

# College Interview Questions

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<http://collegeapps.about.com/od/theartofgettingaccepted/tp/college-interview-questions.htm>

## Be Ready to Answer These 12 Questions in your College Interview

Most college interview questions are meant to help you and the interviewer find out if the college is a good match for you. Rarely will you get a question that puts you on the spot or tries to make you feel stupid. Remember, the college is trying to make a good impression too. Use the interview to show off your personality in ways that aren't possible on the application.

### **Tell me about yourself.**

This question seems easier than it is. How do you reduce your whole life to a few sentences? And it's hard to avoid commonplace answers like "I'm friendly" or "I'm a good student." Of course you want to demonstrate that you're friendly and studious, but try also to say something memorable here that really makes you different from other college applicants. Can you hold your breath longer than anyone in your school? Do you have a huge collection of Pez dispensers? Do you have unusual cravings for sushi?

It seems like such an easy question. In some ways, it is. After all, if there's one subject you truly know something about, it's yourself. The challenge, however, is that knowing yourself and articulating your identity in a few sentences are very different things. Before setting foot in the interview room, make sure you put some thought into what it is that makes you unique. Certain characteristics are desirable, but they are not unique. The majority of students applying to selective colleges can make claims such as these:

- "I'm hard working."
- "I'm responsible."
- "I'm friendly."
- "I'm a good student."
- "I'm loyal."

Granted, all of these answers point to important and positive character traits. Of course colleges want students who are hardworking, responsible, and friendly. That's a no-brainer. And ideally your application and interview answers will convey the fact that you are a friendly and hard-working student.

These answers, however, are all predictable. Nearly every applicant could give the same answers. If we go back to the initial question -- "Tell me about yourself" -- we need to recognize that the answers any applicant can give do not successfully define what characteristics make *you* special. The interview is your best opportunity to convey your unique personality and

passions, so you want to answer questions in ways that show that you are you, not a clone of a thousand other applicants.

So, when asked to tell about yourself, don't spend too much time on the predictable answers. Show the interviewer who you are. What are your passions? What are your quirks? Why do your friends really like you? What makes you laugh? What makes you angry?

Did you teach your dog to play the piano? Do you make a killer wild strawberry pie? Do you do your best thinking when on a 100-mile bike ride? Do you read books late at night with a flashlight? Do you have unusual cravings for oysters? Have you ever successfully started a fire with sticks and a shoelace? Were you ever sprayed by a skunk taking out the compost in the evening?

You are almost guaranteed to be asked to tell about yourself, and your interviewer truly is interested in getting to know you. Your answers need to take the question seriously and you need to answer sincerely, but make sure you are actually painting a colorful and detailed portrait of yourself, not a simple line sketch.

## **Why are you interested in our college or scholarship?**

Like many of the most common interview questions, this one seems like a no-brainer. After all, if you are interviewing at a school, you have presumably done some research and know why you are interested in the place.

Nevertheless, some answers to this question are better than others. Your answer should show that you have specific and admirable reasons for attending the college. The following answers are *not* likely to impress your interviewer:

- "Your college is prestigious."
- "I'll make lots of money with a degree from your college."
- "All my friends are going to your college."
- "Your college is convenient and close to home."
- "My counselor told me to apply."
- "You're my safety school."

The interviewer is hoping that you are interested in the college for reasons other than peer pressure or convenience. Similarly, if you say you applied entirely because of a parent or counselor's recommendation, you'll be suggesting that you lack initiative and have few thoughts of your own.

When it comes to prestige and earning potential, the issue is a bit fuzzier. After all, name recognition and your future salary are both important. The interviewer most likely *is* hoping that you find the college prestigious. That said, you don't want to come across as someone who

is more concerned with material gain and prestige than with pursuing your passions and getting a high quality education.

Many students choose a college based on sports. If you love nothing more than playing soccer, you're likely to look at colleges that have strong soccer teams. During the interview, however, keep in mind that students who are interested in nothing except sports often fail to graduate. Any answer you give about athletics should be balanced with academics.

What you most need to do when answering this question is show the interviewer that you know the college's distinctive features well. Don't simply say that you want to go to the college to get a good education. Be specific. Let the interviewer know that you were drawn to the college's innovative first-year program, its emphasis on experiential learning, its Honors Program, or its international focus. Also feel free to mention the school's wonderful hiking trails, its quirky traditions, or its amazing lilacs.

