Informational Interviews

A guide to preparing for the conversation

UCSF Graduate Education and Postdoctoral Affairs
Career and Professional Development

What are informational interviews?

These are 20-45 minute conversations you have with someone else to learn more about their career path as you explore and make decisions about your own career options.

[Text Version of Image Above] The Arc of an Informational Interview
1) Their Present: Ask about their current role and experience. 2) Their Past: Ask about their academic/professional background and how they got into their current role. 3) Their Future: Ask about what's next for their career in the short term or long term. 4) Their Advice: Ask for their professional advice, feedback, or recommendations. 5) Their Support: Thank them for their time, note specific advice you found helpful, and ask to stay in touch.

What questions can you ask?

You can ask questions that reflect what you want to learn about their career path and the professional advice you want from them. We've provided templates below that you can personalize to your interests and needs.

What does __ look like for you working (as/in/at) __*?	I heard __ about __*. What do you think about it?	How is __ typically done in __*?
How did __ help you get into __*?	How much did you consider things like __ when deciding to join __*?	How did you make the transition from __** to __*?
I've already done __ and plan to do __ next. Could you give me advice?	I'm hoping to __. What do you suggest I do to (improve/build) __?	I want to __ and am thinking __. What else do you think I should consider?

*Their current role, field, or organization
**Their previous role, field, or organization

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Navigate to What You Need

This guide is designed to help you prepare for your next informational interview. Further optional resources are provided in Appendices A and B.

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Create Your Questions for the Chat

The prompts below walk you through the process of making questions to ask in your next informational interview. By focusing on a specific conversation, you will be able to craft questions that are more personalized and beneficial for you. We recommend revisiting what you are looking for before each conversation.

1. **What excites you about getting to talk with the person you're interviewing? What are you hoping to get out of the conversation? Jot down your thoughts in the space provided below.**
   Reflecting on what you want to get out of the chat gives you a starting point for honing in on what to ask.

2. **Mark the ideas/phrases you wrote above that are most important to you for this conversation.**
   Having key ideas in mind is useful to guide your thinking as you go through the rest of the prompts.

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3 **What are the top 3-5 things you want to <u>know about them</u> by the end of the conversation? Pick from the topics below and rank your choices from 1 (most valuable to you) to 5 (least valuable to you).**
You might not have time to ask about everything, so getting more specific on what you want to learn about their career path tells you which topics to focus on.

___ What a typical day or week looks like for them in their role/field/organization

___ What factors helped them decide to work in their role/field/organization

___ What in their academic training prepared them for their role/field

___ What the application/interview process was like for their role/organization

___ What they think about certain aspects of their role/field/organization (e.g. salary, workload)

___ What things in their resume/CV were important for landing their current role

___ What training/onboarding they received when starting in their role/organization

___ What they are looking to do next in their career trajectory

***Bonus Step:** Check how well your choices/rankings align with your reflection on page 2 and adjust them as needed.*

4 **In the table below, write a question for each of your ranked choices from Prompt 3. Craft questions that speak to what you are specifically curious about. You can use the templates given on page 1.**
Ranking your questions here helps you decide how to prioritize them in the chat.

Rank	Questions to learn more about their career path
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

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5 **What are the top 3 things you want to <u>ask them for</u> by the end of the interview? Pick from the topics below and rank your choices from 1 (most important to you) to 3 (least important to you).**
Getting more specific on what support you want from them tells you which requests to focus on.

___ Advice for how I can break into their field considering my background/experience

___ Advice for how to gauge whether their role/field/organization is right for me

___ Advice on what to look for in a role in their field (e.g. training, workload, salary)

___ Feedback on my application materials (resume/CV, cover letter, etc.)

___ People they know who would be good for me to contact and talk with next

___ Recommendations for roles/organizations in their field that I should look into

***Bonus Step:** Check how well your choices/rankings align with your reflection on page 2 and adjust them as needed.*

6 **In the table below, write a question for each of your ranked choices from Prompt 5. Craft questions that speak to what you specifically want their help with. You can use the templates given on page 1.**
Ranking your requests here helps you decide to how to prioritize them in the chat.

Rank	Questions to get their advice, feedback, and recommendations
1	
2	
3	

7 **[After the Conversation] What questions do you still have? What new questions do you have? Jot down your thoughts in the space provided below.**
You can follow up with the person you interviewed or find someone new to answer these questions.

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Appendix A: Learn More About Networking and Following Up

Ask a Career Consultant Advice Column

Learning from other people's questions can be a great way to prepare for situations you wouldn't have thought about on your own. Read our responses to these questions from a graduate student and a postdoc about their informational interviews.

- What do I say? I don't know what I want to do!
  We talk about how to respond if asked about your career interests when you're still figuring it out.

- We had a coffee chat—what do I do now?
  We talk about how to follow up after a lukewarm informational interview with someone whose interests don't overlap much with yours.

You can browse the archive of our past columns for more questions from graduate students and postdocs.

Mastering the Discomfort of Networking: A Comprehensive Guide

Doing informational interviews—and any form of networking—with someone you don't know can be daunting. "Mastering the Discomfort of Networking" is a five-part video series that offers practical advice and techniques on these topics:

1. Why is Networking Important?
2. How to Enter a Conversation with Effective Communication
3. How to Maintain a Conversation and Build Meaningful Professional Relationships
4. How to End a Conversation Gracefully
5. Mastering Networking Strategies for Meaningful Connections

You can watch the video(s) that cover what you want to learn and in whatever order best supports you!

How to Follow Up After a Networking Event

Check out our "How to follow up after a networking event" webpage to learn about the benefits of following up after a networking interaction, get tips on how to do it, and view sample reach-out and thank-you emails.

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Appendix B: Build Your Conversation Roadmap

Instructions: This template provides a structure for organizing your questions in thematic order and crafting your talking points for the start/end of the chat. Fill out the parts that are useful for you and feel free to leave blank the parts that are not.

Note: You do not have to fill out all the question spaces in this template! We recommend leaving space to ask questions that arise for you in real-time as the conversation flows.

Interviewee Name: _____			**Total Time:** _____ **minutes**
Your Introduction	*Suggestions: Thank them for meeting with you; briefly share your current position, institution, and what you want to learn from talking with them.*		
Their Present	*Question 1 (definitely ask)*	*Question 2 (want to ask)*	*Question 3 (ask if time allows)*
Their Past	*Question 1 (definitely ask)*	*Question 2 (want to ask)*	*Question 3 (ask if time allows)*

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Their Future	*Question 1 (definitely ask)*	*Question 2 (want to ask)*	*Question 3 (ask if time allows)*
Their Advice	*Question 1 (definitely ask)*	*Question 2 (want to ask)*	*Question 3 (ask if time allows)*
Their Support	*Suggestions: Thank them for their time; share one thing they said or a piece of advice that you found particularly helpful; ask to keep in touch.*		

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