

# Preparing for Virtual Graduate School Interviews: Fall 2020 Edition

These are notes from the following video:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrbCkYCaSL0&ab\\_channel=NIHOITE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrbCkYCaSL0&ab_channel=NIHOITE)

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# I. Preparation for the Interview Season

## A. Focus on what you can control to reduce stress

## B. Stress

1. Stress is completely normal and is the appropriate response
2. Stress can be reduced by putting discomfort and fear into perspective

## C. Calming your stress in advance

1. Find a quiet and professional place with few distractions and the best possible wifi
2. Download any software required in advance and test it
3. Attend to lighting, your background and the height of your computer so you are clearly visible and framed well
4. Practice your “virtual handshake” and asking/answering questions online
  - a) Virtual handshake = being calm and composed when an interview begins; lean forward/make gesture and say “nice to meet you”
  - b) Practice pausing but not pausing too long
5. Practice social activities on Zoom and speaking up/stepping down and engaging in discussion
  - a) Do not join a group with camera off -- camera always on!
6. Have notepad, snacks, water sorted out and set up in advance
7. Pick out your clothing in advance and wear a full interview outfit (not Zoom business casual, PJs on bottom)
8. Focus on your wellness and resilience now
  - a) Food and sleep
  - b) Use of stimulants and depressants
  - c) Exercise
  - d) Mindfulness and other ways to calm nerves
  - e) Negative self-talk and imposter fears
  - f) Seek support for other concerns
9. Talk with your PI and mentors
  - a) About the science you’re doing
  - b) About other science you wrote about in your application
  - c) About requesting time off for interviews
10. Be thoughtful about planning in time to rest and recover between interviews at different schools
  - a) It’s heavily recommended to wait at least one day in between interviews to collect yourself, attend to work and life, etc
  - b) You also might need time to prepare for the next interview, by looking up faculty members and reflecting on what worked and didn’t work the first go-around

## D. Calming your stress the day of

1. Wellness
  - a) Sleep hygiene

- b) Healthy eating
  - c) Get up early and take a walk, work-out, journal, meditate, do yoga,  
HAVE A ROUTINE!
2. Reach out to a supporter to hear something encouraging
  3. Breathe deeply and refocus
  4. Remember everyone is nervous too
  5. Talk kindly back to any negative thoughts that crop up

## II. What will the interview process look like?

- A. Many unknowns this year
  1. Check the website for each program
  2. Carefully read program emails and any tip sheets or FAQs they send
- B. Components
  1. Virtual campus tour
  2. Opportunities to interact with students
  3. Interviews with faculty and administration
  4. Student panels
- C. Actual interviews
  1. Series of one-on-one short meetings
  2. A group interview: you with multiple interviewers OR you and multiple applicants with multiple interviewers
    - a) Possible that this may be more common this year
    - b) Make sure you prepare for this

## III. Setting up your interview

- A. Respond to calls or emails promptly and professionally
- B. Read instructions carefully before calling with logistical questions
- C. Be as accommodating as possible regarding dates offered for your interview but also realistic regarding your schedule
- D. Be sure you understand:
  1. The structure of your interview
  2. When you need to be available
- E. Follow directions for planning the interview

## IV. Key Principle

- A. The program is interviewing you and you are interviewing the program

## V. Preparing for the Interview

- A. Re-read your application and material about the school/program
- B. Learn about the work of faculty you will meet
  1. Read some of their papers
  2. At a minimum read the description of their work on their webpage
  3. If you do not have enough time to read up on their research, you can say during the interview "Unfortunately I just got my schedule, I'm sorry I

didn't get a chance to read up on your work, would you mind sharing some of it with me?"

- a) Do not need to overdo the apology, just keep it simple and concise
- C. Practice how you will greet people ("virtual handshake")
- D. Practice your short "introduction to me"
- E. Practice talking about your research
- F. Practice answering common interview questions
- G. Prepare questions in advance
- H. Sort out what you will wear
- I. Set up your interview space

## VI. Your Goals

- A. Present yourself enthusiastically and honestly
  - 1. Humble = Convey that you know you have a lot to learn
  - 2. Brag = Be proud of your work
- B. Show that you understand your research and the field you are entering
- C. Clearly describe your research interests, knowing they will evolve
- D. Show that you understand what a career in your field entails
  - 1. Do not just say you want to be a PI because you think that's what they want to hear
  - 2. Show that research is important to you
- E. Explain any bumps in your past without making excuses
  - 1. Don't bring it up yourself, but if you're asked about it, be honest and concise
  - 2. Ask a mentor about how they might address it
- F. Find out if the research being done excites you
- G. Learn details of the program, students, faculty, community
- H. Figure out if this is the "right" school and life for you

## VII. Impressions Count

- A. Preparation pays off
- B. First impressions form quickly and are hard to change. How we form first impressions:
  - 1. From the way we dress
    - a) Neat and clean
    - b) Appropriate for the institution and the event
      - (1) MD/PhD are more formal than PhD
  - 2. From non-verbal communication
    - a) Posture and virtual handshake
    - b) Eye contact and facial expressions
    - c) Gestures and nervous manifestations
  - 3. From verbal communication
    - a) Voice and tone
    - b) Ability to organize and express ideas
    - c) Ability to listen and respond appropriately

