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# How to get an offer and prepare for a university interview for subjects within the biological sciences

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## Getting an offer or invitation to interview

The UCAS basics:

- 1 Apply to universities that are likely to consider your application seriously.
- 2 Have a faultless application form with plenty of interesting content.
- 3 Have a supportive reference containing good predicted grades.
- 4 Write a personal statement that conveys that you are *interested* in the subject and *interesting*.

## Where to apply?

The staff at your school or college will hopefully do their best to help you with this. They should advise you on realistic choices. University departments publish their entry requirements — find out what they are for the courses you would like to enter. Then get a frank appraisal about your chances from the staff who teach you, before you burn your boats and fill in the UCAS entry form. However, be aware that published entry requirements may not tell a particularly useful story — some universities set their ‘requirements’ high to make it look as if they are high profile. Others set theirs at a level at which they know students will cope (but routinely take in students with considerably better grades). Both *may* regularly accept students who fall slightly, or even well, below their published requirements. If in doubt, ask (via email or phone calls, or at open days).

Whatever you do, don’t apply to somewhere with published requirements way above anything you can realistically hope to achieve. And don’t try to persuade your teachers to inflate their predictions with a view to helping you get an offer. Admissions staff are likely to look at your GCSE and AS grades, so are unlikely to offer places to students who have not already performed to the level of their requirements. And if you do get a high offer that you cannot achieve, you are likely to be very disappointed in the summer if you don’t make the grades, because the university does not have to accept you.

If your AS results are way out of line with your usual performance *for some very understandable reason* (e.g. serious ill health — yours or a close relative's), then your school or college should hopefully have indicated this in your reference. But it would be worth you emailing the admissions staff at your target places (if their entry requirements are high) with a brief, accurate and matter-of-fact email to reinforce this if you really are sure you can pull your results up with the next modules/resits.

Lastly, if you are really keen to go to a particular university, don't put four or five similar courses at that establishment on your application. Choose one or at most two — they are likely to have similar entry requirements for all their courses and if you don't make them you will have lost the chance to be considered by other institutions.

## What do admissions staff look for on the application form?

In priority order:

### Your qualifications and your forthcoming examinations

Just make very sure this is complete, accurate and that all the details are correct.

### Your personal statement

This really can make the difference between an offer (or an invitation to an interview) and the dreaded rejection. Here are two openers:

'I have always been interested in zoology...'

and

'I hated spiders as a child...'

Which do you think made me want to read on when I was an admissions officer? You are writing for a fellow human, one who may read several hundreds of forms every year. If you can catch the eye of the over-worked form readers and then hold their interest, the battle is almost won. The personal statement sorts out the boring nerds from the people-who-will-get-jobs. You know who the former are...really focused, know their stuff, straight A\* grades but not another thing to talk about! Such folks are unlikely to get interviews where I work. Why not? Because the better applicants have other strings to their bows. They may have done summer work in some research labs, or an in-depth project as part of their studies. They may have a black belt in origami, or were jugglers on their regional team. They may have worked every Saturday and Sunday at the local garden centre. What matters is that this activity makes them stand out, and that in their spare time they probably had to prioritise and resolve conflict — to read the biology textbook, or to work/practise the origami/juggling etc. They had to prioritise — spending enough time on each to fulfil their obligations to the workplace or reach a good standard at their sport. There isn't a university course in the country that does not require effective prioritising, and not a single job for graduates that doesn't demand at least two balls in the air at once!

The statement is the way to convey *your* interest in the subject/s for which you have applied. I often read forms that tell me that my subject is interesting/important/fast-moving etc. Funnily enough I already know that. What I want to know is what *you*, the applicant, finds fascinating and why. It is also the way to show what an interesting person you are (giving you a great chance to spend some of an interview talking about things you know a lot about, rather than being asked questions about things the interviewer knows a lot about and you don't). It is also a good way to convey what you would like to do

