



ACADEMIC CAREERS: Interviews

Do your research, prepare for questions

Before any academic interview it is imperative to research the institution, department, search committee members, faculty members, campus community, and more. Gathering information will offer insight into whether the university is a good fit and how to best prepare for interviews. Consult colleagues, UW faculty, alumni, higher education news outlets, university websites, and professional organizations.

Faculty interviews will include questions about your research, teaching, service, and professional qualifications. Begin preparing answers to questions well in advance of an interview to ensure that you have clear, thoughtful, and tailored comments. Review lists of questions like the list in this document. Take notes on possible stories and examples. Practice saying your answers aloud to yourself. Gather a group of fellow graduate students or colleagues to ask you the most difficult interview questions they can conjure up. Consider scheduling a mock interview (60 minutes practice session with 25-30 minutes of interviewing and 30-35 minutes of debriefing) with the Career & Internship Center.

Keep your interview answers short—about 1-2 minutes in length unless the question merits a slightly longer answer. Whenever possible use specific examples from your experiences to answer questions rather than speaking abstractly about theoretical situations. One strategy for telling stories is the STAR Method:

- > SITUATION (I was teaching English 101 to 100 undergrads at a research university.)
- > TASK (There was a group of 5 students that talked throughout each lecture and disrupted the class so I needed to find a way to prevent them from talking.)
- > ACTIONS you took to accomplish the task. (I met with the 5 students individually. I was firm, yet considerate. I told them ____.)
- > RESULTS (The students reduced their talking and began contributing to the class. The quality of their work increased and they raised their grades.)

During the interview it is important to convey confidence, poise, and professionalism. The department is considering you as a potential faculty member and will be looking for evidence of this. Answer questions in an organized manner. If you are surprised by a question, take a brief moment to think about the question before responding. Share your comments in an audible, calm, and engaged way so that you convey your excitement for your work and the possibility of working with the department.

Potential questions

Search committee members will likely ask about your current research activities, future research plans, teaching, service, and personal characteristics. They are also likely to ask questions to assess your interest in and fit with their institution, department, and geographic region.

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Current Research: Be prepared to discuss your research in 10 seconds and in 1, 10, and 30 minutes. You need to be able to discuss your work with professionals who have knowledge in your specialty and professionals who have knowledge in your field but not in your specialty.

- > Tell us about your research.
- > How did you choose your dissertation topic? Why does it interest you?
- > How does your research contribute to the field?
- > How does your research relate to the work of ___?
- > What theoretical framework did you use in developing your research? Why?
- > Why did you choose the specific method / instruments / sample / analytic technique?
- > What are the strengths of your most recent work?
- > If you could do your project again, what would you change?
- > What do you most enjoy about the research process?
- > How do you compensate for your research-related weaknesses?

Future Research: When interviewers ask about your future research plans, they want to make sure you are an emerging professional so it is important for you to answer such questions thoughtfully. Formulate a 1-2 year plan, 3-5 year plan, and 5-7 year plan. Think about future projects, publication and presentation outlets, potential funding sources, individuals (inside and outside the department) with whom to collaborate, and necessary space, equipment, and personnel.

- > Tell us about your publication plans for your most recent work.
- > Have you submitted your work for presentation at any conferences?
- > What are your short-term research plans?
- > What are your long-term research plans?
- > What equipment will you need to accomplish your plans?
- > Will you require research assistants?
- > How will you find funding for your research plans?
- > Are you expecting the department to provide lab start-up funds?
- > What are your other research interests?
- > How do you plan to involve students in your research?
- > Do you see yourself doing collaborative research? What kind? With whom?

Teaching: Be prepared to answer questions about your teaching – no matter what type of institution is interviewing you. You'll likely be asked about your past teaching experience and future teaching goals. Be ready to discuss how you can adapt what you learned from past teaching positions to future teaching experiences (especially if you'll be teaching different levels or class sizes than before). At teaching-focused colleges you can expect more questions in this category.

- > How would you teach a course in ___?
- > What texts would you choose for ___ course?
- > Which of our existing courses are you most interested in teaching?
- > What new courses are you interested in developing?
- > What is your teaching philosophy?
- > What teaching methods do you use?
- > What constitutes a good teacher?

