



Continuing Education
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **BOULDER**

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Handouts for Interview Strategies Presentation

Preparing for Interviews:

Answer these questions for yourself in advance

Knowledge of the Profession

- Have you shadowed a *variety* of healthcare providers? What have you learned from observing them?
- Have you engaged in *extensive* direct interaction with patients? What have you learned about providing effective, compassionate care to patients who are under stress due to health issues?
- Are you informed about and ready to discuss our health care system (and current changes to it)?
- Can you realistically acknowledge the rewards and challenges of the work?

Intellectual Curiosity

- How have you developed/demonstrated your:
 - Problem-solving abilities?
 - Critical thinking skills?
 - Capacity for logical thought?
- Which college courses have you found most intellectually satisfying? Why?
- If you have done research, what did you find most intellectually satisfying about that work? Which intellectual skills did you develop through this experience?
- Have you taken the initiative to learn more about health conditions you have observed during your clinical experiences?

Service to Others

- In what ways have you reached out to help others in recent years? What made these experiences rewarding for you? What insights did you gain?
- Have you spent time with people whose lifestyles and/or backgrounds are different from yours? Again, what insights did you gain?

Communication/Interpersonal Skills

- Which of your experiences have best allowed you to hone your ability to express yourself clearly and to listen carefully to what other say?
- Which of your experiences have given you insight into your personal approach to effective leadership? How would you describe your approach to effective leadership?
- Which of your experiences have taught you how to collaborate effectively with others?
- What is your approach to finding common ground with other people whose value or belief systems are quite different from your own?

Maturity/Life Experience

- How have you developed/demonstrated your:
 - Capacity for self-reflection/ ability to learn from experience
 - Personal responsibility
 - Stress management techniques
 - Resilience in the face of challenges
 - Awareness of the larger world
 - Time management skills
- And have you developed a pragmatic “Plan B”?

Other relevant personal traits/skills:

- Consider the healthcare professionals whom you most admire. What are the personal traits they express that make them so great at their jobs? List them.
- Identify how YOU have been developing the same personal traits through your own experiences.

Examples of Typical Interview Questions, by Category

Knowledge of the Profession

- How do you know you want to become a ____? [Insert your desired profession]
- Describe your most challenging/most rewarding experience with a patient.
- What is the most pressing issue in health care today?

Intellectual Curiosity

- Describe your research.
- Have you taken the initiative to learn more about the physiology/biochemistry of a medical condition you've seen during your clinical experiences? Tell us how it works, scientifically.
- Tell me about the most interesting non-science course you ever took.
- What is your favorite science course, to date? Why? Teach me about a topic you've learned in that class.
- How do you go about solving complex problems? Give an example.

Commitment to Service to Others

- Describe a time when you worked with a diverse group and what you learned from the experience.
- Tell me about a situation in which you put aside your own desires in order to help someone else.
- Tell me about your experience in (volunteer activity). Why did you get involved? What did you learn from the experience?

Communication/Interpersonal Skills

- Describe your communication style and a time when you used it effectively.
- Tell me about a time when you were disappointed in a friend who let you down.
- Suppose you have a terminally ill, elderly patient who is ready to die, but whose family wants you to keep her alive at all costs. How would you handle the situation?

Maturity/Life Experience

- Tell me about a time when you found yourself outside of your comfort zone.
- What do you consider your greatest weaknesses?
- How do you manage your time?
- Describe a time when you failed. What happened, and how did you respond?
- What will you do if you are not accepted to ____ school this year?

Other valued personal characteristics, such as honesty, sincerity, and integrity

- How would you respond if you saw a fellow medical student cheating?
- Tell me about a time when you were pressured to do something that you felt was unethical.

Assessing if you are a good fit for that particular school

- Why did you choose to apply to our program?
- Why do you think you are a good fit for our program?
- What questions do you have for us?

Interview Skill Statements

(adapted from: “A Job Hunting Guide”; Georgia Dept. of Labor, and
“Behavioral Interview Techniques – The STAR Approach”; Wayne State University)

Skill Statements contain the following 5 components:

1. State the skill or strength

- Identify your specific skill

2. Set the scene – describe the premise for the situation

- Provide details: who, what, when, where, and why
- Focus on a specific instance, not a generalized approach that you’ve taken to situations like these.

