

CAREER GUIDE  
FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS  
AND POSTDOCS

# INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Your Best Networking Strategy



Career  
Services  
UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>3</b>
Informational Interviewing.....	3
<b>THE BASICS.....</b>	<b>4</b>
The What, Who, When, Where, & How.....	5
Sample Email.....	8
AI Prompts.....	8
<b>GETTING IT RIGHT.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Five Things to Do.....	10
Asking Good Questions.....	12
Meeting Etiquette.....	13
Following Up.....	14
Mistakes to Avoid.....	15
<b>RESOURCES.....</b>	<b>17</b>
Action Steps Checklist.....	18
Sample Networking Spreadsheet.....	19



Access the electronic version of this guide, with hyperlinks to online resources, here:

# CAREER GUIDE

## Informational Interviews

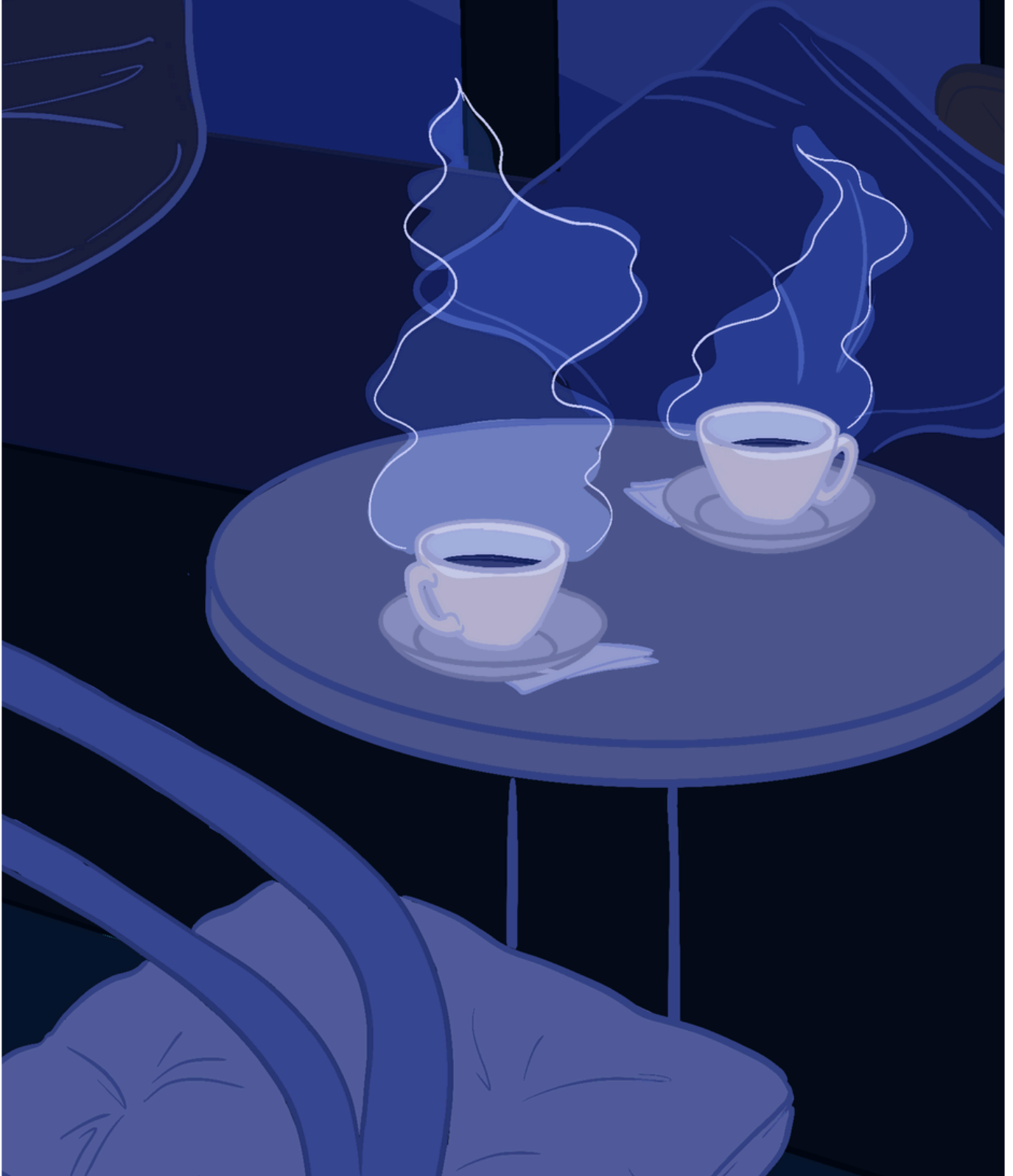
As a master's student, doctoral student, or postdoc at Penn looking to find a job or internship, you may have heard how important it is to do informational interviews as part of your networking strategy.

