Tips for Effective Interviewing: Securing a School Psychology Internship

For many applicants, the interview is among the most intimidating steps of pursuing an internship in school psychology. Whereas you likely were able to take significant time and seek the input of others in carefully constructing your cover letter, vitae, essays, and work samples, the interview requires you to think on your toes and independently provide thoughtful responses to questions.

Internship sites hold interviews in a variety of formats, with a range of focal questions and activities. Yet, the recommendations that follow generally apply to the variable interview situations encountered by school psychology intern applicants.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW: KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Learn about the internship site and position. Review the internship position posting and any other site materials (e.g., recruitment brochures, internship manuals) that are available to you. Visit the site’s webpage, become familiar with staff names and positions. If you are unable to locate much information about your site and position, consider contacting your site’s point person to request additional information or to speak with the site’s current intern(s). Ideally, you will have taken these measures prior to applying to the site; however, you may have applied to the site some time before receiving your interview offer, and you may have forgotten site-specific information during this waiting period.

Your goal in reviewing these materials is to assess what you know and what you would like to know about the internship site and position. This will allow you to enter your interview feeling prepared and to identify questions to ask during the interview.

Develop a list of questions about your internship site and position. As you review internship site and position materials, make a list of questions that remain for you, and take this list with you to your interview day. Throughout your interview day, you will be able to add and eliminate questions as you learn new information (e.g., during interview information sessions or informal conversations with site staff).

Preparing and maintaining this list of questions will serve two purposes. First, it will ensure that you get all your questions answered during interviews. Even if you have thought of many questions to ask your interviewers, you may forget these questions in the moment while potentially experiencing nervousness and/or excitement. Second, it will support you in presenting as prepared, interested, and invested in the internship opportunity. Interviewers often provide ample opportunities for interviewees to ask questions, and you can convey your investment in the opportunity by preparing thoughtful questions. Err on the side of listing more questions than you expect to have time to ask.
Some questions to consider include:

- What are the responsibilities of interns? Are they supervised closely, or are they given more independence in their practices?
- What type of supervision do interns receive? From how many people? How frequently? In individual or group formats?
- How many interns are employed at a given time? Are there opportunities for interns to communicate and collaborate?
- In how many settings are interns placed? With what kinds of populations will interns interface? What is the expected caseload?
- What percentage of time do interns typically spend in assessment-, intervention-, prevention-, and consultation-related activities? Do interns typically encounter other types of responsibilities?
- Is there workspace available for the intern? Will there be clerical support and equipment available commensurate with other professionals?
- Will the intern be able to meet the requirements for their specific training program? National and state certifications? Doctoral licensure (if applicable)?
- How are interns evaluated? Is there a formal feedback process? How does it relate to university evaluation procedures?
- What opportunities are there for interns to attend conferences and other professional development activities?

**Review your application materials.** Although often overlooked in interview preparations, studying your own application materials prior to the interview can be particularly helpful. Interviewers are likely to ask you questions about any of the information you provided.

Think about those fieldwork and research experiences you included on your vitae, and be prepared to discuss past events in appropriate levels of detail, and with confidential information redacted. In addition, read through any essays or work samples you submitted with your application, refamiliarizing yourself with the content or cases.

Some questions to consider in advance:

- Why did you decide on a career in school psychology?
- What do you see as your strengths and weaknesses?
- What are your experiences working with different populations (e.g., disability categories, culturally and linguistically diverse clientele)?
- What are your expectations and goals for your internship?
- What, if any, gaps do you see in your training?

**Review best practices.** Internship interviews commonly include questions about hot topics and key issues in school psychology—particularly those that relate to the potential responsibilities of the school psychology intern.
For many if not all of these hot topics and key issues, your prior coursework and fieldwork will have sufficiently prepared you to answer such interview questions. Referencing the intern position posting, the NASP Practice Model, and/or School Psychology: A Blueprint for Training and Practice III may assist you in identifying any gaps in your training. If you perceive a gap in your training that is relevant to the intern position for which you are applying, you may choose to consult resources such as NASP fact sheets and position statements. This may prepare you to effectively answer best-practice interview questions while also honestly representing your training experiences and competencies.

Interviewees may encounter best-practice questions targeting subject matter and posing hypothetical scenarios relating to:

- Approaches to assessment and intervention
- Strategies for communicating and collaborating with families and staff
- Crisis response procedures
- Ethical and legal obligations

**Plan your interview attire.** Dress for success! First impressions are important. Although there is no official dress code for interviews, professional dress attire is recommended. Specifically, men often wear a suit and tie, and women typically wear a pant or skirt suit. Your internship interview attire is likely more formal than what you will be wearing while on internship; however, presenting a professional appearance shows your interviewers that you are taking your internship and the interview seriously.

Choose your outfit in advance. Don’t wait until the night before to make sure that you have a coordinating suit, snag-less pantyhose, or appropriate shoes. If you need to purchase new pieces or accessories, do so far in advance of your first interview. If you’re traveling to interviews, ensure that you’ve packed all the necessary elements of your interview outfit.

**Prepare your professional materials.** Consider taking a professional portfolio, including copies of your curriculum vitae, in case an interviewer is not familiar with your materials. Depending on your site and its application requirements, you might also choose to take work samples or other materials that evidence your qualifications for the intern position. You may also refer to materials if you are asked a question about your vitae or a work sample. For more information on creating your professional portfolio, see the fact sheet Developing Your Professional Portfolio: Work Samples and Résumés. In addition to these materials, be sure to take your list of questions about your prospective internship site and position.

