

THE UNOFFICIAL GUIDE TO ACADEMIC INTERVIEWS

How to Navigate the Academic Job Market Without
Ripping Out All of Your Hair and Suffering Daily
Breakdowns

Part 1: General Information and Advice

Compiled by K. Anne Watson
PhD Candidate
Department of International Affairs
University of Georgia
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Here Be Dragons

So. This is it. You have made it through graduate school. You passed your classes. You survived your comprehensive exams—written and oral. You have led discussion sections and instructed classes and served as a data monkey for various projects that are not your own. It feels like you have consumed more written and spoken words in the last several years than there are grains of sand in all the beaches or stars in the sky (and you can't recall most of them by this point in time). You pulled a dissertation idea from the depths of your overworked, overflowing, exhausted brain, and then you defended it. You (hopefully) are making good progress are bringing that idea to fruition. And now it is time to start job hunting.

Maybe you feel completely at peace about the job market. You feel like the proverbial sun is shining upon your head and your life choices, and tiny, chirping birds help you get dressed in the morning (with special assistance on job interview days). You sleep like an old, mossy log in a still forest where no trees are falling, so there are no noises to be heard (thereby waking you up). You have no stress at all about the job market, not even a quivery feeling in the pit of your stomach. This guide probably isn't for you (and also, nobody likes you).

However, if you're anything like me, you're hearing every theme from every horror movie playing every day at constantly increasing volume. Jaws, Psycho, Nightmare on Elm Street—you've got them all. You may have watched more advanced graduate students proceeding through the job market, with their faces becoming more haggard and the bags under their eyes getting darker by the day. You may have heard whispers of conflicting information—or seemingly no information at all. (What is a teaching philosophy statement? What is a *diversity statement*? How do people even find their dozens—or scores—of jobs to apply for?) And heaven help you if you're a woman approaching the job market, because you've likely been inundated with conflicting advice and/or downright scary anecdotes of other people's experiences. You may feel lost and confused and inclined to start day drinking. This guide is for you, with my sympathies.

Below is a list of general tips for starting out. It certainly isn't exhaustive, and we all have our own approaches to organization. But these are some things that I have gleaned from my own time on the job market.

1. Start early.

This is key. The academic job market starts around mid-August. I promise you, you do not want the panic associated with not having any of your materials prepared or letter writers accosted before this time. If you happen to be early in your graduate school career, the time to start gathering documents and writing statements and filling out key areas of your CV is now (and also, my sincere congratulations for being so far ahead of the game). If you're planning on going on the job market in the upcoming fall, my strong recommendation is to start preparing absolutely no later than the summer—and having everything ready by the beginning of August.

That being said, you really start preparing for the job market on the very first day of graduate school. We were told that the bare minimum bar for publications and classes taught for the job market is one each. This is generally (but not always) what it takes to make it through the first cut of applications. You should also be considering things to give you skills—or to document these skills—that will make you competitive on the market. Do you love to teach? (Or are you terrified of teaching and desperately want to be better at it?) Consider checking with your Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) to see what kinds of classes, workshops, and certificates they offer. Are you completely uncertain about what it takes to write an application for a grant? There are workshops and certificates for those, too. Does your department or your school offer awards to graduate students? Request to be nominated if you fulfill the criterion—often, so few people ask for these awards that they aren't particularly competitive, but, wow, do they look nice on a CV.

2. Get used to asking for things.

I hate asking for things—help, favors, etc. I far prefer to feel like I can handle everything life throws at me on my own. This is incredibly difficult for grad school in general—and it's impossible for the job market. Most jobs are going to require three letters of recommendation to complete your file. As a brand-new PhD, these letters will generally come from your advisor and two other members of your dissertation committee. They are expecting you to ask them to write letters for you—it's part of the job. But you do have to ask. Furthermore, you won't always get a job with letters alone. This is the time to rely on your committee members' networks (and possibly the networks of other members of your department). If they don't mention reaching out to people they know at the institutions to which you are applying, it's okay to ask. Sometimes a quick e-mail on your behalf to a search committee member (or even a member of the department who isn't on the search committee) is enough to get them to take a second look at your file. When committees are shuffling through hundreds of applications for each job, sometimes a second look is all it takes.