Whatever you say, be specific. Before you set foot in the interview room, make sure you have done your research and identified several features of the college that you find particularly appealing, and make sure at least one of those features is academic in nature.

## **What can I tell you about our college?**

You can almost guarantee that your interviewer will provide an opportunity for you to ask questions. Make sure you have some, and make sure your questions are thoughtful and specific to the particular college. Avoid questions like "when is the application deadline?" or "how many majors do you have?" This information is both uninteresting and readily available on the school's webpage. Come up with some probing and focused questions: "What would graduates of your college say was the most valuable thing about their four years here?" "I read that you offer a major in interdisciplinary studies. Could you tell me more about that?"

Nearly all college interviewers will give you an opportunity to ask questions of your own. The purpose of the interview isn't strictly for the college to evaluate you. You are also evaluating the college. During a good interview, the interviewer gets to know you well, and you get to know the college better. Both you and the college should have a better sense of whether or not the college is a good match for you.

That said, when it is your turn to ask questions, realize that you are still being evaluated. Although you may have teachers and parents who have told you that "there are no stupid questions," there are, in fact, some questions that can reflect poorly upon you.

In general, you **don't** want to ask questions like these during the interview:

- How big is your school?
- Do you offer a major in \_\_\_\_\_? These first two questions can be answered easily with a quick look at the college's website. By asking them, you suggest that you haven't

done any research and you know almost nothing about the school to which you are applying.

- How much do your graduates make? A question about graduate salaries is certainly valid, and it may be something you want to consider before you accept an offer of admission from a college. However, the interview isn't the best time to ask the question. If you focus on salaries, you run the danger of coming across as someone who is overly materialistic. You don't want to sound as if you care more about a paycheck than your undergraduate experience.
- What makes your college better than your competitor? This question is also an important one to get answered, but you want to set the right tone for your interview. If you put your interviewer on the defensive, he or she might respond negatively.
- How easy is it to get an "A"? Think about how a question like this will come across -- you will sound as if you want easy "A"s in college. The interviewer, of course, is looking for students who will work hard to earn their grades. You may very well be nervous about how difficult the college will be, but you should try to keep that anxiety out of the interview.

So what are some good questions to ask? In general, anything that presents you in a positive light and pushes beyond what you can learn from the college's website and brochures:

- "I'm interested in folk dancing but didn't see it listed among your clubs. Would I be able to start a folk dancing club at your college? What's the process for starting a new student organization?"
- "I see you have a self-designed major. What kinds of majors have some of your students designed? Could I use the self-designed major to bring together my interests in art and biology?"
- "I see that all of your first-year students participate in service learning. In what kinds of projects do they often participate?"
- "If I major in psychology, are there likely to be any opportunities for me to do an internship or work with a professor on research?"
- "How would you describe the personality of your campus? In broad terms, what are the students like?"
- "What would you say is the most remarkable feature of your college that isn't presented in your brochures or on your webpage?"

Be yourself and ask questions that you actually want answered. When done well, asking questions of your interviewer can be both fun and informative. The best questions show that you know the college relatively well and that your interest in the school is sincere.

## **Who in your life has most influenced you?**

There are other variations of this question: Who's your hero? What historical or fictional character would you most like to be like? This can be an awkward question if you haven't thought about it, so spend a few minutes considering how you would answer. Identify a few real, historical, and fictional characters you admire, and be prepared to articulate WHY you admire them.

The question comes in many variations: Who is your hero? Who deserves the most credit for your success? Who is your role model? In short, the question is asking you to discuss someone you admire.

This question, like many, is not difficult, but you do want to think about it for a few minutes before your interview. A few answers can fall flat, so think twice before giving responses such as these:

