

## The Most Common PI/PS Interview Questions

- **Tell us about yourself.**

*A short biography of yourself, no more than two minutes. Highlight unique or interesting aspects of yourself, your skills and your interests. Explain why you became interested in law. Ideally, connect your life experience, interest and skills to the particular organization/position. In broad strokes, skim over your resume, but do not repeat the details or content of it. Instead, explain the motivations behind your life/career path. Public Interest and Public Sector employers are often especially curious about what motivates you to pursue what you do professionally (since money is not usually the main factor in these fields).*

- **Why do you want this job?**

*If you are having trouble answering this question, think about three possibilities: (1) you are drawn to the substantive area of law that the organization/position handles; (2) you share the advocacy point of view that the organization/position seeks to advance; (3) you excel at, or like, or wish to further develop your skills for the particular tasks that the organization/position performs.*

- **Why should we select you?**

*Connect your skills, life experience and passions to the specifics of the organization/position.*

- **Why did you decide to go to law school?**

*Ideally, your answer to this question relates in some way to the job for which you are applying. Thus, "I went to law school because I wanted to represent children in court," is a great answer for an interview with a children's law center. But such a perfect connection isn't required. If your reason for coming to law school was totally unrelated to the job for which you are applying, it would be good to describe the journey in law school that led you to apply for this position. Remember, public interest employers are intrigued by your motivations.*

- **Do you like law school?**

*There is no correct answer to this. Many public interest attorneys hated law school because it can seem so divorced from the real world and practical problem-solving. If that's been your experience, too, go ahead and say that, but ideally you'll want to add that, while you've not enjoyed the classroom aspects of law school, you have enjoyed things that allowed you to do actual legal work (preferably the type of legal work you are applying to do or at least something similar); things like clinics and externships. Also, if you are applying to a job that will involve a lot of legal research and writing, it may not be wise to state that you have disliked that aspect of law school (and it may mean you're not a good fit for the position!). If you have loved law school, that's fine to say, too, but if you are applying to a direct services job in which you will be working frequently with clients, you'll want to make sure that you don't sound overly-*

*enthusiastic about the part of law school that involves long hours cloistered in the library with limited human interaction.*

- **Where do you see yourself in five years?**

*If you cannot honestly say you want to do the exact thing you are interviewing for, say those things that nonetheless relate. For example, if your dream job is a District Attorney position in Los Angeles and you are interviewing for a Children's Law Advocacy organization in San Diego, you say: "I see myself in Southern California, seeking to obtain justice for individuals that have been mistreated."*

- **What are your greatest strengths?**

*State your strengths and explain how they relate the particular position.*

- **How do others describe you?**

*Have three to five strong adjectives ready.*

- **What are your weaknesses?**

*The ideal answer to this is a weakness that contains elements of strength. The classic is thus: "I am so committed to the cause that I sometimes overwork myself." No matter what you choose to answer, however, make sure you also state what you do/have done to address/overcome/correct the weakness.*

- **Do you have experience working with diverse populations? What is the key to working well with diverse populations?**

*You will almost certainly get a version of this question if the job announcement includes direct service work (legal aid, public defenders). If you do not have obvious professional experience that relates, think about any life experience you do have that is relevant. Be prepared to talk about your philosophy and practices when it comes to interacting with people whose life experience may be different from yours.*

- **How do you handle working with difficult people and/or people in times of crisis?**

*While you will want to mention that you'll seek help and guidance if things get overwhelming, avoid the impression that you will always go racing to a supervisor as a first resort.*

- **How do you deal with stress at work?**

*Think of a time that things were overwhelming and how you dealt with it. You may wish to tell that exact story. While you will want to mention that you'll seek help and guidance if things get overwhelming, avoid the impression that you will always go racing to a supervisor as a first resort.*

- **How do you handle conflict? Can you provide an example?**

*For direct services positions, this is likely to refer more to working with clients than to colleagues, but employers may inquire about both things. While you will want to mention that you'll seek help and*

