Interviewing Advice by Prof. Peter Guardino

The following is based on several interviews scattered over an enormous variety of schools, from Ivy's and large, hyper-prestigious public universities to small liberal arts colleges and tiny branch campuses in weak public systems. Think about all of these questions. No matter how strange, someone asked me every single one.

Interview questions

#1 Question: Tell us about your dissertation

Make your answer direct and SNAPPY!

Prepare 1-minute version
Prepare 3-minute version
Be ready to be interrupted with clarifying questions.

- How did you arrive at this project?
- Why is your dissertation project important? What contribution does it make to the field?
- What is the broader significance of your research? How does it expand our historic understanding/literary knowledge/humanistic horizons/etc?
- What audiences are you addressing?
- How would you describe your approach or methodology?
- What current trends/projects in your field does your work interact with? [Name specific scholars/works.]
- If you were organizing a conference on your research topic, which scholars would you invite?
- What theorists have you found most useful in formulating your dissertation project?
- What would you hope that a non-specialist reader of your dissertation would take away from it?
- What do you think of X (recent critical book, a current controversy in your field, etc.)?
- Where do your research strengths lie? (Quantitative/qualitative, etc.?) Why? What are your research weaknesses? And how will you improve?
- How would you balance your teaching duties and your research plans?
- Could you conduct research from our library?
  Do you plan to apply for research funding? From where?
- How far along is your dissertation right now? When will you get your degree? [Be absolutely specific and positive.]
- What presses might be interested in your dissertation once it has been revised?
- In what journals do you hope to land your work?
- What will your next major project be?
- What do you think is the most important trend in research in your area?
- How does your own research fit into that trend?
- What is your research about?
- (Don't assume anyone has read whatever samples you've sent.)
- What plans do you have for your dissertation research now that you're done?
- Have you been in contact with any publishers?
- What do you have in mind for a second research project after turning your dissertation into a book? (Yes, there is life after that. Remember that many schools are looking for someone who will continue to be an active researcher. Think of something interesting and not too vague. No one will hold you to it later. Qualify your answer by saying you're at a very preliminary stage in this new project.)
- How do you feel about comparative research?
- How does gender figure into the issues that you address in your research?

- What do you think is the correct balance between lecture and discussion in a survey course?
- Have you read x?
- How is your work related to historical or theoretical debates outside of your area?
- What is your greatest strength as a historian?
- How did you become interested in history?
- How did you become interested in studying Tahitian sexual taboos?
- How do you maintain contacts with Tahitian historians?
- Describe the best undergraduate courses which you had.
- How do you feel about teaching writing?
- Are students today any different from the way they were when you were an undergraduate?
- Where do you see yourself professionally in five years? In ten?
- Where are the strongest graduate programs in your field? What makes them so?
- What made you decide to go to Gingrich University?
- Did you spend much time in your field site?
- Did you visit any local archives?
- What is the state of archives in x?
- How do you feel about teaching courses in political theory?
- Where did you get your undergraduate education? What was your major?

Questions about Teaching

- How do you feel about interdisciplinary teaching?
- Coming from a research university like you do, how do you see yourself fitting into a small liberal arts college like ours?
- How do you feel you can contribute to this university in particular?
- What courses would you like to offer here?
- What is the most difficult thing about teaching?
- What is the most rewarding thing about teaching?
- How is your teaching related to your research?
- If you could have students walk away with one idea from your class, what would it be?
- What attracts you to this position?
- What attracts you to this university?
- Have you been surprised by anything you have found out during your visit here?
- How do you feel about team teaching?
- How do your research and your teaching influence each other?
- What classes could you teach in our program?
- How would you evaluate student learning?
- How have you used technology in the classroom?
- Can you think of a specific example of when a student you were teaching really seemed to learn something that you regarded as worthwhile?
- Take course ___. As you would teach it, what three goals would the course achieve?
- What experiences have you had teaching diverse students? (First-generation, low-income, part-time, students with full-time jobs and/or family care responsibilities, students with disabilities, students representing different ethnic groups and races, religions, ages and genders?)
- Tell me about your teaching techniques (e.g., group projects, case method, etc.)
- How do you motivate your students?
- How would you encourage your students to major in our field?
- How would you work with our students as opposed to those at your current institution?

