

National Fellowship Interviews: Preparation, Advice, & Guidance

Compiled by and from the [National Association of Fellowships Advisors](#)

Preparing for Interviews

Your applications are signed and mailed, and the waiting begins. Although you will not know for several weeks whether you have been selected to interview, you should prepare now.

Why practice for interviews now? First, the skills you hone aren't wasted; they will serve you well for graduate and professional school interviews, and for job interviews in the future.

Second, the more you practice, the more comfortable you will feel with answering questions "on the fly"—and ease in the interview setting is an important ingredient for success.

Know what to expect

- Talk to people who have been through similar interviews to find out what helped them and what they wish they'd done, or not done.
- Use your mock interviews to listen to yourself, to practice framing answers that include the information you want to convey, and to help you with your sense of timing. Twenty minute interviews go by fast.

Prepare yourself

- What points do you want to be sure to make? What character traits do you want to project? Write them down, and review your list before each interview.
- Go over your application carefully. Interview questions will mostly derive from your application materials: the personal statement, study or policy proposal, activities, transcript, and letters of recommendation. Mentally review past course material, consider what activities matter most to you and why, and be prepared to discuss anything and everything.
- Brainstorm a list of possible questions, and practice speaking the answers. Although actual interview questions will most likely be very different, the practice you'll gain from thinking on your feet could transform a hesitant and cautious response into an articulate, confident and effective statement.
- Also, brainstorm a list of potential questions in your major field of study. Ask your advisor to help you. Focus on issues that would interest an educated generalist (and since you've been reading the *New York Times*, *The Economist* or the *Wall Street Journal*, you know what these are). Formulate your answers verbally.
- You may be asked questions on current events. Know what is happening in the world, and have opinions to articulate. Be able to defend knowledgeably your positions on cloning and stem-cell research, campaign finance reform, the federal budget, missile defense, etc.
- Don't be surprised by questions that touch on your extracurricular interests, the kind of books you read, and what you like to do in your free time.

Managing the Interview

- Remember that the committee members are intelligent, accomplished, successful and occasionally famous people. Don't, however, let yourself be intimidated. Engage confidently in the exchange of ideas; respectful differences of opinion are expected and even welcomed. Know the difference between a debate and an argument, and avoid engaging in the latter. Remember how short your time is, and how many other things you have to say.
- Take a moment to think before you answer. Ask for clarification if you need to. Don't be afraid to admit you don't know; do be afraid to fake it.

- Know when to stop. If you feel you could talk forever on a particular topic, ask the committee if they would like you to go into more detail.
- No matter how well you prepare, you will be asked questions you can't anticipate. Expect the unexpected. Even if you feel you've just made a fool of yourself, remember all the other questions you answered well and move on.
- Be honest; be confident; be yourself.

Suggestions for National Scholarship Interviews

Put your selection as a Finalist, and the upcoming interview, in perspective. This is already a significant achievement, a tribute to your accomplishments, an honor for your institution, and an opportunity to share your views and opinions with panelists.

Although you need to prepare for the interview to have a good chance, extensive preparation will not guarantee winning a Scholarship. Other outstanding candidates from your state or district will also be interviewed.

Review your application and study proposal. If recent developments have made your proposal out of date, what do you now recommend? Can you be more specific about your goals, objectives, and opinions than when you prepared the application?

Think about the questions you hope or expect to be asked, and how you might respond. Be careful about having precisely worded answers ready in anticipation of specific questions. Candidates with "stock" answers frequently stumble, having prepared for slightly different questions than the ones they're actually asked.

Participate in one or more practice interviews. National fellowship interviews are generally a challenging and intense experience far different from a job interview or the normal classroom setting. Candidates who have not practiced often perform poorly.

Prepare 30-second opening and closing statements. You might have the chance to introduce yourself, or close with interview with final thoughts. Thank the committee for the interview.

Learn the names of the panelists, and try to use them during the interview. Unless invited, avoid addressing them by their first names.

Dress appropriately. Most men will wear a suit or jacket and tie; women, a suit or dress.

