

Academic Interview Questions and Tips

Initial-round academic job market interviews—usually conducted by phone, over Skype, or at professional conferences—can be stressful and intellectually demanding. To know some of the most common questions and rehearse (without memorizing!) possible answers can help a great deal. Remember that oral communications appointments are available at grad.uchicago.edu.

QUESTIONS:

Humanities and Social Sciences

- Why do you want to **teach** at this institution?
- Please describe your **current academic work** and its **contribution** to the field.
- How would you organize an **introductory survey course** in your area of expertise?
- Please describe what you think will be the **most important developments** in your field in the next decade.
- Tell me about the **most difficult class** you've ever taught.
- What **textbook** would you use to teach an introductory class in your field?
- How would you approach the challenge of teaching **our students** when you've only taught UChicago students?
- Describe a situation in your program or in one of the classes you taught where there was a **conflict** and how you helped **resolve** it.
- What questions do you have **for us**?

Physical and Biological Sciences

- Why do you want to work in this lab as a postdoc and what **expertise** would you bring to it?
- Please describe your **current academic** work and its **contribution** to the field.
- What kinds of roles have you played in labs already and what additional roles are you **prepared** to play as a postdoc/professor?
- Please describe what you think will be the **most important developments** in your field in the next decade.
- What **textbook** would you use to teach an introductory class in your field?
- How would you approach the challenge of teaching **our students** when you've only taught UChicago students?
- Tell us about your **next project**.
- Describe a situation where there was a **conflict** in a lab and how you helped **resolve it**.
- What questions do you have **for us**?

ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Ask questions that demonstrate that you have done your homework; that you are *excited* to contribute to the department; and that reveal something about you.

Avoid yes or no questions! Begin questions with "I'm interested in hearing more about [x]" or "I saw on the website that you are opening a center in [y] and would love to know if there are plans to develop programming there."

Show that you are informed, interested, and enthusiastic to contribute.

IMPORTANT:

- **Marital Status, Number of Children, Citizenship, Religious Beliefs, Sexual Orientation, Gender, or Disabilities:** hiring committees are not permitted to ask questions about these areas.
- **These questions might come up in informal contexts that feel off-the-record:** though you may be at a departmental cocktail party or gathering, it's still not permitted for interviewers to ask these questions.
- **Have responses ready.**

Academic Interview Questions and Tips

MEN

- Neutral color suit
- Blazers can work
- Tame the beard
- New leather shoes
- New belt

WOMEN

- Neutral color suit
- A simple pattern or color “pop”
- Simple jewelry is okay
- Pants or skirt are both acceptable
- Heels based on comfort

EVERYONE

- Fit, not *fashion*
- Fresh haircut
- Wear it all first
- Ask for honesty
- Get it tailored!

ACCESSORIES

- Valise, not backpack
- Metal, not plastic water bottle
- Pens you like to use
- Leather padfolio for CV’s
- Notebook



Strong Interview Answers:

- **Brevity**—two sentences instead of three
- Articulating broad **stakes** of the question
- Addressing **opposing** views
- **Positive** accounts of your department/experience

Indicators of confidence:

- Rephrasing a question to **clarify/shift focus**
- Tying answers to **previous** questions
- Taking a moment to **think** about an answer

Rhetorical Strategies:

Acknowledge, Adjust, Pivot:

- “I thought exactly the same thing at first, but I think that the real concern is [x].”

Admit a Hard Question:

- “That’s a really interesting thought. Do you mind if I take a second to think about it?”
- “That’s a tough question to unpack. What do you think would be the first step?”

Provide Background for Answers:

- “I’ve spent some very productive time on committees in my department and I’ve enjoyed the experience. Can you say more about opportunities to do department service at University X?”

In the Week(s) Before:

How to Prep:

- **Do research.** Understand as much as you can about the institution and its context.
- **Record your answers (audio only and then on video).** Watch and listen with a friend or trusted colleague.
- **Practice with partners outside your discipline.** Have them ask you tough questions about why your research matters.
- **Develop strong questions.** What are you actually interested in knowing about the institution? Design questions that say something unique about you.

Try Out Answers to Questions About:

- **Your research:** its value in the discipline and its trajectory.
- **Your courses:** What kind of teacher are you and how do you *think* about teaching? How will you prepare to teach students at particular institutions?
- **Your next project:** Where is your research heading and how will you advance the goals of the institution to which you are applying?
- **Mentoring:** How do you support students outside the classroom?
- **Tricky questions:** there are things that hiring committees shouldn’t be asking about (see reverse), but it’s important to prepare answers just in case.

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Ten Quick Tips:

- **80%** of what hiring committees think of you is determined in the first **20** seconds
- Your answers are **too long** – be briefer wherever you can, including when you practice
- Understand what **motivates** the question. Know why the interviewer is asking something
- Know your **strengths** and **weaknesses** and be ready to account for them in your answers
- Answers have **beginnings, middles, ends**: make your answers into narratives
- The # of possible questions is **not infinite**. The scope of the interview is limited.
- It's okay to ask for **time** and **clarification**. Interviewers respect thoughtfulness and care.
- **Practice** the way you **play**. Treat practice seriously, and the payoff can be huge!
- Always have **good questions** ready. Do your homework. Strong questions are essential.
- Always send **thank you notes**. They reinforce a good impression.

Avoid Common Traps!

Thinking and speaking like a grad student.

Repeating your cover letter.

Too much information, too much specialized information and jargon, too much monologue.

Rehashing your argument

Underselling yourself and/or your work

The Hem/Haw (shows lack of confidence)

Narrowly focusing on your dissertation topic

Denigrating your own teaching experience

Making incorrect assumptions about institutional goals

Narrowly focusing on your dissertation topic

What's my motivation?

What is the committee really trying to understand? Your understanding of their institutional needs, your ability to work well with others, even just your ability to respond to a difficult question. There are lots of reasons why a committee would ask tough questions. Plot out some of these reasons to craft more effective responses.

They want to know that you're confident: Interviewers want to know if you can go beyond the dissertation and whether your future plans align with the setting of their institution—specifically in the job you are applying for.

Question

Prepare to answer a reasonable set of questions. But, perhaps more importantly, know the kinds of points that you want to make about your experience.

Practice making the same points in response to multiple questions.

Motivation

Rather than guess, it's almost always better to clarify the motivation for a question or get the interviewer to vocalize what they're trying to get at.

This can help you answer the question, while giving you time to think and relax.

Traps

By understanding both motivation *and* your own strengths and weaknesses, you'll be able to identify what you shouldn't say in response to common questions.

Tactics

Talk through your interview tactics with Oral Communications Consultants at UChicagoGRAD, with staff at Chicago Center for Teaching, and with individuals who have completed these kinds of interviews before.

To develop your own workable tactics takes practice!