

How to Survive Your First-Round Interview

It's your first meeting with the search committee. Here's how to prepare — and how to increase your chances of getting to the next round.



Vitae

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The Basics: What to Expect in an Initial Interview

Seeking a tenure-track job or a nonacademic position? Here's what you should know about first-round interviews.

By Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong

Question: *I'll be on the job market this fall, and am hoping to have at least a few first-round interviews. My advisers have let me know that such interviews can take place in person at academic conferences, over the phone, or through video-conferencing technologies like Skype. Is there anything I should be doing to prepare for interviewing in those different formats? And, in general, what can I do to be successful in the first round, and increase my chances of being invited to visit a campus?*

Jenny: The first step in preparing for a first-round interview for a tenure-track position is to learn all that you can about the institution. It's likely that you've already done some research while writing your cover letter and preparing other written materials for the position. Before the interview, review the job description carefully and look at the institution's and the department's websites. Every institution sees itself as unique, so try to get a sense of how the college views itself, what its mission is, and what it offers to students. Think about how you could contribute to those things.

Julie: The challenge of a first-round, or screening, interview is to convey what you think is most important about your work and yourself, and how hiring you would enhance the department in a short period of time. It's important to practice talking about those topics in a concise manner. If your campus career center offers mock interviews, take advantage of that service.

Jenny: Many academic departments offer their students a chance to practice interviews as well. If that is the case for you, practice in both your department and at the career center. The more chances you have to articulate your fit for a given position, the better.

Julie: Academic departments will want you to be able to speak about your teaching, your research, and, occasionally, any service work you have done at your current university. While the principle generally applies that teaching-oriented colleges will be interested in your teaching and research institutions in your research, you should be prepared to answer

a range of questions at both types of institutions. In mock interviews with students and postdocs, we've often found that it's easier for people to discuss their research than their teaching, because research is usually their focus as they begin the job-search process. For many postdocs and for A.B.D.'s finishing a dissertation, it may even have been a year or two since they've taught. That's why practicing talking about teaching is so important.

Jenny: Departments will expect you to be able to discuss the specific courses you've taught, what made them successful, and what you might do differently. You could be asked about your goals for students, about how you might approach a course already offered at the college, and about what new teaching ideas you might add to the department. Members of the hiring committee will expect you to talk about your research in a clear, concise way—to state what is original about your work and describe its importance in your field.

Julie: It's important to think about your interview from the perspective of your interviewers. It is possible that they do not enjoy interviewing candidates. It can be difficult, time-consuming work to evaluate a series of strangers based on a list of questions. Help your interviewers out by being enthusiastic and thorough in your answers. Don't make them drag information out of you. Be careful about the length of your answers; be sensitive to their cues that they are ready to move on to the next topic.

Jenny: The reader who sent in this question is smart to ask about the format of the interview. Speaking in person with members of a hiring committee is very different from using Skype or chatting on the phone. In person, it's fairly easy to respond to physical cues that can help you understand whether it's time to wrap up or change topics. On the phone and over Skype, that is far more challenging. If you're not sure what to expect from a particular interview format, the solution, again, is to practice in advance. A career counselor, family member, or friend could help you get used to responding to questions

over the phone or via the computer. It's especially important that you become familiar with video-conferencing software before your interview.

Julie: If you're going to be interviewed over the phone, be sure you have a quiet space in which to talk. If your cellphone service is unreliable, find a place where you can speak from a landline. That may sound like basic advice, but you'd be surprised how often people forget obvious issues like that when scheduling phone interviews.

During the call, you may be speaking with more than one person. Ask all of your interviewers to identify themselves before speaking. That may sound awkward, but it's common practice during conference calls for many organizations. One advantage of a phone interview is that you can use notes to remind you of points you wanted to get across to the committee (and you can take notes on what you're learning). That said, you do not want to appear as though you are reading from a script.

Jenny: While the format may feel strange and new to many, those who regularly use Skype to connect with family and friends will feel comfortable.

Just don't get too comfortable. This is a job interview with the same formalities, even though you can't shake hands. As with an in-person interview you need to need to dress for the web version, sit up with good posture, and establish eye contact (as best you can) with each interviewer. As with a phone interview, you want to make sure you won't be disturbed.

Julie: Whatever the format, your goal in a first-round interview is to be memorable to a committee that may be speaking with five or 10 candidates. Lots of practice will help you be prepared, polished, and professional, which, in turn, will help you stand out from the crowd.

Question: *I'm a few years into my Ph.D. program, and am beginning to think that academe is not for me. Luckily, my campus has a fairly robust recruiting program through which many employers come to campus to interview students. I've heard that graduate students do sometimes get interviews, though I'm not 100 percent sure that I will. Just in case I do, what's the best way to make a good first impression in these interviews?*

Julie: Your first hurdle is to actually get an interview, which means submitting a résumé and not a CV to the employers recruiting through the on-campus program. Creating a résumé is different from drafting a CV in that the former is targeted toward a particular field or type of job and it highlights your relevant experience instead of the topic or content of your research.

