

# Academic Job Interview

## 1. Types of Interviews

- a. Phone/Skype: may be screening, with one or more members of Selection Committee
- b. Convention: may be at booth, or scheduled later during conference
- c. On-site: those on “short list” are invited to come to campus

## 2. Interview Questions

- a. Teaching: previous classes, type, former responsibilities, classes you’d like to teach in future
- b. Research: past, present and future
- c. Fit with the Dept: greatest fear is you will not fit in, will not be a colleague
- d. Questions you ask them  
<http://chronicle.com/blogs/onhiring/asking-the-right-questions/34300>  
<http://chronicle.com/blogs/onhiring/do-you-have-any-questions-for-us/30222>

## 3. Appropriate Attire

- a. Suit for interview and job talk/teaching demo
- b. Business Casual for informal receptions/dinner (ask for details)

## 4. Structure of the Site Interview

- a. 1-3 days
  - a. Job Talk: adhere to time requirements, backup on flash drive
  - b. Teaching Demo: engage students, demonstrate teaching philosophy
  - c. Social events: lunch, dinner, mingling, perhaps parties
  - d. Formal interview w/Selection Committee
- b. You will meet many people: Selection Committee, Dept Admins, Dept Head, Dean, grad students—take note of names for personalized thank you notes/emails!

## 5. Tips

- a. Be prepared: research the dept/university; have Job Talk well-polished; take copies of CV, handouts for Job Talk, all documents that support your application.
- b. You are always being evaluated: an informal lunch is still part of the interview. Treat the executive asst who sets up your travel arrangements with great respect, as well as the Dean.
- c. Ask questions ahead of time: you will have a contact person—ask if you are unsure.
- d. Take a snack in your bag (not backpack)—you may have limited time to eat.
- e. Wear comfortable, but professional shoes (not brand new).
- f. Take an “emergency kit” in your bag: mouthwash/floss, deodorant, small hairbrush, safety pins, nail file, etc. Take a few minutes before the interview and job talk to “freshen up.” (Some deep breathing and positive self-talk in front of a mirror doesn’t hurt either.)
- g. Beware the effects of alcohol!

## Resources:

[chronicle.com/blogs/onhiring/category/interviewing](http://chronicle.com/blogs/onhiring/category/interviewing)

[www.academickeys.com](http://www.academickeys.com)

[www.nationalpostdoc.org](http://www.nationalpostdoc.org)

Heiberger, Mary Morris and Julia Miller Vick. 2008 (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). *The Academic Job Search Handbook*.

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(<http://www.insidehighered.com>)



## Essay on interview questions in academic job searches

Submitted by Sarah Ann Fleming on April 29, 2013 - 3:00am

Whether you have been invited for a phone interview, an interview at a disciplinary meeting, or an on-campus interview, one can never be over-prepared. Carefully consider the questions listed below and how you would answer each question. It might be helpful to have a friend or colleague conduct a practice interview for you using these questions.

### Questions asked by an interviewer

While an exhaustive list of questions that could be presented to a candidate could never be compiled, below is a list of commonly asked questions.

#### Preliminary

- Why are you interested in our college (possibly in comparison to where you have been)?
- What is your ideal balance between teaching/research/service?

#### Teaching

- Can you describe your teaching style?
- What is your typical classroom like?
- What is something that you did in the classroom that didn't work as well as you might have liked? What did you learn from this? / How did you respond?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses as a teacher?
- How could you use your skills to improve their curriculum?
- What classes are you willing/prepared to teach? Not willing?
- How are you going to adjust to teaching lower level students?

#### Research/Scholarship

- Can you describe your research?
- What are your future research goals?
- Are there possibilities for undergraduate research in your area?
- How do you plan to find a research community if you join our school?

#### Service/Other

- What kinds of service you might be interested in?
- What would be a good activity for a student club related to your field?
- How will working at the institution help you improve/grow?

### Questions asked to an interviewer

One thing will undoubtedly occur during an interview – the candidates will be asked if they have any questions for the interviewers. One should always have questions about the job and the institution in general. Here is a list of possible questions.

#### Teaching

- What is the typical teaching load (for a junior faculty member)? How many preps?
- What courses might I teach in my first few years?
- When are courses scheduled (days of week, times of day)?
- What is the average class size?
- What is a typical class size (max/min)?
- What is the population in the upper level courses? Are they mostly majors? What is the breakdown of majors/non-majors? What about in lower level major courses?
- Is the college open to different styles of teaching?
- Would I get to teach upper level courses? What is considered "upper level" at your college?

- Will I have the opportunity to design my own class?
- What is the teaching load? What does that mean in terms of number of classes?
- How many office hours are faculty expected to have? Will I be expected to be on campus/in my office every day?
- Will I be able to/expected to teach courses in the summer?

#### Service

- What is the service requirement for junior faculty?

#### Research

- What are research expectations for tenure?
- How do current faculty find their research communities?
- Are current faculty active in research?
- What resources are in place to help me keep my research going?
- Do faculty receive travel funding?
- Are there summer funds available?
- Are there opportunities/expectations to work with undergraduates on thesis/research projects?
- Is it possible to get course releases for junior faculty?
- Are there opportunities to interact and possibly collaborate with faculty in other departments or with faculty in nearby colleges and universities?
- Do pedagogical articles count toward scholarly research? (Or articles co-authored with students?)
- What is included in your definition of scholarship?

#### Life

- What are your daily schedules like?
- What is this region like? Where do faculty live?
- Are living expenses in line with salary? Is there on-campus housing for faculty?
- How are the local school systems/districts? (for your own family needs)
- Is there a daycare on campus?

