



Informational Interviews

There are lots of definitions for the word “interview” and there are lots of types of interviews (think college, job, etc.) As you prepare for a career the most important interviews might be “informational interviews”. Continue reading to explore and find out more.



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Sometimes, at an early age, we may know that we want to go to college or what we want to do for our career, and we can make plans to achieve those goals. But what if these are not so obvious, or we want to consider alternatives before making a final decision? How can we find out what our different options are? There is an endless amount of information on the internet and that can be a good place to start, but that information is usually written for anyone who searches – not just for you. That is where informational interviews can be a big help – they can fill in the gaps, make it real and relatable, and have information tailored to your specific questions. Let's look at what informational interviews are and how you can make the most of them.

WHAT IS AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW? Informational interviews are ones where you ask questions of family, friends, teachers, counselors, coaches, and other professionals who may have more information about a particular subject than you (like a career path, vocational school, or college) so that you can learn and make an informed decision when you need to. They tend to be less formal and shorter than other types of interviews, but to get the most of them, you need to take them seriously – be prepared and follow-up.

WHO SHOULD YOU INTERVIEW? In short, anyone and everyone who can provide you with useful information and who is willing to speak with you. It is not realistic to speak with everyone, of course, but it is best to cast as wide a net as possible and get as many different viewpoints as possible. Everybody has different experiences, likes / dislikes, etc. that shape their views. As the one asking the questions, you will want to listen to not only what is being shared with you, but why the person sharing may think that way, and how it may relate to you. Make sure that you interview some people that you do not know well, but who may know a lot about what you are interested in – for example, a supervisor at work, or the director where you volunteer. They may give you a different perspective, or more information, than those closest to you. It does not mean that they are right – just, possibly, different.



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HOW DO YOU START? As a first step, it is good to get a basic idea about what you want to learn about before having the interviews. Do you want to learn about different types of post-secondary schools (state universities, private colleges, liberal arts schools, vocational schools, etc.), what types of jobs and careers one can have in the medical field (nurse, doctor, technician, researcher, etc.) or, maybe, what careers you may be successful in if you are good at math (engineer, computer science, accountant, etc.)? You do not need to have it all figured out – just a few broad questions. This is where the internet can be a big help. With a general idea of what you want to learn, and a few broad questions, take a few minutes to ask some adults that you know well if you can “get their thoughts” about something you want to learn more about.

These first informational interviews can be really brief and informal but remember to take notes or write down what you learned afterwards, and always ask if they think that there is someone else who they recommend you speak with. You have started to create a spider-web of information.

WHAT'S NEXT? You have now gotten some information that may sharpen your questions or that you might want to test with others. Think about how you can get a deeper understanding of what you are trying to learn about. Maybe someone mentioned hearing that being a medical technician is a good career, but did not know how one becomes a medical technician. What questions would you need to ask to learn more – possibly, is a college degree required? Do you need some type of certification? Will there be lots of jobs when you are ready to start your career? Also, who can you ask about these questions – are there any medical technicians in your family? Can you ask a teacher or counselor if they know any medical technicians that you can speak with? This is where you can start to widen your web of information, but remember, you are just learning and there may be many other career opportunities that you want to find out about. So, even if you speak with a medical technician next, you can ask them why they chose that profession and if there are other professions that they considered which you might also be interested in.



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HOW DO YOU INTERVIEW PEOPLE THAT YOU DO NOT KNOW WELL?

People that you do not know well can be a great source of information, but you need to approach them a bit differently than those that you know well. Here are some tips:

1. If you do not know the person at all, try to get someone that you know well to introduce you to them.
2. If you are uncomfortable speaking with someone that you do not know well, have a parent, or guardian, or friend join you – but remember to ask the person that you are interviewing if it is ok for someone join you.
3. Remember, not everyone is willing to be interviewed. It is ok, they might be busy or not think that they can assist you much. Don't be discouraged. You will find that many more people will be willing to speak with you.
4. Be prepared for the discussion. If possible, read up about the person that you are speaking with – LinkedIn is a great source for professionals. Learn a bit about the company that they work for. Try to come up with questions that are specific to the person you are interviewing so that they can give you good advice.
5. Be prepared to give some information about yourself – what school you go to, what you have already learned about the topic that you will be discussing, why you are interested in speaking with the person, etc. Having a brief introduction is a great way to start a discussion and might make it easier if you are naturally uncomfortable speaking with someone new.
6. Before you start the interview, check with the person how much time they have to speak with you and stay within that limit.
7. Listen carefully to what your interviewee is saying and take notes.
8. Ask if there is anyone else that they recommend that you speak with – keep building your spider-web.
9. Thank them for their time and advice.



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ANY FINAL TIPS?

1. You can do informational interviews throughout your life, not just when you are in high school or college. It is a way to continue learning about things that you are interested in.
2. Keep a personal journal with your notes about discussions that you had – what did you learn, what do you want to know more about, how can you stay in touch with your interviewee. Use it as your source of information, but also as a way to reflect on what interests you and why.
3. Remember, informational interviews are only expanding your knowledge, not to ask for a job, or a reference, or anything other than the interviewee's time and advice. Maybe a job or some other benefit will come out of the interview, but don't press for it during the interview.
4. Also, remember your boundaries during the interviews. Try not to share too much personal information about yourself except what is important for the discussion (where you are at school, what you are interested in about college or a career, etc.) and do not ask too much personal information about the person that you are interviewing.
5. Have fun.