Creating a résumé involves more than just shortening your CV; it involves focusing on the functions you have performed and structuring your graduate-student or postdoc experi-

ence in a way that is relevant to nonacademic employers. If you played a role on a project in your department, or were active in student government or a professional association, it's important to include that information on your résumé. I have known students whose work as an officer of a student leadership group or experience in a student-run consulting or biotech group was instrumental in getting nonacademic employers interested in them.

Jenny: To learn more about what nonacademic employers look for in first-round interviews, we spoke with Vanessa Paul, a "talent acquisition specialist" at Standard Chartered Bank in London. Vanessa will be in the United States this September to recruit undergraduates for the company, but she did mention that some divisions of the bank also hire master's and doctoral students. Even when a recruiter is focused on hiring students with bachelor's degrees, he or she usually knows about how the organization hires other types of degree candidates—you just have to ask. A career fair on your campus is a great place to strike up that sort of conversation with nonacademic employers.

Julie: We asked Vanessa what a human-resources recruiter is typically looking for in the course of a first-round interview. "It's important that candidates demonstrate a strong cultural fit within Standard Chartered," she said. "It's paramount that our employees embrace our values, which emphasize the need for collaborative working, creativity, and innovation. ... During a first-round interview we are assessing the competencies of candidates; it's important that they can demonstrate how they work individually as well as in a team showing a balanced approach to both ways of working. Equally as important is for candidates to illustrate an international perspective. We are looking for someone that can approach an issue from a variety of ways. We want people who are open and excited about working with customers and colleagues from different cultures and time zones."

Jenny: Vanessa stressed the importance—as we did earlier in this column—of taking telephone interviews as seriously as the in-person kind. Candidates should be in the right environment—with no distractions—where they can focus on the questions being asked.

Julie: In a first-round interview, Vanessa said many of the questions you'll be asked will be scenario-based questions, often called behavioral questions. An example might be asking you to give a specific example of a project you have worked on, your role in the project, how you measured its success, and what you would have changed or done differently.

Jenny: Job candidates are often mystified by such questions and wonder why they are asked. Vanessa gave us some

good reasons: “We hope to gain a clearer idea of candidates’ core competencies, particularly leadership skills, team skills, time management. We’re looking for adaptability, positive disposition, humility, people’s drive to lead, and their management of stakeholders.” She also noted that a common mistake candidates make in first-round interviews is not having enough examples based on personal and professional experiences.

Julie: Another mistake Vanessa mentioned is failing to do enough research on the organization to which you’ve applied. “It is also important that candidates show that they have researched the bank,” she said. “Showing more than just knowledge of what’s written on a company Web site is always impressive—for example, referring to news and recent deals mentioned in local and global media give candidates a leading edge.”

Jenny: We couldn’t agree more with Vanessa’s advice on preparing for a first-round interview: “Research, research, research! Show a demonstrable knowledge of the business to which you are applying. Be prepared to ask questions. Ideally, if you know who is interviewing you, try and do some research on their background if it is possible. If there’s anything you feel you could have answered better, don’t be afraid to follow-up with an email (but do not bombard the interviewer!).”

Julie: We would add one final suggestion to her advice: Practice! Lists of common interview questions are available in many places online. No matter how many times you’ve thought out an answer in your head, it will inevitably sound different when you speak it out loud for the first time. And that’s why practicing is so important for any type of interview—academic or otherwise—particularly if you don’t have a lot of interviewing experience. Taking the time to prepare your answers will make your interviews much more successful, and help you get to the next step in the process.

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Step One: How to Get Your Foot in the Door

Here are six tips on how to present yourself as the true professional you are.

By Nancy Scott Hanway

You're standing at the edge of a hotel ballroom, where scary-looking older professors are interviewing job candidates. You spot the table where you have your next interview. Another candidate sits there wearing an expensive suit, and she's making the professors laugh. As she walks away confidently, they're still chuckling. They confer for a few moments, scribbling on their notepads. You think, "Oh my God, she got the job! They loved her." And then you quickly wonder, "Do I know any jokes?"

I promise that you have no idea how her interview actually went. You can't tell—from seconds of laughter in a crowded room at the Modern Language Association conference—whether that candidate will get the job. Hiring decisions are made by committees. No matter how much the professors at the meeting may like a candidate personally, they have to take many factors into account when they get back to campus and justify their feelings to their colleagues.

At my small liberal-arts college, we receive hundreds of applications and spend hundreds of hours evaluating cover letters and supporting materials before we invite 10 to 12 potential colleagues to the MLA conference for first-round interviews. From those interviews, we choose two candidates to come to the campus for the final round.

As an associate professor of Spanish, I've conducted interviews at the MLA for tenure-track openings at least four times over the past 10 years, as colleagues retired or left the college. I've met a few applicants who look great on paper but give weak interviews. That's disappointing, because if you're unprepared during a 30-minute conference interview, it's hard for us to get a sense of your promise as a future colleague.

A few years ago, I wrote a column for *The Chronicle* that focused on how to write cover letters for a teaching job at a small college. This time, I will focus on the conference interview and offer seven tips on how to present yourself as the true professional you are.

How do you prepare for a first-round interview? By: (a)

carefully reading the job announcement, (b) carefully reading the website, and (c) engaging in mock interviews. Don't skip any of those steps.

