

Applying, interviewing, and getting the job you want in Academia

AN (INCOMPLETE) GUIDE

Disclaimer:

This guide was developed to accompany a panel discussion organized by PostDocs associated with the Center for Insect Science at the University of Arizona. It has been compiled based on the personal experiences of Graduate Students, PostDocs, and Faculty who went through the process over the past 5 years, or who have served on search committees during this time. As such this guide is subjective, incomplete, and no guarantee for anything. Each search, position and candidate is different. Some of the advice in this guide may not apply to you or the positions you are applying for. Nonetheless we hope that this guide will be of help in providing hints and pointers on how to succeed in the job hunt. Good luck! For comments please contact:
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1. Finding job openings

- *Science* and *Nature* both offer job alerts that you can subscribe to online and arrange for a weekly email update on newly posted jobs. These job alerts have the advantage that you can tailor them specifically to your academic interests, geographic preferences, etc. (<http://aaas.sciencecareers.org/taxis/jobseeker/agentCenter.html>)
- EvolDir (<http://life.biology.mcmaster.ca/~brian/evoldir.html>) offers a similar, more informal service specifically for the greater evolutionary biology community.
- Check the Chronicle of Higher Education for more teaching-oriented jobs
- Meetings and Conferences: check bulleting boards for announcements and talk to faculty at places you are interested

2. When to apply

- Academic jobs are commonly advertised a year to several months in advance. If you aim for a job starting in the Fall of 2005, scan for announcements starting Fall 2004.
- Start applying for jobs early in your postdoc career. If you get an interview, take it, even if you are not sure whether you want the job. An interview will give you valuable exposure and experience regardless of the outcome, and this will help you interviewing for the job you really want. If you do get the job but don't want to start right away you can typically negotiate deferrals.
- Apply for jobs even if you think you are not an exact fit and not yet competitive enough. Searches are dynamic, non-linear processes - a lot of things can happen in the process

3. The academic job search process - Overview

- Position is advertised with deadline for applications (if you are a little late it typically doesn't matter)
- Applicants respond by deadline and submit
 - cover letter
 - CV (with or without references)
 - Research Statement
 - Teaching Statement
 - in addition most places ask for 2-3 letters of recommendation to be sent directly from the reference to the search committee
- Search committee (5-6 faculty often including an outside member) culls applications down to extended shortlist (8-10), then may invite comments from the remaining faculty and ultimately narrows it down to 3-5 who are invited for an interview
- Your application may be read entirely or in part by all or some members of the search committee
- Short list applicants are contacted and invited for an interview and seminar
- Search committee identifies top candidate, faculty votes, top candidate is offered position
- If selected candidate expresses interest negotiations begin, otherwise next-ranked applicant is contacted or search may be re-opened
- Selected candidate comes for second visit and negotiations are finalized during the second visit or at some point thereafter

4. Putting together a strong application

- *General:*

Do your homework about where you are applying to, what the search committee is looking for etc. Be aware of potential collaborators, facilities, teaching needs. It is fine to reuse the materials for multiple applications but if there is an easy way to tailor your application to their interests do it.

Try to stand out from the crowd as much as you can without going overboard. Stress your strengths - a good academic pedigree will get you past a lot of hurdles in the early stages of the search committee's evaluation. Lacking that, stress your outstanding research, publications, etc.

Ask senior colleagues with search experience to read your application before you send it out and incorporate their feedback. Include people who are not familiar with your work. Prepare all application materials carefully and neatly. *Eliminate* spelling and grammar mistakes.

- *Cover letter:*

Keep this brief, but put thought into it. This is your first chance to stand out. Express enthusiasm for the position you are applying for and how a great environment this would be for you to do your work. List your references and the materials you are sending along. Keep in mind that the search committee may receive 100-300 of these, so keep the cover letter short and sweet as much as you can.

- *Choosing your references*

Generally, referees could be your thesis advisor, postdoc advisor, thesis committee member or other mentor. Ideally, you want people of stature who know your work well and are sure to be positive about it.

Choose your referees carefully and make sure they know that they may be contacted for letters. If you are asking them to send letters directly be ready to hassle those who are over committed and slow about responding to requests for a reference. It is a good idea to contact the search committees around or just before the deadline and ask them whether they have received all the letters that should have been sent.