If you don't know what informational interviews are, they are simply opportunities for you to talk to people to gather in-depth information about career fields and positions that interest you. Talking to different people can help you understand what skills are needed for particular roles, learn the language and vocabulary that are commonly used in different career fields, and develop your own professional narrative that you can share with other professionals as you explore careers.

Developing a networking strategy that includes informational interviewing will also grow your professional network by putting you directly in touch with people in the career fields you're exploring, and potentially expose you to job opportunities that arise in organizations of interest to you. The benefits of networking in general are limitless.

When it comes to informational interviews, chances are, you've already done some form of this networking when you ask friends, family members, colleagues, and mentors about their jobs. If you've never done an informational interview before (especially with someone you don't know), this Career Guide will give you all the key pointers on how to ace your first (or next) informational interview.

# THE BASICS





# THE BASICS

## The What, Who, When, Where, & How

### WHAT are Informational Interviews?

Informational interviews are **one-on-one conversations** that you have with professionals to gather information about:

- their career path
- jobs they've had
- industries they've been in
- employers they're familiar with
- emerging and future trends in their fields
- skills they've developed and used

Think of informational interviews as just having a chat with someone to learn about their professional experience as you explore career options. Remember, the goal is **NOT** to ask for a job or a referral, but rather, to seek information that can help you chart your own career path more effectively. Once you conduct an informational interview, you can then use the information you've gleaned to make yourself a stronger applicant when you're ready to apply for the type of jobs you have been learning about.

The goal of an informational interview is to learn from the valuable lived experiences of other professionals. One of the reasons that a busy professional will stop what they are doing to give you 15-20 minutes of their time is that they (like everyone else) like to feel valued. And so, if you can demonstrate to them that hearing about the steps they have taken, and the experiences that they have gained, would be helpful to you as you chart your own career next steps, then these conversations can be a positive point in their busy work week.

For anyone who feels nervous about networking, or drained by the prospect of having these conversations, it is good to note that you can prioritize a small number of meaningful conversations over having to have lots of conversations. Doing the pre-work to understand what questions you are trying to answer, and then finding the people who can answer those questions through their lived experience, will ensure that even a small number of networking interactions will be beneficial. Having a few high-quality conversations can be much more helpful (and will make the experience far more positive for everyone involved) than trying to reach out to every possible alum.

### WHO Should You Conduct Informational Interviews With?

Anyone who's in a professional role or industry that you're interested in would be a great person with whom to conduct informational interviews. If you don't have a large professional network (which many graduate students don't have to begin with), tap into the large Penn alumni network using [myPenn](#) and [the alumni finder tool on LinkedIn](#), as well as the alumni networks for your other alma maters. In addition to helping you learn more about careers, informational interviews will also help grow your professional network, so that you'll have future colleagues and mentors to talk with about developing new ideas or overcoming work challenges that will help you grow as a professional.

