

Preparing for academic interviews

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PhD Interview formats

- A formal **question and answer session** in front of a postgraduate recruitment panel
- A **presentation**
- A **one-to-one discussion** with your prospective supervisor
- An **informal lunch** with your prospective supervisor, other members of your interview panel and / or current PhD students
- Various **orientation activities**, including lab visits etc
- Via Skype with some of the formats above

Panel Interview

3 or more members:

- **Panel Chair** - University or Departments' postgraduate admission staff or Programme coordinator
- The **Head of the Department**
- Your **potential projects supervisor/s**

**The key to successful
interviewing is
effective preparation**

Preparing for PhD interviews

About Yourself

About your Prospective Institute

Preparing for questions

About Yourself

- Background
- Prepare to talk about your dissertation/research to a variety of people (experts and non-experts)
- Pinpoint your strengths and weaknesses
- Think about your motivation for pursuing a PhD

Preparing for questions

About Yourself

Your research interests:

- Prepare to talk about your research interests in detail
- Think about the impact your work had or may have on the field
- Review your research proposal or statement of purpose

Preparing for questions

About Yourself

Future career plans:

- Think about your longer-term plans
- Give consideration to plans to apply for grant funding
- Try to express your plans in a convincing way, even if they are preliminary

Preparing for questions

About your Prospective Institute

- History/mission of the institution
- Panel members
- Research interests of the faculty
- Your potential supervisor's work

Preparing for questions

About your Prospective Institute

- The project or programme you are applying for
- Knowledge of courses offered, students population
- Understanding the position

Commonly asked questions in PhD interviews **about yourself**

- **Tell us about yourself...**
- Tell us about your previous research project
- **What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?**
- Are there any training needs you can identify ahead of your PhD?
- Can you tell me something more about yourself?
- Tell us about a challenge that you have overcome in the past
- ...

Commonly asked questions in PhD interviews **about your research interests**

- **Can you describe a research project you'd like to pursue?**
- What do you see as the most important issue/problem in this field today?
- If you repeatedly get negative results in your project, what will you do?
- **Can you describe a recent paper you have enjoyed and how you would follow it up?**
- Why are you choosing this project?
- What difficulties do you expect to encounter during this project?
- What would you like the impact of this project to be?
- ...

Commonly asked questions in PhD interviews **about your career plans**

- **What made you choose to do a PhD?**
- Why are you applying now?
- **What do you plan to do after you complete your PhD?**
- What do you think pursuing a PhD will do for you?
- Is there any type of training you are planning to take up during or after your PhD?
- **What are your career goals?**
- ...

Commonly asked questions in PhD interviews **about your choice of university/ your fit in the department**

- What skills do you have that make you a good fit for this position or this department?
- **What can you bring to this research group?**
- Why is this program a good fit for you?
- **Why have you chosen to study a PhD at this university?**
- What resources does this program provide that will help you pursue the directions you're interested in?
- What makes you the right candidate for this PhD?
- ...

Some answers examples

What made you choose to do a PhD?

- I've enjoyed my academic work so far, but I really feel I've got more to offer as an independent researcher. I'm also passionate about this subject and don't feel enough attention has been paid to the questions I'm looking to address.
- I can't think of anything to do with my Masters, but my current tutor says I'm clever enough for a PhD.

Some answers examples

What do you plan to do after you complete your PhD?

- I feel my PhD project can open up new lines of inquiry for this field and want to use it as the foundation for a fruitful research career. But I'm also interested in the wider development opportunities included in this doctoral programme. I want to be an academic, but I'm happy to keep other options open.
- I expect someone will give me a job doing more research. That's what PhDs do, right?

Some answers examples

What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?

- I feel that I'm a good written communicator. My existing academic and professional work demonstrates an ability to put forward ideas clearly and concisely. I think this will help me manage the weight of information my PhD research needs to cover and the challenge of producing an effective thesis. But, I'm not always as organised as I'd like to be. I want to address this as part of my postgraduate training and hope to take advantage of classes and development opportunities early in my doctorate.
- My greatest strength is that I have no weaknesses! And my only weakness is that I have no strengths. Hang on...

Prepare questions to ask faculty, students and department head

- What will the supervision arrangements be for the project?
- What kind of training and skills sessions are offered as part of the PhD programme?
- Will I have opportunities to teach / present / patent / publish?
- How many other PhD students has this supervisor seen to completion?
- Are there likely to be any changes to the funding arrangements for the project?
- What is the program's average time to degree?
- ...

Prepare questions to ask faculty, students and department head

- What do they do to promote work/life balance?
- Is the social and intellectual culture supportive?
- Will I have access to great mentors?
- What percentage of students typically land in tenure track positions and at what types of institutions?
- What sort of resources does the university have? (Libraries, lab equipment etc.)
- ...