#### College/Department

- Can you describe a typical student?
- What technology/programs are available to me? For the students? In labs? In classrooms?
- Do you have active clubs in my field?
- Are the department faculty involved in the local sections of disciplinary associations?
- Where do your undergraduates go from here?
- Do faculty typically remain in the department? Have you had a lot of turnover?
- Has anyone in your department been denied tenure?
- What is your tenure process like? What sort of pre-tenure evaluation process is in place?
- Is there a publication quota for tenure?
- How do faculty use their sabbaticals? When are you eligible? How long are they? Do people usually get them when they are eligible?
- What are your expectations for grants?
- What do you like most about working here?

The above lists give you an idea of what might be asked of you. The lists also give you an idea about what to ask those individuals interviewing you. Clearly you would never ask a single individual all of the above questions. Be mindful of the scheduled length of the interview and compile a list of questions compatible with that time frame. You will have more time to ask questions on an on-campus interview than you will have in a phone interview or an interview at a disciplinary association conference.

There is a great deal of advice about interviewing on the internet and through other venues. Be prepared. Be as relaxed as possible. Be professional. Learn as much as you can about your potential position and place of employment. Your new job could be right around the corner!

#### Author Bio:

*Sarah Ann Fleming teaches mathematics at Belmont University. These questions were developed in part at the 2012 Career Mentoring Workshop for Women in the Mathematical Sciences (CaMeW), where the author served as co-director.*

Source URL: <http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2013/04/29/essay-interview-questions-academic-job-searches>

Your Account

On the Cutting Edge - Professional Development for Geoscience Faculty

## Preparing for an Academic Career in the Geosciences

### Topical Resources

Cutting Edge > Career Prep > Job Search > Interviewing > Interview Questions

#### Related Links

- [Academic Job Interviews](#)
- [The Two-Year College Interview](#)
- [Two-Year College Interview Questions](#)

## Some Typical Academic Interview Questions

Carol Ormand adapted the questions below from a list of interview questions compiled by Heppner & Downing in conjunction with following journal article: Heppner, P. & Downing, N. (1982) Job interviewing for new psychologists: riding the emotional roller coaster. *Professional Psychology* 13: 334-341.

*Jump down to*

- [Questions you may be asked](#)
  - [About your research](#)
  - [About your teaching](#)
  - [About how you will "fit" in the department or at the institution](#)
- [Questions you may ask](#)
  - [to a department chairperson](#)
  - [to a college dean](#)
  - [to the search committee](#)
  - [to faculty members](#)
  - [to students](#)

### Questions you may be asked

You may, of course, be asked a wide variety of questions. However, the list below is made up of questions that are fairly typical of interviews for academic positions in the geosciences.

[About research](#) | [About teaching](#) | [About fit](#)

#### About your research

1. Tell me about your research.
2. Where will your research take you next?
3. What kind of [support/start-up/lab space/equipment] will you need for your research?
4. How will you fund your research program?
5. How will you involve students in your research?
6. What is your approach to supervising [undergraduate/Masters/Ph.D.] student researchers?
7. How would you go about recruiting talented students to [the geology major/your research program]?

#### About your teaching

1. What courses would you like to teach [in addition to the one or two specialty courses specified in our job advertisement]?

2. How would you teach [name of a course]? What approach would you take?
3. How would you deal with the challenge of [a large lecture class, teaching non-science majors, teaching a mix of science and non-science majors, students with poor writing/math skills, limited resources]?

### About how you will "fit" in the department or at the institution

1. What attracted you to this particular job advertisement?
2. Where would you like to be five years from now?
3. How do you feel about living in [a big city/a small town/the middle of nowhere/the opposite side of the country from where you've been living]?
4. How do you see yourself fitting into a department such as ours?
5. How do you see yourself fitting into our institution? Variations:
  - At a liberal arts school: how will you contribute to our liberal arts mission?
  - At a church-affiliated school: how will you contribute to our [name of religion] tradition?
  - At a women's college or historically black institution: how do you feel about teaching at a historically women's/historically black institution?
  - At a public university: how do you feel about teaching at a public university?
  - At a community college: what do you see as the role of community colleges in today's changing educational landscape?
  - At many different kinds of schools: how will you make your classes accessible to students from a broad (racially, economically, academically) spectrum of backgrounds?
6. We have a fairly heavy teaching load here. How will you make time for research, on top of all of your other responsibilities?

## Questions you may ask

It is wise to be prepared to ask some questions, yourself. It shows that you have done some research about the institution, the department, and the position, and it demonstrates that you are interested enough to want to know more. Here are some questions appropriate to each of the people (or groups of people) you are likely to talk to. There is some overlap of questions, as more than one person may be able to answer a particular question. In some instances, it's helpful to see whether you get the same answer to those questions from different people.

[To the chair](#) | [To the dean](#) | [To the committee](#) | [To the faculty](#) | [To the students](#)

### To the department chairperson

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the department? the institution?
2. Is the administration supportive of the department and its program? How does that support manifest itself?
3. What are the immediate needs of the geology program? How do you see me fitting into those needs?
4. Where do you see this department, five years from now?
5. What are the relationships like among the various departments in the college/university?
6. How are departmental decisions that affect the faculty made?
7. What behaviors are valued in this department?
8. What are the procedures for promotion and tenure?
9. Are salary raises computed on a percentage basis or a sum increase? What has been the past "track record" for raises?
10. What kinds of monies are available to cover professional convention expenses?
11. What other resources are available, such as research assistants, teaching assistants, computer services, research space, and secretarial assistance?
12. How do you handle transportation for field trips? How does that work?
13. How would you characterize the students here, both geology majors and the general student population?

