

Interviews: How do academic search committees make initial decisions?

While each job search operates according to its own logic, there are some statements that can be said about them as a whole. *(I, Donna Beth, make no claims that this is how all search committees operate, but I believe that it serves as a general rule):*

- Search committees receive ~150 to ~300+ applications per position.
- Prior to the committee meeting, each individual member reads all applications, makes notes, and selects his or her top 40-50 applications.
- Here are a few criteria that committee members often use during this selection process:
 - Does this application fit the criteria posted in the job call? (A non-fit does not mean that an application will not make the list.)
 - Is the cover letter exciting? Does it clearly communicate the applicant's scholarship and teaching range?
 - Is the writing sample exciting? Does it challenge the committee member to think differently? Does it signal new academic and/or creative directions?
 - Would a committee member like to hear more about the applicant's work? Would the committee member like to have a conversation with the applicant?
- Every application that is on someone's top 40-50 list is discussed. If all members agree, this application is put on a "possible interview" list.
- During these discussions, applications are frequently re-read, committee member notes are revisited, and, often, the committee returns to the application pool. Committees take this job very seriously because they understand the stakes of this process.
- Once a possible interview list is assembled, the committee ranks applications. This generally means returning to the applications again to make sure that the committee is doing its best to find the candidates whose scholarship and teaching is most exciting and promises to be the best fit for the position.
- Once 10 applications are selected, the search committee chair calls applicants to set up an interview.

Interviews: preparing for the call

While email may be the first contact a search committee chair makes with you, many times (and this is still true for the academic market, especially) you will receive an initial phone call asking to schedule an initial interview.

Consequently, now is the time to update your voicemail greeting. Ask yourself what a search committee will think of your message and how that message represents you. Use these pointers from [Case Western's Career Development Center](#) as your guide:

- Double check that your voicemail is set up and has space to receive new messages. Delete outdated voicemails that you no longer need.
- Make sure your message is polite, direct, and identifies you as you identify yourself in your job application. (e.g. If you go by your middle name in your job letter, you don't want your voicemail to associate you with your first name.) Set your new voicemail greeting in a quiet space.

- Make sure your message can be understood clearly. EXAMPLE: "Hello, this is (your name). I am sorry I am not available to take your call right now. Please leave your name, number, a brief message, and the best time to reach you. I will get back to you as soon as possible."
- Return phone calls promptly.
- If you are driving, in class, or otherwise occupied, let the call go to voicemail and call back at a better time.
- *Once you have applied for a job, every call that comes to your phone could be a potential employer. Keep this in mind and answer your phone accordingly.*

Interviews: on the line with a search committee chair

Quite possibly the most important thing to have in front of you when you speak to a search committee chair is your calendar. Keep a current log of all your commitments so that you are ready to schedule an interview when you receive a call.

How do I prepare for an academic interview?

Step 1: Contact the Job Placement Officer

When you land an interview, contact the English department job placement officer and ask to set up a mock interview. The best way to prepare for an interview is to simulate one.

Step 2: Study your Job Letter

While interview conversations can go many different directions, they generally start with information from your job letter. Search committees will have read this letter (and CV) several times, most recently just before they interview you. Be prepared for a committee member to ask you to clarify or expound upon statements you make in your letter; be prepared to discuss any text or author you reference in your letter; be prepared to talk about any field, theoretical angle, or concept you mention in your letter. *Search committees are not out to examine or stump you, they genuinely want to know more about you! If you've made it to the interview stage, they like you already.* Why such an emphasis on the letter, then? This is the only document a committee has about your identity as a scholar and a teacher. Consequently, in the interview, it may serve as a guide for getting to know you better.

Step 3: Research the University

Research the members of the search committee. Know what fields they represent. If there is someone on the committee whose work overlaps with yours, you should read a little of it. This will enable you to have a better sense of what that person's research priorities are, and you can anticipate what kinds of things they might want to discuss with you.

Spend a little time researching the college or university. Where is the college or university located? What are the student demographics? How do these things coordinate with your teaching profile? The more you know about the place where you may work in the future, the better you can interview.

Step 4: Practice!

Prepare questions you may be asked, then spend time learning how to answer them. Answers shouldn't be memorized, but you should have a clear sense of what you want to get across. I recommend writing out, in bullet-point form, responses to each question. The week leading up to the interview, spend time every day rehearsing.

Common Interview Questions

Here are some basic questions you should be able to answer:

- Tell us about your work. (Prepare a 60-second response.)
- You just said you do "x." Tell us more about that.
- I'm interested in your next project. Could you describe it further? How far along is it?
- Tell us about your teaching. (Prepare a 60-second response.)
- What introductory and advanced classes could you teach in our program? How would you design them? We have a student population that....how would you reach this group of students?
- Talk to us about your experience teaching remotely. What innovations have you made to remote learning that make it more engaging?

Interview wardrobe, space, and demeanor

Preparing your wardrobe

Be comfortable and be yourself. While you should dress professionally, you should choose an outfit in which you can sit comfortably and feel relaxed.

Preparing for Skype or Zoom interview

- Curate space and practice in it!
- Consider putting a light right in front of your computer so that you are well-lit. Never sit in front of a window.
- Avoid white walls and busy, bright wall art. Choose a wall with a calming color, a bookshelf, and/or a plant. The more comfortable and calming your space looks, the better you and the committee will feel.
- Test technology and retest it.
- Make sure your furniture does not squeak; if you do not have a good chair, consider purchasing one.
- Keep all liquids and food items away from the interview space. While holding a cup of coffee or tea may put you at ease, during an interview, it is an accident waiting to happen.
- Use the bathroom right before the interview.
- Lock your pet in the bathroom or put it outside. If you have a dog, make sure that you cannot hear it bark.
- Log in to the call exactly at the designated time. Do not be early, and do not be late.

Preparing for an in-person interview

- Be prepared for the weather of whatever city in which you are interviewing. Think about shoes (or a change of shoes) in addition to coats, hats, gloves, and umbrellas. Bring a hairbrush. Prepare for a building in which there may be too much heat or A/C or no heat or A/C.
- Bring a few copies of your job materials. If you're interviewing for an academic job, you might also want to bring a few syllabi from courses you've taught (occasionally a committee will ask for them).
- Find out where in the building you should arrive and to whom you should speak upon arrival.

- Do not bring coffee, tea, or food into the building.
- Be punctual! Double-check time zones!

Interview demeanor

- Online interviews can have a little bit of a lag. Make sure that someone is done speaking before you talk. If you are unsure, you can start with a filler word, "right, yes, great, etc." and then a pause.
- To indicate you are done speaking, even a non-verbal gesture, like a nod, or a hand movement that signals handing things over, can be useful.
- Practice active listening. Many people nod naturally when they are listening to others, and something like that is important in online interviews, especially, so that the speaker knows their words are being received.

Thank You Notes & Emails

It is customary to write a short, email thank you after an interview. The appropriate action is to email the job search committee chair and ask them to forward the thank you to the search committee.

The thank you note should be short and include the following information:

- Thanking them for their time and effort to interview you
- Reiterate your interest in the position