Additionally, if you haven't already gotten used to reflexively consulting your advisor (or other mentors) when new situations arise, now is the time to develop that habit. They've already successfully navigated the job market—and they may have done so multiple times. They should have a sense for how the whole thing works, and if they don't know the answer to a question, they know people who do. My advisor has answered panic e-mails from me on everything from “The search committee chair just called me, my voice is gone, and I don't know what to SAY!” to “A member of the search committee asked me to get coffee at a conference. What should I do?!” to various forms of word vomit and no questions, followed by “Help?” If you and your advisor don't have that kind of relationship, try your graduate coordinator, graduate advisor, another committee member, another member of the department, or even friends who have graduated and found the kinds of jobs you would like. Find someone. No one does this alone—and you don't need to.

3. Have a system in place.

It doesn't really matter what this system is, as long as you have one (and it works for you and for your committee members). As with gathering your documents and filling in your CV, this is best done before sending in the first applications. The method I prefer includes multiple spreadsheets and a weekly e-mail update for my letter writers. As job postings start coming in, I add all of the relevant ones (institution names, position types, and other relevant details) to a master spreadsheet, listed by due date. I share this spreadsheet with my committee, and then each week, I send them an update about changes to my dissertation, other projects, and CV (regarding awards and certifications). At the end of my e-mail update, I include a table of the applications coming due in the next couple of weeks (with the applications I have already submitted highlighted) and how to submit each letter, so they can prepare for what's coming up. They let me know when they have submitted their letters, which I add to the master spreadsheet so I can track which applications are complete and which ones require additional e-mails.

On the other hand, a friend of mine simply keeps all of the job postings he's interested in pulled up in a browser and closes them as he applies to them. He now has a job. We're all different in how we work, and that's okay; just be sure you have some method for keeping your applications in order, because...

4. The job market is hell.

It's true. Everyone knows it—the people applying, the people watching us apply, and the people judging our applications. If no one has informed you of this truth before now, they have failed you. In my first year on the job market, I sent out approximately 70 job applications. I received five video or phone interviews, one flyout, and no job. I received dozens of rejection letters (some of them nicer than others). For most of my applications, however, there was simply silence.

Many of the jobs I heard back from said they received anywhere from 200 to 400 applications. If you don't get anything else from me, hear this: *Rejections on the job market, particularly at the application stage, are not personal.* It feels like it, I know. But it truly is a numbers game at this point. The committee has to weed down the numbers somehow, and the decisions they make are often going to be semi-arbitrary. You can help yourself in this process—make sure to have a publication before you go on the job market and to have taught at least one class as instructor of record, for example, and try to tailor your applications to the specific positions (and avoid typos!). But some things are simply out of your control.

Rejection at later stages in the process—after phone interviews or flyouts—are still not personal. These often feel even worse. The committee has now seen your face. They've talked to you. They've asked about your passions and have made some measure of your personality. You are vulnerable and probably a little scared about putting a roof over your head in the next academic year, and being rejected at this stage can begin to feel intensely personal, like they are judging you as a person and

finding something lacking. Remember, just like during the application stage, their choices often have very little to do with you at all—and rarely have anything to do with you as a person.

Search committees are often looking for some unquantifiable *something* that they don't include in their job postings. Maybe they're looking for a specific concentration. Maybe they really do want someone who is further along in their career, so they can tenure them more quickly. You will likely never know why they choose other people, so the single best thing you can do is:

5. Do your best, and then let it go.

Even if we all got tired of hearing it, Elsa had it right. Let it go. Do everything you can—take care of your dissertation, your other research projects, your cover letters, your slides for lessons and practice talks and presentations...and then let it go. Let the typos go. Let the rejections go. It's so much easier said than done sometimes, but you can't carry all of it with you, because it will eat you alive.