- If you have a student who is doing poorly in your class, what would you do?
- What do you find most difficult about teaching and how have you worked to overcome that difficulty?
- How would you teach a major work in your field? (They may name one)
- What kinds of writing do you want your students to produce?
- How would/do you teach [freshman core course, introductory language, composition, etc]?
- How would you teach an introductory survey course in your field?
- How would you teach an upper division course in your field?
- How would you teach a senior seminar in your field?
- How would you teach a graduate course in your field?
- If you could teach any course you wanted, what would it be?
- What interdisciplinary courses could you teach?
- What courses do you not see in our curriculum that you would be interested in adding?
- Do you use primary sources in your classes?
- How do you integrate gender into your teaching in survey classes?
- What is the difference between your goals in a survey course and your goals in teaching more advanced undergraduate courses?
- How would you set up a survey in your area?
- how would you describe yourself as a historian? Are you a social historian, political historian, what?
- How do you feel about teaching large sections of survey courses?
- Describe your best students.
- How do you feel about teaching non-traditional students?

Other Questions

- What do you think is the proper balance between research and teaching?
- Would you be able to take on a graduate student immediately?
- What do you think the role of an M.A. supervisor or a Ph.D. supervisor should be?
- Can you incorporate graduate students/undergraduates in your research?
- Are you willing to be involved in committee work?
- How will you enhance our department?
- What do you think "service" means or entails?
- What do you know about our university?
- Why do you think you would be a good fit in our department?
- Have you heard about our program/certificate/center on _____? Do you see yourself contributing to that?
- Why are you interested in our school/department?
- Why should we hire you?
- What should we know about you?
- What's your agenda for the next 5 years?
- Where do you see yourself professionally in 10 years' time?
- Institution ___ is dedicated to providing a liberal arts/ spiritually based/ holistic education. How would you describe your place within that vision?
- You've seen our mission statement. How would you see yourself contributing to our mission and campus atmosphere?
- We conceive of our campus as one large community. What non- or extra -academic activities would you be interested in sponsoring or participating in?

Personal questions

Potential colleagues want to know many things about you which are not related to your effectiveness as a researcher or teacher. Be prepared!

- Where are you from originally?
- Have you ever lived in a small town before?
- What do you do outside of work?
- Some of the questions they ask are strictly illegal and invite lawsuits. They know, however, that you won't sue. There are, in fact, no effective avenues of redress. Your best course of action on the spot is to answer them, although you probably shouldn't volunteer information on these subjects and you probably should endeavor to give literal answers without elaborating. Often these questions are asked innocently as part of an effort to get to know you as a person. Even so, the answer could be crucial, especially if they hear something which makes them think that you won't stay even if you are offered a job. Sometimes they are qualified by an "I know I'm not supposed to ask, but…" Good luck.
- Are you married? (Often preceded by a "I see that you have a wedding band on.")
- Do you have children?
- What does your spouse do?
- (This can be a killer question if your spouse is an academic or some other person who they feel won't be able to find work in their field wherever the job in question is located. See below.)
- What would he/she do if you came to work here?
- Is x a Hispanic name? (Or Jewish, or Hungarian. Please note that depending on the circumstances, they might be favorably disposed toward a particular ethnic group, particularly one that is under-represented in academia. They also might be unfavorably disposed toward other ethnic groups, or even the same one.)
- People will also fish for this kind of information in less obvious ways. They will also fish for information on your religion, political beliefs, and sexual orientation.
- I've had more of these kinds of questions from deans and presidents of schools with some kind of religious character than elsewhere. Even though these characters are involved in more searches, they seem to be less adroit in asking these kinds of questions and the results can be quite comical. For instance,
- You know that x is a school with a strong Catholic tradition. How do you feel about that?
- Here at x we feel that one of our strengths is our interest in giving our students a strong ethical approach to the world based in religion. Where do you get your own values from? (No, this was not another Catholic school-it was Methodist.) (I swear that both of these questions were thrown at me almost verbatim!)

