

Top 5 Academic Interview Questions and Answers

by Dr Catherine Armstrong

This article will list the most common interview questions for lecturer positions and suggest some possible answers to them. The examples of good answers are not the only options. There are, of course, many other ways of successfully answering these questions. These are suggestions to get you to think constructively about what you could say.

1. Why do you want to work here?

Bad answer: 'Because I desperately need a job, stupid!'

This is a tough one. What they are asking for is some thoughts on what you have seen and heard about the way they do things that make you want to work for them. The emphasis in the question is on the word 'here'. So, to answer this question you need to know a lot about the university and the department. Look at the person specification for the job. If they are obviously looking for someone who is a good teacher rather than an international researcher, answer this question by prioritising teaching.

Good Answer: 'I wanted to move to an institution like this that prioritises good teaching practice and dedicated pastoral care of students. I believe I can offer this because of [x and y examples of experience from your previous career].'

2. What makes you different from the other candidates?

Bad answer: 'Um, they all seem to be much more confident and professional than me and I am very intimidated'

This question is not requesting that you attack the character of your fellow candidates or compare yourself negatively to them. It is short-hand for 'why should we hire you?' or 'why are you special?' Again think about the person specification and make sure you know what sort of academic they are looking for. Tailor your own responses to that as much as possible. Make sure you give examples from your own history to support your assertions. So, for example, if it is an up and coming department looking for a high-flying researcher to boost their reputation, emphasise your role in this. If there is anything you do that makes you stand out, for example a skill or area of experience, mention that here too.

Good answer: Although I am an all-rounder and could contribute to departmental life in many ways, I know that I have the international research profile that you are looking for. [Go on to give details of books and articles written, prizes won etc.]

I also think I am unique in that I have direct experience of running online courses and would be happy to take a lead on introducing that here if colleagues were interested.

3. What are your plans for research?

Bad answer: 'Not sure. I have been so caught up with trying to find work that I haven't thought about it.'

This question is obviously asking you to look forward to the future, so drawing up one year, five year and ten year research plans is helpful before going into an interview. (If you are completing a PhD and looking for your first job this might sound a little excessive, but believe me, it will make you stand out and be taken seriously). They will not just want to hear about the topics you wish to cover but will crucially be interested in two other areas: research funding and your output (i.e. publications). As well as telling them about your exciting projects, tell them how you're going to pay for them (which grants you will apply for) and what published benefits there will be in concrete terms. Aim high at this point; you don't want to sell yourself short. You *can* write that monograph or get an article into a world-renowned journal. The scope of your ambition will help to sell you as the ideal candidate here, so don't worry about sounding arrogant.

Good answer: 'in the next year I will be finishing up the revisions on my manuscript for *x book* which is due for publication on *x date*. I have several other projects on the go that I wish to pursue after that [give details]; if my funding applications to the *x* and *y* grant bodies are successful I should be able to see those projects to publication by [give date].'

4. What courses could you offer to teach?

Bad answer: 'I am so desperate for a job that I will teach anything you ask me to'.

You want to seem keen and flexible and show that you are happy to fit in with the department's teaching requirements but they also want to hear about new courses that you would like to offer. In order to answer this question you need to look at the department's current undergraduate curriculum. That way you can be sure the courses you have invented will fit in with what they offer now. So if the department already has a course on Nazi Germany, do not propose to offer a new one. You have to be careful here: do not let your creativity run away with you. If you do get the job, your new colleagues might say 'I loved that course you proposed in your interview, can you run it next year?'

Make sure you suggest something that you could feasibly teach, preferably based on your previous experience. Think about whether you would offer it in the first, second or third year, and briefly state what some of your teaching exercises and assessment strategies might be. If you can make use of technology then mention that too.

Good answer: 'I would be happy to contribute to some of the existing courses you run, such as *x* and *y* but I also have a few ideas of my own that I feel would appeal to students in the *x* year of their education. [Describe the course] I feel that it would fit into your

curriculum particularly well because it complements your other courses in x field but is unique because it covers an earlier time period or uses different resources [examples].

5. How would you contribute to the administration of the department?

Bad answer: 'Don't you dare find me a time-consuming admin job to do. That's not why I became an academic!'

Here they want you to talk about your past admin experience if you have any, and to show your enthusiasm for this side of things! Fake it if you have to. Pretending that you are desperate to become the new admissions officer will help you to get the job if that's what they are looking for. If you have experience of running your own courses, managing an entire programme, or doing a specific administrative task then mention that. If you can, give an example of a contribution or innovation that you instituted in that role. If you are at the very start of your career then simply show even more enthusiasm and emphasise the transferable skills that are vital in these roles, i.e. being efficient, well-organised and a good communicator.

Good answer: 'I look forward to having the opportunity to fully contributing to the life of the department. I have a special interest in the area of admissions/ exams/head of year etc'. I had some experience in this role at my last institution and realised that I have the skills necessary to do it well [name them] and actually implemented changes to their policy on x. However, I realise the need for flexibility here and would happily take on the challenge of any administration role that would suit my level of expertise.'