### To the college dean

1. How do you perceive the department in relationship to other departments in the college/university? How do you perceive the college in relationship to other colleges in the university?
2. Five years from now, where would you like to see the college? the department?
3. How is the economy affecting the financial budget for the university? the college? the department?
4. What are the strongest departments on campus? the "up and coming" departments? What do they do particularly well?
5. At a publicly-funded institution: What is the legislative atmosphere in the state regarding funding for higher education? How does this state compare with other states in terms of funding for higher education?
6. What have been the enrollment trends in your college? In the university? Why?

### To the search committee

1. Where is the committee in the job selection process? How many people are you bringing to campus? What is your timetable for making a decision? When can I expect to hear from you?

2. How did this position become open?
3. Who was in this position previously? Why did they leave? What did this previous person do well in their job? What do you wish he/she had done differently?
4. If you had magical powers, and could create the perfect person for this job, what would that person be like?
5. What does the work load consist of in terms of courses, advisees, etc.?

### To the department faculty

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the program?
2. How do you evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the program?
3. What are the challenges currently facing the department or program?
4. How would you describe the ideal candidate for this position?
5. What kind of research is being done within the program? within the department?
6. Do you do collaborative research with other faculty members, either in this department or in other departments?
7. What is the expected courseload? number of advisees?
8. What are the students in the program like? How are they selected/recruited? What have your graduates gone on to do?
9. What is the history of the program? the anticipated future direction of the program?
10. What do you like best about working here?
11. What are the areas of conflict in the department? How is the conflict handled?
12. How would you describe [name] as a department chair? For how long is he/she going to continue to be chair? What will happen after that?
13. What are the support services like (e.g., secretarial assistance, teaching and research assistants, travel monies, field trip logistics)?
14. What do you do for enjoyment?

### To the students

Students can be very informative, as they are usually not inhibited in offering their honest opinions.

1. What are the strengths of the program here?
2. What do you wish for, that you don't have, as a student in this department?
3. What are your professional goals? after graduation? in five years?
4. If you know some recent graduates, what are they doing now?
5. Who amongst the faculty do you think does a great job? What do they do particularly well?
6. Especially for graduate students, or some highly competitive undergraduates: How many of you have published an article in a professional journal? presented at a national convention? belong to national professional organizations?
7. How frequently do you socialize with faculty? with other students in the program?
8. Is the program atmosphere conducive to your learning and development? Would you recommend it to a friend?
9. If I were a good friend of yours, what would you tell me that I might not ordinarily find out about this place?





## Academic Job Interview Advice

Mary Corbin Sies, Department of American Studies, University of Maryland, College Park

The following is the text of a talk that I gave at the American Studies Association Annual Meeting in Kansas City, Missouri, as part of the ASA Students Committee-sponsored session on Job Interviewing, Sunday, Nov. 3, 1996. You are welcome to link to or to reproduce this page so long as you include the credit line above and do not alter the content. Please let me know how useful you find the advice. I will try to adjust and maintain the content according to your feedback.

Send me mail:

I was on the job market between 1984-87. During those years I applied for about 140 jobs. I participated in a couple dozen convention interviews and about six campus interviews. The advice that follows is based on those experiences as well as my experiences more recently on the other side of the fence, interviewing job candidates.

Job Interview Workshop  
American Studies Association Annual Meeting  
November 3, 1996

Good morning. My job this morning is to give you some general advice on interviewing for academic jobs, with a special focus on graduate degree granting institutions. My first piece of advice--and probably the most important one I give--is that you should market yourself for the specific job and come to the interview prepared to talk knowledgeably about what you have to offer that specific institution. Academic institutions fall into four general categories and we're going to cover at least three of these this morning:

1. Ph.D.-degree granting institutions
2. State university or college branch campuses (non-flagship universities), many of which will be excellent places to be but which will often carry heavier teaching loads
3. Small universities or colleges offering a liberal arts curriculum
4. And community colleges, most of which have very local constituencies and a large percentage of fully mature students.

Each institution will be interested in different qualities in its job candidates; this will become evident in the types of questions you're asked at interviews.

Carolyn de la Pena, Chair of the ASA Students' Committee, asked me to speak about the competition for tenure track jobs at a graduate-degree granting university. What does it take to land a job at the University of Maryland, College Park, or a similar place? I don't have to tell you what a depressing subject this is--the nature of the market right now makes the competition ridiculous. And it's worth remembering that it's ridiculous because you need to develop coping mechanisms for dealing with what seem like and are possibly high standards, especially for entry-level jobs. Search committees interviewing candidates for a tenure-track entry level position at a graduate degree granting university will look for the following:

1. Ph.D. in hand (or 3/4s of your dissertation) to show by December-January

2. Book or book contract (no, this is not fair. I was once told that I did not make the short list of 10 for a tenure track job because I didn't have a book published or nearly finished).
3. Other publications--placing publications in refereed journals is especially important. One article in a well-thought of academic journal makes a real difference.
4. Teaching experience--you need something in addition to teaching assistantships. Search committees will want to know whether you have lectures written, whether you can teach their department's service courses, and whether you can manage graduate students. They will prefer that candidates have some teaching experience post-Ph.D. or outside of a graduate assistantship and they will look for evidence that you can handle a full load of teaching (anywhere from 2/2 to 4/4)
5. Some evidence that your work has been recognized by others. This evidence usually comes in the form of honors, awards, grants, and fellowships that you have received. In these times of tightening budgets for higher education everywhere, a streak of entrepreneurship--the ability to bring in money to support your research or some other academic enterprise--may seem very attractive.
6. Recognition of your work by scholars in your field outside of your home university. This may simply come in the form of letters of recommendation from scholars outside your home university in your credentials file.
7. Evidence of connectedness. Have you been asked to do the sorts of things that come by networking--write book reviews, serve as a commentator on panels, serve as an officer in the local chapter of your professional organization, organize panels, etc.?
8. Administrative ability--such as service on program committees, organization of conferences, academic advising, etc. What is the evidence that you work well as part of a team?
9. Collegiality. Do not underestimate the importance of "the lunch test".
10. Firm plans for future research. This is important for a department's assessment of whether you're likely to achieve tenure at their institution. Being able to go to an interview and give a first rate paper on a subject other than your dissertation is especially impressive.

