THE INTERVIEW

Background

A long time may pass between the transcript request and your next contact. This is neither a good nor a bad sign. Don’t keep calling the department; if they had something to tell you, they would have done so. If you are to be invited for an interview, the invitation will likely come by a telephone call from a member of the search committee. Try not to act too excited. After all, you are the best candidate for the job, aren’t you? You expected to be selected!

You should recognize that most places will interview fewer than five people, so your chance of receiving an offer is now much better. During the conversation, you and the faculty member will settle on the day(s) of your visit and other details. You will be asked to present a seminar, for which you will need to provide a title and an abstract. The best way to handle that is to say that you will mail or fax them. Do this right away. (You should have started working on your presentation as soon as you put your initial application in the mail.)

Before You Go

Ask about the audio/visual equipment that will be available, so that you can plan your seminar presentation accordingly. Also, ask them to send you a copy of your itinerary before you arrive. You will want to look up each person on this list to find out what he or she does, and be in a position to have an intelligent discussion with each of them. Ask for a packet of information about the department and university to help you. Many departments maintain websites, and further links from there to individual professors can get you up-to-date information.

There are numerous sources where you can find salary information. If the university is a public institution, salaries are a matter of public record, and may be available through your library. Many professional societies also have information about average salaries at various institutions. This could be quite informative. If average salaries at the institution where you plan to interview are significantly different from the average for your discipline, you need to find out the explanation during your visit.

What to Expect

The interview trip is obviously the most important part of the process. You will be there for at least one day, and often two. They will reimburse you for all expenses. Do not offer to pay for anything yourself, because it makes you look like a beginner. They will expect you to make your own travel arrangements, at least as far as their
local airport; you need to inform them of these arrangements. You will probably have to purchase your own airline ticket, and perhaps cover your hotel bill. You will be reimbursed for these later, of course, but you must save all receipts for airfare, hotel, taxis, etc. (This is a good time to apply for a credit card, if you don’t already have one.)

Try to arrive the evening before your interview begins and arrange your departure for after 5:00 p.m. on the last day. If necessary, leave late in the evening or the next morning, as you may need the flexibility. Do not buy a first-class ticket, but don’t take some inconvenient flight just to save a little air fare. The institution will invest several thousand dollars to find the right person; it won’t quibble over reasonable expenses.

You can expect your hosts to make your hotel reservations, and to handle all of your transportation in town if you ask them to do so. Transportation to and from the airport is a grey zone — some hosts will pick you up and drop you off, others may ask you to take a taxi or limousine. Make sure you know what the arrangement is before leaving home, and make sure you have enough cash to cover unexpected minor expenses. Since your hosts may meet you, look professional on the flight: Obtain a briefcase and suitcase. You don’t want to look like a vagabond with a backpack and dry-cleaners bag when you meet your hosts.

One more piece of advice — always carry the slides for your seminar with you on the plane. Maybe you can interview in your jeans and joke about your lost luggage, but you NEED those slides.

You will likely never be alone and awake at the same time during your interview trip. The institution will arrange a series of visits with individuals, or small groups of faculty members. (See the sample itinerary in the Appendix.) This was mentioned earlier, but it’s important enough to bear repeating: Ask for a copy of your interview schedule before you go. Also ask that catalogs, research summaries, and other publications be sent to you so that you will know something about the people you are going to meet. Some places won’t send this material unless you ask for it.

How to Dress

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Dallas Cowboys was America’s Team and Tom Landry was the greatest coach on earth. A young receiver playing in his first game caught a touchdown pass. He then broke into a wild victory dance, spiked the ball, and generally carried on for several minutes. When he left the field, Landry motioned him over. “Son,” he said, impassive as always, “This is the Dallas Cowboys. When you get to the end zone, I expect you to act like you’ve been there before.”
The same rule applies to the clothes you wear during your interview: You should look like you belong there. You are hoping to become these people’s colleague, and you should dress the way you would expect them to, if they came to your campus to give a seminar: businesslike but not overdressed. If your clothing is suitable for a formal wedding, it’s too dressy for this purpose. Your clothes should not draw attention to themselves; this is not the time to demonstrate your fashion sense or your disdain for convention. Men should wear either a suit or jacket and trousers, a white shirt, and a conservative tie. Women should wear a businesslike suit (skirt or pants) or dress. Jewelry should be discreet.

