

Best Practices for Interviewing

Subcommittee on Interviewing Best Practices

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The following is a best practices document that outlines documented techniques or practices that tend to result in better outcomes than other practices. Some institutions may have developed their own set of recommended practices that better fit their situation and that are based on the same considerations of fairness that ground these recommendations. The recommendations may be reasonably modified to fit local circumstances.

The Process

The process standardly consists of two rounds of interviews. In the past, the first round interviews usually took place at a professional meeting, generally the Eastern Division Meeting of the APA in late December. However, this seems to be rapidly changing. Now many departments opt to use Internet-based technology in conducting first-round interviews [See Appendix A]. Such interviews pose less of a financial burden to the candidate. There is also some concern regarding poor treatment of candidates, and, particularly, female candidates in convention interview venues.

After the first round interviews, departments will select a smaller “short list” of candidates. These candidates receive second-round interviews on campus. At the second stage a smaller number of candidates is selected from the interview pool to visit the interviewing campus.

Some departments opt to eliminate this first round. Many researchers have expressed skepticism regarding the usefulness of unstructured interviews in hiring, as well as concerns regarding bias impacts, and this has led some departments to skip the standard first stage, and invite a smaller group of candidates directly to the campus interview. [See Appendix B].

The First Stage

The Committee’s charge is to consider interviewing practices rather than overall hiring practices. However, it should be noted that prior to the first stage interviews the hiring department has a responsibility to properly advertise a position and to fairly and thoroughly read application files, applying criteria consistently. These same considerations of fairness and consistency carry through to the interview process itself.

If a hiring department has decided that it will be conducting interviews at a professional meeting, that department should make sure in scheduling interviews with candidates that enough time is provided for candidates to arrange for transportation and accommodation. Accommodation for disabilities must be provided, and Departments must make efforts to ensure that the interview location is accessible. The interviews themselves must not be conducted in a hotel room used for sleeping. See the [APA Statement on Hotel Room Interviews](#). Interviews must conform to other APA policies such as this one.

Members of the hiring committee should be well prepared for the interviews. Each member of the department’s hiring committee should have a packet on each candidate containing the same information.

This information may include, among other things, the candidate's CV, writing sample, and perhaps a sheet listing highlights from the candidate's dossier.

How much time a department schedules for interviews will depend upon various considerations, particularly how many candidates the department has decided to interview. In fairness to the candidates being interviewed, departments should be as sensitive as possible to limiting the number of interviews to what can reasonably be accomplished.

Most departments schedule 1-1½ hour per interview, which allows the department to talk to the candidate for at least 45 minutes, and allows for the members of the department to have enough time to both briefly discuss the interview once the candidate has left, and to prepare for the next candidate. There should also be time allocated for the interviewee to ask questions.

Members of the hiring committee should confine themselves to asking only questions that are pertinent to the candidate's qualifications for the job. Indeed, it may be a good idea for the hiring committee to specifically discuss what sorts of questions they will ask ahead of time. Candidates should be asked the same kinds of questions in the same order. The basic idea is that that structured interviews are crucial for avoiding unintended bias. Interviewers should make certain that they are not giving some candidates opportunities denied others—for example, giving some candidates a chance to talk about their research while denying that chance to others. Structured interviews do not require that all the questions be identical, since in the normal interview there will certainly be questions that need to be tailored to the specifics of a candidate's research interests, past teaching experience, and so forth. Structuring the interview to the extent that is reasonable has the advantage of making the interview experience for the candidates as fair and consistent as possible, and also helps preclude the possibility that inappropriate questions will be asked. Members of the hiring committee must not ask illegal question and should familiarize themselves with what is legal/illegal to ask a candidate. Hiring committees should be familiar with institutional guidelines as well.

