

**GRADUATE  
STUDENT  
SERIES**

# **GRADUATE LEVEL INTERVIEWING**



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## **The Graduate Level Interview: An Introduction**

There was a time when doctoral candidates in the education disciplines could easily find their own jobs. They relied on placement offices to post job notices and send out placement and reference files. And they were usually adequately prepared for the interview by having completed the rigorous requirement of a Ph.D or Ed.D program. But the number of opportunities in higher education for recent graduates with education doctorates is dwindling. Enhancing your chances of finding an attractive position, constructing a competitive curriculum vita and preparing for the increasingly intense interview are especially important. The following pages are a compilation of suggestions, helpful tips, and sample questions that will help prepare you for this important process.

### **Articulating Your Accomplishments While Interviewing**

Most of us have been taught that it is not polite to talk about ourselves, and especially not to brag about our accomplishments. But, when you are looking for a job, you are not bragging, you are merely conveying useful information to people who need it in order to make good decisions.

Think about significant accomplishments you can point to with pride - write them down. Start each sentence with "I" followed by an action verb (managed, improved, created, invented...) End each statement with an outcome, a result you achieved.

Examples:

\* I co-authored a successful, institutional grant proposal funded by the Mellon Foundation.

\* I initiated and organized an international conference called *Feminist Literature in Latin America*.

\* I designed and maintained an award winning website on the life and work of Samuel Johnson.

\* Remember to write all of your outstanding accomplishments in "outcome" terms.

# General Interview Questions and Tips for Answering

## 1. Suitability: **Tell me about yourself.**

Keep your answers short (30 to 90 seconds). Generally, use the time to offer some personal information (only as related to the job/career field), education and a summary of experience.

## 2. Employability: **Why did you leave (are you leaving) your most recent job (activity)?**

Employers want to be reassured that they are gaining a person who can solve specific problems for them without creating peripheral problems. You, therefore, will want to emphasize your stability, your ability to understand things from an employer's point of view and your general integrity.

For example: *I have really enjoyed my position, but I am looking for something a bit more challenging at this time. I believe this position provides that opportunity.*

## 3. Capabilities: **What are your strengths?**

Savvy interviewees answer this question in terms of the specific position requirements, so sometimes this is an opportunity to ask more questions about the position. Your response can then be tailored and more effectively frame the employer's understanding of your abilities. It is not enough to answer the question in vague generalities. You have to back up your assertions with behavioral evidence that is concrete and compelling. The examples make the information meaningful.

For example: *I am very organized. As my resume shows, I have experience organizing meetings and large events and this is the type of work I enjoy most.*

## **What are your weaknesses?**

Present a weakness that's really a hidden strength.

For example: *I have a tendency to be extremely thorough. Sometimes this means I produce more than has been asked for and it seems irrelevant to some people. Yet often, the extra information provides insights that help avoid problems in the long term.*

### Other Options:

Cite a weakness you're already working to correct.

Cite a lesson learned.

Cite a lapsed skill or a skill unrelated to the position for which you are applying.

## **What is your greatest achievement?**

Customize!! Focus your answer as closely as possible on your understanding of the employer's needs. Avoid conveying an unrelated accomplishment. Remember, words like "best," "worst," and "failure" invite excess emotionalism. Demonstrate balance by speaking with clarity and relevance.

## 4. Compatibility: **What would your former boss say about you? How do you handle authority?**

Body language is often a tip-off here. Negative experiences in the past will often prompt defensive expressions and words. Focus your answer on the best parts of the relationship.

For example: *We didn't always agree, but we were able to work out our differences through open communication.*

The second question offers an opportunity to talk about how (and with whom) you work best.

For example: *I prefer a supervisor who takes an interest in the projects on which I work, but who allows me the autonomy to complete them in my own style.*

## **What would your colleagues say about you?**

Focus on the productive aspects of your relationships and anchor your answer with a story.

## **Where do you want to be five years from now?**

Show ambition and interest in professional growth rather than a specific job title. Use this question as an opportunity to check whether you and your future employer have mutually compatible goals. Be brave enough to say what you want and need to make your contribution count.

## 5. Credibility: **Can we check your references?**

A spontaneous "Of course!" is best. Prepare your references ahead of time by letting them know the details of the position you are seeking and the qualities the employer would find most attractive. That gives your references a chance to highlight the most relevant information about you. Additionally, it may be wise to provide your prospective employer with an additional copy of your CV or resume so that they can speak in greater detail about your accomplishments.

## 6. Affordability: **How much money are you looking for? How much are you presently earning?**

Politely defer salary discussions until it's clear that a partnership is desirable. If the employer insists, you having done your research, offer a salary range typical for that position or a ballpark figure (rather than the exact numbers of your current or last position). Websites such as <http://www.salary.com> and <http://chronicle.com/stats/aaup> can help with this research.