Finally, remember that you will be on your feet, standing or walking, a great deal, and that generally you will be under stress throughout your interview. Be very careful that uncomfortable shoes or clothes do not undermine your well-being. Fidgeting with a tight collar or a skirt that rides up will distract from your professional image. If you buy new clothes for your interview, make sure they are truly comfortable and wear them — especially shoes — before the big event.

When You’re There

While you are there, someone will be your host and will take you to dinner at least one night. Your host is not your friend. Don’t ask how you are doing, and do not confide in your host. Do not drink alcoholic beverages while you are there, even if everyone else does. Your friends will forgive you for saying something stupid — your interviewers will just remember it!

You will have an itinerary which calls for you to meet many different people. Be sure to greet each person with a firm handshake and meet their eyes. There are many people who claim that the final impression is made within the first 10 seconds! Some of the people you meet will be knowledgeable in your research area, and you should therefore expect to have detailed technical discussions with them. For this reason, you should ask for your seminar to be scheduled early in the visit, if possible, so that you do not end up giving it individually fourteen times before you actually present it. There will also be people on your schedule who are not familiar with your research area. These people are probably in some position of influence in the department, perhaps on the recruiting committee, perhaps powerful faculty members, etc. Study the material that you requested to help you talk to these people. (See the Appendix for a sample “who’s who” list.)

Invariably, there will be someone on your schedule with whom you have absolutely nothing to discuss. Ask these people for coffee, or ask about teaching loads, teaching assistants, graders, library facilities, the weather, what it’s like to live in the town, how long have they been there, to visit the lavatory ... ! Everyone feels uncomfortable with long periods of silence, so have a couple of ideas for topics
ready for these moments.

Expect to be asked (often) about your plans for future research, and where you expect to receive funding. If you fumble this one, you will not get a job offer! People especially like to see some ideas which do not just continue your thesis work.

Someone may ask you about your marital or family status. They are not supposed to do this, but some people never seem to get the message. There are various responses to this question, ranging from a pointed reference to the law on this point, to a description of your family status. The person who asked the question almost certainly didn’t mean to offend, and it is not going to help you to get a job if you become indignant. You are certainly within your rights to maintain your privacy, however. Unfortunately, once the question is asked, it isn’t terribly easy to dodge it. Often, the point of this question is to find out if there may be an issue of spousal placement. If there is no such issue, and you don’t want to discuss this topic, then you might say something like, “I don’t have to worry about a spousal placement. Tell me about your research.” In any case, decide before you go how you are going to respond to this question if it comes up.

The Seminar

Your seminar is the single most important thing that you will do on the interview. It is also the only time during your visit when you will be in control of the situation. Some people in the audience will know very little about what you do, and some will know a lot. Make sure that everyone who attends your seminar learns something. The people who know very little about what you do will probably be trying to judge how good a teacher you are. The people who know a lot about what you do will be judging how deep your knowledge is. Your seminar should answer the following questions:

- What problem have I worked on?
- Why would anyone work on this problem?
- What is significant about what I have done?
- How has my work made progress on the problem?

Table II gives a suggested structure for your seminar, which allows you to address these questions.

Prepare carefully for your seminar by making appropriate visual aids. You should try to use the visual aids most common in your discipline. For example,
Table II: Suggested Structure for the Interview Seminar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Time (min)</th>
<th>Target Audience</th>
<th>Detail Level / Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Everyone present</td>
<td>Your parents would understand it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your approach</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>People in related fields</td>
<td>Show you know the field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your results</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>People who work in your field</td>
<td>Show that you are the world expert on something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Everyone in the room</td>
<td>Relate your results to the big picture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

most physicists and mathematicians seem to prefer hand-drawn transparencies using pens of various colors. Many engineers use computer-generated transparencies, while some disciplines use almost exclusively 35mm slides. In some disciplines, it is common to project your presentation from a laptop computer. (More on this in a moment.) In any case, the fundamental unit of your visual aids will be the slide, often with mixed text and figures.