3. Tell the story, describing the action you took

- What did you do? Give details!
- If you were working in a team, focus on the elements that were your personal responsibility. (“I,” not “we.”)

4. State the outcome

- What was the direct impact of your approach or intervention?
- Wherever possible, quantify your results. Numbers convey the true impact of your work.

5. Reflect upon the experience:

Why was this situation significant?

- What insight did you gain? -or-
- What lesson did you learn? –or-
- How did the experience shape your values, motivations, or personal development?

You can examples from jobs, volunteer positions, academic experiences, hobbies – anything, really – as examples of your past behavior.

Remember that many behavioral questions try to get at how you responded to negative situations. Thus, be sure to have examples of negative experiences ready, but try to choose negative experiences that you made the best of or, better yet, those that had positive outcomes.

Here's a good way to prepare for interview questions:

- Identify six to eight examples from your past experience where you demonstrated top behaviors and skills that are valued in your intended profession.
- Half your examples should be totally positive, such as achieving accomplishments or meeting goals.
- The other half should be situations that started out negatively but ended positively, or where you made the best of a less-than-ideal situation.
- Vary your examples; don't take them all from just one area of your life.
- Use fairly recent examples; ideally, most should be from the past three years or so.
- In the interview, listen carefully to each question, then chose one of your prepared examples that suits the question you were asked. With practice, you can learn to tailor a relatively small set of examples to respond to a number of different questions.

Tips for answering a few challenging interview questions

1. How do you know you want to be a ____? [insert the name of the profession you seek]

- What initiated your interest in healthcare, in general? Among the factors you cite, be sure to comment on:
 - Why are you excited about a science-based profession? (Briefly refer to what you've enjoyed about your engagement in the sciences in your coursework and/or research.)
 - Why are you driven to go into a profession based on service to others? (Briefly refer to the most meaningful clinical or non-clinical interpersonal service roles you've had.)
- What are the unique qualities of this specific profession that make it the best fit for you, given your strengths and interests?
- What is your personal vision for how you hope to serve your future patients, above and beyond becoming a competent healthcare provider?
 - Convey why you are passionate about patient care
 - Convey what you have learned about best practices in patient care
 - Share your vision for the positive change (small or large) you hope to bring to the profession, *as informed by your past experiences.*

2. Tell me about yourself.

First, some guidelines:

- This is an intentionally open-ended question. Take it to mean, “What do you care about most, personally and professionally? Furthermore, what motivates you to want to become a clinician?”
 - It is *not* a request for a chronological retelling of your academic and activity history.
 - It is *not* the same question as, “Tell me why you want to be a ____.”

Tips for preparing for this question:

- First think about the top 4-6 most meaningful aspects of your life: personally, academically, and extracurricularly.
 - For each item on this list, identify the top 2-3 reasons why you find it motivating/rewarding.
 - Now look through your lists of reasons. What are the common themes that keep coming up?

Tips for structuring your answer:

- You can begin by sharing a bit about your background: where you were raised, where you went to school, etc.
 - If your upbringing had a profound effect on your reasons for wanting to become a clinician or has informed how you want to approach your future work, succinctly share this information.
- Aim to convey your top 3-4 themes you identified above.

For example:

 - *Mentoring/coaching others*: TA, summer camp counselor, sports coach, crisis hotline
 - *Problem solving*: working on my car, doing research, volunteer at crisis hotline
 - *Creativity*: cooking, doing research, explaining concepts to students as a TA
 - *Building/maintaining community*: sports, church
- Practice! It's hard to fit all of this into a ~3 minute answer, so you must practice answering this question out loud, many times. That said, do everything in your power to avoid having your answer sound rehearsed (because it *will* be rehearsed, but you have to make it sound like it's not).

