

Informational interviews are a conversation with someone else to learn about their professional experience, to aid in exploring your career options. If you've ever asked friends or colleagues about their job responsibilities, professional or academic background, or thoughts about working in a particular organization, then you've already conducted informal informational interviews.

Interviewing for information, not employment

Even if you're searching for a job, informational interviews are about asking for information, not a position. Imagine you're a second year student considering residency in primary care at San Francisco General Hospital. At this stage, you're likely unfamiliar with the hospital's environment, work expectations for the primary care programs, what type of training/support is common, quirks of the programs, or pitfalls to avoid. No one wants their candor dissuading a candidate during an interview for residency — individuals are more likely to share this information and advice if you aren't applying for a position. People have greater freedom to be candid about their work and organization, as well as provide suggestions when the conversation is framed in the context of exploring and discussing their career path.

Five goals of a successful informational interview

Informational interviews help you explore the wide range of career opportunities available to someone with your training, skills, experience, and interests. Aim to get:

1. An understanding of the person's job responsibilities.
2. A sense of their background, how they found the position, and succeeded in their interview process.
3. Information about future career opportunities in their field.
4. One or two other contacts who can share their experiences.
5. Names of professional organizations to explore.

When to begin informational interviewing

Begin informational interviewing in the latter half of your first year all the way through graduation, and beyond. Gathering career information is a life-long skill that will help you learn and advance in your career. Aim to conduct one or two interviews a semester with people you meet at conferences, clinical or research settings, professional meetings, or through recommendations of friends, advisors, mentors, or colleagues.

Who to interview and what to ask

Talk to fellow students, faculty, residents, and alumni about their experience of transitioning from student to professional and learn about specialty options available to someone with your skills and interests. Or ask advice about selecting the best residency program in your specialty of choice after graduation. Learn the responsibilities (e.g., work/patient load, typical week), how to organize your residency search, and prepare for the interview process. There are plenty of [good questions you can ask](#) to get helpful career information. After several interviews, you'll have enough data to draw some conclusions about your professional options now and in the future.

Length

Informational interviews generally last 20-60 minutes, depending on how much time your interviewee has devoted to the interview. Keep track of how long the interview is taking and stick to the allotted time. Interviewees will appreciate your respect for their time and be more likely to assist you with other questions or concerns in the future.

Focus and format

After you briefly introduce yourself, the bulk of the conversation and your questions should focus on the other person: their position, background, career trajectory, and advice. At the interview's end, you can return the focus to yourself to ask questions (e.g. potential contacts, advice about your CV). But for the most part, consider yourself a journalist curious about exploring their experience. Here's a format to keep your interviews on track:

Focus	Length of time	Topics to ask about
Present	10 minutes	Current responsibilities Their organization
Past	5-6 minutes	Academic and professional background How they found their position Interview process If they weren't in the specialty/position, what else would they likely be doing
Future	5-6 minutes	Challenges and opportunities in the field 5-10 years in the future
Advice	5 minutes	Further individual and organization contacts CV critique Recommended resources and activities to pursue

The initial contact

Approach interviewees via email, phone, or in person. Often it helps to first send an email, then follow up by phone. A sample email might look something like this:

Subject: Georgia O'Keefe suggested I contact you.

Dear Dr. Picasso,

I recently spoke with Georgia O'Keefe, who suggested that I contact you. I am a second year medical student at Loma Linda and for the past few months have been speaking with a number of physicians about their experience as adolescent psychiatrists. Georgia briefly mentioned your recent completion of a fellowship at Stanford and thought you could share some valuable advice on the subject. Briefly, my background includes two years of experience as an elementary school teacher, and I previously worked as a program coordinator for a teen outreach program in New York. Would it be possible for us to meet for half an hour? I would appreciate hearing about your current position, your residency application and match process, and any advice you might have for a student considering the specialty.

Regards,
Diego Rivera

Beginning the conversation

Take a minute to set the agenda for the person, reiterating the goals for the conversation from your initial contact. For example:

"Thanks for speaking with me. Let me tell you a little about why I asked for this half hour of your time. As I shared in my email, I'm currently completing my medical degree at Morehouse and am considering the next stage in my career. For the past two months, I've been speaking to as many physicians who chose to work in the biotech industry about their career paths.

Can you begin by sharing a little bit about your role as the Health Educator at Eli Lilly and what you enjoy about your position?"

Closing the interview

As the interview draws to a close, thank the person for their time and advice, and be specific about what you found valuable. Also ask to keep in touch. For example:

“Thank you for sharing your perspective and background. I appreciate you taking the time. Your advice about preparing for a residency interview and suggestions for my CV are very helpful. Thank you also for directing me towards Kofi Annan at La Clinica de la Raza. I’ll contact him next week.”

“May I have your business card? I’d like to keep in touch with you as I move forward in this process. And if I can ever return the favor, please don’t hesitate to contact me.”

After the interview

Send a thank you note via mail or email within one or two days of the interview. You’re building a professional network, so show appreciation for the people helping you. And then keep in touch. Send a follow up email a few weeks or months later to touch base. If they gave you additional contacts, let them know when you make those connections and how it was valuable. If they suggest you alter your resume, or ask a particular interview question at an interview and you found the advice useful, thank them.

Keep the note brief, thanking them again for their time, providing additional reflections about what you appreciated, and a request to keep in touch. A sample note might be:

Subject line (if email): Thank you for our conversation this week.

“Dear Dr. Mozart,

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you about your experience as faculty in the adolescent psychiatry department. After our conversation I have a much better sense of the rewards and challenges of working at a teaching-focused institution. As you suggested, I will get in touch with Scott Joplin at USF this month. I greatly appreciate your time and do hope to keep in touch as I apply for residency programs next year. Please let me know if I can ever be of service to you.

Warm regards,
Aaron Copeland”

AAMC Careers in Medicine website

Adapted with permission from the University of California San Francisco
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