- **Myself** -- In truth, you probably are the person who is most responsible for your success. You may, in fact, be self-reliant with no real heroes. However, if you answer this question with yourself you will sound self-absorbed and selfish. Colleges want to admit students who help each other out and work as a community. They don't want solitary egotists.
- **Gandhi or Abe Lincoln** -- If you have great respect for an admirable historical figure, that's wonderful. Such answers, however, can come across sounding like you're trying to make a good impression, not like you're answering the question sincerely. In your day-to-day life of classes, extracurricular activities, tests and relationships, is Abe Lincoln really influencing your behavior?
- **Ronald Reagan or Barack Obama** -- Here, as with the example above, is the president (or Senator, Governor, etc.) really influencing and guiding you in your day-to-day life? This question has an added danger. Your interviewer will do his or her best to be unbiased, but interviewers are human. If you name a Democrat and your interviewer is a staunch Republican, your response could create a subconscious strike against you in the interviewer's mind.
- **God** -- At a college with a religious affiliation, God could be a fine answer. At many colleges, however, the answer is a crap shoot. The admissions officer may admire your faith. Some interviewers, however, will be skeptical of students who attribute their successes to prayer and divine guidance.
- **My Dog** -- Fido may be a great pet who has taught you responsibility and unconditional love, but keep your answer in the world of humans. Colleges are made up of humans.

So who should you name as a hero or influential person? Speak from the heart here. There is no right answer other than a sincere answer. Also, realize that an influential person isn't always a positive example. You may have grown and changed as a result of someone whose mistakes or inappropriate behavior taught you what *not* to do with your life. Answers to the question can draw from lots of different options:

- **A Family Member** -- For most of us, parents and siblings have a huge impact on our lives. Answering with a family member is fairly predictable but also perfectly appropriate. Just make sure you can articulate the specific ways in which the family member influenced you.
- **A Teacher** -- Is there a particular teacher who got you excited about learning, a subject area, or continuing your education?

- **A Friend** -- For good or bad, your close friends have a huge influence on your decisions and behavior.
- **A Coach** -- Coaches often teach us leadership, responsibility and teamwork.
- **A Community Member** -- Do you have a mentor in the church or some other community organization? Community members often teach us to think outside of the narrow sphere of our families.

Whatever your answer, bring the influential person to life for your interviewer. Avoid vague generalities. Provide colorful, entertaining, and specific examples of how the person has influenced you.

## **Why do you want to major in \_\_\_\_\_?**

Realize that you don't need to have decided upon a major when you apply to college, and your interviewer will not be disappointed if you say you have many interests and you need to take more classes before choosing a major. However, if you have identified a potential major, be prepared to explain why. Avoid saying that you want to major in something because you'll make a lot of money -- your passion for a subject will make you a good college student, not your greed.

The question can come in many forms: What academic subject most interests you? What do you plan to study? What are your academic goals? Why do you want to major in business? Don't be misled by the question. A significant percentage of college applicants have no idea what major they will choose, and the majority of high school students who have chosen a major will actually change their mind before they graduate. Your interviewer knows this, and there is nothing wrong with being honest about your uncertainty.

That said, you don't want to sound like you have never considered the question. Colleges aren't eager to admit students who entirely lack direction or academic interests. So, if you are undecided about your major, think about the difference between these two responses:

- **I don't know what I want to major in.** While this response may be honest, it's not helping your interviewer get to know what *does* interest you. You've shut down the question, and you haven't made a good case for being admitted to the college.
- **I haven't chosen a major yet, but I love working with people. I'm looking forward to taking courses in sociology, psychology, and political science to learn more.** Sure, you haven't chosen a major yet, but your answer shows that you've thought about the options and, more importantly, that you're intellectually curious and looking forward to exploring the possibilities.

If you do have a strong sense of what you want to study, you'll still want to make sure your answer creates a positive impression. Think about the following responses:

- **I want to major in business because I want to make lots of money.** You're telling the interviewer that material gain is your top priority. Are you actually interested in

business? Students who choose a major based on its earning potential are less likely to succeed in college than those who have an actual interest in the subject matter that they are studying. I've seen a lot of business majors and engineers either change majors or drop out of college because they were, in truth, not interested in business or engineering.

- **My parents want me to become a doctor.** Okay, but what do *you* want to do? Do you have thoughts of your own, or are you going to let your parents define your academic path?
- **I want to major in political science because I want to go to law school.** Do you have sincere interest in political science? And why do you want to go to law school? You're going to spend four years of your life studying as an undergraduate, so you don't want to breeze over your response with a comment about graduate school. The interviewer isn't admitting you to graduate school.

Make sure you are ready to explain *why* you are interested in a particular field. What experiences or high school courses piqued your interest?

At some large universities it is possible that you will need to pick a field of study when you apply. For example, some of the California public universities are trying to balance enrollments within different programs. And if you are applying to a business or engineering school within a larger university, you will often need a specialized application for that school.