in the future (if you know; if not, don't feel the need to make something up — there are literally thousands of things biological graduates can do and your years at uni will help you to decide). If you harbour a wish to have David Attenborough's job, this is not the place to divulge it (he's still going strong and jobs like his are exceedingly few and far between). What you should try to show is an interest in something biological that will allow you to talk authoritatively with the interviewer. If you have bred chinchillas for years and have worked out the inheritance of their coat colour, by all means wax eloquent about it in your statement (but expect some interview questions about genetics and breeding behaviour). If you would love to 'work with dolphins' but your only experience of these superb mammals is from a *Seaworld* show, keep quiet until asked 'and what got you interested in biology?' (when the conversation can then be steered in the direction of your voluntary work experience at the local otter sanctuary). Bottom line — don't include *anything* you can't discuss in reasonable depth, with enthusiasm, at interview.

Finally get feedback from teachers, family and friends on what you have written — make sure they think it sounds like you, and go through it with a fine-toothed comb for spelling mistakes and grammatical errors.

### The reference

What should you be doing to elicit a glowing, supportive reference? Well, if you turn up on time to lessons and are engaged and involved in class that will help, but there may be a lot more that you can do. Do you contribute to the wider community in your area, or at school/college? Are you on the peer-support scheme? Have you made it clear to your biology teacher/s that you do relevant voluntary work, or are really keen in some way, such as helping with college open days, workshops, national or international initiatives? Get to know your teachers and make sure they really understand how keen you are on the subject you wish to read at uni. Watch *Horizon*, documentaries etc. and suggest what might appeal to fellow students. Don't be a pest, but make sure the person writing your reference for each subject has a good idea of how keen and engaged you are.

If you are asked to submit a CV or list of achievements, this is your chance to make sure your teachers say something about any activities that you were unable to mention in your statement due to space constraints. If you are offered the opportunity to check your reference before your form is sent off, grab it! Read what has been written, make sure it is accurate and shows you in the best light possible. If you have organised relevant work experience that happened to be through your uncle's firm but then carried it out well, somewhere that he was not involved, make sure the reference doesn't say 'he did some work experience with his uncle'. Make the most of everything you have achieved but don't make things up.

### Your employment record

For non-vocational programmes\* it is not usually important to have had a particular type of job, but more important that you have held one down. Even if it was part-time shop or café work, the fact that you were reliable enough to be kept on for several months will count in your favour — and will attest to your interpersonal, organisational and communication skills.

### Special needs

If you have any, be sensible and put them down. Inclusive teaching practices at most good universities should cover mild dyslexia but to make sure you get the best support you would be wise to be honest about any special needs you have. Many of the brightest and best biological scientists have special needs — for example, see how many scientists (including three Nobel prizewinners) have the 'gift of

dyslexia' [www.dyslexia.com/famous.htm](http://www.dyslexia.com/famous.htm) so make sure your future teachers know how best to accommodate your needs.

## Surviving an interview

You have been invited for an interview. Bravo! That is a huge step forward. All that is needed now is to ensure that the reality matches up to the exciting-sounding individual on the form.

### What to wear?

What you wear really doesn't matter, so long as you feel comfortable and it does not include a T-shirt with a contentious slogan. You are being interviewed about your interest in biology, not clothes.

### What to say?

What you say should also be easy — be yourself. Don't try to guess what the interviewer wants you to say, just give honest responses. It is quite possible that you will not be asked much, or indeed anything, about topics on the A2/AS specifications (what you know about that will be tested in the exams). What you are asked will probably be determined by your personal statement, and should relate to what really interests you. Be prepared to talk in an informed manner about the subject you have applied for, and anything you have mentioned. The chinchilla-breeder should be home free, but the applicant who told me he liked to rebuild classic cars was exposed as a sham when it became pretty obvious he didn't know the difference between camshafts and camknickers!

