

The Academic Job Market: Timeline, APSA, and the Packet

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Abstract

For a graduate student nearing the program completion, the looming job market is not only frightening but incredibly enigmatic. There is a lack of transparent, standardized, and high-quality information about the job market. This article attempts to provide a concrete guideline on navigating the academic job market, including a timeline, how to manage APSA presentations, and details about the job market packet requirement.

For a graduate student nearing the program completion, the looming job market is not only frightening but incredibly enigmatic. Save for a few well-planned programs, there is very little, if any, systematic introduction to how to plan and approach the job market. In particular, there are virtually no guides on what you should be doing when and what to do with each minute requirement. The inevitable outcome is that in the peak season of applications, many ABDs juggle unfinished dissertation, unfinished packet, impending deadlines, nervous email reminders about recommendation letters, and existential dread at the same time. The lack of information on top of the imbalance of supply and demand in higher education is enough to break the camel's back.

While not enough to provide relief to the higher education market's fundamental absurdity, I believe the profession will benefit from having a concrete guideline, including a timeline, how to manage APSA presentations, and details about the job market packet requirement. While (1) the experience shared here is mostly applicable to R1 institution applications, and (2) COVID-19 has immensely distorted the timeline after I first wrote up this article, I believe the general direction presented can still prove useful.

Before the Job Market Year

Preparations begin well before the job market year. For instance, networking with other scholars and students, building a personal website, and building a social media presence (if any) should ideally begin a few years ahead.

The First Steps. Post-coursework, you should focus on (1) finding a good primary advisor and other faculty who will eventually become your committee members and (2) building up research projects. Often, a tentative project attempted in lower years becomes your job market paper or at least one chapter of your

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dissertation. Frequently meet your advisor to discuss the research questions, methods/results, and overall research profile.

In-house/Conference Presentations. If there are regular opportunities for graduate students to present in-house, utilize them frequently. Your department faculty will be able to see the presentation and give comments. These presentations are precious opportunities that should not be regarded lightly. You should also seek to present outside your department—[Miller and Gentry \(2011\)](#) have already discussed the value of attending national/regional conferences as a graduate student.

If given a chance to present, practice well ahead with fellow students. You will learn much from your peers. For example, if there are questions/feedback from these practice sessions, you can create backup slides to jump to if similar inquiries come up in a future presentation. Help each other—you should reciprocate your peers' time and effort that helped better your work.

Carefully note the feedback from the audience. If you do not think that the back and forth with the audience is going well, gently push the discussion to the end and ask to finish the presentation first. Do not let anyone hijack your presentation. Follow-through the questions/comments—for example, meet up with the faculty that have given you insightful feedback to improve your paper.

Dissertation Prospectus. The dissertation prospectus is not only a route to candidacy but an excellent chance to think about how to frame your research in a coherent framework. Do it early to get a sense of what comments/advice your committee may have for your dissertation and other projects. What is the plan? Are there other existing working papers or work in progress? What are your plans in the current and next academic years? You need to tell the committee what the timeline for completing your thesis looks like. How much of each chapter is finished? What do you expect to be a significant bottleneck?

Your dissertation may not end up entirely in sync with the prospectus. But this still needs to convey who you are, what research you do, what you expect your job market paper to be, how it connects to the literature, and so on. Once you finish the prospectus, incorporate the feedback given, and you can lurch forward with the job market paper. Note that besides the job market paper, ideally, you need at least two working papers that you are willing to showcase as near-complete works. Some schools will even ask for three.

The Job Market Paper. Your primary advisor should know (1) what your paper is about and (2) how you are progressing, through and through. Do not disappear from the face of the earth even if you do not have the level of progress you want. Be transparent and seek help.

Explain the paper repeatedly in various lengths to (1) those who have heard multiple versions of the presentation and (2) those who have never heard about your work. Is your audience still confused about the central questions and answers? Setting aside the Appendices material, is your main point delivered well?

You should be exploiting all possible avenues to do early practice/mock talks. Sometimes, your paper or presentation may not be ready, and you may shy away from showing incomplete work. But presenting early versions of your paper will help you decide how to frame the story, what to take out of the presentation, and what to add.