The job ad signals the kinds of questions you may be asked at the interview. I'm always surprised when a candidate appears shocked by a question about how to teach a particular course when that topic was mentioned in the position announcement. In addition, be prepared to discuss your experience with any campus programs, such as community-service efforts, mentioned in the ad.

Next, look at the college's website. Familiarize yourself with the department's activities. Check out the college mission statement and the department's mission and vision statements. Read them carefully. Those documents give you an idea of how the institution sees itself and what the department believes is important.

Finally, find a professor to engage you in mock interviews. You may be tempted to ignore this step because it is nerve-racking. Don't. A mock interview will help you shine during the real thing. Ideally, your mock-interviewer is a professor who has served on a hiring committee. If you are applying for language positions, you will be interviewed in both the target language and in English. Practice your answers in both.

Mock interviewers can help you shape your description of your dissertation. They can tell you to stop chewing on that strand of hair. And they can help you practice answering dozens of questions, especially the dull and clichéd ones. Hiring committees often have to ask interview mainstays—such as "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" or "Where do you see yourself in 10 years?"—because some administrator or committee member insists.

Some of those questions require a lot of preparation. There's an art to describing your greatest weakness in an interview: You should never give one that raises a red flag ("I have trouble finishing anything") or that makes you seem defensive ("I'm a perfectionist"). The best answer will be specif-

ic to you. For example, you could talk about how much you want to grow as a teacher and mention a particular aspect of teaching that you want to concentrate on. Whatever the specifics of your answer, focus on future growth—framing your response in a positive way—rather than implying that this is something you lack.

At a small liberal-arts college, our satisfaction with you as a colleague will depend in large part on your teaching abilities. We need to get a sense of you as an instructor. So be prepared to talk about your experiences in the classroom. Be enthusiastic and give concrete examples of activities and assignments that have gone well. If we ask, give examples of those that didn't go well, and why. Also be prepared to talk about how you would teach your dissertation topic to undergraduates.

Naturally, you will be discussing your research, starting with a description of your dissertation. You will also be asked about your future research plans. We want to know that you have ideas that go beyond your doctoral thesis. If you have already submitted articles for publication, that's great. If not, there is no need to apologize.

Use your mock interviews to develop a list of four or five questions to ask your interviewers. Two of the questions should be about undergraduates. For example, you could ask, "How would you describe the students at the college in general?" Ask about student involvement: "I notice that there is a Spanish Club on campus. What kinds of activities do they engage in?" One of your questions should involve research: "Are there research or interest groups among the faculty?" That lets us know you are projecting yourself into the job.

Be prepared to say why you want to teach at the particular college that is interviewing you. You may want to scream, "Because I need a freaking job!" when I ask you, "Why Gustavus?" But I have to ask, and your answer will demonstrate how much you know about the department and the institution.

Be very well organized. You'll be nervous during the interview. As you search frantically through your bag, your syllabus or handout will elude you every time. So it's important to organize yourself beforehand.

I recommend that you have a different pocket folder for each interview. Write the name of the college and the interview time and place on the front of each folder. It should contain your talking points for the interview, the department course list, and any syllabi you would like to give to your interviewers. Your interviewers will give you props for being organized, and you will feel more confident. A low-tech approach here is best: We all know how distressing it can be when a laptop fails at the least convenient time.

Some candidates also arrive with a wire-bound teaching portfolio that they hand to us. It usually contains a CV, teaching philosophy, syllabi, and student evaluations. We find that heartening, since a focus on teaching shows us that a candidate understands what it means to work at a small college.

Note that the pocket folder mentioned above (mostly for you the candidate to peruse during the interview) and the portfolio (which you hand to us) have two different purposes.

Don't be snarky. There's a cardinal rule of interviewing that some candidates seem to have forgotten: Never, ever criticize anyone with whom you have worked. It's bad form. It makes you look like a complainer. Go out of your way to avoid doing this.

Be pleasant and friendly in your demeanor, but don't worry about developing a personal connection with your interviewers. It's hard to gauge your success at that, and your attempts will only make you more anxious.

Be on time. Get there a few minutes before the interview, if you can. As you're waiting, read through your notes for the interview. Please try not to stare as you wait. It makes us nervous.

Be clean. Your clothing needs to accomplish one simple task: to keep your interviewers from thinking about your clothing. Don't wear a neon fake-fur scarf because you want to stand out. Instead of focusing on you, I will be wondering, "Does it shed?"


Don't get me wrong. I may love the scarf. But I don't want to have to consider it during our precious 30 minutes at the MLA. Go out and buy a professional-looking pair of pants or a skirt. Thrift-shop gear is fine. Just look neat and clean.

Don't worry so much about being nervous. We know you're anxious. We did this once, too. You'll warm up as the interview progresses, and we'll try our best to put you at ease by ignoring your nervousness.

And here is what we won't do: We won't try to trip you up. For the most part, interviewers are not jerks. I know, I know: You've heard all sorts of horror stories. But most interviewers won't ask you, out of the blue, to discuss Habermas's critique of postmodernism. You got this far. We figure you know your stuff.