If you have marvelled at a BBC documentary, see if you can find out a bit more than was given in the programme. *Ocean Giants* was one of my favourites, and since the programme there has been a lot of interest and research into large aquatic animals. Have a look at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/21180618>, for example. This explains how to tag and monitor hammerhead sharks. The site has related stories and related links for you to get more information, including how to work at 'Sharklab' in the Bahamas so you can learn how to do it yourself (now that would look *really* good on a UCAS application!). Read this recent account of someone who did just that and now has a job there: <http://www.independent.co.uk/student/study-abroad/snappy-snaps-from-zoology-degree-to-shark-photographer-8746359.html>

Publications such as BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES REVIEW, *New Scientist*, *Scientific American* and *National Geographic* can give added value to television coverage (and will prepare you with ammunition for the interview question 'and have you read anything that particularly interested you recently?'). Another good source of information is *Science Daily* news, especially as the sources of the information the journalists use are always cited, so you can take your research further ([www.sciencedaily.com/](http://www.sciencedaily.com/)). Have a look on this website the evening before your interview — it could be excellent preparation for questions about the current hot topics in biology.

If you have had any work experience, be prepared for questions that ask you to reflect on the experience. What did you enjoy, what did you find challenging etc.? Employers value transferable skills such as team-working, problem-solving, communication, time-management, and these are also vital skills for success at university — your cautious confidence with most, and your desire to enhance the rest, may be explored.

The obvious opening questions are 'Why did you choose this city/course?' and should be easy to answer. If the football, orchestra or access to local mountains was a factor, by all means say so, but, as above, expect to be asked to elaborate on why these things are important to you, and if at all possible work in some link with the programme for which you have applied. If the 'superb reputation

for research' was a factor, you should know what the term 'RAE' means, and should expect to be asked whether you know about any of the research projects that are currently enhancing that reputation (check the university website before leaving home!). The most obvious closing questions are those that mirror interviews for employment — what will *you* bring to the organisation? Be prepared to outline what contribution you might make to university life.

Finally, it cannot be emphasised too often, don't worry! If there is something you don't know, just admit it (if possible working the conversation round to something you do know about). 'No, I have no idea why all F1 hybrid female chinchillas are brown with white spots, but I have discovered that they all prefer food pellets with more calcium than their parents...' If you say something daft, just own up and say, 'Sorry, can I have another go at that?'

### What to ask?

What to ask can be important. Try not to ask questions that are listed in the FAQs in the 'Interview Day' brochure. Instead focus your questions on academic or employment-related matters that may be specific to *you*, and that show you have researched the course on offer. If there is a work placement scheme, for example, find out whether there are placements available for what you might like to do. If that is work in a museum or zoo, for example, is the work salaried? What standard of first-year examination results are required for entry to that opportunity? Do you have to find the placement, or does the university find them for you? Do graduates get offered jobs at their placement institutions? If there are field courses, are they compulsory, when and where do they happen, how much do they cost, and is the work project-based or didactic teaching? If you have always wanted to take up juggling but have always been too busy working in the garden centre, don't be afraid to ask if there is a juggling club. Your interviewer will hope that you will want not simply to maintain your strengths but to expand your horizons at university.

Don't feel you must ask questions — it is always nice to hear that the literature and introductory talk have 'answered them all'. But you may find it reassuring to have a few written down in advance in case you or your interviewer dries up and you get to that stage with time to spare.

This may be an opportunity to mention problems that might prevent you achieving your predicted grades. If your chemistry teacher was recently run over by a truck and the supply teacher is dreadful, or your father is ill and you have to help run his business, or you have been ill and missed some studying time, then do mention this. There may be nothing that the interviewer can do to alter the offer you are made, but it might make a big difference once the results are out. If you have just missed the required grades but your great interview performance and problem have been recorded, it might tip the balance at confirmation. I have referred to the interview notes made by staff on 'near-miss' candidates and found it in my heart to admit them before now — so don't hold back.

Good luck!

\*This article does not relate to vocational programmes such as medicine, dentistry, optometry and veterinary science, where relevant work experience and a clear idea of what the vocation involves is essential. We have covered some of these programmes in recent magazines and will be covering more in the upcoming issues. Our advice is somewhat different for each, but to start you off, if it is medicine or veterinary science that interests you, we published an article by one of our editors with experience of admissions to medicine in our February 2012 issue (see 'So you want to study medicine...?', Volume 24, No. 3, pages 10–12), aspiring vets should read the Prospects column in issue 1 this year and optometry will be covered in issue 3.