

# The Quick and Relatively Painless Guide to Your Academic Job Search

by Dr. Karen Kelsky

**Vitae**

# Letter from the Editor

More than a year ago, as The Chronicle was building Vitae, we set out to create a home for frank advice on the increasingly tricky task of building an academic career. Naturally, one of the very first people we turned to was Karen Kelsky.

After all, the first step to building an academic career is landing a compelling job. And it's hard to think of anyone more qualified to assist with that process than Karen. Through her business, The Professor Is In, she's advised countless graduate students and junior faculty members on how to navigate the perilous waters of the job search.

Karen does something that's simple but rare: She talks candidly about academic labor, warts and all. That's what we've tried to do on Vitae: Our news, advice, and commentary on the experience of working—or looking for work—in and around academia aims to be honest, helpful, and, when appropriate, entertaining. Karen's weekly Vitae column checks off all of those boxes.

If you only know Vitae through the news and advice, or if you aren't familiar with it at all, here's a quick primer. It's an online community built expressly for students, faculty, and administrators who are looking to make their careers in and around higher ed more successful and rewarding.

We'd like to invite you to check us out online. Creating a free account will allow you to explore our dossier-management tool, search out colleagues, follow authors, and receive our weekly email digest of news and advice.

Thanks, and good luck making your career work for you.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brock Read'.

**Brock Read**  
Editor, Vitae

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# Introduction: The Big Picture

If you're reading this guide, there's a good chance you already know how The Professor feels about the academic job market and the state of graduate training—especially in the humanities and most social sciences.



If you don't, though, here's where I stand. I judge and condemn the vast majority of graduate programs that focus myopically on "the life of the mind" at the expense of the hands-on vocational skills training a job candidate and practicing professional academic will actually need—skills like publishing while in graduate school, "working" a conference to meet senior scholars and create buzz, identifying effective recommendation-letter writers, writing a top-notch job letter, creating a professional CV, mastering the elevator speech, and understanding the politics of a department.

Graduate study that excludes this kind of training almost guarantees that Ph.D.'s will leave entirely unprepared to compete for the rapidly declining number of tenure-track positions available. It's criminal.

You, however, can't pay your rent on righteous indignation. You need a job. And that's where [The Professor Is In](#) comes in. Many of you know my extensive corpus of blog posts on the academic job market. In this short guide I summarize the highlights of that advice, focusing on what you need to do to put yourself on the shortlist. I will explain:

- **What really happens to your job application**
- **The top mistakes of a bad job cover letter**
- **How to handle your conference interview**
- **How to dominate the campus visit**
- **How to negotiate an offer**

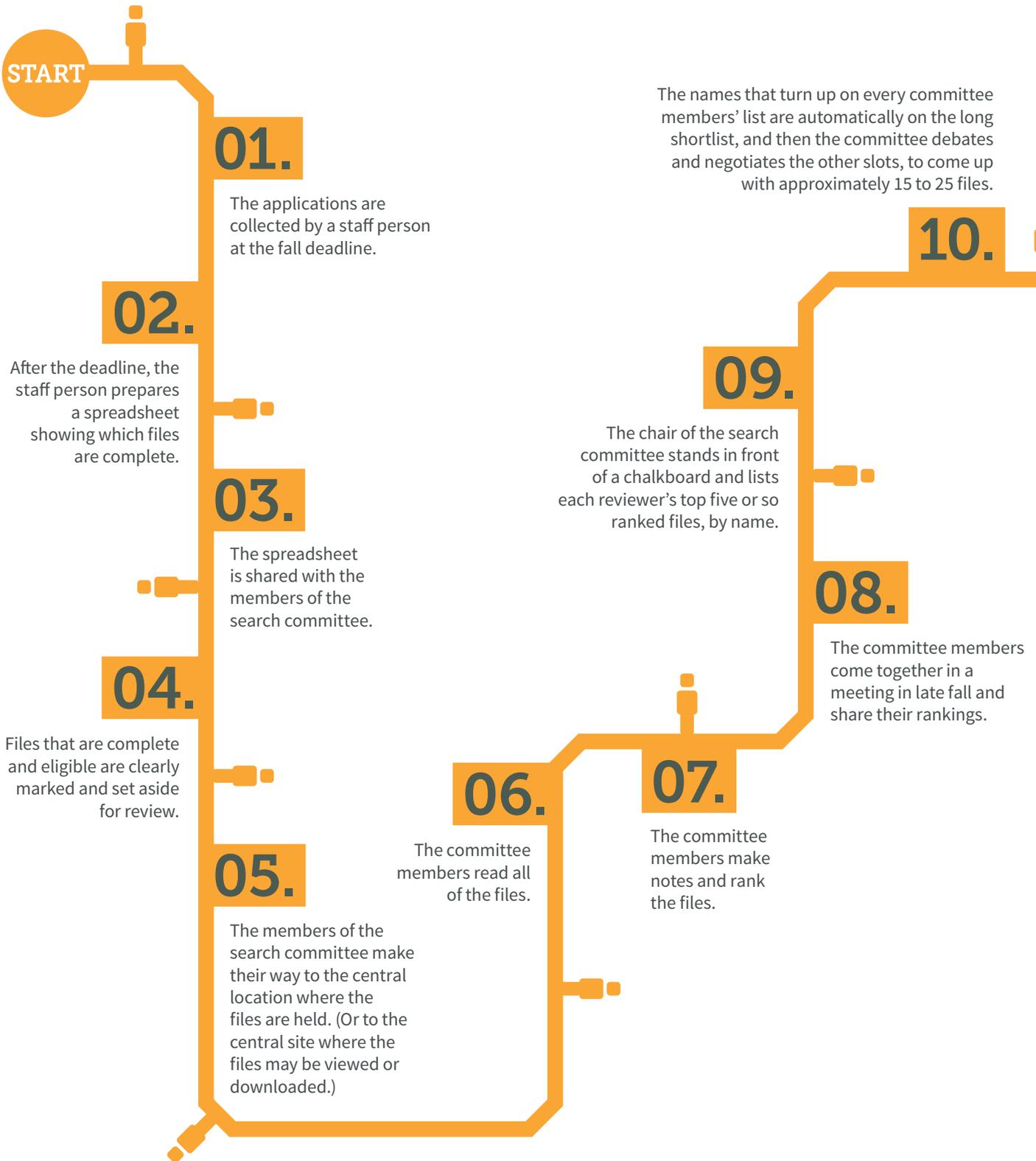
As you might know, I spent 15 years as a tenure-track/tenured faculty member at two R1 institutions. I sat on or chaired 11 search committees. I was also a department head, who handled final negotiations with candidates. I also trained my own Ph.D.'s, who went on to pursue their own careers. In short, I know this racket from all angles, inside and out. Do what I say, exactly as I say it, and you will optimize your chances on the market.