### WHEN Can You Do Informational Interviews?

You can conduct them **at any point** during your time as a graduate student. The earlier you get started, the better it can be for your career exploration, career decision-making, and your professional network. People can be more candid with you when they know that you're not looking for a job immediately. They may feel a bit uncomfortable if they get a sense that there's pressure on them to help you land one. Another good reason to start conducting informational interviews early is that it's often easier to reconnect with professionals when you've already spoken with them before. If you have a great conversation with someone early in your graduate career, you can **build a relationship** with that professional over time.

The best time to look for opportunities to have informational interviews is also when you have done sufficient online research to have as much information as possible about a role, organization, or industry that you are interested in – and when you have a specific **list of questions** you are still looking for answers to. It is this ongoing list of questions that helps you find the right connection to make to get the specific answers you are looking for.

## **WHERE and HOW Do I Conduct Informational Interviews?**

The easiest way to set up an informational interview is via email with a brief, professional, and friendly note. Make your “ask” short and sweet: *“Would you be willing to speak with me for 20 minutes or so about your career path?”*

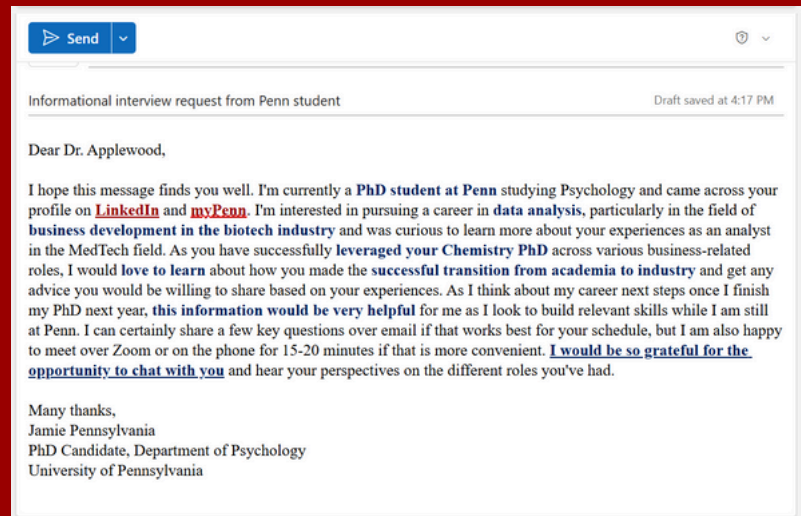
Even though you may find a contact on LinkedIn, this is not always the best platform to send a message to the contact, as not everyone checks their LinkedIn messages. While finding an email can take a little more time, you can often find personal and professional emails for alumni on the [\*\*myPenn alumni platform\*\*](#), from their employer’s website, using a tool like [\*\*CareerShift\*\*](#), or by doing an online search. And remember, wait until after you have had your informational interview to make a connection request on LinkedIn – this is a great way to **keep the conversation going**, and increases the likelihood that your connection will accept.

Informational interviews often range from **20 minutes to an hour**, depending on availability and how the conversation is going. They can take place in person, via phone or Zoom/Teams/etc., or by email. It’s better to meet in real time (either in-person or virtually), but sometimes the professional contact may prefer to answer your questions by email, which is perfectly fine.

**When reaching out to set up an informational interview, always ensure that the time, online platform used, or location are most convenient to the professional.**

The best type of outreach message demonstrates that there is something specific about the lived experience of the professional that is of particular interest to you. It should also demonstrate that you have done some of the hard work exploring the role, organization, or industry you might be interested in talking about. Highlighting people, backgrounds, and educational experiences in common can also be helpful.

