

# Appendix B:

## MLA Job Interviews

by the English Placement Committee, 2002

### BEFORE THE CONVENTION

A BRIEF WORD about additional materials—Assuming you have a polished writing sample, you will most likely need no more than two additional things: a follow-up chapter (which they might request if they wish to see more work); and something you can give as a job talk (this might be “informal,” or a 40-50 minute lecture, and not something they’ve already seen).

Slides and audio-visual aids in general can enrich on-campus job talks and presentations. Now is the time to get such materials together, if you haven’t already.

Things to aim for:

- 1) *Be there.* Try to make your travel plans so that you arrive no later than the morning of the day before your first interview. Weather and other factors can delay flights, especially at this time of the year.
  - 2) *Be sure you know whom you’re talking to and where they can be reached.* This means keeping careful track of phone numbers and hotels. The best bet is to keep this information in one place, and close by you. When you get to the convention city, you’ll probably have to call the interviewers to find out the room locations: hotels are not allowed to give out room numbers.
  - 3) *Scout out the exact location of each interview.* Take the time to visit (in the manner you plan to get there—by cab or by foot) the various hotels your interviews may be in: this includes finding the individual rooms. Because the MLA is held in the “off” season, hotels often engage in remodeling during the convention. This can make it difficult to find the right room.
- Count on elevators being crowded and very slow during the convention.
- 4) *Don’t schedule any interviews less than an hour apart.* This applies even to those held in the same hotel; you can never count on interviews starting or finishing on time, so it’s best to leave yourself a comfort margin.
  - 5) *If you are offered a choice, try to schedule interviews for later in the morning or early in the afternoon.* Early morning and late afternoon interviews can be a little

punchy (the former before the coffee has kicked in, the latter after it’s worn off.) Often you won’t have much of a choice about scheduling, but if you do, try to keep this in mind.

- 6) *Wear something that makes you look professional.* Preferably clothes that won’t distract the interview committee from your face. (Bright argyle socks, for example, are not a good idea). During the interview itself, try to avoid holding things in your hands (pens, notebooks, etc.) that could distract the committee as well. Wear your outfit and shoes several times before the convention to make sure they are comfortable enough to get you through the week. Have extra clothing as a backup. Be careful not to get perfume or cologne on your hands—it can rub off when you shake hands with the committee, and you don’t want them to remember you that way.
- 7) *Have extra copies of your c.v. and abstract with you.* Just in case your interviewers might ask to see it, or in case you meet a representative from a college or university looking to hire. (It can happen).
- 8) *Have a copy of your teaching portfolio with you.* If your interviewers ask you about the kind of courses you’d like to teach, it would be useful to have a sample course description or two to share with them.
- 9) *Research your interviewers.* Find out the basics about the places interviewing you: the demographics of the student body, kinds of courses the department offers, concentrations, etc.
- 10) *Warm up just before the interview.* You may want to warm up your voice by talking to someone, reading aloud, and/or doing vocal exercises before your interviews. You may find that your best performances come after you’ve already been talking for a while (sometimes in the second or third interview of the day).

### IN THE INTERVIEW

GET THERE on time and knock on the door. You will be greeted there and asked to wait; they’re most likely

finishing an interview. When the previous candidate leaves the room, you'll be asked in. The next few seconds are important: you'll be introduced to your interviewers; you should shake their hands firmly and say their names aloud while looking them in their eyes. (By repeating their names at this time you'll stand a better chance of remembering them later when the interview gets underway.)

You'll probably be in a smaller hotel room-sometimes a suite. You'll be given a chair, but don't be surprised if someone on the committee has to sit on the bed. There will be phone calls during the interview (people calling to find out the room number for their interviews), and these calls will be answered; don't let the interruptions fluster you.

The committee will invariably ask you if you'd like something to drink. If you're thirsty, by all means accept. Realize, however, that it can be awkward if there is no place to set the coffee cup down; you may wind up holding it in your lap during the interview. This can be distracting for you as well as the committee.

The first thing to do when you sit down is to move the chair, however slightly. Do this even if the chair is already in a comfortable position, and be seen doing it. This body language is important: it says that, rather than sitting in the "hot seat," you are in charge of yourself and your surroundings. Moving the chair will also remind you not to sit as though immobilized during the interview.

