

# 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 4: Flyout Interviews

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# Flyout Interviews

Hooray! You've made it to what is basically the boss battle of the academic job market: the flyout interview. If your department is anything like mine, you're probably pretty confident about what the research presentation part looks like and absolutely clueless about most of the rest. This section is designed to give you a little bit of an inside look at the three-day marathon interview.

As with all of the other parts of the job market, flyouts vary based on the school and the department. However, as a general rule, you will have dinner with people from the department your first and last nights there. In between, you will have a variety of meetings (over food and not) with as many members of the department that they can fit in your schedule. You will tour the campus. You will possibly tour the town a bit. And you will be required to give a research presentation, a teaching presentation, or both. Each of these is described in more detail below.

Above all else, try to think of this as an opportunity to chat about the things you love with people who also love those things. Prepare as well as you can in advance and then try (as best you can, given the stress of the situation) to enjoy yourself. Make some new contacts, meet some people you might end up coauthoring with one day, and maybe explore a little of a place you aren't familiar with (if you have time). Even if you don't come out the other side with a job, it can still be a good experience.

## Getting Dressed

A quick note: You may get conflicting advice on how to dress for flyouts. Men have fewer options in this regard, but especially for women, I stand by my opinion that departments are more interested in me being comfortable and confident in professional, well-fitting clothing than they are in me wearing any specific article of clothing (like a blazer or heels). Any department that would disqualify me based on the absence of that article of clothing is likely a department for which I would not like to work. The same goes (for women) for wearing a wedding ring. Sometimes we get the advice that we shouldn't wear that particular piece of jewelry (or mention our partners or children) on a job interview. It is illegal for them to ask you flat out about them, but it has to be up to you if you want to mention them or wear your daily jewelry or not. I feel the same way about that as I do about blazers and heels.

Regardless of gender, there are some things that always hold true. Wear clean clothing that fits appropriately. Consider practicing in the clothing that you plan on wearing. *Wear comfortable shoes* (and carry band-aids, just in case). You are going to be doing a lot of standing and a lot of walking. If you plan to wear tights or hose, carry an extra pair in case of runs. And check the weather before you go, so you know if you need to plan for rain or cold weather.

## The Research Presentation

A research presentation for an interview is relatively straightforward, because it's mostly a grown-up version of a conference talk. You'll generally be given about 30 minutes to present a paper (probably a chapter of your dissertation) and 30 to 45 minutes to answer questions about your presentation (and potentially job-related things that your audience perceives as being related to your presentation). Depending on the institution, the audience will consist of a mixture of faculty members, graduate students, and even undergraduates. If the search committee doesn't volunteer information about time limits and expected audience members when they invite you out, it is a very good idea to ask.

The position and institution should guide the way you present your talk. If, for example, you are interviewing at a small liberal arts school where the department includes faculty members from different fields, you want to stay far away from highly technical explanations or jargon-y terms (though this is a good practice for most presentations). If you are interviewing for a methods job, you will want to dig into those technical explanations a little more (while still making them accessible).

Practicing is key. Practice early. Practice a lot. Practice in front of your department (particularly in front of every professor who has ever made a job talk hard for your department's candidates). Practice with people who know nothing about your field or have never heard of your subfield. Practice in front of communications friends who can help point out your verbal pauses and awkward hand gestures (and develop more effective habits). Practice until you could give your job talk with no slides...and with the flu. And practice until you have appendix slides for all possible questions that would require them.

Importantly, any practice talk you give for your department should be (and likely will be) the hardest, worst one you ever give. It is their job in that moment to make it as hard on you as possible. They should ask the hardest (and even the least relevant) questions. They should dig into your methods and your logic and your generalizability. They will highlight your poor public speaking habits and critique your graphs. And they will likely do all of this without starting with the social niceties we afford to actual job candidates, because they are trying to make it the worst experience you ever have (thereby making your real job talks a walk in the park by comparison). It is incredibly difficult to receive this kind of criticism from every person who has trained you, but it is an invaluable step in the process (and try to take it when you still have enough time to change your presentation to reflect their feedback...and practice some more).

A few extra pieces of advice: First, never try to present your whole dissertation in a job talk. There isn't time for that. Focus on one chapter, spend a few minutes at the end placing that chapter in the broader context of your dissertation and broader research agenda, and offer to answer questions about the rest in the Q and A. Second, pictures almost always go over better than tables. Keep the tables as backup in the appendix slides, but show and discuss the pictures. When you include graphs, make them as easy to understand as possible. This isn't publishing, where they charge for color—consider color coding for statistical significance, different models, etc. Third, in keeping with the

theme of pictures, it doesn't hurt to have something aesthetically pleasing for your audience members to look at while you're talking. There's no need to go overboard with pictures, but a photo or two to illustrate a theme and a diagram for your theory are perfectly appropriate. Fourth, if you haven't already, track down a clicker. Finally, if you have a hard time remembering some of your transitions or a couple of facts that aren't appropriate to show on the screen, consider jotting some key words (NOT a script) onto a 3"x5" notecard and placing it nearby (or holding it) during your talk. People care a lot less about you giving your talk 100 % from memory than they do about you being able to keep from panicking and completely losing your place in the middle of your talk. I promise.

