Mastering the Academic Job Search

UCLA Masters and Ph.D. Careers Conference

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The Plan

- How to think like a search committee
- Attend to your job documents
- How to write a cover letter
- The keys to academic interviewing
- Major interviewing mistakes
- The pitfalls of job applicants
- Q and A

Pre-Purchase the book, and I'll enter you into a drawing for free TPII job/grant application services. Just email me the proof-of purchase at gettenure@gmail.com.
The Path of Your Application

The job is advertised in early Fall.
After the deadline, all viable applications considered (250-1000)
The search committee members will each choose their top 20-ish
They will meet to finalize the long short list mid-Fall
The long short list will be asked for writing samples, more info, perhaps
  a skype/conference interview in November-January
SC chooses a short-short list and presents to whole department:
  typically 3 invites, with 2 alternates
Whole department votes to approve
Short-short list candidates invited to campus in early Spring
Search committee/department votes ranking AND
  acceptable/unacceptable
Offer made and negotiated.
The Search Committee Wants to Reject You

To get from a pool of 500 to a long short list of 20 requires a frenzy of rejection.

“How fast can I cut this pile to 25 and go to bed?”

Bottom Line: grab and hold them in the first 20 seconds with both RECORD and PRESENTATION.
How To Not Get Rejected

• Get grants—preferably national, not campus
• Be active in high prestige conferences
• Publish sole/first author in major journals
• Cultivate well-known recommenders

• Perfect your materials/interview

(Refer to column: “Graduate School Is A Means to a Job,” Chronicle)
Move From Peon to Peer

• You have spent 5-10 years as a graduate student, which means---subordinate, supplicant, peon, inferior

• Now you must jettison every graduate student mannerism and habit, and comport yourself like a confident authority, expert in your field, and professional scholar.

• Irony: the better grad student you were the worse job candidate you make
Professional Comportment

- Appropriate dress and grooming
- Steady, level eye contact and firm handshake
- Professorial, fully adult speech patterns
- Scripted and prepared, concise answers to major questions re teaching and research
- Strong but brief statement of your contribution to your field(s)
An Online Presence

Yes, you want a social media presence
Candidates are Googled
Have a website with research summary, papers, publications, syllabi, etc.
Have a few professional looking photos
Set your Facebook setting for privacy
Twitter is active and engaged space for academics
Attend to Your Job Documents

Applicants tend to believe that all the years of work in their Ph.D. programs will simply automatically translate into the outcomes they desire.

Some dismiss attention to the writing of the materials as an anal, OCD preoccupation with meaningless detail.

It is a space of translation between the record and the outcome; it is a space of tremendous creativity and meaning — it is a kind of self-making — and it deserves great care and attention.
The Ethos of Effective Job Market Documents

- Concise: 2 pages max (except for CV)
- Focused exclusively on achievements, not gaps
- Fact-based, not emotion-based
- Focused on finished work, not on process getting there
- No long, over-detailed, self-indulgent verbiage.

If they don’t see irrefutable fact-based evidence that they need you on the first page, you’re finished.
The Cover Letter

Basic points:

Must be on letterhead if available (US convention)
Has date at top left
Has complete snail mail address of recipient below date
Does not have your personal address
Must have 1 inch margins on all sides
Must be in 11 or 12 point font
Must be no more than 2 pages in length, 1 in Philosophy
The Cover Letter

The 9-paragraph model

Para 1: self introduction
Para 2: the dissertation
Para 3: the diss contribution
Para 4: publications from the diss
Para 5: next project
Para 6: teaching
Para 7: more on teaching, optionally
Para 8: tailoring to the job ad
Para 9: 1-2 sentence sign off
I am writing in application to… [No “please accept…”; you are not a supplicant]
I am completing my Ph.D. in xxx from the University of XX in 20xx/I have a Ph.D in xxx from the University of XX (20xx).
I am currently….
My work focuses on…[broad areas, not details]

And nothing else: no begging, bragging, “I’m the ideal candidate,” etc.
This paragraph places you in time and space.

*Read my post, I’m the Ideal Candidate For Your Position!*
My dissertation, *Title*, examines/is a study of.... Specifically, it focuses on xxx, using materials/data/methods/theories such as xx and yy.

I looks at xxx and yyy; I found that ppp and qqq.

I conclude/argue that.....[1-2 sentences]

This research was supported by fellowships from aaa and bbb.

This paragraph should be approximately 6-8 sentences long.
My dissertation, TITLE, is on the social and political-economic determinants of health among women in North India. It focuses on how the changing roles and responsibilities of type 2 diabetic women in New Delhi affect their mental health, ability to participate in gendered social and family roles, and diabetes management. This is a mixed-methods project that uses in-depth ethnography, an epidemiological questionnaire, blood biomarkers, and anthropometrics. I found that women experience serious psychosocial and practical conflicts living with diabetes, an illness requiring a great deal of self-care, in this cultural context, where gender roles and conceptions of personhood value women’s service to others. This work was supported by the Fulbright-Hays Foundation, the Society for Psychological Anthropology, the National Science Foundation, and the American Institute of Indian Studies.
Paragraph 3—The Contribution

“In contrast to much work that has emphasized xxx, this research demonstrates yyy.”

