GRADTalk: Interview Best Practices
An Introduction
Today will provide a few concrete tips on interview best practices as well as frameworks for answering representative questions about research and teaching.
Today’s Agenda

1. Pre-interview
2. Interview (esp. research and teaching)
3. Post Interview
1. Pre-Interview
Pre-Interview

For Skype interviews:
- Technology
- Staging
- Quirks
- Etiquette

For in-person first round interviews:
- Preparing for the elements
- Homework

For both:
- Accessories
- Non-Verbal
- Attire
For Skype Interviews
Technology

- Use a hardwired connection if possible
- Rent a microphone (or make sure that your space has great acoustics)
- Find the right volume on your speakers (headphones are not ideal)
- Make sure you’ve used the equipment
- Always have a second device
Staging: Background
Staging: Background

- Find a bookcase
But don’t overdo it…
Staging

- Find a bookcase
- Keep things simple but not bland
  - Don’t distract the viewer
  - e.g. Table with a flower vase off to the side
  - Bookshelf: varied patterns/empty space
  - Art posters on a blank wall
- What to avoid
  - Busy, Blank, Bright (or reflective)
- Ask a friend for help with staging
Quirks: the job is in the eyes
Quirks

Eyes up
No matter what, your focal point is the camera!

It’s tempting but avoid constantly checking to see how you look
Etiquette

- **DO** close all programs
- **DO** use your hands
- **DO** sit with feet flat
- **DO** pause

- **DON’T** cross arms
- **DON’T** hunch over
- **DON’T** shout
- **DON’T** get too close to the camera
Prepare for the Elements

- Check the weather
- Pack extra clothes
- Make sure you have professional attire in carry-on
- Make sure you know how to get to the interview and how much time it takes to get there
### Homework / Don’t Freak

#### In the Week(s) before:
- Do **research**
- **Record** yourself
- ...in front of a **mirror**
- Practice with **partners**
- Develop **questions**
- Know:
  - Your research
  - Your courses
  - Next project
  - Mentoring
  - Tricky questions

#### 24 hours before:
- Arrive in town with **time to spare**
- Check out **location**
- **Sleep** (but caffeinate)
- No **conference trolls**
- Read something unrelated to the job market—even **enjoyable**—on the morning of your conversation.
- **Goldilocks zone**

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For Both Type Interviews
Accessories

- Your pens
- Copies of CV
- Notebook
- H₂O or Coffee
- Breath mints

James T. Kirk

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EDUCATION

M.A. Starfleet Academy (San Francisco, CA): Pilot, minor field in Poetry
Thesis: “John Donne’s Beguiling Lyric, also Photon Torpedoes”
Advisor: Admiral Pike

B.A. University of Iowa (Iowa City): Physics and Creative Writing
Advisor: Lorrie Moore

Work Experience

U.S.S. Enterprise 2265 - Present

Captain
- Leads large and diverse crew of ~1,000 in high pressure, team-centric environment
- Goes, boldly, where no man has gone before
- Manages multiple budget databases, tracking expenditures/revenues in nonprofit context
- Writes daily 500 word entries in official Starfleet journal
Accessories: This, Not That

- SIGG water bottle
- Mug with pug face
- Brown leather briefcase
- Blue and brown backpack
- Maroon leather notebook
- Minion-themed notebook

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Non-verbal

- **80% in 20 Seconds**
  - Smile / Energy
  - Handshake-ready

- **Eyes up**
  - Where?
  - Bridge of the nose
  - Keep them level
  - But you can look off!

- **Posture**
  - Hands at side
  - Minimal gestures
  - Feet flat
  - Back straight
Attire

EVERYONE
- FIT, NOT $$$$
- Dress professionally (no half-half even if it’s Skype)
- Avoid bright colors
- Avoid busy prints
- Consider the “corporate” question
- Layer for flexibility

WOMEN
- Easy on the jewels
- Make sure the hair is not getting in the way

MEN
- Very clean facial hair
- Simple tie
Questions?
2. Interview
The Interview Breakdown

- Most first-round interviews last anywhere from 30 minutes to 1 hour. However, some are as short as 15-20 minute.
- Usually, 5-10 minutes are devoted to your own questions, and the rest is split between research and teaching.
- Expect teaching-oriented institutions to start with teaching questions, and high research institutions to start with research, but be prepared to start with either!
General: Tips for Success

- Your answers are too long
- Understand what motivates the question
- Answers have beginnings, middles, ends
- The # of possible questions is not infinite
- It’s okay to ask for time and clarification
- Know your strengths and weaknesses
- Practice the way you play
- Always have good questions ready
Research Questions (I)

The Question
“Tell us about yourself/discuss your dissertation/current research”

Motivation
The interviewer wants to see how you situate yourself within a discipline.

Traps
- Thinking and speaking like a grad student.
- Repeating your cover letter.
- TM’s: Too much information, too much specialized information and jargon, too much monologue.

