# The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Interviewer

*Charles J. Stivale*

AS I participate on search committees and in job interviews, I am increasingly struck with the following thought while listening to candidates during the interview event: "How could he (or she) give us that answer? Hasn't anyone explained what interviewers expect in a screening interview?" Of course, at these moments I know I should be listening more closely to what the candidate is actually saying. But I am prevented from doing so by the formal aspects of the response, aspects that are so easily remedied with a clear understanding by candidates of interviewers' expectations. Let me add, though, that the issue of candidates' awareness is equally one of their mentors' responsibility for providing proper orientation before entering the intricate maze of the job search. This essay is an effort to assist that mentoring process and to reflect on the relation between form and substance in the screening interview from the perspective of one seasoned participant who has been on both sides of the process.

Certainly, this reflection is neither new nor unique: an extensive corpus of volumes and essays on the job search and interview strategies has emerged in the past few decades. Limiting a review of these texts to the mid- to late-1990s, the investigator discovers a range of concerns and foci. Notably, one collection of essays about the job search in the fields of English and modern languages, *On the Market* (Boufis and Olsen), offers many valuable insights about the vagaries of the job market, without discussing important details about the screening interview; and, of course, *The MLA Guide to the Job Search* (Showalter et al.) is a mainstay for mentoring graduate students and faculty members. More recently, Lee Skinner has provided invaluable suggestions about the screening interview process from which I draw, and in *Profession 2001*, Walter Broughton and William Conlogue discuss "what search committees want" from the perspective of English department searches.[1]

However, as important as these contributions are to our professional dialogue on this topic, they do not fully develop the specific elements of the screening interview format and exchange, particularly from the interviewer's point of view. That is, despite the many collective efforts to assist job candidates with the steps of the search process—the annual ADE and ADFL mock interviews at the MLA convention come to mind—I have been unable to locate a guide for candidates that specifically addresses the crucial screening interview. Of course, the MLA publishes lists of do's and don'ts for interviewers and interviewees, but these are checklists that are not meant to provide substantial discussion of the question-and-answer exchange. Thus I wish to provide some insights about the structure, possible difficulties, and opportunities for success within the tightly limited framework of the screening interview.

One general remark is vital at the outset: during the many interviews in which I have participated, I have noticed that candidates' success has depended almost entirely on the extent to which they have understood the event as a form of performance. Just as in the dramatic setting, the purpose of the interview is to construct and, figuratively, to flesh out an identity, a persona, through a particularly scripted mode of exchange. In fact, because of the construction of that identity that began with the cover letter, c.v., letters of recommendation, and other materials (see Papp 47–48), this performance must have an altogether effective impact on the interviewers, who will necessarily base their subsequent recommendations on the artificially brief time spent with the candidate-performers.

Thus whether conducted in a hotel room, a public interview center, or some other setting, the screening interview functions as the first of at least two performance events that a candidate faces on the path to receiving a job offer. To reach the second one, the campus visit, 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. This communication is

*The author is Professor of French and Interim Chair of the Department of Art and Art History at Wayne State University.*

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best accomplished if the candidate is relaxed and comfortable in the role, no easy task given the various pressures of the moment. The following sections provide ways through which candidates can conceptualize the setting and action of this performance.

**The Stage and Set: Observing the Unities**

Students of French classical tragedy know well that the structural principles on which the dramatic tension relies are the three unities—site, time, and action—and these unities can serve to conceptualize the screening interview as well, especially in their breach. The unity of interview site within the MLA convention context is generally in a hotel room or in the interview hall made available by the MLA. The unity of interview time is dictated by the likelihood that each interview team will conduct a number of interviews over a two- or three-day period. Hence the entire predetermined scenario must be contained within the prescribed period, usually thirty to forty-five minutes, usually specified to the candidate before the interview. Finally, the unity of interview action relies on the one-pointed focus of the dual-faceted performance exchange between the event's participants.

In terms of site, we know that each of the aforementioned traditional settings (hotel room or interview hall) has its advantages and disadvantages. In the hotel room, candidates are frequently required to sit in the cramped space of someone's temporary bedroom. While some institutions can afford a more spacious suite, these larger rooms are not always available in certain convention cities and even when available, do little beyond providing more breathing room to dispel the artificial atmosphere of the encounter. Yet, despite the potential discomfort in such enclosed space, candidates can be fairly assured of few distractions during the allotted interview period. In the interview center, where there is much less risk of being cramped, the potential for distraction is quite high because of the busy activity at the surrounding tables. Furthermore, a candidate may find the assembled team of the previous day's interview seated a few yards away as the candidate attempts to concentrate on the new team of interviewers without overhearing the nearby discussion. Finally, however spacious, the interview hall is renowned for gathering and emanating an air of collective angst, an atmosphere that all candidates must confront while attempting to maintain their focus.

