CHAPTER TWO

CONFERENCE INTERVIEWS

Here are suggestions, questions to prepare, and information gleaned from many sources, most of them anonymous handouts circulated from school to school. Any advice that appears out of place comes from experience, so don't pass by any of this information lightly.

Image:

Look natural. Oddly enough, you have to practice this!

Look at least somewhat dressed up and thoroughly professional. Make sure your clothes look good when you're in a sitting position as well as when you stand. By that I mean something pretty specific. A short skirt, no matter how stylish it looks when you stand, will ride up when you sit in a low chair, and chairs in interview suites tend to be low. That sends the wrong signal to interviewers, both male and female. If your skirt exposes your knees, wear very opaque panty hose, or your knees will flare white if you sit in a low chair and look like a pair of headlights, drawing attention. Pants have no such problems. Men, make sure your socks stay up, and show no skin if you cross your legs. A member of my dissertation committee tells about some punchy interview committees she has known, who, after their tenth interview of the day, became extravagantly sarcastic and giggly over a candidate's ill-chosen necktie. Wear the outfit several times before the interview so the new-clothing stiffness disappears. Because you may have to do a lot of walking and standing, make sure the new shoes are well broken-in.

Present yourself as a colleague, not a student. Make this a conversation and not an interview by getting them involved in it with questions. Don't just sit and wait for them to ask you something. Don't reply with monosyllabic answers. Don't just be reactive; be active as well. You may find it difficult to overcome student deference or shyness. Even harder, you may come from a background where modesty is prized and boasting abhorred. While you should not boast during the interview, you must keep showing them why you are good. You must work to transform yourself into a colleague before you have actually gotten the job. You need to observe faculty around your current school, and try to see things from their point of view and from an administrative viewpoint, which will differ considerably from a student perspective. A school wants to know what you can do for it; think about the needs of programs and majors and emphases. Think about running a program—composition, Irish studies, a post-colonial reading group. What would that involve? If you are concerned with computers in the classroom be sure you know what software would be needed and have an idea of what kind of support personnel are needed to keep such a system running. For those of you who are shy, remember that you have learned to overcome that in the classroom. Draw on your classroom persona.
Your manner must be energetic and forceful. People will inevitably extrapolate from your personal behavior to your probable behavior in a class. If you are low-keyed, they may conclude that you would be boring and dreary in class. If you seem low-energy and tired, they will presume that you will be unable to take the pressures of teaching, scholarship, and service.

Avoid looking awkward. For example, don’t walk into the room with your briefcase in your right hand. That will cause an inept shuffle when you shake hands. If they offer you a glass of water, take it. Adrenaline will dry your throat out, and your coughing and asking for water in the middle will make you seem clumsy. Their indication that things are over may be abrupt and inconclusive: “I guess that’s it, then.” You should have an exit line or some kind of a line ready to avoid awkwardness. One very practical response is “May I make two points about my interests that didn’t come up? The first is…..” Then thank them for the interview, and ask them when they will be making their decision.

Try to look as if you are enjoying this. If you’re in the groove and answering well, you will find the process exhilarating and exciting. Enjoy the high and let that show.

Attitude:

Be positive. Be optimistic. If you learn that they really need someone to teach the intellectual prose course in your historical period, say cheerfully that you would have from January to September to work up a new course. If a school hired you and wanted that course, you would get to work right away. Your school has such-and-such a resource, and so-and-so has taught the course, so you will consult both and could start working on texts and a syllabus immediately. You may have specialized in something esoteric, but the smaller the department to which you are applying, the more they will need you to be a generalist in your teaching. Indeed generalist vs. specialist issues will cause you to walk a fine line. Say you specialize in francophone literature (but not French), or Caribbean literature in English or Asian-American but not American literature in general. A department may say it wants such a specialist, but you will nonetheless find that you are being tested and queried so they can be sure you are not too strange or unusual. You may even be asked to teach something very mainstream, even though it is not your field, simply to allay this fear of the alien. The same is true if your first job was secured outside of the United States; when you try to get back into the country after three or ten years, you will have to strain to prove your ability to fit normal American academic expectations, even though lip service may be given to multi-cultural experience. By contrast, if your credentials are very standard, you must strain to make yourself stand out as unusual and desirable for other abilities, often by adding technological experience.

Let them know that you can imagine yourself at their school. Sound positive about their school. Do not play hard to get, and do not voice any dissatisfaction or even minor worries at this stage about finding work for partner or schools for kids or whatever. All the larger worries—partner’s job, benefits for same sex partner, need for special
schooling for a child—should be saved until the campus interview at earliest. Just be positive.

