear for interview. You may be away for more than one night, so more than one change of clothes is advisable.
- A book, magazine or school work for all the times when not in interview
- The main university telephone number in case you need to advise them that you are running late (ideally stored in your mobile phone)
- Your school's telephone number in case you are asked any questions about your application on which you need advice from a teacher

### **Personal presentation**

It is best to go for a safe look here. The interview is not the time to try out a new radical hairstyle in order to impress your personality on the interviewer; this should come out through what you say!

Our general tips are as follows:

- Wear the smartest, best quality clothes and shoes you feel comfortable in. Although there is absolutely no obligation to wear a suit or blazer, make sure whatever you choose is smart and presentable. You won't be penalised for making an effort, but a 'scruffy' appearance may have a negative impact on the interviewer by implying that you are not taking the interview seriously. Every year we are asked whether or not it is best for boys to

wear a suit: our answer is generally no, as most people feel more comfortable in less formal clothes. Furthermore, your interviewers are highly unlikely to be wearing suits, so you may even feel a little overdressed if you do.

- Don't overdo the perfume or aftershave.
- Get a good haircut – smart, not necessarily short - and trim your fingernails.
- Practice wearing - and especially sitting down in - your interview outfit and shoes and break them in if they're new.
- Take along a spare shirt or top in case you get any marks on yours before the interview.
- Your clothes should be ironed before you pack – there is unlikely to be an iron if you are staying in halls.

For Men:

- Avoid luminous socks, and socks or ties with garish, 'humorous' or otherwise distracting patterns.

For Women:

- Wear shoes that complement your suit and accessories.
- Avoid clothes which are too revealing, particularly short skirts: these not only distract your interviewer (both men and women) but also make it more difficult to get in and out of low armchairs and sofas elegantly!
- Women often play with their hair when they are nervous – if you know you do this, it may be best to tie it back.
- Women are also often tempted to fiddle with their jewellery when they are nervous, so keep this to a minimum. Larger items of jewellery may also distract the interviewer, and you want him or her to be concentrating on your answers!

In terms of accessories, a handkerchief is preferable to pulling messy bits of tissue out of your pocket. You should take a good quality pen which will not leak in your bag or pocket. Something smart to carry any papers is also advisable: you should try to look professional and organised at all times.

### **Arrival and entrance**

When you first arrive at the university, it is wise to go and check the location of your interview room so that you know exactly where to go when the time comes. Arrive at your interview venue 5 to 10 minutes early, and wait outside. During this time, try to relax. Try to put all your thoughts to the back of your mind and clear your head. Accept that you will be nervous- it's natural! If after about 1-2 minutes after your interview is due to start you have not yet been called in, knock on the door and let the tutor know that you are waiting outside. S/he will probably reply that they will be with you 'in a few minutes'. Even if that turns into a quarter of an hour wait, at least you've let them know you're punctual. When you are called in for your interview, enter with a greeting. Walk tall and smile at the interviewer. Try to look them in the eye and to judge whether a handshake is appropriate: some interviewers will not offer their hand, but, you may judge it appropriate to take the initiative. Avoid the 'dead fish' handshake or the bone crusher. Men should try to avoid shaking hands extra-gently with women and use the same moderately firm grip. First impressions last, so just try to be your normal usual self. Remember that this is the first time they have met you – it's not easy for them, either.

Finally, a reminder that first impressions are critical: after the first five minutes or so, the tutor will have decided whether or not they are likely to make you an offer, and this creates a 'filter' in their mind for the rest of the interview. This means that if they think they will offer you a place, any mistakes you make will be viewed sympathetically. If, on the other hand, they feel you are a weak candidate, it will then be very hard to change their mind. For this reason it is well worth practising walking into rooms, making eye contact, shaking hands and sitting down calmly – ask your parents to help!

