

Informational Interviewing & Networking Guide

**Skidmore College
Career Development Center**

What is an informational interview?

Skillfully used, Informational Interviewing, affectionately referred to as **Info Interviewing**, is one of the most valuable networking functions.

An informational interview is less stressful than a typical job interview. *Directed by your questions*, it presents an opportunity for intimate and flexible inspection of jobs and fields, unmatched by written sources.

Beyond the advantages of gaining valuable career information,

- you are the one in control;
- you can ask questions that may not be strategic to ask during a job interview (i.e., questions regarding salary, benefits, vacation);
- there is great potential for building self-confidence, uncovering leads, and improving your ability to ace a job or internship interview.
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Recognize that an Info Interview is a business appointment and should be conducted in a professional manner, whether you're meeting in person or by phone. Please remember that you are representing Skidmore as well as yourself.

The majority of professionals are very willing to cooperate with college students and recent graduates. Of course, our Career Advisors have each volunteered to be contacted and eagerly anticipate requests for info interviews. They typically offer 30-60 minutes of their time, but ask for 20 minutes.

Outreach to advisors WITH phone numbers

Your first contact will begin with an outreach email to the Career Advisor. This should be a short but **professional** note.

Outreach DOs:

- mention the Network and thank Advisors for their willingness to advise you, ask for 20 minutes of the Advisor's time
- outline your background
- introduce what you want to discuss
- indicate that you'll call to arrange a mutually convenient date and time for your informational interview
- use relatively formal language, write in complete, grammatically-correct sentences
- proofread your email or letter for grammar and spelling

Outreach DON'Ts:

- don't trust spell check software
 - don't write in Textese
 - be strategic - don't overwhelm yourself by trying to reach out to too many Advisors at once
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Example Email Outreach

Dear Ms AdvisorLastName,
I got your name from the Skidmore Career Advisor Network, and am grateful that you have offered to respond to my job search questions.

My goal is to secure an entry-level editorial position in book publishing in Boston. I interned last summer at a major NYC magazine publisher, have started my own fairly successful e-zine, and have worked with the Skidmore News for the last three years.

I would appreciate hearing your advice on conducting an effective job search, and uncovering job leads. I will call tomorrow to follow up and hope to arrange a mutually convenient date for an informational interview. I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,
YourFirstName YourLastName 'XX

Outreach to Career Advisors WITHOUT phone numbers

If the Advisor only provides an email address, include a question in your initial outreach asking how the Advisor prefers to handle arranging and conducting the actual Info Interview (in person, by phone, or by email only?).

Provide your phone number, in case the Advisor wants to call you (though, most likely, your initial communications will be by email).

Example Outreach for Email-only Advisors

Dear Ms AdvisorLastName,

I got your name from the Skidmore Career Advisor Network, and am grateful that you have offered to respond to my job search questions.

My goal is to secure an entry-level editorial position in book publishing in Boston . I interned last summer at a major NYC magazine publisher, have started my own fairly successful e-zine, and have worked with the Skidmore News for the last three years.

I am interested in hearing your advice on conducting an effective job search, and uncovering job leads. I would very much appreciate being able to conduct our informational interview in person or by telephone, but if you prefer to communicate via email I will send you more detailed questions. Please let me know your preference. I look forward to hearing from you, and thank you in advance for your effort.

Sincerely,

YourFirstName YourLastName 'XX
name@skidmore.edu
555-555-5555

Making that first call

Your first call is typically to just arrange the informational interview. You may have to play a little phone tag with your Advisor.

- don't leave the Advisor hanging; call when you indicate you will call (the next day, if you emailed; within the week, if you snail mailed)
 - don't call later than 8pm (Advisor time zone) if you're calling the Advisor at home
 - have a **professional** voicemail greeting message for callers
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Example First Call Script

Hello, this is FirstName LastName, the sophomore from Skidmore College who emailed you yesterday regarding the Career Advisor Network.

I'm sorry I missed you.

I'd like to arrange a day and time for our informational interview.

To remind you, I'm interested in asking about your career path, in general, and about your work at CompanyName, in particular. I'm hoping these types of conversations help me confirm the track I'm on with my major and minor.

My name, again, is FirstName LastName. That's spelled F-i-r-s-t-n-a-m-e L-a-s-t-n-a-m-e; again, F-i-r-s-t-n-a-m-e L-a-s-t-n-a-m-e. I can be reached at 555-555-5555; again, 555-555-5555. Wednesdays and Fridays between 3 and 5 are best for me, but I realize you're busy so if I don't hear back from you this week, I'll certainly try you again next week.

Thank you again for your willingness to advise students like me. I really do appreciate it. Goodbye.