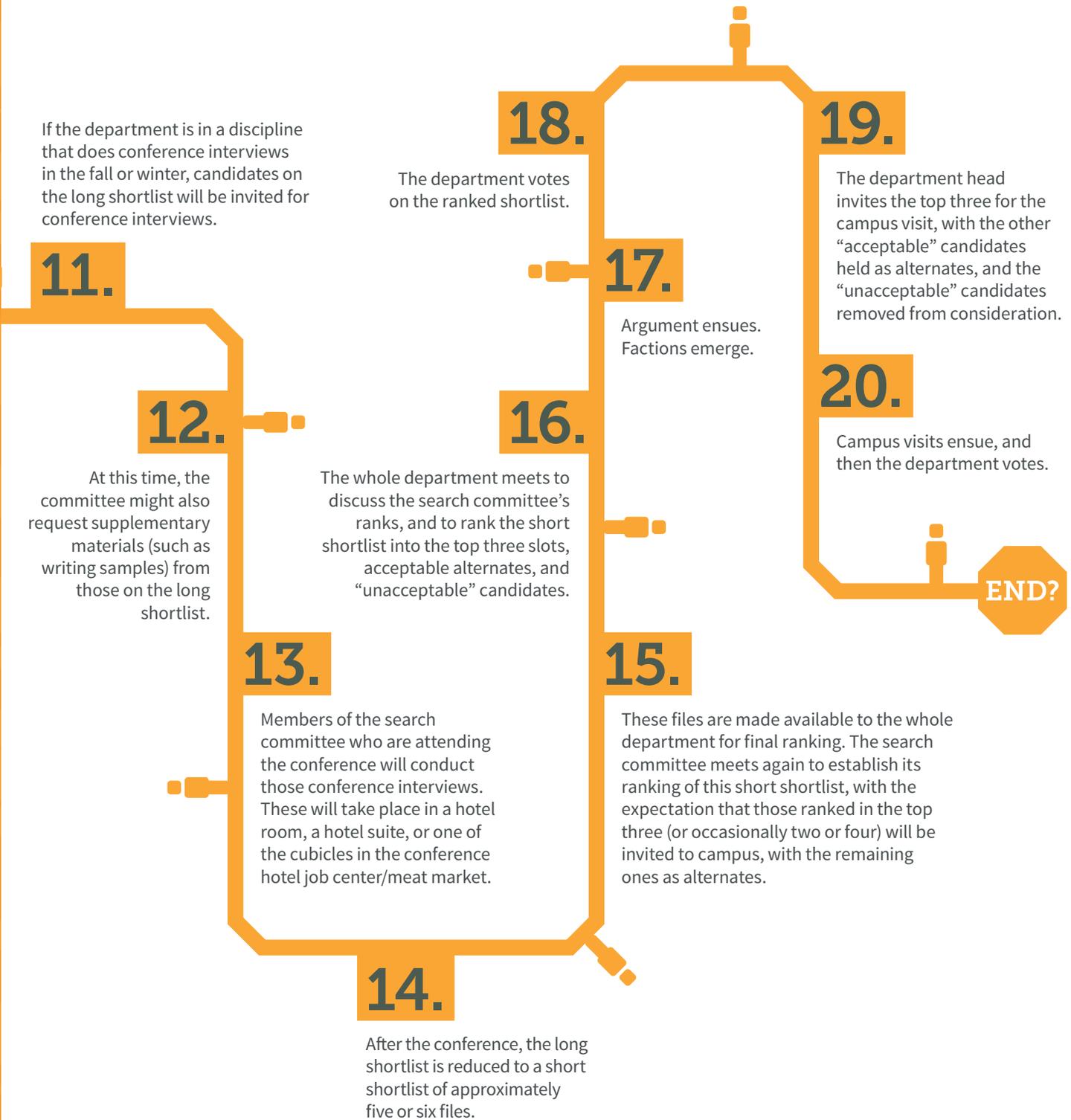
I can't guarantee you a job. Nobody can. In an era of 76-percent adjunctification, there is no individualized solution to the crisis. The majority of Ph.D.'s will not get a tenure-track job; there simply are almost no more tenure-track jobs to get. And it goes without saying that if your work itself isn't fascinating, innovative, rigorous, and well-written (and finished!), no amount of packaging and strategizing can get you a job. This guide will give you the tools to showcase your work and potential. Let's get to it.

# The Path of a Job Application

What happens to your job application once it arrives at the department? This is a common point of confusion. Whether the search is conducted online (as most are these days) or on paper, the basic process and timeline are pretty much the same. I'll describe the paper search here. What happens is this:







## The Crabbiness Factor

This process, while long and winding, seems fairly straightforward. And it is, except for one point. Members of the search committee had to read all the files on their own time. In other words, they read your file after getting home from a long day of teaching, and a stupid, pointless faculty meeting; after driving their kids to soccer and going home to make dinner and driving back to the field to bring their kids home; after yelling at their kids about homework not finished and then having a spat with their spouse about yelling at the kids; after washing up the dinner dishes and putting the kids to bed; after answering 12 emails from undergraduates hysterical about the exam the next day.

At 9:30 at night—crabby, frustrated, short-tempered, underslept, and intensely regretting ever agreeing to serve on this stupid @\$%ing search committee—your reviewers sit down to review your job application.

And what do you think they do? I will tell you. They give each file about three minutes. They flip it open, note the CV, and then quickly scan the job letter. If the letter does not grab them by the end of the first paragraph, possibly the first page, your chance is lost. The file is shut and placed firmly in the “no” pile.

The great untold secret of job applications is that search committee members are eagerly searching for reasons to reject your application. They are not entranced with your project. They are not inspired by your prose. They are entirely disinclined to pore over your CV seeking to discover the minutiae of your graduate school life. They are tired, irritable, and overwhelmed.

And they are sick to their stomachs that the job market is so atrocious that their one little job ad brought in 500 applications. They feel ill seeing full professors so desperate to move that they’re willing to apply for assistant-professor positions. They suffer survivor’s guilt that they are enjoying tenure-line positions while so many applicants are out there still struggling.

They are not enjoying themselves. And if they can reject an application, they will. Because it is one less that they have to continue reading, one less that they have to think about, one less they have to feel guilty about, one less they have to see again.

## What Can You Do to Overcome the Crabby?

Here’s what they want. They want a job application that glows. That takes them out of themselves. That restores their faith in the human condition and the mission of the academy. They also need for the stated requirements of the job ad to be clearly, unmistakably, met. They want to learn something new, but very, very quickly. They also, however, want their world-view to be reaffirmed, by which I mean that they want the spark of new ideas presented in the formats that they already know and respect: high-status publications, prestigious grants, well-known and influential letter-writers.

Your dossier must grab the reader’s attention in the first paragraph of the job letter and never let go. Every word must vibrate with meaning and import. There will be no fluff, no filler, no “indeed it can be argued” or “it is certainly worth noting, on the other hand” or “I hope to” or “I firmly believe,” or “it is a great honor to.” This is wasted verbiage that bores the reader and pushes you up against your space limit. (Page limits are not official, but at The Professor Is In they are strict and inviolable: two pages for a cover letter, one page for a teaching statement, two to four pages for a research statement, depending on the field; science research statements are typically longer.)

Because most departments include a range of subfields, all words must be comprehensible to any scholar in your discipline, and must never lapse into narrow jargon. Your letter will do more with less. Don’t play games with fonts and margins to try and squeeze “just a little more” into a limited space. Instead your letter is spacious, expansive, and at ease with itself. Because every word pulls its weight, fewer words are needed. There is eye-relieving white space on the paper.

Finally, your letter articulates an original, innovative scholarly profile, and then shows, rather than tells, how you are a dynamic, active researcher, teacher, and department citizen. We will discuss details of how to accomplish this below.

# Reading the Job Ad

Before we get into how exactly you accomplish all of this in your brilliant job letter, CV, teaching statement, and letters of recommendation, we must pause to consider the job ad.



Ah, the job ad. When I was on the market, in the days when jobs were advertised in the back of newsletters, I once ended up at the doctor's office complaining of eye strain "from reading the tiny print in job ads." I'm sure that wasn't psychosomatic. He just looked at me.

Job ads are the products of politics. In a department, competing subfields and factions are always fighting to be represented in the next hire. The job ad will represent the victorious faction, but it will sometimes contain clues about the battle. Read the details carefully. If the ad expresses interest in someone who works on gender or media or political parties, chances are those are competing groups in the department. Double-check this by visiting the department website and seeing who the interested parties might be, and what their status is. If you see that the highest-status full professor works in one of those fields, then it tells you something about how they might be ordered in the department's unspoken priorities. Not always, mind you. Just one clue to tuck away in the back of your mind.

It goes without saying that you must read the job ad carefully for clues about the university and department climate. If it is an evangelical Christian college, be aware that an openly gay candidate may not be welcomed. If it is an agricultural college with a strong bent toward quantitative research, know that a woey poststructuralist may not make the strongest candidate. Apply to all jobs for which you are eligible, because I promise you: You, sitting at home in your office, cannot anticipate the inner politics of who makes the final shortlist, regardless of what is written in that ad. Tailor carefully. And apply.

