

# CAREER GUIDE FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS AND POSTDOCS

# INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

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# CAREER GUIDE

## INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

As a doctoral or master's student at Penn looking to find a job after you graduate, you may have heard how important it is to do informational interviews as part of your networking strategy.

If you don't know what informational interviews are, they are simply opportunities for you to talk to people to gather in-depth information about career fields and positions that interest you. Talking to different people can help you understand what skills are needed for particular roles, learn the language and vocabulary that are commonly used in a career field, and develop your own professional narrative as you explore careers.

Developing a networking strategy that includes informational interviewing will also grow your professional network by putting you directly in touch with people in the career fields you're exploring, and potentially expose you to job opportunities that arise in organizations of interest to you. The benefits of networking in general are limitless.

When it comes to informational interviews, chances are, you've already done some form of this networking when you ask friends, colleagues, and mentors about their jobs. If you've never done an informational interview before (especially with someone you don't know), this Career Guide will give you all the key pointers on how to ace your first (or next) informational interview.



# THE BASICS

# THE BASICS

## THE WHAT, WHO, WHEN, WHERE, & HOW

### WHAT ARE INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS?

Informational interviews are **one-on-one conversations** that you have with professionals to gather information about:

- their career path
- jobs they've had
- industries they've been in
- employers they're familiar with
- emerging and future trends in their fields
- skills they've developed and used

Think of informational interviews as just having a chat with someone to learn about their professional experience as you explore career options. Remember, the goal is **NOT** to ask for a job, but rather, to seek information that can help you chart your own career path more effectively. Once you conduct an informational interview, you can then use the information you've gleaned to make yourself a stronger applicant when you're ready to apply for the type of jobs you have been learning about.

### WHO SHOULD YOU CONDUCT INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS WITH?

Anyone who's in a professional role or industry that you're interested in would be a great person with whom to conduct informational interviews. If you don't have a large professional network (which many graduate students don't have to begin with), tap into the large Penn alumni network using **myPenn** and the alumni finder function on **LinkedIn**, as well as the alumni networks for your other alma maters. In addition to helping you learn more about careers, informational interviews will also help grow your professional network, so that you'll have future colleagues and mentors to talk with about developing new ideas or overcoming work challenges that will help you grow as a professional.

## WHEN CAN YOU DO INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS?

You can conduct them at any point during your time as a graduate student. The earlier you get started, the better it can be for your career exploration, career decision-making, and your professional network. People can be more candid with you when they know that you're not looking for a job immediately. You may feel a bit uncomfortable if they feel that there's pressure on them to help you land one. Another good reason to start conducting informational interviews early is that it's often easier to reconnect with professionals when you've already spoken with them before. If you have a great conversation with someone early in your graduate career, you can **build a relationship** with that professional over time.

## WHERE AND HOW DO I CONDUCT INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS?

The easiest way to set up an informational interview is via email with a brief, professional, and friendly note. Make your "ask" short and sweet: "Would you be willing to speak with me for 20 minutes or so about your career path?"

Informational interviews often range from **20 minutes to an hour**, depending on availability and how the conversation is going. They can take place in person, via phone, or by email. It's better to meet in person or speak by phone, but sometimes the professional contact may prefer to answer your questions by email, which is perfectly fine.

**When reaching out to set up an informational interview, always ensure that the time and location are most convenient to the professional.**

Dear Dr. Applewood,

I hope this message finds you well. I'm currently a PhD Student at Penn studying Psychology and came across your fascinating profile on LinkedIn and myPenn. I'm interested in pursuing a career in research and data analysis, particularly in the field of education, and was curious to learn more about your accomplishments as a research analyst in the non-profit, private, and startup industries. Your current role at SmartStart sounds especially intriguing! Would you be willing to meet with me over coffee for 20 minutes or could we arrange a brief phone call? I would be so grateful for the opportunity to chat with you and hear your perspectives on the different roles you've had.

Many thanks,  
Jamie Pennsylvania  
PhD Candidate, Department of Psychology  
University of Pennsylvania

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### SAMPLE OUTREACH EMAIL

Be sure to include:

- Subject line: Informational interview request from Penn student
- Who you are
- How you found the person
- What you have in common
- What you're interested in career-wise
- What you found fascinating or intriguing about their professional background



# GETTING IT RIGHT

# FIVE THINGS TO DO

## WHEN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING

### 1 RESEARCH WHO YOU'RE MEETING

When you contact professionals for an informational interview, remember that they are taking time out of their busy schedules to speak with you. While they may be eager to speak with you, you also want to show your gratitude and respect for their time by being prepared for this conversation. That means reviewing their LinkedIn profiles, reading their bios if they're listed on their organization's website, and in general, doing a Google search on their professional background.

You'll then want to take the information you've learned to **craft good questions** that you want answers to, and shape the conversation in a way that will be most helpful to you.