Avoid asking for information that's readily available elsewhere

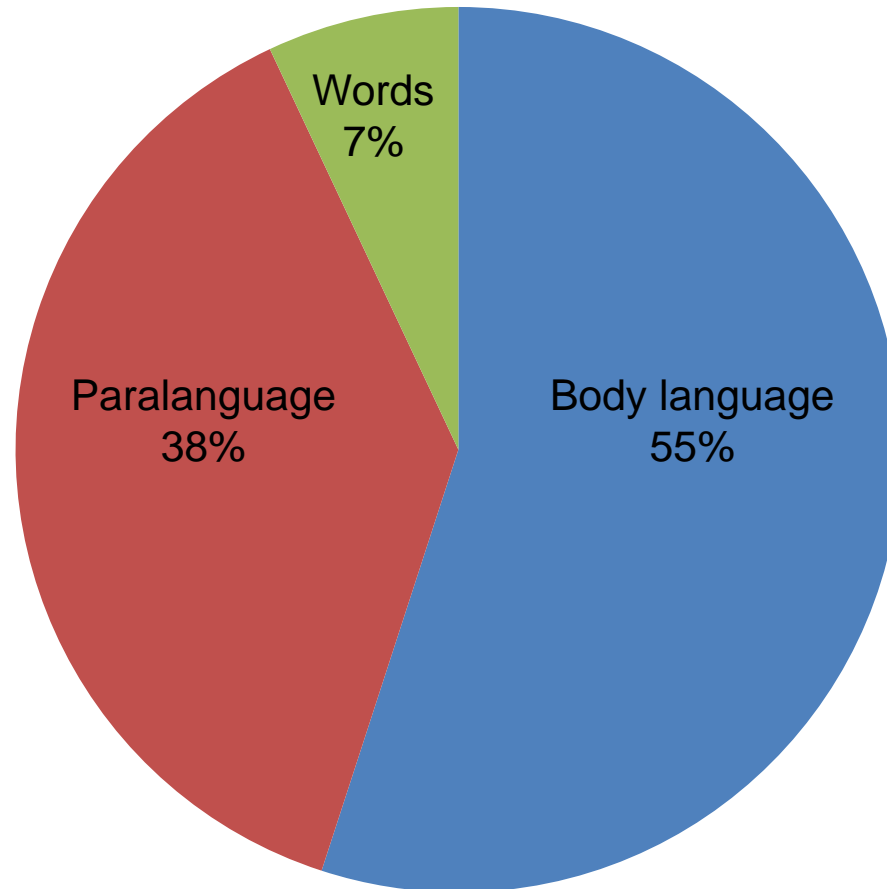
Golden rules

- Read carefully the information they sent you
- Talk with someone in the Department
- Rehearse
- Think about what to wear and what to bring

Golden rules

- Arrive ahead of time
- Be honest
- Watch out for non-verbal communication

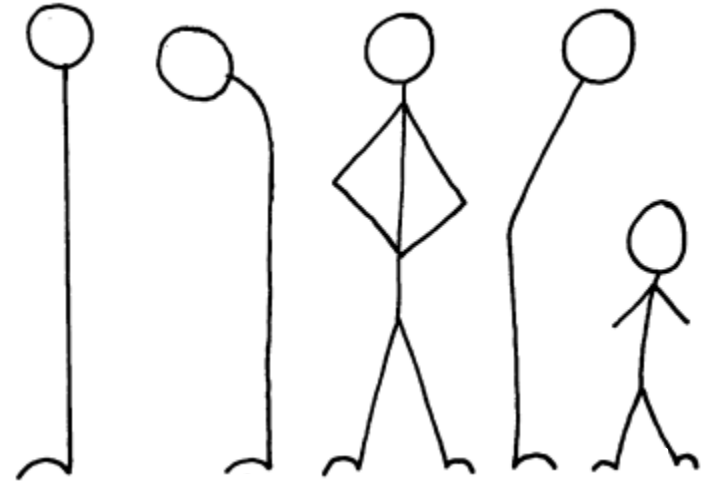
Non-verbal communication



Mehrabian communication model (1967)

Body language

- Clothes and general appearance
- Eye contact
- Facial expressions
- Gestures
- Posture
- ...



Paralanguage

- Speed
- Tone
- Volume
- Pauses
- Ums and ahs, grunts and sighs

Common mistakes to avoid

- Not knowing the Institute, Department or Programme
- Loosing your cool
- Talking about what you can't do
- Talking too fast
- Failing to prepare
- Giving generic answers

**The key to successful
interviewing is
effective preparation**

Practical activity: PhD mock interview

Working in pairs, prepare for a mock PhD interview trying to answer the questions about yourself and your prospective institutions and preparing some questions to ask to the Commission.

We will then simulate a few mock interviews.

Bibliography and reading suggestions

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