

8. Academic Job Search Tools

Edited and expanded by Lindsay Bilodeau, PhD Candidate, Victoria University of Wellington

If academe is your chosen path, you already know the market for tenure-track jobs is very limited. The very existence of a job in your field depends on several factors outside of your control like the economy, retirements, and government funding priorities, among other issues.

The best way to prepare yourself for the uncertainties of the job market is to begin planning early in your graduate career. Build your teaching portfolio through teaching assistantships and, later, teaching at least one course. While waiting for your supervisor or committee members to review your dissertation chapters, sit down and prepare your dossier: design your dream course, write up your teaching philosophy, refine your CV, draft a job letter, and practice summarizing your thesis and its scholarly significance into a paragraph or two. When a job ad appears, you will be ready to respond. Don't wait until the last minute to apply.

While opportunities may be limited, you can and should still approach your job search as a research project. When you're applying, reach out to any faculty or graduate students you know in a program to ask them about their experiences. What is the teaching and service load? Does the institution offer extra research support or start-up funds to new hires? What kind of work is considered in the tenure and promotion process? Academic jobs require a more extensive dossier of files and information than most positions. Below we offer some general advice and links to excellent resources to help you prepare your files.

a. Job Search Tools

- University Affairs: <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/search-job/>
- CAUT Bulletin: <https://www.academicwork.ca/>
- H-Net: https://www.h-net.org/jobs/job_browse.php
- Academic Jobs Europe: <https://www.jobs.ac.uk/categories/academic-jobs-europe>
- The Chronicle of Higher Education: <https://www.chronicle.com/page/employment-opportunities/>

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b. When and Where to Apply

First, you will need to decide when to first enter the job market: after completing a dissertation or when you are ABD (all but dissertation). There are contradictory opinions on this topic. As an ABD you may find that undertaking a modest job search when you are within a year or so of completing your dissertation can give you the experience and build up the confidence you will need when you enter the job market in earnest. On the other hand, the chance of getting full-time academic employment as an ABD is relatively slim. Given the expectation of employers for a finished dissertation and even publications, and assuming you have a choice, you might want to delay your search until you've completed your dissertation.

In the current job market, post-doctoral fellowships are becoming a common intermediate step to full time work. Though post-docs are not a guarantee of full-time work, either, candidates who win a fellowship use these years to get their book out and build their network. Some fellowships also offer teaching experiences. If you're looking for a tenure stream job, try to limit teaching in this time. If your goal is a teaching-stream position, however, a post-doc can be a valuable way to build your dossier in this area.

Once you are actively on the academic job market, it may take a few years to land a job. You might need to move to different parts of the country (or other countries) while you work toward a permanent job. Look outside history departments. History PhDs can be strong candidates for cross-listed and interdisciplinary programs like the Humanities, Education, and Criminology departments, or in law, medical, or business schools. In each case, you'll need to tailor your resume to both the department and the discipline. Look at the courses listed for each department and identify how you can contribute to the teaching team. Show how your research complements and enhances the work being done by other members of the department.

Do not try to guess the motives of employers. Job ads are often deliberately vague because the hiring department has not yet decided (or cannot agree) on the sort of candidate they want, or because faculty are shopping around for an individual who

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can plug all the gaps in their curriculum or have an unspoken vision of the “perfect” candidate.

c. Preparing your application

Once you decide to apply, ensure that you will be seriously considered for a job by producing an application that is thoughtfully and carefully prepared. Faced with dozens, even hundreds of applicants, search committees routinely throw out applications simply because they fail to impress on the first read-through. Never send out a form letter in response to an academic job advertisement. You’ll need to recraft your letter for each job. A succinct 1 to 2-page letter of introduction listing your research, teaching and administrative qualifications is sufficient. Submit the requested documents as specified. If the departments want additional material, they will contact you.