Individual departments will have their own objectives in mind in conducting an interview. Some may focus more on research, others more on teaching. One example of how to conduct an interview is the following: (1) the interviewing department opens the interview with a description of how the interview will proceed (2) someone on the committee summarizes the candidate's writing sample and asks an opening question about the candidate's research, then opens the interview up for discussion of research (3) a committee member then asks how the candidate will contribute to the teaching needs of the department, as indicated in the advertisement for the job, (4) a committee member then asks if the candidate has any questions about the job, and (5) the candidate is given information about a contact person who is available for follow-up questions, and who will be in contact with the candidate about the job.

Interviewing practices must conform to the [APA Statement on Non-Discrimination](#):

The American Philosophical Association rejects as unethical all forms of discrimination based on race, color, religion, political convictions, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identification or age, whether in graduate admissions, appointments, retention, promotion and tenure, manuscript evaluation, salary determination, or other professional activities in which APA members characteristically participate.

Throughout the initial interview process, members of the hiring committee are to maintain the highest standards of professionalism and refrain from behavior that may distract or intimidate the candidate.

There have been reports of deeply disturbing behavior negatively impacting job candidates at the Eastern APA, behavior that is unprofessional, particularly during the “Smokers” or receptions.

Interviewers should not conduct post or pre-interview ‘interviews’ at these receptions. Best practices for mitigating bias in interviewing include treating interviewees alike, as much as possible, and informal interviews by their nature introduce disparities among applicants. Furthermore, the physical environment of the receptions can create barriers for members of the community with disabilities—not everyone can negotiate the ballroom with the same ease, or hear each other speak over the noise, etc.

The Campus Visit

After the first round of interviews, the department hiring committee generally decides to invite a short list of candidates to campus for visits to continue the interviewing process. Each candidate should receive information on arranging for transportation and accommodation. Ideally the department should try to arrange the purchase of tickets and accommodation ahead of time, so that the candidate will not have to incur, even temporarily, the costs of the travel. A detailed itinerary should be provided to the candidate. The travel portion of the itinerary should be arranged as much in advance as possible. The on-campus itinerary should be provided to the candidate at least two days in advance. The itinerary should include contact information for the candidate’s contact person on campus. Breaks should be included in the itinerary to allow for the candidate ample time to meet personal needs and prepare for each stage of the interview. At all stages of the process, the interviewing department should make reasonable accommodation for candidates with disabilities. Accommodation for disabilities may include making sure that all interview related activities take place in accessible locations for candidates with mobility impairments, or providing large print materials, or recordings of printed materials, for candidates with vision impairments.

Ideally, it will be a good idea to provide a packet of materials containing information about the department and university to the candidates. Information that is important will include information that may not be readily available on the department and university website, and information that interested candidates may feel uncomfortable asking about in the interview setting, such as formal policies of the department, college, or university about tenure procedures at the university, dual-career hiring policies, etc. These may be taken from the faculty handbook or other relevant materials.

Two of the central features of most on campus interviews are the teaching demonstration and the “job talk.”

If a teaching demonstration is required, candidates should be informed of the nature of the class—e.g. provided with the syllabus, informed as to whether it is a lecture class or seminar, apprised of the audience for the teaching demonstration, etc. Additionally, technical support should be provided (smart room, AV equipment) if necessary.

The nature of the research presentation will vary depending on the institution. Candidates should be told what is expected in terms of length and formality. They should also be informed of the audience (students, graduate students, philosophy faculty, other faculty, etc.) as well as whether there will be a question and answer period. Again, technical support should be provided as necessary.

Departments must take great care to ensure that each candidate for a position is treated in approximately the same manner and with the same opportunities to meet appropriate faculty. To that end, faculty

members who meet with one candidate should make every reasonable effort to meet with every other candidate as well, in order to form an informed comparative judgment.

Further, departments should take care to treat candidates alike in one-to-one communications with candidates, either as part of the campus visit or afterwards.

After the Campus Visit

The candidate should be informed about whom to contact about further questions the candidate might have (for instance, the chair of the search committee, or the chair of the department). The candidate should also be given information regarding a contact person who will continue to provide information about the status of the search.