In terms of time, whether the interview lasts thirty, forty-five, or sixty minutes (the last, a luxury), the interview structure is one that a candidate should be able to foresee and conceptualize in its entirety.[2] A candidate-performer can, however, prepare for both action and performance by learning about the department generally (through Web sites), by requesting the names of the interview participants from the search committee chair, and by then seeking information (on the Web and at the library) about their research interests. We can look more closely at the interview's relation to the focal action and on the performance, to wit:

*The introduction by the lead interviewer* This part should be as brief as possible so that the interviewers can quickly reach the start of the focal action, the exchange of information with the candidate. Any lengthy introduction, especially discussion about the institution, should indicate to a candidate that the interviewers themselves do not fully grasp the crucial importance of fleeting time. The search committee can easily transmit all such institutional information in other ways, either by a mailing to the candidate beforehand or in a handout prepared for all candidates, which is especially useful for interviewers as a strategy to close the interview. What should a candidate do if the introduction becomes long-winded? Grin and bear it attentively, since by the very nature of the exercise, the interviewee must wait for the actual exchange to begin.

*The research question* The usual first question is about the candidate's research—the dissertation if the candidate will soon defend or has recently defended, and other projects in the case of a more experienced candidate. The response to the question about research could itself fill the interview entirely, so the candidate must be prepared to provide as complete and concise an answer as possible, or answers in the likely event of follow-up questions from the interviewers (see "Trapdoors," below).

*Subsequent questions* The interview can split off in a number of directions at this point. One likely follow-up to the research question, almost a corollary, concerns theoretical foundations of the candidate's research. Here the interviewee must be on guard to be articulate about these foundations without losing the interviewers in a morass of critical jargon or too detailed an explanation. Practice in explaining one's work to family or to friends outside the field can do wonders in providing succinct shortcuts to the heart of the relative theoretical light (or darkness).

Depending on the position's description and the hiring institution's size and needs, a likely subject to follow the research question addresses the candidate's teaching background. These questions can vary but are generally related to methodology, text selection, syllabi organization, experiences with particular kinds of courses (e.g., interdisciplinary, honors, undergraduate, graduate), and use of technology in the classroom. Again, completeness and conciseness are the related terms that should guide all the answers. However, one effective shortcut I have greatly appreciated comes in the candidate's careful anticipation of this question sequence, manifested by providing the interview team with a set of syllabi from sample courses at different curricular levels (I return to this strategy below).

*The target language question(s)* For candidates seeking a position in a foreign language department, the interviewers often are required by the campus search committee to conduct a section of the interview in the language that the candidate will teach and do research in. It's often uncertain what the topic of this exchange will be, and in some cases the candidate may be greeted at the door in the target language, with the entire interview conducted in the language. More commonly, part of the interview is in English, since a committee must also ascertain that candidates have a fluent grasp of English. With several interviewers in the room or at the table, it is also very possible that not all the participants will speak the target language. In any of these cases, the candidate should simply respond in the language of address without undue concern for the linguistic capacity of those present. After all, at this point of the interview, it is up to the committee to lead the exchange.

*The candidate's questions* Approximately twenty minutes into the thirty-minute interview (further along in a longer interview), the candidate should be given an opportunity to ask questions of the interview team. I return to this important interview section below, but once again, the candidate can indicate awareness of the time frame by drawing on some carefully prepared questions (usually a maximum of two) that do not require the lead interviewer (or the other team members) to undertake a lengthy discourse in response.

*Closing remarks* The interview leader should and usually will close with information about the time frame of the next phase of the search process—when the search committee will meet and when the candidate can expect to hear something from the department. Hence, there is no need for the interviewee to include this as a question unless no such information is forthcoming from the interview leader as the session ends.

