How to Prepare Yourself for the Academic Job Market
by Natasha Sajé

In the fifteen years since I earned a PhD and started looking for a full-time teaching job, the academic job market has had ups and downs—alas, mostly downs. It’s harder than ever to land a full-time job because so many institutions are employing adjunct teachers, instructors without job security and benefits. Moreover, the pool of good candidates looking either for adjunct work or a full-time position has grown larger, because of proliferating MFA and PhD programs, and because candidates from these programs are publishing their work. As Paisley Rekdal, Associate Professor of English and Director of creative writing at the University of Utah, an institution that offers both an MFA and a PhD in creative writing, notes, “the market is now glutted with students in two tracks of degrees, each which was essentially sold (to them and to university administrators) as the ‘end degree’ relevant to their field. As fewer and fewer jobs are listed, more and more degree-holders—and prolific degree-holders—pile up.” So, the job market is dismal, but you should know certain other things before you enter it. What follows is an overview of the two different timelines and procedures for applying for teaching jobs in colleges or universities.

For both adjunct and full-time permanent jobs, all credentials (education, publication, teaching experience, service) count, but in varying degrees. If you are looking for an adjunct position teaching freshman composition, for example, you’ll need some teaching experience, but won’t necessarily need publications. Whether you get hired depends on who else is applying and when. In fact, with adjunct jobs, timing is often everything—for instance, if your resume is on the desk or in the inbox of the person who hires instructors the day after someone else quit or the day before a new section is opened. To apply for adjunct positions locally, call or e-mail the chair of the English or writing department during the school year and ask if you may apply for any openings or future openings. Then, visit to follow up, thus connecting your resume to your living, breathing person in the administrator’s mind, and call or e-mail again in July or August when enrollment numbers are firm. Keep in mind that last-minute openings are very common.

According to a recent New York Times article, the number of administrative and student support positions at colleges is climbing. Some of these staff positions make fulfilling jobs for creative writers. For example, after several years of exhausting yet unreliable adjunct teaching, poet and MFA Lisa Nardi found a job as a Writing Specialist for Student Support Services at Bowie State in Maryland. She writes: “aside from meeting the educational and vocational qualifications, my application stood out because I prepared a strong writing sample and demonstrated a genuine interest in students. Although I quickly outgrew this position, I’ve learned more about teaching, writing, leading, etc. in this role than I would have ever learned as an adjunct. It’s opened lots of doors, too. I co-wrote and received a grant last year geared toward changing the culture of teaching and learning on campus. Implementing that program has been absolutely transformative.” Her new position also includes tuition remission, which has allowed Nardi to pursue a PhD at the University of Maryland.

MFA or PhD?

Both are terminal degrees, which helps with institutional accreditation, although the MFA is often misunderstood by academics

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who are not also artists. The MFA requires two or three years of coursework and thesis writing; the PhD in creative writing requires two or three years of coursework beyond the MA or MFA, and another two years of thesis writing. Some PhD programs, such as that at the University of Houston, are studio programs, while others, such as those at the University of Denver or Ohio University, require various qualifying exams. In either case, the dissertation is the candidate's own creative work: a collection of poems, creative nonfiction, fiction, drama, etc. One advantage to a PhD in creative writing, beyond the credential, is that it will buy you more (funded) time to finish and place a book manuscript. It also gives you more teaching experience, since funding usually includes teaching. Although these are called "assistantships," most graduate students design and teach their own classes.

If you want to get a job teaching creative writing, I would not recommend a scholarly PhD. Researching and writing a scholarly dissertation teaches you many things, but it takes time away from your own creative writing. Moreover, while I don't regret a minute of my PhD coursework, or spending four years writing a dissertation on the novel, I can't say it was an advantage in the creative writing job market. This is in part because, while large English departments can pit creative writers and scholars against each other for funds, and a scholarly PhD makes creative writers suspicious about one's loyalties.

Commenting on the original motivation for a PhD in creative writing, Mark Halliday, Professor of English at Ohio University, writes, "[the degree] becomes a travesty if it is simply a way to elbow past the job candidates who have MFA degrees. And yet, if I were thirty years old and desperate to stay in the writing life, I would consider that motivation quite forgivable! The more serious reason for doctoral programs in creative writing is to sustain and reward the complex, many-layered interaction between one's own writing and one's reading in the literary tradition. The PhD should be a way of building a literary culture in which writers know more about great forerunners of previous generations and centuries than they know about the hot names of the last twenty-five years." The truism about a PhD being the safer degree may no longer hold true. In the last few years, Paisley Rekdal has seen "the bulk of the tenure-track creative writing jobs go to MFAs, and mostly MFAs with multiple books. It's the quality (and, yes, quantity) of books that will get you hired, regardless of the level or prestige of the degree and program. An MFA with two or three good books really does have a strong shot."

