



# ACADEMIC INTERVIEW GUIDE

For Masters and PhDs



UNIVERSITY OF  
TORONTO

STUDENT  
**LIFE**

Career Exploration  
& Education

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# RESEARCH PREPARATION

Preparing for an academic interview involves knowing yourself as a researcher and practitioner. By doing so, you can articulate why you are the ideal fit for the institution. Preparation for academic interviews should be done early, as it will also involve researching the institution and department of interest. The pages following offer a series of prompts on: 1) What to research, 2) How to research and 3) Anticipating questions.

## What to research

### The position and the department

- What are the reasons the position exists now?  
What is the committee looking for? What is the department's or the institution's needs now?
- What is the breakdown of teaching and research responsibilities?
- What, if any, are the areas of specialization?
- Who are your potential future colleagues and their research interests?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the department?
- What is the philosophy of the department and institution?
- What are the courses being taught or courses you are expected to teach and at what level?
- What are the future research, teaching or expansion plans for department or institution?
- Are there any internal politics that you may need to take into consideration in how you present your candidacy?
- Based on your research, what are questions you have regarding the position and department?

### The institution

- What is the organizational structure of department within the university?
- What is the mission statement of the university as a whole and their future plans?
- What is the student demographic of the university?
- What are the university rankings on research and teaching?

## How to research

**Posting** - Read thoroughly and list any and all questions that arise. If the posting is brief, use it as a guide to begin your research.

**Website** - Use the department and university websites. At times, especially in the United States, there are some university ranking websites.

**Contacts** - Talk to the following people: your thesis supervisor, committee members and colleagues; people you meet at conferences; other contacts within your network. It is important that you begin to talk to people and establish relationships early in the academic search process.

## Anticipating questions

Once you have researched the needs of the position, department and institution, you can begin to anticipate the types of questions you may be asked during the interview. Some sample questions to help you in this process are:

### Interest and fit with position and department

- Tell me about yourself. Why did you apply for this position? Why are you interested in this position? What motivated you to apply for this position?
- Why do you think you are a good candidate for this position?
- How has your education prepared you to work for our institution?
- Why are you interested in our university? What do you know about us?
- How would you describe your ideal job? What type of institution do you prefer to work at?
- How do you see yourself fitting into this department?
- How do you feel about our institution and community? How comfortable do you feel working in a remote community/outside an urban centre?

### Research

- What are your research interests?
- Tell me about your research and dissertation.
- Why did you choose your dissertation topic?
- What contribution does your dissertation make to the field?
- How will you go about revising your dissertation for publication?
- Can you explain the value of your work to someone outside of your discipline?
- What unique contributions could you make to this department?
- How does your sub-field fit with the larger department?
- What is your understanding of (*theory*) in (*field*)?
- Tell me about your experience with securing funding.
- What resources will you need to conduct your research?
- What are your plans for securing funding to support your research?
- What research topics might you recommend to get grants?
- What are your research plans for the next (...) years?
- What do you like most or least about research?

## **Teaching**

- What do you see as the learning needs of students in this department and area?
- Describe your teaching style.
- What are your teaching interests?
- Give me an example of your curriculum development abilities? Take me through the steps of how you developed the curriculum for the course that you taught at ...
- What do you like most or least about teaching?
- What characteristics do you think are important to be a good instructor or professor?
- What is your teaching philosophy?
- How do you feel about teaching (*an introductory or graduate level course in...*)?
- What courses will you be able to teach?
- How would you teach (*specific course*)?
- Do you have any new courses you would like to develop?

## **Service**

- Describe your service experiences.
- What unique contributions have you made to committees in the past?
- How do you feel about being on the (...) committee?
- What committees have you been involved in the past?
- What professional and/or academic memberships do you have? And why?
- How have you balanced teaching, research and service work in the past?

## **Other**

- Tell us about your experiences with working on a collaborative project.
- How have you navigated deciding authorship in the past?
- What are your strengths?
- What are your weaknesses as they pertain to (*area of study*)?
- What has been your biggest challenge in your dissertation?
- How would you instruct and guide undergraduate/graduate research with students?
- How many Ph.D. students will you be able to supervise?
- How would you go about finding students to work with you?
- What are your short-term goals? Long-term goals?
- What are your other interests?