Care should continue to be taken by the department to make sure that unstructured processes do not infect the structured interview process. The information gathering processes used to make a hiring decision should be consistent across candidates.

All official contact with the candidates should be handled by the same person throughout. It is understood that candidates may contact individual faculty members beyond the contact person in order to follow up on research suggestions or to ask questions that that faculty member may be best suited to answer. Faculty members are discouraged from initiating post-interview contact that might bias the selection process. Information garnered during these post-interview conversations ought to be considered private and not part of the official hiring process.

Throughout the process departments should be informing candidates promptly as they are eliminated from the search.

Once the department has made an offer and the offer has been accepted, candidates should be informed that the search is over.

Appendix A: Guidelines for Interviews via Internet Meeting Software and Telephone

The costs associated with in person convention interviews has led some departments to conduct first-round interviews using Skype, GoToMeeting, InterCall, etc., or via telephone. The following are guidelines to for conducting such interviews.

Departments, colleges, and universities should avoid using these technologies to treat some candidates differently relative to other candidates. Such interviews should be scheduled in a way that treats all candidates for the job fairly and consistently. Of course, some departments may need to schedule Internet-based interviews only after it becomes clear that their first round of in person interviews has been unsuccessful. However, departments should keep in mind how the evaluation of a candidate's interview performance may be negatively affected by technical problems with the software and Internet connection. This should be of special concern when some candidates are interviewed in-person, and others using Internet-based technology or the telephone.

One recommendation to mitigate potential unfairness in the process is for the interviewing department to either give candidates the option of how they want to interview, or to commit to interviewing all candidates in the same manner.

Internet-based and telephone interviews should adhere to the guidelines for in person interviews where practicable. This includes making reasonable accommodation for candidates with disabilities. In the case of Internet-based and phone interviews this may involve making use of specialized equipment.

Interviewing Institutions and Individual Interviewers

- Arrange Internet-based and phone interviews in the same formal manner you would arrange an in-person interview.
 - Allow enough time between your invitation and the actual interview for the candidate to arrange appropriate facilities and technological assistance.
 - Arrange for technological assistance at your institution. Interviews should be conducted in a professional manner with as few difficulties as possible. Remember that the candidate may be nervous. Inadequate connectivity or lack of technological assistance should something go wrong heightens their anxiety.
 - Tell the candidate approximately how long the interview will last.
 - **Provide the candidate with your contact information in case a problem with the connection arises.**
- Arrange an appropriate location and technological assistance for the interview.
 - Universities often have a room designated for Internet-based interviews. The location should be free of distractions and with a secure, wired connection.
 - Test the space and the connection.
 - Make sure a back-up telephone is available in case there is a problem with the connection.
 - Make sure all interviewers are adequately informed about the limitations of the technology. If use of the equipment is not clear, tell them how they ought to speak and direct their voices, where they ought to look, etc. Also let the interviewers know what the candidate can see, what the candidate can hear, and any other information that may be appropriate.
 - If the space for the interview is a classroom, additional microphones might be needed.

- Allow ample time immediately before and after the scheduled interview.
 - Time before the interview allows you to check that the technology is working appropriately.
 - The APA recommends that interviewers arrive to the interview location at least thirty minutes before the scheduled interview.
 - At the end of the interview, ensure that all connections to the candidate have been cut before discussing any impressions.
- Ask questions with the same animation as an in-person interview but perhaps more slowly. Keep in mind that there may be a lag depending on the technology being used.
 - Speak clearly and loudly. You will need to project your voice. This is especially true if there are multiple people using the same connection.
 - In telephone interviews with multiple interviewers, identify yourself each time you ask a question. This may also be necessary with Internet-based interviews depending on the video arrangement.
 - Allow for pauses.