Be positive about your graduate experience, though you need not go overboard. Keep statements about your graduate school specific: “The English department has modified its rhetoric program in X way.” “My advisor gave me a great deal of training in that.” “The rhetoric program gave me a stronger background in Z than most PhDs get from traditional literature programs.” If you badmouth your current school, they’ll figure that you will badmouth them when you leave, or worse, while you’re there. People do not want a rotten apple in their barrel.

Be yourself. Don’t just try to guess what they want to hear. Some people really want to meet a new person with a fresh perspective. If they begin what sounds like an argument, they may just be challenging you to state your position even in the face of opposition, and may like you better if you can do so. You can always hedge slightly. “On the basis of my experience so far, I would choose to do X. What are the considerations that make you prefer Y?”

Be courteous, even if someone is rude and aggressive. You may be faced with a confident assertion about something in your field that you know to be wrong, yet find the person belligerently unwilling to entertain an alternative view. Plenty of loons inhabit academe, and some get on search committees. Never bluster or lose your temper, even if you dislike a question. A search committee crossed off the list someone who protested angrily when asked a standard business-interview question: “Why should we hire you?” That offers an opening for you to present your virtues, but this candidate evidently felt threatened and responded in a fashion that turned everyone off.

Preparation:

Have memorized a ninety-second description of your dissertation. Time it and be able to give that without hesitation if awakened at three o’clock in the morning. After giving it at that length, you can offer to expand on any part of it they wish to learn more about. That’s much safer than talking about your dissertation for five minutes and having the committee’s eyes glaze over. You may be asked for such a description only once or twice, but you will slot bits of it into all of your discussions. That ninety-second description is invaluable. If you are in Comparative Literature or one of the language departments, you should memorize versions of this in all of the languages that might be relevant to your job hunt. You should also practice answers to the questions in your language as well as in English, or—if you are, say, a native speaker of Spanish, practice the questions in English as well as Spanish, even though you expect to get a job in a Spanish department. Remember, if you are being interviewed by a multi-language department or an all-literature or humanities department, most of your interviewers will know nothing at all about your specialty. Do not use jargon, and stress the originality and importance and applications of what you have done.
Also, memorize a list of **four to six points** that you will make during any interview, and prepare ways of working them into the conversation. These are the points that make you stand out, your particular virtues, the things that should make them want to hire you over someone else with similar qualifications. You may have to work them in individually, or you may get a question like "why should we hire you?" That would let you trot those points out all together. If you haven’t managed to get a couple in, you may be able to do so when they ask if you have questions or when they are about to close. Just say you want to make a couple of points first, do so, and then go on.

Brainstorm with friends and fellow job-hunters. Generate variations on the questions and answer them. Ask yourself questions and answer them as you walk, work out, sit in the car, shower, sit on the toilet, or stand in line at the cash register.

Whenever possible, answer the questions you are asking yourself **out loud**. Go over you answers with your dog watching you. Having another set of eyes on you, even if it is your dog, helps. You need to get used to the sound of your own voice, and you need to engage that part of your brain. If you need more than one language, you will need this fluency in all of them, so practicing aloud is crucial. Work to vary your tone and expression. Use your hands.

Construct a profile of your strengths and rehearse them. Think about your weaknesses and prepare for questions about them. If there is an unusual gap in your preparation—no German, and you a medievalist, or a big-shot professor at your school in your field with whom you did not work—have a well-considered answer to a question on the subject. Do not say negative things about the famous professor; he or she may be a bosom buddy of someone interviewing you, or the interviewer may enjoy needling the professor by passing on such a negative comment (with your name attached) at the next professional conference.

Prepare for the interview as if it were the most important exam in your life, but don’t let the interview be an exam. Don’t be submissive. **Make the interview into a conversation.** You can answer a question and then ask one. “When I teach rhetoric, I think three main things are important: A, B, and C. What are the emphases in YOUR rhetoric course?”

Bring materials with you such as sample syllabi of past courses, and—even more important—courses you would like to teach and best of all, syllabi for courses they offer. Bring a teaching portfolio; if you have two versions, bring the longer one and leave it with them.

Be informed. Follow the relevant controversies in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* for the previous year, and be able to describe your thoughts on some. The *Chronicle* will alert you to any hot issues at that particular school, and will let you show your professionalism.
If you attend the MLA, ignore their job information center. You can stand in line for four hours, only to be told (erroneously) that your interviewers have not registered their suite information, or be given the wrong information. Instead, call the interviewer when you’re in the hotel lobby fifteen minutes before the interview, and get the suite number. One candidate, unable to get through and desperate to find out where the interview would be, got it by bribing a bell captain: $20 handed over with authority got him the suite number that the desk would not hand out.