# STRATEGIES FOR ANSWERING QUESTIONS

## Strategies for answering interest and fit questions

Some aspects to focus on include:

- Highlighting aspects such as the specific values of the department that appeal to you
- The alignment of your research interests with the department's direction
- The fit of your experience with the position's subject area specialization
- How you will be able to make a relevant and strong contribution to the position and department

## Strategies for answering research related questions

Some aspects to focus on include:

- Why you chose this area or field or research question, its significance to the research world and to the department
- Any novel approaches you used in your research; relevant results and implications for future research
- Any other relevant research experience; what areas of future research you want to pursue and how these fit with the department's goals and how they can add value to the department
- From what source and how you will be able to get funding for your proposed research
- Your knowledge of the field beyond your dissertation

## Strategies for answering teaching related questions

Some aspects to focus on include:

- Which teaching experiences may be most relevant to the position including teaching assistantships, instructor and/or lecturer positions that you would like to share

- Details about the premise and content of the course, the scope of your role including materials developed, the class size and academic level, and additional administrative duties that may be relevant to the position you are interviewing for
- What you enjoyed about your teaching experiences; the student, peer, and/or supervisor feedback you obtained and what you learned from these experiences
- Elaborating on your teaching philosophy which can include commenting on your overall teaching approach and style, any theories or methodologies that have influenced your teaching style, specific examples of your teaching approach in the classroom, and how you continue to develop as an instructor
- Connecting your experiences to the needs of the position by being prepared to discuss the courses that you can teach, new courses that you could develop, and your overall fit with and contribution to the focus and direction of the departmental goals

## Strategies for answering additional questions

Given that there may be different types of additional questions, the strategy for answering these would be to focus on your most relevant skills, interests, experiences and attributes and to determine which experience(s) would be most relevant to share depending on the position and departmental requirements. For example, if you are asked how you would supervise undergraduate students, some points to consider may include any previous relevant experience that you have, and/or your approach and style in working with undergraduate students and assessing the effectiveness of your experience in working with this group.

# THE SCREENING INTERVIEW

## What it is

- The screening interview can be a first step in the process of short listing candidates to decide who will be invited to a campus interview and visit. This is particularly true for universities that are located out of the geographical area the candidate is living in.
- The time of the interview is typically pre-arranged.
- It may also be possible that you could receive an informal unscheduled phone call from a selection committee member or dean to clarify questions about your application. This call is not a typical interview, but the information gathered can be used to screen you in or out of the competition.
- The interviewing panel can be comprised of a selection of committee members, such as, the dean or associate dean, and additional departmental faculty members.
- The interview length can vary from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours.
- After the interview you may be asked to provide supplementary materials if they were not already included in your application such as a writing sample or teaching dossier.

## Challenges

- Lack of visual, non-verbal cues such as eye contact and body language that indicate how the interview is proceeding: positively or otherwise.

## Tips

- When scheduling the interview time, inquire about the composition of the interviewing panel and the length of the interview.
- In preparation for the interview, find a quiet room with no distractions; have application materials ready (CV, cover letter, other documents), notepad, pen, your list of questions; keep binder with tabs in order for you to be able to get to materials quickly.
- Disable your call wait feature and ignore any incoming calls. If it is through video conferencing, ensure that all your notifications (e.g. social media or emails) are turned off.
- Keep track of the conversation, jotting down notes and asking to clarify whom you are speaking to when necessary.
- Make sure people have stopped talking before you start talking; it is easy to interrupt people speaking as you cannot see faces and determine if someone is finished speaking.
- Speak clearly and slowly.
- Show interest and enthusiasm in your voice and remember to smile.
- Be aware of who you're speaking to, and discuss your research in technical or non-technical terms based on the interviewer's background.

# THE CONFERENCE INTERVIEW

## What it is

- The interview can be a first step used as a screening tool to decide who will be invited to a campus visit, particularly for universities that are located far from the candidate's city.
- Many disciplines do a great deal of screening of and connecting with candidates at large national conferences (e.g. MLA, APA conferences). This practice is more common in the humanities and social sciences, especially in U.S. schools.
- At times, you might be contacted in advance because you may have sent preliminary application materials. At other times, you may not know with whom you have the opportunity to interview until you get to the conference and you find out who is recruiting.
- The interview length is fairly short: typically 30 minutes or so, and may held in conference meeting rooms, or hotel public places such as the lobby, café or restaurant, it would be important to confirm with your interviewers the location of your meeting.
- Typically there are one or two interviewers, and they are often faculty members. University representatives look for clarity, energy, passion and intelligence in your interview with them.
- If you are giving a presentation at the conference, consider that some of the representatives from the university you are going to interview with may be at your presentation.

## Challenges

- The type of interviewing that happens at conferences is often hectic, and fast-paced, and can be stressful as there is a limited amount of time to make a great impression.
- You may need to work hard to keep interviewers' attention as they may be distracted or tired if they have been interviewing intensively.