A good 5-20 people per job may have all or most of these credentials (at least in quantity if not in quality). That's what you're up against.

To get to a campus interview, most job applicants have to survive interviewing at a convention. The convention interview is challenging because you must present yourself so strongly in such a short time. The logistics are as follows: You will generally be called in advance to schedule the interview, but "in advance" may be as late as 2-3 days before the conference starts. It is important that you try to agree on a time and place before the conference starts--it's surprisingly hard and stressful for the candidate to try to reach search committee members during the convention--no one is ever in his/her room. The interview will probably last from 30-45 minutes. It may go longer if they like you.

Convention interviews are usually divided into four components:

1. questions about research
2. questions about teaching. These may very well predominate and will often take the form of specific questions like "what books would you use to teach ..."

3. They'll tell you about the school and the job
4. They'll let you ask questions

My survival advice for convention interviews is:

1. Be prepared. Be sure that you have researched the school so that you have ascertained their needs and can direct your remarks to what they appear to need. This includes knowing who's on the staff, who teaches what and how territorial the place is. You don't want to outline a course that someone else is already very invested in teaching. I prepare a cram sheet for each interview that records my research for the job, my analysis of their needs, and the anticipated questions I'll need to address. It also includes the questions I want to ask them.
2. Strike fast. Try to establish your candidacy in the first 5 minutes of the interview. The standard pieces of advice for business interviews apply here, too. Look people in the eye. Answer questions succinctly. Have ready good snappy short and medium length answers to the standard questions. DO NOT drone on for 15 minutes about the minutiae of your dissertation.
3. It's an old cliché, but try to relax and be yourself. Don't try to hide who you are. Be careful about creating different personas for different interviews at the convention. You will be seeing search committee members throughout the weekend and you need to remember who you are for each encounter. Believe in your skills and give it your best shot.
4. Dress distinctively (but don't violate too many conventions). After 2-3 days trapped in a hotel room interviewing, search committee members are completely fried or bored or both. It'll be hard to remember you if you looked and dressed like every other candidate.

If you are lucky enough to get a campus interview, a "flyback," the advice I gave earlier about marketing yourself for the specific institution becomes truly important. Do your homework. Read the catalog and all the literature you can get your hands on. Call friends or acquaintances who are familiar with the university. Pump your networks for the inside dope. Be prepared to be specific about how you might enhance any one of the department's programs or initiatives. The logistics are that they will generally fly you in for 1-2 days. The atmosphere of the campus interview (barring severe factionalism) is usually quite pleasant. You will most likely be treated well and given every consideration.

What should you expect for a campus interview at a Ph.D.-granting institution? Your presentation will most likely be the most important part of the interview. Have your remarks prepared, after ascertaining what they want, who your audience will be, how long they expect you to talk, and whether they want you to give a formal paper or an informal seminar on your research. How you handle questions will be closely evaluated. On occasion, depending on the circumstances of the search and what kind of folks your future colleagues are, the Q&A session following your talk may get adversarial. Don't let them see you sweat. Be prepared to talk about your research often and in detail to different constituencies of the department and university. They must evaluate your prospects for passing a tenure review in 5-6 years. (It may help you to know that at some institutions, a tenure line will not be returned to the unit automatically after a tenure denial. Your success, therefore, may be vital to the unit's ability to maintain its present size and strength.)

Be ready to discuss how you would teach at least 3 undergraduate courses and 1 graduate seminar. Most of these should be classes you know they expect you to teach. One should be something special, entrepreneurial--something drawing on your strengths that could really enhance their curriculum and that other candidates would not be able to offer. The inability to talk knowledgeably about more than one course is unimpressive. Search committees will expect you to be prepared for these questions. If there is some kind of special initiative that the dept is working on, being ready to say how you could contribute to it will be

impressive. For example, my department is using the World Wide Web for a lot of undergraduate teaching and we're building a virtual museum which serves as the base for this work. What skills or ideas could you bring to this project?

Although negotiations concerning the job will be conducted with the Chair or Head of the department at a graduate-degree granting institution, you may be booked for an interview with the Dean. If so, this will be an important interview; deans authorize offers. Be prepared to explain the importance of your research to someone who has no training in your field. Be able to demonstrate your "connectedness" and high regard within your field. If the Chair hires a star, the Dean will get credit for it. The Dean wants to know whether landing you will enhance his or her (university's) standing. If you can, use the Dean interview to educate him or her about the importance of your subject matter and, by extension, your new department to current scholarly doings. You may be asked to comment on all kinds of developments in higher education that the dean is interested in. There is no substitute for regular reading of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* at a time like this.

Be ready to sell your candidacy to the graduate students. Making the separation between being a graduate student and teaching them is not easy. Put some thought into how you will handle this before the interview.