On *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* Forum section, there is a thread called "Apply for the Damn Job," or "AFTDJ." This pretty much sums it up. If you're at all appropriate for the job, just apply for it. Do not get in touch with the department with some querulous mewling like "Do I seem like the right kind of applicant?" Good god, that's embarrassing. No, just apply for the damn job. But make your application a good one. Rewrite your letter. Make it speak to that ad. Tailor every single application you send out. Right now you're in a race for your life. Put in the work.

# Your Cover Letter

In my 15 years as a faculty member I served on approximately 11 search committees, some of which I chaired.

I've also read the cover letters of my own students, and a passel of Ph.D. students who came to me for advice, as well as a large number of clients since opening The Professor Is In.

So let's say I've read 3,200 job cover letters. Of those, it is safe to say that 3,000 sucked. Sucked badly. Sucked epically. Sucked the way [Cakewrecks.com](http://Cakewrecks.com) cakes suck.



### What's up with that?

Here's what's up with that.

Advisors don't teach their grad students how to write cover letters. They send them out pathetically, humiliatingly ill-informed.

It is, in my opinion, a criminal degree of neglect.

So, anyone reading this now: Here is why your cover letter sucks, and what you need to do to fix it.

## 1. It Is Too Long. And 1a. It's Not on Letterhead.

Your letter must be on letterhead. This is not negotiable. It has come to my attention that departments are preventing their graduate students from having access to letterhead. This is unacceptable, and any subterfuge is justified in response. You may steal the letterhead. You may Photoshop the letterhead. Do what you must, but send all professional letters of every kind on letterhead.

Your letter must be two pages, max. No longer. Do not argue with me. If you are arguing with me, you are wrong. It must be two pages, max.

It must be in 12-point (ok, maybe 11.5) font, and have a minimum of  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch margins. (One-inch margins are far better.)

Why must it be these things? Because the faculty members on the committee reviewing your letters are tired, distracted, irritated, and rushed. Again, they will give your cover letter five minutes. They will not hunt for your main point, they will not squint, they will not strain their eyes, and they will not pore over it.

Serve up your brilliance, your achievements, and your delightful collegial personality loud and clear. You are respecting your future colleagues' time and eyesight, and believe me, they notice.

Do I hear whining that you "can't possibly say all you need to" in two pages? Tough. Do you want a job or don't you? Do it.

## 2. You Are Telling, Not Showing.

All academics in the world, by virtue of being academics, require evidence to accept a proposition. Even the loopyest humanists have to be persuaded that a claim is valid.

Empty claims like "I am passionate about teaching," "I care deeply about students," or "I am an enthusiastic colleague" contain no evidence whatsoever. They can be made by anyone, and provide no means of proof.

Show, don't tell: Instead of "I am passionate about teaching," you must write, "I used new technologies to create innovative small-group discussion opportunities in my large introductory classes, technologies that were later adopted by my colleagues in the department." Or, "I worked one-on-one with students on individual research projects leading to published articles. Several students later nominated me for our campus's 'Best Undergraduate Teacher' award, which I won in 2011."

Get it? Don't waste their time with unsubstantiated and unsubstantiatable claims.

## 3. You Drone on and on About Your Dissertation

They don't care about your dissertation. Seriously, they don't. Your dissertation is in the past. It's in the past even if you're still writing it. It's what you did as a student, and they're not hiring a student. They're hiring a colleague. They want to know about your dissertation only as it relates to identifiable faculty achievements—publications, conference talks, grants, teaching. In short, they want to hear about your dissertation only insofar as it potentially makes their department look good.

Package your dissertation into an easily digestible paragraph that moves quickly from what it is and how much funding you got to do it, to the conference papers and publications that came out of it and the current and future publication plans coming out of it. Also discuss how it inspires and motivates your teaching. Speaking of which...

## 4. Your Teaching Paragraph Is All Drippy and Pathetic

They don't care that you "love" teaching and are "passionate" about your subject. What they care about is that you are an effective teacher. They need evidence of that, so give them some.

More to the point, they want to know why you are an effective teacher. Banish emotionalism and earnest weepiness. Stick to what you've taught, how you taught it, and what the outcomes were. Read my post, [The Weepy Teaching Statement: Just Say No.](#) If you don't have any positive outcomes, then start being a better teacher. If you've been fully funded without ever setting foot into a classroom (my own case, actually), seek out limited teaching opportunities at universities or colleges in your area. And craft a really persuasive teaching-philosophy statement with help from experienced teachers.

## 5. You Present Yourself as a Student, Not a Colleague.

I'm restating No. 3 above, but more directly. They're not hiring a student. They're hiring a colleague. They want to hear you speak like a faculty member. Don't know how? Fake it 'til you make it.

Don't be humble. Don't be a supplicant. Don't be groveling. Be firm, confident, and forceful. Write in short, declarative sentences. Don't make excuses. Don't write about what you didn't do, or what you don't know. You're an expert in your field. Act like one.

Don't ever refer to a faculty member in the department as "Professor So-and-so." What are you, a grad student? In your paragraph about why you're a good fit, write something to this effect: "I am excited about the prospect of teaching in the XXX department and would look forward to collaborating or co-teaching with faculty such as Spade and Archer."

## 6. You Don't Specify Publication Plans

Clearly state which publications are out, which ones are in press, which ones are in submission, and which ones are in manuscript stage, and where you intend to submit them. Do not expect the committee to locate this information on your CV.

If you're in a book field, mention the presses with which you're in discussions about your book. If you're not in discussions with presses about your book, start having those discussions immediately. Set a timeline for the book and an anticipated publication date well in advance of spring of your fifth year in the job. (This is when your tenure file goes out to the external reviewers.)

## 7. You Don't Have a Second Research Project

It doesn't matter if you're still dotting the i's on your dissertation before submitting it, or if you haven't even defended it yet. You still have to have a second major book or research project in sight, well thought-out, and funded if possible. This second project should arise organically out of the first, showing continuity of interest and specialization, but also heading off in vibrant new directions.

They do not want to hire someone only to turn them down for tenure six years later. Show them you've got what it takes.

Here's what you may not know: That second project is now required for a successful tenure case at many institutions. It may not have to be published, but by the fifth year at an R1 or an elite SLAC, that second project has to be proposed, underway, and funded. It has to have produced some high-profile conference talks, and ideally one or two new articles.

In the sciences and "hard" social sciences, it is common to maintain several research projects simultaneously, rather than sequentially as is more typical in the humanities. Know the pacing and breadth of different research appropriate for your field. Whatever it is, demonstrate that arc through tenure. That shows that you are the real deal—a tenurable assistant professor. Not a one-hit wonder, but someone who is going to keep up the work schedule through tenure and beyond.

## 8. You Didn't Do Your Homework

Show that you have researched the department, learned about the faculty, read their work, appreciated their contributions, and taken into account the focus and specializations of the specific program. If the faculty specializes in gender studies, and your project relates to gender studies, make that explicit. Mention one or two faculty members by name as potential collaborators. Collaborators, mind you, not mentors.

## 9. You're Disorganized and Rambling

Here's how a job letter should read:

- 1: Short self-intro; your current position; your Ph.D.-granting institution, your general field, subfield, and area of specialization.
- 2: Your primary research project—what, where, and how, and which achievements arose from it, such as publications, conference papers, panels, and grants.
- 3: Your primary research project's large contributions to the field and discipline as a whole—how it pushes boundaries, engages in dynamic new debates, and enlarges the discipline.
- 4: Your publication plans.
- 5: Your second project.
- 6: Your teaching, as it ties in with all of the above.
- 7: Your specific interest in the job and department to which you are applying, with specific programs, specializations, and faculty mentioned by name.
- 8: "I look forward to hearing from you soon. Thank you, [signature]"

## 10. You Didn't Tailor

You don't have just one job-letter template. You have at least eight. Let's take my own case—a cultural anthropologist of Japan with a focus on gender and transnationalism. I had the following letter templates ready to go:

- General anthro job, research institution
- General anthro job, teaching institution
- Japan area-studies job, research institution
- Japan area-studies job, teaching institution
- Gender-studies job, research institution
- Gender-studies job, teaching institution
- Transnational-studies job, research institution
- Transnational-studies job, teaching institution

The difference between jobs at research and teaching institutions? The former emphasizes your research, the latter your teaching.

