Preparation for Interviews at the ASSA Meetings

by

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Reasons for interview preparation:

(1) The process forces you to think through what is important about your job market paper. What is worth discussing and what is better left for the reader of the paper? What are the “big picture” lessons from your research? This is a valuable exercise in its own right, and will pay off in the interview and fly-out stages.

(2) There is a learning curve associated with the interview process. You need to work your way up that learning curve very quickly. Formally preparing an interview speeds that process.

(3) Interview preparation gives you a structure to fall back on when you become fatigued during the interview process. You will hopefully have a large number of interviews. It can be difficult, after doing many interviews in a row, to keep your thoughts straight. Did you tell the interviewers everything that was important about your research? Having some structure to your interview helps you make sure you did.

The typical interview will follow a common structure:

(1) Greeting: Interviewers will introduce themselves. You will do the same. Give them your name (“Hi, I’m _______. Please feel free to call me ______.”) Tell people what field(s) you work in, and briefly state what your research interests are. (i.e., one or two sentences).

* Interviewers like to know that you have some sense of where you fit into the broader world of economics.

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1 These notes are based on my own experiences with the economics job market (from both the selling and buying sides), conversations with numerous economists, and similar documents prepared by others. Particular thanks to Marty Perry, George Deltas and Dan Bernhardt at the University of Illinois at Champagne-Urbana.
Opening Monologue: You will typically be asked to “please tell us about your job market paper.” This is your cue to begin an opening monologue that summarizes your job market research. This should be scripted (so as to be thorough), but should not sound scripted.

- Identify the research question, controversy, hypothesis, etc… that you are going to tackle.
- Explain how you address this question (theory, data, structural model, quasi-experiment, etc…).
- Theory – explain your model.
- Empirical – discuss your data set.
- Explain your results – make sure people have a take-away message that the interview committee can remember (keep in mind that the committee may be sitting through 30+ interviews, so remembering your particular message may be difficult).
- Enthusiastically identify your contribution to the literature.

Other things to consider for your monologue:

- Don’t spend time discussing previous literature. Doing so can be risky. You cannot assume that your interviewers will know the papers that you cite. If you mention them, you may have to explain what they do in some detail, which wastes a lot of time. Only bring up another paper if it is essential to your discussion. Cite it fully and give a short explanation of what it is about.
- Avoid using jargon. If you want to use a term that is specific to your field, make sure you define it.
- You might consider making a handout to use in your interview (e.g., to summarize your empirical results, present a figure that is important to explaining your figure, etc…). There is no consensus on the role of handouts in interviews – some people like them, others do not. You may want to have them with you and use them only in a situation where you think they would be particularly useful. Discuss this with your advisor.
As you progress through your monologue, one of three things will likely happen:

(a) You will be asked to expand upon particular things. In general, it is important to avoid ceding control of the interview back to the interviewers when these questions come up. There is a risk that you don’t get the opportunity to finish, and key elements of what you are doing are not explained.

(b) You may finish your monologue and find yourself in a quiet room (no questions). You will need additional material in order to keep talking.

(c) You are allowed to finish your monologue uninterrupted, but then are confronted with questions.

You need a common strategy to deal with any of these outcomes. This brings us to the third part of the interview:

(3) Branches: I like to think of the interview process as being represented by a pine tree (the shape is useful, mainly because the trunk is straight). Your monologue represents the base of the tree. As you work your way up the tree, branches represent different mini-discussions on particular elements of your research. For example, you might prepare short discussions of…

- results
- solution techniques (computation
- data collection, manipulation
- econometric techniques

Think of these as being the lower branches on the tree.

- If you have your thoughts organized along these dimensions and situation (a) arises (i.e., you are asked questions during your monologue), you can use the appropriate branch to answer the question and then return back to the point where your monologue left off.

- If you find yourself in situation (b) (i.e., you finish your monologue and nobody says anything), you can start going through your branches until questions arise (“let me tell you a little bit more about my results…”)

- If you find yourself in situation (c) (i.e., you finish your monologue and interviews start asking questions), having your thoughts organized this way will help you answer questions in an organized way.
Higher Branches: Eventually, you will have discussed your job market paper to the satisfaction of everyone in the room, and you will move on to new topics. This is where the upper branches of the tree come in

(i) Other Research Projects:

- How can you extend your research in significant ways? Don’t discuss trivial extensions.

- Are there ways to use techniques developed in your job market paper to address other questions?