○ *Curriculum Vitae*

This deserves a lot of work. Again, the committee may look at >100 of these, and it is your chance to stand out, if not with accomplishments then at least with clarity of presentation.

- find examples and designs that work for you; you may want to ask colleagues slightly ahead of you in their career for their CV
- be absolutely truthful
- list Education, Honors and Awards and Grants
- list publications, consider highlighting your name and/or journal
- list presentations at meetings
- list teaching-related accomplishments and interests
- list the journals you reviewed for
- list outreach and volunteer work
- societal memberships are least important and can be left out

○ *Research Statement*

Two to three page narrative on (a) your research accomplishments and (b) your plans for the future. This is crucial. Be as clear and transparent as possible. Your audience may or may not have any background in your field, so be careful with jargon.

Pay attention to formatting. Assume that 100-300 of these will be read by your search committee. Optimize formatting (paragraphs, headings, etc) so that the main messages of your statement stand out and are easy to grasp even for someone who might skip a few lines or may not be paying 100% attention.

Discuss your thesis and postdoctoral work and how they fit into the big picture of your research interests and the bigger picture of your field. Delineate the significance of your work and identify major publications.

Discuss your future research plans and how they represent a continuation/ expansion on your previous work. If you have room, tie things up with a summary at the end. Tailor your statement to the job and place you are applying for. Mention specific things about why you want to go there, resources, contributions you can make etc. Above all, be enthusiastic.

- *Teaching Statement*

One to two page narrative on

(a) your take on teaching (motivation, style, theory if applicable)

(b) your previous teaching and mentoring experience and accomplishments

(c) the kind of teaching you feel you could contribute as a faculty member
(type of courses, intro vs. advanced, labs, etc)

Teaching statements can be short or extensive, depending on the kind of position you are targeting. These are challenging to write. Be careful with superficial BS about the glory and importance of teaching. Have experienced colleagues read and critique your statement.

Emphasize the teaching you have done and your motivation to be or become an effective teacher. Mention teaching/pedagogy courses you have taken, teaching awards you have received etc. Mention students and their projects that you have mentored over the years.

Explain which courses you would like to teach if you had your choice or could teach if need be. Be specific about which level you would target. Consider looking at the courses offered at the institution you are applying for and see what might be missing.

Be enthusiastic!

5. Preparing for the Interview

So you got an interview. Congratulations! A lot of work lies ahead of you, but before you start to panic take a moment and realize that you have risen above a very competitive pool of applicants. You are one of 3-5 selected from an initial pool of possibly several hundred applicants. You are never invited by mistake. Instead, the search committee is seriously considering you for this position. Now go kill them!

- *Preparation*

Do your homework before you go. Find out who the faculty are in the department that you will be interviewing with, what their research interests are, and what they teach. If you know your meeting schedule, look up these people specifically and read 1-2 of their papers if you have the time. Try to think of questions that would allow you to connect to their research.

Be prepared for an exhausting two days. Plan your wardrobe and travel schedule accordingly. Stay in a hotel, don't crash with friends - you will need your sleep.

Prepare your job talk(s) carefully. This is the single most important part of your interview. Your talk should tell a story, and you should close with exciting current and future research directions. If applicable, use your acknowledgements to show that even though this is all your work you interacted productively and collaboratively with colleagues and assistants. Leave time for questions.

Practice your talk. Select a representative audience for prep talks, i.e. NOT the people in your lab who already know your work and may hesitate to be critical. Incorporate feedback and revise your talk.

Ask the person who coordinates your schedule that you'd be given 15-30 minutes prior to your talk to collect your thoughts and calm down. You will need this.

- Preparation continued -

If you have special presentation needs (PowerPoint projector, laptop etc) ensure ahead of time that those can be met. Bring your own laptop if necessary. Have several backups. If you used PC or MAC PowerPoint to develop your presentation, make sure the same system is available to project it during your talk. Have your talk saved on CD and 100 MB ZIP (not 250 MB ZIPs as many systems still can't read from them). Carry all materials essential for your presentation in your carry-on luggage. You can give a talk in old jeans, but not without your slides or powerpoint presentation.

o *Questions and Answers*

Prepare answers to the following questions likely to be asked during your interview:

- Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years?
- What are your future research plans?
- Which special equipment/facilities do you need to do your work?
- Where will you apply for grant support?
- What will your first/second grant proposal be about, where will it be submitted, why do you think this will get funded?
- Why are you interested in this department?
- What are your teaching interests?
- Who do you see yourself interacting with the most in this Department?
- What do you envision your lab to be like?