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- > How do you define teaching effectiveness? How do you evaluate it?
- > What have you learned from your teaching evaluations?
- > How do student characteristics impact teaching and learning?
- > What do you most like about teaching?
- > What is your favorite teaching experience thus far?
- > In what ways do you still need to grow as a teacher?
- > What was your worst teaching mistake? What did you learn from it?
- > What is an ideal class size for you?
- > What is an ideal course load for you?
- > How does your research influence your teaching?
- > How do you think teaching undergrads is different than teaching grad students?
- > How is teaching majors different than teaching non-majors?
- > How do you evaluate student learning? What are your grading policies?
- > How do you use technology in your teaching?
- > How do you motivate / engage students?
- > How do you encourage critical thinking?

Service: Every department has a service requirement but the types and amounts of service expected vary widely among disciplines, departments, and universities. Search committees will likely want to gauge your attitude about service and ascertain the types of service activities that most interest you.

- > What types of staff / faculty committees interest you?
- > With what types of student groups / committees / activities would you like to be involved?
- > What type of supervisory relationship would you like to have with students?
- > How important is service to you, as compared to teaching and research?

Institution & Department: Search committees want to make sure the people they hire are going to be happy in their department and at their institution. It is not in anybody's interest for a candidate who really wants to do research and work with graduate students to get hired by a teaching-focused school that only serves undergraduates. Committees will ask you questions about how you see yourself in their department, university, and city so they can assess your fit.

- > How do you feel about teaching only undergraduate / graduate students?
- > How do you feel about teaching at an institution affiliated with ____ religion?
- > How do your values coincide with the values of this institution?
- > How do you feel about living in ____?
- > Why do you want to teach here?
- > What most excites you about our department?
- > What reservations do you have about this position / department / institution?
- > How long would you plan to stay here?
- > Where do you see yourself in 10 years, 20 years?
- > How do you feel about teaching in the evenings?
- > What do you think about teaching older students?
- > How do you feel about collaborating closely with other faculty in the department?
- > What unique strengths would you contribute to this department?
- > What makes you think you could earn tenure here?



- > What professional criticisms have you received? How are you improving in those areas?
- > What professional accomplishment makes you the most proud?

Personal Characteristics: Search committee members are interested in you as a colleague - they want to know what it will be like to work in the office next to you and serve on various committees with you for an indefinite number of years. Therefore, you can expect a few questions about you as a person. Be careful that you only divulge personal information you are comfortable divulging. Legally, you do not have to disclose your age, marital or parental status, sexual orientation, political affiliation, religious preference, etc. If you're asked a question you do not feel comfortable answering, figure out the underlying question (i.e. can you fulfill the duties of this job?) and answer it, rather than answering the question asked.

- > What are your non-academic interests?
- > Why are you interested in this field of study?
- > Why did you decide to pursue a position in academia?
- > What other career paths have you considered?
- > How would you describe your doctoral program?
- > What are your personal strengths and weaknesses?
- > Where else are you interviewing?
- > Is there anything that would prevent you from accepting this position?

Asking questions

Asking questions of the search committee shows your interest in the position and how well you understand the department and university. Ask questions that demonstrate you have done your research on their department and school. Try to avoid questions about salary, retirement, and sensitive departmental politics during the interview process.

Possible questions to ask include:

- > What financial resources are available to start a research program?
- > Are funds available to hire research assistants to help with data collection and analysis?
- > How interested are students in becoming involved in research with faculty?
- > What are the expectations about new faculty securing outside funding?
- > What departmental funds are available for attending conferences?
- > What are the library resources like here?
- > Are there campus resources to assist with grant-writing?
- > Do professors have teaching assistants to help with grading?
- > Can I teach in the summer?
- > What is the course load the first year on the job, as compared to subsequent years?
- > What courses will I likely teach?
- > What technical support is available in classrooms?
- > What are the expectations regarding service activities (types & hours)?
- > In what types of services activities do current faculty members participate?
- > How active are faculty members in professional associations?
- > Why do you have positions open in this department?