Exercise good manners and display collegiality at all of the social occasions. There is NEVER a time when you are visiting that you are NOT being interviewed. It's an obvious point, but watch your drinking. It's surprising how many candidates get nervous and overimbibe--usually not to the point of drunkenness but enough that they don't feel very well on the second day. Do not let your guard down and confess things--fears, misgivings, shortcomings in your work, where you REALLY stand with your dissertation writing--to ANYONE while you are there. Last year I was invited to the dinners for all five candidates for a position in a neighboring department and I was often the last person the candidate saw that day. Every single one of them said something to me that he or she shouldn't have.

Here are a few last bits of advice: Search choices are mind-bogglingly arbitrary. You must develop mechanisms for dealing with this aspect of the process. (I took to ritually burning my rejection letters in the fireplace after the first 30 or so piled in. Silly, but it helped). Thorough preparation for a campus job interview takes far more time than you may have. Plan ahead and manage your time to do the best you can. Don't stint on this part of the interviewing process.

For a checklist of all the generic steps in the job application process, see my Academic Job Application Checklist. For a list of all the generic questions I've ever been asked at a job interview, see Academic Job Interview Questions. Feel free to send me feedback and suggestions for improving this site.

Good luck in your job search. May you remember that there really was a reason you went into this business and get a chance to do what you do so well.

*This page is maintained by Mary Corbin Sies, Department of American Studies, University of Maryland, College Park. sies@wum.umd.edu. It was last amended on 1 October 1998.*

## QUESTIONS ONE SHOULD BE PREPARED TO ANSWER FOR JOB INTERVIEWS

Mary Corbin Stes, Dept. of American Studies, University of Maryland, College Park

This is a list of job interview questions I compiled when I was applying for college or university positions in American studies, history, and architectural history. I have kept it up to date; every category of question I have ever been asked at a job interview is represented below. You are welcome to link to and use these questions so long as the above credit line is included and that you do not alter the content if you choose to produce this page. I would be interested in receiving feedback about the usefulness of the list and I will maintain and update it as I hear from you. Good luck in your job search.

and me mail:

Describe your research. (Have a good articulate rap down pat in short and longer versions, for experts and non-experts).

What audiences are you addressing, what are the other hot books or scholars in your field, and how does your work compare with theirs?

i. (Rephrased: what is the cutting edge in your field and how does your work extend it?)

ii. (Answer this question on your terms, not those of your competition).

How will you go about revising your dissertation for publication?

iii. (be able to answer this in both general and specific ways).

i. Question may imply: do you have an interested publisher and where do you stand in your negotiations with said publisher?

ii. Question may also imply: we thought there were some significant shortcomings in your thesis, but we're giving you this chance to redeem yourself by indicating that you're in the process of addressing these shortcomings in ways that we think appropriate.

What you've said is all very interesting, but doesn't work in your field sometimes tend to border on the (choose adjective) esoteric, antiquarian, (and if postmodern) ridiculous? What is the broader significance of your research? How does it expand our historic understanding, literary knowledge, humanistic horizons?

Remember that this is a legitimate and important question--may be the toughest one you get.

Usually asked by someone outside your field. Can you explain the value of your work to an educated person?

i. Asks you to grapple with limitations in your research. Don't be afraid to acknowledge these, particularly you can use such an acknowledgement to indicate where you intend to go in your research after this. (My moral research, you see, is only the necessary first step...)

2. What is your basic teaching philosophy?

2a. Question might be answered quite differently for the small liberal arts college, state branch university w/heavy service teaching load, or graduate-degree granting institution.

3. How would you teach...?

3a. basic service courses in your field

3b. any of the courses on your C.V. that you say you can teach.

3c. What courses would you like to teach if you had your druthers? how would you teach them?

3d. (many committees will want to know which specific books you would use).

3di. this may be an indirect way of ascertaining whether you already have the course in the can.

3dii. Do you, for ex., know what is and is not in print in pb form?

3diii. Which text would you use (have you used) for the U.S. Survey, for English composition, for Am Lit 101, etc.? (Beware: this can turn into a great test of your poise and diplomatic skills when one search committee member says "I love that book" and the next says "I wouldn't be caught dead including that text on MY syllabus.")

3e. Be prepared to talk about several courses, after having sized up the institution's needs.

3ei. Do your homework to anticipate what the department needs.

3eii. Be prepared to talk about teaching its basic service course(s). If you're applying to a small liberal arts College, this could include things like Western Civilization, Western European art history, Brit Lit., etc.

3eiii. Be ready to talk in detail about an innovative course or two that you think the Department might really go for--something new and w/in your expertise.

3f. Take course X. As you would teach it, what three goals would the course achieve? When students had completed your course, what would they have learned that is of lasting value?

4. Tell us how your research has influenced your teaching. In what ways have you been able to bring the insights of your research to your courses at the undergraduate level?

5. We are a service-based state branch university with an enrollment of three zillion student credit hours per semester, most of them in the basic required courses. Everyone, therefore, teaches the service courses. How would you teach Hist Or Lit or Art 101?

5a. (what they are asking is are you willing/experienced/ mentally stable enough to teach a heavy service

course load to students who've likely read fewer than 3 books in their entire lives).

5b. (they may also be saying) No one on the faculty (much less the students) at Middle State U has even heard of the figure/subject/method of your research. How do you think you could fit in here? Could you be happy or at least useful in a backwater? (i.e., can she survive in Timbuktu with idiots for colleagues and morons for students?)

6. Your degree is from Prestige Research University--what makes you think you would like to (or even would know how to) teach in a small liberal arts college?

6a. Depending on the college, this may be one or two questions:

6ai. (can she survive in Timbuktu with idiots for colleagues and morons for students?) same as 5b.

6aii. do you understand the liberal arts college mission, are you a dedicated teacher, and will you give your students the time and personal attention that we demand from all our faculty members?