**The Contents of your Briefcase:**

One folder for each school to be interviewed in this part of the day. In that folder is the cheat sheet attached to the inside cover, the copy of the letter you sent, the syllabi tailored to that school, your syllabi for previously taught courses and those for dream courses, your teaching portfolio, and the Table of Contents of your dissertation, just to remind you of the chapter titles. Bring extra copies of syllabi so you can pass them to everyone on the committee. Bring your teaching portfolio; if you have two forms, bring the longer one and make an opening that will allow you to pull that out and give it to them. Also, bring photocopies of student papers that you have marked up and commented upon. These might be separate, or might be part of the larger teaching portfolio.

If your thesis is well along but not defended, bring a copy of the whole manuscript with you so you can prove that it exists. To reduce weight, you could print it single space and on both sides, but you can tell them the real number of pages. People lie about the state of their dissertation, and sometimes even supervisors do. You need to be able to prove that yours is as you say it is. A diskette does not inspire the same confidence, however much more convenient to carry.

Plan for emergencies. Have with you a few kleenex, a few cough drops, a small bottle of cough syrup, painkiller for a headache.

**Talking about your Teaching:**

Even with research-oriented schools, most of the interview will be concerned with teaching. You need to have given a lot of thought to every aspect of pedagogy.

First, you need syllabi of at least some of the following sorts:
- a survey for your historical period (e.g., Spanish Golden Age, Victorian)
- a broad survey (anthology course, Beowulf to Milton, or Modern European History, or post-Renaissance philosophy)
- your dream courses for various levels of student—these should reflect knowledge beyond the dissertation and should not be too highly specialized in topic
- a writing course
- a rhetoric course
a genre course
a theory course

Be sure you have material for an honors seminar, a senior-level course, and a graduate seminar, and be clear in your own mind how you would handle material and assignments differently in those three.

For period courses, be prepared to do a traditional course and a more radical version. Be prepared for questions (some hostile) on which canonical author you mean to discard to make space for someone non-canonical. You might be asked how you would approach a particular author of the period.

Check their catalogue, and prepare syllabi with some of their courses in mind. Be able to say that you could teach a, b, c, d, and e (their course numbers) with little or no preparation, and would be able to take on f and g with a bit of warning. If you can’t memorize the course numbers, at least have their titles/subject matter clearly in mind.

Know arguments about breadth vs. depth and know what you are trying to accomplish with your chosen texts.

Know the prices of the standard anthologies. If you have to choose between one and another for teaching an anthology course, price might be a factor.

When asked about your dream course, don’t describe something very esoteric and specialized; try to ensure some general appeal. Specify the level you are aiming for, and if the first one you describe is a senior honors seminar, then balance that with a course you would thoroughly enjoy at the sophomore level. Emphasize undergraduate teaching, even lower level teaching; that’s what you will do most of, and they won’t want someone who is obviously hoping to avoid that. If you present syllabi for advanced courses only, they may dismiss you as trying to avoid the lower level teaching that forms most of everyone’s load there. The more the school emphasizes teaching, the more lower-level your syllabi should be.

Talking about your Research:

Be able to talk about your methodological positioning. Step back and define, review, and think through your position with regard to method, predecessors, influences, schools of thought. Don’t make claims for your method that won’t stand up; be aware of its limitations.

Be distanced enough from your own work that you can sound like an expert who can teach the committee about it.

Know your dissertation backwards and forwards. Have that ninety-second description ready, but be prepared to discuss any part of your work at greater length. Don’t forget
to use specific examples. One of the most common mistakes of inexperienced interviewees is talking in abstract generalities. Be sure to anchor all of your general statements with references to specific texts or evidence. Make sure the central literary texts are clear in your mind. Refer in detail to them to make your points.

The Interviewers:

Find out who will interview you, and look them up in the appropriate professional bibliography. Read a bit of their work if you can. Make reference to the work of those in fields near yours if you get a reasonable opening, but don’t force it and don’t challenge them on a point. Instead, point to overlaps or compatibilities between their work and yours, and talk about how much you could enjoy colleagues with such interests to talk with. Be aware of cultural differences. If an interviewer (particularly for a language job) comes from a different country, this homework on your part may be considered sycophantic. Get advice from your mentors on this issue. All American interviewers know that you’ve done the homework specially for the interview—and in that sense you are apple-polishing and you all know it—but most would interpret such a reference as an indication that you are interested in the job and school, and welcome proof that you’ve taken some trouble to learn about them.

