

## The (Somewhat) Lighter Side of the Academic Job Search

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Much has been written about the terrible job market in English, comparative literature, and many foreign languages, and from personal experience I can attest that it's certainly bad. Having applied for hundreds of jobs, interviewed at MLA (and elsewhere), and witnessed the plight of many fellow graduate students and non-tenure-track faculty in similar situations, I feel as if I've pretty much seen it all—much of which was pretty funny. Despite having a Ph.D. from a well-respected program (which of course we had entered at “just the right time”), extensive teaching experience, good teaching evaluations, and strong publications, I spent four years on the job market before landing a tenure-track job. A colleague of mine once referred to what she called her “rejection corridor,” which ran from Illinois across to Ohio and down to Louisiana. I have my own rejection corridor; it runs from Seattle over to Bangor, down to Miami, and across to San Diego. So it's lucky for me that the three candidates ahead of me turned down my first job.

## CANDIDATE QUALIFICATIONS

**Most people who've served on search committees say that the problem with the hiring process is that it's too subjective, but whenever I hear that, I think of an anonymous student who complained on his evaluation form that my English class "was to [sic] subjective." Unfortunately, many faculty and administrators also perpetuate myths surrounding the hiring process. I remember a top-five Ph.D. program that attached a note to its graduate school applications warning of the bad job market (which is true) but concluded with the statement: "Naturally, the best students will always get jobs" (which is false).**

**What I've learned over the past few years is that evaluating candidates' qualifications has nothing to do with being among the "best students" but everything to do with a magic word called "fit." When I first heard this term, I assumed it simply meant that if a school were looking to fill, say, an eighteenth-century British literature position, it might hire a candidate whose specialty is Defoe. What seemed reasonable enough—but in fact I was completely wrong. "Fit" has nothing to do with such trifles. I discovered this when a non-tenure-track colleague of mine landed a tenure-track job at a small college. She was told that she got the job because the head of the search committee thought my colleague "would be fun to go to lunch with." And all this time I'd thought qualifications had to do with teaching ability and scholarship. Maybe schools should just dispense with the interviews and replace them with a swimsuit competition. (I knew I should've lost another five pounds.)**

**Nor is this an isolated incident. A friend of mine told me he had a campus visit in which it became clear that for the department chair one particular qualification stood out over all others. During dinner at an upscale restaurant, the chair, who had been commenting continually throughout the evening on the fine quality of the food, remarked to my friend, “Well, I’m glad to see that you’re enjoying your meal. We had a candidate in last week who ate like a bird.” My uncle Rich always did say that a good appetite is the sign of a good mind. This “subjective” evaluation of candidates is also not restricted to small schools. A former fellow graduate student (who defected and became one of them once she landed a tenure-track job) told me that faculty in her department (at a large university) are looking not for “stars” but for people they can work with. I guess the two must be mutually exclusive. I wonder whether this institution mentions that hiring policy during its annual alumni solicitation campaign?**

**Earlier, I claimed that I received a Ph.D. from a strong program, but maybe I exaggerated. After spending years in graduate school learning about literary theory, literary history, and literature itself (this last, a novel idea, I’m told), it seems that I wasted my time on what now appears to be mere fluff, because I didn’t receive the kind of training I really needed. I plan to call my former graduate director and complain. I had classes in Victorian literature, Milton, New Historicism, and so on, but what do these courses have to do with the aesthetics of eating habits, or the intricacies of small talk, or the fine art of flattering your interviewers? I did have a class on “style”; unfortunately, it was rhetorical style—not fashion style. Where was Emily Post**

**when I needed her?**

## **JOB ADVERTISEMENTS**

**Regardless of the mysticism surrounding the evaluation process, all candidates must go through the long and tortuous (not to mention torturous) job application process (probably longer than that of any other profession). One of the first steps in the job search comes each year with the arrival of the much-anticipated MLA Job Information List. The arrival of the list is the most hopeful part of the job search, a time when most of us deluded ourselves into thinking that one of the schools advertising would actually hire us. Most of the job ads in the list are pretty straightforward, but others can be quite entertaining. For example, I was always amused by the wishing-on-a-star ads that asked, for instance, for “someone with a background in journalism, east Asian literature, flat-earth theory, and colonial American furniture making—ability to teach Farsi desirable.” I wondered whether the school thought that it could actually find someone with such diverse training or whether by some strange miracle there just happened to be a professor’s spouse who had those exact qualifications. It truly can be a small world after all.**