Some Miscellaneous Points. A few miscellaneous points before you enter your job market year:

- Sign up for the PolMeth listserv at <https://www.cambridge.org/core/membership/spm/mailling-list>. If relevant, also subscribe to VIM listserv at <http://visionsinmethodology.org/history/> and register yourself at <https://womenalsoknowstuff.com> or <https://sites.google.com/view/pocexperts>. Scour to see if there are relevant listservs for your subfield.
- Assuming APSA membership, sign up for updates from relevant Section forums. Carefully select your Section when applying for APSA, as this can later determine your eligibility for Section-specific awards.
- Make friends at other institutions such as other job market candidates in your year. They are your support group—you can share information and commiserate together. Moreover, your department's information may be biased or out of date, and it will help to look actively for information outside your department or university. Finally, there may be a group of job market candidate cohorts that are sharing information. In 2019-2020, this was available at supportyourcohort.slack.com.
- Making your website is important/time-consuming, so do it early. On GitHub, there are templates that you can fork and customize, and for R users, blogdown package makes it easy to set up a clean website. Have Google Analytics running on it to track who is accessing your website.
- On Twitter, there are various opportunities to showcase and advertise your work. Some generous faculty will help spread the word.

The Job Market Year Hits: Timeline Overview

The following is a brief month-by-month overview of an ideal job market year timeline. This timeline assumes you have a good job market paper going on.

- January The committee members should be decided and should be notified if you plan to request letters of recommendation from them. Contact should be as early as possible, possibly before the calendar year begins.
- February Frequently meet and discuss with your committee members.
- March As MPSA takes place in April if you are presenting there, this is a good time to seek in-house presentation opportunities and receive feedback. Make it clear to the audience that this is your job market paper so that you have their full attention.
- April MPSA takes place. At least a skeletal form of your website should be ready, especially if you are presenting.
- May While continuing to meet with your committee regularly, you should start drafting the job market "packet," such as the cover letter, research statement, teaching statement, and diversity statement.
- June The first draft of the job market should be ready. The packet should be halfway and undergoing a feedback-revision loop. You should wrap up the website creation. It is now time to start putting together a spreadsheet of relevant jobs.

July Wrap up the primary packet documents. Procure unofficial/official transcripts and student evaluations.

August The first deadlines may occur. All letters of recommendation and the packet should be ready by the end of the month at the very least, and a generic cover letter that you can customize to each opening also ready. APSA usually took place at the end of August or early September to encompass the Labor Day weekend, but this has changed in subsequent years.

September Major deadlines will start to occur, and early flyouts are also possible.¹

October Another round of major deadlines will happen, as well as first flyouts. October is a good time to schedule more practice talks in-house or with friends who are willing to look over the practice talk.

November Next round of major deadlines will occur, along with more flyouts. If you are applying for post-docs, discuss recommendation letter revisions with your letter writers.

December Deadlines will start to wrap up, and the long waiting game or the spring market begins.

APSA

Given this timeline, APSA will be the place to present your work and shout out that you are available for hire. Some tips for APSA are listed here.

Accommodations. Get an official conference hotel if you can afford it. This is not an easy feat for a broke graduate student, and I understand that. However, the job market APSA is extremely draining, and you need to conserve all the energy you can. Furthermore, because APSA is large, the distance between hotels can be quite far, up to 20-30 minutes on foot. On the first day of my 2019 APSA, I walked more than 17,000 steps.

Official accommodations will shorten your travel distance and reduce fatigue. See if there are any travel funds available. If, unfortunately, your accommodations are far away, pack lightly and have comfortable shoes at the ready. If you can find a roommate from another university to share the official conference hotel, do so.

Arranging Meetings. Meet many scholars to discuss job opportunities. Compile from APSA eJobs where you want to apply and show this to your advisor/committee members. Can they contact some people that you might benefit from a meeting? These may include search committee members or other faculty that can tip off the committee. Arranging meetings is not equal to inside baseball—instead, such arrangements are an opportunity to know more about the opening and note what that department is looking for.