Be prepared for interruptions of the interview and possibly for inattentiveness of the part of some interviewers. You may be the 9th candidate seen that day, or one of the interviewers may be coming down with the flu. Someone may come back late from lunch, or be too upset by having had a wallet stolen to concentrate on you.

An Array of Questions: (The most specific questions here reflect English department concerns; cross out “Milton” and write in the appropriate author from your own department. Work out adaptations and variations to fit your field in general and your specialty in particular.)

Preliminaries

They will probably base their questions on the letter of application you sent, so be clear on what you said to this particular school. Don’t get confused and give them the wrong spiel about future work. Frequently a reviewer will underline a term or two in the letter and ask you to explain what you mean by "authenticity" or “thesis nearly done” or “challenging Derrida.”

Remember that their questions about “postmodernism” or “location” will come from their definition of the term, which may differ from yours. Try to catch such differences before they develop into misunderstandings. You can say, “I define X as follows [brief definition]; therefore, I consider Y to be the case.”

If you don’t know the answer to a question, don’t say “That’s a good question.” Think about how you have used this in your teaching as a phrase that is meant to flatter
students while you scramble to think of an answer; these are not students in need of your praise. Try, “I haven’t thought about that before. Thinking out loud, I find myself preferring X.” Another formula: “I don’t know. I would approach thinking about the topic in this way and maybe this and that.” You might then ask what they think and why.

Someone may say, “Before we start, can you tell me how you became interested in the Eighteenth Century?” or “Why did you go into German?” Nothing, however, is off the record or “before” the interview. Everything you say may be used against you. The interviewer is probably just trying to throw you an easy question to help you relax.

They may ask about your next book, meaning what you will turn to after the dissertation book. You must have a well-thought-out project, and preferably have two or three in mind. One might be more attractive in terms of a particular job than another. Say that your thesis was on 19th century fiction. If you are hired as a fiction person, a fiction book, possibly going beyond the 19th century or taking up another fictional sub-genre, would be the right one. If you’re hired as a 19th century person, you might well go beyond your initial work in fiction into non-fiction genres of the period. If you are job-hunting in two periods, you would expect to follow up with the book that better fits the job you will have.

Questions they may ask:

These come from various sources, most of them anonymous. Some were evidently used at Ohio State, the University of Maryland, and Duke. Most were reported by Penn State job hunters as actual questions they had faced. A few came from business magazines.

Testing You:

Why should we hire you?
Teach me something new!
What motivates you?
Two of us went to the production of Richard II last night. Tell us why we as modernists should care about this play (this, to a Renaissance candidate).

In-your-face questions may be used to see if you can think quickly, handle being surprised, and come up with something interesting.

Teaching Questions:

Which courses are you most comfortable teaching?
What was the best class you ever taught? What was the worst, and why was it so bad?
How did you handle the problems?
What is your favorite or most effective “active” assignment for a course?
What is your dream course? What are your dream courses?
How does your teaching philosophy influence your teaching?
Could you please provide some idea how you deal with the broader spectrum of diversity issues pedagogically (nation, race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, etc.)? In what ways are they incorporated into the daily workings of your classrooms?

Please discuss your theoretical approach to the field of Ethnic Studies in general and Native American Studies in particular.

In a predominantly white classroom, when you are teaching about race, how would you deal with student resistance should you encounter it?

All of our department faculty are expected to teach our introduction to ethnic studies course (as well as other general ethnic studies courses). Can you tell us how you might approach teaching such a class?

There will be opportunity for you to develop new courses in our department, so we'd like to know if there are any new courses you might be interested in creating?

Do you share your own writing with students?
What texts would you most like to teach?
What have the students you taught been like?
What do you find most difficult about teaching and how have you worked to overcome that difficulty?

In what ways might technology expand and/or limit your teaching?
What particular kind of student do you find it hardest to deal with?
What was your most embarrassing experience in a classroom?
How do you reconcile the conflict between teaching and research?

Which types of interactions with students do you feel are most productive, from both your perspective and that of your students?

Would you comment on the controversy over composition courses being used to instill political correctness?

What theoretical assumptions inform your composition teaching?
How do you introduce and address difficult topics in your course such as race, gender, and identity?

How do you approach survey courses?
Which textbook would you use for a course in X?
How do you deal with defiant or apathetic students?
A student has plagiarized his final paper, and has gone home for the break so you can’t discuss it with him. What would you do?
Isn’t using film in class just a way to dumb it down?

What are the similarities, do you think, between your students and ours?
You’re used to a big school, but we’re worried about whether you will give our small liberal arts college students the amount of attention and feedback that they have a right to expect. You must prepare for questions probing this anxiety on a small teaching college’s part. One thing you might do is photocopy some student papers you have marked up and commented upon; you could pull these out in such an interview and show the kind of attention you pay to student work.

