

Getting Ready for the Academic Job Market: Preparing for Interviews

I. Preliminaries

Practice first

If at all possible, do a mock/practice interview with faculty. Consider filming it or recording a mock zoom interview to assess how you sound/appear. Students are often nervous about this, about appearing unprepared to the faculty around you. But it is much more important that you get feedback to be able to learn to develop your skills (everyone needs this), correct course, and get comfortable with the form of being not fully predictable questions.

What is the interview format?

Some first-round interviews will take place at marquis conferences in a field, often in hotel suites or plain hotel rooms, though this practice is declining. Increasingly many take place on the phone or Zoom. Occasionally a first-round interview might take place at the college/university itself. (See also the handout on campus visits.)

Pragmatics: clothing; scheduling

Before either sort of interview you should have identified what you will likely wear. It is a good idea to do practice interviews in one of the outfits you plan on interviewing in, too. Make sure you feel comfortable and look professional: you want to project an image of yourself as a faculty member. Bear in mind that professors at many schools are generally more formal than at UO. Suits will be the norm for many, but not all interviewers.

Note: if you wear skirts or dresses and are interviewing at a conference, bear in mind that you may be interviewing in hotel rooms, and it is not unheard of to be asked to sit on a bed or on other awkward seating. Make sure that managing your clothes under awkward seating conditions will not be a distraction for you.

Requests for interviews will arrive by email or, if you've included your phone number on your vita, by phone. Make sure you check email and messages regularly. You will want to check your university mailbox as well. Note that after you have sent initial materials to schools they may request additional materials—a second research/writing sample, a teaching portfolio, teaching evaluations—so have these ready to go.

If a school decides they would like to interview you, you will likely be contacted by the department chair, the chair of the search committee, or a departmental staff member. You should be prepared in advance for such a call, because you want to seem enthusiastic, but calm and collected. The chair will tell you what the interview format will be (what platform; what hotel) and who is on the interview committee. The committee will vary depending on school: some schools include undergraduates and graduates, or faculty from other departments, and the size

can range anywhere from one to five or more. If the chair doesn't share that information (i.e. who will be interviewing you), don't hesitate to ask, since it will help you prepare. If the chair can't or won't offer the personnel, don't worry – the same will be true for every candidate.

Preparing for the interview itself

What to do before any first-round interview: research! Learn your way around the University's website, finding out as much as you can about the faculty, courses, and resources of the department. Don't stop there. Look at related departments or programs of interest (to see if obvious links exist with the department you are interviewing with), the library (include their special collections in this search – they may well have archival material or rare books that would enliven your teaching or research) and the various press releases of Deans and Provost/Chancellor (to learn about the college or university's current goals and challenges). It is also a good idea to look at the schedule of classes for recent semesters. (This is more reliable than department/faculty pages may be, because they are often outdated.)

Pay particular attention to the way the major and graduate program, if applicable, are organized; this can prepare you to start thinking about the service courses you would likely teach, and you can then have well-prepared answers to the inevitable questions about such courses. If you know who is on the committee (especially if they are in your field), it would be a good idea to familiarize yourself, at the very least, with their research or teaching specialties and interests.

At this point, be in touch with your DGS, job placement director (if your program has one), and your advisor, mentors, and/or dissertation or thesis committee to share your good news and to strategize.

Your advisor, mentors, committee, and DGS/placement director can help you figure out the kinds of questions you will likely be asked at the interview. It is a general rule (though regularly broken) that the kinds of questions you will get asked will depend on the relative weight the college or university assigns to teaching and research. Research-intensive schools will spend more time discussing your dissertation and the related research/articles/book project (as relevant to your discipline), as well as potential second projects and larger research trajectory, than will teaching-intensive institutions. You should be prepared to talk about both research and teaching, of course, and ideally to discuss how the two are mutually reinforcing. Be prepared to discuss how you would teach courses ranging from general education and first-year courses, to intro and advanced major courses, to a graduate (or senior) seminar, and have a sense of how you might teach the service courses that you have identified from the course listings as likely to be staffed by you. It is amazing how easy it is to stumble on the most obvious questions: What skills should an introduction to the major teach? How do you see pragmatic and theoretical courses interacting? How would you teach course x (usually a course squarely in your field)? What about course y? – adjacent to your field or methodology. What is your dream course? What are the major issues or trends in your field? While it is a good idea to have sample course syllabi prepared (including learning outcomes), the best answers to these types of questions NEVER take the form of a list of texts or topics to be taught, but instead begin by offering a rationale for and/or set of issues that the course will be based around that make the choice of texts reflect the deeper commitments and aims of the course. **Think about what you wish students to get out of**

