Graduate School Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself.

A strong answer establishes your status as a talented, motivated, and intriguing individual at the personal, academic, and extracurricular levels. You could start by explaining where you're from, where you grew up, and any interesting personal circumstances. Then talk about your undergraduate university, what you majored and minored in, and why you made those choices. Finally, close by talking about your extracurricular achievements – both in school and outside. Everything you say should build toward the idea that your life has naturally led you to apply to graduate school. Your answer should be a concise, demonstrating your ability to synthesize and structure your thoughts without rambling.

2. Why are you interested in this field?

If you haven't figured this out in your personal statement, you should go back to the drawing board. Basically, restate what you've written in your personal statement, but go deeper and broader. By deeper, we mean explaining in more detail those factors and motivations that you mentioned in your personal statement. By broader, we mean all the stuff you couldn't fit in the statement. A good answer might show both depth and breadth and convey your excitement for the field.

3. Why are you interested in our school and what do you know about the program?

List all the reasons why the school is the single most perfect choice for the field that you're studying. Discuss its faculty, facilities, theoretical approach, course offering, student activities, job placement record, location, and any and all reasons that demonstrate a deliberate choice on
Your goal is to convey your belief that the school is a highly compelling choice for you. If it's your first choice, say so!

4. **What are you going to research?**

Explain what you might want to prove and how it would contribute to the field. In other disciplines, particularly the natural sciences, research intentions carry greater weight, as you're likely to be working directly with a faculty member who is conducting lab work or field work in that area. In that case, it's important to have done your homework on the faculty members (read their journal articles and books) and how you can contribute to or supplement their latest research.

5. **What are your strengths and weaknesses?**

Nobody likes answering this question, but it comes up. Describing your strengths should be straightforward. Pick two or three qualities that you possess and which are relevant to your field. For example, if you're applying to an engineering program, you might discuss your advanced knowledge of math, creative mind, and detail-orientation, backing each claim with examples. Talking about your weaknesses is another story. The general rule is to pick weaknesses that are really "weaknesses turning into strengths". You might say, for instance, that you only earned "Bs" in math, but that you earned an "A" in your last semester after deciding to do something about it. Or that you're not assertive enough, but have been practicing speaking up in recent months and are getting better at it.

6. **Why should we accept you?**

Why not? Describe in modest and balanced terms why you are eminently qualified for the program. Talk about your personal, academic, and extracurricular accomplishments and how they make you a strong candidate for the program. Discuss your long range plans and how you will make full use of the university's resources to accomplish your goals -- not just their facilities, but also access to faculty in areas of particular interest to you. While this may
sound selfish, you're really telling the school that they won't be wasting an admissions spot with you.

7. **What are your career goals?**

You might not have a clue, but it's important to have a preliminary idea of your career goals. Perhaps you want to become a professor, or use your graduate degree to conduct advanced work in another type of organization. Whatever the case, sketch your plans and make it clear how the program that you're applying to is an integral stepping stone to a well-thought trajectory. It's okay to have more than one career goal, so long as your goals are all relevant and show that you're planning to apply the knowledge you'll acquire.

8. **Where else are you applying?**

One way to deal with this question is to say that you've applied to a few other schools whose programs correspond with your research interests, career goals, and other criteria. But that their school is really an excellent fit and that you'd love to be considered for the entering class. This is somewhat evasive, but doesn't force a direct comparison between their school and other schools. Another option is to disclose everything, particularly if you have other offers. This shows that you're an attractive candidate and it may help you get admitted. Which approach to take is up to you?

9. **What have you read recently?**

The interviewer is a faculty member who is interested in establishing your intellectual quality and curiosity. Ideally, your library will consist of books and academic journals packed with articles from the same field to which you're applying. This demonstrates that your interest is genuine and even indicative of passion. You can also mention wider reading, to show that you're well rounded, but start with material that's closer to your discipline, particularly if your graduate program is research-intensive.
10. What Questions do you have for me?

You're almost guaranteed to have this in your grad school interview questions. So prepare a list of five or more questions. The best questions demonstrate that you've research your field and the school's faculty members in depth. For example, you can ask the interviewer to talk more about his or her research: "I read your article on ________, which is a topic that corresponds with my own interests, can you tell me more about it?" You can also discuss specific aspects of the school's department, facilities, courses, or other peculiarities that show that you're a serious applicant. So have your own list of grad school interview questions in your back pocket.

References