

Ph.D. INTERVIEW PREPARATION GUIDE

FOR POSITIONS IN ACADEMIA

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WHAT THEY ARE LOOKING FOR

There is no way to know specifically what a given faculty member looks for when interviewing a job candidate. It will vary tremendously from person to person. However, there are a few things that are common to the objectives of many faculty members:

- Someone who will fit in with the current faculty. This means, essentially, someone who has goals and attitudes that are compatible with other members of that faculty. Of course, this also includes general personality. People like to hire someone they would enjoy having around. They don't want someone who is unpleasant to be around, since they may see them daily.
- Someone who has a proven track record. This is an ideal that is not always possible to meet, but if you have teaching experience, have presented papers at conferences, have relevant industry experience, and have published one or more papers, each of these will help you to get an interview. Then, you can expect much of your interview to focus on these items, as faculty members try to determine whether those experiences are valuable and legitimate.
- Someone who is ambitious. Few faculty members want to hire someone who is lazy. The harder you work, the more you will contribute to their program.
- Someone who will stay for several years. Hiring new faculty is a time-consuming and tiring process, so no one wants to hire a person who will leave after only 1 or 2 years. In addition, much of a faculty member's value to a department comes only after a few years experience, so they don't want to lose you before you make your greatest contributions.
- Someone who can excel at *both* teaching and research. Even programs that place greater weight on one than the other tend to want faculty who can do both.
- Someone who is interested in *both* teaching and research. In other words, you don't want to talk about one to the exclusion of the other.
- Someone who is intelligent and adaptable. If another faculty member becomes ill or leaves, it is important to have others who can step in and cover their classes, even if those classes are not in your area of expertise.
- Someone who has depth (particular expertise) as well as breadth (general knowledge of the field). Your depth, typically, is in the area of your dissertation. But you must know more than just that one area (e.g., media). Some faculty members may even ask questions designed to determine whether you have knowledge/interests outside of the field.
- Someone who has a solid education. For example, faculty who are quantitatively oriented may quiz you about statistics and research methods to ensure that you have sufficient expertise in those areas to do publishable research.

WHAT YOU SHOULD EXPECT

Although there are some variations in the hiring process, it is fairly standardized. The following should give you an idea of what to expect.

- You must apply to programs by submitting your curriculum vitae and probably 3 letters of recommendation. Apply to several, and don't exclude schools that you *think* you probably wouldn't like, because you may be surprised. On the other hand, if you are certain you would not accept an offer from a particular school, don't waste their time by applying.

- Most programs will receive several applications, then they will sort through them looking for candidates that seem to meet their particular needs.
- If they decide to interview you, you will receive a call from someone (usually the department chair or search committee chair) inviting you for a visit.
- You will probably be asked to pay for everything, and then to submit your receipts to them for reimbursement. This means that you'd better save room on your credit card, because you may need to pay for airfare and hotel for every one of your interviews. And it is not uncommon for a school to take a month or more to reimburse you. This means that if you have four interviews in the same month, you may need enough credit to pay for all of them before you receive reimbursement from the first one.
- They probably will send you an itinerary, showing your schedule for the visit. Expect a very full schedule. Usually you are invited for 1 or 1 1/2 days of interviewing, and you'll have something scheduled virtually every minute of that time.
- Even your meals will likely be with faculty members who are, either formally or informally, interviewing you.
- Someone (either a faculty member or a graduate student) probably will pick you up at the airport and escort you to your hotel. During the ride they may informally interview you.
- One of your appointments will normally be with the Dean of the college in which you interview.
- You will be interviewed by most, if not all, of the faculty in the department, probably one at a time. We usually schedule at least 30 minutes with each faculty member.
- If you'd like to meet someone outside that department (e.g., because you might be able to do some joint research with them), be sure to tell your contact (e.g., the department chair) in the weeks before you go for your interview. Don't wait until the last minute.
- In most instances you will be required to make a presentation of your research (usually your dissertation research). This may be a presentation to all of the faculty, or it may even be open to others who want to hear it.
- Some schools ask candidates to teach a class in lieu of, or in addition to, the research presentation.

HOW TO PREPARE

There are a few steps you can take in preparation for your interviews:

- When candidates interview with our own faculty, attend their presentation. This is the single most valuable step you can take in preparation for your own interview, because you can see what they do right/wrong and the questions that are asked.
- Try to make significant progress on your dissertation before you begin interviewing. A candidate who is farther along is almost always more impressive. If you are in the proposal stage and you are competing against someone who already has collected data, you are at an inherent disadvantage.
- Attend disciplinary conferences and get to know people. Even if you have a couple of years before you start searching for your job, people may take notice of you and watch your progress with an eye toward hiring you.
- Go through the interviewing process at those conferences.
- Go through the interviewing process at the conference, whether or not you desire a job in a specific department. This is excellent practice, some programs do interview candidates there, and you might find a position that really interests you.
- Prepare your presentation carefully.
 - Find out how long you will have. A common length of time is one hour, but that includes time for questions. Consequently, your presentation might be 30 - 40 minutes. Your contact (e.g., the department chair) should be able to give you some idea how long it should be.
 - Plan it so it won't go over the allotted time. Bad planning can result in people not being able to ask the questions they want, or even missing something that could help to convince them to hire you.