Be polite when reaching out and be mindful of time zones when setting up a meeting time. Never be late for meetings if you have no good excuse. Leave ample time (at least thirty minutes) between appointments since (1) meetings can occur in different hotels or coffee shops, (2) meetings can run over, and (3) you (or the other party) can get lost or end up at the wrong side of the building. Set up timers so that you will know when to hard-end the meeting.

¹Again, this may have changed considerably with COVID-19.

Time Management. Now is not the time to check out mildly interesting panels. It would help if you were picky about how you spend your limited energy. APSA for the job market year is all about setting up meetings/interviews, and most of all, preparing for and delivering on your job market paper. If you are going to panels, pick panels based on the people, not the presentations. It may pay more to practice presenting in your free time instead.

Some Miscellaneous Points. If possible, have your clicker and USB. Back up files everywhere, including your laptop, a USB, and email accounts that you can quickly log into if all else fails. Breathe, steel yourself, eat well, and sleep well. Prepare for time-zone differences and jet lag.

“Meat Market” Interviews. APSA eJobs will list some institutions as “available” during APSA, which indicates their presence at this so-called “meat market” interviews. You must pre-arrange interviews with each institution. They will occur in a single designated area with volunteers to help you find the right table, with curtains between candidates and interviewers. Of course, with COVID-19, these did not happen in 2020, but they may be re-instituted if we have in-person conferences again.

Not all institutions do these interviews. A good number of them are selective liberal arts colleges—for job market specific to these, refer to [Deardorff et al. \(2001\)](#), [Hanley \(2008\)](#), and [Mathews-Gardner et al. \(2008\)](#). Consult your committee on how to prepare for these interviews. For some schools, these resemble information sessions than actual interviews. If more than one faculty member is sitting to interview you, this is a more serious pre-screening interview. The sessions are short, so you should make the best of them.

The Job Market Packet

So what goes into a job market “packet”? Although it will depend on the institution, some essential documents are detailed below.

Letters of Recommendation (LORs). One cannot understate the importance of letters. Talk to your letter writers as often as possible. Convey to them which points you would like highlighted. Depending on the application (whether it is an R1, R2, liberal arts colleges, post-docs, etc.), they may need heavy customization. LORs are usually signed and scanned. Some descriptions in job ads are explicit: “Applicants should also ask three referees to send letters (on letterhead, signed and scanned) directly to the Chair of the search committee in the Department of ...”

Use a Dossier service (Interfolio) to send letters to minimize the need for letter writers to interact with different applications. You can stash confidential letters on Interfolio with unique email addresses generated for each letter, and you can copy these email addresses into any application that asks for email addresses of your letter writers. Interfolio will inform you of successful deliveries. You can use these letters for Interfolio applications, AcademicJobsOnline (see <https://academicjobsonline.org/ajo?forumFAQs-0--63>) applications, ChronicleVitae, and more. Note that Interfolio letters should be processed a few days earlier than the deadline to be on the safe side, as (1) it is not real-time and (2) there may be platforms in which Dossier deliveries are not possible.

Curriculum Vitae (CV). Many say that the long/shortlist of candidates is chosen simply by reading CVs. List your website and contact information, be concise, and order materials by importance. The CV is not a long, drawn-out list of details about your accomplishment. If there is an update to your papers or personal information, reflect it immediately. Such updates include revise-and-resubmits (and which journal, if any). Show the CV to your letter writers and get feedback.

Cover Letter. Again, this is a critical document that should be reviewed by your letter writers. The first couple of paragraphs are particularly important, as search committee members may skip over the rest for initial screening purposes. Ensure no residue from the previous application, as confusing school/faculty names can be disastrous.

There is no single cover letter to cover all if you apply to different types of institutions (R1 vs. teaching-focused). If the position is teaching-oriented, put teaching first. Do acknowledge that you have done minimal research about the institution, although customizing the letter to each institution is a labored process that can yield no reward. Look into the IPEDS Data Center data to see institution-specific characteristics such as student demographics.

