



Continuing Education
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO **BOULDER**

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Handouts for How to Prepare for Interviews Presentation

Preparing for Interviews: Self-Assessment Activity

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 rewarding about that work?
- 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 a direct capacity in recent years? What made these experiences rewarding for you? What insights did you gain?
- Have you spent time with people whose life circumstances, backgrounds, and/or belief systems 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 others say?
- Which of your experiences has given you insight into what makes an effective leader? How would you describe your personal approach to 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 and in their interactions with patients? 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 do you believe to be some of the most pressing issues in health care today? Why?

Intellectual Curiosity

- Describe your research experience. What do you find intellectually rewarding about 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

- What experiences have you had working with diverse populations? What have you learned from these experiences?
- Describe a time you went above and beyond to help someone.
- Tell me about your experience in (volunteer activity). Why did you get involved? What did you learn from the experience?

Communication/Interpersonal Skills

- Describe a time when you taught someone something. What steps did you take and what did you gain from the experience?
- Tell me about a time when you were disappointed in a friend who let you down. How did you handle the situation?
- Think of a time when you exhibited leadership in a situation. Describe the situation and what you learned from that encounter.
- Describe a time when you had to work with a difficult team member. What did you do?

Maturity/Life Experience

- Tell me about a time when you found yourself outside of your comfort zone.
- What do you consider to be your greatest weaknesses?
- How do you manage your time? Give an example.
- Describe a time when you failed or made a mistake. 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

- Have you personally encountered any moral dilemmas to date? Of what nature? How did you proceed?
- Tell me about a time when you were pressured to do something that you felt was unethical.
- What does "integrity" mean to you? How you model that behavior in everyday life?

Assessing if you are a good fit for that particular school

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

The STAR Method

A structured way of sharing stories and specific anecdotes during an interview:

1. Situation and Task:

- **Set the scene – describe the premise for the situation**
 - Provide details: who, what, when, where, and why.
 - Describe the task at hand. This could be an individual task or a group task.
 - Focus on a specific instance, not a generalized approach that you've taken to situations like these.

2. Action:

- **Tell the story, describing the action you took**
 - What did **you** do? Give specific details!
 - If you were working in a team, focus on the elements that were your personal responsibility.
 - ("I," not "we.")

3. Result:

- **State the outcome**
 - What happened?
 - What was the direct impact of your approach or intervention?

4. Reflect upon the experience:

Why was this situation significant?

- What insight did you gain? Or
- What lesson did you learn? Or
- What went well? Or what didn't go as expected? Or
- How did the experience shape your values, motivations, or personal development?

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

Remember that many behavioral questions try to get at how you responded to negative or challenging 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 experiences where you demonstrated the top strengths and skills that are valued in your intended profession.
- Half of 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 choose 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, values, and interests?
- Why are you drawn to this specific educational pathway? (i.e., duration and structure, depth of knowledge/training, medical model vs biopsychosocial, generalist vs specialist, etc.)
- 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, professionally, 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, science classes, past professional experiences
 - *Creativity*: cooking, doing research, explaining concepts to students as a TA
 - *Building/maintaining community*: sports, church, book club, community service

- 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 STAR method anecdote 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 STAR anecdote.
- Weakness: Reflect on this ahead of time. It should be sincere, and it 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. 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.
- Be ready to talk at a basic level about at least one other project going on in your lab. You are not expected to be able to go into specific detail about another project, but you should be able to identify the research question, the scientific rationale for asking that question, and the results to date. Doing so demonstrates that you are fully engaged in the intellectual life of the lab and that you are taking a collaborative approach to your work.

5. Is there anything else about your candidacy that you want to tell me that we haven't had a chance to cover yet? (Typical second-to-last question)

Do your best to have an answer to this question! Here are several suggestions:

- As mentioned above, come into the interview prepared to share your top 3 strengths, along with your vision for what you hope to accomplish in your future career (above and beyond becoming a competent clinician). If you haven't had a chance to discuss each of these topics, this is your opportunity to bring up one or two now.
- If you haven't yet had a chance to talk about an experience you've had that was profoundly meaningful to you, this would be a great time to bring it up. Let them know why it mattered to you and how it shaped your motivations or values.
- If, in the time since you submitted your application you've been meaningfully engaged in a new activity that strengthens your candidacy, provide them with that update.

- If, on a human-interest level, you've been involved or are planning to become involved in something new that you're genuinely excited about, let them know (ex: a big upcoming trip or race, getting married soon, etc. – something that is grounded in who you are as a person)
- If there is some element of your application profile that is less-than-ideal and the interviewer hasn't asked you about it, give them an opportunity to hear your explanation.
 - Ex: "One thing on my mind is that I earned low grades in my first semester as a post-bacc student. Could I provide you with context for that?" – it's strategic to use this opportunity to manage the interviewer's understanding of the situation, rather than hoping that no one on the admissions team will see it in your application.

