

A COMPLETE PREPARATION RESOURCE

# The Boarding School *Interview Guide*

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A guided companion for prospective students & their families navigating high school admissions.

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*“The interview is not a test. It is an invitation to be known.”*

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## FOREWORD

# Your Family's *Interview Companion*

*A guide designed to be read together — student and parents — and returned to as the interview date approaches.*

*“Before the conversation begins, there is the quiet of preparation — and in that quiet, a young person becomes ready to be known.”*

A NOTE ON BEGINNINGS

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### ★ A NOTE FOR INTERNATIONAL FAMILIES

Throughout this guide, you will find specific guidance for students whose first language is not English and for families navigating U.S. boarding school culture for the first time. Look for the ★ symbol.

*Understanding what admissions offices are really looking for — and why the conversation matters more than the transcript.*

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Before preparing what to say, it helps to understand why the interview exists at all. Transcripts and test scores tell a school what a student has achieved. The interview tells them who that student is.

Boarding schools are not simply academic institutions — they are communities. Students live, eat, study, and grow together. The question every admissions team asks is fundamentally about fit.

# Why Schools *Interview*

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*“Will this person thrive here, and will our community be richer for having them?”*

## The Five Things Schools Are Assessing

Across every boarding school interview, regardless of format, interviewers are evaluating the same five core qualities. Understanding them is the first step toward preparing answers that resonate.

### 01 Intellectual Curiosity

Does this student genuinely love to learn? Do they pursue ideas beyond the classroom — for the pleasure of it, not only the grade?

### 02 Self-Awareness

Does this student understand their strengths, their growth areas, and the kind of person they want to become?

### 03 Character & Integrity

How does this student handle difficulty, failure, or ethical complexity? What do they do when no one is watching?

### 04 Community Contribution

What will this student add to dorms, teams, clubs, and dining hall conversations? What is the texture of their presence?

### 05 Genuine Fit

Has this student done their research? Do they understand what makes this school specific, and why they belong here?

#### ★ A NOTE FOR INTERNATIONAL FAMILIES

International families often assume that academic excellence is the primary driver of admission. In reality, U.S. boarding schools weight personal qualities very heavily. A student with slightly lower grades but a vibrant, authentic interview will frequently be chosen over a student with a perfect transcript who appears coached or rehearsed.

The interview is an opportunity for your child's personality, curiosity, and warmth to come through. *Encourage authenticity above performance.*

“

*Let the school fall in love with your child through your child.*

A PRINCIPLE FOR THE PARENT CONVERSATION

## The Parent's Role

Many schools also conduct a brief parent conversation — either alongside the student's interview or separately. Schools are assessing the family, not just the applicant. They want to understand:

- Whether the family's **values align** with the school's culture and mission.
- Whether parents can **support a teenager** living independently — emotionally, practically, and at distance.
- Whether the family will be a **constructive, engaged partner** with the school community throughout the years ahead.

The best parent interviews are warm, curious, and focused on the student. Avoid over-explaining your child's achievements. The interview is not a place to advocate; it is a place to be known.

### AVOID

Reciting accomplishments your child has already listed on the application. Speaking on behalf of your child when they were asked the question.

### AIM FOR

Specific stories that illustrate values. Honest reflection on your child's growth. Curiosity about the school and its community.

*What to expect — and how to prepare for each format with confidence rather than surprise.*

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Boarding school interviews vary considerably in format. Knowing what type of interview your child will face allows them to focus their preparation precisely, rather than diffusing energy across every possibility.

This chapter covers the two formats most international families will encounter, with a particular emphasis on the virtual interview — now the primary format for the majority of cross-border applications.

# Interview *Formats*

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*“Format does not change the questions. It only changes how warmth must travel.”*

ON THE VIRTUAL INTERVIEW

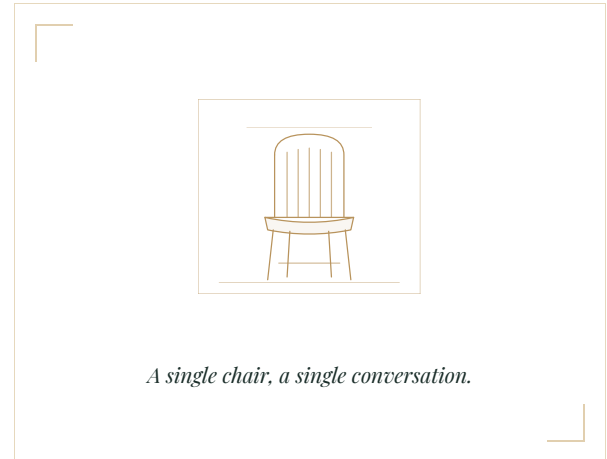
## The Traditional One-on-One Interview

### What to expect

A conversational tone with open-ended questions. The interviewer will guide the discussion but will expect the student to carry it. Silences are normal and do not need to be filled immediately — a thoughtful pause is itself a kind of answer.