## **Interview format**

Try not to think of the interview as an activity in which you play a receptive role. See it more as an assignment you share with the interviewer, during which s/he will help you to demonstrate your abilities in certain areas. Do not be scared to take the initiative during an interview if you feel it will help your skills and abilities to come across. You can do this by asking questions, and by saying what you think on relevant ideas. The interviews will have three broad stages. Firstly there is the warm up stage, when pleasantries are exchanged about your journey, what you think of the city, how you are enjoying your A-Levels, your school and so on. After this, there is the main body of the interview, which will often be purely academic and based upon an article you may have read, a problem, or areas of your subject that interest you. Finally, you will be asked if you have any questions. Make sure you do have questions to ask, and it would reflect more positively on you if these had been stimulated by the discussion, as it illustrates the ability to respond to information quickly. However, do not feel the need to ask all of the questions you prepared before you came up. If your questions have been covered by your discussion, it is best just to say so. The interview may also be running late, and you do not want to annoy him or her by failing to recognise this. Similarly, don't ask questions that are answered in the prospectus - it makes you look like a bad researcher. Finally, make sure you ask the questions that are most important to you, as these will consolidate the interviewer's impression of you (and you will actually want to know the answers!)

## **Interview technique**

In many ways, university interviews are no different from interviews in any other context, so there are a number of generic elements of interview technique with which it is useful to familiarise yourself.

### I. Verbal communication

- Be careful about how you deploy the research knowledge you have prepared for the interview.
- Don't just trot out the facts, as this may make you look overly rehearsed and insincere. Work the information into a conversation as naturally as you.
- Listen to the question carefully, and think before you answer. In posing a problem, an interviewer is not looking for a "right answer", but s/he wants to see how you handle the question, how you respond and how you approach the problem. Interview questions will often be more complicated than they initially seem, so you need to give yourself time to work out if you have missed anything before you start to answer.
- If you are asked a factual question to which you don't know the answer, be honest and say something like "we haven't covered that as part of our course yet" or "I have not read much on that subject". Do not make up an answer, but DO appear interested in the answer and keen to learn more about the subject.
- Do not exaggerate or over-generalise, as this suggests a lack of specific knowledge.
- Keep communication simple as short sentences will convey your point more effectively than longer constructions. Avoid waffle: there is no point in making the same point in ten different ways, or using irrelevant information to pad out your answer. On the other hand, avoid giving very short answers which show no real thought.
- If there is a silence when you finish your answer, wait for the interviewer to break it, as s/he may just be thinking about your answer and phrasing their next question. Interviewers sometimes deliberately use silence as a test: stronger candidates will be confident enough to wait, whilst candidates who are weaker and/or very nervous can misinterpret the silence as a cue to continue talking, and subsequently start adding more on to their last answer (often digging holes for themselves in the process!).
- If you are interrupted (e.g. the phone rings or someone knocks at the door) and the interviewer is obviously distracted, the loss of contact may deflate or de-energise you. Try to retain your focus and use the time to see if you can improve what you were going to say. In addition, remember what you were discussing before the interruption, and offer to jog their memory if they have forgotten.

- Do not take notes during the interview; you wouldn't in a conversation, and essentially that is what this is intended to be.
- Do not be scared to move the discussion onto areas in which you are more comfortable. For instance, if you are asked what you know or think about X and Y, and know very little about X, you could say something like "I believe this about Y, and although I don't know much about X, I can see how it is linked to Z, and I know this, this and this about Z", thus shifting the emphasis onto Z about which you know much more.

## II: Non-Verbal communication

Most of the communication between human beings is 'non-verbal', that is, we communicate far more through our body language and our voice than through the actual words we use. If the two conflict e.g. if you are telling the tutor how much you love your subject but your body and/or voice suggest the opposite, s/he will give precedence to the non-verbal message. It is therefore vital that you are aware of the ways in which the body responds to the stress of the interview environment so that you can control the messages you are communicating.