Ask your supervisor or other senior colleagues to read your letter and provide feedback. Some departments or universities may have workshops or career services to help you prepare your file. Your graduate program chair or administrator can help you to connect with these resources. Take advantage of what your university offers before you graduate.

For references, try to find letter writers that can address your scholarship and teaching abilities. Never hesitate to ask a faculty member to write you a letter of reference; they are standard fare in our profession. But do provide your referees with the time and information they need (ideally, including the job advertisement) to write the letters you want. Do not seek out referees who have an exceptional academic reputation but are relatively unfamiliar with your research. It is almost always better to have a glowing (and precise) letter from a lesser-known scholar than a mediocre or uninformed letter from a “big name.” If possible, try to ascertain in advance if your intended referee is willing to write an enthusiastic letter or will “damn you with faint praise” out of apathy, unfamiliarity, or even hostility.

Employment discrimination is illegal, and many universities in the United States and Canada have policies intended to further “level the playing field” and remedy the effects of past discrimination. Most employment equity programs focus on the four groups that Canadian law recognizes as having been historically disadvantaged: racial

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minorities, Indigenous persons, persons with disabilities, and women. Some universities also recognize LGBTQIP2SAA as protected groups. Employment equity policies and procedures vary greatly from university to university. Often you will be asked to identify as a member of an underrepresented group. If you feel you have been treated unfairly in a job search, the university's equity office or faculty union may be able to help.

d. CVs

CVs offer a complete list of your academic accomplishments, publications, teaching and research experience. CVs are generally for MA or PhD grads and are used in academic job searches. Postings in museums and archives may also invite a CV if the position includes research and publishing. This [comprehensive publication](#) prepared by the University of Toronto Career Centre offers excellent detailed guidelines on preparing your CV.

It is a good idea to start tracking your work in different categories early in grad school. Keep in one place so that you have evidence of all your contributions in research, teaching and committee work. Combined, this material will help to show the breadth and depth of your file. Keep your CV updated once you have found a job. You'll need it for tenure or promotion purposes, conferences, and publishing.

e. Teaching Portfolios

Here again, there are excellent resources online to guide you through the preparation of a teaching portfolio or dossier. Check to see if your university has any services that may help you with these documents. And remember to keep your teaching evaluations, notes from students, and any other evidence you have of your effectiveness in the classroom.

- University of Waterloo Centre for Teaching Excellence:
<https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/professional-development/career-strategies/creating-teaching-dossier>

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- University of Western Ontario Centre for Teaching and Learning:
<https://teaching.uwo.ca/awardsdossiers/teachingdossiers.html>
- Université de Québec à Montréal, Pédagogie Universitaire:
<http://pedagogie.uquebec.ca/le-tableau/le-dossier-denseignement-instrument-de-valorisation-pedagogique-luniversite>

f. Academic Cover Letters

It can be challenging to get all the information you need in a cover letter, tailored, and keep it to two pages. But it is important to hone your pitch to a department with clarity and brevity. Ask trusted senior colleagues to review your letters and provide honest feedback. Our sample job documents section also includes examples of successful letters from recent candidates.

- Jobs.Ac.Uk, “How to Write a Cover Letter for Academic Jobs”:
<https://www.jobs.ac.uk/media/pdf/careers/resources/how-to-write-a-cover-letter-for-academic-jobs.pdf>
- University of Toronto Career Services: https://studentlife.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/Creating_your_cover_letter_for_academic_positions.pdf
- How to Write an Academic Cover Letter, Hook & Eye:
<https://hookandeye.ca/2018/10/05/how-to-write-an-academic-cover-letter/>

g. Interviews

Academic job interviews fall into three general categories: convention interviews, distance interviews (phone or videoconferencing), and on-campus interviews. Most Canadian universities short-list candidates after assessing their written applications, but US universities generally conduct brief interviews before deciding who to invite for an on-campus interview. Many US departments hold preliminary interviews at large conventions like the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, held in early January. These interviews are generally brief, sometimes lasting as little as fifteen minutes. Candidates must therefore be able to sum up their work in five minutes, give or take. Try to avoid being too narrow or cautious in describing your scholarship. Be prepared to think and talk about your interests and expertise outside of your dissertation. Interviewers sometimes ask candidates to talk about general

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trends in the historiography of their fields or to discuss their long-term research agenda.