- > Why are you looking for somebody with ____ specialty?
- > What facilities and equipment are available for new faculty?
- > Describe the review process for new faculty.
- > Describe the tenure process here.
- > What are the expectations for research, teaching, service, and advising?
- > What constitutes a great faculty member in this department?
- > Describe a typical week for faculty members here.
- > Where do you see the department (or institution) heading in the next 5 years?
- > What do you consider to be the department's greatest strengths?
- > What is the most rewarding part of being a professor here?
- > What are the department's weaknesses? What are you doing to improve upon them?
- > What do you anticipate being the biggest challenge for new faculty in this department?
- > Do you have an official mentoring program for junior faculty?
- > How would you describe relationships among faculty members in this department?
- > How would you describe relationships between students and faculty members?
- > Describe a typical undergraduate / graduate student in this department.
- > How is this department perceived within the university?
- > How is the university perceived in the community?
- > What is it like to live in this community?

Interview logistics: Before interviews

If you have applied to positions, make sure you are ready to hear back! Check your email regularly—both inbox and junk mail. Ensure that your voicemail is set up with a professional message. If you receive a call in a place where it is difficult to talk (a bus, the library), consider letting it go to voicemail and calling back when you are in a quieter place.

Prepare professional interview attire—if you do not already have a suit or similar professional clothing, be sure to acquire this well in advance of your interview. If you're on a budget, consider thrift stores, consignment shops and end-of-season sales. When selecting clothes for on-campus interviews, note that you will likely be standing, sitting, getting in and out of cars, going to dinner, and walking around campus. Break in new shoes ahead of time and be sure that older clothes still fit. When selecting clothes for a conference interview, the norm seems to be outfits that require a jacket, although standards vary by discipline. Generally it is better to be dressed more formally than other candidates that it is to be dressed less formally than other candidates and conference attendees.

Conference Interviews

In many disciplines, preliminary faculty job interviews take place at major conferences. It is important to know the dates of the major conventions in your discipline. As with any interview, the point of the conference interview is to assess your knowledge, professionalism, and fit. Some departments will provide a Skype interview option in lieu of the major conference interview.

Interviewers will usually ask about your research and teaching. They will also likely discuss their department and assess your fit with it. The interviewers will typically ask if you have questions for them. Finally, procedures



for following up after the interview are usually discussed. Be sure to remain energetic and focused – conference interviews have many possible environmental distractions.

Tips for conference interview success:

- > Choose accommodations conducive to prepping for interviews and unwinding.
- > Do not schedule your interviews close together – you need to leave time for prepping, eating, traveling between different interview locations, and inevitable delays.
- > Have a map or directions indicating how to get from one hotel to another.
- > Bring copies of your CV, dissertation abstract, published manuscripts, research statement, teaching statement, sample syllabi, etc.
- > Bring blank paper and several writing utensils.
- > Carry a professional looking briefcase or portfolio for your materials
- > Carry all essential documents on the plane. Don't place them in your checked luggage.

Phone and Skype interviews

The content of a phone or Skype/videoconference interview is much the same as the content of a conference interview. You will need to talk about your research, teaching, and interest in the department. Interviewers will also expect you to have questions for them. While there are advantages to a phone or Skype interview (no plane ticket to book!) you will need to make additional preparations on your end. These include selecting a quiet, interruption-free environment, using a landline for your phone (or plugging it in to your charger) and a strong internet connection for Skype (Ethernet is best), and being able to troubleshoot technical issues (why the sound isn't working on your laptop).

Phone Interviews:

- > Listen very carefully so you can hear as much as possible on the other end.
- > Learn the names and voices of each interviewer and refer to them by name.
- > Try not to talk over others. Make sure others are done speaking before you speak.
- > Maintain a strong and steady voice. Communicate energy. Smile as you talk.
- > Have your materials organized. Avoid rustling through papers when answering questions.
- > Refrain from typing, pacing, or doing any other activity while on the call as these sounds can easily be picked up by the interviewers.

Skype Interviews:

- > It's best to use a fast, wired internet connection and a reliable computer.
- > There is often a time lag so you should pause after you are finished speaking so individuals on the other end have a chance to hear the end of your answers.
- > Try not to move too much because movements are exaggerated on camera.
- > Be aware of what else is in the room behind you.
- > Wear professional attire as you will be seen.
- > Minimize your use of notes.



Campus visits

Campus visits are usually reserved for the top 1-5 candidates. The campus visit is your opportunity to demonstrate your fit with the department and your opportunity to honestly assess your desire to work at the institution. Campus visits usually last 1-3 days, with the days starting early and ending late. Throughout the whole campus visit, aim to be natural, cautious, diplomatic, polite, and energetic. Be prepared to offer short and longer versions of your research to wide ranging audiences. Try not to overindulge in alcohol at meals or receptions. Remember that you are interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you so take some time at the end of each interview day to record your impressions and notes.