The spouse issue

Years ago, as late as the early 1970s and beyond in some places, the process through which jobs were filled in American academia was very simple and at the same time very unfair. Everything was handled through networks of relationships, the famous "Old Boy Network." The faculty members of the institution which had an opening called their friends and former classmates, seeking a suitable candidate. Interviews were informal, and only rarely was more than one person interviewed. This system tended to make sure that the faculty of the wealthiest and most prestigious institutions remained male, white, and usually Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. It was sexist in two ways. First, women were largely excluded. Second, the inherent assumption was that the wives of academics existed largely to support their husbands. They would not have professional or even social lives of their own, but would instead be free to move to where ever their husbands went to graduate school and were employed, typing their husbands dissertations, organizing faculty dinners and parties, raising children, etc.

This was obviously unfair, and many people worked for change from the 1960s to the current day. The process was long. In the late 1980s for instance, I recall vividly the fact that the history faculty of my own graduate institution consisted of around 25 men and 2 women. Still, by around then most major universities had established a set of hiring practices that are still the standards today. Jobs are actually advertised nationally, the profession discourages overt racial, gender, or religious discrimination, and institutions interview several people for each position. The result is encouraging. The number of historians who are female is up dramatically, and the number of minority historians is also up, although to a lesser degree. Open searches have also led to an increase in the quality of faculty teaching and research.

Yet there is still a problem. Economic and social change over the same period has also led to a situation where two career couples, unmarried or married, are now the norm. Academia has bowed to that reality in some ways-the spouses of professors no longer are expected to organize the social life of history departments. In other ways academia has not adjusted. The new hiring system is still built largely on the idea that the person who is eventually offered a job is free to take it. This can be problematic, especially for institutions located in sparsely populated areas or when job candidates are partnered with individuals who also are academics or even historians.

Institutions and couples are struggling with this and trying to come up with answers that work for both. This is difficult, and institutional policies are extremely diverse. Some places continue to ignore the issue, and make no provisions for dual career couples. Some work informally to try to find jobs for partners at other, nearby institutions. Some set aside financial resources to hire the spouses of job prospects. In this case institutions face a philosophical problem, because current faculty members often believe that it is important to adhere to the principle of hiring through searches open to all applicants. Moreover, they also want to make sure that all new faculty members are considered equals. Thus, even in the places that are most conscious of the need to adjust to the social reality of dual career couples, specific procedures for doing so are often under discussion.

Now, you're asking, how will all of this affect my efforts to find a job? Obviously it will affect you more if your partner is an academic, especially if he or she is a historian. The key problem is that you really have no way of knowing how any institution or individual thinks the issue should be handled unless you ask. If you do ask during the interview process, you are exposing yourself to possible negative consequences before you could possibly achieve a positive outcome. (No one is going to do anything for your partner until they are sure they want you, and that decision comes after the interviews.) Thus my advice is to keep the spouse or partner issue off the table until they offer you a job. That's the moment to ask if they have any policy or possibility for accommodating your partner. There can be exceptions. Occasionally the chair of a department or search committee might bring the subject up earlier, probably be beginning by stating that they might be able to help your spouse find employment at their institution or elsewhere. In that case you might begin discussions then. In all other cases, though, you probably want to keep the existence of a professional spouse to yourself until you are offered the job.

<u>Dangerous Questions</u>: Nobody should ask you these questions, especially the ones about your family life. But it's not unheard of. Ask your trusted mentors how to best deflect such questions.

