

Communicating Humanities Skills and Expertise to Employers

Courtney Wiersema, Ph.D.
Assistant Director, Graduate Career Development
Co-Director, PATHS

Michael O'Toole, Ph.D.
GRADTalk Coordinator



**What brings you to
today's workshop?**





The Thanksgiving Dinner Problem

How can you translate
your skills and knowledge
for outsiders?



Degrees of Understanding

You say, *I have an M.A. or Ph.D.*

You mean, *I have spent year(s) developing expertise that is both broad and deep. I have significant research (and teaching) chops, as well as unusual intellectual stamina and self-discipline. I value education, inquiry, and the production of knowledge.*

They hear, *I have an academic research degree in a specialized field that may or may not relate to the job at hand.*

Source: Stacy Hartman, MLA, [What Do You Mean When You Say "Ph.D."?](#)



Degrees of Understanding

Feedback from Humanities Employers:

- “If you pursued a research degree, you clearly have a fanatical interest in a particular subject. To get hired at my company, you need to show me why you are now moving away from this fanatical interest.”
- “Don’t ask me how a Ph.D. would fit in at my company. Have a hypothesis based upon your skills and interests.”
- “You have to be able to speak to people who are not like you.”



Translating to Get Hired

This **does not** mean that your degree lacks value in the “marketplace.” You just have to communicate its value during the hiring process:

- When conducting **informational interviews**
- When writing **resumes** and **cover letters**
- When creating an **online presence** (e.g. LinkedIn)
- When **interviewing** for positions
- When **negotiating** salaries and benefits
- When telling new coworkers about your background



Your Skills and Expertise



Skills vs. Expertise

Transferable Skills are the things you can do that other people can do, too.

You developed these skills during your academic training, but you could have developed them elsewhere.

Humanities Expertise is comprised of the things you can do that other people can't.

These abilities are a distinct product of advanced study in the humanities, and they are difficult to gain through other means.



Skills vs. Expertise Exercise

Work with one or two other people to come up with as many examples of **transferable skills** as you can. What skills have you gained from your graduate program that you could use elsewhere?

Then, brainstorm what abilities might constitute a distinct **humanities expertise**. Consider content expertise, methodologies, habits of mind, philosophies or work, etc. What are your humanist superpowers?



Now What?

How do you take this list of abilities and make it meaningful for an **employer**?

You need to learn **what they care about** and **how they talk about their work**.

- Read job advertisements, and practice using their wording to describe your experiences.
- Make a “comps list” of must-read books and publications in that field.
- Talk to those already working in the field, and see how they describe their work.



Preparing Job Documents



Putting it in Writing

AN EXAMPLE

You think, *My humanities degree gives me distinct cultural competencies. I am empathetic, knowledgeable about cultural differences, and skilled in communicating across cultures.*

Their job ad reads, *Applicants should have a demonstrated commitment to multicultural awareness and understanding.*

You write, • *Developed a new course curriculum that drew upon diverse authors to increase the multicultural awareness of 27 students*



Preparing for Interviews



Preparing for Interviews

Put yourself in the interviewer's shoes.

What is an interviewer hoping to learn about you?

- **Relevant** skills and experience
- **Knowledge** you display about the position and the employer
- **Communication** style



Preparing for Interviews

Put yourself in the interviewer's shoes.

What might an interviewer be skeptical about?

- Have you had the opportunity to develop **soft skills** useful in an office environment (teamwork, leadership, communication)?
- Does this job represent a turn away from what you really love (i.e. research)?
- Are you **overqualified**?



What is your story?



Preparing for Interviews

Two features of good interview storytelling:
CONTINUITY and **POSITIVITY**

CONTINUITY

- Persuade the interviewer to think: *This job is a natural progression for you.*
- Develop a story that highlights how the skills and interests you developed in the past lead naturally to the new position



Preparing for Interviews

Two features of good interview storytelling:
CONTINUITY and **POSITIVITY**

POSITIVITY

- Frame your interest in the position as a move **towards** something, not a move away from something
- Emphasize the **connections** between what you like about your current position and what you can develop in your new position



“So, I see you went to grad school. Tell me about your studies.”



Preparing for Interviews

When talking about your **research** . . .

- Talk about not just **what** you studied, but **why** you studied it. Let the interviewer understand your motivation.
- Think about the big picture.
- Use the opportunity to highlight your **core skills** that are relevant to the position.



Addressing the Skeptical Interviewer



Preparing for Interviews

To address the **skeptic** . . .

- Quantify
- Diversify the portrait of what you do
- Talk about academia the way you would talk about a job outside of academia:
- *“I collaborated regularly with my advisor on the best approach to solving this big issue in the study of French history.”*



Practice



Imagine that you are sitting across from a hiring manager at a job interview. The hiring manager says to you, “So, I see you did a graduate degree at the University of Chicago. That’s impressive. But I have a stack of resumes from other people with similar qualities and more work experience. What do you think sets you apart? How does your expertise in the humanities translate to you being a good fit for this position?”



Questions?

cwiersema@uchicago.edu

mfo@uchicago.edu

Appointments?

gradgargoyle.uchicago.edu

