

# Using the Dialectic Method



Who are you?

What do you do?

What do you know?

# in the Competitive Scholarship Interview



by *W. Michael Hendricks*



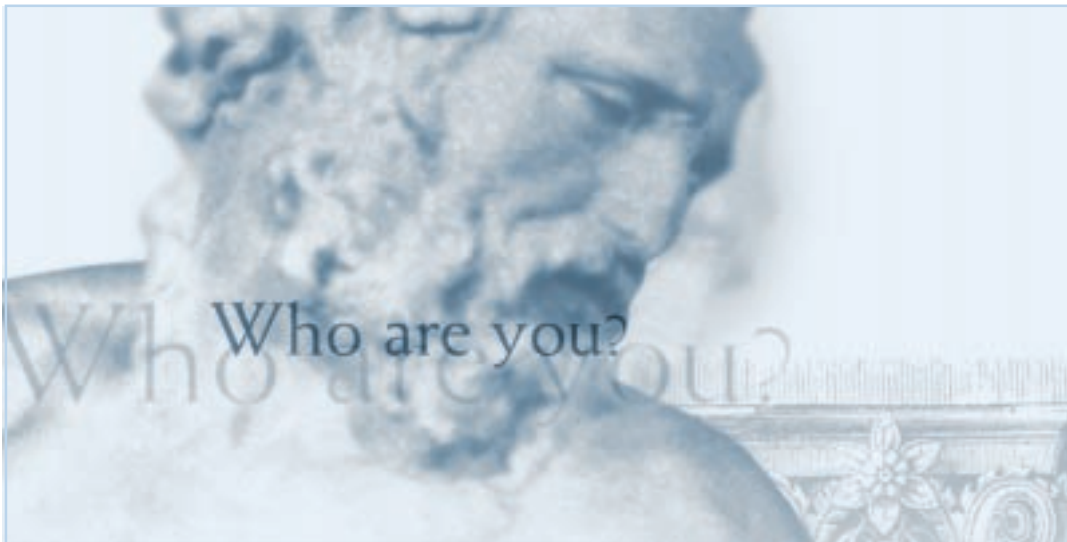
**W. Michael Hendricks** currently serves as the dean of admissions for Widener University in Chester, Pennsylvania. Before coming to Widener University, Mr. Hendricks served as the university director of admissions for Fairleigh Dickinson University (NJ) and worked in the public sector for the Pillsbury Company. He holds a B.A. in international relations from Lehigh University, a M.A. from Fairleigh Dickinson University and is a doctoral candidate in the higher educational administration and leadership program at Widener University.

College admission professionals use the interview process as a tool for evaluating prospective students. Academic credentials and standardized test scores may attest to a student's academic ability, but they do not provide reliable insight into a student's motivation, character, intellect or basic values. To assist in this evaluation process, admission professionals can utilize Socratic questioning during the admission interview to develop a comprehensive profile of the prospective applicant. It is the dialectic method, founded by Socrates, which outlines that the most precise method of attaining reliable knowledge is through disciplined conversation (Stumpf, 1994). This paper examines the similarities that exist between the dialectic method—introduced as an interview technique during a session of interviews with candidates for full-tuition academic scholarships at a competitive private university—and the admission interview. It will provide examples of how the dialectic method can be applied during the admission interview. . . . .

### Similarities

There are significant similarities between the goals and characteristics of the Socratic style of questioning and the admission interview. Initially, each has the foundation goal of obtaining information or knowledge through conversation. The admission interview can be described as a well-planned communication encounter with two purposes: to allow information to be conveyed between the admission officer and the prospective student and to give the prospective student the opportunity to present him/herself as an individual, not just an application. (Utterback, 1984). The dialectic method mirrors the goal of the admission interview since in its most informal sense, dialectic questioning is simply a discussion that progresses toward the truth by critical examination (Oxford Encyclopedia, 1998). Just as in the admission interview, the dialectic method is characterized by questioning and answering within a one-to-one conversation (Elkins, 2001).