- Make it easy to understand. Remember that you (should) know the subject matter of your dissertation better than anyone else, so don't assume that your audience will know everything you do about the topic. Define your terms, explain the basics of the theoretical basis of your study, show them what previous researchers have found, and how your study adds to that knowledge. Make it simple, but not condescending.
 - Spend more time on what *you* are doing, than you spend discussing what has been done in the past.
 - In only 30 minutes you can't possibly cover everything that is in your dissertation, so remember that what you are presenting is a *summary*. Hit only the high points.
 - **Be specific. Give plenty of detail about your sampling, questionnaires, experimental design, analytical methods, etc.**
 - **Use plenty of visuals, and keep them clear and simple. Put all of your key points on visuals, along with any charts, etc., that will help them to understand what you are doing. If you will need certain equipment, such as a slide projector or videotape machine, be sure to let them know well in advance.**
 - **Know exactly what you intend to say, and when you will say it. Have your presentation absolutely organized. Don't try to handle it on the fly. A disorganized or awkward organization is not impressive.**
 - **Know precisely how you will handle your visuals, and when you will show them. Again, you want to avoid the appearance of being disorganized.**
 - **Practice, practice, practice. This should be the smoothest lecture you've ever given. Faculty members will be watching your presentation with an eye toward assessing your ability to teach.**
- Give a brown bag presentation of your lecture in your department, before you do it at any other school. This not only will allow you some additional practice, it will permit you to obtain some feedback from a "friendly" audience. You may find that you want to make a few adjustments as a result of that feedback.
 - Read through and think about each of the questions outlined in the next sections, before you go on your first interview.

SOME QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD EXPECT

It is not uncommon for candidates seeking faculty positions to be asked any or all of the questions listed below. Think about each of these before you go to your first interview, so you will be prepared with a cogent and appropriate answer.

- Why do you want to come to [this school]?
- Tell me about your dissertation.
- How far along is your dissertation?
- When do you expect to defend your dissertation?
- What classes do you like to teach?
- What are the strengths/weaknesses of your Ph.D. program?
- What do you think of our curriculum?
- Do you know, or what do you think of, [a specific professor] at this University?
- What do you think of qualitative/quantitative research?
- Tell me about your teaching techniques (e.g., group projects, case method, etc.).
- How would you teach [a specific class, e.g., media]?
- Are you interested in working with the [Academic] Club (or taking a team to the [Academic] Competition)?
- What specific ideas do you have for improving our [Academic] Club?
- What do you think of "Integrated Marketing Communications" (or Interactive Media, or any current "hot" topic in your discipline)?
- What is your favorite lecture, and why?
- What research do you want to do in the next 5 years?

- In what journals do you expect to publish?
- Tell me about your industry experience (if you have any)? How would you bring that industry experience to the classroom?
- How important do you feel industry experience is for a [advertising, computer science, chemistry, history, English, etc.] professor?
- If you have no industry experience: How do you expect to be able to teach students about the field if you've never worked in it?
- What is your favorite theory or theorist?
- What do you consider your teaching strengths/weaknesses?
- What do you consider your research strengths/weaknesses?
- In addition, you should expect questions about anything and everything on your curriculum vitae. And it is quite common to get the same type of interview questions that you might when seeking any type of job, such as "What is the last book you read for fun?" or "What are your hobbies?"

SOME QUESTIONS YOU CAN (OR SHOULD) ASK

You will be meeting many different people, and will need to be prepared to ask intelligent questions of each of them. The following are some ideas of what you can or, in some cases, *should* ask. They are roughly categorized to give you an idea of whom you might ask them. In addition, of course, as you progress through the interview you should constantly try to develop additional questions based upon what you see or hear.

Search Committee Chair, your contact person, or whoever picks you up at the airport

- What are you looking for in filling this position? (i.e., what qualifications?)
- Do other faculty members have different expectations/desires regarding what they are looking for?
- Are there any "land mines" of which I should be aware (e.g., any topics to avoid discussing, any faculty members who might be difficult)?
- What courses are most/least in need of instructors?
- Is there anything I should expect when talking to the Dean? To the Chair?

