

Tim Ryan's job market tips

I don't claim to be an expert in the Political Science job market. (I've only seen it from one side, after all.) Nevertheless, here are nine things I think I learned through the ordeal. They reflect my own course, which had a few soaring highs, several crushing lows, and ultimately a happy ending. I hope to develop this document over time. Comments are welcome: tjr@email.unc.edu.

1. A question you will face as the jobs are posted is, "How broadly should I apply? Should I skip past jobs that are not really in my 'wheelhouse?' Wouldn't it irritate a search committee member to receive an application that is a forced fit for the posted spot?"

I'd encourage you to apply quite broadly. There are limits, of course. Someone who studies 17th century Portuguese mercantilism should not apply to a job focused on genetic politics. But if you can spin a workable rationale, and if you would actually take the job if it were your only offer, I think you should take a stab.

The reason is that listings can be deceptive, and search committees can be unpredictable. Here is an example. I applied to a listing for someone who focuses on "science and technology politics." Look at my CV and you will see—I can be frank about this now—that that is not really what I do. But my dissertation draws on evolutionary theory (science!) and I have a paper that focuses on Facebook (technology!), so I took a stab. Someone from the school called me a few weeks later and said, roughly, "We love your application. The science and technology mandate came down from the dean, but we don't really care about that as long as you can say something intelligent in response to a question about that when the time comes." I got a job talk. (I did not get an offer, perhaps because of the mismatch, but I was definitely in the running.)

2. Another question is whether you should do the APSA interviews. They are quite annoying because you have to get dressed up and awkwardly wait to be called in the embarrassing "holding pen" area. Then, the interactions mostly feel artificial, patronizing, and shallow. You're likely to encounter someone who has just met twenty people similar to you, and who has given the same basic spiel to each of them. Still, I recommend you swallow your pride and do a few. The stakes are low—I doubt that the people conducting the interviews remember very much—and there is no such thing as having too much live practice talking extemporaneously about your work. (I needed a lot of practice in this area, for one.)
3. Do the application basics (formatting your materials, making a nice website) right. Having proofing mistakes in your cover letter, for instance, could make a very bad first impression. But once that stuff is done, *let it be done* and don't let it interfere with the "meat and potatoes" of a job application (e.g. your writing sample).

There was a kerfuffle in my application season about my department not letting us use department letterhead for our applications. Some people got really worried about it, as if that was going to make or break their applications. There are better places to direct your angst. (I heard of some people who spent hours designing their own letterhead. I just sent my cover letter on plain paper. Not a big deal.)

4. Stay off the \$@^* rumors website. It's a cesspool of nastiness, insecurity, and misinformation. It will make you cynical and give you a jaundiced view of our whole discipline. Don't even go to it.

I followed my own advice here until about November. When I finally gave in to the temptation, it had a negative effect of my happiness and productivity. Be stronger than I was.

5. What should go in a cover letter? Opinions differ on this. I thought of it—and this seemed to work well—as something that could stand in for a research statement for the schools that did not ask for a stand-apart research statement. This is to say that it summarized my current projects, how they fit together, and what I saw as the future directions. (There was also a paragraph on teaching.) Based on conversations I had with folks who have served on Michigan search committees, a statement like this is very valuable. It's the first thing that some people look at, because it is very diagnostic of how well developed the applicant's long-term agenda is (which is predictive of tenure).

My cover letter also had a long paragraph about teaching. I, for one, do not apologize for caring about teaching, though I know some in the discipline see this as a sign of weakness.

6. The interview starts the minute you get off the plane and ends the minute you get back on the plane. Don't let anyone lead you to think otherwise. Don't put much stock in a person telling you, "We can go off the record" or "I'm not going to ding you for your response to this question, but. . ." Keep your guard up if someone starts to get chummy. Never throw anyone—at the school you're visiting or elsewhere—under the bus. You never know what will be passed around. The people whose work you disagree with aren't stupid. They've made important contributions but you're concerned about specific weaknesses, and you're eager to address them.