The admission interview is also an opportunity for a university to personalize the impersonal admission decision-making process by providing interaction between a prospective student and a college representative. This allows the interviewer to see the whole person, not just the academic credentials of the candidate for admission (Utterback, 1984). In much the same way, the central questions imposed by Socrates in the dialectic method, “Who are you?”, “What do you do?”, and “What do you know?”, personalize an interaction among people to create a comprehensive result (Elkins, 2001). The goal of the admission interviewer is likewise to ask questions that will personalize and expand the scope of the interview.





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Another aspect of the admission interview is that it offers college representatives the opportunity to hear the student speak intelligently about the things they know best and allows them to obtain individual opinions and responses that reflect who the student is (Utterback, 1984). Likewise, the questioning employed by Socrates allows for personal interaction, since dialogue is used as the technique for the discovery of opinions among individuals (Samples, 1998). Also, the nature of Socrates' art lay in the fact that he did not appear to want to instruct people, rather, he sought to utilize simple discussionary questioning (Sophies, 2002). This parallels the practice utilized in the admission interview by allowing the student to reflect and respond independently to questions. Also, in the dialectic method, the topics under discussion are strictly kept within the horizons of the understanding of all participants so that the chance that they might lose the thread of argument or build up concealed disagreement are minimal (The Method and Doctrine of Socrates, 2002). In the same way the admission professional attempts to focus the discussion toward what the student knows best so that the discussion can move forward.

During the college interview, the interviewer tries to unveil a student's thought process and observe his/her communication skills (Utterback, 1984). Similarly, participation in a Socratic conversation requires searching questions and active listening (Elkins, 2001). According to Artz, Socratic questioning stimulates discussion and allows students to approach ethical issues with less apprehension (Artz, 1998). This facilitates the open communication and thoughtful responses desired by the admission interviewer. The development of these two conversational attributes is key if the interviewer is to gain insight into a student's thought process.

In addition to taking notes of student answers, Whitney Soule contends that college admission representatives should pay particular attention to a student's willingness to think beyond the immediate answer and elaborate. It is this ability to further the conversation that is being evaluated (Soule, 1995). To facilitate this, Miles Cuttsinger contends that Socratic techniques should be operationalized, placing fewer burdens on the discussion leader (admission representative) so that he or she can focus attention on dialogue with the student (Cuttsinger, 2001). Furthermore, Soule contends that, at the very least, the function of the admission interview is a fact-finding mission and that, to accomplish this, it is best to work within a casual dialogue by asking questions that will extract the information (Soule, 1995). Likewise, the Socratic method stakes out a path of the conversation within the ideological framework of its interlocutors, and the constructive process of the dialectic secures at each step the conscious and responsible assent of the learner (the student) (The Method and Doctrine of Socrates, 2002). In a similar manner, the admission representative is able to obtain the information and assist the student in thinking beyond his or her answer. . . . .

It is also noted that during the admission interview, the student should do most of the talking. Utterback contends that the student should speak about seventy percent of the interview time, similar to that of most employment interview literature (Utterback, 1984). Likewise, Cuttsinger says that when employing the dialectic method, the exchange of lengthy monologues should be eschewed at all costs and that, in order for discussions to be probing and profitable, the interviewer must be brief and to the point. In the dialectic method, democracy consists in everyone's listening intently, not in equal speaking time. (Cuttsinger, 2001).

Another goal of the interviewer is to have students develop a line of thought toward a question while demonstrating mental quickness and a larger sense of the world (Soule, 1995). In the application of the dialectic method, two processes are distinguishable: the destructive process by which the worse opinion is eradicated and the constructive process, by which the better opinion is induced. Socrates accomplished this by drawing out a remote principle or proposition to which a respondent yielded a ready assent and then assisted the individual further with suggestive questioning (The Method and Doctrine of Socrates, 2002). In this same way, the interviewer can use the Dialectic Method to assist the student in the conversation.