Certainly, the structure outlined above is somewhat flexible, and the order of the questions is not carved in stone. However, one fact governs the movement of questions and responses: the interviewers usually have another candidate coming within fifteen minutes of the interview, and thus the flexibility of question-response length decreases in relation to the interview's approaching end. For the questions posed in the second, third, and fourth sections above, candidates must already have reflected on what they wish to communicate, succinctly and clearly, about their ongoing research project(s), about teaching methods, texts, and syllabi. This earlier reflection is all the more crucial in terms of the performance aspect of the interview, that is, for the goal of projecting one's persona. Just as onstage, any appearance of uncertainty or lack of preparation from the candidate-performer, even surprise at specific questions, can undermine the credibility of the interviewee's responses and create doubt about the viability of the candidacy.

**Trapdoors and Catcalls: What Can Go Wrong?**

As indicated above, the candidate-performer arrives prepared to engage with, possibly even to entertain, an audience. The one principle that I relied on while seeking jobs and attending screening interviews as a candidate has been expressed well by Skinner: "Think of the interviews [screening and on-campus] as a way to meet people who are interested in your work" (18). That is, like any other encounter with one's colleagues, this event always has the potential for being a genuine exchange of ideas and for meeting new people, whatever the outcome of the job search. Of course, this is a best-case scenario, and on either side of the exchange—the candidate's and the interviewers'—missteps can occur, trapdoors may open, and there may even be an occasional catcall from some corner of the room. As Skinner also suggests, "Control what you can and try not to worry about everything else. Most of all, try to relax and enjoy yourself" (18). Let me turn now to some possible difficulties that can arise but for which a candidate can certainly prepare in advance.

I should first mention the importance of a candidate's sartorial choices as an element of the performance. Alison Schneider, Lee Skinner, and James Papp consider the issue of dressing for the interview, and some disagreement exists about choosing between conservative and more adventurous clothing. Papp cites a department chair who affirmed the conservative view, strongly emphasizing the importance of "eye contact, professional appearance, and good grooming" (48). Skinner's suggestion, that one should "wear formal clothes in which you feel comfortable" (17), echoes my (conservative) view: clothing protocols certainly are at work in the interview event, and the interview-performance is simply not the occasion to try out casual clothing or a retro look. Should a candidate decide that making a sartorial, grooming, body art, or metallic-accessory statement is essential to the performance, then it's important to feel comfortable with the choice and also to be willing to assume responsibility for the greater likelihood of rejection.

To the credit of most academic professionals, sartorial matters generally become much less important once the conversation begins. How, then, can things go wrong from the interviewee's side? The missteps usually occur less in the substance than in the form of answers to questions, and here are a few possibilities.

The candidate speaks too little in response to particular questions, what one might call the teeth-pulling syndrome. While I have insisted above on respecting the interview's time frame by observing an economy of one's remarks, the interviewee still has to answer the questions posed. Hence, a response can provide the essential elements but be framed so that the interviewer knows that the candidate has more, much more, to say on the topic. This kind of response requires practice, and Skinner wisely describes her strategies—notably, preparing for research and teaching questions in three- to five-minute statements, with flexibility built in to deal with possible interruptions from the interviewers.

Such a carefully crafted and flexible response stands in sharp contrast to one that provides too little information.

The absence of information for whatever reasons—lack of preparation, unfamiliarity with topics raised, sheer nerves—is often exacerbated when the interviewer tries to follow up and draw the candidate out on the same topic. For example, when the interviewer asks for the names of specific texts that a candidate would select for a particular course, an inability to name titles suggests that the candidate simply has not reflected fully on how to organize the course. Indeed, this question could be an opportunity for candidates to refer to the syllabus that they have brought, precisely to discuss such teaching in detail—concisely! A syllabus is a legitimate prop, one that provides evidence of an ability to prepare a course but that also communicates that a candidate comprehends the nature of the interview process and takes it seriously.

A trapdoor can open at the opposite extreme when candidates speak too much in response to questions, what we might call the bursting-dam syndrome, which Dennis Baron qualifies as "a fatal error" ("Interview"). While an interviewer never wants to cut off any answer, the limited time of interviews forces the interviewers to this solution when candidates reply to a question with an overly detailed response. What these kinds of answers reveal yet again is lack of preparation, that is, an inability to summarize thoughts concisely and, far worse, a lack of comprehension about the interview dynamics. Certainly, one may well arrive at an interview with the adrenaline pumping, but candidates should take care not to translate this physical state into a rush of words. At that point, the performance risks breaking down even in the first answer, because the interviewers will already have tuned out.