- How long would you plan on staying at University ___?
- How do you feel about living in ___?
- Do you have a spouse/partner? Are they willing to relocate?
- Do you have children?
- What kind of salary are you looking for?
- If you get more than one job offer how will you decide between them?

- Who else is interviewing you?
- Your current research requires more technological support than this institution is able to provide. How will you deal with this?
- We see that you have done a lot of conference papers and presentations; we have limited professional development funds. How do you feel about that as a limiting factor?

Final Question for Them

Do you have any questions for us?

Answer "yes" but make it short and know the answer to the question already.

Often at campus or AHA interviews people will ask you whether or not you have any questions you'd like to ask them. Sometimes they precede this by saying that you don't have to ask any questions. They're wrong. You do need to ask them questions because, believe it or not, you have to prove to them that you're interested in the job, even if it is a great job by anyone's standards and you did take time off from your busy teaching schedule or final drive to finish your dissertation in order to give your body over to the tender and compassionate hands of airport security and the airline industry to get there, not to mention fronting their university the price of the ticket. No, you still need to prove that you're interested in their school, and the way you do that is by asking many interesting questions. These may not be the questions that you want to have answered, but they will allow your interviewers another chance to shine.

In particular, ask other people in the department about their work-what kind of research they do, what they teach, etc. (Which of these is more important depends on the school and even the particular person you are asking.) Follow up on your questions. It is very important that you stroke these people and let them know that you respect them and therefore will be a good colleague. (See below under answering questions after your job talk.)

What questions you ask will obviously depend on who you are asking. Ask deans and other people outside the department to evaluate the department, ask people in the department about the university's commitment to the department, etc. Other questions to ask:

- What will my teaching load be, and what courses would I teach in a particular year?
- What distribution requirements do history courses fill? Which courses fill them?
- How many history majors do you get?
- How many graduate students are there in the department? How many in my area? What are the areas which have the most graduate students?
- What is the university's sabbatical policy?
- What is the university's policy on leave for people who get outside grants?
- What influence would I have on buying library resources I need for my research and teaching?
- What kind of expectations would I need to fulfill for tenure? Who has a say in the process?
- What do your best students do when they leave?
- How long have you been here and what do you like about the university?
- What is living in x like?
- Does the school have grants I can apply for to fund research?
- Is this position a replacement for someone who's left or retired or is this a new position?
- What other areas has the university/department hired in recently?
- Are they replacements for faculty who've left or retired or new positions?
- What are your students' greatest strengths?

- What do you hope that I would contribute if offered this position?
- What are your hopes for the curriculum in the coming years?
- What is the school's/department's relationship to the community?
- How do you collaborate with faculty in other departments?
- Best of all, ask specific questions based on your research on the department.
- DO NOT ASK about leave, salary, or benefits. Leave that for negotiations after an offer has been made. Do not mention recent scandals or rumors.

The job talk

Some of the things I am going to say here you've already heard. First, dry runs are a great idea. At the very least they give you some idea of the length of your presentation so that you don't have to frantically and nervously skip pages as you're hitting the 50 minute mark of your supposedly 40 minute presentation.

Job talks need to be tailored to their audience, and in fact you should listen carefully to whatever the chair of the department or of the search committee suggests about the talk.

Some places ask for a sample lecture for undergraduates. They may want this to have some relation to your research but as often it need not have anything to do with it. A friend landed a nice job at a good liberal arts college after giving a sample lecture on a subject which was not even related the country he does his research on. The topic was, however, relevant to an area of history the school wanted to cover with this position. I have been asked to give sample lectures in US history even though I have been and always will be a Latin Americanist and supposedly that is what they were looking for. Sometimes they ask you to give this sample lecture in a regular undergraduate class, even one on an unrelated topic. I once gave a sample lecture on Mexican peasant rebellions in a class on Ancient History. (I bombed.) Sometimes your sample undergraduate lecture might be in a mixed group of faculty from history and other disciplines and undergraduate students.