If you are asked a question that you don't expect or one you've already answered, don't get flustered. It could be that the interview is going really well from our perspective and we are starting to dig deeper. Dig with us. You can do this.

Be interested in the job. At the end of the interview, tell us that you are interested. Afterward, email a thank-you note. No matter how the interview went from your perspective, tell us again in that note that you want the job. Make your note specific to us: "I would love to join a department that values



service learning so highly.” If there is something you forgot to say in the interview, now is the time.

You don’t have to be perfect. We’re not searching for someone with a taste for expensive suits. At a small liberal-arts college, we’re looking for a flesh-and-blood colleague: an excellent instructor, a hard-working researcher, a responsible department citizen, and an effective adviser.

You don’t even have to know any good jokes.

Nancy Scott Hanway is an associate professor of Spanish at Gustavus Adolphus College.

The Conference Interview: Do's and Don'ts

The keys to a successful one can be mysterious. But here are a few pointers from a search-committee pro.

By Suzanne Marchand

I've served on numerous hiring committees and chaired two recent searches, yet I have to admit that what makes for a successful conference interview is still largely mysterious. In many ways, the whole episode is like a semi-blind date—without alcohol to soothe the jangled nerves—and with one party, the interviewers, possessing (for the most part, in today's crowded market) the power to make a second date happen.

I can't offer fail-safe advice that will work in every search or in every field. I can tell you what I look for when I do interview candidates in my field, history, and for my department. Everything depends on the “fit” of the interviewee to the specific needs of our department that year, and the ever-changing peculiarities of myself and my colleagues. If we didn't hire you in 2012, that doesn't mean we wouldn't do so in 2015. It's as unpredictable as romance. But here's how—for me at least—you might think about making a good impression.

Some Do's:

1. DO show me that you're ambitious—for yourself, your future department, and your prospective students.

That doesn't mean you should promise to do everything if hired, or pretend we can rival Princeton. But show me that you want to write important books, talk to interesting people, and teach our students great stuff. Have a second and even third book project in mind, and make them significantly different (at least in theme or time-frame) from your dissertation. Show me that you're not just falling across the graduate-school finish line exhausted and panting for air, but that you loved doing the research and are eager to do more.

2. DO show me that you are amiable, that you can get along with just about everyone, and that you like people, especially students. That doesn't mean you have to tell jokes in the interview or speak too colloquially. But you can laugh at yourself or relate a funny anecdote about the Middle Ages (do not make jokes at the expense of your mentor, your current university, your current students, or your grad-school

friends!). You need to show that you are a serious scholar, but also a friendly person. No school needs (or wants) a malcontent. And why become a college professor at all if you don't like undergraduates?

3. DO show me that you are capable—that you can and will take on different roles and cheerfully do your bit. I might be looking for someone to direct the History Honors Club, or serve as undergraduate adviser. I might want you to team-teach “World History” or to prep our grad students for their general exams. Show me you are competent and efficient, uncomplaining and diligent. Intelligence is great; but all-around capability is what most departments really need.

4. DO engage me in describing your research. Remember that neither I nor anyone on the committee probably have much expertise in your subfield (check on that ahead of time, if possible). So give me the “big picture” and intrigue me with your research process. Tell me why I should think your work is important, not just for Spanish history (to take a random example), but for all fields of history.

5. DO show me that you are curious, about history of all types, about the committee members' research (though do not ask us directly about our work; there is no time for that, and it sounds like pandering), about the department's offerings, about our students' abilities. Be sure to have some specific questions prepared for committee members that they will find interesting to answer, such as: What types of courses do the department's students like best? Does the department have a writing group, or a grad student colloquium? Do your homework about the department and the position so that you can ask pointed questions.

6. DO bring sample syllabi for courses you might teach. But don't foist them on the committee if it doesn't seem to want them.

Now for a Few Don'ts:

1. DON'T talk too much. Be ready to describe your disser-

tation research in three to four sentences, including the “take home” message and the historiographical significance of your work. Pause for questions. If there are none, then briefly describe your archival or source work, and then what stage the manuscript has reached. Answer other questions efficiently, making sure that all committee members get a chance to engage you, if you wish.

2. DON’T suggest in any way that this position is your “fall back” job. Maybe it is, but if your top choice slips out of your grasp (as it easily could), you will be sorry you weren’t more enthusiastic about this one.

3. DON’T allow yourself to be rattled by questions that seem to come out of the blue. Ask for clarification if you need to buy some time, then do your best to give a short answer. The questioner may be fishing, or just addled by too much coffee and too many interviews.

4. DON’T beg. You may really want this job, but pleading makes you seem too desperate.

5. DON’T pander. You don’t need to agree with everyone on the committee about everything, or keep saying how you would love to teach every course to everyone. Just say, “That sounds interesting—I’d be glad to try it!”

6. DON’T fail to do your homework. Make sure you know the size of the institution, department, and the city. Know the course offerings or special features of the department that are described on its website, or easily accessible. If you can figure out who you might be replacing, and which courses they have taught, give some thought to how you might teach them in a fresh way that suits your special skills or areas of interest.

It’s a tough market out there, but perhaps some of these tips from a veteran may be useful. Good luck.

Suzanne Marchand is a professor of history at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge.