Help the committee have a good interview. Let the panelists set the agenda. Answer questions precisely and concisely. Maintain eye contact with as many members as possible—particularly the one who asked the question.

Understand the question before you answer. If in doubt, ask for clarification. You may pause to collect your thoughts before answering a complex question.

Be honest and forthright. Give the answers and opinions in which you believe, not what you think the panel wants to hear. Don't be afraid to express your opinions, convictions, and passions. The panel wants to know what you believe or think and why. It's not looking for a particular answer or agreement with an opinion of a member. Don't overestimate past successes and achievements.

Don't evade a question or try to mislead the panel in answering a question that might reveal ignorance, failures, or mistakes. Acknowledge that you don't know, own up to mistakes, don't hide your failures. Tell the panel what you've learned from them.

Avoid appearing to be an expert. At least one panelist is likely to be more knowledgeable than you on the issue. Be careful when presenting data and factual information, especially on complex issues. Be sure that what you state is true, and qualify your answers when making conjectures or assumptions.

Be concise. The panel wants to see a well-rounded picture of you in a short time. You can help by allowing time for many questions. Answer each question directly. Spend no more than 15-20 seconds on short questions; for complex questions, limit your responses to 60-90 seconds. You can always ask, "would you like me to elaborate?"

Let other candidates say "ah," "uh," "you know," and "like." Don't use slang. Don't use "stuff" as a noun.

Don't be defensive about your views, values, and opinions when you think the interviewers disapprove. Panelists are likely to challenge you to test the depth and basis of your convictions. You should not be judged unfavorably as long as you have a clear ethical and intellectual basis for your views, values, and opinions. You may disagree with the statements or premises of questions posed by panelists. If so, respectfully state your disagreement and why. Panelists sometimes make provocative statements to give you a chance to analyze the issue, present a different opinion or view, and justify your views.

Be willing to admit that you do not know the answer or are not familiar with an event or situation. Panelists do not expect candidates to be well-informed on all issues.

Benefit from the travel opportunity. Have fun meeting and getting to know the other finalists. Visit a nearby museum, go shopping, or check out a graduate school.

Three Don'ts

At the reception and during the day of the interview, you will spend time with the other candidates.

- Don't speculate about how you might compare with the other candidates.
- Don't let them distract you from being yourself at the interview.
- Don't worry too much about the outcome.

You won't be able to guess the outcome, so why spend much time trying or second-guessing your answers? The objective is to give all candidates challenging interviews with opportunities to shine. You cannot know how well you met the expectations of the panelists, or how well the other finalists did. Be proud you had the opportunity, and build on the experience for your next challenging interview.

Advice from a Truman Finalist

Don't try too hard. Just go with the goal of interacting with some pretty neat fellow interviewees and panelists, and I guarantee if you do that, you won't be disappointed.

Don't go overboard. Read a little, brush up on what's happening in the world, but don't go nuts trying to digest every article in the *New York Times*, reading 10 Truman biographies, and absorbing sixty years worth of Congressional hearings on hydroelectric power over the next few weeks. Bottom line: be comfortable with who you are and what you know.

Relax. Bring a game to play with other finalists in case you draw a late interview time. Don't let a long wait increase your nervousness.

Be familiar with your transcript. A good number of my interview questions derived from classes I took (for example, panelists saw I'd taken environmental policy, and as a result I was asked about the breaching of Snake River dams). I don't suggest you reread every book from every class you've ever taken. Go over your transcript class by class and brainstorm some possible questions, perhaps with the help of a professor or two.

Be ready to shoot from the hip. I guarantee that one-third to half of the questions will take you somewhat off guard (in spite of all those mocks). Having a successful interview doesn't mean being ready for every question; it's being able to deal confidently and conversationally with questions that you don't expect.

Your interview attitude is just as important as what's between your ears. Expect a rigorous and fun conversation with some smart and curious folks. Don't view the interview as a test—you'll probably flunk.

Have fun. For goodness sake, you're a finalist for a Truman Scholarship! Do you have any idea how many thousands of applicants in the history of this scholarship never even got to this level? That's a distinction no one can take from you.