Job Candidate

- Plan to take the Internet connection or phone call in a room designated by your university for this purpose. Contact Career Services, Graduate Placement, or the IT department for assistance.
 - Ask the interviewers how long you should expect the conversation to last so that you may schedule the appropriate facilities.
 - If no room is designated for interviews, ask for one. An office that is quiet and nicely decorated would be ideal. If you do not have access to an appropriate space on campus, arrange such a space at your home or the home of a colleague.
 - The space should be free of distraction. Think especially about the material that forms the backdrop of your Internet interview. Avoid overly busy or cluttered spaces. Think also about what artwork or posters might reveal about you as a job candidate.
 - For an Internet-based interview, make sure connection is secure and strong. Use a wired connection if possible; wireless Internet connections are less reliable. Check webcam and microphone well in advance of the interview as well.
 - For telephone interviews, try to use a landline that has better sound quality and is more reliable than a cell phone. If you must use a cell phone, make sure it has ample battery life and the reception is excellent.
- Prepare for an Internet-based or phone interview in the same manner you would prepare for an in-person interview.
 - Prepare for the interview.
 - Know the college or university as well as the department that will be interviewing you.
 - Anticipate what sorts of questions they might ask.
 - Compile a list of possible questions that you could ask them if time permits; have these questions in mind for the actual interview. Try to avoid having a written list of questions however.
 - Be able to describe your current and future research in a succinct manner for a generalist audience.
 - Have your application materials and supplementary materials ready-at-hand in a neat file (just to the side of the screen for Internet interviews). Ideally, you should be well enough prepared

that you will not need to refer to these materials during the interview, but in the event a question arises about the content of the application file it might be a good idea to have those materials on hand. Avoid clutter surrounding the computer.

- Dress appropriately as for an in-person interview. This is helpful for telephone interviews as well as it puts you in a professional mindset. Keep in mind that bright colors are often skewed in computer imaging. Solid colors and dark colors tend to display more consistently.
- Practice Internet or phone interview.
 - Ask your placement officer or graduate director to arrange a mock interview.
 - It can be disconcerting for interviewers if the candidate appears to not be looking at them during the interview. However, it is also an advantage for the candidate to be able to see the interviewers during the interview so as the better gauge reactions. To these ends, the candidate can reduce the size of the Skype, or other software, screen in which the interviewers are visible and move that as close to the camera location as possible. In that way the candidate can see the interviewers while looking at the camera.
 - Experiment with angles of your screen that will allow you to look most natural and to see the interviewers most clearly without looking down.
 - Check connection, webcam, and microphone at the location and with the equipment you will be using during your actual interview.
 - Note that in some cases a headset may be useful.
- Perform to the best of your ability with confidence.
 - Make sure any cell phone not used in the interview is turned completely off. Do not distract yourself with the buzz of a text message.
 - It is a good idea to have a back-up phone available in case there is a problem with the connection. Make sure you have relevant contact information for the interviewer.
 - For Internet-based interviews, close all other programs on your computer, especially email and email pop-ups.
 - **Remember to look at the camera.** This is where practice really helps.
 - Avoid any distractions.
 - Be expressive.
 - Keep responses succinct. Internet-based interviews and telephone interviews, even more than in-person interviews, invite distraction from all parties. You can help alleviate that if you answer the questions clearly and succinctly.

Placement Officers and Graduate Programs

- Advocate for the students on the market with your university. If there is currently no designated space or support service for Internet-based and telephone interviews, ask for it.
- Assist candidates with making arrangements for Internet-based and telephone interviews.
 - Much of this could be done prior to the job market season. Provide information including these guidelines from the APA.
 - Coordinate mock interviews using the appropriate technology.
- Assess interview facilities and technology. Make improvements as appropriate.

Appendix B: Research on Interviewing

Some departments do not conduct first-round interviews at the Eastern Division APA meetings, and some do not conduct first-round interviews at all, preferring instead to bring candidates directly to campus for on-campus visits.

