
How to Survive the MLA and Get a Job: What Else Candidates Should Know

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As a graduate student, I decided to experience the MLA convention before reaching ABD' status. I did not realize then that such a decision should hinge on many personal and professional factors (Moore 1999); all I knew for sure was that I wanted first-hand knowledge of the infamous MLA job table ordeal. With the pressure to secure a job safely at bay for at least a year, I entered the interview hall with a relatively low level of job seeker anxiety. Thanks to my advisors and fellow graduate students, I had successfully begun the search process and understood the general order of events.

(1) The responsible interviewee selects advertised positions of interest, provides search committees with all the necessary application materials, agrees on an interview appointment, prepares the appropriate attire and spends a substantial sum of money (that most graduate students do not have) on hotel and travel expenses.

(2) The interviewee registers for the conference and receives information regarding specific interview locations, a hotel map, and an awkward nametag.

(3) The eager (but not too eager) interviewee appears at the interview location on time and having studied not only the job description but having investigated the potential school/department as well.

Sounds easy enough! Most academics remember the all-too-familiar routine awaiting every job candidate. In fact, many in our professional ranks benefited from reading informative materials prior to their own MLA interviews; subsequently, some have written essays to help candidates prepare for the experience. Before my first MLA, I read one of these informative essays: "The MLA Job Interview: What Candidates Should Know" (Bugliani 1992). Full of information that I really did need, this essay helped eliminate some of the "unknowns" relevant to my MLA performance.

Bugliani (1992) explained that my interviewers might know little, nothing, or substantially more than I do about my particular field. They might arrive unprepared for the interview though I should not. Their universities spend a lot of money on the interview process (as did I!). Some interviewers will already have made a decision before they get to me; some may even seem hostile and completely disinterested.

On the other hand, as an interviewee, I learned that I should act neither as if an institution would be lucky to get me nor as if I would be lucky to be offered a position. This necessary balancing act for the candidate is a theme that Bugliani (1992)

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threads throughout her essay: a balance of modesty, interest, ambition, and a positive attitude in the presentation of my own individual abilities and characteristics; a balance in the languages used during the interview, my first language and the language I will teach; a balance in communicating flexibility along with self-confidence; and a balance in the time spent asking as well as answering questions. For me, being ready for these interview questions proved the most unnerving element of the MLA experience.

Though I had prepared for the MLA interviews and had a general sense of what the job table interactions might be like, I did not anticipate interviewers' questions that were extremely broad, unusually narrow, or highly personalized. But, with Bugliani's (1992) helpful advice tucked away for reference, I located the assigned number of my first MLA interview table and cautiously approached. My mind racing with information that I needed to communicate, I introduced myself to the search committee and the interview commenced. Incredibly, from that first of three interviews at my introductory MLA experience, I received a campus invitation. Though it did not result in a job offer, for me it was a valuable learning experience that contributed to what I now know, another MLA convention later.

Search committees benefit from the wealth of published information regarding the academic qualifications and preparation needed by a candidate to meet institutional goals (for example, see Kossuth 1996, Sullivan 1998, Welles 2003). Unlike first-time job candidates who arrive at the interview with only vague expectations for the experience, more experienced, informed search committee members come to the MLA job table prepared to determine which interviewee best meets the needs of their respective departments. Prior to the interview, well-organized committees determine the areas they want candidates to address and often prepare specific questions that focus on issues of particular relevance to their program needs. In contrast, however, even well prepared job candidates arrive at the MLA table having received only general information regarding interview procedures; that is, they do not anticipate the specific nature of what they will be asked and often do not know how they are expected to perform.

In my own situation, I was correctly informed that search committees representing both research institutions and teaching colleges would explore topics related to my research as well as my teaching experience (see Debicki [2001] for a discussion of related issues). Though this was indeed true, their interview questions were often significantly different from what “research” and “teaching” might superficially suggest. Moreover, I was not adequately prepared to respond to the differing needs and expectations of search committees from various kinds of institutions of

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higher learning. Having now participated in many more interviews, I am convinced that well informed, consequently more prepared, interviewees would be better able to help search committees discover whether they are the sought-after match or if there should be a parting of the ways.