- Plans for new research projects unrelated to your dissertation. Keep in mind that you will be asked follow-up questions, so don’t bring-up anything that you aren’t prepared to discuss in detail.

  • Well-developed alternative research projects may have their own set of branches (twigs?). The more organization you can place on your discussion of these topics, the more likely you are to get to what is important when discussing them under a time constraint.

  • Be prepared to answer questions about any paper listed on your vita. (Interviewers may want to make sure that your working papers really exist and aren’t just undeveloped ideas.)

(ii) Teaching:

- What would you most like to teach? Organize a syllabus. What textbook would you use? What are key topics you’d cover?

- Know your audience. Is this a liberal arts college where undergraduate teaching is the focus? Does the department have a prominent master’s program? Is the focus on PhD training?

- What courses could you teach? Be complete but realistic. Some departments (especially smaller ones) will be looking for people who can cover multiple areas, but you shouldn’t claim to be able to teach something that you can’t confidently discuss.

- You don’t need to describe how you would teach undergraduate micro, macro, or econometric theory. Everyone assumes that, with your Duke training, you could teach any of these classes.
- Specialty Teaching Questions:
  
  - A liberal arts school may ask you about your “teaching philosophy”
  - Teaching in a business school is different from teaching in an economics department (lots of team teaching, course content determined for you by the school).

At any point in the interview, you may get a one of a variety of questions:

(1) Big Picture / Miscellaneous Questions (Cawley, 2011):

  - Why is this economics?
  - Why is this an interesting question?
  - Why should we care about your results?
  - If this is important and new, why didn’t anybody do it before?
  - How did you get the idea for this paper? (Interviewers may be curious if your advisor simply handed you the dissertation idea.)
  - (Pointing to one of your paper’s tables): Please interpret and explain this parameter estimate so that anyone could understand it.
  - To what journal will you send it?
  - If you had to guess, what specific comments do you think the referees would give you?
  - In general, what journals do you consider to be the appropriate outlets for your work?
  - When will you finish your dissertation? (Employers prefer that candidates successfully defend before the employment start date.)
  - Which senior economists do you wish to emulate? Why?
  - Tell us the best paper you’ve seen presented in a seminar recently, and explain what made it the best.
  - Based on your reading of the literature and participation in seminars and conferences, where do you see (insert your field here) going?
  - What do you think of the work by this year’s winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics?
  - What is your research agenda for the next five years? What are the next three papers you will write?
  - Will your research use structural models or a more reduced form approach?
  - Do you think you’d be happy in a department like ours? (Especially likely to be asked by interdisciplinary departments.)
(2) Confrontational Questions:

- Why didn’t you use some alternative technique?
- Why didn’t you use some alternative data set?
- What do you get from making so many structural modeling assumptions? What did you learn that you couldn’t have learned from a reduced form model

Work with your advisor to try to anticipate questions that might arise and come up with branches to deal with them.

Sometimes interviewers are simply confused, which may translate into questions that you haven’t considered. If this happens, the safest approach is to react as though their failure to understand is your fault (it very well may be). Apologize and backup until you figure out where you lost people. It is important to not leave any of the interviewers behind

(3) Questions Where You Don’t Know the Answer:

- Occasionally you can simply say “that’s a good question, but I don’t know the answer.” This is better than speculating too much and saying something that doesn’t make sense. If you are speculating about something you haven’t thought about, be clear this is what you are doing.

- You may be able to reorient the question so that it fits one of your branches. If you do this, be up-front about it (“let me try to shed some light on that question by telling you about…”). Don’t look like you are simply trying to dodge the question.

- After the interview is over, write down questions that you couldn’t answer so that you can try to figure them out when you have some spare time.

* If you get a fly-out to a school where you were asked a question that you could not answer, come up with an answer before you go. The same person may ask the same question again, and you should be able to answer it the second time.
(4) Questions About Research With Your Advisor:

- Joint research with one’s advisor is not uncommon, and it is not something that you need to hide from. It simply shows that you and your advisor have common research interests, and your advisor values your input enough to make you a co-author on his/her research.

- That said, you may be asked to identify your contribution to joint research projects. It should not sound like you are simply an RA on the project.

- It is good if you can identify parts of your research agenda that are distinct from those of your advisor.