3. What is your greatest strength and greatest weakness?

- Strength: To prepare, identify your 3-5 top strengths in advance and prepare a Skill Statement for each one. (We recommend completing a CliftonStrengths assessment with our career advisor.) At the interview, choose the one that you consider to be your greatest strength and share that Skill Statement.
- Weakness: Reflect on this ahead of time. It should be sincere, and should be an area of your life in which you are striving to improve. Say what it is, but also say how you have been trying to get better. Don't give a cop-out answer ("I'm such a perfectionist").

4. Any question involving ethics.

- Remember that biomedical ethical dilemmas are ones for which reasonable people can justifiably come down on either side of the issue. Any ethical dilemma will involve competing values; that is, any choice you make will uphold one or more ethical values while violating others. If this is a new subject for you, seek out readings on this topic (see reading list).
- Organize your answer using one of the stepwise methods commonly used to think through ethical dilemmas (practice this in advance). Any such organizational scheme will involve the following components:
 - Get organized: First, restate the facts that are known about the situation.
 - Next, think creatively: What *don't* you know about the situation?
 - What unstated factors could be influencing the behavior of the people in the situation?
 - What additional information would you want to gather before making a decision?
 - Identify potential impacts: In a stepwise manner, identify each stakeholder and their corresponding values.
 - Stakeholders: Who will be directly or indirectly impacted by the situation?
 - Potential stakeholders include: the people identified in the scenario, their loved ones and/or colleagues, you and your colleagues, your employer, an insurance company, etc.
 - Which ethical and professional values are in play for each one?
 - Four pillars of biomedical ethical decision-making:
 - Autonomy
 - Beneficence
 - Non-maleficence
 - Justice
 - Brainstorm: What are possible courses of action? Think broadly. Include possible actions that you know you would *not* choose and explain why you would not pursue those options.
 - Structure as follows:
 - "One option is _____. If we do that,
... the best-case scenario outcome would be [fill in the blank]
... the worst-case scenario would be [fill in the blank]."
 - Always note that you'd consult ethics guidelines for your profession, the ethics board, and legal advisors, as applicable.
 - State your decision, justifying your answer based on:
 - The assumptions you acknowledge you need to make, due to the information you currently have available.
 - How you assigned priority to the ethical values in play.
 - Your focus should be on respectfully acknowledging both sides of the issue. Your own personal stance on a topic is less important than your ability to respectfully acknowledge both sides of the issue and to be able to provide competent, compassionate care to each of your patients, even when the patient's beliefs oppose your own.

5. Tell me about your research experience. (Very likely to be asked if you've been doing research.)

- Convey intellectual excitement for the topic and the process of inquiry.
- Use language any educated layperson could understand, but offer to go into more detail.
- Cover the following topics:
 - In a nutshell: “Here is the question we asked, here is why we asked it, here is what we’ve found, and here is why this finding matters.”
 - Convey your level of involvement/responsibility:
 - *Such as*: working as a lab technician, participating in lab meetings/journal club meetings, conducting a literature review, participating in experimental design, conducting data analysis and interpretation, presenting your results, writing an honors thesis or submitting a manuscript for publication in a peer-reviewed journal
 - Speak like a scientist (e.g., talk about ideas/hypotheses) rather than a technician (e.g., techniques). DO NOT go into detail about the methods, unless specifically asked to do so. Technical skills are not as important as intellectual engagement and problem-solving.

Know Your Interview Rights and Responsibilities

adapted from: <https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/article/preparing-medical-school-interviews/>

Although an interview typically is used to get to know an applicant better, some interviewers want to assess how well you function under stress and thus may ask challenging questions to observe how you respond under pressure. How you communicate will be a critical part of the encounter; however, this does not give an interviewer the right to ask you inappropriate questions in their attempt to challenge you. Professional schools train their interviewers to adhere to federal statutes to avoid discriminatory pre-admission inquiries, but applicants occasionally report instances in which they were asked inappropriate questions (perhaps even in a misguided but well-intentioned effort by the interviewer to try to get to know the applicant).

Inappropriate interview questions are those that *cause* an applicant to reveal his or her membership in a “protected class.” That said, if you disclose your membership in a protected class, unprompted, then it *is* considered appropriate for the interviewer to ask a follow-up question on that topic if it is relevant to the issue under discussion.