Obviously, job candidates cannot possibly be prepared for the particular situations that await them during the job search process; they can, however, be forewarned that their situation as candidates is a potentially uncomfortable, hilarious, awkward, and threatening experience for which they must adequately prepare and during which they must continually display composure. For example, I was privately interviewed by a faculty member who had already had too much to drink by 10 o'clock that same morning. While summarizing my dissertation research to a three-member MLA search committee, one of the members, for reasons still unknown, crawled under the interview table as I began and did not reappear until I had almost finished. I encountered search committees who were extremely warm and welcoming as well as those who were quite desperate to hire anyone who dared to accept the position that they themselves negatively described. I sat with search committees on couches, armchairs, and queen-sized beds during interviews conducted in private hotel suites. I was (mis)informed by a disgruntled faculty member, who was the search "committee," that all the undergraduate students in her research institution were just farmers anyway. And, following the MLA, during an on-campus visit, I rode with a department chair who drove his vehicle into a legally parked car on a restaurant lot; he immediately forsook the empty spot next to the damaged smaller car, moved to the opposite side of the lot to discretely inspect his car for damages, and we entered the restaurant — the incident left to the small car owner's imagination and my reflection!

These recent, perhaps unusual, MLA experiences have led me to add the following five suggestions to Bugliani's (1992) helpful advice. While her essay addresses more "normal" MLA interview situations, my recommendations to candidates focus on how to perform during both expected and unanticipated interview experiences:

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1. Prepare to answer routinely asked interview questions as well as those that might be considered either unusual or, conversely, "common knowledge" in your particular area of specialization.
2. Anticipate original questions that have not been included in previous interviews.
3. Expect rude, strange, as well as exceptionally nice behavior on the part of interviewers.
4. Try to maintain composure no matter what.
5. Hope for the best but plan for the worst.

"...interview questions were often significantly different from what 'research' and 'teaching' might superficially suggest. "

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Beyond hoping that all goes well, candidates do well to prepare themselves as thoroughly as possible. In addition to Bugliani (1992), there are published materials to which the job candidate may turn for valuable advice and insight regarding the academic job search (see the Appendix for several recent

examples). Being aware of the unusual situations that one might encounter during the job search process can be useful because, as the old adage claims “forewarned is forearmed.”

Additionally, it is also prudent for a candidate to prepare for the specific content of the more “normal” MLA interview itself. In my own experience at the job table, following an initial exchange of greetings and “small talk,” I was often invited to describe my dissertation. Search committees frequently asked related follow-up questions and then initiated other areas for discussion. Candidates should prepare to address questions related to general topics regarding the academic position, their own research achievements and interests, their teaching methodology, and other related experiences.

As an aside, some job candidates, desiring to teach content courses similar to those they have taken as graduate students, may have little interest in teaching language courses. Nevertheless, current data show that the most desirable trait advertised in the MLA Job Information List (JIL) (53.9% of tenure-track positions) is expertise in teaching both language and the area of specialization (Welles 2003). Most junior faculty, trained in literature or linguistics, teach language courses at all levels as well as courses in their own research areas and must therefore be prepared for questions regarding their own language pedagogy. This situation may be particularly true at small institutions which, unlike the larger, research universities from which many candidates come, do not rely as heavily on teaching assistants and adjunct staff.

The following 25 questions, which represent actual questions asked during my MLA interviews, are meant to provide interviewees with specific topics that they should expect to address. Though these particular interviews were focused on a Spanish linguistics hire, most of these questions are relevant to the majority of institutional settings and language department needs.

