What is the difference between 'lie,' 'deceive' and 'mislead'?

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Tutors want to see how students think and respond to new ideas.

The University of Oxford is today releasing a set of sample interview questions from tutors who conduct Oxford interviews, in an attempt to explain the reasoning behind even the most strange-sounding questions.

The questions have been released to mark the deadline day for students to apply to study at Oxford University next year. Students applying for biological sciences might be asked whether it is easier for an organism to live on sea or land, history applicants might be asked which historical figure they would like to interview and why, while aspiring philosophers might be asked to distinguish between 'lie', 'deceive' and 'mislead'.

'When considering an application to Oxford, we look very carefully at GCSE results, aptitude test scores, personal statement, teacher's reference and interview performance, and we know that for many students the interview is the most daunting part of the process,' says Mike Nicholson, Director of Undergraduate Admissions at Oxford University. 'Academic interviews will be an entirely new experience for most students, so we want to show students what they are really like so they aren't put off by what they might have heard.

'Interviews are designed to give candidates a chance to show their real ability and potential, which means candidates will be pushed to use their knowledge and apply their thinking to new problems in ways that will both challenge them and allow them to shine. Interviews are an academic conversation in a subject area between tutors and candidate, similar to the undergraduate tutorials which current Oxford students attend every week. Like tutorials, interviews are designed to get students to think, not recite specific facts or answers.'

Mr Nicholson adds: 'Most interviews don't involve strange or irrelevant-sounding questions at all – they might include a logic problem to solve for a subject like maths, or a new text to read and discuss for English. They may start with familiar territory and then move into areas students have not studied before, introducing new material or ideas, and they are entirely academic in focus.

'We will often provide candidates with material to prompt discussion – for example a piece of text, an item to examine, or an image. It is often best to start responding by making very obvious observations and build up discussion from there, rather than assuming that there is a hidden meaning or a highly complicated answer you have to jump to immediately.

'But we hope that seeing some of the less obvious questions will reassure

prospective applicants that tutors aren't trying to catch students out or see how quickly they get the "right" answer or demonstrate their specialist knowledge. Tutors simply want to see how students think and respond to new ideas. We know there are still lots of myths about the Oxford interview, so we put as much information as possible out there to allow students to see behind the hype to the reality of the process. We now have mock interviews online, video diaries made by admissions tutors during the interview process, and lots of example questions to help students to familiarise themselves with what the process is – and isn't – about.'

Here are some sample questions:

Subject: Experimental Psychology

Interviewer: Miles Hewstone, New College

Q: Should interviews be used for selection?

Miles: 'This question could come out of a discussion of errors and biases in human judgement – that we sometimes overlook some information, while attaching too much weight to other information; and we are often over-confident about the decisions we make. What sources of information might be used to select, for example, Oxford students? Why? How do we know that information is valid? What does validity even mean? Once we have chosen what information we will consider, how can we combine it? And what are we trying to predict? (What is the criterion?) How would you design a research study to see how well different sources of information do, in fact, predict how well we can select Oxford students? What would your study need to measure? Would there be a control group? If so, what kind of control group? What would you need to control for?'

Subject: History

Interviewer: Stephen Tuck, Pembroke College

Q: Which person (or sort of person) in the past would you most like to interview, and why?

Stephen: 'Candidates know that this is not a right/wrong type question. The question is not so much about which person the candidate wants to meet, but what sort of issues the candidate wants to find out about (which can be quite revealing) and then working out the best way to do so. "Meeting" Elizabeth I or Winston Churchill might be exciting, but if the candidate wants to find out about, say, their leadership style, they might be better off asking questions of a courtier or member of the war cabinet. Or if they wanted to find out what we don't know about any given period, they might want to interview people who didn't leave any written records. Sometimes we might encourage the candidate to think through whether the person they selected would be willing or able to reveal the information they sought (and we allow plenty of time for the candidate to change the issue they want to find out about, and reconsider their choice of person).'