## Sample Email:



### What this email includes:

- A clear subject line:  
"Informational interview request from Penn student"
- Who you are
- How you found the person
- What you have in common
- What you're interested in career-wise
- What you found fascinating or intriguing about their professional background

## AI Prompts

Looking to generate different types of outreach emails? Consider using tools like ChatGPT and the prompt below as a template:

**"Write 5 separate versions of a 5-6 line outreach email from a [degree] student in the field of X to an alumna with a similar academic background working in the XYZ industry. Make the specific ask about finding information on ABC and offer different ways to connect."**

### For example:

*"Write 5 separate versions of a 5-6 line outreach email from a PhD student in the field of Zoology to an alumna with a similar academic background working in the strategy consulting industry. Make the specific ask about finding information on how they applied their research skills in the roles they have had and offer different ways to connect."*

# GETTING IT RIGHT



# GETTING IT RIGHT

## 5 Things to Do

### 1) Research Who You are Meeting

When you contact professionals for an informational interview, remember that they are taking time out of their busy schedules to speak with you. While they may be eager to speak with you, you also want to show your gratitude and respect for their time by being prepared for this conversation. That means reviewing their LinkedIn profiles, reading their bios if they're listed on their organization's website, and in general, researching their professional background.

You'll then want to take the information you've learned to craft good questions that you want answers to and shape the conversation in a way that will be most helpful to you.

### 2) Have a Clear Idea of How the Professional Can Help You

Don't be surprised if the professional you're meeting with asks you, "So, how I can be helpful to you today?" To ensure that the conversation is valuable to you and worthwhile for the professional, approach the meeting with a clear goal in mind. It can be as broad as to learn more about what it's like to work in a particular industry to determine if you'd like to pursue that career, or as narrow as trying to learn more about a specific employer to decide if you should apply for a job there in the future. While you may be hoping that the professional will refer you for a job that you have seen posted, your first interaction with them should not be focused on referrals or endorsements. Keep the focus on what information they can provide you with, as opposed to what they can do to help you.

Whatever your goal is, make sure you convey that to the professional, so they can be as helpful as possible.

### 3) Convey Your Interest for Their Path/Industry

Professionals will be a lot more interested in you if you show them that you've done your research. Preface your questions with information that you already have, like "I know that you previously worked at X company. How has your current experience at Y company been different?"

Additionally, if the professional is telling you a story about how they transitioned from graduate school to their first job, or from one job to another, listen carefully and be sure to ask a follow-up question to show that you're engaged in the conversation and that the information is helpful to you.



Although you may be interested in exploring multiple career paths, when you are meeting with a professional in a specific industry, be sure to focus your questions on that industry (unless your contact has experience working across multiple industries).

#### **4) Be Curious**

What makes for a great conversation? It's when you approach the meeting with genuine curiosity, have a list of good questions ready to ask, and listen carefully to the answers and stories the professional shares. People generally enjoy talking about themselves, so feel free to ask some open-ended questions about their professional experiences.

You can ask questions that pertain to the professional's career in the past, present, and future, as well as advice or insights they might have about their industries. And remember, the way that they describe their experiences working in an industry is possibly language you want to use to describe some of your own experiences if you choose to apply to roles in that field.

#### **5) Ask for Recommendations and Other Connections**

One of the main reasons you are conducting an informational interview, besides trying to gather information that would be helpful to your career and job search, is to grow your professional network. Asking the professional you're speaking with for their ideas of other people you should talk to will not only help you learn from other people's career paths and perspectives but also increase the number of professional contacts you have. The worst that could happen is that they don't have any suggestions for you, but in the best-case scenario, it could lead to more informational interviews and potential contacts with employers you're interested in! At the end of the discussion, you can also ask if you can connect with the person on LinkedIn.



# Asking Good Questions

Below are some questions you can ask during an informational interview. Keep in mind that the questions you ask will depend on how your conversation is going. As you listen to answers, you can ask follow-up questions to have more meaningful conversations.

## **QUESTIONS TO HELP PREPARE YOU FOR A CAREER FIELD**

- What kinds of experiences do you believe prepared you the best for working in this industry?
- What skills, talents, and personal qualities do you find to be the most essential in this job?
- How did you find out about jobs in this field when you were a student/postdoc?
- Which resources and organizations helped you to learn about this field?

