

A (hopefully practical and useful) guide to getting a faculty job

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All materials are online, including talk notes + slides
+ resources: <https://goo.gl/tprlo9>

Thesis 1: Applying for and interviewing for jobs is a skill that can be learned - and thus you can improve at it!

Thesis 2: There are a lot of ways to greatly improve or damage your chances of success during an academic job search that have nothing to do with the quality of your research; many are non-obvious.

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Caveats before we get started

- Expectations at teaching-focused vs. research-focused schools are different, but there is overlap!
 - Teaching-focused schools often want people who can provide research opportunities for their students, as long as you clearly want to be there.
 - Teaching-focused schools typically want to see real teaching experience (instructor-of-record for course)
 - Research schools have an increased understanding that teaching is important and valuable
 - Both need “good citizens”: committees, student advising, co-/team-teaching, etc.

Why listen to me?

- Chaired 6 search committees at MSU, heavy participation in many other searches (helping launch CMSE; searches in Physics and Lyman Briggs)
- Have read 1,000+ application packages in detail, participated in dozens of interviews
- Have observed many students/postdocs/colleagues successfully apply for jobs (or not)
- Have been a faculty member both in teaching-focused and research-focused units at MSU (basis for comparison)

How do searches work as the employer?

1. Dept. convinces college/university to let them hire a new faculty member (possibly in a specific topic)
2. Search committee formed, typically including somebody from outside of the interest group/dept.
3. Search committee creates list of required/desired qualities of job applicants, writes job ad (ideally)
4. Job ad written and published in various places (Chronicle of Higher Education, sciencecareers.org, higheredjobs.com, discipline-specific message boards, etc. - see talk notes)
5. Applications come in and are evaluated by the search committee using a rubric with criteria based on the job ad (ideally)
6. Possible phone interviews with “long short list”
7. On-campus interviews with 3-6 candidates on the “short list”
8. Job offer to preferred candidate, followed by negotiation. (Possibly with more than 1 candidate)

Job applications

This is where 90%+ of applicants are filtered, by tired people who read many app packages. **Takeaway:** you have very little time to make your case - appearance and organization matters a lot!

- Read the job ad's instructions and provide what is asked for (don't deviate without good reason!)
- A well-formatted and well-organized app can't make up for insufficient research/teaching, but a poor application can take you out of the running.
- Make sure to get several people (esp. non-experts) to **proofread your entire application** and give you critiques on content, writing, overall appearance!
- Note that even excellent applicants might be filtered at this stage b/c applicant doesn't fit some unstated criterion.

Big picture: what is the committee looking for?

- Does the applicant have the necessary/desired qualifications and experience?
- Are they doing what we're interested in?
- Do they seem like “faculty material”? (i.e., big-picture view; coherent writing; evidence of interest in teaching and mentoring; evidence of ability to effectively apply for grants)
- Do they seem like they might be a reliable and responsible colleague?
- Typical materials used to judge this: cover letter, research statement, teaching statement (poss. add'l teaching materials), diversity/culture statement, 3-4 recommendation letters (or possibly contact info for writers)

Cover letters

- Incredibly helpful but often poorly utilized - this can make or break your application!
- Cover letter: guide to your entire application.
- 1-2 paragraphs: why are you the right person for this job, at this institution? Why are you qualified? (This is the part of the application most carefully tailored to this place - make the most of it.)
- Keep it to one page, reasonable font and margins!

CV advice, 1

- Needs to be organized in such a way that people can get required information: education, employment, papers, grants. Poorly-organized CVs sink applications!
- **Critical info must be easy to find** by somebody reading it in a hurry - good formatting/organization is crucial!
- Don't pad paper counts with papers "in preparation" unless they will be submitted very soon. Break papers into separate sections (peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, in press, under review). Put down numbers next to papers and make the years of publication clearly visible!
- Education, employment, awards first, then other stuff (grants, papers, presentations, teaching experience, etc.)

Use MSU's PhD career services office!

