

## Phone Interview Tips

Welcome to Column 21 of Hey Jane! This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions and answers are generated by the committee and SWS members. Answers are compiled from several anonymous sources. All columns are archived on our committee's page on the SWS website <http://www.socwomen.org/page.php?ss=26>

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HEY JANE!

“I am on the job market and have been asked to participate in a phone interview. My department has prepared me well for the on-campus interview, but I am less confident in my phone interviewing skills. Help!”

Phone interviews are a very important part of the interview process. Search committees often use phone interviews to narrow down a short list of 10-12 people to the 2-3 people that they will invite for campus interviews. Phone interviews are tricky because non-verbal communication is completely absent. However, there are many things you can do to prepare for your phone interview.

### \*General Tips for Phone Interviews

- Usually, the phone interview will be scheduled ahead of time. However, if someone calls and wants to interview on the spot, it is perfectly okay to ask to schedule the interview at a time that is better for you.

- Be prepared. This is not just a casual chat, but is often a very serious stage of the interviewing process. Just as you would prepare for a face-to-face interview, during a phone interview, you should know something about the organization, department, and people who will be interviewing you. You should be prepared to answer questions about your research, teaching and service and to ask questions about the position, the department and the university.

- Practice!! Many departments give graduate students the opportunity to do “practice job talks” but may not provide an opportunity for practice phone interviews. Ask your mentor or your friends to practice a phone interview with you. This is especially important for conference call phone interviews (which I will discuss more a little later).

- If possible avoid taking other calls or potentially stressful meetings just prior to the call. One time (before caller-ID) I answered the phone about the time the interview was scheduled and it was my mother. Before I could say “can I call you back, I have a phone interview any minute now,” she blurted out that her neighbor (someone I was close to) had been diagnosed with breast cancer. While I tried to clear my head and get ready for the call that came about two minutes later, I know I was not at the top of my game that day. Needless to say, I was not invited for a campus interview.

- Make sure you have a quiet environment. If at all possible, leave the kids and the pets in another room (you might even consider hiring a babysitter). Make sure that background noise such as televisions, washing machines, etc. are eliminated. Turn off the ringers on any cell phones that might be in the room. You might also consider turning off the call waiting function on your phone if possible.
- Know your equipment. Many people recommend using a landline phone with a cord rather than a cell phone or a cordless phone that might lose power or in some ways be less reliable. If you plan to use a mute button or a speaker phone function, make sure you know beforehand where they are and exactly what they sound like on the other end.
- Dress nicely. Even if you normally wear pajamas when you work from home, it's a good idea to dress for the phone interview as you would for a face-to-face interview. It puts you in the mind frame of a professional meeting. However, if you normally wear earrings, you might take them out for a phone interview as they could clatter against the phone or just be uncomfortable while talking on the phone.
- You might consider standing up while participating in the interview. This will keep you "on your toes." And SMILE!! It will come through in your voice.
- Keep your CV and any notes you have about the department handy. You may want to post large notes on the wall, this will keep them at your fingertips, but let you avoid the sound of rustling papers. Also make sure you have paper, pen and calendar close by. It's unlikely that a campus interview would be scheduled right away, but it is possible.
- Don't eat, drink, smoke, chew gum, etc. while participating in the interview. However, you might remember to have some water handy in case your mouth gets dry.
- Remember that they can't see your non-verbal cues. If you need a minute to think about an answer, say "That's a great question, I need to take a minute to think about it." Or let them know when there might be an unexpected silence or unexpected noise - "Excuse me while I take a sip of water."
- Don't ramble to fill the silence. Finish your answers with a note of finality. You want to avoid yes or know answers, but keep your answers succinct and with a clear ending.

#### \*A Note about Conference Call Phone Interviews

Conference call interviews are a whole different monster. Personally, they are my least favorite way to be interviewed, but they are very useful from the interviewer side. It is a way for the whole search committee to hear your responses rather than have one person on the committee report back to the group. All the same tips apply as for any phone interview, but I would emphasize practicing even more in this context. Especially with conference call interviews, I suggest asking friends to find a speaker phone and help you participate in a mock interview. You might even suggest that your graduate department add this to the practice job talk. One of the

biggest problems with conference calls is that it can be a bit nerve wracking if two or more people talk at once or if you don't know who is asking the questions. If someone doesn't identify themselves – it's okay to say, "I'm sorry, I missed who asked that question?" and then repeat the name, "That's a good question Jane, my research addresses the . . . ."

\*Suggestions for Search Committees conducting conference calls

A conference call interview can be incredibly intimidating for a job candidate. To help reduce some of the stress and be able to get a more realistic sense of the candidate's abilities and personality, the committee might consider some of the following suggestions:

- A group of three to six people is ideal for a conference call. If more than six people need to be in the room, you might consider limiting how many people will actually ask questions. Of course everyone who is in the room should introduce themselves. If you have 25 people in the room, you might let the candidate know that only 5 people will be asking questions.
- Know your equipment. You might practice calling a colleague in the office down the hall, just to test the sound quality and know where any speaker or mute functions are and how to use them before beginning the phone interviews.
- Make a plan beforehand . . . if you'll be asking each candidate the same set of questions, assign a question to each member of the search committee and ask them to go in a specific order. You might even practice once before starting the interviews.
- Make sure someone is in charge of making introductions, controlling the flow and generally avoiding the chaos that can happen during conference calls.
- Identify yourself every time you speak. If you happen to be on an interdisciplinary search committee, you might even state your name and department the first couple of times you speak.
- Even if you're dying to say something, wait your turn. People talking at the same time can be torturous for the candidate on the other end of the line.

If you are well prepared for a face-to-face interview, you should do fine with a phone interview if you keep these simple tips in mind.

CAVEAT to all professional advice: Always check with your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, etc. to find out what the norms and expectations are in your institution. And consult with your professional mentors to determine what is most appropriate in your specific situation.

I hope this helps!

-- Jane