Related, keep in mind that you are interviewing when you interact with department staff, graduate students, or anyone else. Be appreciative and polite, always.

7. When you have a flyout, how should you approach the one-on-one meetings?

Sometimes the person you're meeting with will set the agenda, but more often not. You should have a game plan for what to do when the person leans back and says, "So! What can I tell you?" I got much better at handling this situation over time. Early in the season, I

drew from a laundry list of planned questions about the area and the school. This filled the minutes, but truth be told, I knew most of the answers *ex ante*. And if I didn't, I certainly knew them by my third meeting. So it was kind of a waste of everyone's time and I don't think I did much to accumulate points with the person I was talking to.

A second thing I did, which also did not work well, was to read the most prominent work of each person I was going to meet with. I did this mostly for defensive purposes—to make sure I wouldn't look like an ignoramus, for not knowing the person's work. I usually did not bring the work up on my own. (It would have seemed patronizing, and I was worried to have misunderstood it.) The other person never did, either, so this also was wasted effort.

Here is what I thought *did* work. I dropped any pretense of knowing about everyone's work. Instead, I looked to each person's recent or in-progress work for something that I *genuinely* found interesting, irrespective of how prominent the work was. Almost always, I could find something. I didn't try to learn everything about it. Just enough that I could ask a question. Then, I *did* bring it up, and in a way that made no claim to really know about it. (“I saw on your website that you have a paper about blah blah. It caught my eye because of my interest in blah blah. I didn't get a chance to read it, but what's going on there?”) Nobody I talked to seemed to bristle at my admitting not to have read his or her work. Instead, they lit up—people love talking about their own stuff—and told me all about it. Usually, a number of follow up questions came to mind. (“Interesting. With that design, how would you deal with the problem of. . .?”) In short, this approach led to exchanges that felt more genuine and meaningful.

8. After a practice talk of mine in which the Q&A could have gone better, another grad student made a remark that really clicked with me. He said, “You're playing defense. Instead, you need to play catch.” This remark captures something important. The talk is not about withstanding an onslaught of withering criticism. And the defensive posture that such a mindset evokes does not come across well. Rather, the talk is about engaging an audience in an exchange of ideas.¹ Not every response calls for a direct rebuttal and clarion reaffirmation of your findings.

I remember receiving a question that I thought was a bit batty, and that I thought reflected some significant misunderstandings. After a moment of terror, I just said, “That's an interesting comment. It makes me think about [something else vaguely related], which would also be interesting to study.” Then I moved on to the next question. I never directly engaged the problems in the question. Nobody seemed bothered by my response. I thought it was a graceful way to move past something that could have become confrontational. You shouldn't handle every question this way, of course, but it might be good to have in your bag of tricks.

¹ Of course there are some deliberately antagonistic or combative questioners out there. (Don't be like them.) Still, they are most gracefully handled by channeling the antagonistic remark into an exchange, rather than fending it off back by the sword.

An aside: Perhaps the best package of job talk advice I encountered is this from Tom Carsey.

9. *Illegitimi non carborundum*. (Look it up.) I saved my most important point for last. Most of us spend our graduate school years working our tails off for little reward. The job market is when that should pay off. If you're like me, then you dreamed of being a college professor since early in college, so you have a lot invested. But the difficult truth is that the market is full of flukiness and unpredictability. I don't know anyone who has gone through the process without acquiring a new appreciation for how true this is. Hard work is a necessary—not a sufficient—condition for success. There is a huge stochastic term and nobody—not your advisors, not your chair, not your friends—can guarantee what your final outcome will be.

So what's my advice? Simply that you approach this exciting time knowing that it is all but certain to come with some major emotional highs and lows. I recommend carving out some part of your life—for me it was sailing—that is totally detached from the academic rat race, where you can turn when you need to get your head out of the game for a while. Don't take job market outcomes as a referendum on the quality or significance of the work you've done. Graduate student banter and the damn rumors website might lead you to think otherwise, but trust me: the people who have gone through the process themselves know it is not. You will be happier and more serene if you can take this truth to heart.

Good luck!