**In the last couple of years, the MLA has typeset the ads it receives, but before that you never knew what you might get. I remember applying for a job and misspelling the school’s name, not because I was careless but because the ad was so poorly typed and reproduced that I didn’t make out one of the letters correctly. I thought for sure it was an “n,” but it turned out to be an “m” instead. I suppose I should’ve looked it up just to be certain. I didn’t discover my error until I got the acknowledgment letter—which might just as well have been a rejection letter at**

**that point.**

**My favorite kind of ad, though, was for what I call “clone schools.” At these schools, it seems that “yes” (as in “yes-man” and “yes-woman”) is the department’s anthem. Everyone says the same thing, sees the same thing, and thinks the same thing. (See no evil; hear no evil; speak no evil?) And of course should anyone say, see, or think anything else, Big Brother is always there to help re-educate you. But such departments do remain very open-minded—to all views that coincide with their own. And to give them their due, they’re also very fair and non-discriminatory—they hate all other views equally. (Of course, they would claim that they simply look for the right “fit” for their department.) In particular, I remember a big-time (though I suspect not as big-time as its proponents would like to think) research university that ran an ad a few years ago that went something like this: “If you are one of the enlightened elect who recognizes that literature is a product of its cultural cuisine, that Moby Dick, for instance, is not a novel about good and evil or obsession and revenge but about the effects of consuming quohogs and the resulting indigestion in Massachusetts coastal communities in the early nineteenth century, then come join us at [Clone] University and worship with us at the altar of TRUTH. All other infidels need not apply.”**

## **CONFERENCE INTERVIEWS**

**After already receiving a pile of rejection letters (some arriving even before the acknowledgment letters), I next waited by the phone for most of December hoping for a few MLA**

interviews (if I were lucky). Advisors, colleagues, and other knowledgeable people always emphasize the necessity of being prepared for interviews, and that's very good advice. Preparation, though, means more than merely knowing one's field. A former fellow graduate student was waiting for an 8:00 a.m. interview and struck up a conversation with another candidate, who was waiting for a different interview. It was the second candidate's first interview. After a few minutes, the candidate said to my friend, "Well, here goes," walked to a door across the hall, and knocked. A minute or two later, a man opened the door—eyes half shut, hair standing on end, and dressed only in his underwear. The candidate tentatively asked, "Is this the interview suite for \_\_\_\_\_ University?" The man croaked, "No, and I need to go back to sleep," as he closed the door. The candidate stared at the door for a moment and then turned to my friend and said, "This is beginning badly."

**Sometimes, though, no amount of preparation will suffice. I know candidates who were asked questions that they hadn't expected—nor could they have hoped to expect them had they prepared for years. Most of the time, such questions are only a little off the track, such as when I was asked about modern British poetry during an interview for a modern British fiction job. I, of course, said nothing about the job description and answered the question (anything else would have been interview suicide), but I wondered, "Isn't this a modern British fiction job?" One of the other interviewers pointed out that fact to the questioner (although showing up his colleague probably did me no good, I suspect). In some other cases, though, interviewers seem to forget what job they're interviewing for and in an interview for a job, say, in Victorian literature, ask about the air speed velocity of an unladen swallow (African or European?)—or something else equally relevant to the job**

description. Then, they reject you if you don't know the answer. I know a woman who interviewed for a job in twentieth-century American literature. One of the interviewers must've forgotten the job description, because he asked about her knowledge of Milton. She didn't have any and didn't get the job either.

**Sometimes, the problem with unexpected questions isn't entirely the interviewer's fault, though. Candidates can also be partly to blame. That's what happened with me. Do you remember the first time you heard the term "non-traditional student"? Probably not. I do—during a conference interview about five years ago. When asked about my experience with non-traditional students, I was stumped. I'd never heard the term before and knew that if I let on, I was done for—so I guessed and spent the next few minutes outlining my experience with Chinese and Korean students and how we overcame cultural and language barriers in the classroom. Pretty good answer, I thought, until one of the interviewers smiled at me and proceeded to define the term. It turns out that I actually had a fair bit of experience with non-traditional students but wrongly assumed that "non-traditional" meant non-native English speakers. Nobody had told me that non-traditional students were ordinary old people. (I really should call my former graduate director.) You can guess the outcome of that interview. (I blush to think of it.)**