Whitney Soule believes that admission interviewers need to differentiate between being evaluative and being judgmental. A student should be allowed to relax and act naturally, and an interviewer should not show signs of disapproval regarding opinions or activities since the dialogue developed will wither as the student becomes afraid to offer more information (Soule, 1995). Similarly, Socratic methods avoid moral indoctrination and help develop the student's ability to make moral judgments (Artz, 1998).

One admission ground rule is that the interview is considered an interaction between student and interviewer (Utterback, 1984). Part of the process of the dialectic is for the participants to correct each other as best they can, and the better they are at doing this, the more accurate the understanding of the discussion points is likely to be (Beck, 1996). If opposition arises, Socrates attempts to overcome it by recasting the conversation in terms acceptable to all. This is done through questions that force all involved to take a stand in relation to all statements (Elkins, 2001). During the admission interview, interaction is paramount, and the interviewer must allow the student to respond freely and interject with appropriate opinions and answers.







**I**n Socratic dialogue, the student and teacher or prospective student and admission counselor must be open to the idea that there are no right or wrong answers in dialectic conversation, just answers that need clarification or justification.

Utterback states that usually admission interview questions have neither right nor wrong answers (Utterback, 1984). Likewise, the most important rule regarding the dialectic method is the insistence of Socrates that participants follow the argument wherever it leads (Cutsinger, 2001). In Socratic dialogue, the student and teacher or prospective student and admission counselor must be open to the idea that there are no right or wrong answers in dialectic conversation, just answers that need clarification or justification (Elkins, 2001).

Another aspect of the admission interview is that the information that a student offers and the manner in which it is revealed can tell you a lot about personality, self-confidence and depth and breadth of thought within the individual (Soule, 1995). Likewise, the first rule of Socratic refutation is that the respondent must say what he/she really thinks (Cutsinger, 2001). It is important for students to be themselves by being honest, and they should leave the interviewer with something that may not emerge from an application itself, something transcripts, scores and data cannot convey (Soule, 1995). According to Cutsinger, Socratic dialectic has a different code of manners than polite conversation, where religion and politics are sometimes not discussed and interrupting a long-winded and empty speech is considered discourteous. In dialectic, it is proper to politely insert a request for clarification (Cutsinger, 2001). Since the interview is an interaction between individuals, either person in the conversation can, and should, interject when needed in order to determine honest opinions and attitudes. Therefore, an honest give-and-take must be present in the admission interview.

As identified, there are many similarities between the dialectic method and the admission interview in terms of the goals and techniques employed. However, it is important to point out that the similarities found in the literature between the admission interview and the dialectic method exist mainly in relation to the constructive aspects of the Socratic method. When examining the role of Socratic questioning in the admission interview, the destructive or negative aspects of the dialectic method must be recognized. Samuel Stumph illustrates this point about the dialectic by stating, "Although the technique appeared simple, it was not long before anyone upon whom Socrates employed it, could feel its intense rigor as well as the discomfort of his irony (Stumph, 1994, p.38). In certain interview situations, this technique is required to motivate the student to engage fully in the conversation. Stumph further acknowledges that some of Socrates' dialogues would end inconclusively because he was not concerned with imposing a set of dogmatic ideas upon his listeners, but rather that he was leading them through an orderly process of thought (Stumph, 1994). Similarly, it is the goal of the admission interview to move toward full engagement of a student using questioning and answering regardless of comfort level. . . . .

