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MOST of what I have to say, you've probably already heard or read or thought. You may have learned it through practice, whether through mock interviews or actual interviews. Most of what I have to say falls under the category of common sense and good manners. It contains no trade secrets. Everything you ever needed to know about a successful interview you probably did learn in kindergarten. But it may be helpful and reassuring to have some of the interview's obvious features and details laid out for you.

I was head of the department of French and Italian at the University of Pittsburgh from 1996 to 2003, coming into the position at a moment in the department's history when it was on the verge of a massive turnover in faculty. With one projected retirement next year, there will be only two of us (out of twelve) hired before 1992; it is a young, changing, dynamic unit in which I find myself in the unexpected role as one of the elders. Consequently, for the last six years I have been a member (and presumably will be next year too) of interviewing committees at the MLA convention for jobs in both French and Italian. I have interviewed candidates for positions that have ranged from specialist in literary studies of various historical periods to language coordinator to generalist. We have also made some strategic hires that bridged the two language programs in our department in various ways. Every chair knows well that each line, tenure-stream and non-tenure-stream, is a precious commodity in the complicated world of corporate academia. Maintaining a line, deciding how best to configure it for the sake of the department's needs, advertising it carefully, screening candidates for interviews, filling the position with the

right candidate, then seeing that person through to a successful career in the profession—are all steps to be taken with the utmost care. Interviewers want to make as positive an impression on candidates as possible (although some do forget their manners at times) because they all want to fill the slots at their home institution in the best way possible.

Your reason for being at this session attests to your part in this process. That you are at the convention indicates that you may have an interview or interviews already set up. If not, you may end up interviewing for one of the positions authorized and announced in the recent weeks that you can find posted at the Job Information Center. Or it may be that you are here in preparation for next year or the year after, when the advice we offer will be of some help.

If you have landed an interview, it means that the campus hiring committee that screened your dossier made a case for you to be interviewed by the representatives of the institution at the convention. (The campus committee is usually somewhat larger than the group that comes to interview at the convention. In my department the local hiring committee is a committee of the whole, with every faculty member participating in some way. We always send a team

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of interviewers to the MLA convention, but many programs have only one representative available to interview candidates.) Your main challenge in your interview at the convention is to live up to or even outdo the portrait of you created by your dossier. You should assume that the interviewers think your dossier is a good one; now the burden is on you to show the interviewers just how good it is and why. The information in the dossier creates a multilayered portrait (you tell us what you do, and your references weigh in on you and your work, your accomplishments, your potential), but it can be at times a rather flat portrait. In the interview, by contrast, you have the chance to tell us much more about who you are and to show us how you think on your feet. You have the chance to convince us why we should introduce you to our colleagues at home in a campus visit.

Charles J. Stivale, professor of French at Wayne State University and former chair of the Department of Modern Languages there, has extended the metaphor of the interview as performance. Ann Bugliani, former chair of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at Loyola University, also provides good suggestions. And there is the helpful list “Dos and Don’ts for MLA Convention Interviews,” drawn up by Herbert Lederer of the University of Connecticut and revised in 1995 by the MLA Committee on Academic Freedom and Professional Rights and Responsibilities. Lederer’s list is also published every year on the inside cover of the October *Job Information List*, and there are always copies available at the Job Information Center.

Stivale appropriately highlights the performative aspect of the MLA interview. The hotel room, the hall for public interviews, the conference table in the suite all become the stage for this particular performance. But the performance should not be merely a revelation of the dossier. Stivale points out:

A candidate must employ the screening interview as a performance event to communicate clearly and convincingly how the constructed persona corresponds exactly to the qualifications of the advertised position and the needs of the hiring department. (41)

That is, the performance is about more than unpacking the fullness of the dossier; it’s also about showing how the candidate fits the department, staging how the candidate is precisely what the hiring department needs. Of course, one shouldn’t construct a false persona that doesn’t correspond to who one really is or who one wants to become. To thine own self be true,

but wherever possible show how who you are makes you just the person for the job in question.

Whether or not the candidate is the right fit for the department and its various programs is often the question asked when interviewing committees discuss potential candidates. But the notion of fit is a rather vague construct, consequently it is difficult to prepare for such an assessment. It may be more effective to think of the interview as a kind of classroom performance through which you need to teach the interviewers why they should hire you.