Contribution should shift based on the field of the job.

Contribution must not dwell on others’ failures or gaps in the literature; that makes you look like a jerk.

This paragraph should be quite short—2-3 sentences suffices.
My scholarship contributes new perspectives in medical anthropology and the connections between political economy, gender, and health. It bridges anthropology and the health sciences by using both standard and locally-derived methods to measure mental health, intervening in the longstanding debate in cross-cultural psychiatry about the dangers of “medical imperialism” in comparative mental health scholarship. My focus on urban middle- and upper-class women in low-income countries also sheds new light on a rarely studied population.
Paragraph 4--Publications

I have two articles forthcoming based on this work. The first is in the *Journal of XX* and concerns xxx [very brief]. The second is the *Journal of YY* and focuses on yyy [very brief]. I have another article in process that I plan to submit to the *Journal of Z* in May/Spring/etc. I am working on transforming the dissertation into a book and will submit it to xxx and yyy presses in the Fall.

If you are in a book field you need a plan for the book. In all fields, you need to show a trajectory of publications. You can mention the occasional conference paper here, if you have few pubs and need to fill space; they should be important national/international ones.
An editor of the University of Indiana Press has invited me to submit my manuscript, which I plan on having ready for review by January 2013. A chapter has been published in *The XXX Review* under the title “Poison, Sensation, and Secrets in *The Lifted Veil*.” I have another chapter accepted for inclusion in an edited collection entitled *XXX Medicine and Popular Culture*. Additionally, I am currently at work on a related article on alchemy, poison, and chemistry in the works of Wilkie Collins. I have also organized a panel at the upcoming Modern Language Association conference.
My next project will focus on xxx. [1-2 sentences]. The research will bring xxx methods/ data/analysis/theory to bear on xxx. I will seek/have sought funding for this project from xxx. I will be presenting a paper on this research at the XXX Conference.

You need a next project no matter your stage, even if you’re still ABD. It shows your tenurability.

Refer to my post, Why You Need a Second Project
I am prepared to teach xxx, yyy, and zzz [general courses always demanded of someone in your general field]. I can also teach specialized courses in xx and yy. In my teaching I prioritize/emphasize xxx and yy. For example, in my course “XXX,” I have students....

This paragraph should be substantive, with specific teaching experiences, competencies and methods used.

Do not tell a chronological tale of adjuncting here and there. This is an ahistorical statement of teaching methods that emphasizes transportability.

It must not be emotional, weepy, earnest, passionate, tender or teary-eyed.

Refer to my posts: The Dreaded Teaching Statement: 8 Pitfalls, and The Weepy Teaching Statement: Just Say No
Paragraph 6 Example

I am prepared to teach xxx, yyy, and zzz [anthropology]. My teaching style draws on experiential and conversational learning techniques which encourage active engagement and conversation through varied materials and minimal lecturing or use of slides. I use multi-sensory source material to accommodate different learning styles, such as music, TED Talks, examples drawn from film and social media, and excerpts of my own data for class exercises. In my Introductory classes, a simple yet particularly effective technique I use is to ask students to write on a slip of paper what they know about me, what they can infer about me based on what they see and hear, and how they might find more information about professors like me. I then collect the slips and confirm or correct a sample of them in front of the class. This serves as the basis for a critical discussion about participant observation, the assumptions we make about others, and how context affects social roles.
Paragraph 7—Teaching (Optional)

For SLACs and teaching-centric schools it’s good to include a second paragraph.

Provide additional examples of courses taught, or examples of a course or two that you’d develop for the program, or a special skill/competency you bring such as teaching in methods, theory, special area, etc.

This is where you can bring in your diversity candidate identity, if you have such an identity. Read my post, How To Identify Yourself as a Diversity Candidate.
As a Latina, I am attentive to issues of race and diversity in the classroom. When I teach xxx, I foreground the writings of xxx and yyy, and focus on Twitter activism such as #BlackLivesMatter. As a result of my record of pedagogical excellence and experience, I was awarded the competitive XXX Dean’s Teaching Fellowship for the 2012-2013 academic year. In 2011, I was appointed assistant director of the XXX study abroad program in Buenos Aires, Argentina where I designed and taught a class section on culture and politics in public spaces. This position entailed selecting and researching locations of historical and political significance, planning short lectures, and working directly with enrolled students.
This position is appealing to me because of the department’s emphasis on xx and yy. I would look forward to collaborating with faculty such as xx on xx and yy on yy. I can envision contributing to the department’s new research cluster on xxx. I also look forward to participating in the activities of the Center for XXX on campus.

Tailoring is the hardest part of the job letter because of self-absorption and desperation.

Do not pander or flatter or go emotional

Do not harp on about yourself in a self-absorbed way. This is not more me, me me; it is about them.

