

How to Approach Phone Interviews

***Editor's Note:** Brian Maricle spent some time in the job-hunting trenches before landing his position at Fort Hays State University, and he learned plenty along the way. One particularly challenging situation he regularly faced was the telephone interview. Aware that many other postgraduate students were about to go through what he went through, now that spring is in the air, he asked us whether the ASPB News might be interested in sharing a few of the lessons he learned in the world of phone interviews. We are happy to publish his advice and hope our postgrad community finds it of value. Good luck in the job market!*

I finished my PhD about two years ago and began applying for jobs. Shortly into the application process, I had my first phone interview. That phone interview was unquestionably the worst experience of my professional life. I was completely unprepared for it. Since then, I have had temporary positions, so I have been in the applicant/interviewee pool for three consecutive application seasons. My interview skills have improved since then (I was hired!), but I always found the phone interview to be challenging.

One of my former lab mates from graduate school recently approached her first phone interview. She asked if I had any advice. For the benefit of both of us, I organized what I knew. I realized that my phone interviews all had common themes. Despite the different institutions and the

different positions, many types of questions were regularly asked. I am passing along what I have learned in the hope that others can learn from my mistakes. At the very least, those people who make phone interview blunders will know they are not alone.

The major challenge with a phone interview is that it occurs over the phone. In my opinion, it is far easier to relate to someone face to face. One cannot “read” people very well over the phone. You cannot see body language, or facial expressions, or the gestures they are making to each other (thumbs up, thumbs down, throat-slashing gestures, etc.). This leads to a strange awkwardness that always seems to be present during a phone interview.

Additionally, realize that you will probably be talking to a number of people crowded around a speakerphone. It can be

a little unnerving, which can compound the awkwardness. If possible, try to practice with someone else when preparing for phone interviews. Question each other over the phone about some of the following elements, and try to prepare some good responses. Keep notes, and have them handy while you are doing your real interviews.

Getting Started

Your first order of business is to develop a clear idea of what you want in your job and in your life. Prospective employers commonly ask about your long-term goals and what you would consider an ideal job. Remember, an institution is making a long-term investment in a faculty member. It is in their best interest to hire someone who will be happy and productive for a long time.

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During your phone interview, be prepared to answer specific and general questions about the various facets of the position. The more you know about the position and the institution, the better. Do your homework. Most institutions have websites that describe departments, course offerings, faculty research, and so forth. You will fare much better if you can demonstrate that you have a working knowledge of the institution.

For faculty positions, institutions will normally expect contributions in three areas: teaching, research, and service. Depending on the nature of the position, they will prioritize these differently and expect different commitments from you accordingly. For example, Research 1 institutions will expect you to spend the majority of your efforts in research, while teaching institutions will prioritize teaching above all else. Make sure you are getting yourself into something you want. Again, the more you know about the job, the better. Here are some specific suggestions relating to the three areas.

Teaching

Interviewers will ask what courses you want to teach. Often they are looking for someone to fill a specific niche. Try to play to this, but also try to be flexible. Show a willingness to teach introductory or general education classes. Be prepared to explain why you want to teach a particular class. If it is a new class for them, know what sorts of materials would be needed (especially the lab portion—reagents, materials, space, equipment, etc.).

In addition, expect them to ask some general questions about how you teach. Know your strengths and weaknesses. Identify techniques that you have found to work well. Talk about how you approach a class of students, how you try to motivate them (important for general education classes), or how you might try to align lecture and lab, for example. How do you keep students interested? Do you find it helpful to post notes online? (I have learned that many students do not come to class if you do.) How do you lay out expectations? Can you

focus on a “theme” for the term? Are you willing to team teach? Teaching is always an important area, so consider it well.

Research

Be prepared to describe what you do and what you would like to do over the next few decades of your life. Why is what you do important? Be able to provide specifics in case a specialist is present, but also be prepared to talk to nonspecialists. Have an idea what you need for lab space, equipment, and other requirements. They may want to know what you would expect for start-up funds as well as where you expect to apply for funding. Above all, talk about how to involve students, perhaps even undergraduates. Can you interest students in your research? If there is a graduate program involved, can you mentor graduate students? Tenure decisions often involve student mentoring, so make sure you address this.

Service

Although many experienced faculty members grumble about service, it is important. Committees are needed to keep the university going. Faculty members (especially those working toward tenure) are expected to contribute. In addition, there are many other types of service in academia. New faculty members may not be expected to advise students right away (although, if they ask, tell them you are willing to do so).

Other types of service might include various practices of student recruitment. This is important because universities need to make money. Thus, they want to recruit more students who pay tuition. Administrators pay attention to numbers of majors and numbers of student credit hours in departments. Will students want to take your class? Can you interest nonmajors in transferring into biology or botany? Can you go to high school recruiting events and interest people in biology? Administrators follow this closely.

Wrapping Up

Finally, the interviewers will likely ask if you have any questions for them. Make sure you ask something—someone who does not have questions does not seem

interested. You may ask about the facilities for teaching or research, or you may ask how your time is to be allocated. (For example, my contract says my time is supposed to be split 60-20-20 among teaching, service, and research. Although these numbers do not necessarily represent reality, it is good to know basic expectations.) It might be good to ask about tenure expectations or about what sorts of changes are expected in the department or college over the few years.

Ask about the town. What is the cost of living? Is it easy to find a place to live? What is the quality of local schools? What cultural or other activities are in the area? Remember, you are making a long-term decision here, so make sure this is a place you'd like to live.

After the interview, send a follow-up thank you note to the person chairing the search. Thank him or her for the interview and for the group's interest in you as a candidate.

Normally, the round of phone interviews is finished quickly, and you will soon learn if you will be invited for an on-campus interview. Don't worry too much if you do not hear anything for a week or so. It is okay to call or email the search committee chair to ask about your status. Do not become a nuisance, but some contact shows you are interested in the job. If you do not hear anything within about two weeks, you can probably shift your focus to other applications; they are likely wooing another candidate.

If you are invited for an on-campus interview, then you have made the next cut. It is in an institution's best interest to move quickly, because the best candidates will soon be hired by someone else. Thus, you will probably not have a lot of time to prepare if you are invited to campus. On-campus interviews favor the prepared candidate. Have a 50-minute research seminar ready (refined and rehearsed), but also be ready to give a sample course lecture, and hope for that next call!

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