Dean of College

- How much interaction will an assistant professor have with the Dean?
- What research funds are available at different levels of the university?
- Tell me about the health plan.
- Tell me about the retirement plan.
- Is this position fully funded (or might it disappear before anyone is hired)?
- What are the most dramatic changes you expect for the college in the next 5 years? How about 10 years?
- Where do you expect the department/program to be in 5 years? 10 years?
- What is the financial state of the college? Of the department?
- How is tenure approved at different levels of the university administration?
- Is there an annual review of performance for assistant professors, so they know whether or not they are making adequate progress toward tenure?
- As Dean, you are in the position to see many tenure decisions. What practical advice would you give to a new assistant professor about securing tenure?
- How might you describe the [advertising, computer science, chemistry, history, English, etc.] department/program to a fellow administrator (i.e., try to assess their attitudes toward the program).

Department Chair and Senior Faculty

- When does the faculty meet as a group, and for what reasons do they meet?
- What is the teaching load? Will it change over time?

- How many new preps can I expect in the first 3 years?
- How large are the classes? [Ask about specific classes.]
- Do faculty have any input as to when and where their classes meet?
- Is there any teaching relief for service activities, directing theses and independent studies, etc.?
- Who makes teaching assignments, and how is that done?
- Is there a sabbatical system? How does it work?
- Are there opportunities to develop new courses?
- Do assistant professors teach graduate courses?
- Which courses are in greatest demand by faculty?
- For which courses does the department have the hardest time finding instructors?
- How are graduate student applications evaluated? [Follow up with other questions about the grad program, if any, such as how many grad students come from the department's own undergrad program.]
- Where are your undergrad students usually placed? Your grad students?
- What are the strengths/weaknesses of the department?
- What, in particular, are *you* looking for in filling this position? Are there different agendas within the faculty?
- What are the most dramatic changes you predict for the department in the next 5 years? 10 years?
- What kind of summer support is available? [Be sure to find out how it is calculated. Some schools offer 1/6 of salary for teaching a summer class, while others offer 1/9. And, summer teaching may be available only upon a seniority basis.]
- What does it usually take to obtain tenure (e.g., number of publications)? [Ask specifics about the process, e.g., "A" vs. "B" journals, external reviewers, number of years before you can go up for tenure, balance of teaching vs. research vs. service.]
- What are *your* expectations for tenure?
- Who was the last person to go up for tenure, and what happened?
- What is the role of part-time, adjunct instructors/professors?
- What is the relationship between sub disciplines (e.g., speech & journalism)?
- How much interaction is there between [advertising, computer science, chemistry, history, English, etc.] professors and [journalism, marketing, PR, etc.] professors?
- How does being housed in [this college or department] affect the [advertising, computer science, chemistry, history, English, etc.] program's mission?
- What travel money is available?
- Are there set limits on such things as phone calls or photocopies that can be done by a professor?
- How is teaching evaluated? [e.g., student evaluations, peer reviews, etc.]
- Especially if you're a woman: Who is the highest-ranking woman in the department/college/university?
- Who is the highest-ranking minority in the department/college/university?
- In what competitions do students compete?
- Who does advising for undergrad/grad students?
- How many grad/undergrad students are enrolled in the program? Is this number increasing or decreasing?
- Ask about specific courses, e.g., how they're taught, prerequisites, etc.
- What is the financial outlook for the department/program?
- How are raises determined? [e.g., merit, cost of living, do less active people get the same raises, etc.]
- What would you like your new hire to teach during their first semester here?
- Are there any labs for experimental research, or phone banks for survey research? [More specifics on research facilities?]
- In what areas do you consider this department to be a leader?
- What research are you doing?

Junior Faculty

- Ask about parking, postage, photocopies, computers, software, long-distance telephone charges, and office space.

- What classes did you teach in the last year? How many students were in each? How many preps? How much influence did you have regarding which classes you taught and when?
- How is your teaching evaluated?
- How are you expected to spend your summers?
- What support do you receive for your classes? [e.g., TA support, AV support, availability of videos, secretarial support, teaching training, faculty advise/assistance, supplies, etc.]
- Is there any formal mentoring system for new faculty?
- What support do you receive for research? [e.g., RA support, photocopies, postage, teaching release, secretarial support, computer & statistical consulting, grants, etc.]
- Is there a distinction made between "skills" courses and others?
- Do you like living in this city/town?
- Are you satisfied with your benefits? [e.g., health, retirement]
- What do you consider to be the strengths/weaknesses of the department?
- What is your greatest frustration with your job?
- What is your opinion regarding the quality of undergrad/grad students here?
- To what extent do faculty members socialize with one another?
- Where and with whom do you usually eat lunch?
- What service are you involved in?
- What are the expectations regarding service? [Including university service, community service & professional service.]
- Do you find the journals you need are available in the library? [Other specifics about the library and research materials?]
- When you teach a course that has been taught before, or is simultaneously being taught by someone else, are you encouraged to depart from the previous syllabus? Do you independently select the text used?
- Is consulting encouraged or discouraged?
- How many office hours are required for every hour in the classroom?