Where you get your degree matters only because students who go to selective programs tend to be surrounded by good mentors and peers, and subsequently produce good writing. In the end, your writing gets you the job in the same way that your writing got you into a graduate program in the first place. Supplementary degrees in other fields, for instance an MA in theatre or an MS in landscape design, show that you are capable of advanced thinking and writing. Such advanced degrees also mitigate the unfortunate image that some scholars have of living writers as the great unwashed, i.e., idiots (maybe not even idiot savants). Ironically, even if scholars spend their lives working on dead authors, in poet and scholar Alicia Ostriker's words, "a living writer is an embarrassment." That's not to say the prejudice doesn't sometimes go the other way. Some writers see literary theorists as jargon-spouting spoilers. Nota bene: one thing a PhD program gives a creative writer is experience with that very jargon.

In this difficult job market, it's wise for candidates to have multiple strengths. Poet and fiction writer Nance Van Winckel, Professor Emeritus at Eastern Washington University, now teaching at the Vermont College of Fine Arts, recalls, "I got my first teaching job primarily because I had some journalism background and I could advise the small college's newspaper and yearbook staff in addition to my writing and literature teaching duties." Paisley Rekdal concurs: "nonfiction is the genre I push the most, not only because it seems to be a 'growth' field in universities, but because it is one of the few genres that might train students to be able to work outside the university as well." Steve Kistulentz was a candidate (with an MA, an MFA, and a PhD in creative writing) who fit the bill at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi. He writes, "my job at Millsaps was posted as an open-genre search, but my comfort level with multiple genres helped me get a number of interviews, including that one. But almost every job listing I've seen is looking for secondary expertise. So my publications eventually meant that I had the opportunity to teach workshops and genre-specific literature classes in all three genres as a graduate assistant." Thus, it's helpful to show range, for instance by publishing some kind of academic prose (book reviews will do) in addition to creative writing.

Recommendations

Even for adjunct positions, you will need letters of recommendation, including at least one that discusses your teaching. These recommendations can be on file at the institution from which you received your last degree, at AWP, or at some other credential service. Sometimes candidates save their own recommendations, which means they are not confidential. For a tenure-track job, you'll need confidential recommendations, but for adjunct positions, a quicker way might be OK. In either case, administrators are used to reading between the lines of the recommendations, looking at what's not said as well as what is said. When asking someone for a recommendation, you should have a sense that they will write a thoughtful one, and frankly ask them if they will be able to write you a good one. Make it possible for them to say "no." Some famous writers are asked for so many recommendations, they might give short shrift to your request, and a recommendation of a few sentences can seem less than positive even if it is not negative. In other words, in these days of inflated language, it's rare to see an outright bad recommendation, but terseness can seem negative. You might ask that your recommendations be sent to a graduate school mentor, who can screen them for effectiveness and then counsel you to switch out any that are too brief or negative. When someone agrees to write you a recommendation, you should give your recommender a curriculum vitae, writing sample, and job application letter, plus a stamped envelope and the signed confidentiality statement, if that's the route you are taking.

Teaching Experience

Teaching freshman comp for one year at a community college, teaching poetry writing to senior citizens, teaching a free workshop in memoir—all of these can "count." If you don't already have teaching experience, it isn't hard to get some. Offering to teach for free can get you a course if you're starting from zero. Such volunteer work also counts as service, another component of experience. For a full-time position, however, you will need several years experience teaching college courses, probably in composition and literature as well as creative writing.
**Service**

Colleges and universities are run in a model of shared governance, wherein faculty serve on committees that do much of the work of the institution. Faculty may not have power to decide things, but they often do the research that helps administrators make those decisions. Therefore, a spirit of volunteerism is an important component in a candidate’s profile. If you are applying for a full-time job, your future colleagues—who will be hiring you—want to know that you’re the kind of person who volunteers for work. This can be addressed in your letters of recommendation, of course, but it should also be documented in your vita. Serving the academic and literary communities is easy because many literary institutions and organizations are underfunded. You could, for example, volunteer to read submissions or raise funds for a literary magazine or conference. Writers@Work has a “fellowship reading” event where anyone with an MFA can act as a first screener for entries. Most literary magazines are desperate for help reading submissions, ditto community reading series. Another kind of service is grant writing, which makes you particularly attractive to an institution (you’re bringing in money!). Research the grant possibilities in your state and write one for teaching creative writing to children after school, seniors, etc. That way, you can get paid and get two kinds of experience (grant writing and implementing a new program).

