

Mastering Interviews for Internships and Graduate Schools

If you are invited for an interview following your application for an internship or for a graduate position, it usually means that your papers are convincing, and that you are in the small group of people who are being considered seriously for the position. For internships, in fact, you may be the only candidate. Interviews can be held in person, or over the phone. They can last 15 minutes or two days.

What are they trying to find out?

It is important for the principal investigator (or the program admission committee) to establish the following:

- Does this person really have the **experience and training** that they stated in their application papers? Especially, what is the scope of their practical experience? Can this person work in a lab without causing disaster?
- Is this person **reasonable**, i.e., can they follow a logical line of thought? This is very important since a lot of time in research is spent in discussions.
- Is this person a **friendly personality** and good to talk to? This is important because in a research setting, people interact a lot with each other.
- Does this person want to work with us for a **scientific reason**? Are they really interested in what we work on?
- Do they know what they are getting into? Are they **motivated** to work hard? Can they troubleshoot? Will they stand and fight when the unavoidable problems come, or will they give up and run?

All questions are asked with these points in mind. There may or may not be a brief science examination, and you may be asked to comment on the current work of the group (or the department).

Some questions

Some questions that get asked very often:

- Why do you want to be at this university/in this department/in this program?
- Do you have any practical experience? What did you do in the lab? What was your project, and what is its scientific purpose?
- What do you do when you come across a problem in your practical work?
- Do you get on well with your supervisor?
- What paper did you find especially exciting within the last 6 months?
- If you had a million euros, what would you use it for?

Preparation

The best way to prepare for an interview is to gather as much information about the research activities of the group or department as possible (i.e., by reading papers and reviews), and by making sure you know why you would be excited to join this group or department. (Only scientific reasons count.) Good luck!