Graduate Students

- How do you address faculty members? [e.g., "Dr.," "Professor," first name, ...]
- What kind of support do you get from faculty? [e.g., reading & commenting on your work, research collaboration, helping to secure funding, etc.]
- Are you working with anyone in particular? Do you co-author papers together?
- Which professor serves on the most graduate student committees?
- Do you have more class contact with some professors than others?
- Where do you go when you have questions about research methods? About theoretical issues? About industry issues? About teaching?
- Do graduate students get travel funds?
- Do graduate students and faculty socialize with one another? When? [e.g., eat lunch together, do faculty socialize with particular grad students or as a group?]
- Why did you choose to get your graduate degree at this school?

Faculty Member in Another Department

- You are probably meeting this person because of his/her research interests, so obviously you want to ask them about their research, support they receive, whether anyone in the [X] department seems interested in their research, etc.
- Do you work with anyone in the [X] department? In what capacity? [e.g., research, committees, team teaching, etc.]
- Would you be interested in collaborating with someone in another department who had research interests similar to yours?
- As an outsider, what would you say are the strengths/weaknesses of the program/department?
- For someone in the same college or school: What is the relationship between the disciplines?

- For someone in the same college or school: How does being housed in this college or school affect your program's mission?

Last Meeting with the Chair

- Will you be interviewing other candidates?
- Who will make the decision regarding whom to hire?
- What is your timetable for filling this position?
- At this point you may want to clarify: tenure requirements, teaching requirements, travel money, summer support, computer equipment, etc.
- If you are *asked* about salary expectations: What salary range has been established for this position? Aim a little high when you state your expectation, and back it up with a good rationale.

SOME QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD *NOT* ASK (UNTIL LATER)

Generally, avoid discussing salary until they bring it up. Don't try to negotiate your salary when you don't yet have an offer. Not only is it tacky, they may have one amount in mind before you arrive, and that amount may change as they learn more about your value to their program. Consequently, unless they specifically ask you about salary or make you an offer, save those questions. It may be that you won't get an offer until weeks later. You can ask the following questions at that time:

- Always thank them for the offer, even if you're not interested.
- Clarify teaching load for the first year.
- What kind of computer hardware/software and office space can I expect? [Ask for the best, then negotiate down if necessary. You probably won't get another computer for years.]
- Will moving expenses of your new hire be covered? [Probably not! Generally, universities only pay moving expenses for high level positions (e.g., Chairs).]
- In some cases you may want to ask for something special. For example, if you do experimental research, you may want to try and negotiate for laboratory space and equipment.
- Is there any summer research support available for a new hire? [Try to get at least the first summer paid, without teaching, so you can get your research program moving.]
- How much time do I have to decide? [You should get 2 - 4 weeks. Whatever you do, don't accept their offer on the spot. Give yourself some time to think about it, and to check other places you have interviewed, to see if they intend to extend an offer to you.]
- If salary is lower than expected, say: I am very excited about the prospect of coming to work here, but I am a little disappointed about the salary. Is this still open to negotiation?
- If you already have another offer, and it's higher, be sure to tell them. They may be able to go back to their Dean and get more, using your other offer as leverage.
- **Make the best deal you can**, because you will never again be in a bargaining position unless you have offers to move to another school.

If you decline the offer, be diplomatic. Never burn your bridges. Express appreciation for the confidence in you as a candidate, and say something positive about the department. Focus on your personal reasons for declining the offer.

GENERAL ADVICE

- Perhaps it goes without saying, but show a definite interest in each of these people and in the research/teaching/projects they are doing. People tend to be more positively disposed to someone who is interested in their work than someone who shows no interest in it. Where possible, point out how their work might dovetail with your own, and how there might be an opportunity for joint research later.

- Show a sincere interest in their program/department. I've seen candidates come to our [advertising, computer science, chemistry, history, English, etc.] Department to interview, and all they talk about is their research & teaching of journalism classes, without ever mentioning how that experience would transfer to, or benefit, our department. They seemed to forget what department they were in! If you're not really interested in their program, don't interview there.
- Mention ways that you could see yourself contributing to their current efforts. Talk as if you could see yourself working there, to help them visualize you working there.
- Tact! Remember that different faculty members have different opinions and agendas. For example, some feel that classes should focus on giving students useful skills, while others feel classes should help students learn to think without any need to teach them practical skills. Be honest, but don't unnecessarily offend.
- Think before you answer a question.
- Be a good listener. Don't talk when someone else is talking.
- Don't call a faculty member by their first name unless they invite you to do so.
- Be confident and show your knowledge, but avoid arrogance.
- Be nice to everyone.