Don't go in thinking you have to win. That attitude will start you on an emotional roller coaster—very bad for your self confidence. When I played baseball, what I loved more than anything was my crusty old coach who would yell, "Way to be!" every time I was on the field. Your university is already proud of you; the rest is gravy.

Surviving a National Fellowship Interview:

Advice from a Former Gates Cambridge Scholar and University of Arkansas Honors Student

(Adapted from the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville, <http://fellowships.uark.edu/638.php>)

Of the daunting tasks that made up my fellowship application process—researching my proposal of study, requesting a preposterous number of recommendation letters, and working through thirteen drafts (yes, thirteen) of a personal statement—none was as intimidating as the interview to which I hoped the never ending paperwork would lead. After spending several months buried under my Marshall and Gates Cambridge applications, I was fortunate to emerge with an invitation to interview for a Gates Cambridge Scholarship. Grateful, yet terrified, I was assured by Dr. McCray that the hardest work was yet to come. Indeed, in the weeks leading up to my February interview, I endured a rigorous program of interview training, courtesy of the Office of Nationally Competitive Awards.

To be sure, my series of mock interviews was not easy to stomach. I had to be sure that I was familiar with every implied as well as overtly stated detail of my application. For example, in response to the question about my future career aims, I had noted that I was interested in arts administration and outreach. I was advised that my response would likely prompt a question about arts funding and the recent clashes between Congress and the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities. "What clashes?" I asked. As it turned out, I had much to research and learn. Yet apart from all the specific facts, figures, and issues specific to my own discipline (music and the arts) I had to familiarize myself with, there were some general pieces of interview advice that I took away from Fayetteville that were particularly helpful during my actual interview. In this brief article, I'll recount these bits of advice and give a short account of my interview.

The most important tip I took away from Fayetteville was to relax. Far too often during interview practice, I was so nervous and uptight that I found I could not answer questions and discuss issues as well as I could had I been more physically and mentally at ease. Of course, there is such a thing as being too relaxed, which might give off an impression of apathy or boredom. Finding the balance here is crucial.

Another valuable piece of information was to avoid sounding rehearsed when delivering answers with confidence. Unfortunately, delivering answers with assurance takes practice, and with this practice often comes a robotic tone. I found that one of the best ways to avoid falling into rehearsed sounding answers was to answer the same question differently each time. As a result, I think my answers always sounded fresh and "off the cuff" even though I had said them all many times before.

Other tips I found beneficial applied not necessarily to the interview itself, but to my mental approach. First, I was consciously aware that there were major benefits to interviewing as opposed to being judged on paper alone. In these twenty or so minutes, I finally had the chance to present myself in person rather than on a page. I was also afforded the opportunity to speak up about some relevant issues that I might not have covered in my application. This perspective

gave me a much more optimistic outlook on the whole affair and mitigated some of the inevitable dread that comes along with this sort of event.

There was, of course, a catch: I wasn't the one asking the questions and directing the interview. However, with a little (okay, a lot) of practice, I learned how to navigate through questions in ways that allowed me to say more than just my direct answer. I must admit that my interview is not the best example of one of those notorious (yet perhaps exaggerated) interviews in which a student is annihilated by the interview committee, as mine was eerily friendly and non-confrontational. I must stress that while I was lucky in having a relatively friendly interview; others have not been so fortunate. No two fellowship interviews are the same, and interviews for different scholarships certainly have different vibes and expectations. While some interviewers are polite and friendly as mine were, others can be downright confrontational and even rude. (They're not actually rude people; they're putting you in the hot seat to see how you react under pressure.)

An additional technique that I found useful was to approach the interview as a discussion structured around a series of questions rather than simply an extended line of confrontational questioning. Going in with this perspective, I found myself more at ease with answering questions, as I think my tone was consequently more conversational. Indeed, during my "interview" the committee members even discussed the issues at hand between themselves. This sort of dynamic definitely made the interview more fun and relaxed, and made me feel more like I was at a round-table discussion.

