

A Magic Guide to Interviewing for the Job You'll Luv

ON THE INTERVIEW PROCESS ITSELF

The Unwritten Rules:

1. When departments hire they have unrealistic expectations. They want creative productive scientists, great personalities, brilliant conversationalists, selfless colleagues, etc. During an interview, you turn on like a lightbulb and shine as brightly as possible. There can be no lapses in conversation -- everything you say should be clever, original, insightful, and mature. On the other hand...do not talk too much...you have to listen as well as blab...and not give the impression of someone so caught up with their own cleverness that they never let anyone else get in a word.

2. Not only must you shine like a bulb, but you also need to change colors at an instant. Every faculty member wants to get someone fun and special For Themselves. This brings up the second fundamental rule: you must be yourself, but you must try to exhibit as many of your very own multiple personalities as you can. When talking to people during an interview, it is natural to concentrate on the research you've spent the most time at, but this is also what you will talk about in your seminar and thus what everyone will know. Before the interview starts, it is essential to review all the Other Interests you have -- side projects, current work, things you are just fascinated in and have vaguely thought of doing in the future. Bring them out as they fit in with the interests of those you are talking to, so that you show as many sides of yourself as you can.

3. Any single faculty member's opinion may win you the job, or kill your chances. This single fact is well-worth remembering. It implies several things:-- don't just try to be appealing to the ecologists in the department; molecular biologists, developmental specialists, etcetera must also want you. This is the hardest part of interviewing (Doak's opinion): trying to be interesting to and interested in someone with whom you actually have little or nothing in common. Worse, these people will themselves usually be bored and restless when they talk to you. HOWEVER, this is precisely why the points you score with people far from your field can get you so far -- most of the other schmucks interviewing will not even try to have fun with these folks, so your efforts will really count.-- Since virtually all academics are self-centered pricks, ask sincere and interesting questions about each faculty member's (and graduate student's) own work; don't just talk about your own.

-- But finally, much of what each person thinks of you will have more to do with the state of their constipation that it does with anything you do or say -- don't get strung out about it. Also, Don't Ever Give Up on someone's opinion. You need to realize that you will have no ability to judge how someone will rate you versus other candidates. Even if the old fart you are talking with falls asleep after 5 minutes, he may vote for you if you are start asking interesting questions again when he walks up.

PREPARATION

So, some people are full of bs, and all this comes naturally...with no preparation. That is the exception. Thus, here are some of the simple ways to prepare:

1. KNOWING YOUR FUTURE COLLEAGUES

For most of us it pays to do some research and read or skim a few papers of each of the faculty in the department at which you will interview (or minimally the search committee). The important thing here is to be able to ask one or two leading questions that show to each and every person that you are interested in them.

2. QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK CHAIRS, DEANS, AND SOME INDIVIDUAL FACULTY (and examples of how to sound like you have some sort of experience or originality)

The banal question: Is there money to bring in seminar speakers?

The correct version: If I wanted to teach an interdisciplinary course on ecology and economics (or just pick any field not well-represented in this department), could I get money to bring in 2-3 speakers in a semester who would address some of the themes of the course?

The banal question: what support is there for teaching courses?

The correct version: if I teach a special field ecology course, can I purchase modest pieces of equipment such as field balances, GPS units etc...that could serve the course as well as researchers for years?

The banal question: what is the teaching load?

The correct version: for my research, it would be best if I doubled up in some quarters or semesters, to free up time to focus on research during portions of the field season, what are my options for such teaching flexibility?

The banal question: How much space will I get?

The right question: I plan to conduct a combination of lab work, field experiments, and computer-intensive modeling. How much space could I expect for my lab computer facilities, and how much to house my grad students? Also, will I have access to pre-existing growth chambers and greenhouse space? [if the answer is no: If I came I'd be very interested in taking the lead on an institutional equipment grant to build more chambers if other people in the dept are interested....]

The banal question: how well do faculty get along and cooperate among departments?

The correct version: has the department ever been involved in a multi-department training grant proposal?

The banal question: what are computer facilities like?

The correct question: I am interested in using several computer labs in my course on _____. What sort of computer facilities are available for that type of instruction?

The banal question: what are class sizes here? The correct question: I enjoy lecturing to big classes and have some experience doing that. But I also think that students need to take at least some very small classes in order to really learn research ideas and methods. Can I

create a mix of one big lecture course and some quite small advanced classes so that I teach both styles of class each year?

do you get the idea....here are other questions:

When graduate students are recruited, if I were a new faculty member would I get any special help in either recruiting or admitting students ? I would like to get 2-3 students quickly...both to get my program underway, and so they'd have one another to interact with.

Obviously, research, teaching and service are part of the tenure decision. I have two concerns about the type of research I do. My fieldwork can take 2-3 years before it bears fruitful results -- is the publication record of field biologists judged by their standards...and not by the standards of molecular biologists? Secondly, with funding increasingly scarce, I intend to go after some pretty untraditional sources (DOE, TNC etc.) -- is there any prejudice against funding that does not come from NIH or NSF?