### Best preparation

Practice speaking at length about yourself, your interests, and your goals. Prepare three to five rich stories about experiences that reveal your character — not your résumé.



## The Virtual Interview

The same questions, the same conversational depth, and the same evaluation criteria as any other format. What changes is the technical environment and the discipline required to project warmth through a camera.

Test your internet connection, lighting, microphone, and camera at least one day before the interview. Choose a quiet, neutral background. Dress fully — head to toe — as you would for an in-person professional meeting.

## Setting Up Your Environment

Five details that quietly communicate professionalism — or quietly undermine it. Address each one the day before the interview, never the morning of.

### LIGHTING

Position a light source **in front of your face**, not behind you. Avoid sitting with a bright window at your back — it will silhouette you.

### BACKGROUND

A clean, neutral background is ideal. A tidy bookshelf or plain wall communicates focus. Avoid beds, kitchens, and busy decor.

### CAMERA HEIGHT

Position your camera at **eye level**. Stack books under your laptop if needed. Looking down into a camera reads as small; looking up, as deferential.

### AUDIO

Use headphones with a built-in microphone for best sound quality. Built-in laptop mics introduce echo and ambient noise that strain a listener.

### DEVICE

Use a laptop or desktop whenever possible — phones create a less professional impression, and the small screen makes natural eye contact almost impossible.

#### ★ INTERNATIONAL FAMILIES · VIRTUAL INTERVIEW TIPS

- Schedule the interview during your child's **best time of day** for mental sharpness — account carefully for time-zone differences.
- If English is not your child's first language, hold a **10-minute warm-up conversation** in English immediately before the interview.
- Have a backup plan ready: a mobile hotspot, a second device, or a backup location.
- Confirm the meeting link, platform, and login details **24 hours in advance** — and again 30 minutes before.
- If a technical problem occurs, stay calm, apologize briefly, and continue. *How you handle disruption is itself a character signal.*

*A decoded question bank — the underlying purpose, talking points to guide preparation, and a sample answer for each.*

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This chapter walks you through the fourteen questions most commonly asked in boarding school interviews. Read each as a piece of a larger conversation, not a script to memorize.

**BEFORE YOU PREPARE ANY ANSWER**

Read the school's mission statement and identify two or three values that genuinely resonate with you. Then look for places in your answers where those values appear in your own life. The strongest answers weave them in naturally.

# Common Questions

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*“Prepare to think clearly, not to perform perfectly.”*

A PRINCIPLE FOR QUESTION PREPARATION

## 01

*Tell me about yourself.*

## WHAT THEY'RE REALLY ASKING

*Can you present yourself with clarity, warmth, and confidence? They want to meet a person, not hear a list of achievements.*

## TALKING POINTS

- Keep it clear and concise. Tell them where you are from, what grade you are in, and what subjects excite you.
- Mention one or two extracurricular activities or passions.
- End with something memorable — a value, a curiosity, or a goal. Do not read your application back to them.

## SAMPLE ANSWER

*"My name is [Name], and I'm a tenth-grade student from [City], [Country]. I've been passionate about science for as long as I can remember — I actually set up a small chemistry experiment station in my room when I was twelve. Outside the classroom, I play competitive tennis and volunteer at a local literacy program. I'm someone who genuinely loves learning, and I'm excited to bring that energy to a new community."*

## 02

*What is your favorite subject? Why?*

## WHAT THEY'RE REALLY ASKING

*Are you intellectually engaged? Do you pursue ideas with genuine curiosity, or just study to get grades?*

## TALKING POINTS

- There is no right or wrong answer — pick a subject you genuinely enjoy.
- Go beyond "I'm good at it." Think about a specific assignment or moment that lit something up for you.
- Tell it as a short story, not a list.

## SAMPLE ANSWER

*"My favorite subject is history, particularly modern world history. What I find fascinating is how the same period can look completely different depending on which country's textbook you read. Last year, I wrote a comparative essay on how different nations teach World War II, and it completely changed how I think about the idea of historical truth."*

## 03

*What are your goals at this school?*

## WHAT THEY'RE REALLY ASKING

*Have you thought seriously about why you are here? Do your goals align with what this school actually offers?*

## TALKING POINTS

- Be specific about *this* school — not boarding schools in general.
- Reference programs or values that genuinely appeal to you.
- Show that you have thought about what you will give, not only what you will gain.