## Tips

- When making appointments for the interviews, ensure you have sufficient amount of time between interviews and presentations to be able to get from one to the other comfortably. As well, ensure you are clear about where you are meeting.
- Be succinct but also make your points: ensure that the core themes you are presenting are clear. The answers you give should be memorable in order to stand out from other candidates.
- Be professional and ready at all times outside of your scheduled interview time as you may be interacting with key people throughout the conference. You may meet people from the university you interviewed with at other conference events.
- Prepare for the conference interview as you would any other interview, anticipate questions and prepare your responses, dress appropriately and research the position and university.

## During the interview:

- Try to establish rapport with the people interviewing you, by being open and friendly, and understanding if they are running late.
- Ask questions of the interviewers and about next stage of process if not mentioned.
- Concluding the interview by reiterating your interest in the position, thanking the interviewers, and indicating that you enjoyed meeting them.
- Remember to stay flexible about unexpected events at the conference. For example, there may be technological challenges, a room change or different interviewers than anticipated.
- After the interview send a thank you email or note to the interviewers.

# CAMPUS INTERVIEW AND VISIT

## What it is

The campus interview and visit consists of series of meetings and events that will allow the committee to determine your suitability for the position. It consists of individual and group meetings with different stakeholders such as the search committee members, other faculty members, students and university administrators (dean, associate dean, heads of department); the job talk; potentially a teaching session or seminar; lunch, dinner and other social gatherings.

## What to expect

- Typically candidates that have been short-listed, either through a screening or conference interview, are invited for the campus interview visit which is a more rigorous interview process.
- The interview can last one or two days.
- Travel, lodging and related expenses are typically covered by the institution. Some arrangements may be made by the institution while others may be made by the candidate. Candidates may be provided with a schedule for the visit outlining meetings times and people you'll be meeting with and additional events.
- It is key that you prepare and practice extensively for the interview and anticipate any challenges you might encounter and options of how you would deal with them.

## The four components

### 1. Interviews with selection committee members and students

A key component of the campus interview and visit consists of individual and group meetings with different stakeholders such as the search committee members, other faculty members, students and university administrators such as the dean, the associate dean, and heads of departments.

### 2. Job talk

- This presentation is typically 30 to 45 minutes with a 15 to 20 minutes additional question-and-answer period.
- This is typically a presentation of your research and knowledge. However, some universities will be more directive about what type of presentation they are looking for.
- The audience can be comprised of any or all of the following: members of search committee, faculty members from other cross disciplines, students, and members of academic community at large.

#### *Considerations for the job talk*

- It needs to be interesting and stimulating.
- It needs to demonstrate your knowledge of and depth in your specialty and the ability to communicate this information such that both experts and non-experts in your field who may be part of the audience can understand it. Ensure that you ask who will be in audience prior to the presentation so that you can prepare accordingly.
- Some aspects that you may focus on include the significance of your research, your approach, the results, practical applications of your work, and implications for future research.
- Use audio-visual aids including presentation slides and handouts as needed.

- Arrange in advance with the department for the required audio-visual equipment to be available for your presentation. Make sure you have backup electronic and hard copies in case of technical issues or disruptions.
- With regard to the presentation style, ensure that you make eye contact with the audience, you speak clearly and not too fast nor too slow, you use slides and handouts appropriately, and that you do not extensively read from your notes.
- Anticipate questions you might be asked from the audience and how you might handle them. Do not be defensive if someone challenges you: this may be an opportunity for you to demonstrate how you engage in discussion about opposing views on your research topic.
- Attend other job talks in your field to learn what is effective and assess strengths and weaknesses.
- Practice! Practice! Practice!

### **3. Teaching demonstration**

- A teaching demonstration may be more frequently requested for teaching focused positions to assess your teaching style and experience.
- Ensure you are clear about the audience and details of the demonstration. Ask about the course the session is a part of, what material has been covered and what are the course objectives, and if possible, obtain a copy of the course syllabus.

### **4. Lunch, dinner, and social gathering**

- These events are an opportunity for search committee members and other stakeholders to evaluate your candidacy, therefore it is important to remain professional at all times.
- Practice good etiquette with respect to eating and drinking, and be thoughtful of conversation topics.

## **Challenges**

- The campus interview and visit is often a very long and fast-paced day, and you need to stay focused. There are multiple meetings with very little time to pause in between.
- It is key that you remain professional in any unexpected situations, such as delays in meetings, or unreliable technology for your presentation.