## **QUESTIONS ABOUT A PROFESSIONAL'S JOB AND FUTURE CAREER**

- How did you choose this career field?
- How do you spend your time during a typical workweek?
- What do you find most rewarding about the work?
- If you were ever to leave this kind of work, what would drive you away from it?
- What type of formal or on-the-job training does your organization provide?
- Does your work become more interesting as you stay longer?
- If things develop as you'd like, what does the future hold for your career?

## **QUESTIONS ABOUT A PARTICULAR ORGANIZATION / COMPANY**

- Why did you decide to work for this organization and what do you like most and least about it?
- How does your company differ from its competitors?
- What is the organizational structure of your company like?
- In what ways does this employer provide ongoing training and professional development for its employees?
- What obligations does your work place upon you, outside of the ordinary workweek? Do you enjoy these obligations?

## **Brainstorming questions**

Tools like ChatGPT can give you a great opportunity to brainstorm different types of questions you might ask in an informational interview. You should always prioritize questions that are the most meaningful to you, but having additional questions is always a good idea. You can use a prompt like:

**"Come up with 20 questions that a [Degree] student in XYZ field can ask a [role] at [company name] as part of an informational interview."**

# Meeting Etiquette

## In-Person Meetings

If you have set up an in-person conversation with a professional, make sure that you are on time for the meeting. Your contact may have to leave promptly at the end of the agreed-upon time to return to their work, and so be respectful of their time by finishing your conversations with a few minutes to spare. For meetings that happen at a coffee shop, while it's not strictly expected for a graduate student or postdoc to buy coffee for a professional during an informational interview, it can be a polite gesture. The professional is generously giving their time and insights, and offering to cover the coffee is a small way to show appreciation.

If you're concerned about the cost or feel unsure, you can simply offer at the counter: "May I get your coffee?" Many professionals may decline, but the gesture will still be appreciated. The key is to express gratitude, regardless of whether you pay for their coffee or not.

## Virtual Meetings

If you are setting up a virtual meeting (e.g., over Zoom), then be sure to send a calendar invite with a meeting link once a time/date has been confirmed. While informational interviews are a more informal type of networking, you will always want to make a positive and professional first impression. Make sure your video background is appropriate, that you are on time, and that you present yourself appropriately (e.g., business casual attire).

Do not record the virtual session without permission from your contact. Since most professionals are representing themselves, and not their employers, you will get better answers when the conversation is not recorded, and so think carefully about whether asking to record the session is necessary. Some video platforms have built-in AI tools that provide a summary of the conversation based on the transcript that is generated (e.g., Zoom AI Companion), rather than a direct recording of everything that is said. It will still be polite and professional to let your contact know if you have a tool like this running in the background and ask if they are comfortable with this.

## Being Mindful of Time

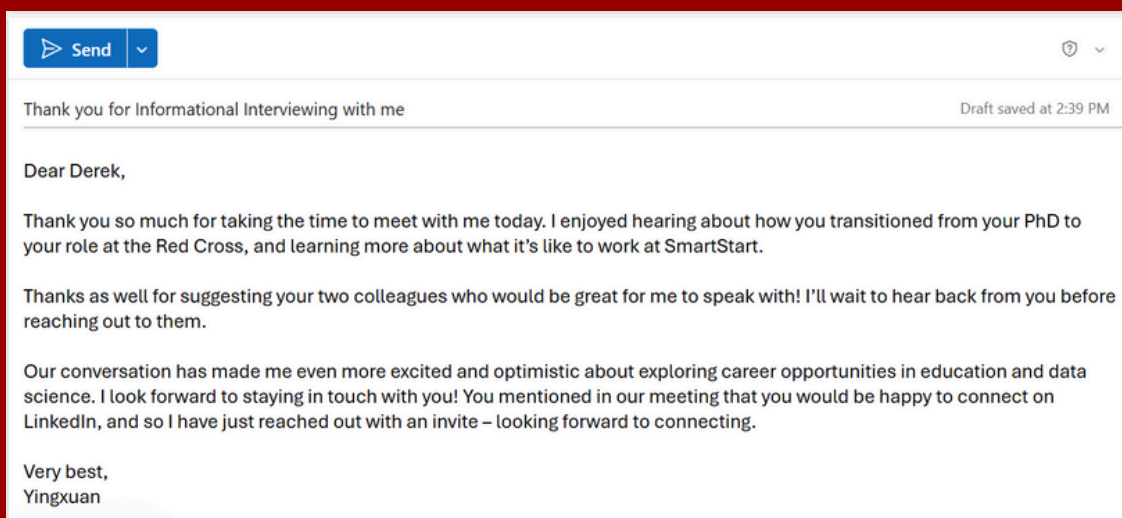
When you share the meeting invitation with the professional, you will need to decide how long to set the meeting. 30 minutes is a good guideline; in this timeframe, you should have enough time to have a robust conversation without impinging on the rest of the professional's day. Keep an eye on the clock during your meeting and be sure to not extend beyond the meeting time. Be sure to leave a minute or two at the end to express your thanks before a timely wrap-up.