You will probably be asked about teaching, so be prepared to talk briefly about how you would organize key courses. You can bolster your preparation and courage in advance by having trusted faculty and friends ask you difficult questions in a simulated interview before you go into the real one. There are some sample interview questions in the following section that you can use for practice.

Phone and video-conference interviews are sometimes similar in length to those held at conventions, and usually serve the same purpose: to reduce a large pool of candidates to a number small enough to be brought to an on-campus interview. They are used if a candidate is abroad or cannot get to the convention, or if the university has limited funds to bring candidates to campus. In Quebec, in particular, they offer a way to evaluate the French language skills of candidates with first languages other than French.

On-campus interviews often happen once you have been short-listed for a job (either after a convention or phone interview, or from the pool of written applications). You will be brought onto campus and put through a series of meetings and interviews. Try to get a detailed interview schedule in advance, as well as some information about who will be evaluating you. Interviewers inevitably interpret your knowledge about the department as evidence of your interest and engagement; they may see its absence as apathy or disinterest in the position. If you are short-listed, you may be told on very short notice (often only a week, sometimes two), so be prepared for the possibility of a quick move. Some job advertisements are extremely specific about the research and teaching expertise they are seeking; they may want a candidate to teach a first-year survey course in the department. In this case, you should construct a basic syllabus for the course to distribute during the interview and be prepared to discuss it. Do not simply borrow or download someone else's outline. In addition to showing how your research fits the hiring department's needs, it is a good idea to try to link your work to other research centres and clusters at the university.

The interview process can take multiple days and the structure of the interview varies from institution to institution greatly. You will almost certainly have a formal interview by the search committee or possibly the entire department. Ask for breaks if

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they have not already been put into the schedule. If you have a disability or any other condition that might affect your interview, the university is obliged to accommodate you.

Often, interviewees are expected to demonstrate their teaching abilities by providing a guest lecture before an undergraduate class or a mock lecture before the faculty. It's essential to be clear about what the hiring committee expects in terms of a research talk or teaching presentation. The key is to demonstrate that you have the basic skills necessary to teach at the post-secondary level and can discuss a topic that is not in your area of expertise. (The lecture topic is often, but not always, chosen by the host department).

It is a good idea to compile a mental list of questions to ask while you are on campus. When you meet with the department chair or dean, ask about teaching responsibilities and tenure criteria. Ask members of the department about enrolments and student profiles, resources and opportunities for faculty development, evaluation and promotion, departmental structure, anticipated hiring, and library facilities. Also ask about how and when the department will make its decision. It is not appropriate to ask about the other candidates and a properly conducted search will keep that information from you until the final decision has been made. Wear what you consider to be formally “dressed-up,” try to find dress in a way that is “formal” but that also allows you to feel comfortable and good. In certain contexts, specific cultural dress may be accepted or expected. You can get more information from [University Affairs](#) and the [Chronicle](#), while these articles focus more on academic-specific interviews, the information they cover can be used to prepare for any interview.

You don't have to share personal details with your interviewers, but don't feel that you must talk solely about professional topics; it's useful and important to let people know that you have other interests. Letting your interviewers know about things you like doing in your spare time is an important means for them to get to know you as a potential colleague. Handling innocent questions about your personal situation can usually be done with a certain degree of tact.

No amount of advice can change the fact that interviews, and the hiring process itself, can seem full of arbitrary interactions and unexpected decisions. A good candidate is

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enthusiastic about the job, brings new ideas to the university, and shows the promise of future ability. Even if you don't get the job, you will have a chance to practice your job talk and make valuable contacts. That is a success!

