You Have an Interview. Now What? — Fruscione #3

From this week we are moving from a general “buck up, little soldier” support for your decision to transition to the post-ac search, toward targeted advice about the search itself. We’ll be focusing on all the core elements of the job search–resumes, job letters, interviewing, etc. Over time most of the panel of experts will be weighing in on each of these topics, so you’ll get a variety of viewpoints on what to do, and how to do it. Today Joe talks about a recent interview, how he prepared for it, and how he is framing the experience even though he didn’t get the job. I appreciate that, by the way. This transition requires throwing a lot of pasta at a lot of walls to see what sticks, and rejections will be part of the experience. Don’t get discouraged–learn from them! It’s a new world and it will take a while to figure out your place in it.

Joe Fruscione

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When you get an interview for a post-ac job, you shouldn’t experience the kinds of horror stories academics sometimes share. (Say, an interviewer reclining on a bed and asking no actual questions.) Navigating the process as a post-ac job seeker may be tricky, but at least you can expect to meet in a conference room or hiring manager’s office.

I was fortunate to get an interview for the first post-ac job to which I’d applied: it began with a pre-screening phone discussion. I’d talked to a Twitter friend—who originally told me about the job opening—to get some basic information. Having some background, such as what the hiring manager wanted from an editor, helped me prepare. I’d also learned that the hiring manager was concerned that I’d be overqualified. An additional tricky part is that the company does science consulting—clearly a far cry from the literary studies work I’d been doing for almost 15 years. I knew I’d have to address this, as well as emphasize that more experience would make me a stronger editor.

The pre-screening began as I’d expected: *Why are you leaving your career as a professor*? I gave her a short, positive version: *Given the academic job market, I’m looking for a new field that lets me draw on my strong editing and proofreading skills.* We discussed the projects they handle and some recent editing work I’d done. In response to her concern about my being overqualified, I said, *As I see it, my experience will make me a stronger editor, because I’ve commented on **a lot** of writing*. (Prepare several answers to the “overqualified” question, depending on the position.)

By the end we’d scheduled an in-person interview for the following Wednesday. Things went well. I met with four people: the hiring manager and three writer/project managers. The first question was expected: *How does your background in literature prepare you for editing science writing?* I responded:

The content is different, but my skills as a writing professor, author, and editor are transferable. I’ve always had strong copy editing and proofreading skills, which I’ve strengthened with some recent projects.

When asked about how I multitask, I drew from my years of teaching de facto 4-4 loads across two universities:
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I used to have 70-80 students per semester requiring different kinds of class prep and assignments, and I stayed organized and on schedule while doing my own research and professional work.

At their request, I showed them some recent edited projects I'd done, explained the editing needs for each one, and provided references.

I sold myself and my skills as well as I could, and at some level I assuaged doubts about how my English background could translate into editing scientific writing. At the end, I talked with the hiring manager about logistics and my desired salary (*Is the $70,000/year range doable?*, I asked). I inquired about their telework policy and learned that, except for emergencies, they don't do it. Because my wife and I are adopting a baby soon, I'm looking for freelance telework to match our plan for me to be the stay-at-home parent. (I didn't mention this at the interview, though.)

It's always smart to end with something like *What's the next step?* or *When do you anticipate making a decision?* to keep communication open. Be professional and tactful, and *always* write a follow-up note the next day thanking them—even if you think you bombed the interview. Act as if you want the job.

Yet, I didn't get the job. I had a feeling that they'd choose a comparably experienced editor with a science background. It was frustrating but not demoralizing, because I didn't *need* this job. The hiring manager said to check in if I hadn't heard from her within two weeks: I did, and she replied with the formal rejection email. Nevertheless, I gained a lot of experience and practice describing and marketing my work.

We won't always have friends on the inside. In these cases, do your homework before an interview: reread the ad; review the website and any social media presence the company has; self-reflect and prepare; make sure your resume stresses the skills and experience of the specific job; ask non-academic friends for advice. As Chris Humphrey reminds us, "**The bottom line is that you'll need a clear rationale for your career change, because a lot of folks still think a PhD = academic."** Craft, practice, share, and refine your story. Be ready to draw on it when you're asked—and you *will* be asked—why you're leaving academia.

This is self-evident, but…don't forget to stay focused on the interview and organization at hand. They may not know (or care) how bad the academic job market is, or that you (like I did) felt stuck as a full-time part-timer. Practice your career-change story, and have a few positive variations on it for different kinds of jobs.

When eyeing specific jobs and wondering whether to apply, heed some advice I got from a fellow postac expert: don't self-select out of a job just because you might not seem ideal for it. How many times have we all heard, *You never know…*? I wound up with a valuable, well-paying editing project that I almost declined applying for because I'm not an expert in its topic area (religious history). In some emails and a phone interview with the project editor (who knew me from Twitter), I sold my lack of expertise as an asset: because I'd be objective, I'd focus primarily on grammar, wordiness, typos, and the like—just the kinds of detail-oriented work they needed. She offered me the job after about 30 minutes of talking *You never know*, indeed.

As in any interview situation, emphasize your strengths and interest in the position, and mute any criticisms you have (no matter how justified) of the profession you're leaving. They'll likely wonder about why you're changing careers, but they'll likely care the most about whether you're capable of doing the work they're considering

hiring you to do.