# After the Meeting - Following Up

## Send a Thank You Note

Send an email within 24 hours and follow up on anything needed. Don't forget to request to connect on LinkedIn with a personalized note as well. Stay in touch in the long term! You can follow up a few months later with an academic or professional update or question.

## Sample Thank You Email:



The screenshot shows an email draft interface. At the top, there is a 'Send' button with a dropdown arrow and a 'Draft saved at 2:39 PM' status indicator. The subject line is 'Thank you for Informational Interviewing with me'. The body of the email is as follows:

Dear Derek,

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me today. I enjoyed hearing about how you transitioned from your PhD to your role at the Red Cross, and learning more about what it's like to work at SmartStart.

Thanks as well for suggesting your two colleagues who would be great for me to speak with! I'll wait to hear back from you before reaching out to them.

Our conversation has made me even more excited and optimistic about exploring career opportunities in education and data science. I look forward to staying in touch with you! You mentioned in our meeting that you would be happy to connect on LinkedIn, and so I have just reached out with an invite – looking forward to connecting.

Very best,  
Yingxuan

## Some tips on what you can include:

- Something specific that you appreciated hearing about
- Any follow-up from your conversation
- A positive and optimistic end to your message

## 5 Mistakes to Avoid

### 1) Don't Stumble on the "Tell Me About Yourself" Question

This is often the first question that you'll get asked, and your answer will set the tone for the rest of the conversation, so don't stumble on this answer by talking at length about your specific research, mentioning things in your personal life that are irrelevant to a professional conversation, or freezing up and being totally speechless. Although there are a million ways to answer this question, focus on the things that are relevant to the professional you're speaking with. A great answer, lasting one to two minutes, will begin with who you are, what you're doing currently, and what you hope to do in the future, and end with why you are excited to speak with a professional. If you have a connection to the professional, like if someone recommended that you speak with him/her, be sure to mention that as well. When answering this question, convey your enthusiasm and gratitude for the opportunity to chat.

### 2) Don't Be Negative or Vague About Your Career Goals

Figuring out your career goals can be challenging, especially if the goal you set out to achieve becomes ever more elusive due to changes in the job market or other circumstances beyond your control. However, it's important to be upbeat and positive about your future, not just for yourself, but also when you're seeking advice during an informational interview. It can be hard for a professional to feel like they must give you a pep talk when they thought they were just giving you career advice from their own experiences. At the same time, don't be so vague about your career goals that it undermines the usefulness of the conversation.

Even if you are exploring several different careers, only focus your conversation on the career field that the professional is in; stating all your career field interests can make you appear unfocused and directionless in your goals.

### 3) Don't Ask for a Job, Referral, or Other Inappropriate Questions

Don't be that person who asks for a job, personal salary information, or other inappropriate questions during an informational interview. The point of an informational interview is to gather information that you can then use for your own career exploration and job search, not to awkwardly pressure the person you're speaking with to find you a job or divulge personal information.