There is growing evidence that many departments are opting for Internet-based interviewing for their first round interviews. At the December 2014 meetings of the Eastern Division, only about 25 departments interviewed job candidates. In 2013, 60 departments had interviewed at the Eastern Division meetings.¹ Reasons for avoiding the Eastern Division Meetings in favor of Internet-based interviews largely center on the costs of performing first-round interviews at the meetings. Institutions must cover the costs of faculty traveling to conduct the interviews, and interviewees—many of whom are graduate students—must cover the costs of their own travel to the meetings. It is especially problematic for graduate students when the job market is precarious, since many will end up spending a great deal of money for one or two interviews.

However, some departments feel that there is value in face-to-face interviews. They believe that they are better able to ascertain the teaching effectiveness of a candidate through an evaluation of in-person communication skills. Some also view the first round, face-to-face interview as an opportunity to ‘sell’ their department more effectively to prospective colleagues. However, given the growing trend by more departments to rely on Internet-based first-round interviews, departments should seriously weigh any benefits they believe they are achieving by using in person interviews against the significant costs those interviews present to candidates.

Some departments have chosen to avoid first-round interviews altogether. Cost may be a factor, but, additionally, work in social psychology has cast doubt on the usefulness of first-round interviews. The “interview illusion” refers to the view that one can glean a great deal of useful information about a job candidate from a brief, unstructured, interview:

...the one-hour personal interview has virtually no validity for predicting job performance, yet people often feel convinced after such interviews that they have a good idea of the candidate's attributes and how well the candidate would perform on the job. Indeed, such an inflated belief in the certainty of knowledge obtained in the interview may cause people to overturn completely (and wrongly) preconceptions of the candidate based on job recommendations that probably do have some validity (Nisbett and Ross 1980, 72).

Their diagnosis is that the vividness of interview data swamps the dull, but more reliable data provided in the candidate's dossier (Nisbett and Ross 1980, 290). One source of error is the tendency to place great weight on the behavior of others while discounting one's own similar behavior:

Interviewers often feel confident relying on interviewee's behavior in order to infer more stable internal states—such as passion, mental stability, or drive. In making such inferences, interviewers pay attention not only to interviewee's carefully composed replies but also to their implicit or uncontrolled responses, such as nonverbal gestures, off-the-cuff remarks, or unintended slips of the tongue. The very unintentional and unmonitored

¹ See the October 2014 Report of the Secretary-Treasurer of the Eastern Division to the Board of Officers of the American Philosophical Association for data on earlier years. This report can be found in the [minutes of the November 2015 meeting of the board of officers](#).

responses that people view as meaningless in their own case, people often view as meaningful in the case of others (Pronin 2009, 17-18).

Evidence is compelling that impressions from *unstructured* interviews are very poor predictors of successful performance. There is evidence that not only are unstructured interviews ineffective, they may actually harm the interviewer's judgment (Dana et. al. 2013). Much of this evidence, however, is gathered from interview settings not specific to academia.

Though unstructured interviews are fairly consistently viewed as providing poor evidence of job success, some researchers regard the *structured* interview as potentially useful (Macan 2009). What is meant by 'structured' is not always clear, but the most common understanding involves making the interview procedure as uniform for candidates as possible.² Candidates should be asked the same questions in the same order, for example.³ It is also possible the wording of the questions matters as well, and care should be taken to make sure that the questions are formatted the same way for all the candidates. There should be a consistent rating scale used in evaluating responses (Macan 2009, 206). There seems to be some evidence that highly structured interviews "can minimize or eliminate potential bias with respect to demographic similarity between applicants and interviewers." (McCarthy et. al. 2010, 351). In the case of academic interviews it may be difficult to be perfectly consistent between candidates, since research projects and teaching techniques will vary, and require different follow-up questions between candidates. There are also interview formats that fall between the two extremes, semi-structured interviews, in which the interview experience is kept as consistent as possible between candidates, but some allowance is made for questions that permit 'probing' or following up on a given response.