## SAMPLE ANSWER

*"I have two main goals. Academically, I want to push beyond the limits of what my current school can offer. Personally, I want to grow into greater independence. I also want to contribute: I'd love to bring an international perspective to classroom discussions and start or join initiatives that connect students across different backgrounds."*

## 04

*What are your strengths?*

## WHAT THEY'RE REALLY ASKING

*Do you know yourself well? Can you speak about your qualities with honesty and evidence, not just confidence?*

## TALKING POINTS

- Choose one or two genuine strengths and anchor them in a specific story or example.
- Avoid generic answers like "I'm a hard worker" without evidence — everyone says that.
- Think about what your teachers, parents, or coaches would say about you.

## SAMPLE ANSWER

*"One of my main strengths is adaptability. Because I grew up in a multicultural household and have moved between cities twice, I've had to rebuild my friendships and adjust to new environments more than once. My last teacher told me I was the student she trusted most to make a new classmate feel welcome — and I think that comes directly from having been the new person myself."*

05

*What are your weaknesses?*

## WHAT THEY'RE REALLY ASKING

*Are you self-aware enough to identify genuine areas for growth? Are you actively working on them?*

## TALKING POINTS

- Be honest — but not self-defeating. Name a real weakness.
- Explain where it shows up, then describe the concrete steps you have taken to address it.
- The goal is to show growth, not perfection.

## SAMPLE ANSWER

*"A weakness I've been working on is speaking up in group discussions. I noticed this gap when I joined an international debate club and realized I was holding back ideas I genuinely had. I started setting small goals: contribute at least once in the first ten minutes of every session. I've gotten much more comfortable — and I see this school as an opportunity to keep building that skill."*

06

*What do you like to do for fun?*

## WHAT THEY'RE REALLY ASKING

*Who are you when no one is grading you? What do you pursue for its own sake?*

## TALKING POINTS

- Talk about activities that reveal genuine passion or curiosity — not what sounds impressive.
- Mention sports, creative pursuits, community involvement, or personal projects.
- Show that you use your free time with intention.

## SAMPLE ANSWER

*"One thing I really enjoy is photography, especially street photography. I started carrying a camera around my city about two years ago — it's taught me to slow down and pay attention in a way I never did before. I also play basketball twice a week and I've recently started learning to cook traditional dishes from my region, partly because I know I'll miss the food when I'm abroad."*

07

*What subject do you find most difficult?*

## WHAT THEY'RE REALLY ASKING

*How do you respond to difficulty? Do you avoid it, or do you engage with it constructively?*

## TALKING POINTS

- Be honest, but not dismissive of the subject.
- Name the difficulty, explain specifically why it is challenging, and describe the steps you've already taken to improve.
- Ending on a note of determination matters.

## SAMPLE ANSWER

*"The subject I find most challenging is English literature — specifically analyzing texts in a second language at a high level. I've been working on this by reading more widely in English and keeping a journal in English. My teacher told me my analytical writing has improved noticeably this year, which was genuinely encouraging."*

08

*Tell me about your family.*

## WHAT THEY'RE REALLY ASKING

*How has your upbringing shaped your values and your way of seeing the world?*

## TALKING POINTS

- Share what makes your family meaningful to you — not just facts about its members.
- Talk about values your family has instilled in you, and a specific memory that illustrates those values.
- Including extended family or cultural traditions adds depth.

## SAMPLE ANSWER

*"I come from a close family — my parents, my younger brother, and my grandparents who live nearby. My grandmother has shaped a lot of who I am. She grew up with very little access to education but reads constantly to this day and always says that curiosity is the one thing no one can take from you. That idea has stayed with me."*

09

*Tell me about a person you admire.*

## WHAT THEY'RE REALLY ASKING

*What values matter most to you? What kind of person are you trying to become?*

## TALKING POINTS

- Choose someone whose qualities you genuinely aspire to — it does not have to be a famous person.
- A teacher, a family member, or a friend can be a more powerful and authentic answer.
- Identify one or two specific qualities and say how they influence your own goals.

## SAMPLE ANSWER

*"The person I admire most is my older cousin. She moved to a different country at seventeen with limited language skills, and within five years she had completed her degree, built a career, and was mentoring other young immigrants. What impresses me most is not the achievement — it's her consistency. She never seems to wait for ideal conditions before doing what she thinks is right."*

10

*What accomplishment are you most proud of?*

## WHAT THEY'RE REALLY ASKING

*What do you value? How do you define success — and does that definition reveal maturity?*

## TALKING POINTS

- This is not an invitation to boast. The most impressive answers often involve something done for others.
- Be specific about what you did, what was difficult, and what you learned.
- A moment where you grew in a way that surprised you is often more compelling than a formal award.