Also be prepared to explain unusual features or discrepancies in your record (e.g. no letter from a recent mentor, time lapse in employment, etc)

- *Questions you should not be asked but probably will*

You are not supposed to be asked certain questions, but nonetheless they may still come up. Decide ahead of time how you will handle them. Here are two common examples:

Example 1: What does your husband, wife, partner do?

If you hope to negotiate a position for your partner should you be offered the job you should at this point try to dodge this question if you can. If you can't you may want to try for an answer that represents the truth while at the same time implies that what your partner does is really not relevant for your job search at this point. This is very hard to do but often the best you can make of this situation. For example:

"My partner is a microbial ecologist. S/He too got her degree at Princeton, but at this point s/he hasn't really decided whether she s/he wants to continue in academia, or focus on teaching, or do something else. We hope to find a place where there is sufficient diversity in and outside academia so that there may be some options for him/her. Right now however we are mainly looking for a place where I can work, and then we will make the best of what options we have regarding his/her future job"

However, do NOT raise the issue yourself at this point. You can only loose (unless your partner is a famous person they really want, chances are though that doesn't apply).

Do NOT say *I don't want to answer this question*. Chances are this will look as if you have a hidden agenda. When offered the job, this is the right time to raise the issue and see what they can do for you (see below).

Example 2: Where else are you interviewing / applying?

Admitting that you have several interviews lined up will actually make you look better and it would be ok to mention where else you are interviewing. If you do, however, take care not to make them feel like you are more excited about these other places than the one you are currently interviewing for.

If you don't have other interviews lined up you may want to mention that you have applied for several positions that have not had a chance to decide on a short list.

6. The Interview

- *A word of caution*

Keep in mind that regardless of the outcome of this interview, the people you are meeting with will be your colleagues one way or another. You may get the job and end up working in the same department, or you don't, in which case they will still remember your name when reviewing your manuscripts, grant proposals, thinking about who to recommend to students as a PhD or postdoc advisor and so forth. It is in your interest to be courteous and respectful at all times. Also keep in mind that a good search is a ton of work on the part of the search committee. Lastly, be aware that it is a small world. If you come across as a jerk at one place there is a chance this knowledge will travel to where you might go next.

- *Overview*

You are in for a grueling two-three days. Here is a typical schedule:

Day 1: You arrive in the afternoon or evening. Someone picks you up at the airport. You have dinner, talk science, then go to the hotel.

Day 2: You have breakfast with faculty, after that 30-60 minute meetings all day with faculty, deans, student reps, lunch in between.

By the time your brain is a real mess your talk is scheduled, typically at 4pm. Then dinner, then reception, then you get back to the hotel.

Day 3: Again 30-60 minute meetings all morning, your second seminar or meeting with the search committee. Lunch. More meetings.

Then someone will drive you to the airport. After you say good-by you may now collapse.

- *Individual meetings - general*

Maintain an open, positive attitude and try to enjoy yourself. Realize that some people will be on your side and easy to establish a connection with, and others won't.

Allow people to guide you through the meeting. Some will have things that they want to tell you - let them. Others expect you to ask questions - do so. Most people won't like a candidate who won't let them get a word in edge-wise.

Don't say NO to too many things at this point (e.g. teaching certain courses in the future), especially when talking to the search and department chairs and dean. Avoid stating absolutes that might get you written off right away unless you are absolutely certain that you don't want to go in this direction. In all likelihood you won't get a second chance to correct what you said. A lot of things are negotiable later on anyway.

Don't let an unsatisfactory meeting ruin the rest of your day and stay focused.

○ *Individual meetings - faculty*

Express interest and enthusiasm in others' research. Legions of candidates have failed because they did not care, or were perceived not to care, about the research of other faculty.