**On the other hand, there are always those questions you know could be asked but pray won't be. Sometimes, they're questions about a gap in your training. A question about, say, The Scarlet Letter (which I've never read) would likely make me**

feel a little sick. Other questions, though, can cause even stronger reactions. A friend of mine had an even more difficult job search than mine, spending three years in a non-tenure-track position and then two years out of academia entirely before landing a tenure-track job. During his out-of-academia experience, he continued to look for an academic job. At one interview, there was a stereotypical English professor—an older gentleman in a tweed jacket, looking utterly prim and proper. At one point during the interview, he looked down at my friend's vita and said, "I see that you were teaching at \_\_\_\_\_ University from 19\_\_ until 19\_\_." Then came the question my friend had been dreading: "What have you been doing this past year?" My friend saw that the jig was up, and so he came clean: "Delivering pizza." At that point, a look of complete disgust came over the professor's face. Knowing that the day was lost, my friend decided to console the professor and said, "That's okay. It's not your **fault.**" **During the rest of the interview, my friend was distressed alternately about losing the job and about the possibility that at any time the interviewers might ask him to go fetch lunch.**

**Acts of fate can also destroy a perfectly good interview opportunity. Lost luggage, canceled flights, and other disasters sometimes happen. For instance, many flights were canceled or delayed during the 1998 MLA convention. In fact, the candidate our department hired had just enough time to go from the plane to the interview—out of breath. A fellow graduate student once experienced a less common near disaster. While waiting in the hotel hallway for her next interview, she suddenly got a nose bleed and then made the unpleasant discovery that she had no tissues in her purse. Being bright and resourceful, though, she sprinted to the ice machine down the hall and**

started shoving ice shivers up her nose to stop the bleeding. She stopped the bleeding but now had a watery, bloody mess running down her face. She looked around to make sure no one was watching, wiped her face on the back of a window curtain in the hallway, and then went in to face the interviewers.

Unfavorable interview circumstances can also affect the outcome of an interview. A friend told me of an early-morning interview in which he walked into the hotel room, only to find that in addition to the interviewers there was a young woman (the department chair's daughter) asleep in one of the beds. The interview was then conducted in whispers "because she needs her sleep." More disconcerting, though, was the fact that the interviewers had placed my friend's chair right next to the woman in bed. He wondered whether this weren't all some kind of bizarre psychological concentration test to see if he could withstand the rigors of teaching at an institution of higher learning. If so, he failed—since he found himself concentrating less on the task at hand than on the woman at hand.

In my case, I had an interview in one of those open-center hotels. For most candidates, that wouldn't be a problem, but for me it was, because I'm terrified of heights and become completely irrational when I can't avoid them. I am the documented most-afraid-of-heights person in the world (also the only person who hates ketchup). I get dizzy standing on tip toe; my life passes before my eyes climbing a step ladder. Anyway, the hotel room where I was interviewing was on about the 4,000<sup>th</sup> floor.

Fortunately, I talked someone into letting me take the service elevator instead of the all-glass tube-of-death elevator (my perception) that everyone else used in the center of the hotel lobby. I still had to walk from the service elevator, though, across those 12" wide catwalks to get to the room. Of course, it's never a good idea to be late for an interview, so I always arrived about five minutes early. So there I was, waiting outside the hotel room, spread eagle, back plastered against the wall, eyes glued shut, certain that the next breeze would suck me over the 6"-high railing and down 20,000 ft. to a less-than-pleasant death. Typically, I don't get nervous before interviews, but by the time the interviewers finally opened the door (five minutes late at that), I must've looked as if I'd just pulled my finger out of a light socket. I didn't say anything about my fear of heights, of course, for even greater fear of looking foolish, and needless to say I didn't get the job either.

Other unexpected problems for candidates can occur during an interview as a result of comments by poor-self-image schools. A colleague of mine once had an interview with a comprehensive university in which one of the first things the interviewers said to him was that their "students aren't exactly dumb, but they do come from the worst schools in the country." The problem was that my colleague didn't know how to respond. Should he say, "Oh, that's nice" (which sounds at least condescending if not down right stupid), or should he say, "Oh, that's too bad" (which sounds as if he doesn't want the job)? (I suppose he could've just grunted.) I guess he didn't give the right answer, though, since he

**didn't get the job.**

**Another colleague had an interview for a job at a research university in which the interviewer spent almost the entire time talking about how awful the school and job were. Again, my colleague was at a loss as to how to respond and found himself trying to console the interviewer, telling him that it wasn't such a bad job and so on. My colleague didn't get the job, so maybe he should've just agreed that it was a terrible job. I'm sure that would've got him the job.**