It is vital during the interview that you speak clearly, get your points across, and keep eye contact. If you can remember the interviewers' names, this will help your presentation, and make your time there seem more like a genuine conversation: *"To answer that question, I'd like build on my response to Professor Johnson's question about ..."*

Use your hands, if only to keep them away from your face. It's a given in conversation that people unconsciously imitate those they're speaking with, so be careful here to avoid letting interviewers control the way you present yourself (That is, if someone puts his hand over his mouth while speaking, there's no reason for you to do that as well.)

## TYPICAL QUESTIONS

SOME QUESTIONS will arise as a matter of routine. You should prepare for these, but try not to sound "canned" in your answers. A short moment of reflection before answering any question is usually a good idea.

1) *"Tell us about your dissertation."* This is usually the first real question of the interview. How you answer it should depend on the phrasing (i.e. "Tell us a little" is different from "Tell us about"), on the length of the interview, and on your sense of how they are responding to your summary. You should have a range of these summaries: 30-second, one-minute, two-minute, and five-minute versions. They should sound relatively fresh and spontaneous. Make sure you use simple words that are easy for you to pronounce ("My thesis shows/asks My thesis is about. .") rather than the "written" language of your abstract ("My interrogation of previous approaches radically engages . . ."). If you know that someone on your interview committee has knowledge of the topic, you might shape your summary for that person while keeping in mind the fact that the other interviewers will probably be from various fields. Ideally, this summary should include your topic, your argument, the texts and kinds of texts you take up, the books and critics your argument falls next to (or contradicts), and what your argument will do to change the direction of criticism in the area. Prepare to be interrupted during your answer, for they've got an agenda of their own that they will want to pursue. Be prepared to shorten or lengthen your answer here on the basis of the interviewers' responses.

2) *"How does your work fit into other work on the same subject?"* Here you may want to be as honest as possible in setting out the differences between your work and other criticism, but it's good to remember to acknowledge your indebtedness. You may be tired of New Historicism, for instance, and not want to talk about it, but part of what makes you attractive as a candidate is your relation to movements the interviewers can recognize. So be sure to make your disagreements come out as positive things that will advance dialogue and help the profession, and not as things which work only to set you off in isolation. Speaking of "we" here can help convey the impression that you are thinking of others in the profession, and of yourself as already part of the profession.

3) *“What kinds of courses would you like to teach?”* You should have syllabi in your head for at least a dozen courses, from basic composition to graduate seminars (not every school has graduate programs, of course). The committee might press you for titles if they’re interested, so it’s best not to start rattling off book titles. But you can drop a few names and titles to help flesh out your hypothetical courses. It can be a good idea to have sample course descriptions that you can pass around, if the committee is responsive to your offering them.

4) *“We have a composition component; how would you teach composition?”* How could you make it new and relevant?”

5) *“We have a diverse student body. How would you teach a survey course in literature to make it relevant to such a population?”* (and, alternately) *“We have a very homogenous student body. How would you bring in issues of cultural diversity when teaching a literature survey?”*

6) *“Describe your biggest success [or failure] in teaching. What did you learn from it?”*

7) *“Describe your future research plans.”*

8) *“Do you have any questions for us?”* Here it’s important not to ask certain questions. Do not ask about salary here (in fact, don’t ask about salary until after they’ve offered the job: it looks a little pushy, and some departments can’t tell you in front of the interview committee because salaries are confidential). It’s also a good idea not to ask about teaching loads—this can imply that teaching is a burden. Make sure that what you ask is phrased positively; ask them about opportunities—for team teaching, or multi-disciplinary courses, or anything else that you’re interested in. It’s usually unwise to ask them questions that can be answered with numbers: you want to give your interviewers a chance to talk about their school or department in a meaningful and positive way.

### **FREE TIME DURING THE CONVENTION**

RELAX as much as possible. If you are staying in a hotel with fitness facilities, consider using them (it can help cut down on the anxiety and help you sleep better). Be a tourist. Movies, too, are a time-honored tranquilizer for MLA anxieties. One thing you may wish to consider is postponing dinners and outings with friends on the market. This can be an extremely tense time for everyone, and it is almost impossible to avoid talking about one’s interviews (with the expectable result of making everyone more nervous). It can be a good idea to do things with non-academic friends in the convention city, or with friends who aren’t on the market.