

**Teachers' HE  
Factsheet  
Series**

**won.ac.uk**

**Preparing students  
for university  
admissions  
interviews**

This factsheet has been designed from sixth formers' frequently asked questions about admissions interviews. It will allow teachers to advise and support students towards preparing thoroughly for university admissions interviews.



# At a glance

## Universities which interview

- **Usually interview:**  
Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial, University College London, professional training degrees (e.g. Teaching, Dentistry, Nursing, Social Work etc.)
- **Often interview:**  
creative talent-based degrees such as Art and Design, Acting, Music, Performing Arts
- **Might interview:**  
Computing, Engineering and Sciences (e.g. if competitive course)
- **Least likely:**  
Humanities and Social Science degrees (e.g. English, Geography, History and Politics)

## Popular ways to prepare students

- p03** • Practising generic and subject questions
- p04** • Body language guide
- p05** • Mock interviews
- Watching interview technique videos

## The interview format

Could be:

- **Relaxed** – informal and 'chatty'
- **Probing** – applying knowledge to scenarios
- **Unusual** – random questions testing intellect, required skills and current affairs

**p03**

## Common question categories

- Ice-breakers
- Subject specific
- University focused
- Personal reflection and achievements
- Testing initiative and critical thinking with random questions

**p05**

**p06**

# Why universities interview

Universities can interview applicants for different reasons. It might be that:

- they wish to clarify aspects of the application
- the course is highly competitive
- an interview is required by the professional body
- or simply that interviews are the norm for that course/college/university.

As it is difficult for universities to re-arrange interviews, advise your students to avoid re-arranging them unless absolutely necessary. They **MUST** also confirm attendance to the university directly or through UCAS Track.

## The format interviews will take

As formats vary, advise your students to attend interviews with an open mind, ready to respond positively to whatever might be asked of them.



Sometimes a single interview is required. The length of an individual interview can range from fifteen to sixty minutes.



Sometimes (e.g. professional vocations) a half day of activities such as group discussions, case studies, tests and presentations is required.



Creative degrees often organise portfolio or performance based interviews.

### Relaxed

Some academics adopt a relaxed approach which feels more like a chat about their personal statement and interest in the course and institution.

### Probing

Some interviewers will challenge students to apply their knowledge to new scenarios and to evidence application claims.

### Bizarre

Occasionally questions will appear unrelated or just plain 'weird'. These are in fact testing applicants' ability to handle themselves under stress, to evidence statements in the personal statement (e.g. knowledge of current affairs) and to apply skills required in the course such as initiative, independent thinking or forming logical arguments.

## Popular ways of preparing students for interview

- Lists of generic and subject specific questions
- Body language guide
- Mock interviews with parents, governors, employers to practice body language, performing under pressure and evidencing passion for their subject
- Watching interview advice videos compiled by UCAS and university admissions/outreach teams
- Booking university staff to give interview preparation talks and workshops through [www.won.ac.uk](http://www.won.ac.uk)
- Plan a workshop in conjunction with your preferred university staff contacts
- Experiential curriculum embedded exercises (See page 4)

# Trying something new



The following exercises are designed to facilitate the experiential, developmental and reflective learning-style that OFSTED is looking for when it assesses schools' CEIAG. Tick them off as you try them:

## Why do you want to come to this university?

Ask students in small groups to take turns in answering this question without repeating anyone else's answer. Students should take multiple turns in order to establish a broad collection of potential answers. Answers should be fed back to the whole group so that strong and weak answers can be analysed and selected.

## How are you suitable for this degree?

Hand out pre-prepared cards (see page 7) showing weak and strong answers to this question on it. Ask students in groups to discuss the answers and rank them from strongest to weakest. Get the whole class to feedback the rationale for their rankings followed by a class/tutor-group vote.

## Subject extension questions (see pages 5 and 6)

Subject teachers ask students to select some degree specific questions from the resources which follow, (or that teachers have researched themselves) and then compile and compare replies.

## Body language videos

Show a video demonstrating body language for interviews and ask students to draw up a check-list of do's and don'ts as they watch.

## Power of three (more advanced exercise)

Once students have researched interview practice and undertaken preliminary interview exercises around body language and answering generic/subject specific questions you could try this group exercise.

Divide students into groups of 3. Each group of 3 has an interviewee, an interviewer and an observer. Provide the interviewer with a list of questions that the students themselves have produced over previous lessons/homework and give the observer an observation sheet. The interviewer then has a set amount of time to choose a few questions from the list. The observer watches and writes brief comments on categories such as body language, clarity, comprehensiveness. The group members then swap roles.