Minding Your Manners for the Initial Interview

Balance careful preparation for a Q&A with a willingness to abandon those plans and wing it.

By David D. Perlmutter

It was a heady time for a graduate student at his national conference as he rushed from one job interview to another. Late to one and out of breath, he quickly began his introductory talking points: how he was just the right fit for the position, the department, and the university. The members of the search committee sat in silence until the student paused, allowing one of them to interject politely: “I think you’re in the wrong room. You’ve been talking about another school.”

The faculty-job-search process is a particular mix of the professional and the ad hoc, the programmed and the unexpected. Unlike in corporate America where a few people, or just one, may play a direct role in nonexecutive hiring, searches for assistant-professor posts may involve scores of people, from undergraduates who evaluate a candidate’s teaching presentation to a college dean who meets with the potential hire one on one.

The campus visit by a finalist is the subject of much scrutiny, but the equally vital meet-up that happens first is the conference interview. That is the point where you meet faculty members from your desired employer for possibly the first time, and potentially the last. Because of the importance of the occasion, the conference interview is worth planning—in detail. At the same time, it is also an occasion to accept the unhappy, the surprising, or the absurd with good humor and levelheadedness.

If you can, go. It is an old insight about politics and hiring that the world belongs to the people who show up. Conference interviews are not an endangered species, but their primacy has been challenged by the increasing costs of attending conferences, the reduced (in some fields) number of positions open, and the rise of the Skype interview as a replacement. Nevertheless, if you can manage it, go to the conferences identified by your advisers.

Conferences, despite their preplanned nature, are free-flowing entities. Unforeseen opportunities will pop up. Departments may have secured permission to hire only after the conference program went to press, and then decided to

hold interviews at the last minute. Or maybe a job is not yet “official,” but the department is doing selective interviews in anticipation.

You may even have others connect the dots for you. During a recent research panel at a conference, one of our doctoral students impressed an attendee who then invited the student to interview for a position he had not heard was open. Impromptu recruiting is not unusual.

If you have a choice between doing an initial interview by phone or in person at a conference, choose the latter. I have no data to prove that people who interview at conferences tend to be invited more often as campus finalists than those who interview by phone or Skype. But it simply makes sense that you have a better chance of making a good first impression of the real you if you meet key players face to face. In an era in which a single tenure-track opening attracts hundreds of applicants, any narrowing of the odds can help.

Be ready for your close-up—all the time. A friend, now a professor, once described going to a conference as a graduate student looking decidedly casual in a T-shirt, sandals, and scruffy coiffure. He planned to tidy himself later for his paper presentation. Then he ran into some people who knew his adviser and who had an opening in their department. They were just finishing their interviews but wanted to squeeze him in—in an hour. He showed up dressed nicely, well shaved, and wet-combed. A member of the committee commented, “You clean up well, young man.”

Fields and institutions differ in their sartorial and grooming standards for job candidates. If you’re interviewing for a job as an assistant professor of painting at a freethinking liberal-arts college, the dress code is going to be different than if you’re seeking to become an assistant professor of accounting at a conservative religious university. There are few academic hiring situations, however, where being “cleaned up” will make a bad impression.

Of course you must also be ready intellectually. A spontaneous interview might erupt at any moment in an elevator.

Last-minute schedule changes could force an earlier-than-expected meeting: “Hello? I know we planned to meet on Friday, but we need to do our interview now because our chair is leaving early.” Furthermore, in today’s hiring environment the whole world is listening. I have heard graduate students make comments in hallways and coffee shops at the conference hotel that would not go over well if heard by members of a search committee. And who is to say they are not sitting at the next booth?

So prep for a job interview before you leave home, and be ready to go into candidate mode at the extension of a hand to shake.

Know the players and the playhouse. That 10,000-times-told piece of advice about job interviews is always right: Personalize your application, especially when you are meeting anyone face to face. If possible, try to find out which members of the department will be conducting the interview. Once you have their names, do your homework—their history, accomplishments, role in the department. You don’t need to get too chummy, but recognizing them and having something to say about a topic you share in common is always a good ice-breaker and shows you care about your potential colleagues and the open position. Make sure to send their names to your references and advisers, asking if any of them have a connection.

Do research on the department, too—what it does, what it wants, and where it’s going. Take your notes to your interview. It is both helpful and impressive if you can pull out a file card (or a screen on your iPad) that lists, for example, the courses the college offers that you think you can teach.

Keep your answers short and on message. Think of a conference interview as akin to a press conference. You will get peppered with questions, ranging from the expected (“What attracts you to our opening?”) to the at-best inadvisable (“Hail from Utah, eh? So does that mean you are Mormon?”) to the zany (“If you could be any kind of nucleic acid, what kind would you be?”). Your level of coolness under fire will be one way people evaluate you. Whatever you are asked, come to the meeting with talking points and use them. If your research experience and publications exactly fit the qualifications stated in the job ad, make sure the committee knows that. Don’t let the interview end without enumerating your strengths.

Read the room. Preparation and rehearsal are vital to job interviewing, but anything can be overdone or come off as forced. And you need to be ready to adapt if you encounter topics you haven’t prepared for. Make your points, but don’t forget to listen to the members of the search committee and notice the subtler signals of body language.