At most colleges, however, being undecided is fine. Here at Alfred University, for example, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences recently changed the official designation for undecided students from "Undecided" to "Academic Exploration." Exploring is a good thing, and it's what the first year of college is for.

## **What will you contribute to our campus community?**

You'll want to be specific when answering this question. An answer like "I'm hard-working" is rather bland and generic. Think about what it is that makes you uniquely you. What exactly will you bring to diversify the college's community?

This question is asking for some vital information. The admissions folks will admit you if they think you can handle the work and if they think you will enrich the campus community. This question is asking you to explain how you will make the college a better place.

It may be tempting to answer this question by commenting on your character: "I'm hard working"; "I like to be challenged"; "I'm a perfectionist"; "I'm good at managing my time." While these answers suggest you have positive personal qualities, they don't actually answer the question. They don't explain how your presence will enrich the campus community. The question asks about the community, so your answer should be community oriented. Think in terms of your hobbies and passions. What are you likely to be doing outside the classroom when you are in college? Are you likely to be serenading your classmates as a member of the

acappella group? Are you hoping to start a D-League intramural hockey team for students who have never skated before? Are you the student who will be baking brownies in the dorm kitchen at 2 a.m.? Do you have ideas for a new recycling program that you think would benefit the college? Are you bringing your camping gear to college and looking forward to organizing outings with classmates?

In short, think about how you see yourself interacting with your classmates and other community members. The admissions officers have your grades and test scores, so they know that you are a good student. This question is your opportunity to show that you can think outside of yourself. A good answer illustrates ways in which you will enhance the college experience of those around you.

## **Tell me about a challenge that you overcame**

This question is designed to see what kind of problem solver you are. When confronted with a challenge, how do you handle the situation? College will be full of challenges, so the college wants to make sure they enroll students who can handle them.

The question isn't a difficult one as long as you've put a couple of minutes of thought into it before your interview. The main danger with the question is being unable to think of an appropriate challenge during the interview.

Realize that you can draw from many different kinds of "challenges" when you answer this question. You don't need to have lived a life of adversity or oppression to have a meaningful challenge to discuss.

So your first step is to figure out what challenge you want to share with your interviewer. You would be wise to shy away from anything that is too personal -- you don't want your interviewer to feel uncomfortable. But an appropriate challenge can come in many forms:

- **An academic challenge** -- Perhaps you found chemistry or English particularly difficult?
- **A challenge at work** -- Did you have a boss or co-worker who was difficult to work with?
- **An athletic challenge** -- Did you have to work hard to improve your skills? Did you have a competition that was especially demanding?
- **A personal tragedy** -- Did you lose someone close to you and have a hard time getting over the loss?
- **A personal goal** -- Did you set a goal for yourself that was difficult to accomplish?
- **An ethical dilemma** -- Were you put in a position where none of your options were attractive?

Keep in mind the purpose of this type of question. The interviewer isn't necessarily interested in hearing about some horror story from your past. Rather, the question is designed to help the interviewer discover what type of problem solver you are. College is all about developing



critical thinking and problem solving skills, so the interviewer wants to see that you have promise in these areas. When confronted with a challenge, how do you respond?

The best response will highlight your ability to navigate a challenging situation.

## **What do you do for fun in your free time?**

"Hangin' out and chillin'" is a weak answer for this question. College life obviously isn't all work, so the admissions folks want students who will do interesting and productive things even when they aren't studying. Do you write? hike? play tennis? Use a question such as this one to show that you are well-rounded with a variety of interests.

The interviewer might ask this question in one of many ways: What do you do for fun? What do you do when you're not in school? What do you do on your weekends?

This is not a trick question, and many kinds of answers will do well. The interviewer is simply trying to get to know you better. College is about much more than academic classes, and the admissions folks want to know how you keep yourself busy when you're not doing schoolwork. The most attractive students are those who do interesting things in their spare time.