Consider preparing a few figures to explain some of your research to people who missed your talk and want a run-down of your work.

Try to forge research connections and discuss areas of collaboration where reasonable. Be prepared to discuss your interest in teaching.

Have questions of your own ready to ask, such as:

- How do you like working here?
- Where do you see the department develop in the future (growth, focus, composition, etc)?
- What is the quality of undergraduate/graduate students in the department?
- How difficult is it to attract good graduate students?
- How are graduate students admitted into the department?
- What do you teach?
- How do you like teaching here?
- What is the average teaching load?
- Availability of facilities?
- Ease and extent of interdisciplinary collaborations?
- Extent of technical support (computing, molecular tools, teaching)?
- What is the quality of life (outdoors and recreation, schools, arts and culture, etc)?

If you are meeting with faculty who were hired recently, ask how difficult it was to get started, attract students, whether renovations were done in time and as discussed etc. If you are meeting with faculty who were tenured recently ask them how hard that was, whether the process went as expected /explained at the beginning, etc.

○ *Individual meetings - department chair, search committee chair*

Here in particular you may want to ask questions about lab space availability, shared equipment and facilities, special needs you might have (equipment, facilities, etc).

Ask if you could see some of the space that comes with the position. Be ready to respond to questions regarding start-up needs and when you might want to start the position.

Do not try to negotiate anything at this point (e.g. salary, job for partner). This is the wrong time. Try to dodge questions about salary by saying something like "*It still seems early in the process to discuss salary but I am willing to consider all reasonable offers*". Focus on getting the offer rather than discussing the details.

- *Individual meetings - deans*

Not every department will have you meet with a dean during your first visit. If you do there is a chance you will enjoy a 30-minute monologue without a chance to ask many questions.

Alternatively you may run into a dean who actually wants to know what your research is about. In this case be prepared to briefly explain your research such that a History or English Professor could understand it.

In case you have a chance to ask questions here are some that a dean might be particularly competent to answer.

- Where do you see the department develop in the future (growth, focus, composition, etc)?
- How would you characterize the contributions of an excellent assistant professor?
- How are tenure decisions made?
- How does teaching factor into tenure decisions?
- What was the tenure rate of the department over the past 5-10 years?
- Benefits?

- *Meeting with Graduate Students:*

Be congenial, try to connect with them and express enthusiasm for teaching and mentoring. Ask them about their concerns and be sympathetic. Try to leave a good impression but don't worry so much if a student interview doesn't go so well. Students typically have relatively little say in hiring decisions. Additional questions you might consider asking are:

- How are graduate students admitted into the department?
- Do you get the support (administrative, departmental, training etc) you need to accomplish high quality dissertations?
- What is the proportion of students supported by TAships?
- Are TAships enough to cover living expenses?
- Are TA's given training in teaching?
- Which courses should be added to the curriculum?
- What is the quality of live (outdoors and recreation, schools, arts and culture, etc)

7. The chalk talk / informal meeting with the search committee

Many departments schedule you for a second seminar, which can range from a second full-fledged formal presentation for the whole department to an informal presentation to a subset of your original audience, or an informal meeting with just the search committee. These second presentations are often challenging and can be just as important as your main seminar. Here are a few suggestions you might want to take into account.

- *Preparation*

Ask the search chair what is expected of you during your second presentation and what kind of audiovisual support you can use. If they want you to give a second seminar, the same recommendations apply as for your first, though you probably want to use this as an opportunity to emphasize current preliminary findings, future directions etc. Use your first seminar to foreshadow the focus of your second presentation.

Keep in mind that portions of your audience may not have been able to attend your first seminar, or may have forgotten it already. You may need to restate the same background information so that your audience can follow.

If your second presentation is an informal chalk talk with a subset of your original audience, prepare a talk that does not rely on sophisticated audiovisuals and where you can be interrupted a lot without losing focus. Again, the focus will be on current and future research, but as before make sure to make clear how this presentation relates to your main seminar and fits into the bigger scope of your research.