*guidance if things get tense, avoid the impression that you will always go racing to a supervisor as a first resort.*

- **How do you handle difficult or demanding assignments?**

*Discuss your approach to breaking down problems and prioritizing. While you will want to mention that you'll seek help and guidance if things get overwhelming, avoid the impression that you will always go racing to a supervisor as a first resort.*

- **What do you know about our office?**

*A good way to answer this question is to start off by saying: "Please correct me if I am wrong about any of this, but my understanding is..." and then discuss what you have learned by researching the office on the internet, speaking with former interns, etc. This demonstrates that you've done your homework, but also invites the interviewer to jump in if you are off-base about anything.*

- **Tell us about your legal research and writing skills.**

*Law school work is an appropriate topic here, but also draw on undergraduate and/or professional writing experience if you have it. This is a good time to offer a writing sample if it has not already been requested.*

- **Describe something that did not go well for you and what you learned from that.**

*You should think of an example along these lines and be prepared for a question like this. This is a chance to tell a story.*

- **When are you available to start?**

*You should know this in advance. Bear in mind that it is always easier to move up a start date than to move it back.*

- **Are you prepared to relocate?**

*For the purposes of an internship/job interview, the answer to this question is unequivocally yes. If you actually have concerns about this, keep them to yourself.*

- **What questions do you have for us?**

*Always ask at least one question. We recommend that you have five questions ready, since the answers to some will come out in the course of the interview. If you have trouble thinking of questions on the spur of the moment, one possible approach is to write down your questions in advance on the pad you take into the interview. Then you can refer to the questions when the time comes. You don't need to hide this. You say: "There were a few things I wanted to make sure I found out about this position. Give me a moment to check that we've talked about all of them." Then look at your list and ask any questions that haven't been answered already. Here are some ideas for questions:*

- a) *What projects have past interns worked on?*
- b) *What is a typical day like for interns in this position?*
- c) *What do you like most/least about your work with the organization?*
- d) *How would you describe the working atmosphere at the organization?*

*A couple of slightly bolder questions (so ask them very courteously) are:*

- a) *Are there any former interns that I could speak with about the position?*
- b) *Do you have any specific concerns about my candidacy that I can address?*

*Whatever questions you ultimately choose to ask, think about the message that the question itself potentially conveys, even if you don't intend it to. For example:*

- *"What is the work/life balance like at the office?"*
  - *Implied message: "I don't like to have lots and lots of work." Perfectly rational and reasonable, but nonetheless not what you want to convey at the interview.*
- *"What kind of training/orientation is available?"*
  - *Implied message: "I'm feeling a little insecure about my ability to do the work." Again, rational and reasonable, but not the impression you want to give.*
- *"How often do interns do X?"*
  - *Implied message: "I'm only in this for X." If X isn't a large part of what the employer wants/needs from you, then you've just given a big hint that you're not the right fit.*

*You may wish to avoid asking certain questions (like those above) if the potential implied message is not one that you mean to convey. That is not to say you shouldn't do your due diligence and find out the answer to these questions if you can, but they are better reserved for informal conversations with former interns or employees, or with current staff that you know well. Alternatively, they are appropriate questions once you have the offer and are considering whether or not to accept. (Though bear in mind that the questions still carried implied messages and could, at least potentially, lead an employer to withdraw an offer. This is unlikely, however, since once an offer has been made, the employer usually wants you to accept and frequently has at least some ego invested in you accepting.) Still another approach is to go ahead and ask the question at the interview, but explicitly acknowledge the potential implicit message and counter it in the question. For example: "I expect to work hard and I like to work hard. I'm happy to work weekends and evenings when it's needed to get the job done right. That said, I want to do this work for the long haul and I know I need to avoid getting burned out. What's the work/life balance like around the office here and how do you all make sure you stay refreshed and rejuvenated even as you work really hard?"*