6b. At our college, teaching is the first priority. Do you like teaching? Would you survive (and thrive) under those circumstances?

6c. What experience do you have teaching or learning in such a setting?

7. This is a publish or perish institution with very high standards for tenure review--what makes you think you would be able to earn tenure here? (see next question)

8. Tell us about your research program. What are you working on currently? (now that you've completed your doctoral work)? What do you plan to look at next?

8a. Having a paper or a talk ready that showcases a topic different from your doctoral research demonstrates research prowess.

9. Why do you especially want to teach at Nameless College or University? How do you see yourself contributing to our department?

9a. (The real answer to this, of course, is "because I need the job, jerk!" But don't be caught without a well-considered answer. This is a hard question to answer if you are unprepared for it. Be sure you've done your homework).

9b. (for small colleges) We conceive of our campus as one large community. What non- or extra-academic activities would you be interested in sponsoring or participating in?

10. Are you connected? (If you were organizing a special symposium or mini-conference on your topic, which scholars could you pick up the phone to call?)

11. For women only: (Hem, haw) What does your husband think about you taking a job in another state?

11a. How long do you (do you really) plan to stay? The correct answer is "at least until my tenure review." These days, no one expects a longer commitment than that.

11b. How will you handle the separation? (This is asking for reassurance that you plan to live at Nameless U rather than commuting from your husband's home base. The last woman they hired did that and it didn't work out; she was never around).

11bi. they may be trying to ascertain whether you have children w/o asking directly.

11bii. you may want to offer a strategy for how you're going to manage your marriage (we've done this before--it's no big deal; my husband has a more marketable career and can't wait to follow me to your wonderful location; it's none of your business).

11biii. if you're not obviously married (if you're straight or gay and have a SO), committees probably will not bother you with these sorts of questions. It will then be up to you to raise them if they are important to you. Would there be any chance, for ex., of landing a joint appointment for my "fiancee" or "companion"? I don't recommend this unless it's a decisive issue for you. If it is decisive, and it's a job you want, then by all means raise it at the time of the campus interview.

11c. An enlightened and clever search committee might raise this question with a candidate, acknowledging that it's a personal matter but will weigh on your decision to take the job, should you get an offer.

11d. Whether you're male or female, a search committee (assuming they find you an especially attractive candidate) may try to ascertain this sort of information to 1) inform you (because they feel it's only fair) what their institution's policy is on joint offers, or 2) see what it would realistically take to land you (is a joint offer the only terms you'll accept).

11di. (As someone who has been stuck in a commuting marriage for 7 years now, I am obviously not the best person to give advice on how to pull this off).

11dii. A wrong answer to such an inquiry may disqualify your candidacy.

12. You've seen our (religious) mission statement. How would you see yourself contributing to our mission and campus atmosphere?

12a. technically, asking about your religious affiliation/ beliefs is an illegal question. Committees will be more or less direct with you about this question and you can perceive the degree of conformity/support they expect according to how they broach the subject.

12b. they are also trying to tell you that character (defined in their traditional, conservative way) counts at the institution and in town as well; they want you to withdraw from consideration if you won't fit in.

For a checklist of all the generic steps in the job application process, see my Academic Job Application Checklist. For some additional advice on job interviews, see Academic Job Interview Advice. Feel free to send me feedback and suggestions for improving this site.

# THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

## Manage Your Career

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October 15, 2004

### **The Academic Job Interview Revisited**

*By Mary Dillon Johnson*

Interview season is upon us, so now is a good time to review the ins and outs of that piece of the hiring process.

#### The Preparation

You've heard it before, but it's worth hearing again: The first step in preparing for an academic job interview is to do a little research on the institution and, if possible, on the people who will be interviewing you.

At the very least, you need to know whether the institution is a large research university, a selective liberal-arts college that values good teaching, a midsize institution with a heavy teaching load and a mixed student body. With the minimum of research you will avoid the mistakes that come with not knowing your audience. You will be able to lead with your own experiences that match the emphasis of the institution.

In making the case for gathering some advance information, let me share the following incident: A department chairman, talking to a group of graduate students, advised them to do what he noticed that good candidates coming through his department did -- namely to be familiar with the fields or major work of the department's faculty members, and certainly of professors in their particular subfields. He noted that one candidate seemed "manipulative" because he had read the recent publications of everyone on the search committee and managed to "drop" something about each person's work during the interview. Manipulative or not, the chairman said, that candidate was the one who got the job.

#### The Goal

When you walk into an interview, your goal is to convey an image of yourself as a colleague. After all, a colleague is what your interviewers are looking for.

What that means is for you to express your excitement and enthusiasm for your work, for the work of members of the hiring department, and for the institution. You want to convey the feeling that you are already comfortable as a member of the academic

profession.

When I say that to a group of graduate students, someone invariably asks, "How can I show enthusiasm without seeming silly?" I'm not talking about being cheerful (though that's not a bad thing) but about showing how invested you are in your work.

Often the next question is "How can I seem comfortable in this professional role when I still think of myself as a graduate student?" For current graduate students on the academic market, shaking the student identity can be especially challenging.

My advice is to think of yourself in your future role from the time you start applying for jobs, if not sooner. If you are actively engaged in research and teaching and in collaborations with other scholars, it will be easier for you to identify as a colleague. The way you convey your professional comfort in the interview itself is through your discussion of all the things you are doing. You show that you are productive, have had some classroom experience, and have thought about what it means to be a faculty member.

If your job interviews feel a lot like an exam -- with the interviewers asking the questions and the interviewee giving the often qualified and hesitant answers -- that is a telltale sign of a graduate student who still sees himself as a student.