There is no hard-and-fast rule about the length of your answers to questions. You should, however, through roaming eye contact, be able to gauge when enough is enough and your interviewers want you to move on.

Two rhetorical tools in your interview kit may help out in such situations. First, don’t just memorize a fixed answer to common questions. Develop both a short and long version of your answer. Second, have a “wrap up” comment in reserve that allows you to wind down when you sense they want you to finish. Example: In answer to a research question, say, “Anyway, I have much more on this in my most recent paper, and I can send it to you, if you wish.”

Don’t overschedule yourself. Conferences are expensive, budgets are tight, and the time passes quickly. Many graduate students on the job market try to maximize their investment by tightly scheduling their days and nights on site. That strategy is sensible—until it interferes with your interviews. The point is to be “tanned, rested, and ready” when your moment to shine is nigh. Showing up five minutes late, sweating and flustered, because you had another meeting that ran overtime does not make a good impression.

Plan some downtime. Rest, especially between interviews, if you can, and allow yourself Zen interludes to get ready mentally and review your notes for the next interview. Likewise, get to know the conference site plan; be realistic about how long it takes to get from one room to another. Keep in mind that while conference traversing is chock full of chance encounters with friends, it is also possible that new job contacts might surface and slow you down.

Come with handouts. A graduate student told me he had “aced” a conference interview: He had received great responses to his answers and felt like he had truly impressed his audience. The afterglow lasted for two days until he ran into a member of the search committee who obviously could not remember who he was without some awkward prompting. It turned out the panel had interviewed a dozen other candidates as well. (Not to mention that for senior professors, conferences are continual memory challenges, with hundreds of vaguely familiar faces alongside the well-known ones.)

One tactic to make you stand out is the handout. Bring extra copies of your CV, maybe even some syllabi, and so on. But also consider providing a short—no more than a page—summary of your qualifications. Some candidates go further to help memory prompts by including their photo on the page. Use that sheet to answer some of the obvious interview questions like: “Which of our classes do you see yourself teaching?”

Say thanks, but not too much. You will find wildly varying advice on the protocol of post-interview acknowledgments.

My age and ancestry drive me to advise the formal: Send a

written thank you (on a card, not copy paper) to anyone who interviewed you. Other senior faculty members will tell you not to bother, but I think some form of timely thanks is justified, especially if you were treated well.

A final note. One of the most tragic circumstances of modern academic hiring is that you can't give candidates real—or really any—advice on what they did wrong. It is sad to see a candidate perform well in many ways but then display some flaws in, say, the research presentation that may eventually sink the person's candidacy. Clueless about the error, the candidate will presumably make it again at future interviews.

A conference interview is no guaranteed bridge to being a finalist for an academic position. It does, however, afford an early test market for some of the ideas, talking points, manner, and tone that you will offer in the much more grueling campus visit. A conference interview is a great opportunity to learn what scores and what falls flat.

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When You Can't Meet In Person: Skype Interviews

A professor chronicles the odd lighting and visual issues you should consider before your virtual job interview.

By Stephen Winzenburg

For years, search committees conducted preliminary job interviews for academic positions by telephone, making it easy for a candidate to sit at home in shorts while answering serious questions.

But times have changed, and Skype is now the preferred method many institutions use to conduct long-distance interviews. Some job listings are even warning candidates that they may have to make an initial appearance before the committee via webcam.

I had read about universities using Skype for job interviews, but I was unprepared to be so quickly thrust into on-camera performances in front of three different search committees over a period of two weeks. With only a couple days' notice, I had to make my first screen appearance.

After losing a bit of sleep pondering the proper webcam angle and what to wear, I approached the first meeting with an attitude of trepidation and adventure. Before the interview, I conducted a Skype test run with my daughter to—let's be honest—see how bad I looked. A webcam isn't the most flattering piece of technology and can make you appear gaunt, overweight, beady-eyed, or narcoleptic. And often you look all those things at the same time.

My best camera angle turned out to be with the webcam pointed down slightly, so I placed my laptop on an empty cardboard box and tilted the webcam toward me. Then I turned the laptop so the light wouldn't be behind me (avoiding a shadowy face).

Because the first interview was being done in my home, I cleared out whatever could be seen over my shoulder so the committee wouldn't have to stare at the scuffed shoes sitting on the floor or the dog's toys scattered around the room. I changed into a blue pinstripe oxford, knowing that white is a bad camera color because it reflects too much light and can wash out your facial features.

The first Skype connection took place right on time, but the committee was surprisingly distant from its camera. In order to accommodate all five in the screen, the table they sat be-

hind was set well away from the lens, so I couldn't make out facial details. The little image I saw of myself in the corner of my screen, however, showed a larger-than-life close-up of my face that seemed to distort my features.

The interview itself went surprisingly well. Instead of answering questions over the phone with no reaction on the other end, I could see committee members nodding their heads or taking notes, leading me to believe I had said something that they liked. They may have been grading papers or smiling at my pasty-white winter complexion, but I choose to believe they were reacting positively to my responses.