The interview as performance has a script—or lesson plan, if you prefer that image—and it usually goes something like this. After the interviewer makes a brief introduction on the position and the institution, you’ll be called on to discuss your research. Be prepared to speak carefully, clearly, and passionately about your work. And be succinct. You need to communicate excitement about what you are doing and what you imagine yourself doing in the future, both in the profession at large and in the specific institution of your interviewers. If you can’t get excited about your research and career, how can you expect others to? Practice your set piece before you head into your interview so that you can say it effortlessly and thoughtfully.

For whatever the institutional category of the place that is interviewing you, you’ll need to respond to the question of your research. It is helpful to have a longer version ready just in case the interviewers want to know more (usually a good sign) about that. Discussion of your research often modulates into its potential applicability to the interviewing institution. That is, how will your research enable you to find a niche for yourself among future colleagues, not just in the specific department of the interviewers but also beyond the boundaries of that department in interdisciplinary programs and centers for area studies and programs of various kinds of outreach? Moreover, how will you be able to convert that research into appropriate courses at that college or university?

Discussion of your teaching will constitute the second major section of your interview. Depending on the institutional needs of the place interviewing you, this question may focus on undergraduate or graduate courses; lower-level or upper-division courses in language, literature, and culture; courses in the target language or in English. Knowing about the institution’s curriculum will help you greatly here. Candidates who have teaching experience often bring with them syllabi of courses they have taught. Even if you

haven't taught much (many new PhDs haven't taught any advanced language, literature, or culture courses), it is a good idea to prepare a rudimentary syllabus for a course you could offer. At the University of Pittsburgh, we are always interested to hear how a candidate would organize a third-year course on culture.

In the third portion of the typical interview, which is briefer, the candidate is given the opportunity to ask questions of the interviewers. Have some questions, thoughtful but not ponderous, in mind for that eventuality. Even in an interview where the bottom falls out, you may still have the chance to ask your questions. The interview is likely to end with some reference to the timetable for the next phase in the hiring process. The interviewers should volunteer this information; if not, feel free to ask about the probable time of the decision.

Most interviews are conducted in English, with a portion of the conversation in the target language associated with the position. The shift from English into the target language can be awkward and artificial, but don't be fazed by it. Take your cues from the committee on when to move out of English and back into it again, as necessary.

Allow me one war story. Not too far into my interview with X University, one member of the two-person team rose from the interviewing table in the great hall of a Chicago hotel to say hello to an old friend. While he lingered with his buddy for more than a little bit, his embarrassed colleague tried to continue the interview but finally gave into the moment and asked me if I had any questions for her, which I did. I spelled them out one by one, taking advantage of the interview as a practice session if nothing else, fully aware that this was one job I wouldn't get and already thinking that I wouldn't want to have a position that came with such a colleague. Eventually her colleague returned, and they sent me away, she somewhat apologetically, he with total nonchalance. The moral of the story is to salvage what you can and move on. Everything interviewers need to know, they also should have learned in kindergarten, but let me warn you that some people never do.

You're more likely to encounter a kooky than a rude interviewer. Watch out and be prepared for the wacky question. I seemed to get more of these than my peers did when I was going through the hiring process in 1985. By "wacky" I mean a question out of the blue, not in the context of the conversation as it is developing between you and the interviewers at that moment. Such a question often arises when there is a larger group of interviewers and one of

them wants to get his or her two cents in. It may be an indication that the interviewing team is not as prepared as it should be. Of course, you must respond. If you are on the lookout for the wacky question, you won't be as shocked if it happens. Also, don't be taken aback by an aggressive question or questioner. The interview shouldn't take on the trappings of an inquisition, and if it does, you probably don't want to work in such a setting anyway. Still, respond tactfully and with as much grace as you can muster.

In your response to the very predictable topics of research and teaching, it's important to communicate to the committee why you want to come to their school. This message can often be given in response to a specific question, but even if the appropriate question doesn't come up, try to infuse some of your remarks with a tone that suggests you have given thought to your future in their college or university. They are looking at you not just as someone who will be teaching courses in their programs and not just as someone with whom they expect to talk about and share research. They are imagining how you will fit into the life of their department. Be prepared to help the interviewers in this process. Summarize your qualifications for the job and the institution as memorably as possible.

To conclude, I return to the comments of Stivale:

Candidates must be aware of and take comfort from the knowledge that a complex array of determinants bears down on any decision made by search committees, and many of these determinants have to do with issues of fit, areas of specialization, possibly even preferences by administrators rather than with the qualities of individual candidates. In short, for all one's preparation in advance of the performance, the audience may not even be present in the house during the screening interview. At best, then, one can rehearse the lines, prepare the props, and hope for the best when the show does go on, however the next act turns out. (46)

To which I add, Break a leg!

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