Protected classes include the following:

- Race, color, or national origin
- Religion/creed
- Political affiliation, political philosophy
- Sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression
- Sexual orientation
- Marital Status, pregnancy status, or number of children
- Disability

If an interviewer asks a question that falls under one of these categories, ask yourself:

- Is this question relevant to all applicants, *regardless of identity*? (That is, is it likely that this interviewer is asking this question of *all* other applicants?)
- Is this question pertinent to assessing my readiness to perform well in professional school and my future career?

If so, try to relax and provide a thoughtful and articulate response that provides past evidence of your readiness to meet the challenges before you. If not, you may respectfully decline to answer the question and explain that you were advised not to answer questions that fell under certain categories.

Professional schools are expected to maintain procedures for applicants to report such incidents in a confidential manner that will not bias your application review. You are encouraged to report an incident if it occurs to help prevent further occurrences. Professional schools should inform you of these procedures prior to interviews, but if a school does not inform you of its procedure and an incident occurs, use the following guidelines:

- If possible, ask to speak to an admissions officer in confidence at the end of your interview day. Provide the interviewer’s name and identify the interview question(s) that was/were asked. Otherwise, e-mail this information to an admissions officer within 24 hours of the interview, noting the date and time of the incident.
- Furthermore, you have the right to ask if another interview is deemed necessary to ensure an unbiased evaluation of your application to that professional school.

Examples of inappropriate questions:

- What is your race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, political affiliation, marital status, etc.?
- Are you planning on having children during professional school?
- Do you have any disabilities?
- Will you require special accommodations?



READING LIST FOR ASPIRING HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

Stay up-to-date on current healthcare topics:

- *The New York Times'* online Health section offers current, interesting, health-related news stories.

Be aware of issues pertaining to health disparities and unequal access to health care

- Do an online search for *Access to and Quality of Health Care*, by José J. Escarce and Kanika Kapur, which summarizes the main factors that can prevent people from accessing health care. (Although this article focuses on Hispanics in the U.S., their conclusions apply to the experiences of anyone in a group that experiences barriers to health care.)
- The CDC Health Disparities and Inequalities Fact Sheet provides a comprehensive introduction to the main issues in the topic area of health disparities
- Specific topic areas:
 - Trans health: <https://www.amsa.org/advocacy/action-committees/gender-sexuality/transgender-health/>
 - Minority health: <https://www.cdc.gov/minorityhealth/>
 - Healthcare and homelessness: <https://www.nhchc.org/resources/general-information/faq/>
- The CDC's Health Equity Blog provides a number of interesting readings on these topics

Be ready to discuss biomedical ethical topics

- Read *A Practitioner's Guide to Ethical Decision Making*, by Holly Forester-Miller and Thomas Davis for a solid introduction to this topic area (https://www.counseling.org/docs/ethics/practitioners_guide.pdf?sfvrsn=2).
- The University of Washington School of Medicine's *Ethics in Medicine* website discusses each of the hot topics in biomedical ethics
- You can purchase a booklet written by a physician that provides several case studies, with discussions on each, at: <http://www.admission-interview.com>
- The *AMA Journal of Ethics* releases an issue each month that delves into a variety of specific biomedical ethical topics
- Do an online search for a profession-specific ethics handbook for your desired field.

Health Care Reform

- This topic is evolving quickly. The best approach is to stay up-to-date on the news surrounding health care reform efforts.
- Be conversationally familiar with the main provisions in the Affordable Care Act and the rationale behind them. Start here for a balanced introduction to this topic: <http://healthcarereform.procon.org/>

Additional topic area for pre-dental students:

Be aware of the relationships between oral health and systemic health:

- As a starting point, this webpage provides a general overview: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/dental/art-20047475?pg=2>
- Next, search for more information on topics that interest you on the ADA website: <http://www.ada.org/en/member-center/oral-health-topics>

SKILL STATEMENTS FORM

Pre-Health Interview Prep

Skill: _____

Setting: _____

Story/Action: _____

Outcome: _____

Reflection: _____

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