

Navigating the Job Search

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First of all, I'd like to put a disclaimer on this advice—I have not done any scientific surveys of the job market (we'll leave that to the AHA), and this is solely based on my opinion. However, as someone who has been on search committees and/or on the market for the past several years, I think that I have some experience in the search process. I'd like to share some observations and opinions with you that may help you to negotiate through this important phase of your career. You can take it or leave it, and the bottom line is: do what you think best shows your abilities to a committee.

Let's begin at the beginning with the COVER LETTER. The cover letter is really one of the most important pieces of your application—it's what I always look at first, as do most members of the search committees on which I've served. Make sure to triple-check it for spelling, grammar, and other editorial mistakes. This seems like a simple thing to do, but I've known professors who mark cover letters with red pen, just for fun. And **KEEP IT SHORT AND TO THE POINT.** Don't go over two pages, and don't try to summarize dissertation chapters. Successful cover letters state clearly these points:

- Current research project's thesis, scope, and importance to its field. You can manage this in 2-3 paragraphs.
- Classes taught, or classes you can/would like to teach. At this point, it's nice for you to have looked at the course selections of a particular college/university to mention if you can fill any holes you've noted in their curriculum. This can be covered in a paragraph.
- Additional reasons why you can contribute to this particular school's campus community. Are you an advisor for a club or organization? Have you done any undergraduate advising? Have you garnered any awards for your teaching or research? This paragraph can stand out and separate you from other candidates who may not have that "something extra" you might be able to provide. This should be no more than one paragraph.
- **WHY YOU WOULD BE A GOOD FIT FOR THIS SCHOOL.** I can't stress the importance of this paragraph, which I think makes a nice conclusion to the letter. Schools have dozens of candidates applying for each position. Committees tend to look very favorably on those candidates who have gone to the Web site, checked out the general information about the school and the region, and can give a few reasons why they are strong candidates. This doesn't take a lot of effort with the Internet at your fingertips, so **DO IT.**

So you have an interview? Congratulations for making it to the short list, which is in itself an accomplishment for which you can be proud. Allow me to give you some suggestions about dealing with interview situations.

- Look professional. I know this seems obvious, but hey, it doesn't hurt to hear it again. I'm pretty "old school" here—I don a suit jacket and skirt, cosmetics, jewelry, the whole nine yards—but my more modern pals (who

are also gainfully employed) tell me that a nice pantsuit for women and a blazer, tie, and pressed slacks for men is perfectly acceptable.

- Do some research on the search committee. You have every right to ask your contact committee member about who will attend the interview (When I am the contact person, I always tell candidates up front.). Check out their publications, their teaching fields, and if you can access it, a syllabus or two. It really helps to know where the committee members are coming from in terms of their analytical and pedagogical foci. It also lets the committee know that you cared enough about the position to find out who they are.
- Have answers to these questions: 1) “Tell us about your research.” This can be asked in lots of ways, but the bottom line is that the committee wants to hear you talk for about 10 minutes on what you are doing. This is usually the first question in any interview I’ve ever had, and folks, it’s meant to be a softball! KNOW what you are going to say about your dissertation before you get to an interview. UNDERSTAND where it fits into the historiography, and even mention a few names here. But DON’T go on for 20 minutes about it. Committees want to know that you have a handle on your research, and that you understand it well enough to distill it. Give a succinct, interesting answer, and then the committee can (and probably will) follow up with questions. 2) “How would you teach class X?” This is meant to be another softball. You know what the position is for, so you should know what you would be teaching. Start with an overview of the class—what would be the themes you’d use to structure the course? What is your pedagogy—lecture, discussion, or both, and why? What readings will you use? Don’t just say that you’d “use a lot of primary sources.” Name some of them. Give the names of books you’d assign and why. I can’t tell you the number of candidates I’ve seen through the years provide inadequate answers to these questions, which again, are really not meant to trip you up! Committees are not trying to give you trick questions—remember that.
- Don’t be afraid to ask a committee member to clarify a question. Sometimes committees have been at it for five hours before they get to you, and they don’t always phrase something well. Ask them to rephrase if necessary, or to clarify a point. This also gives you some time to formulate an answer.
- Don’t be afraid of silence. Ponder what you are going to say before you say it if that helps you to give a clear, concise answer.
- FINALLY, when the committee asks if you have any questions for it (and the committee will ALWAYS ask this), ask SOMETHING. This is where that Googling stuff is really valuable. Does the university have a compelling study abroad program you’d like the opportunity to help oversee? How large are the biggest introductory classes? I love it when candidates have really checked out our school’s Web site to find something unique to ask.
- AFTER THE INTERVIEW: follow up with a thank-you e-mail upon your return home.

Woohoo! You got the call! Now what? Visiting campus is exciting, nerve-wracking, and, of course, as essential to the process of your learning about the university as it is for the department to learn about you. Some tips:

- Follow the structure given to you by the committee. Are you teaching a 50-minute class at the introductory level? Ask to speak with the instructor and find out where they are in the course. Are you giving a 20-minute research presentation to faculty? PRACTICE IT. Don't ramble for 50 minutes—it looks disorganized. So stay within the guidelines provided to you by the committee, and you'll do just fine!
- Have questions at the ready for administrators (whether you're meeting with the provost, dean, or assistant dean), department chairs, and others with whom you are having formal interviews while you are there.
- Time to do some more research—check out the faculty members outside of the search committee. Learn about what they are doing. Ask them questions about their work. It makes them feel good to know that YOU know who they are—after all, they have done their homework on you!
- This is the time for you to decide if this is a place for you, as much as it is for the department to decide if you are the candidate for them. Ask questions about the region, about the city's school system, real estate, etc.—whatever's important to you.
- AFTERWARDS—send another thank-you e-mail, and some candidates send them to the entire department. I think that's a nice gesture.

And, if you don't succeed, there's always next year. Remember that there are many, many fine candidates for every position. It's tough to not take rejection personally, but often decisions come down to whether someone's specific teaching/research field is more necessary to the department than someone else's. Keep publishing and seeking out teaching opportunities, and you'll be a stronger candidate next year!

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