CV advice, 2

- Other relevant things:
 - Mentoring experience (undergrads, grad students, etc.) - who did you mentor, what was accomplished, where are they now?
 - Teaching experience (including guest lecturing and workshops)
 - Grant-writing workshops and experience (even if grant were rejected)
 - Outreach activities
 - Open-source software development (esp. if available online)

Anything you have done to develop your professional skills or share experience should be listed - CVs are supposed to be comprehensive, and you don't know what the committee is looking for!

Use MSU's PhD career services office!

CV advice, 3

- Things you **should not put in your CV** (for apps in North America, at least):
 - Personal information (birth date, marital/relationship status, information about family, info about hobbies unless relevant to work, religious affiliation, non-academic organization memberships, ...)
 - Picture of yourself
 - Lists of declined fellowships/positions
 - Publications irrelevant to job (e.g., articles for a climbing magazine, church newsletter, etc.)
 - Don't try to be cute or clever.

Use MSU's PhD career services office!

Research statement

- **This is a sales pitch, not a review article!**
- Needs to be accessible to the non-expert (and the intro should be accessible to somebody outside your field) - this is evidence you can write grant proposals!
- Committee looking for evidence that you're "thinking like a faculty member" - you see the big picture and have a long-term plan
- Do you have projects that can be given to grad/undergrad students and turned into dissertations/publications?
- Where do you anticipate the funding for your research will come from? (Definitely mention funding agencies and offices/directorates. OK to mention specific calls for proposals, but not necessary.)
- Keep it to **4-5 pages** and don't be afraid to put in a figure or two. Excessively long = committee will question your judgment.

Teaching statement/materials

- **Lecturing is highly deprecated** - learn about active learning, clickers, flipped classes, backward course design, learning goals, etc., and make sure you actually know what they mean and how they're used!
- If asked for example course materials or student reviews, include these strategically - don't overwhelm the committee!
- Also a good place to talk about mentoring experiences if you have not taught a class! (And even if you have.)
- Keep this to 1-2 pages unless specifically instructed otherwise.

Diversity/culture statements

- Have become very popular in the last couple of years, but often very little guidance is given in the job ad.
- “The purpose of the [diversity] statement is to identify candidates who have professional skills, experience and/or willingness to engage in activities that would enhance campus diversity and equity efforts.” - UCSD Center for Faculty Diversity and Inclusion
- It is important to carefully think through what you write here!
- Tell your story, acknowledge your privilege, and avoid false parallels.
- Be specific - what have you done to help students from underrepresented backgrounds succeed, and what would you like to do as a faculty member? (Teaching, research, mentoring.)
- Modify your statement based on where you are sending it! (Universities are situated in unique places w/unique situations and populations)

Recommendation letters

- Provide the number of letters asked for; no more than one extra, and **only** if there is a strong reason! (And explain that in your cover letter)
- Make sure your letter-writers can (and will!) write you a strong letter.
- Don't be shy about giving your letter-writers suggestions! (Accomplishments, traits, explanations of things that don't appear elsewhere in the app)
- Be strategic in choosing letter-writers: think about what they'll talk about and how the set of writers will be perceived.
- Give your letter-writers your CV, research, teaching, diversity statement drafts, any additional information 2+ weeks ahead of time. **Remind them of deadlines!**

Contacting the search committee

- Search committee chairperson's name is generally on the job ad - one of their main functions during the application process is to answer questions.
- **Don't** contact them just to "get your name out there" or to find out who is on the committee - this usually backfires.
- **Don't** ask questions about department politics/personalities - this is inappropriate and will backfire.
- **DO** ask questions regarding fit with the department, what they're looking for with teaching or diversity statements (esp. if other material is requested), etc.
- A phone/Skype/Zoom call with the committee chair is not out of the question, but make sure you have a short list of questions ready and don't waste their time!

How can you make yourself
a stronger applicant?

Two critical points

1. The more you can speak about matters the way a faculty member would (i.e., broad perspective), the easier it is for the search committee to see you as a member of their department!
2. The more you already do things that a faculty member does that grad students/postdocs typically don't, the easier it is to see you as a faculty member!