For specialists in a language, you may get questions about whether you can teach culture as well as language, and questions on how you would do it.
Curricular Questions:

We’re trying to start an X program or concentration in our department; what do you think such a program needs? (Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Women’s Studies, Irish Studies, Rhetorical Studies, American Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Studies in the Americas, African and African-American Studies, Chicano/Latino Studies, Asian American Studies and the like. If you are applying to a language department, you may be asked about setting up or altering their offerings in culture or in business writing in that language. If you are in any of these areas, you MUST have a good answer in mind.)

How is your work on X [ancient Greek, rhetoric, linguistics, film, Punk music, etc.] relevant to a literature department?

Isn’t your work rather antiquarian/esoteric/philosophical? How does what you do matter? Or how does it expand our historic understanding/literary knowledge/humanistic horizons?

You’ve seen our catalog list of courses. What courses do you think you would like to develop and offer that we don’t already have? If you haven’t studied their catalog, you may well lose the job here.

What is the role of composition in an English department?

How would you justify using literature in a composition course?

How would you define the curricular paradigm in your field?

How do you justify a whole course on Milton?

If you had to teach an entire course based on one book written in the last fifty years, what would you use? Based on one author?

We have a required Shakespeare course. I believe we should, but John here thinks we should get rid of all such requirements. What do you think?

Which courses should be required of English majors, and why?

A student of mine is thinking of specializing in your area. Why should she?

What do you think is the most difficult course to teach in an English department?

Should literature in translation be taught in an English department?

Research oriented questions:

What presses might be interested in your thesis book once it has been revised? Why do you think so? Be able to list a couple of books the press has published that are similar to yours. Be sure you understand the relative prestige of the various presses you think might be approached. You do not sound professional if you think you should approach South Carolina first and Chicago second. If you can’t answer this question effectively, an interviewer who values professional competence will cross you off the list right then and there. Six out of nine candidates in one search laughed nervously and said they had never thought about presses before. Functionally, the interviews terminated at that point, five minutes in.
In what journals do you hope to land your work? Know the major journals in your specialty and in the larger departmental range of journals. An answer that has nothing but specialty journals will be a black mark against you because most members of the department will never have had reason to look at them. Know the relative prestige of journals.

We have to worry about department members landing research in the “top twenty” journals on the Dean’s approved list; while we’re interested in someone with an off-beat focus like yours, we want to know how your work might fit into basic departmental outlets.

How does your research influence your teaching?

What does your dissertation contribute to its field?

What do you mean when you say that you are “putting Foucault aside” to build your argument?

You mention reforming the rhetorical conventions of male political practice. What do you mean by that?

Who in the field most influenced you?

How far along is your dissertation right now?

What conclusions did you reach in your dissertation?

What’s a hot book in that field right now?

What do you think of Y’s book? If you haven’t read it, be honest and say so. Then say that if the interviewer will indicate the book’s argument, you will offer your response to that.

What is the cutting edge in your field and how does your work extend it?

Who else is working in your area?

What do you need to do to revise your thesis as a book?

How did your research interest evolve?

Do you see yourself as applying someone’s theory to your material, or are you constructing your own theoretical framework?

Do you think you can get any outside grants to support your research?

What is the relevance of so non-literary a cultural studies topic to a literature department?

How will you handle research with a 4-4 load?

I see you’ve written an article called X. Can you tell me about it?

In your writing sample, you say Y. Will you explain what you mean by that?

If you’re in a contemporary field, expect questions like “What are the two most important political films/novels in the last five years?” Or “Which film/novel of the last ten years will be read one hundred years from now?”

Questions about You or Your Training and Background:

Look out for some form of the old chestnut, “What are your strengths and what are your weaknesses?” Claiming perfectionism as your weakness is worn out. Don’t use it.

Variants on the last question might include “What were the strengths of your graduate training, and what were the weaknesses?”
What in your background and experience particularly prepares you for this job that we haven’t seen in your dossier?

Why did you become an English (German, History) major and go on to a PhD?

What’s your agenda for the next five years?

We would like you to lay out more specifically your current and projected research agenda.

What do you expect to have accomplished in the next 10 years?

What are your hobbies?

Will you need a green card? For this question, you should do some homework for each interview. Find out from their website and by phoning around exactly what person in what office at what phone number handles green card matters at that school. Be able to tell the interview committee what forms the department will have to file and what these forms entail. Their part is actually pretty easy, so don’t make it sound difficult, and giving them the information of person and office at their school will demonstrate your competence and helpfulness. Have that local information for them printed out, and hand it over at the interview.