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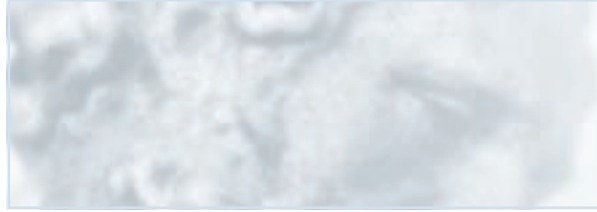
**Example**

The dialectic method was introduced as an interview technique during a session of interviews with candidates for full-tuition academic scholarships at a competitive private university. These students were the academic stars of the applicant pool, having a mean academic profile of 1420 on the SAT, a 4.0 GPA and a class rank in the top 2 percent of their graduating class. Because of the nature of this select group, and the expectations placed on them by the university, it was imperative that the interview be comprehensive and diligent. Also, the students' own expectations demanded that the interviewer challenge their intellect and justify their interest in the university.

The interviewer was charged with several responsibilities during the interview. The first was to critique the student's ability to think critically and converse intelligently by formulating ideas and concepts. The second was to assess the student's knowledge of current events, and finally to determine the student's breadth of overall knowledge and academic sophistication. In addition to assessing each student's academic abilities, the interviewer was asked to identify individual character strengths and weaknesses and to make assumptions about the student's abilities to interact socially. The need for this level of in-depth analysis was required to determine if the prospective student would be a productive member of the campus community.

Socratic questioning was employed because of the similarities that exist between the goals and characteristics of the admission interview and the dialectic method, as well as the need for the interviews to be rigorous and fact producing. To accommodate the traditional structure of the admission interview, e.g., the introduction and student questions, the dialectic method was used exclusively in the body of the interview and made up approximately twenty minutes of the interview. The interviewer framed the discussion by asking the question, "In your opinion, what current issue or concept, most significantly affects humanity, either negatively or positively?" Once the student identified a topic, discussion ensued. In true Socratic form, no topic was excluded. If a student struggled early in the discussion because his or her arguments became stagnant or he or she lacked the communicative sophistication to move the conversation forward, the interviewer would guide the discussion so that it progressed toward the overall goals of the interview.





**A**pplication of the dialectic method can be rigorous and unnerving, especially to students who are unaware of the technique being utilized during the interview. As it was not the intent of the interview to intimidate or unnerve the student, the admission interviewer relied on the basic rule that lighthearted jest or humor is always welcome in Socratic dialogue.