Do not make word slides with sentences on them, because you will invariably turn your back to the audience and simply recite them. Instead, make each point with two or three words. These will mean something to you, but the audience will have to pay attention to find out their meaning. Try to have no more than three or four points per slide. If you make color word slides, make sure you use no more than four colors on any slide, lest they look like ransom notes. The slides should be consistent; i.e., the title on every slide should be in the same place, and the same size, font and color. If you use bullets to highlight your text items, they should all be the same color, perhaps different from the title. Do not use fancy or shaded backgrounds, or other meaningless adornments. They make the slides look overly produced and detract from the content.

Be sure to let the institution know ahead of time what audio/visual equipment you will need. If you have special needs, such as a movie or computer projector, let them know. Often seminars are given in large rooms. If you think you may need a microphone, ask for one to be provided.

Practice your seminar before you go. Practice in front of your adviser, some fellow graduate students, and at least one person who knows nothing about what you are doing. Get their comments, and practice it again. Make sure that your seminar is at a level where each of these people comes away with a good under-
standing of the issues and the approach that you took. Practice it again with a
different audience, if possible. Make sure that your seminar lasts no more than
forty-five minutes, because it may take longer when you present it for real. Prac-
tice it again. Figure out which slide corresponds to halfway through, and learn to
notice the time when that slide appears. That way, you can tell whether you are
going too slowly or too quickly — while you still have time to do something about
it! Have a few slides that can be put in or left out, according to how your time is
going. Don’t plan to tell jokes; you never know who might be offended.

Shortly before you give your seminar, ask to go to the room where it will be
presented. Make sure that the audio/visual equipment that you need is there, that
it works and that you know how to use it. Run through some of your slides to
see how they work in the room; make sure there is a pointer; and stand where you
will stand to give your presentation so that it will not feel foreign to you when you
actually begin. If they haven’t provided a time for you to do this, ask for it. If you
use 35mm slides, make sure they are loaded properly in the carousel before you
begin.

The question of whether or not to project your seminar from a laptop computer
warrants further discussion. There are some advantages to using this medium.
When it is done well, the laptop presentation has a smooth, professional feel to it.
Certain features, such as animations, can be added in a seamless fashion. You can
also modify your slides right up to the last moment. However, there are several
important disadvantages that you should weigh carefully before electing to go this
route. It is much easier to lose your place in a laptop presentation, because the
next slide isn’t sitting on the table in front of you to remind you of what is coming
next. This can be ameliorated to some extent if you make a printed outline of
the slides that you keep nearby to help you segue smoothly from one slide to the
next. This is one advantage of an overhead transparency form of presentation. In a
laptop presentation, it’s also more difficult to skip slides if you are running short of
time, and more difficult to retrieve a slide to answer a question at the end of your
presentation. Note that these disadvantages also apply to 35mm slide presentations,
as well.

There are several potential pitfalls unique to a laptop presentation. Foremost
among these is that it increases the probability that something will go wrong with
the mechanics of the presentation – incompatible hardware and software are more
common than most people realize. Be sure to check ahead of time to ensure that
your hosts will have the necessary equipment to connect to your laptop. Consider
sending your presentation by email before you arrive, allowing your hosts time to
ensure that it displays properly. You should also bring a disk or (better) a memory
stick, so that you can easily transfer your presentation from one machine to an-
other if hardware problems arise. One thing to be aware of is that in some poorly
designed presentation software, certain fonts do not display properly on different platforms. Having all of your symbols turn to empty boxes, for example, is an unpleasant experience to say the least! **Always** bring a backup hard copy of your presentation in case something goes wrong. If you can’t get the projection system to work, you still have to give a seminar!

With most presentation software, it is easy to lose the distinction between what you can do and what you should do. Resist the temptation to use special effects, like cute transition effects between slides. Above all, **never** use sound effects to accompany the appearance of text on the screen. By the third slide, this “feature” becomes amazingly annoying to the audience. Also resist the temptation to add one line of text at a time to your slides. You’ll end up paying more attention to the laptop than to the audience. This approach also gives you a lot more slides to skip through if you need to shorten your talk, and makes it more difficult to go backwards.