Read my posts, How to Tailor a Job Letter (Without Flattering, Pandering or Begging) and Tailoring a Job Letter, Beginning and Advanced.
XU’s long-standing strengths in anthropological demography and population health make this position a particularly appealing one for me. I would look forward to participating in the activities of the Population Studies and Training Center, and can participate in the Center’s research foci on disparities in health and development & demographic change. I also anticipate developing courses on anthropological demography and gender and health for graduate students in the Anthropology and Population Program, and can envision bringing material on those topics into introductory courses such as “Culture and Health.”
Paragraph 9—Sign Off

Thank you for considering my application. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

If you live overseas you may mention a plan to attend a national conference.

Otherwise, that’s it. No other verbiage goes here.
Final Notes on Cover Letters

Vary sentence structure; do not use a series of I-statements; you sound self-absorbed.

Do not cram in every last detail of everything you ever did. That’s a grad student move. Be selective; choose highlights suited to job.

No cheap, manipulative language meant to pump up the import: important, significant, vital, critical, essential, urgent, etc.; It’s trite and grad-studenty.
Final Notes on Cover Letters

This is not the place to tell the story of the historical or literary or cultural or biological, etc. thing that you studied. Do not explain the THING, explain the RESEARCH ABOUT THE THING. No lecturing.

This is not the place to tell the story of YOU—ie, your personal drama of identity. Eschew narcissism. This is an entirely fact-based account of your scholarly and teaching accomplishments, without bragging or rhetorical or emotional flourishes.
The Keys to Academic Interviewing

1. Concise
   In a conference interview of 30 minutes, you have 3-4 minutes for each of your answers.

2. Properly Conceptualized and Organized
   All answers must target the position. Cast your work to fit the job, with no digressions or extraneous detail.

3. Well-Rehearsed
   Write out 3-5 sentence outline responses to all major questions and practice exhaustively ahead of time until second nature. They must “appear” spontaneous in the moment, but actually be rehearsed.
1. Tell us about your dissertation, and its contribution to the field.
2. Tell us about your five year plan for tenure/your publishing plan
3. What grants do you expect to pursue?
4. How would you teach our Intro course? Methods course?
5. Briefly describe two courses you would develop for us.
6. (How would you mentor graduate students?)
7. How do you see your work fitting into the work we do here at the department?
8. Do you have any questions for us?
Interviewing Mistakes

Rambling

Querulousness (an insecure tone, manner, or affect)

Not targeting the specific requirements of the job

Being caught unprepared

Collapsing in the face of challenges

(learn the art of academic jiu jitsu)
The Most Common Pitfalls for Job Seekers

1. Narcissism

1. Telling, Not showing

2. Hyper-emotionalism

3. Excessive humility and pandering

1. Inflexibility
The Narcissism Trap

Example: “I have always been fascinated by xxx, and that led me to pursue an inquiry into yyy for my dissertation. First I approached it from the angle of zzz, but then I realized that rrr methods would yield more insight. That recognition inspired me to suggest that ppp.... “

Vs.

“My dissertation focused on yyy, using the rrr method. I argue ppp.”

Bottom Line: Nobody cares about your process. They want to know what you researched, concluded, and published, when. And what next.
Telling, Not Showing

“I am a passionate and committed teacher who always finds innovative ways to engage student interests.”

Vs.

“In the Introductory class I teach fundamentals of ethnographic research, and then assign mini-ethnographies that allow students to research a group in the community of their choice. At the end they present their research in a class ‘conference.’ Students in the course nominated me for the X teaching award twice.”
Hyper-Emotionalism

• I am fascinated by the question of xxx.
• I firmly believe in the value of yy theory.
• I yearn to teach students these skills.
• I love being in the classroom.
• I am passionate about teaching.
• I desire to bring my findings to a wider…

Hyper-Emotionalism II

Most adjectives and adverbs are cheap efforts to artificially inflate the impact of your letter.

“My work is an important and innovative exploration of a badly under-studied topic in the field, and it utilizes unique methodologies that have yielded remarkable new insights that will have wide impact.”

Vs.

“My work is the first to examine the topic of xxx using the methods of yy and zz. An examination of xxx in this manner has yielded the insight that in contrast to previous studies, xxx may be understood as qqqqqq.”
Excessive Humility and Pandering

• I would strive/seek/aim/try/endeavor/attempt to become a teacher and scholar worthy of your illustrious department…
• I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to…..
• I trained under Prof. XXX and inspired by him I have attempted to explore…
• It would be an honor and a privilege to teach at…..
• I believe that my training in xxx makes me a qualified candidate for this position…

Bottom Line: The more you self-abnegate and pander, the less respect you gain. Make them want you. You are an autonomous and fully adult scholar and expert in your field.
Inflexibility

If you have sent out 30-50 applications and not been long-short-listed at all, there is something wrong with your materials and/or presentation.

Take your ego out of it, and get help.

Extreme cases of Ph.D. poverty are those candidates who continued to pursue one course even when evidence showed them it was not working.

Be flexible, alert to new opportunities. And please… remember the post-academic option.
Thank You!

And best of luck on the market next year....