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Tips for the Phone Interview

Phone interviews are both like and not like face-to-face interviews. They are like face-to-face interviews in that many of the same questions are asked in both formats. They are completely unlike them, however, in that phone interviews are usually shorter, with fewer questions, and are far more difficult for most of us to “shine” in. (Perhaps those who’ve had previous careers in radio will disagree.)

Why a Phone Interview?

- Phone interviews are generally conducted by search committees that are unwilling or, often for budgetary reasons, unable, to travel to the convention.
 - Sometimes phone interviews are conducted by a department that wants to get a jump on the customary job search calendar.
 - Sometimes they are conducted later in the job search season by departments that want to weed out all of those who took jobs as a result of convention interviews.
- Phone interviews are most often conducted by teaching-intensive (rather than research-intensive) institutions and usually last 30 minutes.
- Phone interviews may be conducted by one person or by as many as four or five people.
 - If you are interviewed by one person, that individual will be responsible for reporting back to the rest of the committee about how you performed and what you said.
 - The interview may be slowed as that person takes notes, or that person may ask if you are willing to be recorded. (Of course you are willing to be recorded!)
- Search committees generally conduct the same number of phone interviews as other committees do face-to-face interviews: 10-12. Among that number, they will be searching for 1-3 finalists to bring to campus.

Preparing for the Phone Interview

PRACTICAL MATTERS

- If your cell phone sometimes cuts out (and whose doesn’t?), don’t use it for the interview. Their technical problems (and there may be some) are embarrassing to them. Your technical problems are annoying to them.
 - Give them the number of a land line with complete privacy and no background noise, if at all possible.

- If you can disable your call waiting in advance of their call, do so, so that you aren't annoyed by any beeps that cut out their voices.
- Although it seems crazy, almost all of the literature suggests that you should dress up for a phone interview, even though no one will know the difference. I suppose the idea is that you will be in the best frame of mind to present yourself professionally. I have to admit I have never dressed up for one of them, but I would never have done one in my bathrobe either. Dress as you would for work, perhaps, to get in the right frame of mind.
- Plan to do your interview at a desk space or table on which you can write.
 - Many people find it relaxing to take notes during the interview, to keep you focused and to remember what happened, in the post-interview haze. I would recommend taking notes.
 - Make sure you have a pen that works and a pad of paper.
 - Do not type your notes on a computer during the interview.
 - Other things you may want near you: glass of water, cough drops, Kleenex.

RESEARCH

- You should have researched the department just as thoroughly as you would have for a face-to-face interview, knowing about its strengths, curriculum, structure, etc.
- If you know the person or people to whom you will be speaking (often the person who initially sets up the interview by phone or email will have that information for you or you can request it), you may want to have any web-based information you can glean about them printed out before you, too.
- You should prepare a question for the committee that shows off your knowledge of the department and if possible allows the questioners to brag about the strengths of the department in their answer.
 - You may only have time for one short question at the end of the interview, if you are even invited to ask one. Be mindful of the clock.
 - If you've been told you will have a 30-minute interview, and they are asking you for your questions at minute 20, it's perfectly fine to ask multiple questions. Think of this as additional time to sell yourself to them as a candidate. They won't have learned much about you in 20 minutes.
 - Effuse, effuse, effuse. This is the time to be upbeat and excited about everything they say, not to probe them for what life is really like on their campus.
 - If you have a thirty-minute interview, and they ask you for a question at minute 29 or 31, be mindful of their time.
 - After your first question, you might even say, "I have so much more I'd like to know about what it's like to teach at x." Respond to their conversational cues. If they say, "Oh, we have five more minutes," then you may continue the conversation.

- Given the compressed nature of the phone interview, you may not be offered the opportunity to ask a question at all.