So, when you answer the question, make sure you actually sound like you do interesting things in your spare time. Answers like these will not impress:

- **I like hangin' with my friends.** (Do you actually do anything with those friends, or do you just take up space on our little planet?)
- **I do Facebook in all my free time.** (This is true for many students, but too much online time is a major source of poor academic performance in college)
- **I like partying.** (Another activity that, if abused, has caused many students to fail out of college)
- **I watch lots of TV.** (Many of us watch too much TV; don't highlight that fact during your interview)
- **I don't have any free time.** (This answer is true for some highly involved students, but it is an evasive answer; what *would* you do if you did have free time?)
- **I've been reading all of the Greek classics.** (Good for you, but really? Colleges like good scholars, but they also want students who occasionally take their heads out of their books)

The best answer to this question will show that you have passions outside of the classroom. The question allows you to show that you are well rounded. Within reason, it doesn't much matter what you do in your free time as long as you do something. Do you love working on cars? Playing a pick-up game of soccer? Hiking in the neighboring mountains? Experimenting in the kitchen? Building rockets? Playing word games with your younger brother? Painting sunsets? Surfing?

Your transcript will show that you are a good student. Your answer to this question will show that you are also someone who has diverse interests that will enrich the campus

## **What do you see yourself doing 10 years from now?**

You don't need to pretend that you have your life figured out if you get a question like this. Very few students entering college could accurately predict their future professions. However, your interviewer does want to see that you think ahead. If you can see yourself doing three different things, say so -- honesty and open-mindedness will play in your favor.

This interview question can come in many flavors: What do you want to do with your life? What are your goals? What is your dream job? What do you want to do with your college degree?

However your interviewer phrases the question, the goal is similar. The college admissions folks want to see if you have thought about your future. A lot of students don't succeed in college for the simple reason that they don't have a clear sense of why college is important to them and their goals. This interview question is subtly asking you to show how college fits into your long-term planning.

Realize that you definitely do not need to know what you want to be doing ten years from now. College is a time of exploration and discovery. Many prospective college students have not yet been introduced to the fields that will define their future careers. The majority of students will change majors before they graduate. Many students will have careers that aren't directly connected to their undergraduate majors.

That said, you don't want to evade the question. Answers such as these may be accurate, but they won't impress anybody:

- "I don't know." True enough, but keep on reading to see a better way to present your uncertainty.
- "I'm not sure what I'll be doing, but I want to be making lots of money." This answer suggests that you have no academic interests, but you have strong materialistic desires. Such attitudes aren't very attractive to a college that is trying to enroll an interesting and engaged group of students.
- "I want to be working for a big company." Try to focus more. What type of company? Why? A vague answer isn't going to create a strong impression.
- "I hope I'll be married with kids." That's fine, but the interviewer isn't really asking about your personal life (in fact, it wouldn't be appropriate for an interviewer to ask about your future plans for family and marriage). Keep focused on career goals that are connected to your college education.

So, if asked about your future goals, be honest but also answer in a way that shows you have actually thought about the relationship between college and your future. Here are a couple ways to approach the question:

- "I want to major in aeronautical engineering and work for NASA." If you know what you want to do, an interview question about your future is easy to answer. However, be sure to elaborate and explain *why* you want to pursue a certain career path. What got you interested in the field? What do you hope to accomplish in this career?
- "I don't know what I will be doing, but I know I want to work with people. In college I'm interested in taking classes in sociology and psychology to learn what some of the options are." An answer such as this shows your uncertainty, but it shows that you know yourself, you've thought about the future, and you are eager to explore new fields of study.

Again, the interviewer is not expecting you to know what you will be doing in ten years. If you can see yourself in five different careers, say so. You will have successfully answered this question if you do more than shrug your shoulders or evade the question. Show that you are excited about the future and that college plays a role in that future.

## **Does your high school record accurately reflect your effort and ability?**

In the interview or on your application, you often have an opportunity to explain a bad grade or a bad semester. Be careful with this issue -- you don't want to come across as a whiner or as someone who blames others for a low grade. However, if you really did have extenuating circumstances, let the college know.

This interview question provides you with an opportunity to explain a bad grade or weak spot in your academic record.

Nearly all highly selective colleges have holistic admissions, so the admissions officers want to get to know you as a person, not just as a list of grades and test scores. Your interviewer knows that you are human and that extenuating circumstances can sometimes affect your academic performance.

That said, you don't want to sound like a whiner or grade grubber. If you have mostly A's, don't feel that you need to come up with an excuse for that one B+. Also, make sure you're not blaming others for your own academic performance. The admissions folks won't be impressed if you complain about an unreasonable teacher who doesn't give out easy A's.

