Mistakes to avoid in academic job interviews

The following are mistakes to avoid in academic job interviews.

1. **Good question, but now let me answer the question that I really want to talk about.**

   Those trained to or used to talking to the news media have learned a technique called bridging, where you first briefly answer the actual question, but then transition to a different point that you want to make. For example, a politician, when asked about his votes on transportation bills, briefly answers, and then shifts to a barely related point about his views on economic policy. If you do this in a job interview (say, bridging from a question about your research training to how much your students and labmates love you), this will not go over well, as you are merely pretending to answer it. The search committee will probably ask the same questions to all the candidates, and expect complete answers. If you cannot answer that question in enough detail without digressing, they may assume that you cannot answer it or do not want to answer it.

2. **I have no clue, but I’m not going to admit it.**

   You might be asked a difficult question for which you do not have an answer. But it is better to admit that you don’t know than to bluff, make up something, or give a poor or irrelevant answer. They will think better of you if you admit that you don’t know, or if you say that you would need to look into it, rather than if you try to pretend. However, if you have to say this too often, or have to admit ignorance to a basic or important question, then perhaps that job is not right for you, or you need to prepare better for the next interview.

3. **I’m so glad you asked. Let me answer that in excruciating detail.**

   Answers should be complete but reasonably short. If you keep going on and on, or if it is something that you love to talk about at great length, the committee may not want to listen to your whole five-minute oration. Watch their facial expressions and body language for signs of boredom and end appropriately, as it will be embarrassing if they have to cut you off. Overly long answers can indicate that you lack self-control, that you cannot answer it, or that you have an oversized ego.

4. **I’m going to keep that face smiling and that head nodding.**

   When interviewing before a whole group, you may notice one or two particular persons who smile, nod, and seem receptive to your answers. You should not focus on just them, since the enthusiastic listeners may not be the ones you need to persuade. Make sure you give attention to everyone, especially those who may express skepticism or neutrality in their expressions – they could be the more influential ones. On the other hand, don’t focus too much on those who seem unresponsive, as that can distract you. Don’t try too hard to win over

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everyone. If you focus too much energy on a few skeptical faces, you may ramble or go on too long as you try to argue your points.

5. A little embellishment never hurt anybody.

Don’t embellish your record or abilities, either on your CV or in your interview. The committee members can do a simple Internet check to find if you’ve stretched the truth. If you show that you are not trustworthy about your qualifications, you may be untrustworthy in other areas. They will not trust you enough to hire you.

6. I’ll try to make everybody happy.

Different groups of people within a department or institution may have different values or beliefs, sometimes leading to conflicts (which you as an interviewee may not be aware of). However, if they ask you questions about where you potentially align, you do not want to give the impression of being wishy-washy, not having any principles, or wanting to get along with everyone. If you are hired, it will be impossible to please everyone or remain neutral, unless you want everyone to use you, walk over you, or exclude you. You can show that you hold to certain views without being dogmatic about it, and that you can respect differing opinions, but if asked, you should indicate clearly where you stand. But don’t be too dogmatic or arrogant about it. This is especially true in fields where significant differences of opinions exist.

If you are in such a field, and you get a number of aggressive questions during your job talk or interview, it could be a sign that some or most professors in the department do not like your point of view, or that the department is very politicized and fragmented along philosophical or ideological lines, and that it may not be a good place to work.

7. Weaknesses? Me?

When asked about your weaknesses, interviewers expect an honest sounding answer about difficulties or weaknesses, and how you have grown or have been overcoming them. A person who seems unaware of his/her own weaknesses would probably not be a good person to work with. Such weaknesses and your response should say something about your character or abilities, and should be within reason (thus, admitting to a drinking problem would not be helpful, or other moral or character flaws). Admitting a significant lack of knowledge related to the job or field, or that you do not really like teaching, are responses that would not go over well.

Saying that your greatest weakness is that you are a perfectionist is a very cliché response that sounds arrogant and unoriginal, so avoid this (unless you have really struggled meaningfully with your intrapersonal psychology of perfectionism and have valuable lessons to share).

8. I’ve got this great new technology for my talk.

Some job talks have failed because the presenter wanted to use new technology that s/he was not really skilled at using. Stick with familiar technology for job talks or interviews, or be ready to give a good presentation without it if it does not work. A job talk is not the place to experiment with new technology or new presentation techniques.

9. We really know how to handle that problem at my university.

You may be asked how you would handle certain challenges or difficulties, or such issues may naturally come up. Search committees probably do not care to hear how well your current department or university does everything so well, and that your school has all the answers to
their problems. Suggestions rather than prescriptive answers often sound better. If your current place does everything so well, why not stay where you are?

10. Don’t ask me such stupid questions.

Some questions, especially during a job talk that is open to students in the department, may seem dumb. But if you act arrogant or dismissive, even to a seemingly dumb question from a new graduate student or an undergraduate, this will not go over well with others in the department, such as with the committee. An academic person should be able to give clear, respectful, maybe precise answers, to simple questions. After all, in an academic or professional career, you will have to deal with students, novices, non-experts, and sometimes the general public.

11. That will never work.

When a committee member (or audience member at an open job talk) mentions a solution to a problem in the field, in their department, or at their school, that may not be the best time for you to say that it won’t work. A dismissive attitude will not win points with the committee. If skeptical, express skepticism politely, or say that you would need to think about it first.

12. Here’s a long list of what I need for the job.

If asked what you would need to work there, avoid going into detail about salary, lab space, start-up research money, or other conditions for employment. At the interview stage, keep such answers short and simple, even vague, and do not ask for much; you do not want to seem too demanding. (In fact, if someone asks you about your requirements, you can simply indicate that it is premature to discuss that, and that you can discuss it later when appropriate.) Only go into specifics if they have actually offered you a job – then you can start negotiating. And only do so if you have a written offer – an offer is not official until it comes in writing.