PRACTICE

- You should practice one- to two-minute answers to the open-ended broad questions listed below. Practice them with someone else and simulate the conditions of the interview—that is, have your questioner/listener be on the phone with you.
 - Have that person listen not only for your best answers but for your annoying conversational ticks: ums, you knows, kindas, audible sighs, nervous clicking, etc. Work to eliminate them in your subsequent practice sessions!
- Prepare some vivid anecdotal answers about classroom experiences that went well, as well as some that didn't go well.
 - Make sure that the ones that didn't go well turn into success stories, demonstrating how you performed with grace under pressure or turned lemons into lemonade.
- Practice a very short gracious opening greeting and closing remark. Write it down if you need to!
 - Sample closing remark: “Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today. I'm very excited about this position, and I really hope we'll have a chance to continue our conversation in person.”

Performing Well in a Phone Interview

- Again, it may seem crazy, but all of the literature suggests you should *smile* while you answer the committee's questions. Apparently, even though people can't see your smile, you will sound more animated and pleasing.
- If there is a team of people interviewing you, they will usually begin by going around the room and briefly introducing themselves. It's fine to wait until after all of them introduce themselves to respond about how nice it is to “meet” them.
- Questions asked during a phone interview will often be shorter but usually more broad in scope.
 - “Tell us about your research.”
 - “Tell us about a course you'd like to teach.”
 - “Tell us about your experience in the composition classroom.”
 - “Tell us about your experiences working with a diverse student body.”
 - “What is your philosophy of teaching?”
 - “What does a liberal arts education mean to you?”
 - “What is your proudest moment in the classroom?”
 - “Tell us about an obstacle you overcame in the classroom.”
 - “Tell us why our position appeals to you.”
- Your answers to these open-ended questions should begin enthusiastically and positively (never, never defensively or sarcastically) and should last on the order of about a minute and probably not longer than two minutes.
 - You may want to have a watch in front of you, if that won't prove too distracting, and particularly if you tend to be long-winded when nervous.

- Answers just tend to seem longer over the phone than in person to the people who are listening. Just as you can't see their response, they can't give you any cues as to whether they've heard enough or want to know more.
 - Long-winded answers are terrible, but so are overly short answers. One's teaching philosophy should take more than a few sentences to describe.
- They may have follow-up questions, but they will rarely interrupt you to ask them. You'll need to give them a conversational opening to do so.
 - Asking, "Is this what you were hoping to hear about, or is there something more I might tell you?" is okay to ask once or twice, if you are very confused about whether the question was seeking a longer answer than what you gave.

Phone interviews often follow a script, in which every candidate is asked exactly the same questions in the same order. If you don't invite them to ask follow up questions in this case, they definitely won't, and sometimes even then, they'll simply move onto the next question as soon as you stop speaking. It is therefore important to make sure you give a complete answer (with a topic sentence, example, and takeaway point) before you stop talking. As previously noted, though, your answer should not be longer than two minutes.

- Short, specific questions should be answered succinctly.
 - For instance, "Would you be interested in teaching world literature?" is a question in search of a short answer. (e.g. "I'd welcome that opportunity! I've taken (or taught) x courses in that area and saw that that was a part of your department's offerings. That's really exciting.")
 - If they want to know *how* you would teach the course, they will ask that in the first place or ask it in a follow up.
 - If you say, "Would you like to know more about how I might approach such a course?" be sure you are prepared with a winning answer, because it will be difficult for them to say "no" to you. As a result, your answer will cut into time that could be spent communicating to them *other* winning answers that you are more prepared to offer!
- Don't be afraid to be human.
 - It's okay to acknowledge (once) that you wish you could see how they were responding to what you are saying.
 - It's okay to express gratitude if you hear them laugh at something you'd said, because you can finally tell how they are responding.
 - It's also okay to tell them about how you were responding during a long question. You could say, "As you were asking that question, I couldn't help nodding and smiling."
 - The committee, in addition to wanting to get a sense of whether you are a strong candidate, wants to figure out if you are sane, likeable, and can

listen. This is more difficult to communicate by phone than you might think!

- If the committee offers to tell you the timetable for the search (or if you ask them for it), that is the universal sign that the conversation is about to end. Once they tell it to you, make sure you close by responding to what they are saying to you and then by delivering your gracious closing remark!
- It's customary to follow up an interview of any kind with a thank you email to the members of the search committee. Your email should be short and more or less reiterate your closing remark in more formal terms.