courses you are asked about and start there. Talk about your concept of the best ways to teach to certain learning outcomes. Then you can offer a few examples.

You should have a firm grasp on how you want to describe your dissertation/book project. It is a good idea to compose, in your speaking voice, several answers of varying lengths to this most frequent question as a way of preparing for interviews. 2 minutes, 5 minutes, 8-10 minutes are not uncommon lengths. You can begin with your favorite example, or with the question or sequence of events that started you on the project, or with the central question you ask and answer, or with the configuration of your field that made you wish to intervene or add. Focus on the greatest significance of the project – how you hope others will see and understand your contribution to scholarship and knowledge.

Important review

Be sure to revisit the materials you sent out to the schools interviewing you – this is the material on which they are basing their interest, so you should be familiar with it. The committee is likely to ask you to expand on things you mentioned in these materials. Some of these questions may be predictable: it's a good idea to learn where you are unusual (which is almost always a good thing) and be prepared to elaborate on it.

In-person/travel-related interviews

Travel with all of your job materials, your interview clothing, and essentials (medication, a toothbrush etc.) in carry-on luggage. Bring whatever it takes to make you feel comfortable in an alien environment, and remember that you may encounter a range of weather (in the PNW, bring an umbrella. While there, build rewards and relaxing practices into your day and especially in your room. Drink only moderately; make sure you don't overcaffeinate; exercise if you have time. In these and any other ways you can, maximize your chances to sleep well the nights before interviews.

If interviewing at a hotel

Arrive at the hotel in which you will be interviewing a *minimum* of 15 minutes before your interview (and if scheduling multiple interviews, bear distance and timing in mind). If this is at a conference where interviews are common, bear in mind that elevators in the large conference hotels also get extremely crowded with interviewing candidates. You should anticipate that you might have to wait through several rounds of elevators experiencing heavy use (i.e. making frequent stops). Again, plan to begin your ascent with plenty of time to spare. It's far easier to burn extra time in the hallway outside the room or suite than to be suffering because you are late and the elevator still has multiple stops to go before your floor. Regardless of what happens on the way, compose yourself before you go in. If there is some logistical mix-up, be courteous in apologizing but not abject.

Breaking down the Interview

If this is in a conference hotel, you'll enter the hotel room, shake hands with everyone, and be offered a seat and possibly coffee or water. As you meet everyone make sure to make eye contact. The interview will likely begin with the search chair offering you a "safe" question (describe your dissertation, your teaching experience, etc.) and you will be off and running.

A note on the space: hotel rooms and even suites were not designed with interviewing in mind, and the space can be awkward. You may be sitting on a bed, with the committee on chairs throughout the room.

If in person, make sure as you answer questions to engage every member of the committee with eye contact, not just the one who asked. In Zoom/video interviews, try to look into your camera frequently, so they feel that same eye contact. Either way, it is important not to fixate on the chair, or on the loudest or most aggressive questioner, even though it is natural to do so. You want to come across as a colleague who respects others' opinions, even if you disagree (it's okay to gently mark disagreement – "I think we won't quite agree about that," said with a smile). Be mindful, in particular, that you are not seemingly ignoring one of the committee members, particularly someone who might seem less relevant (a grad student, someone out of the department or field, a junior female professor in a sea of senior men, etc.).