Tactics
- Brevity: Two sentences instead of three
- Use smaller “building blocks”: instead of a 3-minute response think about three, 1-minute responses.
- Focus on broad stakes of the research and not on its details.
Tip 1: Be Modular
Why be modular?

- Helps keep you organized
- Creates hierarchy of importance
- Ensures central message isn’t truncated
- Allows you to be interruptible
Your ultimate goal, regardless of settings, is to have a good conversation.

Monologues, by definition, are not conversations.
**Research Questions (II)**

**The Question**
“How would you envision your future research program at this institute?”

**Motivation**
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...

**Traps**
- Narrowly focusing on your dissertation topic

**Tactics**
- Talk about current or near-future projects that do not involve your dissertation
- Talk about your long term book goals (the second project)
- Be prepared to discuss what it will take to get your research started (including questions of funding)
- Consider ideas for connecting work with community outreach
The Question: “Why should I care?”

Motivation:
Testing your ability to sell an idea in a concise and convincing way, while assessing your ability to position potentially novel work within a broader, more established academic landscape.

Traps
- Rehashing
- Underselling
- The Hem/Haw (lack of confidence)

Tactics
- Be excited!
- “Yes, and” / Frame contribution as doing two things: building upon existing ideas and introducing new ideas
- Take the long view: don’t be afraid to talk about future implications of your work even if they aren’t yet realized.
The Question
“How would you teach an intro class at our institution?”

Motivation
What do you know about their major requirements? What is your take on the big concepts/skills that introduce students to your field? What do you know about their students? Will students want to take your intro course (gateway to the major)?

Traps
- Not approaching the course from the students’ perspective
- Pitching the course at too high a level, or to an overly narrow audience (i.e. only majors)

Tactics
- What are the big concepts/questions/skills that should be in an intro course?
- What makes your intro course exciting?
- Link your intro course to their major/distribution requirements
The Question:
“How can you contribute to the curriculum (major/gen ed requirements)?”

Motivation:
What is your take on the broad pedagogical goals of a major in your field? What kinds of courses can you teach that align with those goals? What other forms of student learning can you help the department achieve?

Traps
- Overly narrow focus on your subfield
- Stepping on toes

Tactics
- Talk about advanced courses you are prepared to teach
- Think about what and how you teach develops translatable skills
- Talk about innovative teaching strategies you can bring
- Be familiar with the major/gen ed requirements, and be ready with some (modest) thoughts on how you might contribute to curriculum development
The Question:
“Can you tell us about a time when something went wrong in the classroom and how you handled it?”

Motivation:
How do you approach classroom teaching? How can you improvise? How do you interact with students?

Traps
- Being too negative—vis-à-vis the student and your teaching.
- Not being ready with an example.

Tactics
- Have an example ready!
- Talk about what you did in the moment and what you did after.
- Consider framing your response through the lens of inclusivity.
Other Questions You Should Always Expect

- Why do you want this job (Why do you want to teach here)?
- Do you have questions for us?

Motivation

The interviewer wants to see how you see yourself fitting in, that you understand the position and the various contexts of the job (disciplinary, departmental, institutional, etc.)

Traps

- Not understanding the specifics of a position, department, institution

Tactics

- Do your homework (“it’s a great university!” will not get you the job)
- Contextualize and explain your motivation (“I’ve spent 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?”)
- Weave things that excite you about the into your story—a story that combines your past and present with the future you see yourself having at that position.
Illegal Questions

Questions about national origin, citizenship, age, marital status, disabilities, arrest and conviction record, military discharge status, race, gender, or pregnancy status are illegal. Any question that asks a candidate to reveal information about these topics without the question having a job related basis are a violation of various state and federal discrimination laws.

Examples of Illegal Questions

- Are you a U.S. citizen?
- Are you planning to have children?
- What does your husband/wife do?
- How old are you?
- What is your religious affiliation?
Illegal Questions

How to Deal with Illegal Questions

If asked an illegal question you can:

- **Choose not to answer**
  
  “I’m uncomfortable with this question and prefer not to respond”

- **Choose to answer**
  
  - Respond directly and briefly if you feel comfortable doing so
  - Respond to the intent of the question
    
    “Nothing in my personal life will prevent me from taking this job”
  - Ask for the motivation behind the question
    
    “It’s not clear to me why you’re asking about this. Can you please explain?”
  - Deflect
    
    “It’s interesting you ask me about children--do you have kids yourself?”
  - Ignore and change the subject
    
    “I hear the music scene here is great”
Questions?
3. Post-interview
Follow up

- Follow up every interview with an email
- If you can, send individual emails
- However—
  - In short Skype interviews it may not feel right. You still should email but can send a group email to the search committee as a whole.
Questions?
For Appointments: gradgargoyle.uchicago.edu

> Academic & Career Development
  > Presenting & Interviewing: Advising

OR

> Communication Skills and Teaching
  > GRADTalk: Advising