Lastly, I would urge you not to approach this process assuming that it is fair and just. Unfortunately, many perfectly qualified and even ideal candidates are often denied scholarships. I myself was very lucky in that I had completed a year of study at Cambridge as a junior and had a very supportive letter of recommendation from one of the faculty members there—a circumstance that likely led my particular committee to feel that Cambridge was the right place for me. In other words, these interviews (and the application processes that go with them for that matter) are often driven by tremendous amounts of luck and circumstance, with external factors having a hand in a committee's decision to grant or withhold scholarships from interviewees. And speaking of such "external factors" I would like to close by explaining how one seemingly unrelated circumstance came into play during my interview, fortunately to my advantage.

The first "question" I was asked when I sat down at the table was a rather strange one: so, did you get any takers on your crab cake dinner? I'll explain. After I had arrived at the hotel in Annapolis, I, like all the candidates, had registered in the hotel's conference room in order to get my welcome letter, interview time, hotel key, etc. I was also informed that I could, if I wanted, write a message on the large white message board sitting on an easel in the room. The purpose of this board was for us to open the lines of communication so that we could get groups together to go out to eat and socialize for the night. I admit that, at first, I thought it was lame, but then realized that I didn't really want to sit in my room or eat dinner alone. So I left a message—the first in fact—for other finalists: Crab Cakes Anyone? (Remember our proximity to the Chesapeake.)

As it turned out, many others wanted crab cakes as well, and the evening turned into a successful and jovial social outing. So why, you might ask, did the committee ask about this much less know about it? Well, as luck would have it, the committee members met for breakfast the morning of the interviews in the very room in which we had registered, complete with the white message board that had been left overnight. Having seen my message, my committee used it as an ice-breaking intro. My point of this anecdote is that even though these interviews seemed to be closed (i.e. ones that were not supplemented by other activities such as the cocktail party at the Rhodes interviews), there are still ways and means by which the interview extended outside the bounds of the "official" twenty minutes. It was clearly circumstantial, but there was a brief moment when I considered that I had to present myself in a way that was congruent with the aims of the scholarship, namely to be socially outgoing, while outside the interview room. Above all, I would urge you simply to go into the interview aiming to have a great (as in constructive, not necessarily fun) experience. Whatever the outcome, remember that you are very fortunate to have made it to the interview stage; hundreds apply, and few proceed. Your University is proud, and you should be as well.

Preparation and Strategy

Adapted from <http://www.reed.edu/~brashiek/Rhodes-Marshall/interview.html>

- **Be sure to re-read your application and try to see it as a third-party** might. Also re-read your transcript before the interview. If there is an out-of-place grade on it, that's obviously fodder for a question. If there is a course there that seems well outside your specialization, you might be asked how you as a chemist responded to Crime and punishment or how a linguist can contribute to a discussion on evolutionary theory.
- **Be current on current events**, especially those that may be related to (directly or tangentially) or might impact your area of proposed study/research.
- **Don't rush your answers.** It's fine to pause a moment for thought. Once you've answered -- and keep the answers concise but thorough -- be quiet and wait for the next one.
- **You may be interrupted while giving an answer**, and this may simply be intended to see how fast you react to a new situation. And it is important to say "I don't know" if necessary. Interviewers want to see if you will hold onto your ideals but not be so dogmatic as to not budge an inch. Otherwise they may pursue you into rougher waters. If you feel you didn't answer something well, don't let it fluster you. You've probably answered other questions better, so just move on.
- **Don't rave about your accomplishments**; that's already in the application. But do be prepared to answer questions with specific anecdotes and examples from your own experiences.
- **Have an opening and closing remark in mind** -- no more than thirty seconds -- just in case the need arises. For example, some scholarships typically begin, "So, tell us a bit about yourself." And they often end, "Do you have anything you would like to add?"
- **Know your benefactor.** While reading his/her biography look for any parallels with, direct application to, or remote echoes of your own "story."
- **Think of the interview as participating in a good discussion rather than a back-and-forth Q&A**, and endeavor to construct logical arguments on your positions and goals during the interview itself.
- **Practice!** Avail yourself of mock interviews through the CUSE Fellowships Office, and also ask your friends, roommates, parents, rectors, professors to interrogate you. The more questions you get from varying perspectives, the better.