First-round interviews can last anywhere from 20 to 75 minutes. However, the most common length is about 30 to 45 minutes. You should not assume that everyone in the room has read your materials with extreme care (though it is possible that they have), so it is important that you convey a good deal of information about your work quickly, clearly, and efficiently. You don't want to repeat letter materials word for word, but it is good to restate core ideas in a way all can understand, even people in a different research areas. That testifies to your skill as a teacher, communicator, and thinker.

It is comforting to remember that as much as you are trying to get committee members to like you, they want you to like them as well. They have selected you from a large pool of candidates, are interested in your work, and want you to be interested in working with them as colleagues.

Interviewers' biggest hope is that you will turn out to be ideal for them, and so they are always pulling for interviewees, not trying to cull you. (Their biggest fear is that none of the candidates will be right – again that means that they want you to do well.) Bear in mind that they are also used to new job seekers. It is common for nervousness to be overwhelming at first, and almost every committee will be understanding about this. It is genuinely okay (and it is common) if the first few minutes are awkward: just power through.

Basic guidelines: Listen carefully to questions. Look around, making measured eye contact with each member of the committee, and not just at the person who asked the most recent question, as you answer. Do not assume you can tell where a question is headed from how it begins (don't *anticipate* the question). Likewise, don't feel the need to answer the second the question ends. A measured pause may give you the chance to collect your thoughts (indicate you're thinking with body language and expression). Do not lie. If you haven't read a work in question, you should not pretend to be in control of unfamiliar material (indeed, the person asking you probably is in control of it, perhaps even expertly so). Instead, just say so or gracefully redirect the question.

Folks may cut you off at some point – don't take it personally, because it is likely the product of time constraints.

On the whole, you should aim to answer short, rather than long, since they and you will want to cover as many topics as possible – they can always ask follow-up questions if they want to know more. Be sure to come to a clear end as you answer (indicated with tone and/or body language). Your attitude should not be arrogant, condescending, or overly critical (especially of fellow grad students, your students, or your department in general – this doesn't bode well for future collegiality), but enthusiastic, engaged, energized, and friendly. Enjoy yourself: it is, from one angle, a unique chance to have a serious discussion with a group of smart people who are truly interested in you and your work.

Research questions: The most basic question, often the first, will ask you in one way or another to summarize your dissertation project. You should have this down pat – with a clear outline of its contours and its key questions. Keep in mind that your description should be clear and appealing to a non-specialist, and make certain that you do not duplicate your phrasing from the letter or abstract exactly. As mentioned above, they are also likely to ask you questions about things written in your cover letter or your dissertation abstract, so be prepared for these as well. In many cases, a version of “why do you think this work is important?” (or, less politely, “why on earth would anyone want to do that?”) will be asked. You should be prepared to answer this one. Other likely questions in this category include: what will your next major project be? How do your research and teaching influence each other? What theorists have you found important or influential in your dissertation or your intellectual approach? Where do you locate yourself (and/or your dissertation) in relation to other scholars who work in your field? Could you envision conducting your research in our library? When will you finish your dissertation? In the case of this last question, you should be specific and positively certain in your answer, even if this may not necessarily be the case. Bear in mind that many questions will take off from your own answers – most will not be these generic ones. Let yourself enjoy an interesting conversation as it develops; making your enjoyment of intellectual conversation visible is a good thing.

Teaching questions: As mentioned above, it is a good idea to have some sample syllabi prepared (or even appropriate examples of courses you've already taught). You can mention that you've brought them, but hand them out only at the end – you want them listening to your ideas, not reading your syllabus during the interview. Also as mentioned above, the most important aspect of any course overview is explanation of its organizing principle, what links the texts together, and how that arrangement works to communicate something important to your students. It may also be a good idea to think about what kind of assignments you'd give in the class in order to teach the skills or concepts you want students to learn. If you've looked at the department's offerings, the types of teaching questions you'll be asked will probably not be too surprising: How would you teach a survey in your field? How would you organize an upper-division course/senior seminar in your field? What kind of graduate courses would you envision teaching? Other questions might address your own teaching style and philosophy, such as: How does your research affect your teaching? What kinds of essays, problem sets, or types of assignments do you find most useful? How do you teach X (a major work or subject in your field)?