If your second presentation is an informal meeting with the search committee be prepared to talk about future research in depth. You may want to prepare a handout for each member of the search committee to help guide you and them along, and to have something they can take with them after you leave. You may want to consider three aspects in particular:

(1) introduce and overview your short term research goals (3-5 years). Explain which grant proposals you will write and where you will submit them for funding, and why you think they will get funded

(2) introduce and overview your long term research goals (>10 years). Be prepared to explain/defend why reaching these goals would constitute major contributions and how your current and short-term goals will help you achieve them.

(3) summarize teaching and mentoring goals (less important).

8. Beyond the official interview

- *Dinner and receptions*

At dinner and receptions feel free to drink alcohol if others are drinking but stay in control. Allow the conversation to proceed to lighter topics. They want to be sure you will be a good colleague socially as well as professionally. Keep in mind that they are looking for someone who might possibly be there for the next 25 years. Remember to stay "on".

Receptions and dinners are a good opportunity to learn about quality of life issues associated with the location at which you are interviewing (housing costs, schools, recreation, culture, etc.) and to observe how faculty interact with and treat each other.

- *Checkout meeting*

Often your last meeting is again with a member of the search committee to cover any last questions and brief you on how the search will continue from here, how many more interviews there will be etc. Make sure to ask when the search committee hopes to come to a decision and when you might hear from them, emphasize that you will keep them informed of any future developments such as other offers, etc.

9. After the interview

- *Follow up*

Within one week consider dropping a brief email to all or at least some of the people you met with, in particular members of the search committee. Thank them for their time and for answering your questions and express your continued enthusiasm for the position. This can be a chance to correct any mistakes from a meeting that went poorly.

- *Maintaining communication*

Update the chair of the search committee on any new developments. If you get an offer from some other institution let them know. This will make you look more desirable and it will put pressure on the committee to come to a decision.

If you haven't heard back within a month check back with the committee chair and send an email expressing your continued interest and enthusiasm and offer to provide additional information.

10. The offer

If the search committee selects you as their top choice the committee's chair may give you a call and inform you of their decision. Even though nothing is official at this stage, this is the most significant decision. Congrats! Everything else is typically a formality.

In most cases the committee recommends its top choice to the department as a whole, which then approves the selection and sends it to the dean, who gives it his or her blessing. This may take a few days to 2 weeks. Then negotiations start and official offers can be made.

- *What to expect now and how to prepare*

Talk to your mentors and others in similar situations to find out what is reasonable for your field and position with respect to start-up funds, salary, initial teaching load etc. Try to find an advocate on the search committee or within the department to help you with negotiations. Recent hires may also be able to provide valuable information. The order and timing of things can vary quite a bit from place to place. Be prepared to deal with the following:

You likely be asked to submit a detailed budget to justify startup funds for equipment, personnel, etc. In the appendix find a list of things that you may need to consider.

You will be asked again about space needs. You now need to be specific about how much space you need now or at some point in the future and in what shape it needs to be in.

You will be invited for a second visit to discuss the details of your offer, look at lab space, discuss renovations, and make clear where renovation funds will come from (i.e. NOT your start-up). It is appropriate for your immediate family (spouse, kids) to come along on a second visit and for the Department to cover the costs.

NOW is a good time to discuss the two-body problem and deferring starting dates

Now is also the time to be as specific and clear as you can be in what you need to succeed. Don't be a jerk, but be persistent. Consider asking for money to pay for a postdoc or technician, summer salary etc.

You are likely able to get a larger total startup by negotiating a certain amount to be made available for your first year, then some for your second and third. Institutions typically are much more limited with respect to how much they can promise NOW as opposed to years for now.

It is a common misconception that being persistent in negotiations will somehow cause the institution to withdraw its offer and pick someone more "grateful". Your institution has invested a lot of effort to get to this point. Your polite but assertive query about negotiating and improving an offer is not enough to offset that investment. They will let you know which aspects of the offer are non-negotiable.

GET EVERYTHING IN WRITING and do not sign until you are certain you have everything you need and are ready to take the position. Since not every little detail can make it onto paper at some point a certain level of trust between you and your negotiating partners comes in and you need to just go for it.

NOTE: If you have already decided that there is no way in hell you will take this job, there is no point in prolonging negotiations at this point.