The following are ways in which your body language can support your answers:

- Smile! It is surprisingly difficult not to return a smile, so this is one of the most effective ways to establish a positive relationship with the tutor. It is perhaps not surprising that applicants very rarely smile during their interviews (!), so this will really help you to stand out. That said, avoid the extreme forced, plastic smile. Think of something pleasant - such as your favourite music - to help you relax and smile more naturally.
- Make eye contact with the interviewer, and avoid staring at the carpet for long periods. This said, do not just stare at them all the time, which is unnatural. The occasional glance elsewhere is fine. If you find looking them in the eye difficult, try to look at the 'triangle' between the eyes and end of the nose - it is impossible to tell the difference!
- Keep your hands away from your face. Touching the face - especially the mouth - shows nervousness, uncertainty and even dishonesty. Some people gesticulate naturally, which is fine, but don't fidget in a distracting way. If you're not sure what to do with your hands, clasp them in your lap.
- Try to listen 'actively' when the interviewer is talking: nod your head from time to time to show you are paying attention, and interject as appropriate to show that you understand. This will help you to focus on the question – it is easy not to listen when you are nervous.
- Lean forward slightly to show interest, with your head tilted slightly upwards, but avoid looking down your nose at the interviewer.
- Do not make any sudden movements during the interview (e.g. crossing your legs, shifting in your chair) – this will distract the tutor from what you are saying at that point.
- Try to maintain 'open' body language i.e. arms and legs uncrossed. This helps to build rapport by ensuring there are no physical barriers between you and the tutor.
- Beware the "voice of fear" - the quavering, high, breathless and utterly unpersuasive voice that often comes out when you're scared. Take a deep breath before you start to speak to help avoid this.

Since non-verbal communication is so important, we advise you to ask friends or relatives to read this section and identify any bad habits you have before the interview. You can then work on these habits before the big day so that you feel confident.

## **Dealing with nerves**

Quite simply, the best way to avoid undue stress during the interview period is thorough preparation. However, despite all of your preparation, it is inevitable that you will become nervous during the build up to your interview. Here are some of the ways in which you can physically reduce the stress you may suffer. Try them out in advance before the interview to find out which is best for you.

### **Muscular Relaxation**

Find a warm, quiet room, and sit or lie in a comfortable position. Tense your muscles in your feet for a couple of seconds and then relax them. Do this again about 2-3 times, and you should feel them becoming 'dead' and more relaxed and less tense. It helps if you concentrate on them. Then move on to your legs, thighs, and right up your body, alternatively tensing and relaxing them, until you reach your head and neck. Keep your eyes closed throughout this exercise.

### **Meditation**

Breathe in and out deeply. Count "one" as you breathe in and "two" as you breathe out. Concentrate on the numbers as this will help you ignore any unwanted thoughts. It is a good way of clearing your mind, and might be advisable just before you go into your interview room.

### **Positive visualisation**

Imagine yourself in the interview room, calmly answering questions clearly and concisely, and using all your knowledge and skills to their full effect. If you find that you also feel nervous before exams, these techniques can often help to improve your performance, particularly in the first few minutes.

### **Tutor research**

When attending a university interview it can be useful to know the academic interests of the tutors who will be interviewing you, since you will usually be told in advance who will be interviewing you and in what format (e.g. multiple one-on-one interviews, or one panel interview etc.) This is for two main reasons:

1. To get a feel for the interview situation. It's always good to have as much information as possible beforehand, and if you are going to be interviewed it doesn't do any harm to know who they are and where their interests lie. Going into the interview this should make you feel more relaxed as you will have a better idea what to expect.
2. So you know what you might be talking about. Although we do not advise you to do extensive work to find out lots about the tutors' area of interests (there is a strong risk that you might look a bit obvious as you try to talk about something that on which the tutor is probably a world expert and about which you in fact know very little!), an idea of their interests within the subject can help you to anticipate the approach they may take to your written work and the texts you have mentioned in your personal statement.

We advise that you carry out at least a little research on your tutors before the interview. Almost every tutor will have a profile somewhere on the internet about their research areas. To find this profile we suggest the following tips:

- Use the university websites and from there to look at the faculty website.
- Searching for the tutor on Google ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)). Such a search will usually take you directly to the tutor's profile on a university website.

### **Final note**

We hope that you will find this information useful as you prepare for your interview, and we wish you every success. As your interview date approaches and you start to feel nervous, remember that most applicants genuinely enjoy the conversations they have at interview, whether or not they are ultimately made an offer, so we hope that you will too.

**Good luck!**