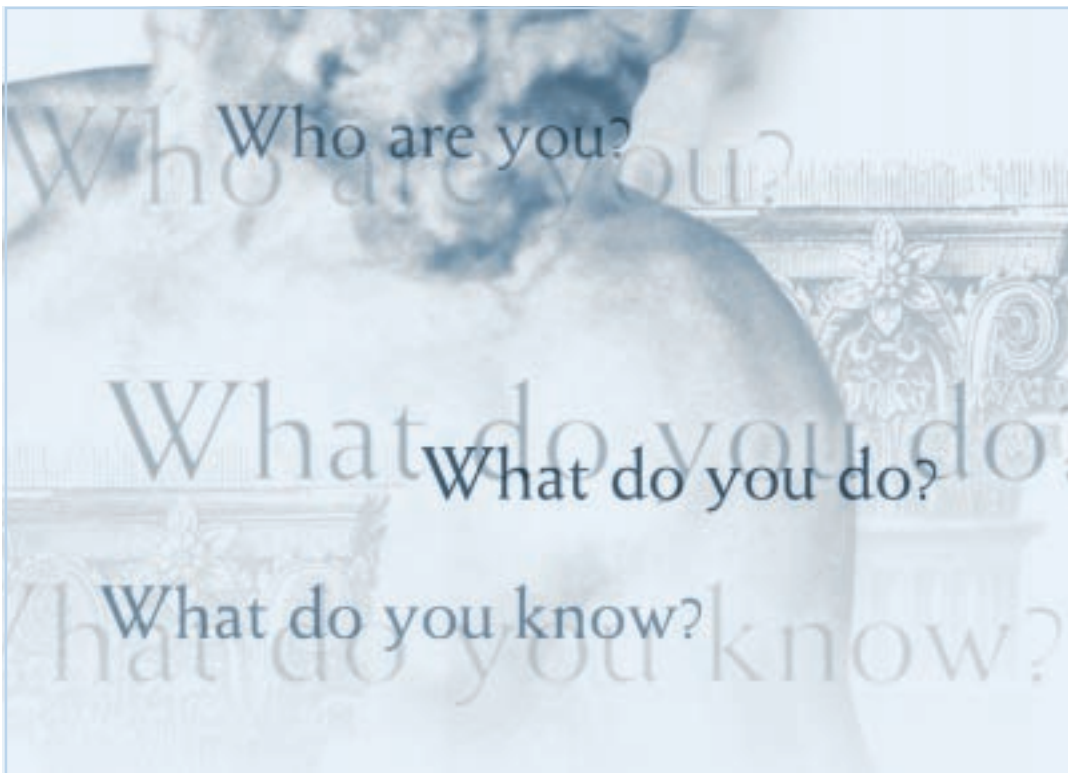
Basic principles of the dialectic method were followed during the interview. The technique that was used most effectively and often was that of playing one argument against the other. Argument and counter argument produce a dialogue between competing arguments (Stein, 1991). An example of this technique occurred when a student identified abortion as an issue. During the discussion, the student stated, “that any person who receives an abortion should face a mandatory prison sentence. This will decrease the number of abortions performed in the United States and ultimately alleviate the problem.” The interviewer responded by saying, “if such a law was created, would it not by *de facto* be discriminatory and sexist, as I am unaware of how an abortion is performed on a male? Is this the intent of the law?” The question and counter argument led the student and the discussion to a more critical focus on the definition and scope of the law, which induced a better opinion from the student. In such a discussion, the interviewer was able to clarify a point through a question, bringing the debate to a logical conclusion or generalization and helping the student articulate a clear definition of the concept (Stein, 1991).

The questions asked by the interviewer were done in a provocative but unchallenging manner because Socrates himself played the role of the humble inquirer, rather than the prosecuting attorney (Stein, 1991). Following the advice of Whitney Soule, the interviewer made sure to lighten the discussion or interject humor if needed as a way to calm the student and allow him or her to engage fully in the conversation (Soule, 1994). As noted previously, application of the dialectic method can be rigorous and unnerving, especially to students who are unaware of the technique being utilized during the interview. As it was not the intent of the interview to intimidate or unnerve the student, the admission interviewer relied on the basic rule that lighthearted jest or humor is always welcome in Socratic dialogue (Artz, 1998). . . . .



It was also important for the student to be able to give definition to concepts. For example, a student was discussing the negative aspects of racism and contended that “the way to eliminate racism was through education.” The interviewer asked the student to “define education and how it would accomplish your goal of eliminating racism.” The student could not answer and became frustrated with his or her inability to further the argument. This also serves as an example of how the Socratic technique can be intense and, at times, irritating.

At the completion of each interview, the interviewer inquired about the student’s knowledge of philosophy and the concept of Socratic questioning. In addition, the interviewer explained the use of the dialectic method and relayed to the student the information obtained through its use in the interview. The notes of the interviewer and the anecdotal responses from students confirmed that the method had been successful in accomplishing the goals of the interview. In particular, students thought that initially the interviewer was asking them questions to “talk them in circles” during the interview. Once they were made aware of the line of questioning employed and were told of the thought processes and communication skills observed by the interviewer, the students became intrigued and began to retrace the path of the conversation. Many appreciated the sophistication level of the questioning and commented that the intellectual rigor and expectation placed on them by the interviewer exceeded their expectations for the interview. Finally, the insight gained into the beliefs, opinions and cognitive skills of the student by the admission interviewer allowed the office of admission to select the appropriate award winners.



Many appreciated the sophistication level of the questioning and commented that the intellectual rigor and expectation placed on them by the interviewer exceeded their expectations for the interview.

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