Sample interview questions for academic jobs:

Interview committees ask a wide range of questions, and it is impossible to know what exactly you will be asked. However, some questions are common. Think about how you would respond to the following:

- How would you characterize your research interests in relation to our department?
- Are there other research clusters or programs in this university with which you want to interact?
- What courses would you like to teach at the undergraduate and graduate levels?
- How would you teach a survey course?
- What is your teaching philosophy?
- What are your teaching methods?
- What kind of assignments do you find most effective?
- How do you think you would relate to students at our (rural/big city/francophone, etc.) university?
- What administrative experience can you bring to the department? Are you willing to serve on committees?
- Would you like to work with graduate students? What kinds of research projects and methodologies might you encourage them to pursue?

Questions that you can ask the department/your interviewers:

- What are the demographics of the student population in this department like? Do they come from across Canada? Do they commute or live in residence? What issues concern them?
- Are there faculty or graduate-student-run lecture series, research seminars, or regular conferences?

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- Are there any start-up grants or internal research grants for new faculty? Is there travel funding for faculty?
- How are faculty members assessed/evaluated for tenure and promotion?
- Where do most professors live?

h. Profile: Ornella Nzindukiyimana

What is your current role?

I am an Assistant Professor; I teach at all levels except first years. Since I work at a small undergraduate university, I prepare my own courses, deliver them, and, generally, I evaluate any assignments myself. In conjunction with this, I supervise honour students' work and/or directed studies. I also pursue research, secure funding, publish in reputable scholarly venues as much as possible and I sit on a few committees.

What degree(s) do you have?

A Bachelor of Science with Specialization in Human Kinetics (Honours), an MA in Human Kinetics, and a Doctorate in Kinesiology

Did you work during your degree(s), if so, were your jobs related to your degree?

Throughout my undergrad and MA years, I worked as a science educator and a science camp counsellor at the Canada Science and Technology Museum. While completing my MA and doctorate, I worked as a teaching and research assistant, which is the first time I had a more specifically academic job. In that capacity, I was proctoring and marking assignment, but I was also intermittently given the opportunity to guest lecture in some classes.

When did you start applying for after graduation jobs during your last degree?

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I started applying for jobs in my second year of PhD, right after I had finished my comprehensive exam.

In brief, can you tell us about a search tool or university job support program (if any) that you found useful in your job search?

The listserv of the North American Society for Sport History of which I am a member was a main source. I have found that listservs provide very good information about jobs and would recommend them.

Can you briefly describe one skill that helped you succeed in your application for your current role?

I believe some experience in teaching was key when applying to become a Lecturer. In my application I had to demonstrate that I was able to balance both a strong research portfolio and a full course load.

Can you provide advice from your experiences with committee work in academia?

A good approach with committee work is to not undertake more responsibilities than necessary. As a junior faculty, it is imperative to 'protect' your research time, especially when dealing with an already heavy teaching load. Do not take on service tasks that will require you to take on too much. Colleagues with experience should be able to help you navigate through the options.

How did you balance your personal preferences, for example cities you did or didn't want to live, institutions or companies you did or didn't want to work for, with the need to get a job and build experience?

This early in my career (in my second year as a tenure track faculty), I do not have many options or the luxury to pick and choose. It was important that I be prepared to move where the job was. The only boundary in my personal case was that I was not willing to travel to the United States. Gaining experience early on takes priority over

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where one does or does not want to live. Experience opens more opportunities in the future.

What do you wish you had known about the job search when you finished your graduate studies?

I would have appreciated a realistic overview of what I could do with my degree outside of academia, to be much better informed about my options and to have a better array of choices. I also wish I had discussed an academic career path with my mentors to get a real sense of what academia really means, instead of picking up on the fly. Finally, I would have liked to be aware of what a search committee typically look for in an application.