A third area of difficulty can arise from a candidate's questions. Of course, posing no questions is unacceptable, since interviewers expect that candidates will have additional areas of concern. Some appropriate questions include those seeking information about the position in the broader undergraduate or graduate program, opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching and collaborative research, the language laboratory facilities and use of technology in the department and university, and details included in the job description (e.g., expectation of community outreach, teaching in translation) but not discussed in the interview. Topics that are best avoided as being premature concern actual compensation, medical and retirement benefits, and any questions that might suggest that the candidate is less than enthusiastic about full-time teaching, notably questions about course reduction, sabbaticals, and leaves. Legitimate questions that one might ask but should present carefully concern requirements for tenure and promotion and institutional support for research. As Baron observes, "[W]e like best those thoughtful queries that open up discussion between the candidate and the committee, just as our own questions are designed to do" ("Interview"), but they should stay within the limits of the interview's final minutes.

In any event, this exchange is ultimately both a performance and a conversation, however artificial and fraught; at the end, the interviewee must be mindful yet again of the time while posing questions. Questions about the departmental philosophy on teaching or the history of the university's general education program can wait until the campus visit. The screening interview is a first chance to meet new colleagues and to share ideas and the fruits of hard work and reflection. As in most social occasions, there exists a particular sort of *bienséance*, that is, a general set of expectations about this form of exchange. But, of course, not all participants follow the same script, which brings me to how some interviewers might approach the screening interview in such a way as to hamper the candidate's performance.

On the basis of my own experience as a job candidate and as an observer of missteps on the part of fellow interviewers, I offer some possible interventions, active and passive, that the interviewee may observe:

*The interviewers evince a lack of preparation or interest.* A number of factors can explain the impression a candidate might receive about lack of interest, most notably the fatigue that inevitably sets in after several hours of interviewing. I recently and regrettably lost track of the interview questions and posed the same question to the candidate that my colleague had posed a few minutes earlier. During one of my own interviews, an interviewer had difficulty turning away from the football game on the TV. Whatever the signs, the candidate can only focus on providing answers to the questions and simply cannot assume lack of interest. Some of the interviews that I thought went most poorly in this regard were actually positive and resulted in the desired follow-up with a campus interview.

*The interviewers speak too much, allowing little time for the candidate, and poor time management in the interview leaves little or no time for the candidate's questions.* As I indicate above, there is little that the interviewee can do to direct the flow of the discussion other than to respond forthrightly and concisely to the questions posed. Papp argues that "interviewers who hog the conversation should be politely but firmly interrupted with a reference to something in their train of thought that the interviewee can usefully respond to. To make a surprising impression is better than making none" (49). Any such interruption must, of course, be handled with extreme tact; often the path of least resistance is to nod politely. A candidate who feels hustled out of the room at the end of the interview can always ask if it's possible to request additional information by e-mail after the convention. However, decisions for on-campus interviews will be made fairly quickly following the New Year, and it is probably better just to wait to ask any other questions until the campus visit, should it occur.

*Inappropriate, rude, or argumentative questions—the catcalls—assail the candidate.* Susan Kress provides some useful strategies for candidates confronted with the inappropriate question, and the MLA has issued guidelines about certain kinds of questions and practices that interview teams must avoid. Baron recounts several tales that include interviewers falling asleep during the interview and inappropriate questions about candidates' religious and political orientations. Unfortunately, no guidelines can regulate individual misbehavior. As with campus interviews, candidates attend the screening interview to learn about the colleagues that they meet on such occasions, and should the interviewers be unable to comport themselves properly in what for them is ultimately (or should be) a sales presentation, then the candidates will have received an important lesson that can inform their decision to pursue (or not) the search for the position.

*Confusion about the interview time or location creates difficulties, even the need to reschedule.* This, of course, is the nightmare scenario. In another essay ("MLA Moment"), I recounted the result of one such miscommunication. I arrived on time (for me) but early for the interviewers, one of whom was clad only in his underwear (he did catch his colleague's glare and then put on . . . a robe!). Another nightmare that I witnessed was a candidate arriving at the MLA convention interview center, where the interview was to have taken place, only to learn that the location had been changed to the department's hotel room—across town but at the same time! These cases really are exceptions, however, and usually interviewers clearly communicate the location and time. One question that a candidate can ask before the convention is whether the department will place its interview information at the MLA Job Center. If so, a candidate can generally gather that information before the interview, saving the bother of calling the department's room and risking interrupting an interview in progress.