▶ See my Vitae column on writing for a visiting teaching position for some insights. This list doesn't even include the postdoc letters. See my post, "The Postdoc App: How It's Different and Why," for more on those.

Follow these rules, and you have a fighting chance of getting shortlisted.

Tailoring is without question the most universally wretched element of my clients' job letters, the place where they @#\$% up the most spectacularly, and the place they struggle the most to correct.

That's because tailoring is where the obsequious, desperate, fawning grad-student mentality rears its ugly head. For more on tailoring, please read ▶ [How To Tailor a Job Letter \(Without Flattering, Pandering or Begging\)](#) and

▶ [Tailoring a Job Letter, Beginning and Advanced.](#)

**One more thing:** Twist the arms of as many trusted, savvy advisors as you can find, and have them read and comment on your letter. If they have criticisms, don't defensively claim that they "missed the point." Write it over! If they missed the point, it's because your point wasn't clear enough. The burden is on you to get this thing perfect. Absolutely perfect.

How long does perfection take? Expect and plan for no less than two months of steady work on this letter. And after those two months, while you're on the market, expect to devote weekly efforts to improving it. Each new job tailoring will reveal new errors, new insights, new turns of phrase, new opportunities for improvement. Embrace those, and continually rework this letter, ceaselessly, throughout your job search.

# Your CV

If you're reading this guide, you have a CV. But god only knows what it looks like. When my clients submit CVs in first-draft form, I'm continually shocked at how badly conceptualized most of them are. I am not going to include specific models of CVs here, because different disciplines have different expectations. What I will include here are my instructions for what your CV must include. Please also read my comprehensive post for more detail, "[Dr. Karen's Rules of the Academic CV.](#)"



Of course your CV includes the following sections, each (with the exception of the opening name/title/address/date entry) under clear, bolded headings. Your order of entries may differ. Be guided by your advisor and others in your specific field.

- **Name, title, address, and date**
- **Education** (Include your dissertation title, expected date of completion, and advisor's name, as well as general research interests.)
- **Professional Employment** (If you have a teaching position at a university already.)
- **Teaching Experience** (If you have only TA-level teaching experience.)
- **Research Interests** (These can also be folded under your Ph.D. affiliation in Education.)
- **Publications** (Separate your books and articles here. Also separate out published work from works in other stages—submitted pieces, “revise and resubmits,” and manuscripts. Also separate out online writing and blogs—and include these only when they're truly relevant to your scholarly profile, of course.)
- **Invited Talks**
- **Conference Presentations** (Separate your experience as a panel organizer—which of course you have, right?—and as a paper presenter.)
- **Honors and Awards**
- **Grants** (Include grants you were awarded but declined. But do not include ones you just applied for!)
- **Research Experience** (this is more common in the sciences, where you'll list work in labs, than in the humanities)
- **Classes Taught or Prepared to Teach**
- **Service to the Profession** (Manuscript review, officer positions in professional groups.)
- **Graduate Advising** (When appropriate.)
- **Languages Spoken** (If these are relevant)
- **Technical Skills** (If these matter in your field.)
- **Professional Affiliations/Memberships**
- **References** (List these by name; do not write “available upon request.”)

Now we turn to the Top Ten Problems of Bad CVs. These items are nonnegotiable. Take out your CV, study it, and make sure any of these you find are immediately eradicated:

## Top Ten Problems of Bad CVs.

1. You have typos and/or misspellings.
2. You are inconsistent in your use of fonts, spacing, and/or punctuation.
3. You use anything that even remotely resembles a “résumé” format. Don't state your “Career Goal” at the top; don't use bullet points; don't explain your “job duties.”
4. When applying for a job in the U.S., you include personal information of any kind. This includes your marital status, children, or social security number. (In Europe or elsewhere, these may be appropriate. Check with others.)
5. You have too little content. CVs are supposed to be long, and getting longer with every passing month. [Please see my blog post: “How to Build Your CV”, it introduces the idea \(recommended to me as a brand new assistant professor\) of adding one new line a month during the school year.](#) Be sure that you have thoroughly mined your past and present accomplishments. Include every talk, every guest lecture, every award and grant, no matter the size.
6. You have too much content. An academic CV for the job market should not include nonacademic work, awards for which you were nominated or came in second, part-time jobs outside the university, or anything from your undergraduate days—except for the fact of your bachelor's degree, listed under Education.
7. You've squished everything together on the page. This could be because of font sizing, line spacing, margins, or other issues. To repeat: The CV is supposed to be long. Choose a legible font, have clear spaces between entries and headings, and use substantial margins.

8. You don't "sell" yourself enough. Yes, it's true that the CV is basically an unadorned list without the flash of a résumé. Nevertheless, within its sober and serious limits, it must showcase your achievements and productivity. Be sure that all the titles and terms you use put you in the best light. For example, instead of writing "TA Instructor," you write, "Instructor." Instead of writing just "Ph.D. Candidate," you write, "Ph.D. Candidate, defense scheduled May 2016."
9. Your CV is not tailored to the job for which you're applying. Research jobs and teaching jobs require different CVs. Keep a detailed section on your teaching accomplishments, and include that only when you apply to liberal-arts and teaching colleges. Similarly, shift around your statement of "research interests" to suit each job. If you're an anthropologist of Japan with a specialization in gender, then for the Japan job, you'll list Japan as your primary interest. For a general anthropology job, you'll list your disciplinary focus as your primary interest. For a women's studies job, you'll list gender as your primary interest. Be smart! Tailor!
10. Your CV just isn't impressive. You need to build your CV from day one in graduate school. Choices about how to spend your time, how hard to push yourself, what grants to apply for, and what publishing opportunities to pursue should all be considered in light of how they will look on your CV. By the time you go on the job market your CV should be the equivalent of a young assistant professor's. It should include a substantial record of grants and awards, at least one and preferably more high-status publications in a refereed journal (not an edited collection!), an impressive record of conference participation, and a range of other professional activities. If it doesn't, put down this guide and go start making that happen today.

▶ Beware the impulse to substitute cheap, "easy" CV lines—like book reviews or conference appearances—for the harder, more prestigious, high-value ones. Read my post, "Don't Get Your Career at Costco" for more on this very common pitfall to which none are immune.

# Your Letters of Recommendation

My first and foremost piece of advice for letters of recommendation is: If at all possible, get fresh, tailored letters for every application. In most fields the top job candidates will have letters freshly written for each application by their recommenders, even when they are applying for 30 to 50 jobs in a year.



I myself at one point had three Ph.D. students on the market, each applying for 20 to 30 jobs. I wrote fresh letters for them all. What I required from my students, and what I recommend that you do, is to create an Excel spreadsheet for your letter-writers, with columns specifying, for every job for which you're applying, in order of deadline:

- **The institution and department**
- **The title and rank**
- **The email and snail mail contact info**
- **The deadline**
- **The job ad**
- **Special notes about the department, its politics, its emphasis, and what you will be emphasizing in your application letter**

I printed out this file and taped it to the wall by my computer. I checked it daily for upcoming deadlines, and I made sure that my letters got sent on time. It is an obligation of professors to provide these letters, as long as they personally support the candidate. This is a major part of faculty work and responsibility.

However, in some fields, such as English, faculty members have largely abandoned this responsibility. Instead they insist that you resubmit one letter of recommendation, over and over again, through an online dossier service.

Dossier services are becoming more and more widely used, and they do provide some advantages—the main one being that you know that your letters arrived because you were in control of sending them. In cases where your letter writers are unreliable or it is the absolute norm of your field, use a dossier service.

 One such dossier service, of course, is the free one offered by Vitae. Create an account and try it out here.

Letters of recommendation require strategizing. Don't just assume that your dissertation advisor and two other members of your dissertation committee constitute the best options for the three letters of recommendation that most job ads request. On the contrary, if all of your letters come from your Ph.D.-granting institution, that's generally a sign that you're a "green" candidate, one not quite ready for prime time. Just think: How helpful is it to have a letter that reads, "Margaret was one of the top students in my seminar, and got an A on her final paper for the course"?