Specific suggestions, 1

- Research: take a grant-writing workshop and participate in the writing of a few grant proposals to use those skills.
- Mentoring: read about mentoring/go to a mentoring workshop and volunteer to mentor (or co-mentor) an REU student or grad student in a clearly-defined project.
- Service: join a committee and organize something for a while (conferences are the big one; but seminar, journal club, astronomy/science on tap, etc.)
- Diversity: many ways to do this by volunteering for appropriate groups on campus or locally (as a tutor, speaker, mentor/adviser, etc.)
- Website: create a modern and up-to-date website that highlights and expands upon your application! (And keeps the personal stuff to a minimum.)

Specific suggestions, 2 - teaching

- Go to teaching workshops to learn about the “right” things to do - active learning, backward course design, flipped classes, etc. (CIRTL network, ISEE PDP, ...)
- Guest lecture for one or more faculty members, but strategically - courses that are like what you might teach in the future.
- Help create an assignment for a class and get feedback on it.
- Teaching-focused institution: try to be the instructor-of-record for at least one course so you can get that experience. (This is easier than you might think.)

The interview

General thoughts

- If you get this far, you're clearly qualified.
- It's more about if they actually want to hire you. ("Fit.")
- Job interviews are a two-way street: the committee/dept./dean is selling you on the institution as well as vice versa!
- At this stage, it's OK to ask the search committee chair details about the interview - especially about your job talk, search committee discussion/interview, etc.

What are we looking for in a candidate?

- Do they seem sane, and not (too much of) a jerk?
- Will they be successful enough in their research to get tenure?
- Would they be a good research collaborator and student mentor?
- Will they do a good job representing our department?
- Will they be a good departmental/college citizen?
- Do we think they'll be a good teacher?
- Do they actually want to come here?

How to prepare, 1

- Research the department/college/and the general area (East Lansing is not Ann Arbor)
- Make sure to have short “elevator pitches” on your research for an expert, a non-expert in your field, and somebody entirely outside of your discipline.
- **Very important:** think carefully about how you might fit into the department. What’s your 5-year plan at this institution?
- Think about how to answer questions that are likely to be posed to you - how to spin them to make you look like a good faculty candidate?
- Come up with lists of questions to ask people - you need to have good questions to ask.

How to prepare, 2

- Make two lists: (1) funding agencies and specific programs where you would write grants to support your research, preferably with an idea for each one, and (2) dissertation-scale projects for grad students. (Maybe also undergrads!)
- Think about what you might want for your startup package, and make sure it's realistic for your field the type of institution you're interviewing at.
- Ask for your meeting schedule ahead of time and look up the websites/papers of the people you're going to meet with, and make notes!
- Choose an appropriate interview outfit, make sure it fits and it's clean. (Do this at least a week before your interview!)

During the interview

- Bring a bottle of water and portable+non-messy snack, notebook, pens/pencils, paper copy of your schedule (but make sure it's up-to-date).
- Don't be shy about making bathroom/water fountain stops between meetings or asking for a few minutes of quiet time. People rarely think to ask/schedule this in.
- Make sure to ask people questions, and ask multiple people the same questions (this can be very informative)
- Set your phone to “silent, no vibration” and do not answer phone calls or texts during meetings or your talks. Similarly, don't use your phone to take notes - this can be very off-putting and potentially distracting.

The job talk

- Not a standard seminar: more like a colloquium due to non-experts present (**biggest/most common mistake** is making this too “expert”)
- Need to capture the big picture: where/how does your work fit?
- Talk about your work and make it clear what you personally have done. Now is not a time to be humble!
- You don't have to talk about ALL of your work - can focus on one or two particularly interesting things (but mention that you have more)
- Talk about your future plans for a few minutes - what would you do if you came to this dept.?
- Make sure your slides are legible from the back of the room!
- Give two practice talks: once to 1-2 people you really trust to tear it apart, and then to an audience including people outside your sub-field. **Get feedback and implement it!**

After your visit

- Make notes about everybody you met with: what you talked about, impressions, ideas you had for research/teaching/collaboration, etc. - this may come in handy later.
- Send a **short** thank-you email to everybody you met with! Keep it **vague and positive**. (This is surprisingly important.)