## SAMPLE ANSWER

*"The accomplishment I'm most proud of is a community tutoring project I organized with two friends for children with gaps in their schooling. What I didn't expect was how much I would learn from the children. Explaining concepts simply forces you to understand them deeply — I actually improved in math myself by teaching it. We served around thirty students over six months."*

11

*Tell me about a time you took on a leadership role.*

## WHAT THEY'RE REALLY ASKING

*Can you take initiative? How do you influence and motivate others without being told to?*

## TALKING POINTS

- Use a specific story. Set the scene, describe the challenge, explain what you did and why.
- Leadership does not require a formal title — stepping up when something needs doing is often more impressive.
- Share the outcome and what you took away from it.

## SAMPLE ANSWER

*"During my school's Model UN preparation, our team of six was struggling to coordinate. I proposed that we divide the topic into sections and each take ownership of one, then share findings in a shared document. I created the template and set up daily check-ins. The team told me afterward it changed the energy entirely. We placed second overall and I was named best delegate in my committee."*

12

*How will you contribute to our school community?*

## WHAT THEY'RE REALLY ASKING

*Are you thinking about giving, not just receiving? Do you understand what this community values?*

## TALKING POINTS

- Think beyond activities and sports. Consider the perspective, energy, and values you will bring.
- As an international student, your cultural background is a genuine asset — name it specifically.
- Reference the school's values and show how yours align.

## SAMPLE ANSWER

*"I think I'll contribute most through perspective. I come from [Country], a place most of my future classmates will have read about but never visited, and I've found that even simple things — the way we approach conflict, the role of family in decision-making — can open conversations people hadn't thought to have. I'd also love to start or join a cultural exchange initiative if one exists."*

13

*What are your future goals or career aspirations?*

## WHAT THEY'RE REALLY ASKING

*Do you think beyond today? Do you see this school as part of a larger journey?*

## TALKING POINTS

- You do not need a perfect answer — schools do not expect you to know exactly what you want at 15 or 16.
- Show that you are thoughtful about your future and take your education seriously.
- If you have a specific passion, connect it to a field. Keep it open and honest.

## SAMPLE ANSWER

*"I'm still genuinely exploring, which I think is the honest answer at this stage. What I do know is that I want to study at a strong university in a field that sits at the intersection of science and society — something like environmental policy or public health. I believe the foundation I build in the next few years will shape what that path looks like. That's a large part of why this opportunity matters so much to me."*

14

*Do you have any questions for me?*

## WHAT THEY'RE REALLY ASKING

*Have you done your research? Are you genuinely curious about this community, or just going through the motions?*

## TALKING POINTS

- Always have two or three questions prepared. Never say you have none — it signals disengagement.
- The best questions are specific to the school, reflect genuine curiosity, and cannot be answered by reading the website.
- You can also ask questions that arose naturally during the conversation.

## Questions Worth Asking

The questions you ask reveal as much as the answers you give. The five below are crafted for students applying from abroad — each invites the interviewer to speak with specificity about the school's culture rather than its brochure copy.

### ★ SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

- How does the school support international students during the first few weeks of adjustment?
- Can you tell me how students from different countries tend to connect with domestic students?
- What does cultural diversity look like at the school, and how is it celebrated?
- How does the school handle situations where a student is struggling academically or emotionally?
- Is there a community service or social impact program, and how do students typically get involved?

## A Final Word on Question 14

Bring a small notepad to the interview, even if it is virtual. Writing down a single phrase from the interviewer's answer signals genuine engagement and gives you something specific to reference in your thank-you note. The interview does not end when you log off — your follow-up is part of the conversation.

“

*The best questions reveal that you are already imagining yourself inside the school's daily life.*

ON THE FINAL QUESTION

*Log on ready. Present your best self — through the small disciplines that compose composure.*

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Everything you have prepared leads to this day. For international students, the interview happens from home — which means the environment, the technology, and your mental state are entirely within your control.

Use that to your advantage. The student who feels calm in their own room interviews better than the student who feels rushed in an unfamiliar one.

# Day-Of *Logistics*

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*“Composure under pressure is exactly what boarding schools are looking for.”*

A PRINCIPLE FOR THE DAY

## A Day Before Your Best Self

Two timelines structure the hours leading into the interview. The first is preparatory — completed without urgency the evening before. The second is calming — completed with calm intention in the half-hour before.

