

Learning Minds

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ACEING THAT FIRST IMPRESSION

Here's how you can let your sheer awesomeness shine through during your admission interview **BY TRUDY KWEK**

Whether you're interviewing for that dream course, angling for that plum internship at a leading media company or just trying to catch the eye of the resident campus cutie, one time-tested adage holds true: First impressions count.

Walk into the room looking like you'd rather be elsewhere and no one will notice you or even realise when you've left. Making a confident entrance will not only get you noticed, it could even be the first step in your journey towards tertiary glory.

While interviews are usually conducted for scholarship or award applicants, they're also de rigueur for general admission into some courses.

"Admission interviews provide us with a platform to gain a richer understanding of the candidate beyond what is submitted on paper," said Mr Christopher Harris, executive dean for Schools at Kaplan.

Mr Eric Lim, head of Business School in Management Development Institute of Singapore (MDIS), feels that interviews are necessary to assess the candidate's soft skills, passion and suitability towards the chosen course.

"It is important for us to align the candidate's personality with the course," he said.

So showcase your personality, talk about your passion and go beyond what you already wrote on your application. Read on to find out how you can impress your interviewers and increase your chances of landing a place in your dream university.

#1

DON'T JUST WING IT

Does your mind go blank when you get nervous? Practising in advance could be the solution. Mr Lim said: "A lack of confidence on the subject matter could make you nervous, which may lead to a mental block. Boost your confidence by practising for the interview with friends." You should be prepared for questions about your background, motivation, goals, interests, strengths and weaknesses. Mr Lim suggests learning facts about the university and your course of study. It'll help you to craft thoughtful questions and answers, and show your interest in being part of the institution. "Outstanding candidates are usually the ones who have done research on the course they wanted to pursue. They can give clear reasons on why they choose to apply for our university over others," said Mr Lim. But being well-prepared does not mean memorising your answers. "Scripted answers are detectable as they sound overly rehearsed," Mr Lim said. "While you may still pass the interview, the impression would be that you do not possess the ability to perform any impromptu speeches or presentations."



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#2

DRESS TO DEPRESS...

...the other candidates, because you look that good. The way you dress might differentiate yourself from rival candidates. Formal attire should be your go-to option if you don't know the dress code for the interview. "The panel assesses the way candidates dress and groom themselves the moment they step into the room," said Mr Harris from Kaplan. The same applies for students enrolling in MDIS. The first thing that Mr Lim notices is a candidate's attire, hairstyle and etiquette. The bottom line is that you should look neat, smart and professional, as if you are going for a job interview. "Coming to an interview smartly dressed would give the impression that you take the interview seriously and it's a way of showing respect to the interview process and the panel of interviewers," said Mr Harris.

#3

PUNCTUALITY IS A VIRTUE

If you are not able to be on time for that one interview, it doesn't reflect well on your ability to meet assignment deadlines and arrive on time for lessons. Mr Harris recommends arriving 15 minutes early so you have enough time to mentally prepare for the interview and make adjustments to your attire or your presentation materials. Coming on time also shows that you are diligent and dependable. In an age of navigation apps, "I couldn't find my way" is not an acceptable excuse for being late. Make the effort to plan your journey beforehand.

#4

CONFIDENCE IS KEY

Interviewers look out for candidates who are articulate and who can interact confidently. "What makes a candidate stand out is his ability to respond to questions with conviction," said Dr Abhishek Bhati, the campus dean of the Singapore campus of James Cook University (JCU). Tell-tale signs of a lack of confidence can be found in your body language, such as a weak handshake or the inability to maintain eye contact. According to Ms M S Shanti, the associate director of the Singapore campus of JCU, candidates often make the mistake of avoiding eye contact during the interview. "This can imply that the person is shy, not sure about his response or unable to communicate well," she said. Don't get stressed thinking that the interview is going to be intense. Mr Harris says that the interview at Kaplan Singapore is kept formal but convivial. Candidates are given plenty of time to talk about themselves and their passion, and ask the panel questions. The panel, which usually comprises three to four interviewers, are not there to intimidate but to get to know you better. So muster your courage and be yourself. To make sure your nervous habits don't surface during the interview, identify and address them ahead of time.

#5

STOP SELLING YOURSELF SHORT

It's your time to shine, so don't be shy to talk about your achievements and highlight why you deserve to get that acceptance letter, without coming across as being arrogant. When asked open-ended and experiential-related questions, explain the "how" behind your accomplishments and be sure of yourself when answering questions such as these:

- Why do you think you should be awarded the scholarship?
- Tell us a time when you faced a challenge and how you overcame it.
- How can you contribute to society through this scholarship?

You need to know your strengths and communicate them to your interviewers in a persuasive way. Interviewers are also looking for candidates who have a clear sense of direction. Talk about your aspirations and how getting into the university is going to help you reach your goal. Be enthusiastic, focused and passionate. Above all, remember to stay genuine.

AT AN ADMISSION INTERVIEW

DO'S

- 1 Smile and greet the interviewer with a firm handshake.
- 2 Bring extra printed resumes or portfolios.
- 3 Expect to answer experiential-related questions — prepare anecdotes, stories and examples that reflect your strengths.
- 4 Have good manners and etiquette.
- 5 Ask questions. It shows your interest in the institution.

DON'TS

- 1 Slouch.
- 2 Answer in monosyllables. Always elaborate and add depth with examples.
- 3 Appear distracted by checking your mobile phone or watch.
- 4 Stretch the truth and oversell yourself. Be honest.
- 5 Waste your interviewer's time with questions that you can find on the university's website.