**The Application Process**

The full time, permanent academic job market has a hiring season, which begins in fall and ends in spring. Job openings are listed in the MLA Job List (subscription available through <www.mla.org>) and the AWP Job List (which culls listings from the MLA and other sources); some are in the Chronicle of Higher Education, and some are only advertised on the institution’s website. To apply for a job, you should send what is asked for in the advertisement. Standard application materials include the following:

- **a) Letter:** a letter of application is geared to the specific job advertised, and consists of two pages summarizing your credentials in lucid and engaging prose. You should revise each letter according to job description. For instance, if the job is in creative writing but mentions teaching comparative literature, your letter should discuss both. The opening paragraph makes it clear that your credentials fit the job description, and the following paragraphs discuss your research and writing, teaching, and service. One page is probably too short; more than two pages is too long. You should use institutional letterhead if you are currently teaching somewhere.

- **b) Vita:** the academic vita highlights your distinctions—it does not have to include every coffeehouse reading or itty bitty award—but it should be comprehensive. Brainstorm related work experience in order to package it on the vita or in the letter. There are many examples of curricula vitae on the web, so you should look at different styles to determine the best to highlight your own experience. In general, education comes first, followed by teaching experience, followed by publications, then service, and finally a list of your recommenders and how they might be reached as well as how your letters of recommendations can be obtained. It’s wise to get permission from your recommenders to include their phone numbers and e-mail addresses, so that quick queries are possible.

- **c) Writing Sample:** choose your best, most polished (probably published) work, but also pay attention to audience. Research the institution and its members. If you have a book and can afford to send it with every job application, do so. (Job hunting expenses may be tax deductible.) Most people who have served on hiring committees agree that the writing sample is the crucial element, and with so many qualified applicants, the hiring committee can be choosy. Moreover, in research institutions, your publications will make your reputation and that of the institution. In the past twenty years, the publishing landscape has changed, and small presses are not discounted, although Erika Meitner, Assistant Professor of creative writing at Virginia Tech, points out that “university presses have more immediate name recognition and institutional affiliation and thus, stamps of approval” with the literature professors who are on search committees for creative writing positions.

- **d) Recommendations:** a group of four to eight letters of recommendation written by writers and scholars who know you and your work well and will take the time to write a good letter. At least one of them should have observed you teach (a lecture in a low residency program is considered teaching). If you’re not applying for jobs right away, wait to get letters until you are ready to apply (i.e. the letters should be “fresh”). Give your recommenders six weeks to write your letters and have them sent to the AWP dossier service or the career center of your last institution. That way they can be confidential and sent out on your command. Time is an issue in most job searches—the committee is reading hundreds of applications in the short period between the deadline and the end of the semester, and if they have all of your material immediately (as opposed to having to ask for it piecemeal) you avoid mail delays. If you don’t want to send everything “up front,” make sure your answering machine works and you check your e-mail every day. It can be costly to send out recommendation letters and writing samples, and you should weigh the importance of the committee having all your material immediately versus the trouble and cost of sending other items when they ask for them. Some institutions also require that you send a transcript when you apply for a job; this is to ensure that you did indeed earn the degree you claim. In the job application, the transcript usually does not have to be official, so a photocopy will do. At some stage in the application and interview process, you may be asked for syllabi, course evaluations, or a teaching philosophy, so it’s good to have these ready. If all this seems like a lot of work, it is, and it is also work that takes you away from your own writing. Be warned that an occasional school may fail to acknowledge applications or let candidates know their status. For an informal, albeit

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somewhat unreliable, low-down on creative writing job hunting in academia, check out: <http://academicjobs.wikia.com/wiki/CreativeWritingPositions>.

Most important, treat your application materials as you would a poem or a story: get feedback from people you trust, and revise. As Jess Row, assistant professor of English at the College of New Jersey, says, “try to make each application look like it’s the only one you’re sending out, even if you’re applying for twenty jobs at once. Qualified people with sloppy materials lose jobs all the time.” And always send every piece that is asked for in the advertisement.

**The Modern Language Association Interview**

Full-time job advertisements can generate 100–600 applications, depending on the generality of the job description and the desirability of the position. From these, ten to fourteen people are selected for interviews at the MLA association convention (held in a different large city every December or January). If selected for an interview at the convention, you will get a phone call from the committee chair in December booking your interview. The hiring committee usually consists of three to ten people in the creative writing or English department, plus a member from another department, and a student member. Getting yourself to the interview (Los Angeles, January 6-9, 2011) and all expenses associated with it are your responsibility. You could say in your letter that you will not be attending MLA, but this reduces your chances. Some schools do not conduct interviews at MLA; they conduct phone interviews or fly their top candidates to campus immediately. And a few schools conduct interviews at the AWP Conference. The MLA job information list is available online from September 16 to July 30; member departments get a free subscription but creative writing jobs from this list are also reprinted in the AWP Job List.

As few as one person or as many as eight travel to the MLA convention to interview candidates in hotel rooms or suites or the huge interview hall where departments reserve tables. To prepare for this interview, ask mentors at your degree-granting institution—or if that fails, ask friends—to conduct a mock interview with you. You should anticipate questions such as:

• How do you teach a beginning fiction workshop?