What administrative experience have you had?

How did you train/coordinate the TAs for the multi-section class?

If you are in languages, you will get questions about your experience living in the country where that language is spoken (unless you are a native speaker).

Someone interviewing you may know someone in your graduate school department and may ask about that person. If you have had a good experience with the professor mentioned, you can say something about it, but if your experience was not good, be bland. You don’t want enmity, and you don’t want to feed negative information to help along someone else’s vendetta.

They are not supposed to ask about your marital status, sexual orientation, family or the like. However, they might ask in order to establish how well you might fit into their department. You’ll have to think about how to handle this. “You’re not supposed to ask me that,” won’t be well received. One of the anonymous guides in the department’s files has the following suggested line. “I have the sense that you are concerned that my personal life might somehow affect my work in your department. Can you be more specific about your concerns so I can put them to rest?” Since they shouldn’t be asking, this may let them drop the subject.

Remember that colleges with a religious affiliation will probably ask all kinds of things that they are not supposed to ask. From their perspective, their religious rules are more important than any rules issued by any professional society or the laws of the US government. If you know in advance of such a clash between your lifestyle or beliefs and their ideology--and they usually provide you with a document to sign and send back before they set up an interview, you would probably do better to save your time and trouble and not apply there, no matter how perfectly the job description suits you. An example of such an institution is Wheaton College in Illinois. As of 1998, you had to sign a document promising not to drink, dance, or play cards, and you had to take the stance that homosexuality and non-marital sex are sins. They did not at that time list this document on their website, but they sent it to you prior to setting up an interview. Calvin College in 2001 would ask you to compare the theology of your church
with their Dutch Reform theology, and one candidate was told that if she had children, they would have to attend the Dutch Reform school. If you are going to apply to a Mormon school, you had better be a Mormon. A feminist who dealt with Milton found the attitudes towards both her feminism and Milton rather off-putting when she interviewed at a Jesuit school.

Why do you want to become an English professor?

It's cold outside, isn't it? I bet it's that cold in State College. How do you like living in State College? This one can be tricky; anything that invites you to say something negative is poison; avoid negativity, and remember that if their school is in a cold region or their school is isolated, your disparaging the cold or State College will make you seem unlikely to be happy in their location.

Questions regarding their Department and School:

Why are you interested in working for our department?

We'd like to know what particularly interested you about the position in X at our school? Why are you interested in X school specifically?

You're from a big university. How will you handle the demands of a small Liberal Arts college like X?

How would you feel about living in Pocatello? Stockton? The Bronx? Schools may be isolated or they may perch precariously in a dangerous part of a city; you can get probes into how you will feel about dealing with the problems specific to that particular location.

You're from the East. How will you adapt to living in the Texas panhandle? Alternatively--you're from San Francisco; how will you handle living in rural Pennsylvania? Or you're from Michigan; how do you feel about living in Alabama? You're from Georgia; how will you manage a Minnesota winter?

What do you know about our school?

What can we tell you about our department/school?

From what you've seen on our website, with which faculty here do you think your interests might mesh? [This one is important, and if you haven't done your homework, it will count against you.]

Questions you might wish to ask:

You would be surprised at some of the questions asked by interviewees. “How many books does your library have” or “How many students attend your university” only proves that you’ve not done your homework. Why (within broad limits) would it matter anyway? Given the market, answers to those questions are unlikely to determine your decision. You want to know as much about job conditions as you can learn. You also want to be careful not to sound too selfishly concerned about number one.

Here are some possible questions.
How would you like to use someone with my credentials? Which courses do you see me as useful for teaching? What areas would you hope that I might develop for you? What are you hoping that this hire can do for your department? If they mention a course within your period that is not one you are prepared to teach, you can express willingness to work it up.

Are you interested in outreach? Most departments are, and if you have material that would make you a good lecturer to alumni or to the public, you might ask this and point to your qualifications for doing some departmental or college service in that area.

What kinds of computer support and training in use of technology does your university/college offer? Is there a workshop, for instance, that would train me to do a website for my courses?

What kind of email and internet hook-ups are available through the university?

What kinds of travel and research money might there be?

What is the teaching load? Or better--What sort of mix of courses might I be expected to teach? You can learn the load through that without sounding as if you’re desperate for the minimum load possible. You may be, but it is politer to pretend not. After all, you love teaching.

What is the intellectual community like? Is there a faculty and graduate reading group in Postmodernism? Is there a forum in which department members present their research?

What are recent developments in the department or school? (This is a good question to ask them.)

Does the department get its share of resources from the college or university? That may be a bit technical, but you can ask whether the department has been expanding or contracting, whether the school is investing in the technology for language acquisition or remedial grammar practice?

