

# Academic Job Search Interview Questions

Examples and Resources

# One of the best lists...

## Mary Corbin Sies

**QUESTIONS ONE SHOULD BE PREPARED TO ANSWER FOR JOB INTERVIEWS**

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“This is a list of job interview questions I compiled when I was applying for college or university positions in American studies, history, and architectural history. I have kept it up to date; every category of question I have ever been asked at a job interview is represented below. You are welcome to link to and use these questions so long as the above credit line is included and that you do not alter the content if you choose to reproduce this page. I would be interested in receiving feedback about the usefulness of the list and I will maintain and update it as I hear from you. Good luck in your job search.”

Send me mail:

# #1: Describe your research.

(Have a good articulate rap down pat in short and longer versions, for experts and non-experts).

- 1a. What audiences are you addressing, what are the other hot books or scholars in your field, and how does your work compare w/theirs?
- 1ai. (Rephrased: what is the cutting edge in your field and how does your work extend it?)
- 1a.iii. (Answer this question on your terms, not those of your competition).
- 1b. How will you go about revising your dissertation for publication?
- 1bi. (be able to answer this in both general and specific ways).
- 1bii. Question may imply: do you have an interested publisher and where do you stand in your negotiations w/said publisher?
- 1biii. Question may also imply: we thought there were some significant shortcomings in your thesis, but we like you, so we're giving you this chance to redeem yourself by indicating that you're in the process of addressing these shortcomings in ways that we think appropriate.

# Describe your research cont.

- 1c. What you've said is all very interesting, but doesn't work in your field sometimes tend to border on the (choose adjective) esoteric, antiquarian, (and if postmodern) ridiculous? What is the broader significance of your research? How does it expand our historic understanding, literary knowledge, humanistic horizons?
- 1ci. Remember that this is a legitimate and important question--may be the toughest one you get.
- 1cii. Usually asked by someone outside your field. Can you explain the value of your work to an educated layperson?
- 1ciii. Asks you to grapple w/limitations in your research. Don't be afraid to acknowledge these, particularly if you can use such an acknowledgement to indicate where you intend to go in your research after this. (My doctoral research, you see, is only the necessary first step...)

## #2. What is your basic teaching philosophy?

- 2a. Question might be answered quite differently for the small liberal arts college, state branch university w/heavy service teaching load, or graduate-degree granting institution.

# #3. How would you teach...?

- 3a. basic service courses in your field
- 3b. any of the courses on your C.V. that you say you can teach.
- 3c. What courses would you like to teach if you had your druthers? how would you teach them?

# How would you teach cont.

- 3d. (many committees will want to know which specific books you would use).
- 3di. this may be an indirect way of ascertaining whether you already have the course in the can.
- 3dii. Do you, for ex., know what is and is not in print in pb form?
- 3diii. Which text would you use (have you used) for the U.S. Survey, for English composition, for Am Lit 101, etc.? (Beware: this can turn into a great test of your poise and diplomatic skills when one search committee member says "I love that book" and the next says "I wouldn't be caught dead including that text on MY syllabus.")

# How would you teach cont.

- Be prepared to talk about several courses, after having sized up the institution's needs.
- 3ei. Do your homework to anticipate what the department needs.
- 3eii. Be prepared to talk about teaching its basic service course(s). If you're applying to a small liberal arts College, this could include things like Western Civilization, Western European art history, Brit Lit., etc.
- 3eiii. Be ready to talk in detail about an innovative course or two that you think the Department might really go for-- something new and w/in your expertise.

# How would you teach cont.

- 3f. Take course X. As you would teach it, what three goals would the course achieve? When students had completed your course, what would they have learned that is of lasting value?

# # 4. Tell us how your research has influenced your teaching.


- In what ways have you been able to bring the insights of your research to your courses at the undergraduate level?

#5. We are a **service-based state branch university** with an enrollment of three zillion student credit hours per semester, most of them in the basic required courses. Everyone, therefore, teaches the service courses. How would you teach Hist Or Lit or Art 101?

- 5a. (what they are asking is are you willing/experienced/mentally stable enough to teach a heavy service course load to students who've likely read fewer than 3 books in their entire lives).
- 5b. (they may also be saying) No one on the faculty (much less the students ) at Mediocre State U has even heard of the figure/subject/method of your research. How do you think you could fit in here? Could you be happy or at least useful in a backwater? (i.e., can she survive in Timbuktu with idiots for colleagues and morons for students?)