**Learn about the interview format(s).** In some cases, you may receive information from your internship site about interview procedures. In other cases, you may request this type of information from your internship site or from contacts who previously interviewed at this site. You may feel better prepared and more relaxed if you are familiar with the interview format(s) and expectations before entering the interview room. For example, you might seek responses to the following questions:

- How many people will be interviewing me? Many internship interviews are conducted by a panel of individuals, such as a director of psychological services, school psychologists, and school...
administrators. You may find it helpful to know ahead of time if you will be walking into a room of 2, 4, or 12 individuals.

- **How many people will be interviewing with me?** Some internship sites hold group interviews, in place of or in addition to individual interviews, wherein multiple applicants are interviewed at the same time. Some applicants may be surprised by a group interview request and have had limited previous experiences with this type of request. If you are aware of this interview format ahead of time, you may choose to role-play this type of scenario ahead of the actual interview.

- **What tasks are required?** Most internship sites will ask you questions about school psychology and your experiences, but some may also require you to complete a writing sample or case analysis during the interview. Knowing these things ahead of time may prevent you from being surprised by any task asked of you.

- **Is there a time limit?** Some locations may hand you a list of questions and expect you to answer them in a limited period of time (e.g., 30 minutes). Be sure to ask if there is a time limit, allowing you to plan your response length. This action will also indicate that you are organized and manage your time well.

**Practice, practice, practice!** Rehearse responding to questions you expect to be asked by yourself or with the help of someone else. Although it may feel somewhat awkward at the time, hearing your responses aloud will likely increase your preparedness and comfort level when you are responding to questions during an actual interview. Individuals such as your faculty advisor, fieldwork supervisor, or program colleagues may be willing to serve as mock interviewers. Don’t be afraid to ask! Practicing your responses with another individual present allows you to seek feedback about your interpersonal style and responses.

**DURING THE INTERVIEW**

**Effectively cope with any stress or anxiety you may experience.** For many, the largest challenge in interviewing is managing one’s nervousness in order to interact with others and respond to questions as effectively as you might when in a lower-stakes, more comfortable scenario. Do not let the weight of the situation wear you down. Keep yourself grounded in the present and reassured of your professional competence.

As a school psychologist in training, you are likely familiar with coping and relaxation strategies, which you may have taught to students or other clientele in your fieldwork. Keep those strategies in your toolbox for your own use! Would a deep breathing, visualization, or muscle relaxation strategy help you calm your nerves before entering an interview? Apply your knowledge of human behavior and mental health to enable yourself to be maximally successful and comfortable during internship interviews.

**Show off your social skills.** Maintain eye contact throughout the interview. Speak to all interviewers in the room, not only to the one asking the question. Smile, have fun, and show your excitement for the internship position and site as well as for the field of school psychology.

Present yourself as confident but not smug when you enter your interviews. As a result of your training, you are likely prepared for any questions they will ask of you. When you feel confident, you appear confident; this is an attractive trait for potential employers. Remember, however, that you are
a trainee and that there is a lot you have left to learn while you are on internship. You are not expected to know everything or have experienced everything. Explicitly tell your interviewers what you are hoping to learn on your internship.

“Interview” your interviewers. During the internship interview, you are tasked with not only selling yourself as a viable intern; you must also seek information about the site and position so that you may choose the internship that best fits your needs, interests, and goals.

When given the opportunity, seek information from your interviewers and other site staff in a respectful manner, honoring their time as well as the prescribed interview format and schedule. This is when you can reference the question list you developed prior to the interview and updated throughout the day. Be sure to avoid asking redundant questions with the same individuals, but consider posing some of the same questions to different parties to assess additional perspectives on the same topic.

Some interviews may, for a variety of reasons, uncover a "poor fit" between the applicant and the site. Leverage the interview process to strategically evaluate your fit with the internship site. For more information about selecting an internship in school psychology that is right for you, consult Selecting a School Psychology Internship: Tips for Graduate Students.

FOLLOWING THE INTERVIEW

Document your perceptions of the internship site and position. After completing your interview, it is important for you to reflect on your perceptions of the intern roles and responsibilities, the levels and types of support available to the intern, and the (mis)match between your internship goals and the position. Note any unanswered questions or concerns you have about the site. Is there additional information you require? How does this site/position stack up to others?

Express gratitude to the appropriate parties. Following your interview, you may choose to e-mail your internship site contact(s) to thank them for their time and efforts. The interview process is a lot of work for you, as the interviewee, but it is a lot of work for the interviewing staff, too! The thank-you note is also a great opportunity to ask any additional questions you may have and promote recognition of your name among the hiring staff.

Reflect and note lessons learned. Interviewing for your internship presents many of the same issues as interviewing for your first full-time job. For both you need to be prepared and confident, answer questions concisely yet openly, ask good questions, be a good listener, and be able to articulate your goals as a professional. When interviewing for your first job, however, you will have the significant advantage of having worked for a full year on your internship as well as having already completed the interview process for your internship.

Recording important things you learned during your internship interviews might help prepare you for your next “big” interview. For example, what question(s) did interviewers ask that you were not expecting? What responses did you provide that you found to be effective or well-received? Do you wish you would have prepared for interviews in any other way?
LOOKING AHEAD: INTERVIEWING FOR EARLY CAREER POSITIONS

Although it is difficult to predict the format of interviews for permanent school psychology positions, many of the above recommendations apply. Your internship experience may help you pinpoint those job characteristics that are most important to you. Remember to ask about the work environment and the amount of support that exists among psychologists. Determine what mentoring opportunities are available from more experienced psychologists, and feel free to ask questions about salary, benefits, vacations, and resources.

RELEVANT RESOURCES


This fact sheet was initiated by Andrea Cohn, NASP graduate assistant at the time of creation. The content was updated by Brittany Zakszeski in 2018. Brittany Zakszeski was, at the time of revision, the Student Support Coordinator on the Graduate Student Committee.