
The STPF Application: 6 Tips for the Semi-final Interview

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So, tell me a little bit about yourself...

At first glance, the semi-final interviews for the AAAS Science & Technology Policy Fellowship (STPF) seem intimidating. You have to [prepare a memo](https://www.aaaspolicyfellowships.org/blog/stpf-application-5-tips-writing-one-page-memo) (<https://www.aaaspolicyfellowships.org/blog/stpf-application-5-tips-writing-one-page-memo>), be ready to justify it, and then answer several standard interview questions. The interviewers are seven or eight well-established policy professionals, and you can only see their tiny heads on your screen. On top of that, you only have 30 minutes to make a good impression!

Every fellow has had to overcome this seemingly daunting challenge, but most are happy to share their experiences with you. Keep calm and prepare well ahead of time.

Here are 6 tips to help you ace your STPF semi-final interview:

1. Practice responses to standard interview questions.

If it's been a long time since you've had a formal interview, or if you've never had one (a common problem in academia!), it's important to look up and prepare for standard interview questions. Maybe you've been asked 'Tell us one of your weaknesses or strengths' or 'Tell us about a time you failed and how you recovered', both are common questions in an interview. It's useful to prepare for a variety of questions and have your answers ready.

It's also helpful to practice with a friend, they can tell you if your stories make sense. Someone that knows you especially well might remember a better example of an accomplishment, strength, or time you recovered from a difficulty. You've made it this far and must have done some important or interesting things to get here! Ask your colleagues and friends to share their best or weirdest interview questions and answers. Check out [askamanager.org \(https://www.askamanager.org/\)](https://www.askamanager.org/) for many helpful blog posts on [interviewing \(https://www.askamanager.org/category/interviewing\)](https://www.askamanager.org/category/interviewing), as well as a free downloadable guide.

2. Review the highlights of your application.

You may be asked directly about some outstanding accomplishments. But also, reviewing all you've done will serve as a confidence boost, and a reminder of why you applied to the fellowship (another question you might be asked). Having a few succinct points top of mind will help you make sure you hit them in your interview, and if in the end they ask you if there is anything else you want to share, you have a ready and powerful answer to the question.

When you wrote your application, you may have envisioned one perfect agency, or thought of a particular policy focus for your future. How can your experiences be broadly applied, and how can you put your skills to use if you end up in an office unrelated to your scientific background?

3. Stay up to date with the rapid pace of government change.

A new administration, COVID-19, and civil unrest bring daily changes to the federal landscape. Some confirmation hearings are passing by smoothly but others are not. It seems like there are new Executive Orders every day. The information you've put in your memo may change by the time you are interviewed, so be prepared to address such differences. As well, consider what might happen if there is a big shakeup at your favorite federal Department or Agency.

The fellowship is all about adaptability, flexibility, and openness to new experiences: how has your work or life experience helped prepare you for the current state of flux in the government?

4. Review your memo, prepare a script, and keep primary evidence in mind.

You've got five minutes to present your memo and another five minutes of questions. It goes by very fast, so it's important to keep your main points in mind. The interviewers want to see that you understand something of how the federal government operates and that you can make a case for your policy recommendations diplomatically (e.g., in a nonpartisan way).

Are the recommendations in your memo within the jurisdiction of the targeted agency? How would you make the case to someone who disagrees with you, politically? Keep one or two of the most prominent or impactful sources in mind to help you make your case, especially if you drew on a variety of resources. You might get pushback on a particular point, so be prepared for follow-up questions.

5. It's ok to be yourself and show some personality.

STPF fellows come from a variety of research and life backgrounds, are at different career stages, and contribute different skills in vastly different offices. There is no one type of person who makes a good fellow, so don't feel you have to fit a mold. Honesty and authenticity will help you stand out.

Be prepared to share the challenges you've faced, but also your passion and joy. Your interviewers are people, too! They have their own interests and seeing your passion may remind them of theirs. It also doesn't hurt to do some background research on your interviewers. It may feel impossible at first but relax, breathe and remember, regardless of the outcome, you are a talented and highly accomplished person.

6. Virtual meeting rules apply.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, most people have had to transition to the virtual environment, so this tip may already be familiar. Of course, everyone's situation is different, but try to work best with what you have.

Make sure you prepare for the technical aspects of a video interview, including a stable internet connection, proper lighting on your face, and headphones/microphones if you prefer those. Take note of how you will appear in the video, including what is on your background and walls, and remember to look into the camera while speaking. While you may have become accustomed to working in leggings or sweatpants and a t-shirt, now is the time to put on your interview suit. After all, it is a job interview!

Again, you only have 30 minutes, and you want to make sure you answer the questions that are asked succinctly. Sometimes, prospective fellows may get too excited and over-answer, or dominate the conversation. Allow space for back and forth, and envision a friendly conversation about why you are excited about this opportunity!

Good luck!

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