## **Academic Interviewing Tips**

### **Marketing Yourself**

Part of getting the job is luck and the people you know, but there is a significant difference in attitude between people who succeed and those who do not. In a competitive job market, it is important to communicate what you are capable of doing based on an honest self-assessment and on the qualities for which the institution is looking. You need to show the institution that both sets of needs can be met.

Get as much feedback on your written materials as you can, and try to answer the question "Why should we hire you?"

### **The Invitation**

When you get an invitation for an interview, there is a tendency to be awestruck. It is important to be assertive and find out details about the process.

*Who will make the travel arrangements?*

*Is it your responsibility to pay for the airline tickets, hotel, and then be reimbursed later?*

*How will your time be scheduled?*

Find out as much as you can about the courses you will teach, should you be offered the position. The job description rarely provides this information.

### **Before You Go**

- The average length of a fly back is one to two days.
- Request a written schedule in advance.
- Trips usually include a 30-40 minute presentation of your dissertation research or you may be asked to teach a class on another topic. You will likely have separate meetings with members of the faculty, search committee, department chair and dean, as well as informal tours of the area. You may be invited to department or university receptions as well.

- If they are vague about teaching a course during your fly back interview, push for details about the name of the professor, syllabus, and class level.
- Research the institution and department. Check college guides (available at Cubberly on microfiche and the UAC) and university web pages through Yahoo on the Internet.
- Most people recommend that you dress formally. Either a suit or coat and tie for men and a suit or dress and jacket for women. This is part of the fly back ritual. Try to wear your outfit before the interview to get comfortable in it.
- Be prepared to discuss your dissertation, future research interests, teaching experiences and interests and your interest in the institution.

### **Once You Are There**

- Try to relax, realizing that you are one of the selected finalists out of a large group of candidates. You should attempt to come across as a colleague.
- The on-campus interview is designed to achieve the best match between the department's needs and wishes and the candidate's talents, strengths and interests. The on-campus interview allows a more direct assessment of a candidate's social skills, poise, responsiveness, alertness, and energy than do other sources of information. For the candidate, you get a better perspective of the department, university and environs.
- You may be the first choice of the entire department, one fraction of the department, or you may have to prove yourself to the skeptics. Information sessions, meals or conversations, or short walks from one meeting or event to another may be just as important as formal presentations.
- Be honest when answering questions, attempt to focus on the positive and give yourself enough credit for your accomplishments. Do not act as if you know everything there is to know about your field. Do not bring up any subjects that you have little interest in simply to please. On the other hand, if you have a genuine interest in something, it's a good idea to bring it up when appropriate.
- If you are interviewing at a smaller, lesser-known school, you might be asked "Why would you want to work here?" Think about this ahead of time!
- It may be useful to have a three-minute version of your dissertation presentation prepared.
- Be prepared for the unexpected. For example, the power has gone out in the building and you may not have the use of an overhead projector.

- During the 30 minute meeting with a department chair, he or she may ask “What do you want to know?” Be prepared to ask specific questions.
- Be prepared if the department chair brings up salary and/or start-up needs. Research ahead of time to know the average salaries for someone in your position.
- There may be a difference between what the department chair says about salary, and what the dean says. This is another place where salary may come up as a subject. Save actual salary negotiation for the time when the offer is made.
- You should never feel as if the place you are interviewing is your only hope. Be sure that your behavior is like that of a colleague, not a desperate job seeker.

## Questions Applicants Should Be Prepared to Ask

### **Regarding Curriculum:**

1. What courses are taught in the department?
2. What graduate and undergraduate courses would likely be my responsibility?
3. How often are course load assignments changed?
4. What is the average semester teaching load?
5. Are there field-based supervisory duties assigned to the position? Is travel time included in time allocation for these duties? What arrangements are made for transportation expenses?
6. Are/can research hours be counted as a part of the required load?
7. By what means are curriculum and program development decisions made? Who is involved in the decision-making process? When are/were such decisions made?

### **Regarding Duties:**

8. What provisions are made for office space?
9. What is the average number (or the required number) of office hours? Are these to be spaced over a minimum number of days per week?
10. How are the committee members selected? What committees are currently standing?
11. What is the average number of hours per week spent on committee work?
12. What is the average number of advisees?
13. What is expected or required in terms of “service” to professional organizations and/or other designated groups?

### **Regarding Promotion and Tenure:**

14. What are the bases for promotion and tenure?
15. By what methods are faculty evaluated? Are copies of evaluation forms available for your file?
16. How many faculty members have become tenured in the last few years in the department, and at what point?
17. What percentage of the faculty is tenured? For how long?