For the development of new courses such as(have some special creative idea here)...can faculty get some course relief in order to develop new courses?

Is there university or department funding for new faculty to help them collect pilot data for grants they will then submit to NSF or NIH?

QUESTIONS TO ASK INDIVIDUAL FACULTY

1. What is your biggest frustration here ?
2. What are the best features of a position here compared to other colleges or universities?
3. Ask the same questions of graduate students...and even undergraduates -- they will be flattered you take an interest
4. Are the teaching assistantships so time-consuming that it is impossible for grad students to get research done while teaching? Who decides on t.a. assignments? and is there any attempt to be fair ? (ask these questions of both faculty and grad students).
5. What sources of fellowship or research cost moneys are there for grad students? Also, I was pushed to learn grant-writing skills and would want to do that for my students: how many students in the department get NSF Dissertation Awards or similar outside money?
6. What are the hiring priorities for future faculty? It seems like there are few XX biologists in the department -- is that perceived as a problem?7. Is there any reward for involving undergrads in research? and any resources to help with this enterprise? I have a couple ideas for projects in which I hope to involve undergrads...

3. GENERAL PREPARATION TO ANSWER QUESTIONS

First of all, review the materials you sent to apply for the job. Commit to memory the

courses you said you'd love to teach, the research you said was in preparation, etc... Few people will actually bother to look carefully at what you wrote, but some will. You have to be prepared for their follow-up questions. The other major task is to read through the following list and have a set of thoughts about how to answer them. Notice that we Didn't say 'a set of answers committed to memory.' Part of shining in an interview is appearing spontaneous, rather than giving rout answers that are obviously 'canned.' Practice answering these questions in different forms from your friends so that you can think about them as well as just have a pat answer. Finally, check out the geography of the place you are going. If you are a field biologist, have in mind several possible field sites, or at least local communities that you would be interested in working in. This will allow you to ask intelligent questions that show a real interest in the job ('Subalpine meadows are a community that would be ideal for my studies of tardigrade competition; how long does it take to get into the mountains, and where are there protected areas for field experiments?')

4. QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE PREPARED TO ANSWER (with imagination and confidence)

1. What research will you be doing when you show up here ?
2. Will you work around here? [right answer: yes, i plan to start some projects around here quickly while wrapping up or continuing my work elsewhere]
3. Why would you want to come here?
4. What teaching would you like to do?
5. What is your philosophy of graduate student training ? how will you support the students, what type of projects do you expect them to work on?
6. What do you contribute to the department that is not already well covered by the faculty?
7. Where do you expect to get funding?
8. What makes you think you could ever get any outside funding?
9. What is the best idea you ever had?[these last two are actual questions asked of Doak on his interview, in exactly this form]
10. What projects will you start next?
11. What do you do? [many faculty you meet will know nothing about you -- having never read the files -- and this will be their first question. Have a snappy 3-5 minute answer that will make them want to ask more]
12. Where do you see your work going in the next 10 to 20 years? [lots of pricks actually ask this stupid question, so have a nice, clean answer that invokes a some 'big ideas' and 'big problems' in your field]

13. So...yawn...what questions do you have for me??? [see below]

5. MEETING WITH THE GRAD STUDENTS

There are only a few simple rules. First, be prepared as described above. Next, ask the following:

1. What do you all do? (ask this first, no matter how many students are there -- they will make it quick and they will love it that you ask. Also, try to refer to some of their research topics when asking and answering other questions)

2. What do you want in a new person?

3. What is lacking in the dept?

4. It seems to me that for some of you it would be really helpful to have a faculty member who does X (what you do and noone else does), and that that is a real gap that I fill. How many of you would be interested in seminars or reading groups on this topic? What other things could I offer that would be esp helpful?

Ask other questions as above.

6. WHAT TO BRING

Whether you wear shoes or not is your decision, but there is one simple thing that everyone should take to an interview: a notebook. In it should be:

1. your schedule. the faculty will loose their copies, so by having yours, you appear competent.

2. lists of questions to ask. Every time you go to the bathroom or are left alone for a second or two, take a look. It is a way of reminding yourself what you actually want to know, as well as of good things to ask to fill time.

You should also write things down in your notebook. Do not act like a newspaper reporter, but if you ask detailed questions (e.g 'what is start-up' and 'how much greenhouse space'), writing down the answer helps you to remember and shows you really want to know.

7. FINAL WORDS

The first and final thing to remember is: you don't need their stinking job anyway, so have fun! Especially after reviewing all the stuff above, you may feel that interviewing is an insurmountable hurdle. Not so; the advice above is simple, as is the preparation.

Furthermore, it is all just increasing your odds -- you can fuck up many parts of an interview and still get the job. Maintaining a sense of fun is especially important, because seeming as though you are enjoying yourself is a big part of 'shining' and it is hard to fake. Basically, you are acting out a part for the interview. The character is you, but a you that is well-rehearsed and enjoying yourself.