

## U.S. Consular vs. Border Immigration Interviews: What's the Difference?



By [Eileen M. Martin](#)

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Consular interviews are conducted abroad by the United States embassy or consulate officers to determine whether a visa should be issued. These interviews focus on intent, eligibility and documentation.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) interviews occur at U.S. ports of entry (including airports) and determine whether someone will be admitted into the country, even if they already possess a valid visa. Holding a visa does not guarantee entry.

When entering or reentering the U.S. by land, sea or air, all foreign nationals must undergo inspection by CBP officers at ports of entry.

CBP officers conduct inspections to safeguard national security and public safety, ensuring compliance with U.S. laws and regulations. This screening helps maintain the integrity of U.S. borders and prevents unauthorized entries or potential threats.

## Understanding visa requirements

In most cases, individuals from other countries who are 14 years old or older and who want to travel to the U.S. may undergo a visa interview, for either a non-immigrant visa for a temporary stay or an immigrant visa for permanent residence. Visitor visas fall under the non-immigrant category and are intended for those entering the U.S. temporarily for business (B-1), tourism (B-2), or a combination of both purposes.

U.S. embassies and consulates process immigrant visas and provide a list of required civil and personal documents on the U.S. Department of State's travel website. Specific document requirements may vary by country, depending on local availability and practices.

## Preparing for your interview

**Arrive early.** Plan to arrive at the interview ahead of the scheduled time. Embassies and consulates often have security screening and check-in procedures that may take time. Being late can result in denial of entry to the visa office. Some locations have limited space in their waiting rooms and will specify how early you can arrive.

**Gather required documentation.** This usually includes:

- A valid passport Visa application confirmation page (DS-160 or equivalent)
- Receipt for the application payment
- Two identical passport-style photos
- Other supporting documents depending on your visa type (e.g., financial evidence, invitation letter, etc.)

**Bring only required items.** Embassies and ports have strict security policies. Avoid bringing unnecessary items like large bags, electronics or food, unless specifically permitted. Local U.S. embassies typically provide helpful guidelines.

**Dress appropriately.** Wear neat professional clothing. Your appearance contributes to the overall impression you make on consular or border officers.

**Answer honestly and consistently.** Providing false information can lead to severe consequences, including visa denial and potential future ineligibility. Fraud and misrepresentation are taken very seriously by U.S. authorities and can result in a permanent ban from entering the U.S. Be consistent with prior applications; even small discrepancies can raise red flags. Officers may compare your responses with social media, your phone and past records.

**Remain calm and respectful.** Maintaining eye contact, speaking clearly and confidently, and being polite and respectful to the officers are important ways to demonstrate credibility. These behaviours show confidence and respect and make a positive impression.

**Know your rights.** If your visa is denied at a consulate, you may ask for a supervisor to review your case, although there is no appeal. At the border, CBP officers have significant discretion, but you can ask for clarification if you're unsure about the process. You can also ask to have your application renewed before an immigration judge, although the time and expense to do so is rarely worthwhile.

**Prepare for possible inspection.** CBP officers have the authority to inspect your luggage, vehicle and electronic devices. To avoid unnecessary delays or complications, be mindful of who may have driven your vehicle before you and what items might have been left inside. Conducting a quick inspection of your car before approaching the border can help prevent surprises and reduce stress.

**Plan ahead.** Take time to review your documents and prepare for likely questions. Think carefully about how you will explain your travel plans or other relevant details. Staying calm, confident and well-prepared can greatly improve your chances of a smooth and efficient interview process.

## **Common questions to expect during U.S. entry as a visitor**

When you are entering or reentering the U.S., CBP officers may ask a series of routine questions to verify your identity, purpose of travel, and compliance with immigration and customs laws. It helps to think through your answers in advance and respond calmly and clearly. Common questions may include:

- “Where do you live?”
- “What is the purpose of your travel to the U.S.?”
- “Are you travelling alone or with others?”
- “How long do you plan to stay in the U.S.?”
- “Where will you be staying?”
- “Who will you be visiting during your visit?”
- “Have you travelled to any other countries recently?”
- “Do you have anything to declare?”
- “Are you carrying any food, plants or animal products?”
- “Have you been arrested or convicted of a crime?”

## **Expedited entry for U.S. citizens and permanent residents**

Frequent travellers may benefit from Global Entry, a Trusted Traveler Program offered by U.S. CBP. It allows expedited clearance for pre-approved, low-risk travellers upon arrival in the U.S. It is designed for frequent international travellers and includes TSA PreCheck benefits for domestic and international flights.

Navigating U.S. immigration procedures — whether at a consulate abroad or a port of entry — can be intimidating, but preparation is key. Whether you’re visiting for business, study or to reunite with family, taking the time to prepare shows respect for the process and increases your chances of a successful entry into the United States.

If you have questions or concerns, our team at Lippes Mathias LLP is ready to assist. Please contact Eileen M. Martin (emartin@lippes.com) or Elizabeth M. Klarin (eklarin@lippes.com) to learn more about how we can help.

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