Negotiation

- It's all about good-faith negotiation:
 - What do you need to be successful at this institution?
 - Is what you're asking for reasonable given the institution and your specific area of research? (Careful about public vs. private)
- Collect as much information as you can:
 - Advisors and senior colleagues at your institutions
 - Emails to people who recently got jobs at similar institutions
 - Public institution salary info is online, but sometimes hard to find.
- This is where you discuss 2-body problems
- Multiple job offers: can be used to negotiate effectively, but don't play games - the dept. chair/dean has done this more than you, and they're very smart too.

In summary

- Academic job searches are complicated, but succeeding at one is a set of skills that can be learned.
- The application is extremely important - most candidates get filtered out there, without knowing why!
- The interview is a chance to demonstrate that you are a good fit for this job, and also that you're interested in the position. This doesn't replace being a good scientist, but it really helps!

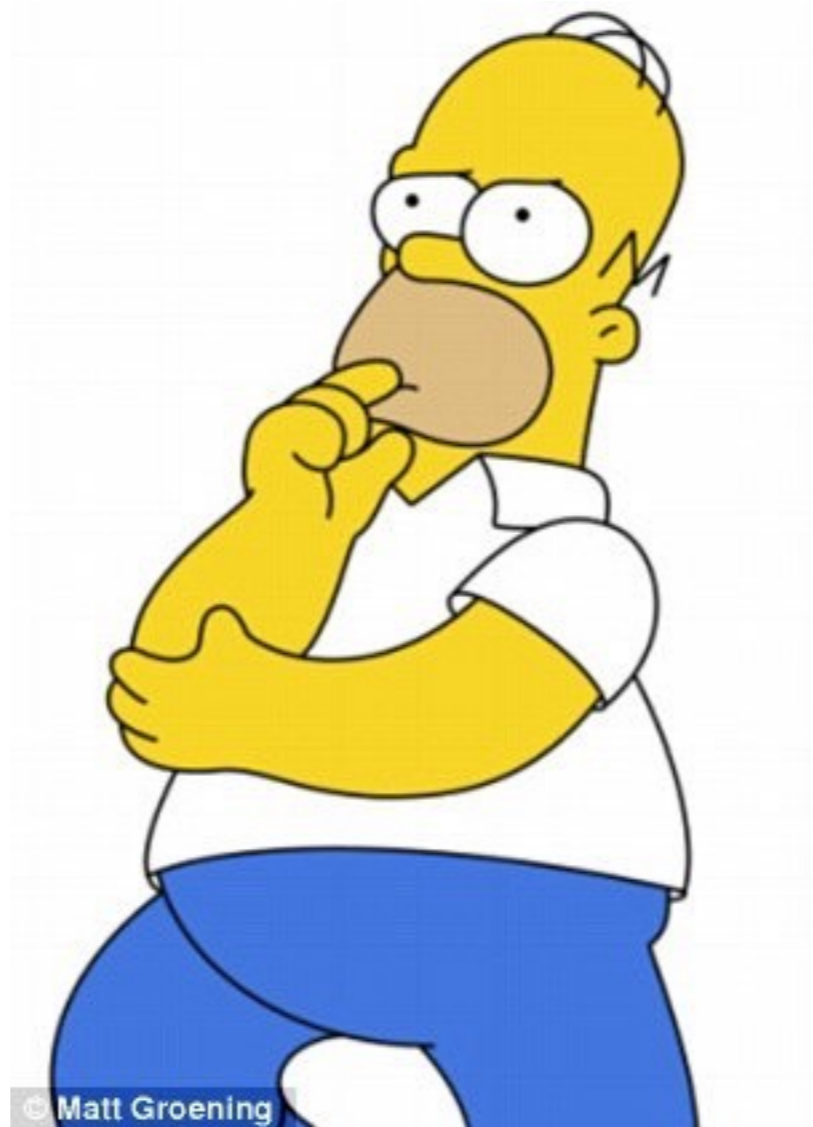
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Questions?



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