Place yourself in the other person's shoes. Imagine if you were doing an informational interview to offer your advice and stories to help someone junior to you. Wouldn't it be uncomfortable for you if they instead expected that you would find a job for them, or refer them to a hiring manager? Stick to questions that draw on their unique background, insights, and perspectives.

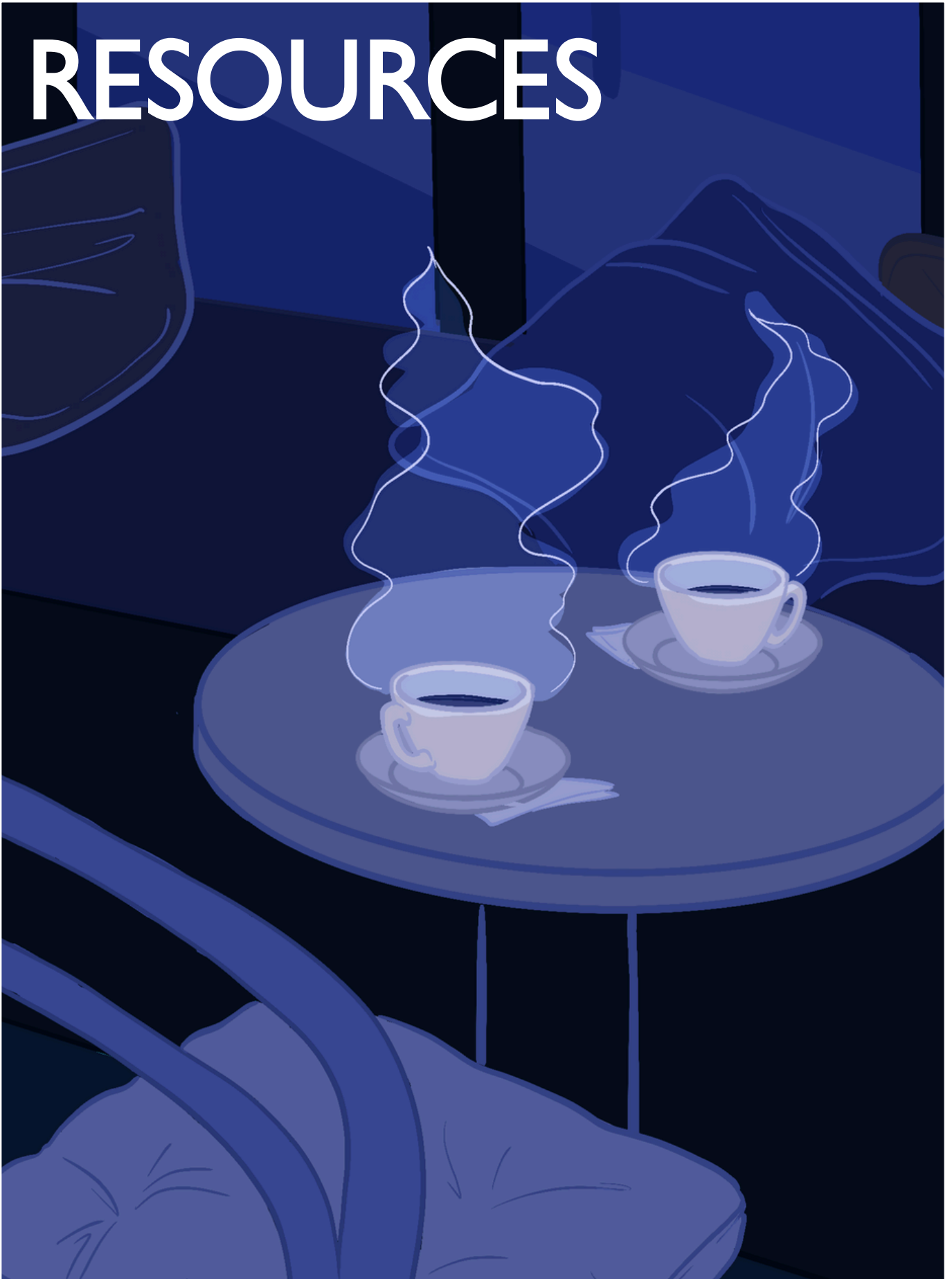
#### **4) Don't Ask Questions that Could Easily Be Found Online**