The following responses are all poor ways to answer the question:

- *"I'm very good at math, but my teacher didn't like me. That's why I got a C+."* Really? This response suggests that you aren't mature enough to own up to the grade you earned. Was your math teacher really that biased and unprofessional? And if so, why didn't you address the unethical behavior with school officials? Even if your teacher didn't like you, this isn't something you want to highlight in your interview. Are you unlikable?
- *"I worked really hard, so I don't know why my grades weren't higher."* This response makes you sound clueless. Students who don't understand the low grades they earned

are risky prospects for a college to admit. Successful students know what went wrong, and they work to address the problems.

- *"I would have put more effort into my classes, but I was too busy with my job and sports."* While this response may be honest, it will not create a good impression. It's wonderful that you are busy with work and athletics, but successful college students have strong time management skills and they give academics top priority.
- *"I didn't have to work hard to get all those A's."* Shhh. Sure, we all had classes that were easy A's, but don't draw attention to this fact during your interview. So, how should you answer a question about the relationship between your record, your effort and your ability? In general, take ownership of your grades and justify low grades only if you have truly extenuating circumstances. The responses below would all be appropriate:
- *"My parents got divorced at the beginning of my sophomore year, and I'm afraid I was too distracted to put in my best effort at school."* Fair enough. Big upheavals at home -- divorce, death, abuse, frequent moves -- can certainly make it difficult to devote 100% of your effort to academics. If a large domestic issue did affect your grades, your interviewer will want to know about it. Ideally, however, your academic record shows that the dip in grades was short-lived. If your grades never recovered, the admissions officers will wonder if you have gotten your act together enough to do well in college.
- *"I had gallbladder surgery in 9th grade and was on a lot of pain medications."* Serious illness or surgery can certainly disrupt your academic efforts, and it is worth mentioning this type of disruption if it had a negative impact on your grades. Here, as with the response above, your record should show that the dip in grades was temporary. Make sure you are talking about serious health issues. Your interviewer will not be impressed if you try to blame that weak semester on the sniffles.
- *"Yes, my record does reflect my effort. I didn't work as hard as I should have in 9th grade, but by 10th grade I had figured out how to be a successful student."* The honesty of this response is refreshing. Some students figure out how to succeed later than others. There is nothing wrong with this. In general, colleges will be pleased to see that your grades have trended upwards throughout high school. A downward trend will raise red flags.

Again, don't be tempted to explain every little aberration in your academic record. The interviewer is really looking to see if you had any *major* extenuating circumstances that affected your grades. If you come across as the type of student who goes on a rant complaining about a single B+, you're going to sound like an annoying whiner.

## **Recommend a good book to me.**

The interviewer is trying to accomplish a few things with this question. First, the question asks whether or not you've actually read much. Second, it asks you to apply some critical skills as you articulate *why* a book is worth reading. And finally, your interviewer might get a good book recommendation!

If you've read a book that you think would work well in an interview environment, [share your recommendation](http://collegeapps.about.com/od/theartofgettingaccepted/a/recommend-a-book-interview-question.htm) (<http://collegeapps.about.com/od/theartofgettingaccepted/a/recommend-a-book-interview-question.htm>) with other readers.

The question can come in many different forms: "What's the last book you read?"; "Tell me about a good book you've read recently"; "What's your favorite book? Why?"; "What types of books do you like to read?"; "Tell me about a good book you read for pleasure."

Whatever the form of the question, the interviewer is trying to learn a few things by asking about your reading habits and book preferences:

- **Do you read for pleasure.** Active readers are people who are intellectually curious. They are also people who are likely to have better reading comprehension and writing skills than non-readers. Students who read a lot in high school are more likely to succeed in college than students who don't.
- **Do you know how to talk about books.** A lot of your college course work will involve discussing and writing about what you have read. This interview question helps figure out if you are up for the challenge.
- **Your interests.** You are likely to get asked about your interests and passions in another interview question, but books are one more way to approach the topic. If you have a love of novels about Cold War espionage, that information helps the interviewer get to know you better.
- **A book recommendation.** An interview is a two-way conversation, and your interviewer may actually want to learn about some good books he or she isn't familiar with.

Don't try to second guess this question too much by recommending a book simply because it has historical or cultural significance. You'll sound insincere if you state that Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is your favorite book when in truth you much prefer Stephen King novels. Nearly any work of fiction or nonfiction can work for this question as long as you have things to say about it and it is at an appropriate reading-level for a college-bound student.