6. What questions do you have for me? (Typical last question)

- Prepare a list of questions in advance – have them written down. The questions you ask should go deeper than the information provided on their website.
- Helpful resources:
 - *Get Into Medical School: A Guide for the Perplexed! (2nd ed.)*, by Kenneth Iserson (ch. 24)
 - *Premed Playbook: The Guide to the Medical School Interview*, by Ryan Gray (ch. 23)

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?
- How does your partner feel about you becoming a [clinical profession] and the long hours it will take away from your family?

Reading List for Aspiring Clinicians

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 Factors Affecting Health Equity* provides a comprehensive introduction to the main issues in the topic area of health disparities
- Specific topic areas:
 - Minority health: <https://www.cdc.gov/minorityhealth/>
 - Healthcare and homelessness: <https://nhchc.org/understanding-homelessness/faq/>
 - Trans health: <https://www.amsa.org/advocacy/action-committees/gender-sexuality/transgender-health/>
- The CDC's Conversations in 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/default-source/ethics/practitioner-39-s-guide-to-ethical-decision-making.pdf?sfvrsn=10/1000>)
- The editors at JSTOR have created the following guide to essential readings in the field of bioethics: https://daily.jstor.org/bioethics-key-concepts-research/?utm_term=ESSENTIAL_READINGS_IN_BIOETHICS&utm_campaign=jstordaily_03152018&utm_content=email&utm_source=Act-On_Internal&utm_medium=email
- The University of Washington School of Medicine's *Ethics in Medicine* website discusses each of the main categories of biomedical ethical topics
- 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

- 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: <https://healthcare.procon.org/>
- Be conversationally familiar with the main provisions of the Great Healthcare Plan that was introduced in January 2026.

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: <https://www.ada.org/resources/ada-library/oral-health-topics>

Virtual Interview Tips

Logistics:

- Double-check the time zone of your interview.
- Select your device in advance and practice on it consistently. People often find that a computer is better than phone/tablet.
- Use headphones.
- Test the device, connection, sound quality, and virtual meeting platform in advance.
- Keep your device plugged in for duration of interview.
- Block pop-ups, turn off all other programs, silence all notifications.
- Screen name should be first (preferred) name and last name. You can also include your pronouns.
- Pro Tip: Upload a professional-looking headshot to Zoom so that your photo is displayed when you turn your video off.

Control Your Environment:

- Find a location for your interview that is quiet and private (no family, no pets, roommates, etc.) Be sure to choose a place that has reliable internet connection.
- Set yourself up so that your background is non-distracting but gently personalized (no white walls!). Do not use virtual or “blurred” backgrounds.
- If circumstances force you to use a less-than-ideal location, send an email to the admissions office in advance to explain that you do not have other options, and assure them that you are taking the interview seriously and will make the best of the option you do have.
- Turn off your phone entirely.
- Sit in front of a window or place a soft light behind your screen for ideal lighting. Make sure you’re not backlit!
- Raise your screen so that it is angled very slightly down toward you. Be sure your face is centered.
- Arrange video boxes so that the interviewer is directly below your camera lens, which gives the appearance of maintaining eye contact.
- Resist temptation to look at your own face. (In Zoom, you can click on the three dots in the corner of your box to “Hide Self View.” Otherwise, you can put a post-it over the part of screen where your face is showing.)
- Shut off fluorescent overhead lights. Close curtains/blinds to avoid harsh light that may wash out your face.

Clothing:

- Wear a professional outfit, just as you would for a high-stakes in-person interview. (Wear the entire outfit, not just from the waist up. Although the interviewer likely won’t see most of your outfit, what you wear during the interview can impact how you present yourself.)
- Opt for solid neutral colors, no distracting patterns.
- No jewelry – it can be distracting on screen.

Body Language on Screen:

- Record yourself on your own and/or schedule a mock interview to assess body language:
 - Eyes directed at your camera.
 - Avoid swiveling in chair or jiggling leg/foot.
 - No playing with hair, beard, pencils, or other items in your vicinity.
 - It’s okay to “talk with hands” at times, but it’s generally best to keep them together in your lap if you can speak naturally while keeping them there.
 - Don’t forget to smile.

Other Thoughts:

- Preparing for the logistics of a virtual interview needs to be done in addition to preparing to answer the interview questions themselves. Be sure to practice in a virtual format!
- Interviewers may be disoriented using a virtual format. Be understanding and patient; you may feel more comfortable than they do.

STAR Method Pre-Health Interview Prep

Skill: _____

Setting: _____

Story/Action: _____

Outcome: _____

Reflection: _____

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