### THE EVENING BEFORE

- Confirm the interview link, platform, and interviewer's name.
- Do a full technical run-through: test camera, microphone, and speakers.
- Check your lighting and background — make adjustments now, not five minutes before.
- Charge your device fully and keep the charger plugged in during the interview.
- Have your backup plan ready: mobile hotspot details, a second device logged in and waiting.
- Review your key stories and prepared questions — a light refresh, not an intense study session.
- Get a full night of sleep. *Fatigue is visible on camera.*

### 30 MINUTES BEFORE

- Close every unnecessary application and browser tab.
- Silence all phone and device notifications — not just on your interview device.
- Let everyone in your home know you are not to be disturbed.
- Eat something light if the interview is in the morning.
- Do a final camera check: framing, eye level, lighting, background.
- Open your notes for a brief, calm review — then put them aside.

## Presence — Dress & Conduct

How you appear and how you behave compose the unspoken half of every interview. The two columns below are mirrors of each other — preparation on the left, conduct on the right.

### DRESS & PRESENTATION

- Dress fully and professionally — **head to toe**, not just what the camera can see.
- Students: business casual at minimum. A collared shirt or blouse in a neutral tone.
- Avoid logos, bold patterns, or anything distracting. The focus should remain on your face.
- Parents joining separately: dress as you would for a professional meeting in person.

### DURING THE INTERVIEW

- Join the call **2–3 minutes early**.
- Greet the interviewer warmly by name.
- Look at the **camera lens**, not at the interviewer's image on screen.
- Answer questions fully — aim for 60–90 seconds on most.
- Use specific stories. “I once...” is almost always better than “I usually...”
- Close with a genuine, specific expression of enthusiasm for the school.

## If Something Goes Wrong Technically

- If you lose audio or video briefly, stay calm. Wait a moment, then say: *“I’m sorry — I think we had a brief connection issue. Could you repeat that?”*
- If the call drops entirely, rejoin immediately using the same link. If you cannot reconnect within two minutes, email or call the admissions office right away.
- Never let a technical issue visibly rattle you. **Composure under pressure is exactly what boarding schools are looking for.**

### ★ A NOTE FOR STUDENTS WHO FEEL NERVOUS

Nervousness is normal. It is also completely visible on camera — and most experienced interviewers respect it. You do not have to pretend you are not nervous.

Take one slow breath before you answer any question. Say *“That’s a great question — let me think for a moment”* if you need time. A student who thinks before they speak demonstrates maturity, not weakness.

*A complete framework — from six weeks out, to the day itself, to the moment after. Use it as you move through preparation; check off each item as it is complete.*

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Preparation is not a single event. It is a sequence of small, deliberate acts spread across the weeks before the conversation, each one reducing the friction of the day itself.

The checklist on the following pages is structured by time horizon. Begin at the top — six weeks before — and let the work compound.

# The *Checklist*

**4 - 6 WEEKS BEFORE THE INTERVIEW**

- Research the school thoroughly: mission, programs, houses, sports, arts, clubs, recent news
- Review your application – know every activity, essay, and teacher recommendation you submitted
- Identify 3-5 core personal stories that reveal character, curiosity, resilience, or passion
- Draft answers to the 10 most common questions (see Chapter III)
- Prepare 3-5 genuine, specific questions to ask your interviewer
- Confirm interview format: virtual (Zoom / Teams) or alumni video call

**1 - 2 WEEKS BEFORE THE INTERVIEW**

- Conduct at least two full mock interviews – timed, on camera, with an adult playing the interviewer
- Review mock interview recordings and identify areas for improvement
- Practice the opening question (“Tell me about yourself”) until it feels natural, not memorized
- Finalize your interview outfit and ensure it is clean and ready
- For virtual interviews: test your platform, lighting, background, and audio
- International students: complete one warm-up English conversation per day ★

**24 - 48 HOURS BEFORE**

- Confirm your interview appointment details: time, location or link, interviewer's name
- Review your key stories and questions – refresh, do not over-rehearse
- Prepare your materials: pen, notepad, printed application copy if applicable
- Get a full night of sleep
- Plan what you will eat before the interview
- Avoid scheduling stressful activities the evening before

## DAY OF

- Eat a proper meal
- Arrive or log on 10–15 minutes early
- Phone fully silenced and put away before the call
- Greet everyone you meet warmly and by name where possible
- Take one slow breath before your first answer
- Ask your prepared questions at a natural moment
- Close with a specific, genuine expression of enthusiasm

“

*You are not preparing to perform. You are preparing to be at ease enough to be yourself — and that is always enough.*

A FINAL NOTE FROM CLEVERED



*“You have worked hard to reach this moment.  
The interview is not the finish line — it is a  
doorway. Walk through it as yourself. That is  
always enough.”*

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**CleverEd**

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