Tips

- leave *detailed* messages
- speak slowly and clearly
- spell your name, twice
- provide your phone number, twice
- indicate that you'll try again if you don't hear back from the Advisor

Surprise Tip

- While this won't likely happen all that often, be prepared to actually reach the Advisor on your first try AND to have the Advisor suggest that they're ready to answer your questions immediately

Preparing for your info interview

Do a little preliminary investigation of the Career Advisor's field and organization before conducting your Info Interview. You don't need to become an expert (you'll be interviewing the expert).

- get a *basic* understanding of the field and the job
- visit the organization's web page to read a little bit about it
- try to learn some of the industry lingo

This will help you ask more sophisticated questions and understand the answers more deeply.

If you're meeting with your Advisor in person:

- be sure to get the right directions
- plan your travel to arrive about 10 minutes early
- plan to dress professionally

If you'll be speaking with your Advisor by phone:

- it's definitely worth trying to secure a land line for the conversation
- ask Career Services if one might be available for your use

Develop a list of Info Interview questions for the Advisor; the more specific your questions, the more helpful the Advisor can be.

You won't necessarily have to stick to a script of questions, but it could help you overcome any initial nervousness and will get the ball rolling.

Conducting your info interview

For your info interview, consider these points:

- be punctual
 - take the lead (remember, Career Advisors volunteered to respond to *your questions*), but be prepared to follow and be interviewed
 - if you're conducting the info interview in person, dress *professionally*
 - feel free to take notes
 - if you bring a resume, ask the Advisor for a critique
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Sample Info Interview Questions to Choose From

Your Info Interview will be most effective if you formulate questions that reflect your genuine curiosity about careers, and specific job search needs, but these might give you some ideas.

1. What has your career path, since graduation from Skidmore, been like?
2. What is a typical work day like (duties, hours)?
3. How much variety is there day-to-day? week-to-week? month-to-month?
4. Where is work typically conducted (e.g., office, field, home, on the road)?
5. What are the most satisfying aspects of your work?
6. What are the demands and frustrations that typically accompany this type of work?
7. How would you describe the culture or personality of your organization? Is this typical for the field?
8. What kinds of courses are most valuable in order to gain skills necessary for success in this occupation? Please distinguish between desirable and indispensable courses.
9. What degree or certificate do employers in this field look for in an entry-level / mid-level / experienced job applicant?
10. What are the most important professional associations affiliated with the field?
11. What kind of work / internship / volunteer experience do employers in this field most value?
12. Which skills do employers in this field most look for? What types of technology are used, and how are they used?
13. How might I uncover opportunities to gain these experiences and skills?
14. Are any co-curricular activities especially recommended?

15. What steps, besides meeting educational and experiential requirements, are necessary to "break into" this occupation? (i.e., exam? interview? union membership?)
16. What are the important "buzz words" to include in a resume or cover letter when job hunting in this field?
17. What questions would I need to prepare for if I was interviewing for an entry-level position in this field?
18. What opportunities for advancement exist in this field? Is an advanced degree needed? (If so, in what discipline?)
19. What are the main or most important personal characteristics for success in the field?
20. Who else on staff do you frequently interact with?
21. Are there clear reporting lines? Who reports to whom?
22. How are entry-level candidates typically evaluated?
23. What are the entry-level / mid-level / experienced employment prospects for liberal arts graduates in your geographic area? Where are the best employment prospects? Is mobility a necessary factor for success?
24. What is the typical salary range / compensation package for entry-level / mid-level / experienced candidates in this geographic region?
25. What are the employment prospects at your organization?
26. Is this a rapidly growing field? Is it possible to predict future needs for workers in this field?
27. What critical issues have you (or your organization) dealt with in the recent past? How might my background be helpful in addressing such issues?
28. What are some of the short-term / long-term trends in your industry? How do you see these trends affecting current job seekers?
29. What are some related occupations?
30. What do you know now that you wish you knew when you were in my shoes?
31. Is there anything else you expected me to ask you?
32. Would you suggest others I might contact to request additional Info Interviews?
33. May I update you on my progress?

Info interview follow up

If you didn't take notes during the Info Interview, take a few minutes afterward to reflect and jot down the key points.

- What important new info did I learn?
- What are my next steps, based on that info?
- Did I get a referral to speak with someone else?

Write a **thank you note** to the people you interview, ideally, within 24-48 hours.

- report back if you follow up on any suggestions

By building strong rapport with career contacts, you enhance the likelihood that they'll continue to offer assistance with your job search and career development.

Thank you notes may be brief but should be professional and error-free.

- email is fine
- but most professionals say they like hand-written notes
- small, professional note cards can be found in the Skidmore Shop

Example Thank You Note

Dear Ms AdvisorLastName,

Thank-you for speaking with me yesterday. Your insights were truly helpful, and have confirmed my decision to gain additional work experience in the field before applying to graduate school.

I will regularly check the website you suggested for job leads, and have already contacted the XYZ professional association regarding student membership.

I will touch base in a month to let you know about my progress. Thank you again!

Sincerely,

YourFirstName YourLastName 'XX