Try not to limit yourself to describing how you have always seen things done (especially here at your graduate institution). Feel free to ask about how they do things if you don't know (e.g., if you are discussing a special topic: "I saw your majors take [a major topic in the field] early on; how does that get developed later in the major?"). Feel free to ask them about their students and student constituencies. Refer to experiences that are relevant but don't hesitate to demonstrate that you have imagined other realities – one logical place for this to happen for an Oregonian is in showing that you have thought through semester-length pedagogy/courses if this is a school on the trimester system. Remember: you are a potential colleague. The more you can demonstrate your natural progression from student to independent scholar/researcher/teacher, the better.

Asking questions: One of the more difficult moments comes at the end, when they ask you if you have any questions for them. You should. This is where your research into the department and institution can really pay off. Questions commonly asked include: where the school draws its students from; the makeup (age, diversity, gender, first-gen %, etc.) of the student body or the department's majors; goals or challenges the department or school has identified or is currently addressing; what the department offers in terms of international exchange, outside speakers, interdisciplinary or multi-institutional projects/initiatives, faculty seminars or writing groups; what the university's role in the local community is perceived as being, etc. Now is **NOT** the time to ask anything about salary, research leave, or other such matters. You will likely be given such information during a meeting with the chair later, in an on-campus visit. Negotiation happens only after an offer is made.

Intrusive or illegal questions: Context and tone are very important in deciding on a response to these types of questions (concerning things such as children or plans for children, marital status, sexuality, religion, health, age, ethnicity, etc.). If you are asked an illegal question, remember that the questioner is as likely to be motivated by friendly curiosity as, say, by discriminatory intent (which is also possible). Assume a friendly motive. You need not answer any such question. If it feels natural, you may deflect with humor ("What age would you like?"/ "I can *be* _____"), or with vagueness (e.g. "I haven't made up my mind about that" in response to questions about plans for children). It is likely that such deflections will recall the questioner to his or her responsibilities. You may also demur: "Oh, I don't think I'm supposed to answer that" (not, "Oh, I don't think you're supposed to ask that"). Spousal issues are generally best discussed only after an offer has been made. If you find yourself answering honestly, don't beat yourself up – it's a natural impulse, particularly when you are in the mode of trying to please. However, you cannot assess anyone's intent (for worse, or for better) and generally it is best not to answer questions that have been deemed illegal for a reason.

Closing procedures: At the end of the interview, the chair of the committee will tell you about the schedule and plans of the search committee. There will likely be some flexibility in the schedule they describe: you might hear "as early as...or perhaps later" depending on the committee, the department, and other factors. Occasionally funding for positions dries up at this late stage.

If the chair does not let you know about the near future, definitely ask. "May I ask about the search schedule/timeline?" is perfectly fine. You will thank them for the interview, once again

shake everyone's hands, smiling, with eye contact, and leave. Should you cross paths with the next candidate on your way out the door, give him or her a friendly nod (likewise before the interview).

Some folks write thank-you notes after interviews; some don't. They have become more common. If you wish to thank the committee, send a brief note to the chair encouraging him or her to thank the committee members for an enjoyable conversation. This may make the most sense for particularly enjoyable conversations – some interviews will be really fun and others may be less so. I would recommend against any reference to future contact in this email or note (i.e. don't say "I look forward to hearing from you").

The most important thing is to treat this interview experience as the opportunity it is. At interviews you will be able to converse with some of the most interested and smart readers of your work to date. Conversations begun at interviews can continue afterward (hold off on contacting committee members, however, until the course of events is clearer). Connections made during these interviews can long outlast the conference or individual searches – and they can yield fruit much later. Twice I have interviewed again with a university many years down the line, and the second time got campus visits at both sites (UO was one of them). I know many similar cases. Interviews, like campus visits, are also a great opportunity to see how other departments and schools work, a surprisingly rare experience in the profession. Good luck, and enjoy!