18. What is the percentage of faculty who were originally employed as non-tenure track and now hold tenure or tenure-track positions?
19. What have been the rates of and reasons for faculty turnover?
20. Does summer school teaching favorably impress a tenure committee?

**Regarding Faculty:**

21. Where did the members of the faculty receive their degrees?
22. How active are the members of the faculty in local, state, and national professional organizations?

**Regarding Research:**

23. What research is currently being conducted by members of the faculty?
24. What interdepartmental cooperation exists? What types of interdisciplinary courses are being taught? What is the department's relationship with a research design or statistics group?
25. What support for research is available?
26. What computer/canned programs are available?
27. What in-house funding is available for research?
28. What funded research projects are currently underway in the department/college?
29. Describe the travel budget. What support is provided for conference attendance?

**Regarding Finances:**

30. What salary is anticipated for the position? What non-salary benefits are associated with the position?
31. How is salary determined after the initial year?
32. Is there collective bargaining?
33. What are the possibilities for and/or restrictions on summer school teaching?
34. What is the basis for the summer school salary schedule?
35. What opportunities exist for "outside income" (eg., consulting, workshops, course overloads, extension courses, etc.)

**Regarding School and Community:**

36. What are the admission requirements for graduate and undergraduate students?
37. Characterize the student population in terms of geographical, economic, ethnic, and scholarship range.
38. What is the relationship among the town, the local schools, and the university?
39. Describe the community in terms of stability, ethnic composition and race relations.
40. What cultural opportunities exist in the community?
41. What is the cost of living in the community?
42. What kinds of housing are available?

**Regarding School Image:**

43. List three positive aspects of this position.
44. Describe the department as you perceive it in five years.
45. Describe the ideal candidate for this position.
46. Describe the ideal assistant professor's first year.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

**Heidberger and Vick, *The Academic Job Search Handbook* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).**

A comprehensive and realistic guide for graduate students conducting an academic job search, written for new Ph.D.s as well as junior faculty who are changing positions. Many sample C.V.s, letters, dissertation abstracts, etc., which may be useful as guides in preparing your own application materials.

**Packert and Leape, *Preparing for Your Academic Career in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Office of Career Services, Harvard University, 1989).**

A general guide on various aspects of the job search.

**National Academy of Sciences, et al, *Careers in Science and Engineering: A student Planning Guide to Graduate School and Beyond* (National Academy Press, 1995).**

An excellent introduction to the issues and challenges of pursuing a science career in today's job market. Available on the NAS website (<http://www.nas.edu>)

## Resources from the CDC Career Resource Center Database

### Regarding the Academic Job Search:

*Academic Job Search*

*Academic Job Search Handbook*, by Mary Morris Heiberger, Julia Miller Vick

*Cracking the Academia Nut*, by Margaret Newhouse

*MLA Guide to the Job Search*, by Showalter, Figler, Kletzer, Schuster, Katz

*Outside the Ivory Towers: A Guide for Academics Considering Alternative Careers*, by Margeret Newhouse, Ph.D

### Regarding Interviewing:

*50 Ways to Get Hired*, Max Messner

*Behavior-Based Interviewing*, Terry L. Fitzwater

*Beyond Blue Suits and Resumes: Proven Methods Insure Your Job-finding Success*, Annette L. Segall

*Information Interviewing*, Martha Stoodley

*Job Search in Academe*, Forme & Reed

*Naked at the Interview: Tips and Quizzes to Prepare You for Your First Real Job*,  
Burton Jay Nadler

*On the Market: Surviving the Academic Job Search*, Christina Boufis, Victoria Olsen

*Princeton Review: Guide to Your Career*, Bernstein and Schaffzin

*Quick Interview & Salary Negotiation Book, The*, J. Michael Farr  
*Smart Woman's Guide to Interviewing and Salary Negotiation*, Julie Adair King  
*WetFeet Industry Insider: Getting Your Ideal Job*, Gary Alpert  
*WetFeet Insider Guide: Landing the Job You Want*

## **Graduate Resource Packets Available at the CDC**

(Look for the Purple Cover on the Packets)

Internet Resources for Careers, Grants, and Fellowships  
Ph.D. Pathways: Alternatives to Academic Careers  
Academic Job Search for Ph.D's and Post-Doc's  
Dossier Preparation: Teaching Portfolios and Teaching/Research/Personal Statements  
Resumes and Cover Letters: Graduate School Level  
CVs and Cover Letters  
Community College Job Search for Graduate Students

*And Remember: Career Counseling is Available!*