After the mock interviews, the interviewees receive their observation sheet and each group discusses what went well and what could be improved upon. As a wider group, the successes and improvements required are then shared.

## Filming your own videos

Once practice has been undertaken, the more confident students could be recorded in the 'power of three' activity above or they could script and make a 'how not to' and a 'how to' interview video for subsequent years to use.

# Handout 1 – Sample interview questions

You can photocopy these questions for use in your tutor time and classroom exercises.

## Degree focus

- Why do you want to study this degree?
- What attracts you to this degree when your A levels are not directly linked to it?
- What makes you suitable for this course?
- Why did you choose this university or college?
- What extra subject reading have you done?
- What specific areas of this degree/subject are you interested in?
- Tell us what skills you will need on this degree and how you have developed them so far?
- How will this course prepare you for your future career plans?

## Future facing

- What types of careers might this degree lead to?
- Which career insight activities have you undertaken to make sure this is the right degree course for you?

## Personal / Ice-breakers

- Tell me more about 'x' from your personal statement
- What achievement are you most proud of?
- Which positions of responsibility have you held?
- What are your interests?
- How have you prepared for this interview?
- Tell us about any work experience you have

## Random

- Should chimpanzees have human rights?
- Who's most influential: Teresa May, Simon Cowell or the Dalai Lama?
- Tell me about this plant...

## Subject specific questions

Below are some question examples from the UK's most popular degree subjects (Telegraph 2016). You can also provide students with subject specific questions you have collated from: your alumni, university contacts, open day visits, Brian Heap's Book 'University degree course offers,' Gardner and Hamnett's book 'University interviews guide', [www.university.which.co.uk](http://www.university.which.co.uk), [www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/interviews/sample-interview-questions](http://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/interviews/sample-interview-questions)

## Art and Design

- Can 'fine art' be defined as 'design'?
- With reference to a recent exhibition you attended, explain if it influenced your thoughts or work at all
- Tell us how you designed and made some of the pieces in your portfolio
- In this piece, what influenced you to choose this particular style?
- What motivates and inspires you?

## Biosciences

- What articles have you read recently in the New Scientist?
- Why do cats' eyes appear to glow in the dark?
- Describe the advantages and disadvantages of genetically modified foods
- Describe the structure of DNA
- Tell us about one main theory of cell biology
- Why is sugar in your urine a good indicator that you might have diabetes?
- What issues could arise when society relies on one main type of foodstuff?

## Business and Management

- Is the customer always right?
- What qualities should a manager have?
- Using examples from your part-time job or volunteering, tell us how you would improve the organisation
- What are your views on Sunday trading?
- Could you market a service or product you didn't believe in?
- Do bankers deserve the pay they receive?
- Should the government have a say in how much company directors are paid?
- Tell us about a current economic issue

# Sample (subject specific) interview questions (cont.)

## Computing

- Tell us about your A level computer science project
- Explain which programming languages you know and what you have used them for
- Can machines make their own decisions?
- Suggest a method for listing prime numbers to 1000
- Logic problem, such as 'missing numbers', e.g. You are given a list of less than 1,000,000 numbers, all different and each from 0 to 999,999. Without taking too long, how would you find a number which is not on the list?

## Education

- Tell us your views on a current educational issue in the news
- Describe your experiences working with children
- What challenges do teachers face these days?
- What skills do 'successful' teachers require?
- Describe a good lesson you have observed and what made it effective?
- Give us an example of a time when you helped a child or young person
- Why do you want to specialise in teaching your chosen age group?

## History

- Which person from the past would you most like to interview and why?
- How can a country's population influence its foreign policy?
- Define globalisation
- What are your personal biases when studying history?
- What can people learn from knowing about the past?
- Is violence always political? Does 'political' mean different things in different contexts?
- Explain the importance of using first-hand evidence in the study of history

## Law

- What recent legal cases have you heard of?
- What would you do to reform the legal system?
- What does it mean for someone to 'take' another person's car?
- Are there any cases in which you can justify laws being broken?
- Tell us what you thought about your visit to a court
- How are law and politics linked?
- Should the government have a say in how much company directors are paid?

## Nursing

- What do you believe the role of a nurse to be?
- What challenges do nurses face these days?
- What did you learn from your work shadowing in a health setting?
- What does 'care' mean to you?
- Discuss one nursing related issue in the news recently.
- What qualities make you suitable for nursing?
- Why did you chose nursing over other health professions?
- How would you deal with a difficult patient?

## Psychology

- Tell us about the areas of psychology which most interest you
- Do you know what a psychology experiment is and have you ever carried one out?
- What is 'normal' for humans?
- What is perception?
- Are humans the most intelligent species?
- Should interviews be used for selection?
- Can you think of an experiment you could design to test whether animals see in white and black?