## The Teaching Demonstration

The teaching demonstration is a completely different beast from the research presentation, and it is entirely position specific. Sometimes they will give you an actual classroom to take over for a day. Other times, you will be teaching to faculty members in the department—or even to just the search committee. Often, you will be given free reign over the content you teach, but sometimes the topic will be given to you. At least once, a faculty member informed me that they really prefer to see someone aim a little higher with their activity (or activities) than they can actually accomplish in the time and setting provided to them, just so they can really get a sense for their style.

If you are tasked with a teaching demonstration, be sure to ask questions about all of the above (if you can)—time, topic, audience (number, majors/nonmajors), and course (if applicable). And then I highly recommend checking with members of your cohort or your faculty to see if you can take over their class for a day for a dry run (especially if it's a lesson you haven't taught before or haven't taught recently).

*The Professor Is In* has a couple of nice blog posts on this:

- <https://theprofessorisin.com/2017/01/26/the-teaching-demonstration-3-goals/>
- <https://theprofessorisin.com/2012/01/10/how-to-give-a-teaching-demonstration-a-guest-post/>

## Meetings

Meetings come in different forms. You will definitely be meeting with professors, either one on one or in groups. You may also meet with graduate or undergraduate students (depending on the department). These are unstructured meetings, so the questions asked of you will range broadly across life as an academic. There are several goals here—to get a sense of you as an instructor and researcher, of course, but also to see how you fit in. Are you funny? Are you genuine? Do you seem like someone they'd like to coauthor with (or attend wine club with)? Do you seem like someone they will be able to tenure (if it's that kind of job)? They will ask anything from follow-up questions

to your presentation/demonstration (if you've given it already) to how you would teach a specific class to if you like to hike or not.

And then—always—they will ask if you have any questions for them. I am here to tell you that you must always have questions for them, because a failure to ask questions is perceived as a lack of interest in the job. The rules get a little more lax at this stage in the process, which should give you more material—it is more acceptable to ask about available resources for teaching and research development, for example (although asking about salary is still prohibited). By the second or third meeting of the day, you will likely have run out of novel questions. Ask the same ones again—no one is comparing notes here. If you have a chance to prepare person-specific topics of conversation in advance, that's great! If you don't, that's okay, too. I recommend keeping a cheat sheet of questions on your phone to look at in between meetings or when you get a bathroom break.

On that note, some people are better than others at offering bathroom breaks. And you may or may not spend more time answering questions than eating at meals. Carry snacks, mints, and a water bottle, and ask to stop at a restroom if you must. They aren't intentionally starving you; they're all just excited to have you there (and busy with all the other things they have to do).

Jumping back to the question of salary, it is still considered a bad sign for you to ask about amounts. However, while it is extremely unlikely that it will come up, it does happen, particularly if you have a meeting with the department chair. Be prepared to use your poker face, just in case. It is also rare, but occasionally the department chair will also ask you about your non-negotiables. A friend of mine in one of the hard sciences carried a series of lists with her to all interviews—the non-negotiables (priced and unpriced) and the fond wishes (also priced and unpriced). This is by no means necessary, but if you have non-negotiables for a job, it's not a bad idea to think them through before you show up for an interview.

The last truly important thing to note about these interviews is that there are certain lines that it is illegal for your interviewers to cross. They are not legally allowed to ask you questions about your age, marital status, children, sexual orientation, religion, national origin or citizenship, or disabilities. Yale's Office of Career Strategy has a useful summary of illegal questions, their legal doppelgangers, and strategies for responding here: <https://ocs.yale.edu/get-prepared/illegal-interview-questions>.

## Thank You Notes

As with phone/video interviews, thank you notes are expected after a flyout. In this case, I would try to gauge where they are in the process when deciding whether to send e-mails or handwritten notes, with two exceptions. First, if your handwriting is illegible, stick with typing. And second, if you had to travel a significant distance to get there and can't finish them before you leave, stick with e-mails, so you know they'll get there before final decisions are made. Again, no one is comparing their notes to see if you come up with unique content for each of them, but the more you *can*

personalize (without taking forever), the better: reading or data recommendations, particularly funny stories or meaningful compliments, serving as tour guide, etc. And make sure you try to send them to everyone with whom you interacted, because even students and staff can (and likely will) be asked about their opinions of you.