

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 3: Phone and Video Interviews

Compiled by K. Anne Watson
PhD Candidate
Department of International Affairs
University of Georgia
2019

With special thanks to Stephen Bagwell, Chad Clay, Laura Huber, and Pedro Monarrez for their contributions and commiserations and to Danny Hill for patiently answering all of my panic-laden e-mails.

Phone and Video Interviews

Congratulations! You have made it to the next round of the job market, which involves either a phone or video (using something like Skype or Zoom) interview. It can be very difficult to tell exactly what search committees are looking for at this stage of the process. You know they like you enough that they've pulled you from the giant stack of applications, but many of them won't tell you much else. If you're lucky, they'll give you the names of the search committee members in advance and maybe let you know a specific class they're looking for someone to teach, so you can prepare. Most of them will not do that. The only major topic that is going to be entirely off limits is money—salary, money for research, money for teaching development, etc. Don't bring it up; it's considered *very* poor form.

You will want to check out the department and the institution in advance. What makes them tick? What are their big initiatives and commitments? What do you like about what you see? How will your research and teaching both fit in and stand out in the department? What questions do you have for them? All of these are things you'll want to think through, in addition to having answers prepared for a variety of questions that they might ask you (with examples included in the section following the one on flyout interviews). Beyond this there are several things that you might take into consideration before participating in this round of interviews, such as the technology you're using, the visuals you're presenting, preparing, the general awkwardness of academics, and following up. I've briefly addressed each of these below.

Technology

Make sure your technology is charged, up to date, and tested in advance of every phone interview! There is absolutely nothing worse than finding out once the call has connected that your microphone or camera doesn't work—or having your laptop die in the middle. Test it before each call, because technology is tricky, and consider doing practice interviews with your friends over whichever kind of technology you will be using, because being able to watch the camera instead of your image reflected back to you is a skill that you develop over time, as is the ability to talk about your professional life while sitting down. You think I'm kidding. I'm not.

Unless you have no other choice, try to use a computer for video interviews; the sound and video quality are different on a phone. Things happen, and this isn't the biggest deal, but you're trying to eliminate all potential issues that *are* under your control. You will want to confirm how to connect with them in advance (and trade phone numbers, just in case something goes wrong). Oh, and don't call them—they'll call you.

Aesthetics

Your options may be limited here; we don't all get nice offices (or any office) as graduate students. However, in case it hasn't come up yet, you should be performing these interviews in a professional setting and dressed in professional clothing. No one wants to see your couch, your kitchen, or your bedroom. Showcase your nicely stocked academic bookshelf and desk—or borrow someone else's and show off theirs.

Additionally, try setting up your camera so that it looks straight into your face, rather than up your nose. You're likely going to be projected onto a screen so that everyone can see you, and while no one expects (or wants) your most flattering selfie angle, straight up the nose isn't anyone's best angle.

Practice and Prepare

Just like it will (eventually) with your job talk, practicing will really come in handy here. Following the section on flyout interviews, I have included a list of crowdsourced practice interview questions. These are all questions that faculty members have asked or fellow graduate students have been asked in academic job interviews. Try running through the questions a few times by yourself and at least once with someone else who can tell you if you always use the same verbal pause or awkward face or hand gesture. (And if knowing you have these habits doesn't help you stop, consider holding a drink during any video interviews you have. Just holding it can stop you from making awkward gestures, and if you feel like you're about to stumble or can't think of anything to say except "um," you can take a sip instead.)

It can be surprisingly difficult to think of a one-sentence teaching philosophy or elevator pitch for your research agenda off the cuff. I know I also have a very hard time thinking of examples of activities or learning moments with students on the fly. Having these prepared in advance can be really helpful—and even if the questions you are asked are slightly different, practicing will get you used to talking explicitly about professional skills and preferences we often take for granted. If there is any specific class or program that they've highlighted in their job posting, you also want to be sure to prepare answers to questions about those—what books or major assignments would you use to teach those classes, for example, or which classes would you teach for that program?

That being said, you don't have to go into this without a safety net! Feel free to write out a page or two of notes for yourself—things you definitely want to mention to them, classes you would like to teach, notes on the search committee members (if you know their names), and questions you would like to ask. Don't read directly from them, but if you need to jog your memory about something, glance at them quickly and move on.

Awkwardness

Academics are often very awkward. Skype and phone interviews are also very awkward. Put them together, and you end up in an epic amount of awkwardness, where no one can really read anyone else's body language and no one can meet anyone else's eyes. On a phone interview, add in the complete inability to tell if someone is taking a breath or waiting for you to answer a question. It's going to be awkward, and it isn't something you can control or improve. Prepare for that to be the case in advance, and try not to let it get you down afterwards.

Thank You Notes

After a phone or video interview, it is expected that you will follow up with each of the search committee members with a thank-you note (in the next 24 hours, unless it's a weekend). This means that if they did not communicate their names to you in advance, you should definitely try to catch them on the call. These notes need not be overly long (everyone is too busy to read an epic saga of a thank you note from each of the ten to fifteen candidates they interview at this stage), and because the process (usually) moves fairly quickly at this stage, an e-mail note is fine.

The more you can personalize these notes, the better. But to be honest, no one is comparing their notes to see if they got original content, and this stage of the interview process flies by, clocking in at times as short as 30 minutes—or even 15 minutes. So if someone recommends a particular reading or data source to you, or if there was a particular question or topic you enjoyed discussing with that person, try to include it. Otherwise, aim for a 3-4 sentence note to each person expressing your pleasure in having the chance to chat with them, being impressed about something their institution does well, and thanking them for their time.

Oh, and don't be discouraged if no one answers your e-mail at this stage. It can be a good sign if they *do* respond, but there is basically no correlation between answers to thank you notes and moving on to the next interview stage. You still have to send them.