

# careers

MY ANTI-UNEMPLOYMENT

## Guide to Answering Academic Job Interview Questions

### 1) Please discuss your dissertation/current research project.

**Answer tip:** You should be able to answer this clearly and concisely (aim for three minutes max. to begin with; if the committee has questions, they'll ask them). Remember that your interview committee will almost certainly consist of people who are not in your particular specialty, especially if it's a small department. Be sure that you convey the "so what?" factor--why is your project interesting, and how does it contribute to the scholarship. You may be asked to describe your future research plans and goals, so have some idea of what to say. Interviewers from a doctoral institution may have some pretty searching questions here; you should expect that they'll want to know how your work addresses Major Scholar X, etc.

2) Teaching/situational questions: faced with problem X, how would you solve it; how do you teach (lecture, group work, multimedia classrooms, etc.); which texts do you use and why; on an average day, what would your students do in one of your classes; what assignments do you require and why; discuss your grading policy.

**Answer tip:** Before you go to the interview, check out the department's website and look at the courses offered. It's a good idea to prep syllabi for different types of courses: a lower-division survey, an upper-division course in your field, a graduate course. (If you like, you can bring sample syllabi to the interview.) Many interviewers like to ask the "dream course" question, and you definitely should be prepared to answer it. Be specific at all times and give examples whenever possible.

### 3) Questions to ask the committee.

**Answer tip:** Check the website, and note if the department has anything special going on. Ask about the students, the library, and the locale. If you're interviewing at a comprehensive college that has an MA program but emphasizes undergraduate teaching, do not spend all your time asking about the number of grad courses you'll get to teach. Similarly, at this stage in the interview process, it's **not** appropriate to ask about money (whether salary or travel money), sabbaticals and release time, or the course load (which, incidentally, you should be able to figure out from the website, even if it wasn't listed in the job advertisement).

### 4) Preparation.

**Answer tip:** Do mock interviews; see if you can get at least one professor to participate, perhaps someone on your dissertation committee. You want to think of the interview as a conversation, not a monologue--learn how to answer questions without "lecturing" or otherwise noodling on. Definitely prep your dissertation speech ahead of time, as well as your course descriptions. Get your friends to ask you tough questions about your scholarship or teaching.

**5) Why are you interested in this position? Alternative: How will you complement our program?**

*Answer tip:* The key here is showing some knowledge of the institution and arguing it is the place you want to teach. Example: "I myself am a first generation college student, and I think I could relate to the students at your institution..." Bad answer: "I need a job."

**6) Where do you see yourself in ten years?**

*Answer tip:* "A tenured professor at [name the university]!" Then go on to talk about long term book projects, teaching goals, learning opportunities, research projects, etc. Convey to the committee that you have a plan which shows ambition and careful thought.

**7) What is your teaching philosophy?**

*Answer tip:* There is no right answer here, except to show that you take teaching seriously and have given it some thought.

**8) If I were to come into your classroom, what would I see? What do you do that is unusual or particularly effective?**

*Answer tip:* Wrong answer: "I lecture for 8 weeks, and then I give a test." Show how you engage the students.

**9) What courses have you taught previously?**

*Answer tip:* What matters is to be enthusiastic about teaching and well prepared to discuss key issues in teaching.

**10. What strengths do you bring to the University, and particularly our department, if you were to be hired here?**

*Answer tip:* Collegiality, work well with people, good with students, balanced lifestyle, offer field-based courses, offer technical training, etc.

**11. How have you gone about making your research relevant to communities outside of the university?**

*Answer tip:* This question is increasingly important. You should talk to high schools, do outreach, newspaper op/ed pieces, children's books, etc.

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## Important General Interview Guidelines:

- 1. Be professorial.** Remember, they're looking to evaluate you as a potential colleague, so don't act like a student. Discuss your research and theirs as you would with a colleague.
- 2. Remember, you're not going there "To get a job." You're going there to meet your colleagues.** They will be your colleagues for a long time, whether you get the job or not. You will see them at conferences, read their papers, they will read yours, they will be your journal reviewers and you will be theirs. This is an opportunity to meet people who will be important to your career regardless of the job outcome. So meet them, get to know them, let them get to know you. Enjoy.
- 3. Steer towards your strengths.** The meetings with members of the committee and other faculty members are really more conversations than interviews. Lots of the things that have been mentioned above will come up, but in a conversational way. This means two things: First, it's a lot less awkward and confrontational than you're probably imagining. Second, it's a conversation, and conversations are between conversation *partners*. You both get to steer the conversation. So by all means, steer towards your strengths.
- 4. Practice! Practice! Practice** your talk to death. Get anyone you can to come, listen, comment, ask questions, and make changes based on each practice run. Be especially sure to have people who don't know your research and don't know your area -- remember that most of the people who go watch your talk will fit into those categories, so you want to make sure it makes sense to those people. By the end you should be able to give your talk with confidence and barely looking at your notes.
- 5. Decide ahead of time what questions you want people to ask at the end of your talk**, and design it to steer towards those questions. If people at your practice talks ask questions you think are off base or that you just would rather not deal with, figure out what in your talk brought out that question and fix it. But have an answer for that question, and all others, be prepared just in case.

Source: [Ask MetaFilter](#)

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