- C. At group activities, it is not all about you
- D. You are trying to connect professionally and personally
- E. Even social activities are part of the interview
- F. You must have questions when asked
  - 1. In individual meetings with faculty
  - 2. During talks and at posters
  - 3. OK to ask about social life and non-school activities, but balanced by more academic questions (which should come first)

## VIII. Interviewing Successfully

- A. Show that you understand the “big picture” and the details of your research projects
  - 1. WHY and the HOW
  - 2. You have to talk about what you are doing now and might also have to talk about less recent work
  - 3. Be clear about how COVID impacted your progress, but don’t get caught in a negative space about it
    - a) “I wasn’t in lab for 3 months, but I learned R”
    - b) Be concise and clear, don’t harp on it
- B. Target your responses based on whether the listener is an expert or non-expert
  - 1. If you’re unsure “Would you like me to introduce things, or should I just dive into my experiments?”
- C. Do not ramble
- D. Where possible, use examples/analogies/stories to “show” rather than “tell”
  - 1. Instead of “I am an excellent communicator” say “I had many opportunities to give lab meeting and gave X number of conference presentations”
- E. Do not use props, i.e. slides
  - 1. You may not be able to show your screen
  - 2. Can lead to awkwardness or technical difficulties that will waste time
- F. Ask questions about science AND the program (science first)
- G. You can say “that’s outside my field, can you help me understand X”
  - 1. Don’t pretend to be an expert or understand... you’re not expected to know everything
- H. Use your questions, answers, and interactions to show you are enthusiastic, realistic and hard-working
- I. Gracefully accept responsibility for poor grades or blemishes on your record

## IX. What you might be asked:

### A. Typical Grad School Questions:

- 1. Tell me about yourself
- 2. Tell me about your previous research experience
  - a) You can steer the conversation onto a particular experience and say something to the effect of “Do you mind if I tell you about Y

experience because it really influence my interest into going in Z field?"

3. What do you enjoy most about doing research?
4. What don't you enjoy about doing research?
  - a) Don't say you don't dislike anything
5. How has the pandemic influenced your research experiences?
6. What types of scientific problems do you hope to work on? What approaches would you like to apply?
7. Why do you think you are ready for graduate study?
8. What interested you in our program? (Or my group?)
9. Why did you do so poorly in \_\_\_\_\_?
10. Why do you want to be a scientist?
11. What are your career goals?
12. What are your strengths and weaknesses?
13. What do you think will be hard about graduate school for you?
14. You say you want an academic career. Are you aware of how difficult academic careers are?
15. Do you have questions for me?
16. How do you deal with research setbacks and disappointments?
17. How do you relax?
18. What have you read recently?
19. Is there anything you wished I had asked you?
  - a) There is a chance to humble brag

## B. Behavioral Questions:

1. Describe a time when you had difficulty working with a supervisor or co-worker. How did you handle it?
2. How do you juggle and keep track of multiple projects?
3. Tell me about a time when you came up with an innovative idea to a challenge your group was facing
4. Tell me about a time you failed to meet a deadline. What did you learn?
5. Give me an example of a conflict in your group and how you handled it
6. Tell me about a time you really struggled in a class or in your research. What did you do?

## C. Preparing for Behavioral Questions

1. Do some self-reflection in advance
2. Focus on your interactions with and responses to people around you in the research space
3. Consider using the SAR approach to formulate your answers
  - a) Situation - explain what happened
  - b) Action - explain what you did in response
  - c) Result - talk about how it worked out in the end
4. Practice!

## X. What you might ask:

- A. What are the qualities you see in students who succeed here?
- B. What kinds of positions do your graduates take?
- C. How has the pandemic affected/shaped your program?
- D. How does the mentor selection process work?
- E. Is this a supportive community? How do members of the graduate community support each other?
- F. Do you anticipate taking students in the coming year?
- G. What types of wellness and career/professional development programs are offered here?
- H. What happens if the mentor I want to work with does not have funding for me?
- I. Where do students publish?
- J. Do students attend meetings? Who pays?
- K. What is the average time to degree?
- L. Do many students leave before completing their PhD? Why?
- M. Are there teaching requirements? Teaching courses?
- N. Do many students have their own grants? Do they get help writing/submitting them?
- O. What do you like best about the program? What do you think needs improvement?
- P. What happens if a student needs to change groups?

## XI. Avoid the following:

- A. Bad mouthing other schools or programs
  - 1. Sometimes this might be initiated by students or faculty members at the school you're interviewing for (!!! YES I KNOW IT'S CRAZY !!!), but you should not participate
- B. Talking too much about other schools
- C. Forgetting to thank each interviewer
  - 1. Thank you at the end of the interview
  - 2. A short thank you email afterward is appreciated and appropriate!
- D. Skipping Zoom socials to study, visit friends or family
- E. Checking email or answering your phone while in a Zoom meeting
- F. Arriving late for interviews and activities

## XII. After the interview

- A. Send emails to thank the Program Directors, program admins, and any student hosts
  - 1. TIP: Gmail has this cool option for scheduling an email to send at a certain date/time... you can still add specific information to spruce up an email before it sends, but it's nice to have set-up so you don't have to worry about sending the emails when you might have to prepare for your next interview

- B. Acknowledge offers with a prompt “thank you” and find out when the program needs a firm commitment
- C. Do not hesitate to email or call with questions
  - 1. You can ask to speak to current students for advice
- D. Do NOT commit before you are ready