*The candidate becomes the interviewer, career counselor, or secretary.* Admittedly, this is a worst-case scenario, that is, meeting an interviewer who is unenthusiastic about the prospect of the candidate's coming to the institution, reveals a general discontent, and even seeks counsel from the interviewee. I would not include this scenario if it had not happened to me—but it did. To waste time with someone who clearly is disgruntled and cannot speak well of the institution is disheartening in itself. Moreover, I was privy to another, related scenario, in which a candidate had to assist the interviewer by managing an incoming phone call from one candidate while the interviewer answered a knock at the door . . . from another candidate. Imagine the phone caller's surprise when the response was, "I really don't know the answer to your question because I am here being interviewed myself! Please hold on."

Some conditions are beyond the control of either the candidates or the interviewers. Weather-related problems occur because the MLA convention takes place in December, and most interview teams are prepared to make additional arrangements, even to schedule a phone interview should that become the only possibility. The physical setting of the interview—hotel room or interview table—can have its degrees of comfort and discomfort depending on how cramped it is, so perhaps the candidate's mock interviews before the convention should include elements of discomfort, fatigue, even noise in the background.

**Award Time: What Can Go Right?**

The answer to the subtitle of this section is so obvious that this risks being a very brief discussion: what can go right is that the interviewee receives a follow-up invitation to visit the campus. At that point, a candidate moves into a new phase of preparation: researching the campus Web site, again if necessary, to glean additional information; preparing or honing a presentation on research; possibly preparing a demonstration teaching lesson. Beyond these efforts, one can do little more than get ready for several days of scrutiny, for meeting colleagues from different departments, for meeting various administrators (dean or associate deans), and for feeling very lonely in a strange place with relative strangers who evince varying degrees of good will and moral support.[3]

However, the vicissitudes of that next phase should not obscure the achievement of having successfully completed the screening interview process. This achievement means in all likelihood that a candidate's performance has allowed the interviewers to feel they engaged in a genuine conversation that they wish to continue. It also means that the persona projected in the screening interview was successful and convincing, communicating "something extra" that interviewers remember distinctly and positively. However, a thirty-minute exchange is not at all like a visit for several days, and if that persona is too much at odds with one's real character and personality, any such disparity will no doubt emerge. Hence, the persona projected to interviewers and potential employers should be as close to the genuine article—who one is as a person—as possible, if for no other reason than that trying to project a false image or imitation is just too fatiguing and cannot be sustained.

Even if the award of a campus invitation is not forthcoming from the screening interview, a candidate needs to continue with the interview process and preparation in ways that take into consideration the needs and limitations of this mode of exchange. My experience is that an interview team and especially the person charged with maintaining direct contact with candidates will greatly appreciate such attentiveness. Since not all search processes result in hires by departments, for a broad range of reasons (from competition to internal decisions and reorientation), a candidate may again be interviewed by the same team.

Furthermore, the reasons for not being invited to campus may have little to do with a candidate's actual performance during the screening interview. This statement may seem counterintuitive, even counterproductive after all I have stated. 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.

## Notes

[1]To these publications, I would also add essays by Bugliani, Moore, and Papp as well as documents in the *ADE Bulletin* and *ADFL Bulletin* archives and on the *Chronicle of Higher Education* Web site.

[2]As chair of the English department at the University of Illinois, Urbana, Dennis Baron provides an alternate format for the screening interview: (1) a five-minute exposition that "[talks] about the university, the department, the teaching load, and research opportunities on campus" and concludes with "what recently successful tenure candidates presented for their sixth-year review"; (2) the interview proper, "a conversation about the candidate's work" that begins with "[t]he 'So What?' question" (i.e., "Briefly describe for us the contribution that you are making to the field of English studies"); allows for additional questions that "invite the candidate to talk beyond the page, to explore the ramifications of an idea, to elaborate those parts of their writing sample that may have seemed [. . .] tentative or unresolved"; and about halfway through introduces questions on teaching in the form of "the 'teach your dream course' variety"; (3) the conclusion, "a candidate-generated question—usually there is time for only one"; and (4) a parting explanation of the decision-making schedule plus an invitation for the candidate to e-mail or call with additional questions ("Job Interview").

[3]Baron discusses the campus visit and the job negotiations ("You're the One").

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