Three Views of the MLA Interview Process

THE MLA INTERVIEW

Peter Hess, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Germanic Studies

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW:
When scheduling interviews: try to leave at least one hour between interviews.

Research the department/school:
- Research catalogs of target institutions (on web, hard copy at PCL); copy and bring along the description of German program.
- Check Monatshefte/DAAD directories and web sites, and MLA International Bibliography and LLBA online for publications (also will help remember names).
- Check statistics in most recent Fall issue of Monatshefte.
- Who is there? What are their specializations?
- How large/strong is their program?
- Analyze strengths and weaknesses. How could you fit in?
- Try to anticipate their needs. Why would they want to hire you? Are they likely to look primarily for a language teacher?
- Are they looking for a strong researcher or teacher? Do they expect a lot of service work?

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD EXPECT:
Expect the unexpected. Some interviewers like to see how you react to a surprising question. You might encounter some comprehensive-exam-type questions ("Is Simplicissimus a Bildungsroman?"). Typically, part of the interview will be in English, part in German. Native speakers of German should be prepared to do the entire interview in English. Some colleagues--specially from smaller institutions--might feel intimidated by native speakers of German.

1. TEACHING
Remember: At most smaller institutions teaching is more important than at large research-oriented schools. You can show interest in teaching by volunteering
information. Show that you have ideas about program development and extracurricular activities.

• Which textbooks do you use now in first/second-year language instruction? Do you like it? Why/why not?
• Which textbooks would suggest for ***? Why?
• Which approaches do you use in elementary language teaching? What factors influence the approaches you choose (large/small classes, community college vs. Ivy League, etc.)?
• What is your experience with / approach to computer-assisted instruction in the language classroom?
• Would you be willing to co-ordinate a first-year language program?
• Could you teach a course on under-water aerobics--or just about any other imaginable topic?
• How would you design a undergraduate course in your specialty? Which texts would you include?
• How can you make Baroque literature (fill in the blanks) palatable to American undergraduates?
• How would you design a graduate course (survey course, seminar) in your specialty? Which texts would you include?
• What course would you like to teach? (Think of a couple of courses you would like to teach!)

2. DISSERTATION
Questions about the dissertation often serve as warm-ups. Here, you can show that you can express ideas and that you can engage in a scholarly discussion.

• What is the main idea of your dissertation? Tell us about your dissertation--in two minutes or less.
• In what way does it contribute to scholarship? What is the unique contribution of your dissertation to scholarship?
• Why should I care about your dissertation?
• Why did you choose this topic? How did you get into this topic?
• What is your methodology? Why do you use this approach?
• What does the timetable on the completion of your dissertation look like?

3. FUTURE RESEARCH

• What will your next project be? What is your next book going to be about?
• What does your research program for the next five years look like?
• Which book would you like to be famous for in twenty years?

4. PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

• We at *** University don't have a language requirement. How would you go about attracting students into our language classes?
• We at *** have problems attracting enough students to our upper division German courses. Do you have any strategies how this could be achieved?
• Do you have an interest in extracurricular activities?
• Would you be willing to run German House, Film Club, German Club, German Play, Stammtisch, etc.?
• What's the place of culture in a FL curriculum?

5. PROFESSION
• What are the most pressing problems facing our profession in the next decade?
• How can we generate more enrollment in our elementary language classes?
• What is the value of language instruction in our university curriculum today?
• What is the value of a humanities education in our technological age? Do we act responsibly by convincing our students to become humanities majors?
• Is the language requirement good or bad for our profession?
• What is German Studies? What is your definition of German Studies?
• Should we continue to offer traditional literature classes, or should we frame them in a German Studies curriculum?

6. LOADED QUESTIONS (which doesn't mean others aren't ...)
• Do you see yourself teaching elementary language as part of your professional future?
• Would a young woman like yourself be comfortable in our community? in our department? in our foreign language department?
• Was that your wife/husband I talked to on the phone the other day?

QUESTIONS TO ASK (AND NOT TO ASK)
Try to make questions specific to their situation! Your questions also should indicate that you know something about the target institution.
• Do you have a language requirement?
• Do you have study abroad programs?
• How many majors/grad students?
• Possibility to teach interdisciplinary courses?
• Library holdings (small school: major research library nearby?)
• One-year job: chances for extension?
• What do they expect of their new colleague?
• Don't ask about salary and health insurance at this point!
Nine questions asked in almost every interview

1. At what point in the dissertation process are you?
2. Describe your research. What audiences are you addressing? What direction do you plan to take with your research? How will you go about revising your dissertation for publication? (Have a good articulate description in short and longer versions. In the practice interviews we did at Arizona, this was the one area where EVERYONE stumbled! Keep it short and sweet, but be crystal clear).
   You may be asked to talk about the limitations in your research. Don't be afraid to acknowledge these, particularly if you can use this as an opportunity to indicate where you intend to go in your research. (My doctoral research, you see, is only the necessary first step...)
3. What is your philosophy of foreign language teaching?
4. Why would you like to be a professor specifically at our university in our department?
5. Be prepared to talk about several courses you'd like to teach, after having sized up the institution's needs.
6. Tell us how your research has influenced your teaching. In what ways have you been able to bring the insights of your research to your courses at the undergraduate level?
7. For small, liberal arts colleges: Do you understand the liberal arts college mission, are you a dedicated teacher, and will you give your students the time and personal attention that we demand from all our faculty members?
8. We conceive of our campus as one large community. What non-or extra-academic activities would you be interested in sponsoring or participating in?
9. If you were organizing a special symposium or mini-conference, which scholars could you pick up the phone to call?

Seven questions that may catch you a little off guard:

1. What's the best course you've taken as a graduate student and why?
2. How do you fit with the faculty in our department?
3. What is your philosophy of language? (this is different from #3 above).
4. Usually asked by someone outside your field. Can you explain the value of your work to an educated layperson?
5. How would you teach...?
6. What is the cutting edge in your field and how does your work extend it?
7. In which journals do you intend to publish?
Six questions to ask them:

1. What are tenure expectations at your institutions, and the usual tenure timeline?
2. What do you see as the contributions to the department that are most needed by the person who fills this position?
3. What are policies or local possibilities about interdisciplinary work? Is it encouraged, discouraged?
4. What support for faculty development is there at the university? What support is there in general for new faculty in terms of mentoring, professional development, buddy systems with experienced faculty, etc.?
5. What is the typical teaching load, the standard division of teaching, research, and service in percentages, and expectations for community outreach, student contact outside of class, etc.?
6. Is there an active local or regional or state chapter of professional organizations here (e.g. AATG)? Are students, grad students, and faculty encouraged/required to attend any extra-curricular activities (e.g. Stammisch, Film Series, Speaker Series, etc.)?

Still More Interview Questions from the PFF list-serve

- thanks to Professor Rick Cherwitz

1. Provide us with a brief chronological outline of your teaching/tutoring experience.
2. What is your experience with underprepared students?
3. Describe a situation where you dealt with a student in crisis and your role in a solution to the situation.
4. Describe your experience, if any, with working with an entire group of 17-19 year old students.
5. Describe your experience, if any, with working with a group of people of vastly different ages, e.g. 16-80 year old students.
6. What is your experience with learning disabled students?
7. Give us an example of your ability to work as a member of a team.
8. Give us an example of your ability to be the leader of a team.
9. Describe your professional goals for the next 2 years, 5 years.
10. Describe how you have used technology in your classroom.
11. What is your greatest strength, greatest weakness as a teacher?