

Applying for an Academic Teaching Job

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Applying.

Different schools have different strengths, just as job candidates do. Ph.D.-granting institutions usually emphasize research; smaller colleges usually focus on teaching. But, this is just a difference in emphasis; every institution will really expect you to do both. Before you apply for a job, it is useful to know what kind of institution is offering the position. Check the university's Web site and look up the publication record of department faculty; see what kinds of courses are offered, and get a sense of how many courses faculty teach each semester (four courses would imply an emphasis on teaching, two or three indicates research is important). It is helpful to have multiple versions of your cover letter and of your CV, geared toward different kinds of universities. At undergraduate teaching institutions, emphasize your experience in the classroom; at research institutions, highlight fellowships, papers, and articles.

As you decide which schools to apply to, keep in mind that departments generally put more emphasis on the primary field requested of a candidate than on secondary fields; in other words, schools will not ordinarily exclude a candidate if the secondary field does not match, as long as you do match the primary field. If you do not match in the secondary field, you can always stress your willingness to learn an area. You may know more about a topic than you think, and you should be able to stay ahead in a freshman course, at least. Once you have decided to apply for a particular job, look for the ad in a few different places, as schools may run shorter versions of ads in some publications/Web sites, and longer, more detailed ads elsewhere.

Your application should include a good, powerful, one-page letter. This should have a summary of your research project, also tailored to the job, if possible, and designed to make a reader excited about the project. Besides your vita, include a one-page philosophy of teaching, and syllabi from courses you have taught, or could teach, that pertain to the position. Do not, however, include course evaluations at this stage.

Your application will also include letters of recommendation. The career center at your university may offer a credentials file. The people acting as your references may write letters for you that can apply broadly to many jobs and place them in a credentials file; as you apply for jobs, you contact the career center which will (usually for a fee) send out the letters to the appropriate addresses. You may also, though, wish to ask your references to specifically tailor letters to the positions in which you are most interested.

The phone call inviting you to an interview.

When you receive a phone call inviting you to interview, take the opportunity to ask the chair or faculty member calling you if he/she has time to answer a question or two. You will want to ask some basic information, including who will interview you, how long the

interview should take, and where it will be. Take the chance, also, to ask the caller what role he/she sees this position filling in the department.

Preparing for the interview.

In general, your first interview will be a screening interview before the final two or three candidates are invited onto campus. This interview may take place via phone or at a convention. Before the interview occurs, you will have another opportunity to research the institution and get ready for the interview.

The screening interview will usually last about half an hour, and you will be asked three basic questions: tell us about your research project; tell us about teaching; what questions do you have for us?

While you undoubtedly could go on for a long time about your research, resist the temptation. Prepare a brief 2-minute statement about your dissertation, designed to elicit questions; you want to intrigue your audience, not bore them. When interviewers do ask you questions, be ready to provide interesting examples from your research, to address other fields of history (since your interviewers will most likely themselves teach in other fields), and to explain how your project says something that is new and exciting in your field. Be prepared, as well, to answer questions about what your second major research project will be, and what kind of publication schedule you envision for current and future projects.

To prepare for the teaching question, check the university's on-line catalog. Know what courses are offered already at the university, which courses you are prepared to teach, and what new courses you could introduce. Why do you enjoy teaching? What are your strengths and weaknesses as a teacher? What has/has not worked in your teaching? How do you employ technology? Think, also, of how your teaching strategies might vary by the type of class. How would you teach a lecture course for 100, as compared to a seminar for 15? How would teaching a class of freshman/sophomore non-majors differ from teaching a class of senior majors? What graduate courses are you prepared to offer? But, do not emphasize your interest in teaching grad students if the university is focused on undergrads; check to see what the average class size is at the college before laying out your strategy for teaching small/large classes. Demonstrate to the interviewers that you have done research about their school, and know what is distinctive about them. Again, though, you do not want to bore the interviewers; be prepared with a two- or three-minute statement on teaching, and then be willing to answer their follow-up questions.