There are specific formats you should respect for the cover letter. First of all, it should be in your institution letterhead. Do not use the recipient institution's logo/seal/letterhead. Usually, your university will have official letterhead templates. If the ad does not ask for the research/teaching statement, the parts may have to be lengthened, depending on the institution's type. Otherwise, keep it short and under two pages.

Writing Sample. The first of these is, of course, your job market paper, presumably single-authored, or with another student who is not using it as a job market paper. Suppose you can only submit one writing sample. In that case, a single-authored manuscript seems preferable to a coauthored publication/forthcoming paper, as this shows the ability to perform research on your own. Other documents can be shown in your CV and written in your cover letter.

As aforementioned, have at least two more papers that you are willing to show as near-complete works that speak to your research agenda. Some schools have particular requirements, such as name redactions or page limits.

Research Statement. According to who you talk to, and according to who you are, the advice on research statements can be highly heterogeneous. Include an executive summary or a summary paragraph.

Ideally, various statements should 'talk' to each other. That is, they should all be interrelated and displaying your field and strength, such as "I can teach class X because I work on the area and have a paper on the topic."

Teaching Statement/Portfolio. Pay attention to how this requirement is titled. Is it a "teaching statement," "teaching portfolio," "teaching evaluations," or something else? In my teaching statement, I put teaching philosophy, a summary of teaching evaluations, quotes from taught/mentored students, teaching portfolio (course offerings), etc. Some schools require that you break these down into separate documents and also ask for sample syllabi. Adhere to the guidelines.

Diversity Statement. This is usually not about your demographic category. Instead, this is about how you would foster diversity as a scholar and how you would contribute to the institution's diversity mission. Some schools take the diversity statement exceptionally seriously and have specific guidelines.

Applications

Finding Openings. The major outlet is, of course, APSA eJobs. See [Moore and Reeves \(2011\)](#) on how to search and compile position information. When you create a spreadsheet of places to apply, screenshot the actual advertisement, as they can be taken down without warning, even when the deadline has not passed.

Do not assume you are unqualified—that is for the search committee to decide. As long as your time and energy permit, apply to that job. Even when there are two jobs for the same institutions under different subfields, you can apply with modified cover letters/materials, as the search committee can be radically different.

Deadlines. The consensus was that the political science job market is starting earlier and earlier every year—schools are frontloading, with earliest deadlines around August 15th. The timeline may have been set back due to COVID-19, but it is not easy to generalize just yet, and so it would be best to be prepared for mid-August applications. Make sure that you have your packet and your letters of recommendation ready early. Major deadlines are the 1st and 15th of September, October, and November.

You may shy away from sharing incomplete application materials with your committee. Please do not do this. Early feedback is vital in getting your packet into shape, both in eloquence and accessibility to the public. Communicate often with your advisor and peers.

Submit the application a day before the deadline and be mindful of time zone differences. Some say it is sufficient if you apply on the deadline—but I advise you to be on the safe side. Finish all applications before your first flyout. You cannot concentrate on re-doing applications once you are at the flyout stage.

Phone Interviews, Flyouts, and Beyond

As this is a short article, I will not be able to go into details about phone/Skype interviews and flyouts, as I have done with previous job market stages. [Miller and Gentry \(2011\)](#) provide an excellent overview of phone interviews, on-campus interviews (including job talks and teaching demonstrations), and negotiation/acceptance. Uncle [Wuffle \(2006\)](#) and [Hassner \(2008\)](#) are two more recent articles that go into details about how to give a job talk.

How search committees will navigate these more in-depth interviews with COVID-19 is still not very clear at this point. But whether the interview is all virtual or the traditional on-campus flyout, the principals remain the same. Research the place you are going, practice your talk well, prepare a set of questions that you can ask your interviewers, have a conversation instead of a monologue, and be personable.

The academic job market incredibly imbalanced, not to mention suffering severely from COVID19. There are very few jobs compared to the number of job market candidates. There is a surprising degree of randomness, and the market outcome does not reflect your values as a person or as a scholar. There is

a lack of transparent, standardized, and high-quality information about the market. I hope this article serves to dispel some of the information asymmetries in the academic job market.

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