Not even all job talks about your research will be the same. Your research doesn't change to fit the circumstances, but how you frame your research can and should. You should try to frame you research in such a way that your audience, or at least the key people in it, can relate it to their own research, interests, or experiences. This will easier if you are dealing with large history departments which have someone in your field, or close to it, but even in those cases you need to try to reach the bulk of the department, not just the specialists.

To do this go on the web and find out who is there. If everyone has been out of graduate school for thirty years and few are active researchers, don't frame you research in relation to the very latest hot theory. I don't mean that you should look down on these people and water down what you have to say-this profession is full of very smart, very well-read people who entered it before it became the publishing contest it is now. Just frame the issues more broadly.

Your objective should be to make some kind of contact with everyone in the room, either by mentioning an author they have read or at least heard of or by mentioning a problem they have run across in their own research or at least heard of. This gives them a familiar life preserver to cling to as they listen to the your unfamiliar, new, and (hopefully) exciting original research. One way to get to those who are unfamiliar with your area is to spend some time talking about your sources. In the end sources may very well be the only experience which everyone in this profession has in common. I don't suggest that you spend time complaining about the poor light in the archive. Instead talk about how you squeezed information from the sources you had, say letters from diplomatic consuls to their superiors.

I feel that one of the reasons I eventually landed the job I wanted was that after giving my job talk several times I finally made a serious effort to bring my style of presentation and the way I framed the questions into line with the current style in the profession, at least for social history. I actually spent time writing and delivering a coherent four part introduction which had something for everyone. I briefly described a dramatic incident, followed it with contradictory quotes about it from two contemporary figures, followed that with the question I'm trying to answer in my work, and finally hit them with some historiography and theoretical perspectives on the issue. The introduction took at least five minutes. Only after all this did I start getting into the substance of my research. It all sounds corny, pretentious, and slow, but it worked. By the time I go to what I really wanted them to hear, everyone was listening and each person had something they could use to frame what I was saying.

Framing what you have to say at the beginning of your talk is not sufficient. You should make certain that you come back to at least the theoretical or historiographical stuff at the very end, also.

Try to make sure that your presentation ends with at least twenty minutes for questions. You may not always have twenty minutes, but that should be your goal. The questions serve a lot of purposes. They allow you to put to rest the doubts which some people may have about what you had to say. They allow you to expand on points which you made in your presentation. They also allow people in the department to show how smart they are. This sounds infantile, but it is a legitimate concern for you.

Most of us are used to a style of give and take in graduate school honed in seminars and orals. What we learn to do is to answer questions briefly and directly. That will not do for job talks in most cases. Why? It makes you sound unfriendly. It also makes it sound like you did not appreciate how important and intelligent the question was. Both of these impressions are VERY BAD. They are compounded by the fact that most of us in grad school don't pat each other on the back during intellectual discussions. Your graduate school intellectual style may make you sound like an unappreciative and unfriendly potential colleague.

People received this impression from the way I answered questions after my job talks several times, in fact in the majority of cases where I received any feedback at all.

O.K., but what should you do instead? First, begin your answer by patting the person who asked the question on their head. "You know, that's a good question. I never thought about it quite that way before. Looking back on my research, it seems to me that…" These kinds of statements make a difference. This is difficult. In fact, it is harder to do this when the question really <u>is</u> good, because your heart is racing and your mind is desperately trying to come up with a response. It is also hard to do because remembering to stroke the audience is difficult when you're pumped up, as you probably will be after a well-delivered, interesting presentation, or when you're depressed, as you will be if you don't feel you did well. DO IT! This may be even more important than the intellectual content of your job talk.

Most people are exhausted after their talks. The faculty may realize this and either put you on a plane or send you to rest somewhere. On the other hand, the grind may continue, and you may need to continue to be witty, outgoing, and friendly for hours at a reception and/or dinner. It seems impossible, but you have to try.

Good luck!