Subject: Philosophy, Politics and Economics

Interviewer: Dave Leal, Brasenose College

Q: I'm having trouble with the meaning of three words: Lie, Deceive, Mislead. They seem to mean something a bit similar, but not exactly the same. Help me to sort them out from each other.

Dave: 'When I used this question, candidates adopted a number of strategies. One was to provide definitions of each of them – which

turned out to be less easy than one might think without using the other words in the definition. Or they could be contrasted in pairs, or, like a good dictionary, examples might be given of sentences where they are used. No particular strategy was "correct", and a variety of interesting discussions developed. A few candidates were inclined to think that it might be possible to lie without intending to; most reckoned that one could unintentionally mislead. A fertile line of discussion centred on misleading someone by telling them the truth. When Lucy tries to console Mr Tumnus, the faun, in Narnia, she tells him that he is "the nicest faun I've ever met". Which does sound comforting. She's only ever met one faun, though – him – so he's also the nastiest faun she's ever met. If he had felt comforted by her remark, would be have been deceived? And, in saying something true, had she deceived him, or had he deceived himself?

'Questions of this sort help us to test a candidate's capacity to draw nuanced distinctions between concepts, and to revise and challenge their own first moves in the light of different sentences containing the key words. Discussion may well lead into areas which could crop up during a degree in philosophy, including questions in ethics, the philosophy of mind and of language. It's not, though, a test of "philosophical knowledge", and the content of the discussion begins from words which candidates should have a good familiarity with. Until asked this question, they would probably think that they knew their meanings pretty well. Those for whom English isn't a first language might be thought to be at a disadvantage, but they often do strikingly well at such questions, better indeed than native speakers. There may well be reasons for this, which could form the basis of a different interview question!'

Subject: Biological Sciences

Interviewer: Martin Speight, St Anne's College

Q: Is it easier for organisms to live in the sea or on land?

Martin: 'Firstly candidates should define "easier" – does it mean less complexity, less energy expenditure, less highly evolved, less likely to be eaten etc? Then candidates could think of problems caused by living in the sea, such as high salinity, high pressure, lack of light etc. Problems living on land include extra support for the body, avoiding desiccation, the need for more complex locomotory systems (legs, wings etc) and hence better sensory and nervous systems etc. Then ask in which of the two ecosystem have animals and plants been more successful? So now they have to define "successful"...'

Subject: Modern Languages

Interviewer: Helen Swift, St Hilda's College

Q: What makes a short story different from a novel?

Helen: 'To further their subject interest and to discover whether the Oxford modern languages course is a good fit for them, candidates are encouraged to try reading some literary texts in the foreign language. We know that most won't have studied literature formally before in the language for which they're applying, so this will be reading that they've undertaken independently. In that respect, short stories, such as those by Guy de Maupassant, are a good and a popular place to start: they're engaging, memorable and can feel quite approachable. So if a candidate mentions s/he has read a few short stories, we might begin by asking them which they found the most engaging (or, for instance, the most challenging) and why. After developing this discussion for a short while, we might then push outwards from particular narratives to broader, conceptual issues, such as "what is a short story?" or, differently posed,

"what makes a short story different from a novel?"

'This isn't a question on which we'd necessarily have expected the candidate to have reflected already; it would be the beginning of a conversation, which would start by breaking down the question itself and building up an answer gradually: what might we want to think about in making such a comparison? What elements of plot design or structure or character presentation might differ? Are there, in fact, salient differences? Is it a valid opposition to make? We'd be looking for a willingness to try out new ways of thinking and an aptitude for thinking carefully and imaginatively through a perhaps initially unfamiliar issue. That we'd been speaking about one or two particular stories before posing this "bigger picture" question would mean that the candidate would have ready to hand material to illustrate her/his responses. In asking such a question, I as interviewer don't have in my mind a fixed answer or set of expected points as the candidate starts to respond; the follow-up on any question depends on how s/he sets about thinking her/his way through it.'

Provided by Oxford University

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