## Tips

- If possible, arrive the day before the interview to allow for any transportation delays, and to be well rested for the interviews.
- When traveling, keep your most important materials, such as the job talk notes, schedule, contact names, and interview clothing, in your carry-on luggage in the event your checked luggage is delayed.
- Knowing who you will be meeting with throughout the day can help you be more prepared by researching their backgrounds and areas of interests.
- On the day of the interview, keep extra copies of your CV, research and teaching statements with you. As well, ensure you have your job talk and/or teaching notes, notepad, and other essentials (e.g. water bottle) with you. Finally, arrive early so that you have enough time to locate your first meeting venue.
- Be friendly, polite and professional with everyone you meet. When meeting with students, engage with them by discussing their research topics and inquiring their experience at the institution.
- Consider the fact that committees look for clarity, energy, passion, and intelligence in the candidate they are interviewing. They are also assessing you for a fit with the department, in terms of how you would be as a colleague, your potential productivity, and your career goals and commitment to the position.

## Questions to ask at the interview

Your questions should be thoughtful and reflect your interest in the position and department and demonstrate that you have thoroughly researched the department. There may be different questions directed to the different people you meet (e.g. faculty member, graduate students, deans).

### Some sample questions to ask can include:

- What do you like best about working here?
- What support is provided for new faculty members?
- I understand the department is expanding into the area of (...), and I was wondering if you could tell me more about the upcoming plans for this expansion.
- What is the teaching course load for the first few years?
- What are the research expectations of new faculty members?
- What financial support is provided to set-up a new lab?
- How are new faculty members evaluated?

## After the interview

- After the interviews, always send a thank-you letter to your hosts indicating your appreciation for the opportunity to meet with them, your interest in the position, department, and institution, and highlight some specific aspects from your interview that stood out for you.
- Assess your performance by considering what did you do well and what would you like to improve for future interviews. If you were not offered the position, consider if it may be possible or helpful to obtain informal feedback.
- At this point, consider the opportunity by analyzing if this is the right opportunity for you at this time.
- You may also need to begin to anticipate how to respond to a potential offer or multiple offers.
- Before making a final decision, you may choose to visit the campus again.

# NEGOTIATING THE OFFER

Many factors can create hesitation about negotiating for a more favourable contract including:

- an understanding that biases based on gender and racial identity can impact the negotiation experience;
- a fear to avoid appearing pushy, demanding, or too concerned with remuneration;
- a lack of knowledge about what it is reasonable to expect from an academic job, and how much negotiating is too much (or too little);
- the sense that in a difficult job market, any job (offer) is to be gratefully jumped at.

Negotiating involves flexibility, tact, and self-assertion. The negotiating process can shape the parameters of your job description and your salary in significant ways, and can help you establish a solid foundation to set approach subsequent renegotiations about the terms of your position in future years. Make sure to get all the details in writing where it is binding.

## Beginning your negotiation research

It is important to consider all of the components of the job — a contract is not just a statement about salary. By carefully thinking through your expectations, and by being prepared to articulate and prioritize, you will be well positioned to confidently state and support them in a discussion of the contract.

The components of the job can include commitments on:

- the kind and number of classes you will teach (your teaching load should offer the time required to research and publish in order to secure tenure), and/or teaching relief;
- teaching and research assistance;
- lab space and office space;
- research leave and sabbaticals;
- other important considerations such as spousal hires and assistance with moving expenses.

In preparing for these discussions, consider the following:

- Solicit the advice of your supervisor or faculty members you know well and feel comfortable with. Such advice can give you important information about starting salaries, and raises, as well as information about research and teaching assistance, that can reasonably be expected depending upon the type of academic position you are negotiating.
- Get in touch with the faculty associations at the universities you are interested in, and try to get information on such things as salaries and contracts. Consider that salaries can vary widely among institutions and of course are also influenced by country and geographical location. In Canada, most universities have faculty associations that you can contact, and these associations can give you valuable institution-specific information. Your discussions with the faculty associations will be confidential, and contact information can be easily found at the website for the [Canadian Association of University Teachers](#). Similar information for

U.S. schools can be found at the website of the [\*\*American Association of University Professors\*\*](#), while additional information specifically for Ontario universities can be found at [\*\*OCUFA\*\*](#). Statistics Canada is also a useful resource, since they collect data on salary by age, university, and discipline. Once you have the average figures for your institution, make sure you are not asking for anything below this range.

When discussing teaching commitments and lab or office space, your goal is to secure specific commitments about how much you will be teaching, what types of classes (graduate versus undergraduate) you can expect, class size, as well as, the type and amount of teaching support you will receive in the form of teaching assistants, and/or markers.