A Ph.D. who has been well-prepared for the job market—one who started networking, conferencing, publishing, and collaborating early in his or her graduate program—will likely have one or more potential letter-writers from other institutions. That's especially helpful if those other institutions are more prestigious than your own. Let's say two of your recommenders write that "Dr. X is among the top 2 percent of graduate students with whom I've worked in my career." One of them is from Colorado State; the other is from Cornell. Which of those letters is going to carry more weight?

Dedicate yourself to networking. Gain the support of senior scholars in your field from other, higher-ranked institutions. This is a process that takes time, so start early. Seek them out at conferences. Send them offprints of pieces you've published that cite them. Invite them to be discussants on panels you organize at national meetings.

# The Conference Interview

The conference interview is about speed and first impressions. Generally it will last just 20 to 30 minutes. The interviewers are on a tight schedule, with a large number of candidates being hustled in and out of a small, cramped interview space. It is awkward and exhausting for everyone.



Your task is to act “at ease,” to project an aura of calm and good humor in a stressful situation, to speak quickly and directly to your strengths, with no—absolutely no—digressions, and to dress and walk and talk and comport yourself as little as possible like a graduate student, and as much as possible like a confident, experienced faculty member and future colleague.

Preparation is key. Find out who is on the search committee (it’s OK to call the department secretary and ask), and check to see which members of that crew will be in attendance at the conference. Once you know the likely interviewers, spring into action. Research their work and the profile of the department as a whole. Familiarize yourself with the course catalog, and review the department’s website to see its recent accomplishments.

Check on the large classes that young assistant professors are most likely to be asked to teach, and prepare ideas on how to teach them. Suss out the financial footing of the department, and the level of graduate support. Be prepared to engage with those faculty members on their wavelength, as a potential colleague, as much as you can.

## What Questions Will I Be Asked?

In my work with clients, I prepare them for the following questions:

- “Please describe your dissertation, its contribution to the field, and the publications associated with the work.” (Yes, this is a three-part question, which must still be answered in 5 minutes total.)
- “What are your publication plans for the next five years?”
- “Tell us how you would teach [Intro Course X].”
- “Tell us how you would teach [Course X in your field].” (A course that’s already on their books, that is.)
- “Describe two courses you would develop for us, one at the intro level and one at the advanced undergrad or grad level.”
- “How would you mentor graduate students?” (If it’s a grad program, of course.)
- “How do you see your work fitting into the work we do here at the department? What attracted you to this job?”
- “Do you have any questions for us?”

If you can answer those questions, you will ace 90 percent of all conference interviews.

However, if you want to prepare further, consider working on one-to-two-minute responses to these ones, too:

- “Who are the biggest scholarly influences on your work?”
- “What do you think the most important intellectual debate is in your field?”
- “What inspires your teaching?”

In all of these responses, you must be brief and to the point. To achieve this level of focus and brevity, practice is essential. You must write out the answers to questions like these. Practice them in front of a mirror and in front of friends, and at mock interviews, over and over and over again, until they become second nature to you. Then and only then are you ready for the conference interview.

And don't forget: Graciously refer to the work of your interviewers that you already know of and have read. This is where preparing ahead of time pays off. They will love you if you can respond, "I would certainly consider assigning your recent article in an upper-division class on political economy, because I think it provides an excellent case study from Eastern Europe." You have to be sincere, I cannot emphasize that enough. Everyone despises a bullshitter. But if you can be sincere, that is pure interview gold.

I cannot leave behind the conference interview without a word on clothing. I have seen unspeakable things, sartorially speaking, in the halls of the conference hotel, amongst the milling throngs of interview candidates.

To repeat, your task at this short interview is to give the overwhelming first impression of being a dynamic, successful young assistant professor. Not a graduate student. An assistant professor. What does that mean?

#### **For men, this means:**

- A new jacket (or perhaps, depending on the formality of your field, a suit) fresh for the interview season—one that fits you at your current weight, buttons across your middle, and has been tailored so that the sleeves hit you at the proper spot.
- A good quality, department-store shirt
- A quiet tie of recent vintage
- A new leather belt (no cracked old ones)
- The best quality leather black oxfords you can afford
- Socks that match either the shoes or the suit.

#### **For women, this means:**

- A stylish, well-cut, fitted, new gray or brown suit or dress/skirt/jacket ensemble fresh for the interview season (skirt or pants, it matters not)
- A stylish blouse in a not too bright color (if wearing a suit)
- Stockings or tights in a neutral shade
- Good-quality, stylish closed-toe leather shoes with a one- to three-inch heel for height (less critical if you're 5'7" or above, and can be ignored if you simply don't wear heels)
- Conservative jewelry

Your hair should be cut and styled, not dragging or springing about in the stringy or unkempt clump so commonly seen in our graduate lounges. Both men and women should invest in the best-quality leather or microfiber briefcase they can manage. (Last season's models are often on deep discount at office goods chain stores like OfficeMax. TJ Maxx and Ross are also excellent sources.)

One of the saddest sights in the hotel conference hall is the ineptly-dressed interview candidate—the one in the brand new, too-cheap, shiny, ill-fitting suit with too-short sleeves and too-long pants, rushing through the halls clutching a backpack. That person smells of desperation. Don't let it be you.

# The Campus Visit

Congratulations! You impressed them enough at the conference that you got the campus fly-out! Now is the time to intensify your efforts. The research and preparation that you did for the conference interview? Now it's that on steroids. You have to prepare for this visit as if your very life depends on it. Because, financially, it kind of does.



## The campus visit typically includes some or all of the following (in any order):

- Breakfasts, lunches, and dinners with the search committee
- Breakfasts, lunches, and dinners with various department faculty members
- Breakfast or lunch with the department's graduate students
- A meeting/interview with the search committee
- A meeting/interview with the department head
- A meeting/interview with various individual faculty members who sign up to meet you
- Your job talk
- The reception following your job talk
- A meeting/interview with the Dean
- A tour of campus with one or more graduate students
- A tour of the town with a faculty member
- Small break periods, for which you may or may not get an office
- Visits to relevant places on campus, such as the library that serves your subject, the Humanities Center, and so on

Different ranks of schools will have different versions of the campus visit, based mostly on their financial resources. I will explain here the typical R1-campus visit, as a basic example.

It will last one-and-a-half to two days. The department will fly you out and put you up in a nearby hotel—for one night if your flight is short, two nights if your trip is longer. A graduate student or faculty member is likely to pick you up at the airport and take you to the hotel. Depending on what time you arrive, that person will either come back to take you to dinner or leave you alone until the next morning. In either case, your interview starts the minute you step out of airport security and greet the departmental emissary in charge of driving you home.

Everything you do, everything you say, and in some places everything you wear will be scrutinized and made note of for later discussion. There is no downtime on a campus visit, except when you are alone in your hotel room. To discuss every last aspect of a campus visit would require a separate guide. [▶](#) In the meantime, for more on this, please refer to my post, [Dr. Karen's Rules of the Campus Visit](#). We will limit our discussion here to the main, make-or-break elements.

## What to Wear

You will dress for the main day of the campus visit exactly as you dressed for the conference interview. On day two, you may make the slightest adjustment downward in formality. For men, this can mean going without the suit jacket, or retaining the jacket and going without the tie. For women, this can mean wearing an unmatched jacket and skirt or pants, or perhaps going for a blouse or sweater, without a jacket at all. Dresses are OK, if you prefer those, as long as they're appropriate to the setting.

## Handling Meals

One of the most stressful aspects of the campus visit is that so much of the grilling takes place over meals. Not only do you get no relief from the stress, but new stress is added as you try to navigate the treacherous questions of what to order, when to order, whether to order alcohol, how to handle food sensitivities, and how to eat without dribbling food down your front—all while holding forth on recent trends in the housing market in Russia.