### 2 HAVE A CLEAR IDEA OF HOW THE PROFESSIONAL CAN HELP YOU

Don't be surprised if the professional you're meeting with asks you, "So, how I can be helpful to you today?" To ensure that the conversation is valuable to you and worthwhile for the professional, approach the meeting with a clear goal in mind. It can be as broad as to learn more about what it's like to work in a particular industry to determine if you'd like to pursue that career, or as narrow as trying to learn more about a specific employer to decide if you should apply for a job there.

Whatever your goal is, make sure you convey that to the professional, so s/he can be as helpful as possible.



### **3 CONVEY YOUR INTEREST FOR THEIR PATH / INDUSTRY**

Professionals will be a lot more interested in you if you show them that you've done your research. Preface your questions with information that you already have, like "I know that you previously worked at X company. How has your current experience at Y company been different?"

Additionally, if the professional is telling you a story about how they transitioned from graduate school to their first job, or from one job to another, listen carefully and be sure to ask a follow up question to show that you're engaged in the conversation and that the information is helpful to you.

### **4 BE CURIOUS**

What makes for a great conversation? It's when you approach the meeting with genuine curiosity, have a list of good questions ready to ask, and listen carefully to the answers and stories the professional shares. People generally enjoy talking about themselves, so feel free to ask some open ended questions about their professional experiences.

You can ask questions that pertain to the professional's career in the past, present, and future, as well as advice or insights they might have about their industries.

### **5 ASK FOR RECOMMENDATIONS AND OTHER CONNECTIONS**

One of the main reasons you are conducting an informational interview, besides trying to gather information that would be helpful to your career and job search, is to grow your professional network. Asking the professional you're speaking with for their ideas of other people you should talk to will not only help you learn from other people's career paths and perspectives but also increase the number of professional contacts you have. The worst that could happen is that they don't have any suggestions for you, but in the best case scenario, it could lead to more informational interviews and potential contacts at employers you're interested in!

# GETTING IT RIGHT

## ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Below are some questions you can ask during an informational interview. Keep in mind that the questions you ask will depend on how your conversation is going. As you listen to answers, you can ask follow-up questions to have more meaningful conversations.

### **QUESTIONS TO HELP PREPARE YOU FOR A CAREER FIELD**

- What kinds of experiences do you believe would be best for working in this industry?
- What skills, talents, and personal qualities are most essential in this job?
- What credentials, educational degrees, licenses, etc. are required for entry into this kind of work?
- How rapidly is your present career field growing? What opportunities for advancement are there in this field?
- How do people find out about jobs in this field?
- Which professional journals and organizations would help me learn more about this field?

### **QUESTIONS ABOUT A PROFESSIONAL'S JOB AND FUTURE CAREER**

- How did you choose this career field?
- How do you spend your time during a typical workweek?
- What do you find most rewarding about the work?
- If you were ever to leave this kind of work, what would drive you away from it?
- What type of formal or on-the-job training does your organization provide?
- Does your work become more interesting as you stay longer?
- If things develop as you'd like, what does the future hold for your career?

### **QUESTIONS ABOUT A PARTICULAR ORGANIZATION / COMPANY**

- Why did you decide to work for this organization and what do you like most and least about it?
- How does your company differ from its competitors?
- What is the organizational structure of your company like?
- In what ways does this employer provide ongoing training and professional development for its employees?
- What obligations does your work place upon you, outside of the ordinary workweek? Do you enjoy these obligations?

# AFTER THE INTERVIEW

## FOLLOW UP

### SEND A THANK YOU NOTE

Send an email within 24 hours and follow up on anything needed. Don't forget to request to connect on LinkedIn with a personalized note as well. Stay in touch in the long term! You can follow up a few months later with an academic update or question.

#### SAMPLE THANK YOU EMAIL

Dear Derek,

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. I enjoyed hearing about how you transitioned from your PhD to your role at the Red Cross and learning more about what it's like to work at SmartStart. Thanks as well for suggesting your two friends and colleagues who would be great for me to speak with! I'll wait to hear back from you before reaching out to them.

Our conversation has made me even more excited and optimistic about exploring career opportunities in education and data science. I look forward to staying in touch with you!

Very best,  
Jamie

Send

Discard



Be sure to include:

- Something specific that you appreciated hearing about
- Any follow up from your conversation
- A positive and optimistic end to your message

# **FIVE MISTAKES TO AVOID**

## **WHEN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWING**

### **1 DON'T STUMBLE ON THE "TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF" QUESTION**

This is often the first question that you'll get asked, and your answer will set the tone for the rest of the conversation, so don't stumble on this answer by talking at length about your specific research, mentioning things in your personal life that are irrelevant to a professional conversation, or freezing up and being totally speechless. Although there are a million ways to answer this question, focus on the things that are relevant to the professional you're speaking with. A great answer, lasting one to two minutes, will begin with who you are, what you're doing currently, and what you hope to do in the future, and end with why you are excited to speak with the professional. If you have a connection to the professional, like if someone recommended that you speak with him/her, be sure to mention that as well. When answering this question, convey your enthusiasm and gratitude for the opportunity to chat.