You will also want to have two or three questions for the interviewers. Again, indicate that you have done some homework on the university and tailor questions to the institution. You might ask about the student body, interdisciplinary programs, the university's mission statement, or other topics. You should know something of the library's holdings, about what other faculty members have written, and about the university's locale (that is, why do you wish to be there?). It is also acceptable to ask about their timetable for the position.

If your university offers a mock interview program through its career center, give it a try and receive some critiques on your interviewing techniques. Otherwise, find a friend from your program and practice interviewing each other, with each taking turns as interviewer and interviewee. The AHA also offers sessions on interviewing at the beginning of each annual meeting. Speak, as well, to graduate students or to recent hires in your department who have already gone through the interview process.

The first interview.

If your first interview will be via telephone, ask to have it scheduled for a particular time and date. Create a professional atmosphere around you for the interview; have a copy of your letter of application, CV, and syllabi near the phone, and eliminate any distractions. Take notes as you are being questioned. Try to create a dialogue with the interviewers and respond as fully as possible to the questions asked. Do not be short in your answers and do be sure to speak fully and distinctly. Remember, too, to thank the interviewers for their time at the end. Do not eat, drink, or chew gum while on the phone.

If your first interview is at a conference, be prepared for a cattle call. Interviews usually take place in a ballroom or convention room filled with tables. Interviews will be going on at tables all around you, often without even a curtain for privacy. There will usually be two or three people interviewing you. It can all be a little distracting, but being well prepared can help you to do well. Come prepared with a CV for each interviewer; they might have forgotten to bring copies of your application. Come, as well, with sample syllabi; they can help provide you with talking points as you discuss teaching, and they emphasize that you are prepared to fill the offered position.

If you get a question that you do not want to answer, then do not answer it. There are illegal questions, such as, what does your spouse do for a living, or do you have children? A good stock answer is, "There is nothing in my personal life that would interfere with my ability to perform this job." You can also restate the question to the interviewer, or ask for clarification on the question; he/she may explain why the question is being asked, or drop the question.

The on-campus interview.

When you are invited to interview on campus, tell the university that, no, you cannot put out the money to fly out for the interview. Ask the university to have their travel agent make the arrangements. You can also ask how many other people are being interviewed for the job. You can request a written itinerary for the visit, especially who will be with you at different times during the visit. You can also request that you receive some break time, by yourself, especially if the visit is overnight. It is a good idea to schedule a break for the half hour or so before you give your job talk. Ask, as well, what kind of audience you will have for when you present your research: in addition to faculty, will students be invited? (If you need AV support for your presentation, be sure to request it before you arrive on campus.) Ask to meet with students during your visit; ask if you will be requested to teach a class. You will probably meet with the dean, as well as with faculty, during your visit; ask the dean questions about requirements for tenure, healthcare, retirement, and sabbaticals. Additional questions that you may wish to bring up on your

visit include teaching support, faculty reading groups, technical support, pre-tenure leave, interdisciplinary teaching, committee work, and publication expectations.

Remember that you are always “on” during your on-campus visit. You may be having a friendly dinner with a handful of faculty at the end of a long day, but they are still evaluating you. Watch what you say and what you do.

After returning home, send thank you notes, thanking your hosts for their time and attention during your visit, and reiterating why you are interested in the position.

Receiving the offer.

When you receive a phone call offering you the position, request to have the offer made to you in writing. Ask for two weeks to decide on the job. Now is also the time, while you are still on the phone, to push for the salary you want; they have made the offer, you are the candidate they want, and they need to get you. You can also call other schools and tell them you would like to know where you stand in their search processes, as you have already received an offer.

Good Luck!!!

Useful resources.

Lucy G. Barber and John Wood Sweet, "Successful Strategies for Interviews at the Annual Meeting," *Perspectives*, (Dec. 1998), 51-53.

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