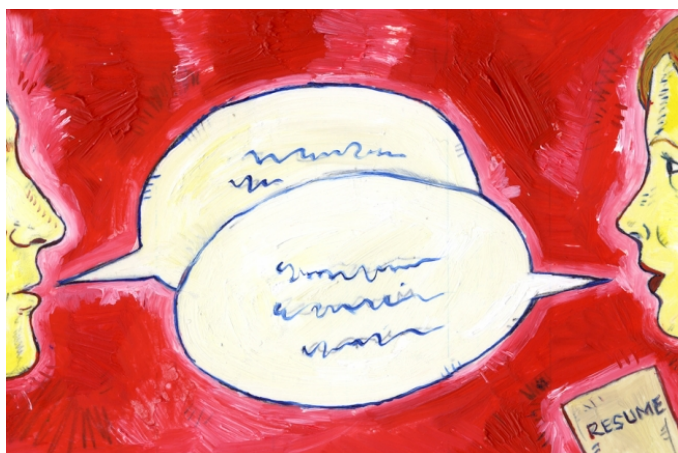


ADVICE

What to Expect in a First-Round Interview



Brian Taylor

By Julie Miller Vick and Jennifer S. Furlong |

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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?

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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 Web sites. 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.



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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. **THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education** It may sound awkward, but it's **LOG IN** 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: If you're going to have an interview by Skype or another Web camera platform, be sure to read the recent column in *The Chronicle*, "How Skype is Changing the Interview Process." 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 experience 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. (Check out the before and after versions of this job candidate's résumé in our 2010 CV Doctor feature.)

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."

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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 e-mail (but do not bombard the interviewer!)."



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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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