The first thing to realize is that you will not get properly fed. It is impossible to eat all you need to while handling the questions. But it is essential that you keep up your energy. How to deal with this dilemma? Pack protein bars and eat them in your odd moments alone. Kind departments will schedule small private breaks for you in an office set aside for your use. Eat your protein bars there, or while walking across campus to another meeting, if you find yourself alone. Failing these options, just eat in the bathroom if you have to. But one way or another, keep yourself fed, so that over meals, you can focus on the talking.

Should you order alcohol at dinner? If you drink alcohol, this is tricky, and must be handled carefully. (If you don't, well, there's your answer.) Some departments have a culture of conviviality over wine. At those dinners, to refuse wine will be seen as a rejection of their way of life. In other departments socializing plays only a little role. At those dinners, ordering wine would be looked on with grave disapproval. You must wait for the cue from your dinner partners. Always arrange to order after the others have ordered drinks (dive down to "turn off your cell" if the waitress comes to you first), and follow their lead.

How to deal with food sensitivities and allergies? These must be communicated early, ideally when you are first invited for the interview. One time, at a campus visit at a small and intimate liberal arts college, I was unexpectedly picked up in the morning and taken to the department head's house for breakfast! He proudly served me an almond-filled granola—which I had to refuse, in an ignominious flurry of apologies, on the grounds of my anaphylactic allergy to nuts. An elderly man, rather set in his ways, he seemed deeply offended by this. I was completely flustered, and never regained my equilibrium throughout the entire visit. Needless to say, I didn't get the job. Save yourself from such awkwardness, and clearly communicate allergy and diet issues as early, and as simply, as you can.

## The Search-Committee Interview

Before you ever open your mouth at this interview, your body language and overall demeanor will make a powerful impression that may well gain or lose you the job. Your body is speaking at all times. Control what it is saying.

Master the confident sitting posture. Take up all the room in the chair to which you're entitled. Square your shoulders, and keep your arms wide apart. Do not fold or nervously twist your hands in your lap. Keep them up, and visible, on the arms of the chair or on the table. Gesture for emphasis. Keep your chin up and make strong, steady, direct eye contact with each and every committee member in turn. Speak directly to the person asking each question while also including the others in your response.

Do not laugh nervously. Do not fiddle with your hair. Do not fiddle with your jewelry. Do not let your eyes dart anxiously around the room. Do not apologize. Do not make excuses. Do not open any response, of any kind, by discussing what you "don't know," or "didn't do." Here's an example:

**Q:** Tell us about your publication plans.

**A:** Well, I haven't really sent anything out to a refereed journal yet, but I am definitely planning on it. I just haven't quite finished the essay yet.

**Banish this! Let these words never pass your lips!**  
Here's what your answer should sound like:

**Q:** Tell us about your publication plans.

**A:** I have a manuscript nearly finished that I will be submitting in the spring to the *American Anthropologist*.

Let's try another one, a common question that easily trips up a candidate:

**Q:** What do you think of Nelson's new book? (You haven't read Nelson, but Nelson is famous, so you at least know his general point of view.)

**A:** (*bad version*): Oh, gosh, I haven't actually read that yet. Ummm, yeah, sorry. I, um, know it'll be good and I definitely need to read that!

**A:** (*good version*): Nelson and I agree on a lot of things, and I've taken many insights from his work on XX. But my work departs from his in its focus on XX.



## Additional Questions

Get it? You use scholarly Jiu Jitsu to move the discussion away from what you don't know and back to what your own work is and does. In the search committee interview you should be prepared to answer all of the questions listed under the conference interview section, as well as other ones. These include:

- “ We notice you were trained at a large public institution. How do you feel you'll fit in at a small liberal arts institution like ours? ”
- “ What is the most significant piece of research that you have read in the last year? ”
- “ What do you envision for creating a research program here? ”
- “ Do you plan to apply for research funding? ”
- “ What is the funding record of your field? ”
- “ We have a large teaching load here—four classes a term. How would you manage this and still stay productive in research and writing? ”
- “ Your current research requires more technological support than this institution is able to provide. How will you deal with this? ”
- “ We see that you have done a lot of conference papers and presentations; we have limited research funding here to support that kind of travel. How will you adapt to that? ”

➤ (Many of the questions above I drew from: <http://www.unl.edu/gradstudies/current/development/interview-questions>)

On the campus visit you must be prepared to move beyond abstract discussion of your dissertation and teaching experience, to answer direct questions about your fit with that particular institution and department. Although all questions related to private issues such as marital status or children are illegal, some questions can become quite pointed, and you must be prepared to offer thoughtful, plausible responses. How would you deal with limited research support? How do you feel about living in the Midwest? How will you cope with a heavy teaching load? These are questions you must answer satisfactorily in your own mind before you ever set foot on that campus.

Be aware that all departments in the humanities and social sciences are facing severe budgetary crises. Many are in a chaotic state of flux. Many are confronting immediate imperatives from the deans and administrators to reduce costs and increase enrollments. You may be asked questions specifically about saving money. Be prepared for these. If the search committee asks you how you feel about teaching large classes, there is only one correct answer, and that is: “I believe large classes can be a powerful and effective learning environment. I would look forward to using new technological innovations to maximize the opportunities for student discussion and participation.”

If the search committee asks you how you would propose increasing the undergraduate enrollment in their department, you respond: “I would certainly welcome the opportunity to create classes that show how fascinating our discipline is to new populations of undergraduates. I am developing a class on [sexuality/popular media/blogging cultures/major league baseball/reggae/slam poetry] that I would be happy to open up to enrollments over 100.” Be the job candidate who saves the department head money.

## Q: Now It's Your Turn to Ask

And you must be prepared to ask questions of your own. One of the biggest interview pitfalls is when the candidate is asked, “Do you have any questions?” and he or she can’t respond with a single one. To prevent that from happening, here is a selection of Professor Is In-approved questions:

- “What’s the relative importance of teaching, research, and service for tenure?”
- “Can grants be used to supplement salary?”
- “Could you tell me about your student population?”
- “Where do the undergraduate students go after graduation?”
- “What kinds of technology are available in the classroom?”
- “How well does the library meet departmental needs?”
- “How do the department and university support the improvement of teaching?”
- “What resources for research are available within the department (computer facilities, say, or equipment)?”
- “Is there a research office on campus to help faculty write grants?”
- “Is outside grant support essential for promotion and tenure?”
- “How are graduate students supported?”
- “How do graduate students select research advisors?”
- “What kinds of financial support are available for research?”

**Remember:** On the campus visit, you are also interviewing them. Make sure that your major questions get answered. If you’re worried you’ll forget them, write out the list ahead of time, and refer to it at the end of the interview. It’s OK to do that.

## The Job Talk

Ah, the job talk. How many promising young job candidates have crashed and burned here? This is the climax of your campus visit, and success here can overcome a host of mistakes in your interviews, while failure here can erase all of your successes.

➤ For more, please read this post: “Dr. Karen’s (Partial) Rules of the Job Talk.”

You must dominate the job talk.

And this goes double for the Q-and-A session afterward. I have personally seen candidates eradicate their previous excellent chances by flubbing the Q-and-A. Don’t let that be you.

Expectations for a job talk will differ by field, so I can’t speak directly to those expectations here. What I will discuss are methods for optimizing your talk.

**PREPARATION:** Start writing the job talk early. Dedicate at least a month, and preferably two or three, to perfecting it. Once you’ve written it, have it read by every qualified reader you can find. More crucially, schedule a mock job talk. Good graduate departments will schedule these for all Ph.D.’s on the market, and they’ll rouse the faculty to serve as a critical audience. If your department is not one of those, schedule the mock talk yourself and personally invite professors to come. If you do only one thing from this guide, let this be it. You need the practice of giving the talk in front of an audience of faculty. Urge the professors to target your weaknesses and ask hard and pressing questions in the Q-and-A. Sure, it’s hard. But better you bomb here than during the real thing.