This is the time to really lean in to that work-life balance. If you haven't already picked up a calming hobby (running, yoga, knitting, baking, reading smutty romance novels, etc.), this is the time. Put in your work hours. Progress on your dissertation and your other projects. Get your grading done. Send in your applications. But carve out time for yourself, too. Get plenty of sleep. Drink enough water. Eat a vegetable. See the sunshine occasionally. And give yourself time to relax. We all love academia (or we wouldn't be in this situation), but it can't be our whole lives. That's a quick route to burnout. Try to take care of yourself, especially when it gets hard.

6. Consider all of your options.

A friend of mine once told me that he was constantly worried about living up to his advisor's career—and then he admitted (like it was a dirty secret) that he wasn't sure that he wanted that kind of career anyway. We are generally trained to work at R1 universities and to display patterns of R1 tenure-track productivity, but the R1 life isn't for everyone—and there aren't enough R1 jobs for all (or most) of us even if we did all want one. It's totally okay to pursue other options if you think you're better suited for them. Maybe you're drawn to liberal arts institutions. Maybe you want to work with non-traditional students at a community college (and I am here to tell you that some of the professors who had the most influence on my life and well-being worked at a community college). Maybe you hate teaching and want to leave academia to work for a think tank or be an analyst for a company or government agency. Maybe you love teaching so much that you would like to help others develop their own teaching and you'd like to work for a university's Center for Teaching and Learning. Any of these (and many others) can be a viable option with the education you now have. Make the choices that will be most fulfilling for yourself, even if they won't lead to a life that looks like that of your role models. Life is both too short and too long to be unhappy in a job you hate.

And one last thing:

Although I did ask around for comments and contributions from others, I am an unmarried, white, American woman with no children applying to jobs between 2018 and 2020. Although my field (international affairs) is male-dominated, my subfields of interest (human rights and women in politics) display a fair amount of gender balance (comparatively speaking). Everything included in this guide is reflective of my own experiences. That being said, most academic jobs ask for similar application materials, and the practice questions provided here have been crowdsourced and are broadly applicable across fields. I hope you find something that helps make the process a little easier for you—even if it is printing out this document and shredding it into confetti by hand.

Good luck, and may the gods of academia and a kindly Reviewer 2 be with you.

More Resources

Since I first created this resource, Duke University has put together a kick-ass set of professional development resources. They've done an incredible job compiling way more resources than I've provided to you. You can find it here:

- <https://postdoc.duke.edu/resources/professional-development>

I also highly recommend Amanda Murdie's fabulous series of *Duck of Minerva* posts on the academic job market:

- Before You Go on the Market
<https://duckofminerva.com/2015/08/gearing-yourself-up-for-the-academic-job-market-before-you-go-on-the-market.html>
- No Dabbling
<https://www.duckofminerva.com/2016/08/gearing-up-for-the-academic-job-market-dont-dabble.html>
- Getting Your Packet Together
<https://duckofminerva.com/2015/08/gearing-up-for-the-academic-job-market-getting-your-packet-together.html>
- Skype Academic Interviews
<https://duckofminerva.com/2015/03/skype-academic-interviews-what-not-to-do.html>
- Getting THE CALL
<https://duckofminerva.com/tag/phone-calls>
- Waiting
<https://duckofminerva.com/2015/07/gearing-yourself-up-for-the-academic-job-market-waiting.html>

And Michael Flynn's series of posts on *The Quantitative Peace*:

- So You're on the Job Market, Part 1: Preparation
<http://quantitativepeace.com/blog/2014/06/so-youre-on-the-job-market-part-i-preparation.html>
- So You're on the Job Market, Part 2: Expectations
<http://quantitativepeace.com/blog/2014/07/so-youre-on-the-job-market-part-ii-expectations.html>

- So You're on the Job Market, Part 3: Coping
<http://quantitativepeace.com/blog/2014/07/so-youre-on-the-job-market-part-iii-coping.html>

As well as a couple of helpful twitter threads:

- Liz Bucar's Dos and Don'ts for Job Talks
<https://twitter.com/BucarLiz/status/1096485248785936385>
- Andrew Whitehead's Tips for Cover Letters, Job Talks, and Interviews
<https://twitter.com/ndrewwhitehead/status/1142091185193803777>