- *Multiple offers and pressure situations*

If you have multiple offers it is ok to mention that you have been offered higher salary or startup at other places. Make sure you have this in writing. Again, don't be obnoxious, but raising the issue politely may just take a few minutes of everybody's time yet earn you a decent amount of additional funds.

Some departments/universities will force you to make a decision by setting a deadline, e.g. 1 week after the final offer is made. This can be truly stressful. Find out (from recent hires) whether your place is like that. If so, and if you need additional time, try to slow them down without going overboard. Most importantly, tell the other places you hope to hear from that you are being pressured. Most places will try to move as fast as they can.

- *Declining an offer*

If you have decided to decline an offer, do not wait longer than is absolutely necessary to inform the search committee. Keep in mind that they are eager to move to their next candidate before that person, too, accepts another job.

You may call or write to the head of the search committee, but either way put some thought into this. Let him/her know that this was a hard decision, that you think theirs is a terrific place to work and you appreciate all the effort they put into this search. You may or may not want to mention why you decided against them. If you tell them why you turned them down be careful not to inadvertently belittle the efforts of the committee and the dean to make you the best offer they could afford.

GOOD LUCK!

APPENDIX

Categories for startup funds

(note: some of these may not apply to your field or discipline, others may be missing. You will have to research your own \$\$ amounts. Include items that may be available as shared equipment unless you know for sure that they are and that this is sufficient for your needs. Be ready to defend your budget and be reasonable. Don't ask for (much) more money than the stuff actually costs.)

I. Wet Lab equipment

Lab Microscopy

Compound microscope for fluorescence
High aperture low magnification lenses (10x, 20x)
Digital Camera for Compound Scope
Appropriate Software
Computer Hardware
Monitor
replacement lights

dissecting scope w/ fluorescence setup,
light box, interchangeable hp objectives
photo adapter for dissecting scope
regular digital camera for dissecting scope
Cold light source plus light guides

Molecular Biology

Thermal Cycler, 96 well
Real-time PCR machine
Gradient PCR machine
Microbalance
Regular lab balance
SLEE Cryostat MEV
sectioning supplies (blades, solutions, sharpening equipment)
Picoliter injector for RNAi injection
Micromanipulator incl. control unit
NANOpure DI Water Purification System
"-20 freezer
"-80 freezer, 490 liter
nutator mixer (3)
Microwave oven
water bath, shallow
water bath, large (2)
heat block (2)
equipment for agarose gel electroph.
gel doc power supplies

II. Computer needs

PC stations complete with CD reader, writer, ZIP, (2)
MAC station
laptop
software (PShop, Sigma Plot,
Adobe Writer, 3D rec software, Virus protection etc)
laser printer
color printer
flat bed scanner with slide adapter
misc. supplies
(disks, cartridges, paper, chords, surge protectors etc)
appropriate furniture

III. Fees for Equipment Use and related

Confocal
SEM
Sequencing
xerox
dish washing
phone use
postage/FEDEX

IV. Rearing supplies and related

rearing supplies (\$3000/year for 2 years)
standup incubators (2) with low temp range
20 cuf Chest Freezer
Insect Boxes
Mounting Supplies
Storage Cabinets (2)
appropriate furniture

V. Office

office supplies

Wester Blotting Equipment
UV Stratalinker
Speedvac concentrator
Vacuum pump
Orbital Shaker
Benchtop shaking incubator
Slide hybridization oven
tabletop Centrifuge, refridgerated
lab cart hd (2)
high capacity centrifuge
minifuges (2)
vortexer (2)
Sonicator
Spectrophotometer
DIGI DOC gel imaging system
Electroporation System
Hyfrecator
microscissors (3) and forceps (5)
Pipetteman set (3)
timers (3)
glass and plastic ware
chemicals
antibodies
molecular biology kits and consumables
autoclave
hood, sinks, counter work space
appropriate furniture

Radioactivity

Liquid Scintillation Counter
handheld Geiger Counter

furniture for graduate student / postdoc office

VI. Salaries

Part-time Technician, 2 years
Postdoctoral support, 2 years*
Summer salary for 6 months
Funds to support undergraduate research, 2 years

VII. Other

Funds for collecting and shipment of research animals
(expected 10 shipments / year, \$300/shipment**, for 2 years)
Travel expenses associated with field work for 2 years***