One of the most annoying things for a professional participating in an informational interview is to have to answer questions that can easily be found online. You're not only showing the professional that you didn't do your research ahead of time, but you're also wasting the time that they could have spent answering other more insightful questions. Take advantage of the Vault industry guides on the Career Services website and use prompts like this to explore career roles or industries using AI tools: "Provide an overview of X role in Y industry in a way that would be relevant to a [degree] student in ABC field exploring career options in this field."

#### **5) Don't Force the Meeting to Be Longer than Planned**

If the professional says they must go, they have to go, so don't needlessly impinge on their time. Remember that they are taking time out of their busy schedules to chat with you, so show them your gratitude by acknowledging that they have other responsibilities and thanking them for the advice they gave and the time they spent with you. If you enjoyed the conversation and have more questions to ask, save them for a follow-up email or conversation. It gives you a good reason to stay in touch!

# RESOURCES





# RESOURCES

## Action Steps Checklists

Informational interviews are hands down the best use of your time as you plan for a career after Penn, so get started!

You'll learn so much more from speaking with professionals than just reading online. If you ever feel hesitant about reaching out, just remember that they have once been in your shoes. To get to where they are today, they had to network with people in their fields. Most people are excited to give back by helping others with their careers. Once you land a job as well, you'll likely receive requests to do informational interviews with the next generation of students, so remember to pay it forward in the future once you achieve that career goal of yours.

Now, be curious, be brave, and start informational interviewing!

### Pre-Interview Checklist:

- ☐ Research the person's professional background using LinkedIn, [myPenn](#), and their organization's website
- ☐ Find out about their current and previous roles and employers
- ☐ Learn about their educational background (note any connections to Penn and your alma maters as well as second-degree connections you have)
- ☐ Know their leadership and volunteer interests
- ☐ Confirm the time, date, and location/logistics of your conversation
- ☐ Send a confirmation email the day before if the informational interview was arranged more than 1 week ago

### Post-Interview Checklist:

- ☐ Send a thank you note via email within 24 hours and follow up on anything needed
- ☐ Send a LinkedIn request to connect with a personalized note
- ☐ Follow up a few months later (such as sending an article relevant to a topic you discussed, sharing a professional or academic update, or asking a question)
- ☐ Reach out to other contacts suggested for informational interviews
- ☐ If the professional has been and will be helpful to you and your career, stay in touch in the long term!



# Organizing & Tracking Your Interviews

Consider keeping a spreadsheet of your interviews, including:

- Who you're meeting with and their current role/organization
- Their contact information and any connections you have
- When and where/how you're meeting
- Questions to ask and notes from the conversation
- Follow-up action steps

Here is an example spreadsheet layout to help you keep track of your networking contacts.

## Sample Networking Spreadsheet:

Name	Current Role & Employer	Penn & Other Connections	Contact Email	Scheduled Date, Time Location	Questions to Ask	Notes from Conversation	Date Thank You Note Sent	Date Follow Up Sent (2-3 Months)	Connected on LinkedIn?	Other Questions to Ask Later

## General Career Resources

- [10 ways to use Career Services for Master's students](#)
- [10 ways to use Career Services for PhD students and postdocs](#)
- [10 ways to use Career Services for International students](#)

## Networking Resources

- [Networking playlist on the Penn Career Services YouTube Channel](#)

Have more questions about informational interviews?

Make an appointment to meet with an advisor



Access the electronic version of this guide, with hyperlinks to online resources, here:



# Career Services

UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA



CAREER GUIDE FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS AND POSTDOCS