

PhD Interview Questions

Kate Nussenbaum

Questions you might be asked

In my experience, my interviews focused much more heavily on future plans / what I was hoping to do and not a lot on what I had already done. But this could vary a lot. Most of my interviews focused a lot on the first two questions — they usually kicked off good conversations about research directions. Some PIs clearly had a more rigid list of questions they wanted to get through and those meetings felt more like formal interviews and less just like conversations about research.

What do you want to research? What draws you to this lab? What questions are you interested in? How has your past experience led you to those questions?

If you say something general, be prepared for: How would you go about testing that?

What's an idea for a project that you would want to do?

What recent papers have you read and found exciting?

What's your favorite part of the research process? Your least favorite part?

What methods do you see yourself using?

What expertise would you bring to the lab?

What other faculty are you interested in working with? Why?

Describe a project you have done in the past.

What are your future aspirations after grad school?

Questions to Ask

Remember that you will have an opportunity to ask additional questions after you are admitted as well. I think it can be useful to save some questions (e.g., is there money for me to do fMRI studies) for after acceptance, but others might disagree.

For PIs

What grants do you currently have? (This was more to ask about big projects and not so much to ask about \$\$)

How do you see your research developing over the next five years? (Highly recommend this Q, especially to newish PIs)

Do you think there are going to be any big methodological innovations that will fundamentally change how you do the work you do?

What do you want your grad students to get out of grad school?

What's your approach to teaching computational modeling?

How do you help students become better writers?

One challenge for me is always figuring out how to design a task to answer the questions I care about. What's your process for doing this? How do you design good tasks?

What is your mentorship style like? How often do you meet with students?

What open science practices does your lab regularly adhere to?

For any faculty (PIs + others)

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How common is it for students to work across multiple labs? Does this typically involve combining elements from two labs/ expertise from two professors in a single project, or do students often complete separate projects across multiple labs?

What are the opportunities for training in advanced quantitative/ statistical methods?

What are the department's priorities in terms of hiring new faculty?

For students:

Are you generally happy here?

Do you like the classes?

How did you pick a grad school?

Is there anything you wish you considered when you selected a grad school?

What are the best and worst parts of the program?

What do you recommend doing before beginning grad school?

What's PI's mentorship style like? (This is a vague question that's hard to answer — you might gain more information by being more specific)

Can you live reasonably off the stipend?