If you do choose to give a laptop presentation, plan to practice your talk enough that the mechanics of using the medium become second nature for you. Learn how to export the display from your laptop to an external projector. If you use a Mac, learn the difference between the primary and secondary displays, and how to mirror the displays if necessary. Be sure to place the computer someplace where you can change slides without stepping into the path of the projector. This is distracting both to you and to the audience. Become facile with the software you are using, so that you can easily find a particular slide in response to a question.

I strongly recommend that you carry a set of overhead slides in case disaster strikes. At a conference, when computer problems arise, the schedule can be revised to accommodate them. In the case of an interview, your audience is made up of busy people who might well have other commitments following the seminar. You need to be able to make your impression in the allotted time.

During the presentation, be sure to maintain eye contact with the audience. Choose people at various locations in the room, and systematically sweep your eyes around to be sure that you engage the entire audience. Avoid standing right at the overhead projector and pointing at it with a pencil. You may obstruct the projected image, or the view of people near the front, and you also will be partially blinded by staring into the bright light. If you use a wooden or metal pointer, keep it by your side except when you are pointing at the screen, otherwise you may look like one of the Three Musketeers. If you use a laser pointer, use both hands to steady the light when you point with it, and then let go of the button! Most laser pointers won’t last more than 20 minutes, or so, if you overuse them.

During your talk, if you are interrupted with questions, try to answer them as directly as possible. If the questions become too frequent, ask the audience to hold them until you finish, otherwise you may run out of time. If a question isn’t clear,
rephrase it to be sure you understood it. A phrase like, “I’m sorry, do you mean ...” can be very helpful. Never argue with the questioner. If the discussion on some point seems to be going in circles, suggest that you and the questioner meet afterwards to discuss it further, then go on to another question.

Your Responsibilities in the Interview

You should recognize that, while you are selling yourself on the interview, you are also buying. You need to find out whether this is a place you would like to work. Ask to meet some young untenured faculty members and some graduate students. Ask for a laboratory tour. Ask someone (in a tactful way) early in the interview what the problems are in the department. Every place has some problems. Ask what percentage of the assistant professors have been getting tenure. If this number is 100%, they are probably not very discriminating; if this number is 10%, this is probably an uncomfortable place to work.

Except in rare instances you will visit the dean or associate dean sometime during your stay. This conversation is important because deans always have veto power, even though they usually do not have the power to force your being hired. Some deans are more technically oriented than others, so be prepared for anything. When you go to the dean’s office, there are two possible settings — the “official” one, where you sit in a chair in front of the dean’s desk and the dean sits behind it, and the “colleague” position, where you both sit on a sofa or chairs arrayed around a coffee table. The latter may be more common during an interview, but don’t take that to mean that what you are doing is informal.

You will want to show the dean your intellectual abilities and excitement for your work. However, some deans are more technically oriented than others, and this may not fill your time. If the conversation lags, the dean will probably ask you if you have any questions. Think of something beforehand for this eventuality. Samples of questions you could ask the dean:

1. Where is the institution headed (under your steady hand and brilliant leadership)?

2. What, in the dean’s view, characterizes the contributions of an outstanding faculty member? This is a good question to ask the department head, as well. Compare their answers! A big difference could mean big problems for you.

3. How does the tenure process work here?

4. What is the role of the department in your scheme of things?
Do not ask the dean or department head about benefits such as health care or retirement. You want to look like a go-getter, not someone who is going to retire in place. Both of these are nonnegotiable anyway, and may have been included in the packet of information about the institution.

**Negotiating the Startup Package**

Universities tend to use one of two administrative structures for their departments. In one structure, departments have chairpersons who are elected by faculty members, usually on a two-to-three-year rotating basis. In this structure, the dean usually has more financial control than the chairperson, and you will likely negotiate the startup package with both of them. In the other structure, departments are administered by heads appointed by the dean, and the department head usually has a great deal of autonomy. In this case, you might negotiate your startup package with the department head only.

You should expect that, when they hire you, the institution will want you to succeed. Ask for the things you will need to do so. Remember — you get what you negotiate, not what you deserve. You should be able to get most of the following:

1. A reduced teaching load for the first year or two.
2. Support for at least one graduate student for at least one year.
3. Paid attendance at a meeting in the first year.
4. Summer salary for at least the first summer, or a guarantee that they will pay your summer salary if you don’t have a grant by then.
5. Funds to start up your laboratory. Beware of packages that require you to get external funds that the institution matches only if you get them. There may be a board at the institution where you apply for funds that departments match. Success rates there should be high, but ask about recent history for other candidates.
6. Laboratory space of your own.
7. An office computer.
8. A return trip to find housing — usually available only if you accept the job.