**WRITING:** Write for a highly-educated audience but not one narrowly committed to your particular subfield. Do. Not. Use. Jargon. Few departments contain only one kind of faculty, and jargon does not travel well across subfield boundaries. If your argument depends on a fairly esoteric term, then take a moment to clearly define it early on. It may

have been critical to throw around intimidating language in the graduate lounge. But when your career and financial well-being are at stake, you need to ensure that your arguments are comprehensible to both the primatologist and the cultural anthropologist, both the military historian and the post-Marxist. Because they all vote. Write in shorter sentences than you would for publication. It is very difficult for an audience to follow a long, complex sentence with many embedded phrases. You want to catch them in the first sentence and hold them spellbound throughout. The best method for this is using short sentences delivered in a strong, assertive tone.

**VISUALS:** Visuals are crucial in this day and age, but move cautiously. PowerPoint is almost universally resented by sophisticated academics, who hate the degree to which it has taken attention away from the spoken word. So in your slides, you must be very, very judicious in repeating text from the talk itself. Use the slides primarily for visual illustration. Make sure your font size is large enough. Do not use fancy, overly elaborate themes. Keep it simple. The focus here should be on the brilliance of your argument.

What about Prezi? I am ambivalent about Prezi. Prezi presentations can be vibrant, dynamic, and arresting. However, I have not seen these used in a job-talk situation, and I'm concerned that in some of our more staid academic environments, they may be perceived as too flashy, "artistic," and ultimately distracting. I might be out of date on this, however. I recommend that you check with faculty in your department and recent successful Ph.D.'s on the job market in your field as to their suitability.

**PERFORMANCE:** Even the strongest talk will fail if it is badly presented. It is crucial that you spend hours practicing, in front of both the mirror and as many audiences as you can muster, always with a timer. You must time your talk. And re-time it. One of the surest ways you will alienate your audience is by going over time. The time limit is nonnegotiable. Failure to abide by it will cast your entire professional legitimacy into question.

You must not stand in one place and read your paper straight from the page. You must look up, make excellent eye contact with individual members of the audience, gesture with your hands when appropriate, and move about if possible. Find the right places for dramatic and effective pauses, and mark those clearly on your page as "stage directions" for yourself. Don't expect to remember anything! Your nerves will be working against you, so have all directions, such as "next slide," "insert joke here," and "pause for effect," clearly marked on your page.

**AUTHORITY:** Job candidates undermine their own authority in many ways, most of them completely unconsciously. The most common error is in tone of voice. Speak in an audible, confident voice. Far better you speak too loudly than too softly. Modulate your voice so it is in the lowest register you can manage, especially if you're female. Women: Beware the whisper, the squeak, and the nasal upper register. It is critical that you master the low, strong, steady, highly modulated professional speaking voice of academia well before your first job talk. If you're a woman reading this, put down this guide, grab a piece of academic writing, and go into the bathroom and practice reading it in that low, steady voice right now. Don't come back until you've mastered it.

Your body language must project confidence. Your shoulders must be squared, your back straight, your feet widely spaced, your posture erect. Do not lean nervously on one foot. Do not shuffle your feet. Do not play with your hair or your jewelry. Do not stare at the page or let your gaze wander anxiously around the room.

Tape yourself and check whether you do that upward-inflection thing so common among young American women (and some men) in recent years. "I work on Nigeria? And, my project is on family structures there? And I conducted my fieldwork in Abuja?" Recognize it? Chances are, you do this. Stop it. Stop it now. Master the authoritative falling tone.

**THE Q-AND-A:** The best advice that I can give about the Q-and-A is encapsulated in my blog post “Speaking Better in Public: How Women Can Stop Apologizing and Get a Career.” That blog post contains two videos, the first showing a job candidate flubbing a response to a fairly pointed direct attack, and the second showing a job candidate dominating the interaction.

In the clips, a questioner asks how the candidate can justify her own argument when it is directly contradicted by a recent article by “Nelson.” The candidate has not read the article. Panic time.

In the first case, the candidate engages in all of the self-sabotaging practices that destroy a job talk Q-and-A—wide, panicked eyes, darting glances, playing with hair and jewelry, opening with what she didn’t do (in this case, read the piece), apologizing for it, making excuses for not doing it, and finishing lamely: “I don’t know, did that answer your question?”

In the second case, the candidate responds with confidence and style: “Nelson has been publishing for some time on this topic, and I think we all are familiar with his perspective. I’ve learned a lot from Nelson. However, my work differs from his in that it starts from a very different point of view, that of the transnational, rather than national, perspective. And because we start at a different place, where we finish—our ultimate argument—is of course quite different. [Pause; fierce direct eye contact with questioner] Thank you. [Pause; turn gaze strongly to rest of audience] Next question?”

If a question catches you off guard, do not topple. Rather, hold firm to your own scholarly center, and pivot, by turning the terms away from the attack, and back toward your argument and your position, with no acknowledgment whatsoever of what you don’t know or didn’t do.

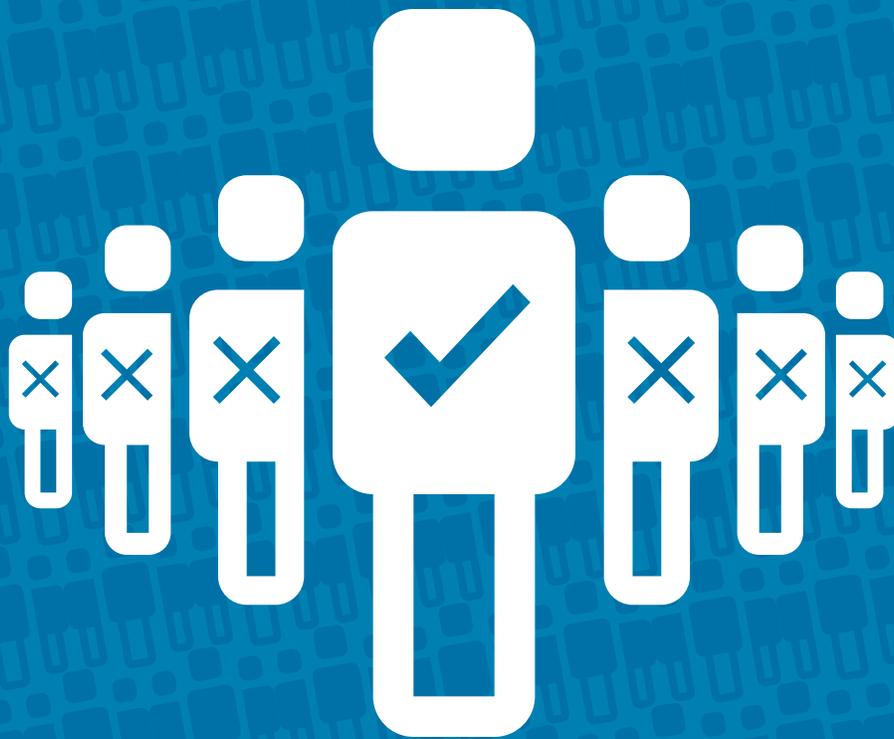
Never, ever finish by asking, “Did that answer your question?” You may, on occasion, finish with, “I hope that answers your question,” before confidently moving on, yourself, with “Next question?”

It is highly effective to preface your answer to the most pointed or hostile questions with, “Why, that’s an excellent question [pause for thought].” This gives you a moment to collect your thoughts, and also shows your complete command of the situation, and refusal to back down in an attack. This gets respect, real respect, in any academic setting.

**A last note on campus visits:** Always follow up your campus visit with a personal note of thanks to the department head and the search committee chair, and to anyone else with whom you had a particularly positive encounter. Email is fine. Gently and briefly reiterate your interest in the position, and conclude, “I hope to hear from you soon.”

# What to Do When You Get the Offer

**Congratulations! You did it! You got the offer!**  
Take a moment and just bask in the glory.



**DO NOT**, under any circumstances, accept the offer the same day they make it. When they call or email, answer pleasantly and politely, “Oh thank you. That is good news. I’m so pleased.” And then say, “I’d like to know more about the offer. When can we discuss the details, and when can I expect a written contract?” If the department head tries to push you for a commitment, simply repeat: “I am very happy for the offer, but I will need to discuss the terms and see the contract before I can make a final commitment. I very much look forward to discussing this further. I hope we can begin soon.”