## Sociology

- What do you hope to get from studying on our sociology degree?
- Explain what social policy is
- Describe what you feel makes a quality newspaper article
- Tell us about three of the most pressing current social issues facing England today
- Can and should schools play a role in reducing crime levels?

# Handout 2 – Sample interview questions

## Cards for the exercise ‘How are you suitable for this degree?’

- 1 Copy and cut out enough of these cards to give one set to each group of approximately 5 or 6 students in your class.
- 2 Ask each group to rank the cards in the order of strongest to weakest answers to the question: ‘How are you suitable for this degree?’
- 3 Then get the groups to feed back their ranking rationale to the whole class, followed by a vote if agreement has not been reached.



Both of my parents came to your university so I know it is the right choice for me. I’ve been on tour around the buildings and the accommodation and I know I will be happy here. Plus lots of my friends are coming here so I know I will be happy.

This law degree will build on my strengths and abilities, in particular by expanding my critical thinking and analytical skills which I have developed through my A levels and through my Saturday job as a researcher for a local charity.

I have thoroughly researched journalism degree courses offered in the UK. Yours is unique. No other institution offers your combination of modules, employs as many industry professionals nor offers such first class studio facilities.

Although I’m first in my family to apply to university I have spoken to previous students from my school about the subject, work load and social life. I then attended a taster course which I loved so much I visited on your open day. From these experiences I understand your course and know it is the right match for my skills and passion.

I’ve wanted to be an engineer since I was little. My work experience helping my dad renovate classic cars has given me the team work and problem solving skills which are the corner stone of your Engineering degree.

I am really well suited to the intellectual demands of this course and I have read lots of relevant books around the subject area. My county athletics track record will be an asset to your sporting university and it would be an honour to be able to compete as part of your team.

I have the right A level subjects and grades and know from your prospectus that I am suited to your Mathematics degree. You are looking for students with a rigorous approach to problem solving. My parents are both accountants so your course will help me follow in their footsteps.

I’ve been considering a Government and Policy degree for a while through volunteering in my local MP’s office. It was however, through studying education reform in depth for my AQA extended project that I realised just how fascinating this would be to study for 3 years. The project also showed me what I need to succeed as an independent learner.

# Useful Resources

Some of the resources often cited as most useful by careers advisers and university admissions staff include:



**University Degree Course Offers – The essential guide to winning a place at university** – by Brian Heap

This guide is up-dated annually and contains subject specific interview questions.



**Andy Gardner** has produced many useful resources on university interviews (books, web pages and presentations).



**<http://university.which.co.uk>**

For subject-by-subject personal statement advice.



**[www.thestudentroom.co.uk](http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk)**  
and **[www.studential.com](http://www.studential.com)**

For interview questions from recent interviewees and current students and to use the interview discussion forums.

**[www.ucas.com](http://www.ucas.com)**



Your students could try for example, the on-line personal statement tool, timeline and blog.



**Build up your own resource bank by:**

Designing and embedding activities into the curriculum, tutor-time and career education programmes, in which your students are required to practice our suggested exercises and resources.



**Booking university workshops**

Admissions teams often provide interview guides and outreach teams can deliver presentations and workshops on/off campus. Liaise with your Network Coordinator via **[www.won.ac.uk](http://www.won.ac.uk)** to request these through local institutions and through relevant specialist national outreach teams such as those dealing with potential Oxbridge applicants, CPD sessions about Russell Group institutions, care leavers and students with disabilities.

# WON

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OUTREACH  
NETWORK

Western Outreach Network  
University of Bath, Claverton Down, Bath BA2 7AY

**[www.won.ac.uk](http://www.won.ac.uk)**

The Western Outreach Network is a government funded partnership comprising of the University of Bath, Bristol, Bath Spa, UWE Bristol and six Further Education Colleges. The WON provides schools with free activities and resources to engage, inspire and inform young people about higher education and their future choices.

Schools and colleges can benefit from:

- a single point of contact for all institutions
- a website providing information about events and activities hosted by local universities and colleges
- free resources and training to support the use of [careerpilot.org.uk](http://careerpilot.org.uk)
- access to a broad range of teaching resources to support the delivery of careers education and guidance
- free continued professional development opportunities for educational practitioners
- bespoke school visits to include talks, workshops and student ambassador visits
- campus visits
- subject specific workshops

**To subscribe to the network and register your interest in these opportunities visit our website or contact us at [won@bath.ac.uk](mailto:won@bath.ac.uk).**