- For those in the sciences in particular, lab space and proper lab equipment can be crucial to successful research. Be ready to outline, very specifically, what it is you need and want, and don't hesitate to emphasize that you are eager to minimize any loss of start-up time (while also demonstrating both your enthusiasm and professionalism to those with whom you are negotiating).
- For those in the humanities and social sciences, where labs are not an issue, it is equally important to ensure certain standards for your office space. See the space beforehand if possible, and determine exactly what kind of furniture and computer you are entitled to.

## What to negotiate

- When discussing research funds, travel money for conferences, and funds for professional development, it is important to be clear of the amount of funds you will be receiving, if any.
- Administrative and committee work is another area where you can clarify expectations and responsibilities. You can ask such things as whether you will be expected to sit on a certain number of committees in a given year and how often you can expect to have to take up

administrative roles (such as undergraduate advisor, placement officer, or coordinator of a hiring committee).

- Another component to negotiate is the benefits for your family and children. In many cases, medical benefits will be covered by union agreements, and though they will not be negotiable, look at these agreements before signing your contract. Spousal hires and tuition waivers for your partner or children can all legitimately be brought forward during the negotiation process. For academic couples in particular, spousal hires can determine whether or not the applicant accepts the offer, and you should certainly raise this issue if it is relevant, since such hires are not uncommon. If your partner or spouse is not looking for an academic position, it can be worthwhile to see if the institution will provide assistance in helping him or her find a position in his or her area. Also inquire about assistance with moving expenses and help finding accommodations, or the possibility of faculty housing support, if these concerns are relevant to your situation.
- It is important not to neglect your well-being as it is crucial to your success in your new role as a faculty member. These discussions can include benefits for same-sex couples, parental and adoption leaves, ethnic, cultural, or religious matters, accessibility issues and any necessary accommodations that may be required. Many universities have offices devoted to the status of women and minorities, equity issues, and matters of family and health, so contact and draw on such resources wherever necessary. The faculty association at your university can also serve as a valuable source of information and support on any such issues.
- Finally, make sure you read over your contract carefully, and that you ask for sufficient time to do so. Consider what might be a reasonable request depending on the circumstances of the position and the start date. Take this time to run your contract past a faculty association representative as well as your lawyer.

# RESOURCES

Visit the Career Exploration & Education website at [www.careers.utoronto.ca](http://www.careers.utoronto.ca) or [clnx.utoronto.ca](http://clnx.utoronto.ca) for a full list of programs, services and resources. Consult our advice page on [academic interviews and question](#) for quick tips and to access our Academic Interview and Academic Work Search Process guides.

- ▶ [Canadian Association of University Teachers](#) is the national voice of teachers, librarians, researchers, and other academic professionals. They produced a handbook (found under services) that is a step-by-step instruction on negotiating salaries.
- ▶ [Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation](#) provides leadership in teaching and learning at the University of Toronto and provides support for pedagogy and pedagogy-driven instructional technology for all teaching staff and teaching assistants (primarily through the [Teaching Assistant's Training Program](#)) across the university's campuses and divisions.
- ▶ [University Affairs Canada](#) lists academic opportunities at Canadian universities and provides information on higher education in Canada, and directories and links to Canadian universities.
- ▶ Wilfrid Laurier University produced [sample academic interview questions](#) that may be asked by Deans, Chairs and other Faculty.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Questions in these guides were developed in relation to additional resources. The questions in this guide are similar to and/or the same as the other guides in the list below:

- [Academic Interviewing for Graduate Students by Graduate College Career Services Office, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign](#)
- [Academic Job Interviews by Career Education & Development, York University](#)
- [Applying for Academic Positions by the Center for Teaching Effectiveness, University of Delaware; the Center for Teaching and Learning, Stanford University; Karen Young Kreeger](#)
- [Interview Questions – Faculty Positions by University Career Centre, Texas Tech University](#)
- [New Resource: Questions for Academic Job Interviews by Katherine McDonald, University of Exeter](#)
- [Preparing Future Faculty – Interviewing Tips by Career Services School of Public Health, University of Minnesota](#)
- [Questions to Bring to Your Faculty Interview by Marina Dang, Nuclear Science & Engineering](#)
- [Sample Interview Questions by the Career Development Office, Illinois Graduate College](#)
- [Some Typical Academic Interview Questions by the National Association of Geoscience Teachers](#)
- [Tenure-Track Recruitment Procedures, Guidelines and Resources 2018-2019 by Sonoma State University](#)
- [The Development and Testing of the Academic Information System Survey by Lionel Plummer, University of Texas](#)