• How do you teach freshman composition?

• How do you teach metrics?

• How do you feel about teaching in a religious institution/state school/community college?

• What are your goals for the next five years?

• In what direction is your work moving?

• How does your current book project differ from your first one?

Saying “I don’t know, I need to think about that” usually doesn’t satisfy the interviewers—they want you to perform, they want to see you present complex ideas on your feet. It’s a good idea to get the group talking to each other, and you can ask an occasional question of them, too. A seemingly safe question to ask is “what are the students like?”; still, at one of my MLA interviews, two members of the department differed in their response and got into an argument over it. Make eye contact with everyone. Wear business clothes. At this point, they are trying to think of you as a future colleague. Sometimes what they say they want is not really what they mean or want, but you have no way of knowing this. It’s also not uncommon for the interviewers to get testy with each other. The process is stressful not only for candidates (the hotel corridors are lined with people dressed up and looking anxious while waiting for their interviews) but also for interviewers.

**The On-Campus Interview**

Most institutions invite two to four candidates to campus (this time at the school’s expense) for a two or three-day interview. They’re trying to think of how you’ll fit into the place, what kind of colleague you’ll make, what your range is, what you’ll contribute both professionally and personally. You’ll be meeting all sorts of people (singly, or in groups): students, faculty, administrators. During the interview, you’ll probably be asked to give a reading of your own work, plus a lecture or teaching demonstration. You might practice such a “job talk” before you actually give one. The mixed audience for it (an actual class, a made-up group of students, plus people on the hiring committee) can be a problem. You want to make it interesting enough for the faculty members, but accessible to the students. You’ll also have to eat breakfasts, lunches, and dinners with various members of the department. Don’t get too personal, even though some of this may seem purely social. Do, however, express an interest in the people you meet. Steve Kistulentz notes, “I had one distinct advantage, which was experience in another career. That meant that I would never walk into an interview without knowing who I would be speaking with, and what they’d written. That little bit of research made the interviews feel more like natural conversations, and a lot less like the artificial exercise that the worst ones can be. On more than one occasion, I had a person on the search committee tell me that I had been the only candidate to ask them about their work.” Some of the faculty members you meet might be crazy, rude, get drunk, etc. Some may say things that make you think you got the job or convince you that you didn’t. You may be scheduled for tours with a real estate agent or given a rental car and told to amuse yourself until your flight back. Above all, even if it seems truthful or helpful, don’t be negative.
It’s important to be aware of audience, to research the department and its faculty before the visit. It’s OK to ask while you’re there how the decision will be made, i.e. a vote (by whom?). But do not bring up money or benefits; let them do it. In a state school, the salary is not (much) negotiable and made public; in a private institution, the salary is confidential, and usually only relayed by a dean or other administrator. It’s OK to ask how many other candidates they are bringing to campus; it’s not OK to ask who they are, although you can try to discern this info from talkative students, the school newspaper, signs posted on doors, etc. Knowing your competition helps you highlight your strengths. Thank you notes are optional; if there’s a real reason for thanks, then send them. Ask, “by when may I expect a decision?” and know that the first candidate may turn them down, so the job may still be offered to you. One benefit of being “on the job market” is that you become known: I once was offered a year-long position on the basis of an interview the previous year. It’s also OK to ask your mentors to write personal notes or make phone calls on your behalf. In fact, you should let your recommenders know where you are applying.

Prose writer Jess Row notes, “the whole process is very choreographed and structured, and to some degree, to get a job, you have to observe that choreography as faithfully as possible. It can feel really dehumanizing, especially if you’ve had a warm, nurturing experience in graduate school. But keep in mind that the job application process (once you’ve got the job) is just a warm-up for the process of getting promotion and tenure. If you want to work in academia, these are skills you have to have.”

In the job market as in life, everything matters but no one thing matters by itself. The complex web of who you are and what you’ve done (or not) as well as the web of institutional politics (often unknown to you) figure into hiring decisions, which in the end are out of your control. So keep trying, knowing that there’s luck or serendipity or whatever else you want to call it, involved, and that at the end of the day, you got into this because you love to write, and therefore it’s your writing that will sustain you, emotionally, even if not financially, with a job offer. Case in point: after several years on the job market, prose writer Pamela Balluck, PhD, has learned that she’s much happier than she thought she’d be, “in my low rent apartment teaching adjunct writing courses, surrounded by a nourishing literary community, while I continue to write write write, the stories and chapters and essays that might some day be the reason I get hired as a creative writer who also happens to be a professor.”

Natasha Sajé is the author of two books of poems, Red Under the Skin (Pittsburgh, 1994) and Bend (Tupelo Press, 2004), and many essays. She teaches at Westminster College in Salt Lake City, and in the Vermont College MFA in Writing Program.