There is also concern over the role implicit bias plays in the evaluation of candidates. In a famous study involving 238 psychologists, the psychologists—118 were male, 120 were female—were asked to evaluate a curricula vitae that had been randomly given either a male or female name. The male name received a better evaluation than the female name, though the CVs were otherwise identical (Steinpreis et. al. 1999). In another study, applicants with "White-sounding" names received 50% more call-backs after a resume review than applicants with "African-American-sounding" names (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). To minimize the role implicit bias plays in reviewing job files, some recommend that files be anonymized prior to review. This may involve, for example, using a multi-step screening process: first review CVs, writing samples, teaching, and research statements that have been anonymized by personnel who are not involved in the evaluation process. Then, after the pool has been narrowed, letters of recommendation are read. The letters would come at the end of the process, since they tend to contain identifying information that would be extremely difficult to redact. The advantages are that gender and sometimes race will not be obvious from the names if the names are absent during the initial review process. One worry about first-round face-to-face interviews is that implicit bias would be allowed to enter into the hiring process again, after the initial review of files. Of course, this would be true as well at the on-campus interview stage, but there may still be value in eliminating as much as possible implicit bias in earlier stages. There is some evidence that biases can to some extent be mitigated by the passage of time. Ziva Kunda and Steven J. Spencer report that

² Macan's review article goes over some of the different ways 'structured' is understood in the research literature.

³ See, for example, *Structured Interviews: A Practical Guide*, U.S. Office of Personnel Management, September 2008. Available online at: <https://apps.opm.gov/ADT/ContentFiles/SIGuide09.08.08.pdf>

initially activated stereotypes can fade in as little as 15 minutes of exposure: “As time unfolds, one’s attention shifts from the person’s category membership to individuating information or to the demands of the task at hand.” (Kunda and Spencer 2003, 528). Thus, there may be some value to the structured in person interview if it is long enough for implicit bias to be mitigated, and most interviews are over 15 minutes long. However, they also report that stereotypes can reassert themselves throughout an interaction. For example, in an interaction in which one needs “to determine one’s partner’s attributes or likely behavior” a stereotype may be activated. They cite a set of studies that in which the study participants engaged in structured interviews with a White or an Asian confederate. The interview consisted in “stereotype-irrelevant” questions:

Following 10–15 min of such interaction, half of the participants were given the goal of forming an impression of their interaction partner’s personality and likely career choice. Controls were given, instead, the goal of elaborating on the contents of their discussion. As may be expected from the finding that stereotype activation can dissipate by the end of such a lengthy encounter (Kunda et al., 2002), controls interacting with an Asian confederate showed no activation of the Asian stereotype. In contrast, participants given the task of forming an impression of their Asian partner did activate the Asian stereotype. Most likely, they recruited the stereotype so as to inform their impressions of this person (Kunda and Spencer 2003, 529).

This evidence indicates that care should be taken with interviews, and even with longer, on-campus, interviews in ensuring that stereotypes do not reenter the interview process.⁴

There are several worries about eliminating first round interviews. The first worry is that without this extra exposure to a job candidate, problematic individuals will not be detected early enough in the hiring process to avoid the wasteful expenditure of resources involved in bringing someone to campus for an extended interview who is not a viable candidate. This would be especially problematic for departments with small recruiting budgets. Another worry is that job candidates will not get valuable information about how well they are faring on the job market. The number of first-round interviews can provide candidates with some information about how well their files are being perceived, even if the candidate does not get a job during that particular hiring cycle. One way departments could address this problem is by having a policy of informing candidates when they have made the long-list. For example, the department might explicitly state that when they long-list candidates they will request additional materials (e.g. an additional writing sample). If this is known to be the procedure in lieu of interviews, a department could still convey the valuable information to the candidates.

Sources

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⁴ Kunda and Spencer discuss other ways in which stereotypes are accidentally reintroduced in interactions.

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Other Resources

The Implicit Bias & Philosophy Project web site has several useful reading lists.

<http://www.biasproject.org/>