The other extreme can be just as telling: a job candidate pontificating at great length to the interviewers about how a subject should be taught and what faculty members should do. Keep in mind it's a junior colleague they want.

Demonstrating a generally pleasant manner throughout the interview may help you convey your suitability as a colleague. Yes, faculty members want colleagues who will build up the reputation of their department or attract more students or spark their best work. They also want a nice, maybe funny, person in the office next door. Even at top research universities, where excellence is clearly the main criteria, turning on the charm can't hurt.

### The Questions

A graduate student I know, in describing a recent interview, told me how surprised she was to be asked a question about how she would teach the introductory course in her field. I was surprised that she was surprised.

There are some standard questions -- and that is one of them -- that you should anticipate. I am not suggesting that you write out a set of answers, memorize them, and deliver on cue in the interview. I am suggesting that you think about the typical questions and decide

what points you want to make, what stories you want to tell. Stories drawn from experience are excellent answers to many questions, and it can be hard to pull up the right one on the spot unless you have thought about it ahead of time.

Generally, common interview questions fall into three subject areas: research, teaching, and what I can best label "general." Use the information you find out about each institution and department as the guide to the questions you anticipate.

For example, if you are interviewing at a foreign-language department, be sure you check the department's course offerings to decide whether to lead with your literary research interests or with your solid experience teaching all levels of the language. Be aware that research universities may also ask some questions about your teaching, and teaching-oriented institutions may ask about your research.

Under the "research" category, "tell us about your dissertation" is a standard question that should never take you by surprise. Be prepared to talk about the work of others in your specific field and compare it with yours. You may well be asked about your next projects.

A few examples of common "teaching" questions: "Tell us about your teaching experience." "How have you used technology in the classroom?" "How do you feel about teaching students of mixed abilities?" You may be asked to talk about your teaching philosophy or to describe a course that you are eager to teach.

Under the "general" category come broad academic questions like "tell us about your long-range plans and commitment to this department," as well as questions about your comfort level in the region or a certain type of institution.

For example, if you are from a major university in a big city and are interviewing at a liberal-arts college in a small town, you should expect to be asked how you feel about such a transition. If you are interviewing at a religious institution, you may get a question about how comfortable you are teaching at such a place -- especially if there is nothing in your vita that shows a connection to that college's particular religious affiliation.

#### Practical Tips About Your Answers

Give yourself a moment after each question before you answer. Take a breath, collect your thoughts. You want to avoid rushing down a path with an answer, only to find that you didn't want to go there.

At the start of the interview, answer questions with specifics -- a concrete example of a classroom strategy that worked or a course you taught, a specific description of your research focus. Make sure the stories you tell have specific details.

You are most nervous at that point of the interview, and focusing on specifics will ground you. You know about these things; you have experienced them. It's not the time to take flight with generalizations and hypotheticals. Throughout the interview, keep drawing on specifics. They will make every answer more interesting.

That does not mean to avoid "framing" an answer. Some questions really call for you to begin by laying out the principal ideas or goals before you describe particulars. Structure your "tell me about the dissertation" answer by giving an idea of the whole, and perhaps tell the story of how you got interested in the topic before you elaborate on any part.

For the question about how you would teach an introductory course in your field, start with what you want students to learn from the course, and how that determines the curriculum and evaluation, and so on. In short, don't jump right in with a list of texts.

Whenever possible, use the present or past tense when you speak. Talk about what you do and did, not about what you might or would do.

### The Telephone Interview

The special challenge of the telephone interview is that you have only your voice to use to convey your collegiality. To help your voice do that work by itself, sit upright, smile, lean forward, and even gesture as you talk into the phone, just as you would in person. You may feel a bit odd, but that activity will energize your voice and make it expressive.

Good luck.

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# THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

## Manage Your Career

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### **The First Interview**

*By Steven M. Cahn*

One of the crucial steps in obtaining an academic position is the initial interview. Understanding its dynamics is critical to success.

If you are a new Ph.D. or will soon be one, you may know the basics of the initial interview: The encounter usually takes place at a professional conference, either in a hotel suite or perhaps at one of numerous desks arranged in a large meeting hall. Two or more faculty members will talk individually for 30 to 40 minutes with a dozen or so candidates and choose about three to come to the campus for a second interview.

You may also know some general rules about first interviews: You are responsible for your expenses; check and recheck the location; wear something that, without appearing unnecessarily formal, will place you among the better-dressed attendees at the conference; and don't be late. In addition, you should know basic information about the institution that invited you.

What you probably don't know is what will happen during the actual interview.

When you're called in and introduced to your interviewers, look them in the eye, shake hands firmly, try if you can to remember a name or two, and, most important, smile. In fact, throughout the interview, you can't smile too much. When smiling, all of us look more approachable and amiable. You'll also put the interviewers at ease, a vital goal.

After all, an interview is not akin to a doctoral defense. You are not being questioned to reveal in your work whether you overlooked an obscure reference or failed to grasp a subtlety in someone's argument. Consciously or unconsciously, interviewers are asking themselves: Do I like this person? If they find you appealing, then those interviewers will give you the benefit of the doubt when they assess your answers. If they don't feel comfortable in your company, the details of your answers won't matter. (Of course, if you exhibit a flagrant lack of knowledge or fundamental unsuitability for the position, even the most charming personality won't help.)

At a doctoral defense, you can be personally obnoxious, yet impress

the members of the committee with your grasp of the subject; at an interview, obnoxiousness is fatal. At a defense, you can express yourself with timidity and still win admiration; at an interview, your own lack of confidence leads others to lack confidence in you.