### **2 DON'T BE NEGATIVE OR VAGUE ABOUT YOUR CAREER GOALS**

Figuring out your career goals can be challenging, especially if the goal you set out to achieve becomes ever more elusive due to changes in the job market or other circumstances beyond your control. However, it's really important to be upbeat and positive about your future not just for yourself, but also when you're seeking advice during an informational interview. It can be hard for a professional to feel like s/he has to give you a pep talk when they thought they were just giving you career advice. At the same time, don't be so vague about your career goals that it undermines the usefulness of the conversation.

Even if you are exploring several different careers, only focus your conversation on the career field that the professional is in; stating all of your career field interests all can make you appear unfocused and directionless in your goals.

### **3 DON'T ASK FOR A JOB OR OTHER INAPPROPRIATE QUESTIONS**

Don't be that person who asks for a job, personal salary information, or other inappropriate questions during an informational interview. The point of an informational interview is to gather information that you can then use for your own career exploration and job search, not to awkwardly pressure the person you're speaking with to find you a job or divulge personal information.

Place yourself in the other person's shoes. Imagine if you were doing an informational interview to offer your advice and stories to help someone junior to you. Wouldn't it be uncomfortable for you if they instead expected that you would find a job for them? Stick to questions that draw on their unique background, insights, and perspectives.

### **4 DON'T ASK QUESTIONS THAT COULD EASILY BE FOUND ONLINE**

One of the most annoying things for a professional participating in an informational interview is to have to answer questions that can easily be found online. You're not only showing the professional that you didn't do your research ahead of time, but you're also wasting their time that they could have spent answering other more insightful questions.

### **5 DON'T FORCE THE MEETING TO BE LONGER THAN PLANNED**

If the professional says they have to go, they have to go, so don't needlessly impinge on their time. Remember that they are making time out of their busy schedules to chat with you, so show them your gratitude by acknowledging that they have other responsibilities and thanking them for the advice they gave and the time they spent with you. If you enjoyed the conversation and have more questions to ask, save them for a follow up email or phone call. It gives you a good reason to stay in touch!



# SUMMARY & RESOURCES

# ACTION STEPS

## CHECKLISTS

Informational interviews are hands down the best use of your time as you plan for a career after Penn, so get started!

You'll learn so much more from speaking with professionals than just reading online. If you ever feel hesitant about reaching out, just remember that they have once been in your shoes. To get to where they are today, they had to network with people in their fields. Most people are excited to give back by helping others with their careers. Once you land a job as well, you'll likely receive requests to do informational interviews with the next generation of students, so remember to pay it forward in the future once you achieve that career goal of yours.

Now, be curious, be brave, and start informational interviewing!

### PRE-INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

- ✓ Research the person's professional background using LinkedIn, myPenn, and Google
- ✓ Find out about their current and previous roles and employers
- ✓ Learn about their educational background (note any connections to Penn and your alma maters as well as second-degree connections you have)
- ✓ Know their leadership and volunteer interests
- ✓ Confirm the time, date, and location/logistics of your conversation
- ✓ Send a reminder the day before if the informational interview was arranged more than 1 week ago

### POST-INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

- ✓ Send a thank you note via email within 24 hours and follow up on anything needed
- ✓ Send a LinkedIn request to connect with a personalized note
- ✓ Follow up a few months later (such as sending an article relevant to a topic you discussed, sharing a professional or academic update, or asking a question)
- ✓ Reach out to other contacts suggested for informational interviews
- ✓ If the professional has been and will be helpful to you and your career, stay in touch in the long term!

# INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS RESOURCES

## ORGANIZING & TRACKING YOUR INTERVIEWS

Consider keeping a spreadsheet of your interviews including:

- Who you're meeting with and their current role/organization
- Their contact information and any connections you have
- When and where you're meeting
- Questions to ask and notes from the conversation
- Follow up action steps


Here is an example spreadsheet layout to help you keep track of your networking contacts.

## SAMPLE SPREADSHEET

Name	Current Role & Employer	Penn & Other Connections	Contact Email	Scheduled Date, Time, Location	Questions to Ask	Notes from Conversation	Date Thank You Note Sent	Date Follow Up Sent (2-3 Months)	Connected on LinkedIn?	Other Questions to Ask Later







**HAVE MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT  
INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS?**

**MAKE AN APPOINTMENT TO SPEAK  
WITH A CAREER ADVISOR.**

Penn  
**CAREER**  
SERVICES