Now, there are several things you need to know. In most cases, once an offer has been made to you, the institution will not offer the job to anyone else for a certain amount of time. While that amount of time may vary by institution, be assured that you have at least one week—and possibly as much as two or three—to contemplate your response. During that time you are mostly in the driver’s seat. While unscrupulous or panicky or pushy department heads may try to hustle you, do not allow yourself to be hustled. You are now the one in charge. Bask in that.

Most offers have room for negotiation. You should first see what the formal offer provides by way of salary, summer salary, teaching load, leave time, research support, expectations for tenure, graduate-student funding, service expectations (particularly if it is a joint appointment), support for a spousal hire, and other matters. Until you have these in writing, you cannot make an informed response. Scientists will of course prioritize lab arrangements, and perhaps institutional support for major grants.

However, also be aware of the specter of the rescinded offer. This is a real thing, although thankfully it’s still quite uncommon. [See the Chronicle Forum “Universities to Fear,” and see this post, “The Rescinded Offer: Who Is In the Wrong?”](#) If you’re dealing with a small institution, especially one with a current or former religious affiliation, move very, very cautiously indeed: These are the types that, to my knowledge, are most likely to rescind without warning. Do all the research you can to judge the feel of the process of the offer, and above all else, never attempt an R1-style negotiation at a tiny, cash-poor teaching institution. They’ll be alienated, offended, and if they’re grossly unethical, they’ll be punitive and snatch the offer away.

However, in the vast, vast, majority of cases, negotiations are expected and conducted in good faith and with goodwill.

Once you receive the elements of your offer, decide what you’re going to come back with in negotiation. Because, aside from the caveats and cautions above, you always come back asking for more. It is expected. Do not miss this one-time-only opportunity to negotiate greater gain for yourself and your family. What you ask for will depend on you and your goals. A single person with no children might decide to prioritize research support—additional leave time and a larger research budget to pay for overseas research. A person supporting a family might forgo additional research funding for a higher salary. A person seeking a position for his or her spouse might forgo both research support and salary in order to make a spousal appointment happen. The point is, in all cases, this is the one and only time in your early years in the department that you can attempt to turn circumstances in your favor. So do it.

Always proceed courteously and professionally. Respond quickly to emails and calls, and never leave them hanging, even if just to say, “I received your latest email. Thank you. I will study it and respond by tomorrow.” Ideally you should have a trusted senior colleague assist you in these negotiations. It is critical that you maintain positive relations with your likely future colleagues. They might grumble a bit as the negotiations carry on for a week or two, but they will respect you. This is how the game is played.

Now, one aspect to consider is if you have another competing offer or possible offer. If you do, first off, lucky you—you have rocked the system. This is the absolute best position to negotiate from. If you are waiting on an offer from a second school, you may contact that second school and inform them of the offer you received from school one. You will write something to this effect: “Dear Steve, Thank you again for having me out to visit your department at Johnston U. I enjoyed the visit immensely. I am writing to let you know that I have received an offer from another institution. My timeline for accepting this offer is approximately one week. I wonder if I could receive a response regarding your search within that time frame. I want to reiterate my interest in your position. I hope to hear from you soon. Sincerely, XX”

You can be assured that this email will send a jolt of terror through the spine of Steve, if you are his department's first or second choice. The greatest fear of a department once an offer is made is that the candidate on the receiving end will reject it and accept an offer elsewhere. The department may have a solid alternate candidate available, but often it does not. Departments often end up voting all but the top candidate as "unacceptable," so failure to get the top candidate means a failed search, and the risk of losing authorization to hire that year. All their eggs are in one basket, and that basket is you.

If you are their top candidate, and they just haven't told you yet because they haven't had a chance to complete their voting-and-offer process, this small, courteous email will send the department into a panic. And a panicked department is what you want. Because a panicked department, sensing that they might lose you to Institution No. 1, will be more likely to agree to your demands for salary, leave time, research support, and spousal positions.

Now all departments have financial and logistical limitations. You cannot negotiate above those. If you try, you will quickly alienate people. The committee will not withdraw the offer, but it will resent you, and those feelings of resentment are dangerous for a soon-to-be junior faculty member. The key to negotiating is to always maintain good faith and honesty, and to always maintain a highly delicate sense for when you are hitting a true wall of "we can't do that." Because when you hit that wall, that's when you stop.

Be aware that many public institutions suffer from salary compression problems. This means that associate and full professors' salaries have not kept pace with the national market. Consequently, new assistant professors are offered salaries nearly as high as those of the tenured faculty who have been on campus for years. Salary compression creates terrible feelings of resentment and low morale in departments suffering from it. The head will be all too well aware of these feelings. When the head tells you, "we cannot go higher than \$70,000 for your starting salary, or we will offend some faculty," take that as a hard "no," and turn your efforts elsewhere—summer salary for one to three years, one-time research support, a guaranteed graduate research assistant, and other shorter-term forms of compensation that don't put pressure on an already hot salary structure.

Once you make your decision, call or email both departments immediately, and courteously and professionally express your gratitude for their offers. Accept one with warmth and enthusiasm, and turn down the other with kindness and respect. Remember that the colleagues in the rejected department will continue to play a role in your professional life for many years to come. You will see them at conferences, they might be external reviewers for your journal article or book manuscript, and who knows, one of them might end up one of your tenure writers one day. So preserve your good relations with these people at all costs. They will not be angry that you rejected their offer. They will just be disappointed. Be very friendly when you next run into them at a conference.

## And there you have it.

Do all of this and your applications will rise to the top tier of the pool, and you'll know how to comport yourself each step of the way. It is a grueling process, but the results are intense.

It goes without saying that nobody can promise jobs in a disintegrating academic job market or guarantee the success of any one particular application. The politics and hidden agendas of any selection process are known only to the selection committee members themselves—and sometimes not even to all of them! If you do all this and still don't score that elusive tenure track job, please don't despair.

Or rather, despair for a while. Be angry—furious, even, at the bait-and-switch played on your generation of Ph.D.'s. Feel your feelings, and then start looking at post-academic options. You'll be joining a large and vocal group who are reinventing the post-Ph.D. life course, and they have shown all the ways it can be done. If you take the advice in this guide to heart, and apply it, you'll know that you did everything you could to optimize your chances in your search.



## About Dr. Karen Kelsky

Dr. Karen Kelsky is a former tenured professor at two institutions—the University of Oregon and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She has trained numerous Ph.D. students, and as a department head, she handled the hiring of new faculty. She created the business The Professor Is In to guide graduate students and junior faculty through grad school, the job search, and tenure. If you would like to work with her personally on any of the tasks in this guide, get in touch at [gettenure@gmail.com](mailto:gettenure@gmail.com). She works with clients on job documents, grant-writing, interviewing, and negotiating. [Browse the archives of Karen's weekly column on](#)

# Links

## The Professor Is In

Get to know Karen Kelsky, esteemed author of the guidebook that brought you here.

## The Weepy Teaching Statement

Here's how to banish emotionalism from this potentially important document.

## How Do I Pitch Myself for a Visiting Assistant Professorship?

Applying for a full-time but temporary job is a balancing act. Here's how to walk the tightrope.

## The Postdoc App: How It's Different and Why

Don't treat it too much like a job application; that's a common mistake.

## How To Tailor a Job Letter (Without Flattering, Pandering or Begging)

Here's part one of the all-important tailoring discussion...

## Tailoring a Job Letter, Beginning and Advanced

...and here's the follow-up.

## Dr. Karen's Rules of the Academic CV

These are the baseline expectations that should guide you.

## How to Build Your CV

Add one line a month, every month.

## Don't Get Your Career at Costco

Adding "affordable," "easy" CV lines doesn't pay off.

## Dr. Karen's Rules of the Campus Visit

Details on the job talk, the interviews, and all sorts of logistics.

## Dr. Karen's (Partial) Rules of the Job Talk

You must dominate. Here's how to start.

## Speaking Better in Public: How Women Can Stop Apologizing and Get a Career

The headline says it all.

## The Rescinded Offer: Who Is In the Wrong?

Negotiating a job offer isn't out of the question, but it requires caution.



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