Why are the two situations so different? The members of your doctoral committee are only interested in the quality of your scholarship, whereas interviewers are concerned not only with your research but with your potential as a teacher and colleague. To award someone a doctoral degree doesn't require anyone to enjoy working or socializing with that person; your interviewers, however, expect to see you often in both formal and informal settings, and they want to enjoy your company.

As to the questions you'll be asked, the first is almost a certainty: "Tell us something about your dissertation." Prepare by having practiced a two-minute answer that explains the essence of your work. The temptation is to go on at length, but resist that impulse. The interviewers have limited time, and if they want to hear more, they'll ask.

Do not assume they are specialists in your area of research, for almost surely they are not. If they were, they wouldn't be searching for someone in your field. The challenge is to convey as clearly as possible the reason your topic attracted you, the insights you gained, and the relevance of your work to broader interests the interviewers might have. Don't use arcane terminology or refer to obscure sources. Your primary goal is not to show off your profundity but to demonstrate how effectively you can communicate. If you can't express yourself clearly to your interviewers, they will doubt you can do any better with students.

After your two-minute summary, you may be asked questions that test your ability to defend your views. Even if an interviewer's inquiry seems elementary, take it seriously. The most simple-sounding question can turn out to be challenging. Moreover, an apparently naïve query may be a test of how well you can respond to uninformed students.

If an interviewer's manner is pugnacious, stay calm. Some like to test how you perform under stress, so even if provoked, don't display annoyance.

When a decision is made regarding whom to invite for a second interview, even a single negative vote can be decisive, for if several candidates are acceptable to all, why choose someone who isn't? For that reason try to remain on good terms with everyone, regardless of the tone of their remarks.

If you're questioned about a controversial issue, don't offer your views in a manner that suggests no reasonable person could possibly disagree. Some of your interviewers probably see things differently. You don't know where they stand, so the safest course is to have your say without scoffing at contrary viewpoints.

You are likely to be asked how you would teach a course in an area of your competence. Be prepared to respond in detail. You might even have available multiple copies of syllabi that you can distribute on request to the interviewers. For each course listed on your vita, you should know the texts you would use, the topics you would cover, the readings you would select, and the methods of evaluation you would employ. After all, you have claimed to be able to teach particular courses; you should, therefore, be prepared to explain how you would do so.

If you have experience as a teacher, you can rely on it as a basis for answering questions about pedagogy. If you haven't had classroom experience, your answers can nevertheless be effective so long as you have prepared carefully. The decisive factor is not how many courses you have taught but how detailed and persuasive you can be about your approach. Suppose in responding to a question about how to teach a particular course, a candidate replied, "I'm not sure. I'd have to think about that." Now contrast that answer with this one: "I'd use the new, third edition of Smith and Dale and concentrate on the readings in sections two and four." Which candidate would you prefer?

You may be asked whether you could teach a course you haven't listed. If it lies completely outside your areas of interest, say so. But if, given reasonable notice, you might be willing to try, then an effective response is, "I'd like to do it, but I'd need a few months to prepare."

Why are you being asked about that particular course? Obviously because someone is needed to take it on. If you appear ready to accept the assignment, that willingness might be crucial to your being offered the position, particularly if the course is one with which few applicants are comfortable.

If you are asked about your interests in the discipline apart from the subject of your dissertation, be sure to have a couple you can discuss. Even though specialization is the heart of graduate school, interviewers appreciate a breadth of concerns.

Most interviewers realize the inappropriateness of asking candidates personal questions that have no bearing on performance as a faculty member. For example, no one should ask you, "Will

your spouse be living with you?" If such a question is posed, be noncommittal. Few interviewers will probe further.

Toward the end of the interview, you will be asked if you have any questions. Because having none suggests a lack of interest, have one ready, but don't use the occasion to embarrass your interviewers by calling attention to a weakness in their program: "Any reason the library holdings are so meager?" Nor should your question suggest that you are concerned with trivia. My favorite of this sort was posed by a candidate who inquired seriously: "Does the school provide free pencils?" He never had the opportunity to find out.

Here's a more promising query: "Do you have a visiting lecture series?" If the answer is positive, you can offer to help administer it. If the answer is negative, you can indicate your willingness to try to establish one. Either way you appear to be an interested colleague, to have the welfare of the department at heart, and to be prepared to do your share of the work.

Ask one or two questions but no more. Time is limited. If you're called back, you'll have the opportunity to raise as many issues as you like. Furthermore, don't ask about salary, benefits, moving expenses, travel money, and other matters involving dollars and cents. You're being presumptuous by assuming you've already been chosen as a finalist, and you're also asking the wrong people in the wrong setting.

One additional warning: Don't go out of your way to tell jokes. Spontaneous humor can relieve tension and be helpful to you, but you're not auditioning to star at a comedy club. What one person finds funny, another may consider silly.

Before leaving, you're entitled to ask when you might hear something further about the progress of the search. Regardless of the answer, express your appreciation for having been invited, and, as you shake hands, acknowledge by name as many of the interviewers as you can while you do one other thing: smile.

If you've rarely been interviewed, your first attempts are apt to leave you dissatisfied with your performance. Don't despair. As in so many areas of life, practice helps. For that reason, assuming you have even slight interest in a position, you should accept any interview offered. Gradually you'll become more at ease, and eventually you'll know the most likely questions and be able to relax and even enjoy the interaction.

One final suggestion. When nervous, some people become passive, displaying little energy or enthusiasm. Others become aggressive and try to seize control of the situation. Both approaches lead to

failure. Just be friendly and display enthusiasm for whatever the interviewers want to discuss. Your goal is to persuade them that you present no problems and can make a positive contribution to the success of their mission. If you succeed in conveying that impression, you'll be on your way to a campus visit.

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