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Mock, Phone, Video Interviews

January 6, 2014

By [Cheryl E. Ball](#)

Mock Interviews

Participating in a mock interview my first time on the job market was the most embarrassing moment of my academic career. My program's job mentor had gathered a group of seven scholars from my humanities department, which ran the gamut in specialties from rhetoric and composition studies to philosophy and foreign language. I was a cocky grad student, but I went on the job market early and hadn't quite figured out my academic identity in a shifting market that had begun combining writing studies fields across rhetoric, technical communication, and new media. Thanks to my interdisciplinary humanities education, I was none of those fields alone, but finding a job ad where I could do all of them was difficult. The job mentor could see this problem and prompted me to do the mock interview. Per her request, I provided my "dream" job ad to the committee along with my cover letter and C.V. for that job. And then I waited, unprepared, for the scheduled time.

On the day of my mock interview, I dressed in as close to a suit as I owned at the time and walked into the large classroom we had scheduled, where the seven faculty members sat in a semicircle. I had only taken classes with one or two of them. I sat in the facing chair, totally unprepared for what was about to happen. I figured all I had to do was talk about myself and my (in-progress) research, not really knowing what the structure of these interviews contained. The faculty were all specialists in their fields, so their questions probed my ability to be conversant in each field whereas my specialty was about combining the fields. Yet I wasn't able to articulate how or why I did that. Realizing that I really couldn't answer their questions was incredibly humbling. I tried to mask my nervousness by being more informal (which I thought was being "congenial"), a choice that backfired with some of the more traditional faculty. By the time the 30-minute mock interview was over, I remembered almost none of it, except the feeling of dread and ill-preparedness I had.

Then the deconstruction began, and that is when I learned the most important lessons: what worked, what didn't, why they were asking certain questions, how they expected me to answer them, how I didn't, etc. Each field will have [different questions](http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2012/12/17/essay-questions-one-might-be-asked-mla-interviews) (<http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2012/12/17/essay-questions-one-might-be-asked-mla-interviews>) that typically get asked during these preliminary interviews, so I won't go into those here.

The point of mock interviews is to practice not only your answers to disciplinary- and job-specific questions, but also to practice how you present yourself to people you don't know well. This is why it is important to have a mock interview team that isn't your dissertation committee. Those interviewers will be assessing not only your answers, but also (for good or ill) your attire, physical tics, tone of voice, confidence level, seating position, eye contact, hand shake, and other mundane things like how gracefully you navigate around that awkwardly placed end table in some hotel room so figure out where you place your coat or purse or briefcase. It's a choreographic nightmare that most academics never practice, but they should. And while it may feel very awkward to do so, the hope is that you'll get the jitters out of your system.

As you may have noted, there are all sorts of [able-bodied](http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2011/02/07/margaret-price-on-the-search-process-for-those-with-mental-disabilities) (<http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2011/02/07/margaret-price-on-the-search-process-for-those-with-mental-disabilities>) narratives built into job-interview scenarios. One of the suggestions for [ameliorating this problem](http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/111/111) (<http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/111/111>) – as well as cutting down on the costs of attending conferences for underpaid graduate students – is to do technology-supported preliminary interviews via phone or other audio- or video-conferencing system. Job mentors sometimes overlook this rapidly growing area of needed practice for job seekers: Just as mock interviews have been done in face-to-face setting, so too do they need to be done by phone and Skype.

In my field, for instance, it's getting rare to have a face-to-face interview at the Modern Language Association; last year, many of the preliminary interviews job candidates I knew had were via videoconference, with the search committee in a conference room at their university. (The benefit of having the search committee all in one place is that Skype can be used with its video option, an option that isn't free if more than two computers are in use.) These technology-rich scenarios have a host of other issues that need to be minded, and thus mock phone or Skype interviews should be a top priority for fields that are moving in this direction.

Over the years, I've developed some tips that are unique for each of these types of interviews:

Phone Interviews

- Ask if it's possible to get the questions in advance. If they can provide them, jot down notes, but do NOT read from your notes during the actual interview.
- Dress just as you would for a face-to-face interview. It will make you feel more confident and professional.
- Make sure you have a phone line that is reliable. If you have a bad cell connection where you live, consider investing in a landline.
- If you are already employed, avoid conducting phone (or video) interviews at your place of employment if at all possible.
- Make your phone location as quiet as possible. If your cell phone is reliable and your office or home is full of noisy colleagues, children, or pets, consider sitting in your parked car. The soundproofing is usually rather effective.
- If using your cell, turn off your ringer after you receive the call to avoid additional interruptions from text messages, Facebook updates, etc.
- Don't talk endlessly for each question. Have a succinct answer of one-two minutes and then just STOP talking. Without the paralinguistic cues of an in-person audience, a lot of phone interviewees will just ramble for five-six minutes. If the search committee has more follow-up questions, they'll ask.
- Don't freak out when you don't hear lots of nods and yeses and other good-answer clues you'd normally get in a face-to-face interview. Just wait for the next question.

Video Interviews

- As with phone interviews, don't do this at work if you already have a job, unless your personal computer is just not up to the job.

- Make sure to accept the search committee member’s contact request well in advance of your interview. (And if they forget to send it to you, email them to ask for it at least a day in advance.)
- Test your technology several days before the interview, to be sure it works. Make sure to test your audio AND video.
- Set the camera angle on your computer. If using a laptop, consider setting it on a stack of books, so the search committee isn’t looking up your nose.
- Set your stage. Arrange the background so it is not distracting or overly obvious or super-ridiculous messy. Bookcases are easy. Your Japanese wall hanging when you’re applying for a Japanese art position might be overkill. I forgot to arrange my setting once, and a search committee got a pretty sweet view of the giant, blue cat condo my cats use.
- Check the lighting. Windows and lamps in the camera’s sightline will produce awful glares.
- If you’re interviewing from home, keep the dogs, cats, children, parents, spouses, etc., at least TWO rooms away from you. One room just isn’t enough, because they can knock, claw, bark, and hiss and still be heard behind that closed door. Again, this is a lesson learned from embarrassing, cat-fighting experience.
- Do not wear your mullet outfit (business on top, pajamas on the bottom) to a video interview. While super comfortable, you never know when you’ll have to get up to make the cats stop fighting in the next room.
- If you use Google Hangouts instead of Skype or Webex or another video-conferencing system, keep in mind that those are not private sessions and that anyone can join a hangout. Let it be the committee’s responsibility for policing the interview.
- Close or hide or practice not looking at the little video window of yourself. It’s SUPER obvious when you do.

Elsewhere I’ve written [tips about interviewing in face-to-face settings](http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2012/12/12/essay-mla-job-interview) (<http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2012/12/12/essay-mla-job-interview>), so I won’t repeat those tips here. If you don’t have a job mentor at your department, politely ask several faculty members yourself. But you’ll only need 20 to 30 minutes to conduct a brief interview and 10 minutes to get feedback from the mock committee members. For virtual mock interviews, job mentors might also consider arranging faculty from other institutions to participate as well, which will give more realistic practice. The point is, in all cases — whether you’re interviewing (or hoping to interview) by phone, or by video — practice does make perfect! Or at least better-prepared.

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