Only one of the five faculty members didn't seem to want to be there. He appeared on the upper-right corner of the screen, partially cut off from my view, taking no notes and fidgeting in his seat. He looked down all the time, even when he was asking me his lone question. Only later did I discover that he had just been replaced as department chair a month earlier and apparently wanted nothing to do with the hiring process.

After the call ended, I not only felt a sense of relief but also found that I had actually enjoyed the experience. I felt that I got to know them much better than I would have if I had only heard their voices coming from a speakerphone. Instead of the blank uncertainty I had always felt, hanging up after a phone interview, I left the Skype experience feeling that I had made new friends.

It was only a few days later when I had my second webcam interview—his time in my college office. As a faculty member with heaping shelves of books and messy piles of papers waiting to be filed, I knew I had to clean up the place a bit. After everything behind me got put away (some of it hidden in spots the interviewers couldn't see), I propped my laptop on the empty cardboard box and checked the scene. The lighting in my office was not only dramatically different from my home, but the fluorescent ceiling bulbs added an angelic glow to my hair. I was uncertain if that would help or hurt my chances.

This time the initial connection didn't go quite as well on

their end. First the chair had my wrong Skype address, misspelling it by one letter. Then it took the committee members 20 minutes to get their Skype called up, so I anxiously waited, staring at a blank screen, while they used a cellphone to give me updates. Note to search committees using Internet video links: Have someone come early to set up the technology.

Once the interview started, I tried to watch the facial expressions of the four distant people. The members of the group were spread out in a small classroom and had to look way up into a corner to see me on their monitor. With my halo hair and their upward glances, the experience could only be described as celestial.

Everyone smiled, nodded, and took notes—except for the one guy in the upper-right corner who was playing with his laptop and checking his phone for text messages the whole time. He asked one question and made no eye contact. I began to wonder if it is a requirement that every interview must include one committee member who acts like a student who doesn't want to be in class.

By the time I had my third Skype interview the next week, I felt like an old pro. I was happy to have a smiling older professor call me at home. He was seated in a TV studio and was close to the webcam but was difficult to see because the camera lens pointed up toward some glaring television lights. He said there were three committee members in the room, but the only other person in the picture was a woman sitting 20 feet directly behind him, and I could not make out her face.

The committee chair asked all of the prepared questions, and in the middle of one of my answers, I saw the woman behind him start waving wildly. It looked like she was pointing at something behind me with one hand, trying to signal that I should look. I turned around but had no idea what she was gesturing about.

Then, out of nowhere, a young male head popped in from the left side of the screen. He looked at me for about five seconds, then disappeared—never to be seen again. I assume he was the third member of the committee, but I'm still unsure why neither of the other members said anything during the interview.

I handled most of the questions well, until I suffered the consequences of a very poor preinterview decision on my part. After having no trouble with my dog in my first at-home Skype interview, I had allowed her to once again lounge just off camera. But as this interview was winding down, I heard the dog run to the front window and start to growl. That meant she spotted something, and she was going to make sure everyone knew about it.

In the middle of an eloquent (I thought) answer about my philosophy of teaching, the dog started barking wildly and

would not stop. I stared into the webcam and kept talking with a plastered smile on my face as I moved my left hand out of view, snapping my fingers to try to get the dog's attention. Nothing would keep her quiet. So with gritted teeth, I pretended that it was totally normal to have a dog barking in the background of a professional interview.

The first two Skype interviews led immediately to campus interviews. The lesson here: A face-to-face preliminary interview turns out to have advantages for both sides. It's easier to have a conversation when you can see how people are responding to your remarks. And even when things go wrong technologically, it's revealing to see how both parties handle the problem. As for that third Skype interview, I heard nothing from the search committee for weeks and blamed that on my pesky pooch. Then one day, I got a call informing me that I was a finalist for the position. I decided not to ask whether all of the barking was what led the committee to delay calling me.

But I am now resolved: The next time I have a Skype interview at home, my dog will be safely resting in the windowless laundry room at the other end of the house.

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10 Bloopers to Avoid in Job Interviews

Don't let these rookie mistakes sink your candidacy.

By Robert J. Sternberg

In the course of my academic career, I've been interviewed for junior and senior faculty positions as well as for administrative posts like the provostship I now hold. I have also been on more search committees than I care to count. Over time, I've observed (at least) a dozen bloopers to avoid at all costs in job interviews.

1. Good question, but now let me answer the question I wish you had asked. When you receive media training, you learn a technique called "bridging." The idea is that, in an interview with a reporter, you briefly (perhaps super-briefly) answer the question that was asked and then bridge to the point you really want to make. In that way, you appear to have heard and paid attention to the journalist's question but get the opportunity to say what you really want to say.

However useful that technique is in media interviews, it is a dud in job interviews. Chances are the interviewers are asking the same question of every candidate: If you do not answer it properly, the questioner will assume that you either can't answer it or, just as bad, don't want to. The interviewer no doubt thought the question was a good one, and he or she is unlikely to think more of you for not answering it.

2. I have no clue, but I'll be damned if I'm going to let you know that. It's hard to say "I don't know" in a job interview, but search-committee members will think more of you if you admit that you don't know the answer than if you give a poor or irrelevant one. Sometimes they will be impressed that you were willing to admit your ignorance.

