



10 Points to Remember When Applying for a Nonimmigrant Visa

1. Ties To Your Home Country

Under U.S law, all applicants for nonimmigrant visas, such as exchange visitor visas, are viewed as intending immigrants until they can convince the consular officer that they are not. You must therefore be able to show that you have reasons for returning to your home country that are stronger than those for remaining in the United States. "Ties" to your home country are the things that bind you to your hometown, homeland, or current place of residence: job, family, financial prospects that you own or will inherit, investments, etc. The interviewing officer may ask about your specific intentions or promise of future employment, family or other relationships, educational objectives, grades, long-range plans and career prospects in your home country. Each person's situation is different, of course, and there is no magic explanation or single document, certificate, or letter that can guarantee visa issuance. If you overstayed your authorized stay in the U.S. previously, be prepared to explain what happened clearly and concisely, with documentation if available.

2. English

Anticipate that the interview will be conducted in English and not in your native language. One suggestion is to practice English conversation with a native speaker before the interview, but do NOT prepare speeches.

3. Speak for Yourself

Do not bring parents or family members with you to the interview. The consular officer wants to interview you, not your family. A negative impression is created if you are not prepared to speak on your own behalf.

4. Know the Program and How It Fits Your Career Plans

If you are not able to articulate the reasons you will participate in a particular exchange visitor program in the United States, you may not succeed in convincing the consular officer that you are indeed planning to come temporarily, rather than to immigrate. You should also be able to explain how research or teaching in the U.S. relates to your current or future professional career when you return home.

5. Be Brief

Because of the volume of applications received, all consular officers are under considerable time pressure to conduct a quick and efficient interview. They must make a decision, for the most part, on the impressions they form during the first minute of the interview. Consequently, what you say first and the initial impression you create are critical to your success. Keep your answers to the officer's questions short and to the point.

6. Additional Documentation

It should be immediately clear to the consular officer what written documents you are presenting and what they signify. Lengthy written explanations cannot be quickly read or evaluated. Remember you will have 2-3 minutes of interview time, if you are lucky.

7. Not All Countries are Equal

Applicants from countries suffering from economic problems or from countries where many students and other individuals have remained in the U.S. as immigrants will have more difficulty getting visas. Statistically, applicants are more likely to be asked about job opportunities at home after completing their exchange visitor program in the U.S.

8. Employment

Your main purpose in coming to the United States should be for participation in a temporary teaching or research position, not for the chance to establish a career in the U.S. While many scholars hold regular employment positions during their exchange visitor's program, appointment to such positions must be temporary in nature. You must be able to clearly articulate your plan to return home at the end of the program.

9. Dependents Remaining at Home

If your spouse and children are remaining behind in your country, be prepared to address how they will support themselves in your absence. This can be an especially try area if you are the primary source of income for your family. If the consular officer gains the impression that your family will need you to remit money from the United States in order to support them, your visa opportunity will almost certainly be denied. If your family does decide to join you at a later time, it is helpful to have them apply at the same post where you applied for your visa.

10. Maintain A Positive Attitude

Do not engage the consular officer in an argument. If you are denied a visa, ask the officer for a list of documents he or she would suggest you bring in order to overcome the refusal, and try to get a reason you were denied in writing.

Credits: Gerald A. Wunsch, Esq., 1997, former member of NAFTA Consular Issues Working Group, and a former U.S. Consular Officer in Mexico, Suriname, and the Netherlands; Martha Wailes, Indiana University, and the U.S. Department of State.

Note Regarding Potential Visa Issuance Delays

All applicants for a U.S. visa are subject to security checks before a visa can be issued. Visa delays for some applicants can range from weeks to several months. A visa will not be issued until the application clears all security checks. In addition, for F and J visa applicants, the Department of State must be able to verify SEVIS information in its system, which does not contain "real-time" SEVIS information. Rather SEVIS information must be uploaded periodically from a separate immigration SEVIS system used by schools.