A typical startup package should be worth at least $50,000. If you do experimental work, it may need to be higher. Be suspicious if the package is much smaller than that.
Before you leave, make sure that you ask when the hiring decision will be
made. If there are two more candidates to be interviewed, you probably will not
hear anything for four to six weeks. Telephone calls do not help now, either.

After the Interview

When you get home, think about the interview for a day or two. Then write a letter
to your host and/or the department head thanking them. If you want the job, ask
for it. If you don’t want the job, tell them. Mention a couple of things that you saw
while you were there which make the place desirable. You should do this even if
you are telling them you are not interested.

The Worst Case

The worst case scenario would be receiving a letter that states “Best of luck in your
future endeavors” or “I am sure someone with your qualifications will be able to
find a suitable appointment elsewhere.” Although you will feel bad, remember that
at least you made it to the short list, and resolve to do better on your next interview.
Write a letter to your host and/or department head thanking them for considering
you.

Note that not being offered a job does not necessarily mean that you did any-
thing wrong. Many departments are looking for very specific research and/or teach-
ing specialties, even if the ad doesn’t say so. You may just not have been a perfect
fit.

The Best Case

You receive a phone call, either from the department head or dean, saying that they
want to offer you a job. Do not immediately say yes. You need to find out the
particulars of the offer. Refer to your notes about the negotiation session you had
with the dean or department head (you did make these notes, didn’t you?) and ask
specifically about each one of the key points. Your negotiating position will never
be stronger than it is in this phone call. There is usually little room for negotiation
on salary, but all of the issues related to the startup package (teaching load, lab
space, startup funds, research assistants, summer salary, etc.) are negotiable. These
items must be spelled out in an offer letter. Until you have the letter, you do not
have an offer. If the offer letter does not include the things you negotiated, you
do not have them. This discussion can become somewhat delicate, because the
caller may feel that you are questioning his/her honesty by asking for these items
in writing. Try to say you feel most comfortable doing it this way so that there will
be no misunderstanding later about what was agreed to. He/she may ask you to write the letter yourself. Always accept such an offer.

The letter may take a few weeks to arrive, since many approvals are needed, so ask when you should expect the letter. When you receive the letter, check it carefully against your notes from the call. You may need to clarify any omissions. (See the sample offer letter in Appendix.)

What to Do If You Are Entertaining Several Offers

This is a highly personal decision, of course, and your decision process should be one that fits your personality. However, you may find it worthwhile to make a list of attributes important to you, and to compare the institutions in each area. Some things to consider:

- Reputation of the institution
- Time derivative of this reputation (are they going up or down?)
- Opportunities for collaboration
- Quality of students
- Teaching loads
- Facilities
- Salary
- Startup package
- Geography
- Quality of life in the area
- Your overall impression

Do not neglect this last one; it often represents your subconscious integration of the rest.

Once the department makes you an offer, they expect an answer within a few weeks. If you have several things going and this is not your first choice, then try to delay their formal offer. This will usually work for about one month, but you need a good excuse (your spouse needs to find a job in the area, etc.). Once you receive the offer letter, you can ask for a month or so before replying, but usually not more. Imagine the situation from their point of view. They need to fill this position, so they cannot wait forever for you to decide.
What to Do When You Want to Accept the Offer

Write a letter back accepting the offer, repeating the salient points from the offer letter. Congratulations!

How to Deal with a Spouse Who Needs Employment

This should not be a primary discussion point in your interview, because you are the one being interviewed. However, if you would take the job only if your spouse finds employment, you should mention to the department head that your spouse is also looking for a job. How much help you will get with this problem is highly variable. However, most institutions are facing this issue with increasing frequency, and have procedures in place for addressing it.

They may be able to help you make contacts with other parts of the university, and in some cases special programs exist to support the salary for “spousal placement.” It may also be possible to get contacts with non-university employers, as well.