Campus visits often include the following elements: Interviews, presentations of your research or teaching, campus tours, meetings, and meals.

Interviews: Candidates invited for campus visits will sit through traditional job interviews with faculty members. You will be expected to talk about your research and teaching in more detail than during conference or phone interviews. You may meet individually with several different faculty members or meet with several professors at the same time.

Presentations: Perhaps the two most important aspects of the campus visit are the job talk and the teaching demonstration. The job talk usually consists of 30-40 minutes of presenting, 20-30 minutes of questions, and an informal reception. The teaching demo may range from you guest-lecturing in a real class to you teaching a topic of your choice to a random group of students and faculty. See separate handouts for more information.

Campus Tours: Search committee members often take candidates on a tour of the campus, with a probable stop at the library and/or labs. In many smaller places, this also includes a tour of the town. Some departments may even arrange a meeting for you with a real estate agent.

Meetings: You will likely meet with the program head, department chair, and/or dean. These individuals will ask about your scholarship and interest in their institution. They will likely talk about their institution in an effort to recruit you. You may also meet with a representative from human resources or the faculty union so you can learn about benefits such as health insurance and pension plans. Try to avoid asking about salary during these meetings but be prepared to discuss if it arises.

Meals: Campus visits invariably include multiple meals. The setting can include nice restaurants, department conference rooms, or even faculty members' homes. Usually candidates will have a meal (or meeting) with students, without faculty members present. Students want candidates to talk some about themselves but also express interest in learning about the students and department. Candidates often share a meal with junior faculty; this gives candidates the chance to assess what it is like as an assistant professor in the department. Candidates usually eat with the entire faculty at least once; conversations may focus on your scholarship, departmental information, or professional gossip. Select food options that are familiar and easy to eat because you will be talking for much of the meal. Have snacks packed in your bag for short breaks.



Packing for your campus visit: Be sure to pack all critical documents and materials in your carry-on luggage (personal, medical, and professional). If you will be immediately picked up from the airport, plan your travel attire accordingly.

Tips for packing and travel success:

- > Bring copies of your CV and all job application materials
- > Save your job talk materials and slides in at least two electronic formats (USB, cloud, email, etc.)
- > Bring copies of any supplementary materials that you might refer to (dissertation abstract, summary of teaching evaluations, etc.)
- > Pack extra pens and a notepad
- > Consider bringing an umbrella, gloves & hat, or whatever you need for inclement weather
- > Breath mints, water and snacks (protein bars, etc.) are good to have on hand
- > Try to arrive by afternoon of the day prior to your interview. This will allow you some time to prep, eat a good meal, relax, and sleep.

Before you leave clarify:

- > Who is responsible for making the travel arrangements?
- > Who is responsible for paying for the travel arrangements? (usually the department pays)
- > What documents do I need to be reimbursed for my expenses?
- > Will somebody pick me up at the airport and transport me during my visit?
- > When will I receive my agenda? Can I have one prior to my arrival?

Thank you notes

Within 48 hours of completing an interview send thank you notes or emails to the department chair and other individuals with whom you spent significant time on an individual basis, such as search committee members and deans. It is not necessary to send thank you notes to individuals with whom you only interacted for a few minutes or in a group setting. Thank you notes should be concise, sincere, and positive. In your thank you letter, express your appreciation for the interview, confirm your interest in the position, briefly restate the reasons you match well to the position, and provide contact information for following up. If you promised to send additional information such as extra copies of your publications or teaching evaluations, be sure to send them with your thank you notes. If you paid for the trip and will be reimbursed by the department, send your receipts and other necessary documentation with your thank you notes.

Additional resources

- > The Chronicle of Higher Education – Advice and Vitae Sections
- > Berekely Career Center – Academic Job Search, <http://career.berkeley.edu/PhDs/PhDAcademic>
- > Kelsky, K. (2015). The professor is in: The essential guide to turning your PhD into a job. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- > Vick, J. M., Furlong, J. S., & Lurie, R. (2016). The academic job search handbook (5th ed). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.