Preparing for Virtual Academic Job Interviews

Navigating an academic job interview is always challenging, and virtual interviews can be particularly daunting. Since many experts anticipate that virtual interviews will continue to play a prominent role in academic job searches even after the current pandemic is brought under control, now is the time to develop a set of strategies for approaching virtual interviews with confidence. Initial screening interviews are the most likely to be held virtually, so this article will provide some basic recommendations to help you prepare effectively and make a strong positive impression.

The role of an initial screening interview

Before we consider the virtual interview setting, it’s important to step back and consider the role of the initial screening interview (also called a first-round interview). If a search committee has invited you to meet with them, this means that they have reviewed your materials and believe that you have potential to be a successful candidate for the position. The screening interview is an opportunity for them to learn more about you and how you conduct yourself so they can determine whether your candidacy for the position should advance. Not only do they want to learn more about your qualifications for the position, they also want to know what kind of colleague you will be. Most importantly, they want to know that you take a professional approach to your work. All of these are demonstrated by your preparation for the substance and setting of the interview.

Doing your homework

Regardless of the mode in which you are interviewed, careful and thorough preparation is the first step to presenting yourself as a professional. Members of the search committee will want to see evidence that you have taken time to learn about the position, the institution, the department, and the faculty members you will be meeting with. This means that you need to spend time learning about the type of institution you are applying to and the type of work the position requires. Not all faculty positions are the same, and you can’t simply assume that your job will look like your advisor’s: in fact, most of the positions you apply for will be at institutions that are quite different from UAlbany. You can find some vital information in the job announcement, but that is only the starting point. It is essential that you devote time to carefully scrutinizing the institution and department websites to get a clearer sense of the service, teaching, and research the job will require before an initial interview. This “homework” will prepare you to demonstrate that you share the institution and department’s mission and values, that you are genuinely interested in doing the specific job you are interviewing for, and that you are likely to develop and thrive in the position.

Preparing for the virtual setting

While your first job is to do the hard work of research and preparation, it is also important to know how to conduct yourself in a virtual setting. Being able to navigate the technology successfully and present yourself on camera won’t substitute for careful preparation, but not being able to do so can detract from the overall impression you make on a search committee.

Technology. First, there are some very basic technical requirements for demonstrating that you have taken a thoughtful, professional approach to planning for a virtual interview. In her article “Making the Most of a Skype Interview,” academic job expert Karen Kelsky recommends that a solid internet connection and high-quality microphone and camera are basic requirements. If you don’t already have this equipment, you should invest in it as part of your job market preparation.

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You may not be sure about the quality of the technology you have: in that case, ask a trusted colleague or ITLAL consultant to have a virtual meeting with you and tell you about the quality of...
your audio and video. You can also use your University Zoom account to record a meeting so that you can see if your camera and microphone work well.

Environment. In the past year, many of us have become accustomed to getting a glimpse of others’ personal spaces in virtual meetings. For an interview, however, you want to ensure that you are in a professional setting that minimizes distractions, both for you and for your interviewers. This shows your interviewers that you understand the formal conventions of an academic interview and sends the message that you have the potential to be a dependable and professional colleague. If you have an office on campus where you won’t be disturbed (and you feel safe coming to campus), you might consider doing your interview there. If you need to do the interview from home, think carefully about creating a visual setting that looks professional. This might mean that you need to move to a space that is different from your typical work area or make some small, strategic changes to simplify and declutter what your interviewers will see. When you are on screen, make sure that you are centered in the camera, both vertically and horizontally, so that interviewers can clearly see you on the screen. Finally, try to ensure that you won’t be disturbed by others walking behind you or visibly coming in the room while you are in an interview.

Not only is what interviewers see important, you want to think carefully about what they hear during your interview. If others will be in your home with you while you are in an interview, try to ensure that they are quiet during the interview. In any case, make sure to practice preemptive muting, which means keeping yourself muted unless you are speaking. That can help prevent distractions and also helps ensure that you don’t accidentally talk over or interrupt your interviewers. Finally, make sure that you are sitting close enough to your microphone to ensure that you can be heard. Test your microphone settings before the interview to make sure everything is working.

Ask a trusted colleague or ITLAL consultant to run a test meeting with you so that they can help you prepare a professional environment for your interview.

Appearance. As with any interview, it is important for you to project a professional appearance when you are interviewing virtually. Even though your interviewers won’t see all your clothing in the way they would in a face-to-face interview, dress in fully professional attire so that you put yourself in a professional mindset. Consider checking in advance to see how the clothes that you have chosen for the interview look on camera. It is usually recommended to wear bright and contrasting solid colors because they show up best, but you’ll want to make sure those colors work well with your lighting. Your goal is for interviewers not to be distracted by any elements of your appearance, so make sure you have thought carefully about how you will appear on screen.

Communicating in a virtual setting

In addition to preparing for the technical realities of virtual interviewing, you also want to make sure you have a plan for communicating effectively. Virtual conversations feel different, especially when you haven’t actually met the people you’re talking to, so you need to have reflected on and practiced professional communication skills.

Speaking. It is important to speak confidently and clearly during the interview, and since initial interviews tend to be short, you need to be able to convey substantive information succinctly. Take time, for example, to practice describing your dissertation research and your future plans. Similarly, you should practice describing your teaching experience and philosophy, and be prepared to discuss in some detail a course that you might be asked to teach upon starting the position. The more you have practiced, the more natural it will feel at the time of the interview. During the interview, use explicit cues to convey clearly when you have finished speaking.

Listening. One challenge of virtual communication is that the non-verbal cues we use to navigate a conversation are much less obvious, meaning that careful listening is crucial. Remember that interviewers are looking for a future colleague, so you want to present yourself as someone who is attentive to and considerate of what they have to say. It’s ok to allow for a short pause after an interviewer asks a question so that you can be sure they have actually finished and to reflect and mentally prepare your answer. Keeping yourself muted until you are ready to speak can also help ensure that you wait until others have finished before you begin speaking.

Preparing to communicate effectively. In addition to practice with using the technology a virtual interview requires, it’s important to practice presenting yourself as a colleague. One helpful strategy is to create a list of likely questions with the help of your advisor and with some web research. Then practice responding to those questions succinctly with a trusted colleague or ITLAL consultant to build fluency and to get feedback on your communication skills.

Next steps

After an initial screening interview, a search committee will choose candidates for follow-up interviews, which are more extensive. Currently, many extended interviews are also being conducted virtually. These will include additional elements, typically including a “job talk” about your research and a teaching demonstration. ITLAL’s Spring 2021 workshop series is focused on helping you prepare for all these pieces of a virtual interview, so we hope you can join us for one or more sessions. (See information in the sidebar.) We also invite you to schedule a consultation with ITLAL staff as you prepare for the academic job market; we offer feedback on application materials (CVs, cover letters, teaching and research statements, etc.) and can also do mock interviews to help you become more comfortable in the virtual setting.

References