Into what new areas of curriculum has the department been developing?

How easy is it to develop new courses and get them on the books?

Are team teaching or interdisciplinary team-taught courses easy to set up, or are there problems with financing them?

Does the library acquire databases routinely and easily, or is the budget pinched for such research tools? If the school is part of a state system, does it run into problems such that if one campus has acquired the database, others cannot?
Is the library good at working out piggy-back license arrangements with that other campus? If you are a historical scholar and the school is isolated, the answer to this question might be very important to your future.

Don’t ask about tenure requirements at this stage. If the issue comes up, make sure that you do not appear to be trying to find out what the bare minimum may be.

What’s the cultural life like in the town? That’s a good final question but not one to ask early on, because they talk it up, and that leaves things on a positive note. If the school is located in a major city, you should instead ask about something more specific about the area of the city near the school—range of ethnic restaurants or good bookstores or something of personal interest to you, or mention how wonderful it would be to be in a city with an opera company or a baseball team.

Be wary about the person to whom your questions are directed (i.e., don’t ask women on the search committee where you might find certain spices or men where the best sporting goods stores are).

When you leave, ask when you might expect to hear from them, and when they are planning to make their decision. The moment you leave the room, jot down their answer.

When you get home, email a follow-up thank-you note to the search chair. Send any offprints or references promised.

**Logistics of the Conference**

Stay at the conference hotel in which most of your interviews will take place.

Share your hotel room (to cut costs and to give you someone to talk to). A partner is ideal, but you can also share with a fellow job hunter. You want someone with whom you can relax, go out to a good supper, share anecdotes, practice interview questions. Good advice from one job hunter: although you may have no money, don’t stint during the conference. Stay at the conference hotel, eat at a good Thai restaurant rather than McDonalds, and use phones freely to call your partner and unload whatever is on your mind. The money will be well-spent in ameliorating your experience.

When you travel there, carry everything you need for interviews (including interview clothing and a spare outfit) in carry-on luggage. Lost luggage is endemic during the holiday season. You should bring with you a dictionary of literary terms and copies of any articles you have written, as well as your writing sample. You can expect to get questions on the older work, and by now you may nearly have forgotten what it was about. Review it a bit when you’re tired of drilling yourself on questions and definitions of your terms.

Arrive the day before the conference starts and get oriented.
If you have a partner, try to scrape up the money for the two of you to go together. That partner can help you carry stuff, help you talk your impressions aloud, supply advice, and be unobtrusively supportive. Your partner can carry a snack, a spare pair of panty hose, even a spare shirt or blouse (in case you drop tomato sauce on your front at lunch). The partner should not appear at the door of the interview suite with you, but can sit in the lobby. Partner might carry a few medicines--painkiller, anti-diarrhea medication, cough syrup. You never know what you might want urgently! The partner might also carry a cheap tape recorder that can help you talk about your impressions aloud and record important information after each interview. When you talk into that, record when you can hope to hear from the school, what further information you have promised, and any questions you wish to follow up by email.

When scheduling interviews, try if possible to schedule your preferred schools after the first interview, since you gain immensely more fluency with that bit of experience. While I advise trying to keep two hours between interviews, to allow for note taking and getting to another hotel, some job seekers strongly prefer cramming interviews closely together so that your adrenaline stays up and you ride the crest of your wave from one interview to the next. The letdown during a wait can be irritating beyond belief. Judge that decision by your own personality. You do need notes on each interview, but hasty talk into a small tape recorder could cover the main points in ten minutes.

Don’t put much store by your impression of the interview. Many interviews that seemed like love feasts never produce further contact, and some that seem failures do get you to the next stage.

Don’t fret over washouts or lost opportunities. Keep thinking positively of what is to come, not negatively over what you cannot change. Remember that some very decent jobs first appeared in job lists after the major conference. If you feel you flopped on your only two interviews, this is bad, but it is not necessarily the end of the world. Furthermore, if you feel that you did not answer a question well, you can make that the excuse for a follow-up e-note, giving your considered answer and saying something enthusiastic about the interview.

Don’t make any social arrangements; stay focused on job hunting.

Do attend social functions that your interview schools invite you to, because this will give you a chance to meet your competition.

Keep in touch with your supervisor during the conference. Know where to reach her/him (whether at the conference or your home institution) and know where other faculty members who might be helpful to you are to be found at the conference.