While there is nothing wrong with saying you don't know, you should be concerned if you are saying it (or thinking it) too often during the interview. That might mean you should think about other job opportunities. Or you might do a bit more homework next time: You don't want to show an excess of ignorance about the place where you want to work.

3. I'm so glad you asked. I've got an excellent colloquium on just that question. Occasionally you get the question that you have been prepping for and can't wait to respond. So you answer it ... and answer it.

Question periods are usually short, so interviewers are looking for relatively short answers. If you find that you are going on and on, stop yourself before someone else does. Overly long answers suggest a lack of self-control, uncertainty about how to answer, or, sometimes, an outsized ego.

4. I'm going to keep that face smiling and that head nodding. When you are talking with a search committee, there may be one or perhaps two people in the group who consistently smile or nod their heads when you answer. Because they seem to be rewarding you for your answers, your tendency may be to talk directly to them and to say whatever it takes to get them to keep smiling and nodding.

The trouble is they are probably not the people you need to convince. You need to pay attention to the stone faces and the frowners. They are the ones you need to persuade that you are viable for the job.

5. A little embellishment never hurt anybody. It is tempting to embellish your record just a little here and there. After all, you are facing stiff competition for the job, and every little bit helps. But that is risky, for at least two reasons.

First, especially with the availability of the Internet for fact checking, it's just too easy for potential employers to figure out that you're stretching the truth.

Second, once you have shown you are untrustworthy, you can kiss the job goodbye. If the hiring committee catches you exaggerating in one area, its members are likely to assume that you have done the same in other areas. You're better off sticking to the truth.

6. You can count on me to make everybody happy. Colleges look for people who are compatible with institutional values. The problem is that different groups within the institution are likely to have somewhat different values, and sometimes the differences cause conflicts.

One approach some candidates take is to show how they can get along with absolutely everyone. But by doing that, you may give the impression of being wishy-washy or unwilling to stand up for principles, if indeed you are perceived as

having any. No one expects you to be best friends with everyone. Show who you are. If the committee members don't like who you are, you don't want to go to their institution, and you should thank them if they reject you.

7. Weaknesses? Me? I once interviewed a candidate and asked what I considered to be a thoroughly standard question: What do you see as your major weaknesses? The candidate replied that no one had ever asked him that, and that he had not really thought about it. I knew I would not hire him. Someone who is unaware of his or her weaknesses—or not savvy enough to have thought about a good answer to such a standard question—is not going to be effective on the job. Know what your weaknesses (and strengths) are, and be prepared to talk about them. You can come out ahead in an interview if you demonstrate that you know how to correct or at least compensate for your weaknesses.

Just make sure that, whatever they are, your weaknesses are not fatal for the job. For example, if you do not particularly enjoy teaching, an interview for a faculty position is probably not the place to mention that. (Of course, if you don't like to teach, you might want to reconsider whether you want to be a faculty member in the first place.) Similarly, if you can never stand to suffer fools with a smile, you may find an administrative position very challenging.

8. We really know how to handle that problem at my university. We want to hear about your experiences and how you have handled various problems. But if you convey to the hiring committee that you think your current institution has the answer to every problem, some people may wonder why you don't just stay there. We had a job candidate who seemed to be in love with his current college. His candidacy received little support from members of the search committee, because no one could figure out why he wanted to leave where he was.

9. Here's a long list of what I need for the job. I made that mistake once. Asked during an interview what I needed to make the position work, I went into great detail. The problem was, I didn't yet have an offer. And I didn't get one.

You have to be careful about specifying conditions of employment too soon in the process. You will be in a bargaining position after you're offered the job, but not really before.

And remember never to accept or turn down a job you have not officially been offered. If you don't have an offer in writing, you really don't have an offer, as I learned painfully many years ago when what I thought was an oral offer evaporated into thin air.

10. I'll teach you never to ask such a stupid question again. It was my first job interview. I was 25 years old and naive. A scruffy-looking guy who appeared to be a first-year

graduate student asked what I thought was a really dumb question. I gave a response that was too clever by half—sort of a putdown. How was I supposed to know he was the chair of the search committee?

I have never given a snarky answer since, no matter how weak I thought the question was.

By now, you probably would like a comparable list of things you should say in a job interview. That's understandable, except that what works varies from place to place, search committee to search committee, and job to job.

Your best bet: Be yourself and speak honestly. If the institution does not hire you, be glad you avoided landing at a place where you would not fit.

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Links and Resources

Vitae

<http://www.chroniclevitae.com>

Career advice, networking tools, and a database of jobs, brought to you by The Chronicle of Higher Education.

The Professor Is In

<http://theprofessorisin.com>

Academic career advice from Karen Kelsky.

Hacking Your Academic Interview

<http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/tips-for-hacking-your-academic-interview/22892>

The folks at ProfHacker share a few basic tips on getting through the first round.

Academic Job Hunts from Hell: Inappropriate, Hostile, and Awkward Moments

<http://chronicle.com/article/Academic-Job-Hunts-From-Hell-/234459>

How do you deal with off-putting exchanges in job interviews and meetings?