## **REJECTION LETTERS**

**Typically, the last and most discouraging part of the application process is drowning in the seemingly endless flood of rejection letters. I have to admit that I sometimes regret having thrown away all those letters. It might be interesting to look back through them, but I suppose it was just too upsetting at the time to keep them around. I suspect that those letters would probably upset a lot of environmentalists too, considering all the trees that died for the cause. Some environmentally conscientious schools, though, have found an effective way to avoid killing so many trees: they simply don't send letters. As far as anyone's told me, I'm still being considered for a job at a research university that I interviewed with at MLA back in 1995. They sure seem to be taking their time deciding.**

**The wording of some rejection letters can be amusing, from intentionally abrupt rejections to unintentional mistakes. Everyone knows that typos and other editing errors can doom a**

**candidate's application. Still, I have this picture in my mind of some fussy professor reading applications and chortling at finding a split infinitive, or a sentence using the phrase "more importantly" instead of "more important," or one ending with a preposition (the sort of pedantry up with which Churchill would not put), then folding the letter into a paper plane and flying it across the room and into the trash.**

**But those professors forget that editing errors can happen the other way around too. I remember applying to a university in the Southwest that had an identity crisis. I will call it the University of New Canada. Several months later, I received a rejection letter from the University of Canada instead. (I didn't even know one existed.) I wonder, though, how many nanoseconds it would have taken the school to reject me if I'd been the one to call it the University of Canada instead of New Canada?**

**Occasionally, a rejection letter would also include a bonus. I used to love the schools that would send me a rejection letter in the same envelope with an affirmative action survey or some other form (typically without return postage included) that they then wanted me to fill out and send back to them for their records. One wonders about the accuracy of such records?**

**Other rejection letters come from schools that seem to want to be absolutely sure that you know they're rejecting you. I call them salt-in-the-wound schools. Several years ago, a certain comprehensive university had two openings: one a generalist literature position, the other rhetoric. I applied for the generalist**

**literature position (and was of course rejected), and a fellow graduate student applied for the rhetoric position. He got an MLA interview but not the job. Several months later, he also got a letter rejecting him for the generalist literature job as well (for which he hadn't applied). Other salt-in-the-wound schools would send a rejection letter to my office, one to my home, and maybe throw in an e-mail message just for good measure. At least, they didn't phone me too. A fellow graduate student had a similar experience, except that instead of receiving two rejection letters sent to different addresses, he got his own rejection letter as well as someone else's. For salt-in-the-wound schools, it seems that once is just not enough.**

**A variation on the salt-in-the-wound effect occurred after a conference interview I had on a Saturday morning 1,000 miles or so from my home. On Wednesday, I had a rejection letter in my hands. Ouch! I would've thought that they could have waited at least a couple of days before sending the letter. I had a similar experience when I applied to a certain school with strong religious ties; I got a rejection letter about a week later. Apparently, the committee took one look at my vita and sent out a rejection immediately—overnight express if I remember correctly.**

**I appreciated the schools who tried to be nice about the difficult job situation and wrote compassionate (though not entirely true) letters (since not everyone who applied could've had extraordinary qualifications, despite what those letters often stated). Still, it was a considerate gesture, and I appreciated the thought. Sometimes, though, those compassionate letters**

could get a bit out of hand. I remember one letter from a comprehensive university that went something like this: “We regret to inform you that you are no longer under consideration for our position in \_\_\_\_\_ literature. Naturally, these decisions are subjective and some good candidates can be overlooked. Mistakes can happen, and so you shouldn’t necessarily interpret this rejection as a reflection on you or your qualifications. We could have made a mistake and may not have hired the best candidate available. In fact, maybe we did make a mistake. We hope not, but since all truth is relative, human beings are fallible, and it’s still unclear whether the new millennium begins in 2000 or 2001, you can never know anything for certain. We are very sorry.”

Finally, one school had the same ad in the job list every year I was on the market, kind of a generic ad, stating that they needed people in various areas (which basically covered every area of English studies). Every year I applied, and every year I was rejected—including last year. The only thing is that I didn’t apply for any jobs last year, let alone for one with that school. But I guess my annual rejection has become such a school tradition that they couldn’t help themselves. Maybe the department’s new dictum is this: “Each December send out the Christmas cards—and don’t forget the rejection letter for that Peters guy.”

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