The MLA says **you must have two weeks to decide on an offer**, and other professional organizations have similar guidelines. You can refuse to give a decision on the spot, and cite the MLA rules. Know what your professional organization recommends on this point. Most schools wouldn’t try to get you to say yes on the spot, but it helps to know your rights.
Never, never, never promise you’ll go to school X until you have the offer in writing. If the school in question is your dream school, you can certainly give every encouragement, and say the if the written offer is along the lines discussed, you certainly expect to accept, but your supervisor told you never to offer a firm acceptance until you have it in writing. Blame the supervisor, blame the placement officer, but don’t let yourself be bullied or sweet-talked into making an absolute commitment before you have the letter or at least until you have done what you can to boost the terms. You can even say, “This is the job I want and I expect to accept the offer, but let’s talk about some of the terms.” That is conditional enough that you can still withdraw if you need to for some reason. Some schools try to pressure you into an oral commitment and don’t wish to offer writing until you’ve committed. This should be resisted, especially if it is a school you don’t want and you are waiting to hear from one you do. You want to see the actual terms. You also lose negotiating room if you have simply said yes.

For the possible bargains you can drive, see the next chapter.

**Telephone Interviews**

Some will be conducted by one person; others may be conference calls. Your standard preparations for conference interviews won’t be as much help as you might wish in a telephone situation. However, you can pin up notes to yourself, which is a distinct advantage. Here are a few things to do or remember.

Remember that you will get no visual feedback. In a regular interview, you can see facial expressions, indications that you have waffled too long, signs of disagreement. You have no such aids in a telephone interview.

Keep a cheat sheet taped to the wall by the phone. Be sure it lists the four to six points you wish to make about yourself for this job, and check them off as you make the points. Print the names of your interlocutors on a wide sheet of paper with bits of information about the person’s interests under the name. Download their pictures from the web if there are any and paste them above the names. If you have no web pictures, look through an old magazine and cut out a few male and female faces of the right general age and paste those up. Pretend that those people are your interviewers and direct your eyes to the right one for the answer. Try to “persuade” the person whose picture you are looking at. This is a technique used by people in business school, and job hunters who have tried it said that it genuinely helped them.

Work hard to vary your vocal production; use more range of voice than you might otherwise. They will extrapolate from your speaking voice to possible classroom effectiveness, so you must show variety and vigor and emotions.

Get someone to critique your vocal production on the phone. Have a friend give you a mock-interview by phone. You may be someone who lets sentences trail off toward the end. If so, you will be difficult to understand in conference-call situations. Work on that.
If you are an international student, the point of such a call may well be to make sure your English is good, so be sure to speak clearly and don’t let natural exuberance push you into high-speed talk. If you have any accent, speed will vastly reduce your comprehensibility.

Although I have not heard of unannounced phone interviews for people in English, departments with language jobs may designate a professor to call you out of the blue and talk in the target language, expecting to assess your basic fluency that way. You might even get a call with two professors, alternating questions in your two non-English languages and expecting you to answer in the appropriate language. Because you might get a call with no warning, you may wish to have a general cheat sheet (in all relevant languages) pinned up by the phone. That will help keep you from blanking on crucial terms.

**The Pitfalls of Ignorance:**

One of the most difficult problems you may have to deal with will be inexperienced interviewers. They may be very bad at asking questions that will let them judge you or let you show off your paces. If you realize that you are not being allowed to make a good presentation, you must do everything you can to take the interview into your own hands. Look for opportunities to say, “Let me tell you about X.” Don’t let yourself get drawn into protracted arguments over some point of interpretation or matter of ideology. You can be blunt: “I will be happy to discuss this at greater length if it is a central concern to the committee, but if not, could I tell you a bit more about some of my other qualifications?” If one person is going on about this irrelevant issue, the rest of the committee will probably chime in then on your side, and help you push toward a more useful set of topics. They will, in fact, appreciate your effort to steer the conversation in a more useful direction. Getting an interview back on track when it has been derailed takes skill; you’re unlikely to get to the next stage if you fail to take control and make that interview work, so you’ve nothing to lose by trying blunt measures, and you might gain very significantly in respect from some members of the committee. If the head of the search committee is inexperienced and does not remember to tell you when to expect to hear from that school, you can prompt her or him with a question.

**Expenses:**

Keep track of all your expenses in a small notebook. What does not get reimbursed becomes a tax deductible expense, so keep every receipt and put it in an envelope just in case the IRS audits you. Do this during your campus interviews as well and make it a habit throughout your professional career. Keep a separate envelope that you place all receipts in for that year.

**The Aftermath:**

The weeks following the conference are in some ways worse than the interview process. For that you had adrenaline to carry you through. While waiting for the invitations to campus, though, you mull over the interviews, reliving every question and awkward moment, second guessing your every answer. The best thing you can do to get your mind off such speculation is to work on possible campus presentations.