Common Mistakes Made During Interviews

Adapted from <http://www.reed.edu/~brashiek/Rhodes-Marshall/interview.html>

- Candidates use the words "never" and "always." That simply opens oneself up to a forced withdrawal.
- Candidates are falsely confident. It is fine to be phased; it is acceptable to be a bit embarrassed.
- Candidates refuse to say "I don't know."
- Candidates attribute everything they knew on a given subject to a particular book they read in a particular course. In such cases, "you" disappear, and the book takes your place.
- Candidates take the interview as an exercise in defense rather than discussion. At an extreme, candidates even get defensive when something about their application or personal statement is under examination.

Adapted Message from Tara Yglesias

Deputy Executive Secretary, Truman Scholarship Foundation

I imagine that a lot of folks would have advice for you - but as a Truman Scholar, frequent interviewer, and Foundation employee, I can offer the following:

Most interviews spend very little time asking questions about the written materials (e.g. - "I see that you do college debate. Tell me about that.") and more time using the written materials as jumping off points for other questions ("What skills did you learn as a debater that might help you in your career as an urban planner?"). Sometimes the policy proposal/research proposal is the focus of the interview, sometimes not. You should be prepared for questions that ask you to extrapolate your thinking on the proposal into other areas.

Current events come up fairly regularly. If you don't know what a panelist is talking about, just ask. I rarely hear complaints that a student hasn't heard of something (unless it is in her issue area), but I have heard plenty about students who try to bluff.

The biggest pitfall for students is the inability to identify when a panelist is playing devil's advocate. I often ask questions like: "Why should we care about participatory democracy anyway?" The Scholars are the ones that can happily engage me on that issue and never make me feel like a jerk for asking.

You should also be sensitive to the fact that panelists come from different backgrounds and disciplines. Civilians often ask completely different questions than professors - and many panels are mostly civilians. As for fellow interviewees, most students are surprised how well they get along with each other.

Characteristics of Successful Interviewees

Louis Blair, Executive Secretary Emeritus, Truman Scholarship Foundation

In my observations of about 2500 Truman interviews over the past 20 years, I sense that successful Truman Scholarship Finalists generally possess the following characteristics:

Comfort/Level of Ease in the interview setting: While they may be nervous at the start, they quickly settle in, enjoy the give and take of the interview, do not get put off by challenging questions nor the lack of encouraging words or smiles from panelists. Perhaps the best sign of success is when the candidate turns the interview into a conversation with the panelists.

Sophistication on the issues: The candidate realizes that there are few clear-cut answers and solutions, that there are problems and obstacles, that our political system rarely moves ahead full-speed ... and for good reasons. Just saying that something should be this way or that way is rarely enough. The best ways to become sophisticated are probably through regularly reading the NY Times [especially the editorials] and through small-group or seminar discussions of issues.

Exciting in one or more dimensions: This can be through an unusual career/education program that makes sense, outstanding accomplishments, extraordinary devotion, personal appeal, energy, humor, occasionally sheer intellectual horsepower targeted toward public service.

Breadth of interest and knowledge beyond the intended career field: Single issue folks rarely appeal to selection panels. A frequent question to persons who appear to be single issue is: "What would you do if the problem you want to address suddenly went away?"

Ability to analyze "on the fly": Often panelists ask questions to see how well candidates can grapple with issues and concepts that they have not connected previously. Examples of questions are: "What are the most meaningful books you have read that the President should read?" "What are the biggest issues facing American society?" Successful candidates feel somewhat comfortable in grappling with such far-out questions, maybe even having fun.

Consistency with the written material: Successful Finalists talk the way they write, thoroughly understand their policy recommendations, and display some of the characteristics mentioned in Item 14 and in the Faculty Nomination letter.