## #6. Your degree is from Prestige Research University-- what makes you think you would like to (or even would know how to) teach in a small liberal arts college?

- 6a. Depending on the college, this may be one or two questions:
- 6ai. (can she survive in Timbuktu with idiots for colleagues and morons for students?) same as 5b.
- 6aia. do you understand the liberal arts college mission, are you a dedicated teacher, and will you give your students the time and personal attention that we demand from all our faculty members?
- 6b. At our college, teaching is the first priority. Do you like teaching? Would you survive (and thrive) under those circumstances?
- 6c. What experience do you have teaching or learning in such a setting?



#7. This is a publish or perish institution with very high standards for tenure review--what makes you think you would be able to earn tenure here? (see next question).

## #8. Tell us about your research program.

- What are you working on currently? (now that you've completed your doctoral work)? What do you plan to look at next?
- 8a. Having a paper or a talk ready that showcases a topic different from your doctoral research demonstrates research prowess.

## #9. Why do you especially want to teach at Nameless College or University?

- 9a How do you see yourself contributing to our department?
- 9b. (The real answer to this, of course, is "because I need the job, jerk!" But don't be caught without a well-considered answer. This is a hard question to answer if you are unprepared for it. Be sure you've done your homework).
- 9c. (for small colleges) We conceive of our campus as one large community. What non- or extra-academic activities would you be interested in sponsoring or participating in?

# #10. Are you connected?

- (If you were organizing a special symposium or mini-conference on your topic, which scholars could you pick up the phone to call?)

# #11. The spouse/partner Question

- 11. (Hem, haw) What does your husband/Wife/Partner think about you taking a job in another state?
- 11a. How long do you (do you really) plan to stay? The correct answer is "at least until my tenure review." These days, no one expects a longer commitment than that.
- 11b. How will you handle the separation? (This is asking for reassurance that you plan to live at Nameless U rather than commuting from your husband's/wife's partner's home base. The last woman they hired did that and it didn't work out; she was never around).

# Spouse/partner/cont.

- 11bi. they may be trying to ascertain whether you have children w/o asking directly.
- 11bii. you may want to offer a strategy for how you're going to manage your marriage (we've done this before--it's no big deal; my husband has a more marketable career and can't wait to follow me to your wonderful location; it's none of your business).
- 11biii. if you're not obviously married (if you're straight or gay and have a SO), committees probably will not bother you with these sorts of questions. It will then be up to you to raise them if they are important to you. Would there be any chance, for ex., of landing a joint appointment for my "fiancee" or "companion"? I don't recommend this unless it's a decisive issue for you. If it is decisive, and it's a job you want, then by all means raise it at the time of the campus interview.
- 11c. An enlightened and clever search committee might raise this question with a candidate, acknowledging that it's a personal matter but will weigh on your decision to take the job, should you get an offer.

# Spouse/partner/cont.

- Whether you're male or female, a search committee (assuming they find you an especially attractive candidate) may try to ascertain this sort of information to 1) inform you (because they feel it's only fair) what their institution's policy is on joint offers, or 2) see what it would realistically take to land you (is a joint offer the only terms you'll accept).
- 11di. (As someone who has been stuck in a commuting marriage for 7 years now, I am obviously not the best person to give advice on how to pull this off).
- 11dii. A wrong answer to such an inquiry may disqualify your candidacy.

#12. You've seen our (religious) mission statement. How would you see yourself contributing to our mission and campus atmosphere?

- 12a. technically, asking about your religious affiliation/beliefs is an illegal question. Committees will be more or less direct with you about this question and you can perceive the degree of conformity/support they expect according to how they broach the subject.
- 12b. they are also trying to tell you that character (defined in their traditional, conservative way) counts at the institution and in town as well; they want you to withdraw from consideration if you won't fit in.

# Etc.

- <http://otal.umd.edu/~sies/jobquess.html>
- *The page above is maintained by Mary Corbin Sies (Dept. of American Studies, University of Maryland, College Park).*
- Other sources of questions include:
- <http://serc.carleton.edu/NAGTWorkshops/careerprep/jobsearch/interviewquestions.html>
- Chronicle of Higher Education
- The Academic Job Search Handbook – Vick and Furlong.