There are, however, a few types of works that might be weaker choices than others. In general, avoid works such as these:

- **Works that were obviously assigned in class.** Part of this question is to see what you read outside of class. If you name *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Hamlet*, you'll sound as if you've never read anything but assigned books.
- **Juvenile fiction.** You don't need to hide your love of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* or *Redwall* books, but these works are also loved by kids much younger than you. You'd do better to recommend a book that is more in line with a college-level reader.
- **Works chosen simply to impress.** James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* isn't anyone's favorite book, and you'll sound insincere if you recommend a challenging book in an effort to make yourself look smart.

The issue gets a little more fuzzy with works like *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*. Certainly plenty of adults (like me) devoured all of the *Harry Potter* books, and you'll even find college courses on *Harry Potter*. You certainly don't need to hide the fact that you were addicted to popular series such as these. That said, so many people love these books (including much younger readers) that they make for a rather predictable and uninteresting answer to the interviewer's question.

So what is the ideal book? Try to come up with something that fits these general guidelines:

- Pick a book that you sincerely love and that you are comfortable talking about.
- Pick a book with enough substance to it so that you can explain *why* you like the book.
- Pick a book that is at an appropriate reading level; something that is a huge hit among fourth-graders is probably not your best choice.
- Pick a book that gives the interviewer a window into your interests and passions.

This last point is important -- the interviewer wants to get to know you better. This interview question isn't so much about the book you choose as it is about *you*. Make sure you are able to articulate why you are recommending the book. Why did the book speak to you more than other books? What about the book did you find so compelling? How did the book engage issues that you are passionate about? How did the book open your mind or create new understanding?

## **If you could do one thing in high school differently, what would it be?**

A question like this can turn sour if you make the mistake of dwelling on things you regret. Try to put a positive spin on it. Perhaps you've always wondered if you would have enjoyed acting or music. Maybe you would have liked to give the student newspaper a try. Maybe, in retrospect, studying Chinese might have been more in line with your career goals than Spanish. A good answer shows that you didn't have the time in high school to explore everything that is of interest to you.

This interview question is a bit trickier than most. You'll want to make sure you don't wallow in regret or draw attention to really bad decisions you've made.

You have a tough balancing act to negotiate with a question like this. The best interviews are ones in which the interviewer feels like he or she has really gotten to know you. If all of your answers are calculated and safe, you'll end up making a tepid impression at best. At the same time, providing too much information is also a danger, and this interview question can easily lead to TMI.

In general, you'd probably be wise to avoid answers related to topics such as these:

- **Your relationships.** It wouldn't be surprising if your biggest regret from high school was a disastrous relationship. However, if you answer the interview question with details about that nasty boyfriend or girlfriend, you'll be introducing a lot of negativity into your interview. This type of response can easily sound immature, ungenerous, and spiteful. Steer clear.

- **A class you hated.** Do you really regret taking that class with that jerk of a teacher? Fine, but keep it to yourself. The best students can navigate all kinds of classroom environments, and your interviewer won't be impressed if you start bad-mouthing your teachers.
- **Your problems with drugs or alcohol.** If you got messed up with drugs or alcohol in college, hopefully you do wish that you could go back and do things differently. That said, the college interview is not the best place to address this issue. While your interviewer may be impressed with your ability to confront your substance abuse, he or she may also feel uneasy about admitting a student who abused alcohol or drugs. Your interviewer may question your judgment or feel that you represent too great of a risk to the college. After all, colleges have enough problems with substance abuse without admitting students who have a proven track record of abuse.

The best answers to this interview question will put a positive spin on it. A strong answer doesn't express regret about a bad decision; instead, it presents regret over not seizing all the opportunities available to you.

For example, the following would make good responses:

- You wish you had taken calculus instead of an easier math class.
- You wish you had looked for a more challenging job than the local burger joint.
- You wish you had discovered earlier in high school that you really enjoy theater.
- You wish you had worked harder in your freshmen year (some students are late bloomers, and your interviewer won't hold this against you)

A more personal response is also appropriate as long as it presents you in a positive light. Perhaps you wish you had spent more time with your grandmother before she came down with cancer, or perhaps you wish you had helped your brother more when he was struggling in school.

Think carefully about this question before you set foot in the interview room. It's not a difficult question, but it does have the ability to go astray if you draw attention to an action that reveals foolishness or poor judgment.