- “Do you plan to continue to work with your advisor?”
Scheduling Interviews:

- Treat this process like a tactical operation. Begin with a map of the ASSA meeting hotels, and determine the fastest way to get from one to another (walk, cab, public transit?). It is good to get into town a day early and get the lay-of-the-land.

- The typical interview will be 30 minutes long. Occasionally, an employer will ask you to leave 45 minutes for their interview.

- Schedule interviews with 30 minute gaps between them to the extent that this is possible.
  - There are significant delays at the elevators in ASSA hotels on the hour and half-hour.
  - You will not have the opportunity to change hotels and get up the elevator for back-to-back interviews.
  - Scheduling back-to-back interviews in the same hotel is feasible, but you should be ready to take the stairs.
  - Leave time for meals, coffee break, etc… Try to keep your schedule as normal as possible.

- If an interview is running long (which is generally a good sign), don’t be afraid to tell your interviewers that you have to go (but you hope you can continue the conversation in the future). They will respect the fact that you have a busy interview schedule. It is important, though, to not look at your watch while you are interviewing.

Things to consider:

- Have enough shirts, suits, etc… that you can change clothes if necessary. Know where your hotel room is relative to the hotels in which you are interviewing.

- Plan for the weather (this is Chicago in January).

- Carry some simple nutrition (water, granola bar)

- Assume everyone at the meetings is sick. Still, you need to shake their hands. You can’t afford to get sick after the meetings (you may have flyouts very soon afterwards), so carry Purell in a bag and avoid touching your face!
ASSA Official Hotels

1. Amalfi Chicago 20 W Kinzie St
2. Embassy Suites Chicago Downtown - Lakefront 511 N Columbus Dr
3. Fairmont Chicago, Millennium Park 200 N Columbus Dr
4. Hard Rock Hotel 230 N Michigan Ave
5. Hilton Chicago 720 S Michigan Ave
6. Hotel Monaco Chicago 225 N Wabash Ave
7. Hyatt Regency Chicago 151 E Wacker Dr
8. InterContinental Hotel 505 N Michigan Ave
9. JW Marriott Chicago 151 W Adams St
10. Palmer House Hilton 17 E Monroe St
11. Renaissance Chicago Hotel 1 W Wacker Dr
12. Swissôtel Chicago 323 E Wacker Dr
13. theWit, A Doubletree Hotel 201 N State St
Uncomfortable Situations

Unfortunately, interviewers do not always conduct themselves in a professional manner. While rare, these instances can be disconcerting. The key is to not allow them to throw you off your game. For example, I am aware of situations in which interviewers have

- checked email
- watched television (this seems to be a particular problem during the NFL playoffs)
- commented inappropriately on the candidate’s appearance
- engaged in activity that could be considered (verbal) sexual harassment

Some employers (especially smaller schools) may not have reserved an interview suite. You may be interviewing in the hotel room of the head of the interview committee. It is not uncommon for you to be in the room with an unmade bed and a dirty towel hanging over the bathroom door. Ignore these distractions and be professional. If the interviewers are doing their job, they will give you a chair (not the bed) to sit on.

It is inappropriate for interviewers to ask you about your religion, family life, sexual orientation, etc… However, it may be easy for people, trying to be friendly, to veer off-course and ask an inappropriate question. The best way to handle these situations is to be professional and try to re-channel the interview back to where it should be – on your research. If you feel like something really inappropriate happened during your interview, please tell a member of the Duke faculty about it.

An interesting question comes up with respect to information about your family structure. While interviewers are not supposed to ask for information about your family life (and will typically avoid it), there may be information that you want them to know.

Suppose your spouse just got a job offer in Bozeman, Montana and you are interviewing with Montana State. Letting them know that you have a spouse moving there makes it far more likely that you’d accept their offer. If possible, you can try to work this information into the conversation. If not, it may be the sort of thing your advisor can communicate to people at that department at a later point in time.

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Cawley (2011) cites the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) website http://www.eeoc.gov, where you can find Federal statutes and regulations regarding discrimination. He refers to the following quote regarding questions that should not be asked: “From an employer’s perspective, any question pertaining to the applicant’s membership in a protected class (race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, pregnancy, children, age, or handicap) should not be asked. Even though in some cases it may not be per se illegal to ask the question, if there is an adverse employment action down the road, the employee/plaintiff may use the question to show evidence of bias. Further, an employer should understand (but usually doesn’t) that even if the candidate has “opened the door” to a topic that really shouldn't be discussed, the employer should not walk through that door and keep talking about it.”