General Topics

1. Why do you want to work in our department and take this particular position?
2. Which part(s) of our job description interest(s) you the most?
3. Why did you specialize in ...?
4. In your opinion, what is the ideal job like?
5. Where do you see yourself in five years?

Search committees view responses to these questions as successful when the content reveals that interviewees have done their homework. That is, when candidates relate their own personal informa-

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tion and professional goals to a particular institution's needs and job description, a search committee can be convinced that candidates possess a sincere desire for their position and demonstrate interest in their school. Clearly, this connection should be naturally and legitimately expressed. Search committees are on the lookout for interviewees who simply are trying to get a job, any job!

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Pedagogy

6. What methodology do you use to teach language classes?
7. If you were to teach a composition/conversation/first-year/... class, how would you organize it?
8. In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good teacher?
9. What is your teaching philosophy?
10. What role do you see for technology in the teaching and learning of languages?
11. Describe a typical class session or lesson plan in a first-year language class.
12. What importance does grammar have to you and how is it related to the role of communication in learning a language?
13. What courses would you like to teach and why?
14. How does one learn a second language?
15. In your opinion, what is the ideal textbook/class/classroom like?
16. What are your goals for first-year/second-year/... language students and how do you know if they have reached those goals? How do you view assessment?
17. Do you believe in the concept of a university language requirement? Explain.

Interviewees are expected to answer these types of questions thoroughly. Often it is useful for candidates to identify one or two specific examples of original classroom activities that have worked well in their own teaching experience. Most importantly, candidates' answers should clearly reflect their particular teaching styles and beliefs. The goal of each person present at the interview table should be to determine if there is a match between the interviewee and the institution. Misrepresentation of oneself for the purposes of securing a job usually results in future discontent for all involved. Thus, while highlighting established pedagogical principles, interviewees should be sure to respond to all questions both honestly as well as personally.

Research

18. Describe your dissertation. What publishing plans do you have for it in the future?
19. Besides your dissertation, in what other research projects are you now involved and/or what type of research would you like to do in the future?
20. Describe your recent publication in . . .
21. How do/could you integrate your own research in the classroom?

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Having (maybe!) already read their dossiers, search committees are as interested in how candidates answer these questions as in what they actually say. They are looking for evidence of the ability to articulate one’s thoughts in academic settings, to simplify (in complexity and in duration) one’s ideas and to discuss areas of scholarly research. Candidates should particularly beware of providing answers that go on too long or lack clear organization. Interviewees do well to remember that MLA search committees often endure hours of interview dialogue,

often with 10-20 candidates. A few specific suggestions on how to be appropriately concise: Provide search committees with a well-developed, succinct presentation of specific research accomplishments and ideas for their evaluation; follow their lead when determining how far to explore additional information or whether to deepen a discussion; and, prepare for dialogue that may or may not adhere to formal, scholarly conventions.

Related Experience

22. What experience do you have working with diversity?
23. Describe your perspective on the role and responsibilities of a course supervisor. And, if you were to be responsible for class observations, how would you conduct them?
24. Describe your interest in/experience with teaching... heritage language learners, language for business, translation, etc.
25. Have you spent time in a Spanish/French/...-speaking country? Describe your experiences.

Interviewees should realize that search committees may ask these types of questions with particular tasks in mind. No candidate should pretend to be a specialist in everything. Again, honest responses to these questions provide both interviewers and interviewees a basis on which to judge the potential for a successful professional match. Any previous experience that a candidate has in related areas should be explained but not exaggerated. If an interviewee has no prior experience in these areas but is open to exploring them in the future, this willingness should be expressed.

Prepared interviewees communicate to search committees a desire for a particular position, an individualized approach to the job search process, and a commitment to academic professionalism. Given the potential for encountering challenging and stressful circumstances throughout the job search process, candidates do well if they can stay focused, maintain composure, and carefully evaluate the institutions that are simultaneously evaluating them.

“No candidate should pretend to be a specialist in everything.”

Note

I. All but dissertation.

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