Responsiveness to the questions: They address head-on the questions raised and try to respond to what the interviewers have asked, not what the candidates necessarily want to address. Not getting bogged down, especially on questions to which they are not doing well. Few successful candidates answer all of the questions well. It is far better to keep answers short, cut losses, and let panelists pose lots of questions.

Keeping the interview and the outcome in perspective - Candidates who come in with the attitude that they "have to win" or are "destined to win" do poorly. This is not a life and death situation. Most Finalists will get to graduate school.

Interviewing for Scholarships from Kansas State University

Adapted from <http://www.k-state.edu/artsci/scholarship/interviews.shtml>

These tips cover some common mistakes and some of the factors that come into play. You hopefully already know many of the items mentioned here.

Just remember:

- Nobody can do all these things perfectly.
- Every conversation is different. Read the moment.
- You can improve your skills through practice and reflection.

Preparation

Logistics

- Bring your ID and whatever the panel has asked you to bring.
- Pack everything you need. Print a good travel checklist from the web if necessary.
- Scout the location well ahead if possible.
- Buy/download a map well ahead otherwise.
- Build flextime into your travel schedule. Allow for the unexpected.
- Arrive a few minutes early.

Physical Presence

- Dress suitably for the interview. Nice. Conservative. Professional.
- Consider packing two options for clothing.
- Your clothes should feel comfortable.
- Test drive them prior to the day.
- Have them cleaned and pressed.
- Polish your shoes and belt.
- Eat two to four hours before you arrive. Moderate. Healthy.
- Consider taking an early walk.
- Bladder status . . . empty when you arrive.
- Take some slow deep breaths before you enter. Discreetly.

Mental Engagement

- Know thyself.
- Bring a copy of your application. Review what they know about thyself.
- Know the scholarship. Know the organization that gives the award.
- Read the newspaper that morning.
- Look forward to the challenge of difficult questions.
- Visualize a confident and comfortable meeting.

Non-Verbal Communication

Visage

- Smile when you enter and when you leave. At least.
- Make eye contact. Spread it around evenly.
- Show an interest. Let them see an engaged candidate.

Body

- Do not swivel just because your chair does.
- Sit erect even if your chair leans back.
- Lean slightly forward to communicate interest.
- Pull up to the table when you sit down. The table is the playing field.
- Never give a judge your shoulder.

Hands

- Keep them away from your face.
- Avoid repeated tics like picking at the edge of the table.
- Let them out of your lap. Hidden hands seem tentative.
- Some gesturing: not bad. Makes you seem animated.
- Same gesture over and over again: bad. Makes you seem automated.
- Shake hands with a firm grip. Present your hand with confidence.
- The gesture is incomplete unless you smile and make eye contact.

Holistic

- Stay focused but relax . . . interviews are not lethal.
- More deep breaths if the jitters hit you.

Content

Delivery

- Make sure you are clearly heard. Articulate carefully. Project across the room.
- Avoid jargon and slang.
- No chewing gum.
- Budget the time you spend on any single answer.
- Pause to collect your thoughts as needed. Keep your brain ahead of your mouth.

Substance

- Listen carefully to each question.
- Follow general statements with concrete examples. Particulars. Details. Instances.
- Realize when you have no more to say. Dead air beats rambling.
- Show respect for opposing views as you articulate your own.
- Have an introductory or concluding comment ready. Read the situation if asked for one.
- Admit it if you don't know an answer. Provide the facts or context that you do know.
- Reveal your expertise and knowledge.

- Reveal what you are passionate about.

Troubleshooting

- Move on if you botch an answer.
- Almost all questions are an invitation to talk. **Yes** or **No** is insufficient.
- Filter your strengths through your experience and goals. No bragging.
- Don't try to guess what the judges want to hear. Show them how you think.
- Ask for clarification if the question is unclear or too broad.
- Try not to introduce topics about which you are unprepared to talk.
- Do not ask the judges topical questions. It eats your time if they answer.

General

- Thank the judges for the opportunity to talk with them.
- Show your positive side.
- Make it feel more like a discussion. Less like an oral exam.
- The judges want to get to know you through the discussion. Let them.
- Have the confidence to sound as sharp and insightful as you really are.