

6 Ways to Ace Scenario-Based Questions in Medical School Interviews

Applicants should demonstrate compassion and trust-building skills during medical school interviews.

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<https://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/medical-school-admissions-doctor/articles/2016-11-08/6-ways-to-ace-scenario-based-questions-in-medical-school-interviews>

DURING [medical school](#) interviews, admissions committees are relying more on scenario-based questions, which are designed to test applicants' critical-thinking and reasoning skills. A substantial portion of medical schools now use the multiple mini interview format, which often uses scenario-based questions.

But even medical schools that engage in [traditional interviews](#) may ask scenario-based questions. If you are given a prompt asking you to deal with a situation or problem, especially one including ethical or moral components, here are six tips to ace it.

1. Show empathy: As a physician, it will be important for you to show empathy. So, if you face a scenario-based question in which someone is struggling or in pain, your first approach should be to [exhibit compassion](#).

Be sure to demonstrate to the interviewer that you have this trait – that you would know to sit with the hypothetical patient, friend or classmate, [listen to the person](#) and acknowledge his or her problems, situation or pain.

2. Build trust: If the prompt asks you to confront someone, be sure to [demonstrate your ability](#) to build trust.

For example, if you are given a scenario in which a classmate is overwhelmed and considering dropping out of medical school, show that before confronting your peer, you would create an environment in which he would feel comfortable discussing this sensitive issue with you. Do so by establishing a rapport, staying positive and pointing to his strong suits by recognizing the things he does well.

3. Identify knowns and unknowns: Any time you have a difficult decision to make, you need to be informed. If you face a scenario requiring you to make a decision, first ask yourself what pieces of information are most useful in guiding your decision-making process.

Next, ask which pieces among those are available to you and which are unknown. Then walk through each piece of known and unknown information with the interviewer, explaining how it would affect your decision-making process.

For example, consider a situation in which you are asked to deal with parents who request medicinal marijuana for their 7-year-old child with seizures. Here are some pieces of information that might

inform your decision making process: Are you legally allowed to prescribe medical marijuana in the state where you practice? Have the parents exhausted other more viable options?

What are the effects of medicinal marijuana on seizures and on children of that age? Do the parents seem responsible and trustworthy or negligent? Could there be ulterior motives at play? Then discuss how each piece of information would affect your decision-making process.

4. Do not show off your knowledge: Avoid falling into the trap of thinking you are supposed to rely on your knowledge base. You will rarely need to keep any specific medical or legal knowledge in your back pocket to solve these scenarios.

As in the example above, if you do happen to know the potential beneficial or harmful effects of marijuana on seizures, great. But that is not required.

Interviewers want to see you employing reason and logic – it is more important to demonstrate that you recognize that the effects of the drug, whatever they may be, would inform your decision-making process. For example, you can state, "If marijuana has serious side effects, then I would be less inclined to prescribe it. But if the side effects are minimal and the benefits on seizures could be significant, then I would be more inclined."

5. Understand there is no right answer: This should come as a big relief: Scenario-based questions have no right answer. They are designed to evaluate a process instead of a result.

An interviewer wants to see how you approach a situation – not to grade your final decision. Like actual medical practice, scenario-based questions are illustrations of complicated matters. Embrace the gray area.

6. Remember the patient comes first: If the scenario involves a patient, never forget that, regardless of the complicating factors in any situation, your decision must be first and foremost based on what is best for the patient. Demonstrate your understanding of this bottom line.

Scenario-based questions can be an exciting and rewarding part of the interview process. Do not get in your head.

Rather absorb the prompt given and then demonstrate your process and approach – that you would express empathy toward the patient and investigate each piece of information, whether known or unknown, to effectively make a decision regarding what is best for the patient involved.