

Job Market Tips

Julian Gerez

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Hi friends! I'm making this document to have a concentrated version of my advice that I can easily share. I'm happy to talk more with folks directly, but you can think of this as a first-stop. If you haven't seen it already, please reach out to me (or any other former Columbia PhDs) for Noah Zucker's job market tips document, which he also created as a public good to be shared and is great. Note that this document is *not* meant to cover the *basics* of the market, e.g., what kind of materials you need, timing, where you apply, etc., so definitely ask your advisors for help with that (Noah's document helps a lot with that too). This is more meant to be a set of "less obvious" tips. Feel free to share this document with any Columbia political science PhD student, but reach out to me personally if you want to share it more widely.

Tip #1: The job market is very idiosyncratic. Don't take failures or successes personally

Ok, so this one is quite obvious but it bears repeating as the very first point. If you take nothing else from this document, take this: the academic job market is wildly unpredictable, and you shouldn't internalize rejection (easier said than done, of course!). Sure, some people get tons of interviews and offers but for me (and I imagine most folks), it's a long, opaque process that doesn't make a lot of sense. I went on the market twice (Fall 2023 and 2024), applied to 200+ positions, and ended up with 3 first-round interviews, 2 flyouts, and one offer. Why those? Honestly, I have no idea. Sometimes what a department says they're hiring for doesn't match what they actually want. A lot of this comes down to timing, internal politics, or just luck. The job I got had two lines (so that helped), and was actually a perfect fit for me—one line was for crime in Latin America, and in both lines they were looking for people to teach quantitative methods—even as these things were not mentioned in the ad(!). Further, one of the members of the search committee worked on capital punishment and I happened to have a side project on that topic. The upshot is that you shouldn't take failures personally, BUT you shouldn't take successes personally either. The more you can detach your sense of worth from outcomes, the more sustainable this whole process becomes. Corollary: I got very lucky, so take everything I say with a grain of salt!

Tip #2: Apply even if you don't perfectly fit the ad

Building off of the previous tip, if you want to increase your odds of landing something, then apply to more jobs! Your number one constraint is time, so unless you do not have the time for it, it doesn't hurt to apply. With the exception of tiny schools/departments (who probably wouldn't be hiring the following year anyways), there is almost no chance the search committee will be composed of the same people from one year to the next, and as far as I can tell there is no "penalty" for applying—even if you are not a good fit (of course, you probably shouldn't apply if you're not a fit at all), so apply widely! Sometimes the fit is more flexible than it sounds, or they don't even know what they want. Worst case? You get practice applying. That said, there's one rule here: do not apply

anywhere if you would not take the job if it were the only one you got offered, because that's how you actually burn bridges and potentially damage your reputation in the discipline.

Tip #3: Think deeply about how you want to “market” yourself

Apropos of the previous tip, in the first year I was on the market I applied pretty much only to political science jobs. In the second year, I expanded my search, applying to jobs in public policy and criminology. I got a job at a criminology department at a public policy school! It was only in the summer after my first time on the market that I thought about applying beyond political science, and it was only in creating the materials (see Tip #5) for these interdisciplinary-type jobs that I realized maybe not a political science job might be a better fit.

Tip #4: Better to have rough drafts early than a “perfect” set of materials late

One big mistake I made the first year on the market is that even though I started very early on making my materials (cover letter, research statement, etc.), I never started sharing them with my letter writers until later on in the summer. This was a huge mistake, because I basically redid them completely anyways and so I wasted a ton of time on “pre-release” revisions with only myself.

Tip #5: Tailor your materials (especially cover letter), and use that to think about fit

You'll have a general “template” for all of your materials, but tailor each cover letter to each specific job. If you're applying to a teaching-heavy institution, foreground your pedagogy and specific course plans. If it's a policy school, explain your policy relevance even if you have a lot of focus on theory. You could also make templates for each “type” of institution (e.g., teaching vs. research vs. policy), which is what I did, but even still, tailor the details of each letter to each listing, such as highlighting ways your research overlaps with what they want, definitely list specific courses if they're mentioned in the ad, etc. In doing so, you might learn that you're a better fit for a specific type of school or department rather than just political science. If you have a personal connection, this could also be something you note in your cover letter. For example, you're applying to a job in Europe and you're from Europe. In your cover letter or in an email your advisor sends (see Tip #7), say you have an EU passport and are ready to move back. They want someone who will accept the job and who will stay. When I applied to a job near Miami at an R2 university that might not have expected someone who got the job to take it (and more importantly, stay), I mentioned that I was raised in Miami, had parents that still lived there and would love to be there long-term. Proceed with caution on this for top jobs, though (see Tip #7).

Tip #6: Use Interfolio Dossier

Save your letter writers the headache of having to send each recommendation letter individually, and save yourself the headache of having to track whether or not your writers have submitted their letters. Very few application systems cannot be handled by Interfolio Dossier. Just buy it.

Tip #7: Signal interest, but do so carefully

APSA has a signaling platform where you can send a signal for up to three jobs. Do not waste your signal on a job at Harvard or a postdoc at Stanford. Everyone wants those jobs. Think of places where there's a big gap between your level of interest and the average level of interest (e.g., a school that is in a potentially not-very-exciting location where you have family and would be genuinely happy to go, or a teaching institution that might be skeptical of Columbia PhDs wanting to come and stay). You can also do this through your advisors: if they personally know someone at a department, they can send a note to say that you're seriously interested. But again, don't have them email someone at Harvard, and make sure they only do this sparingly—if they email everyone, the signal stops being a signal. You can also use advisor emails to signal general interest as a result of a personal (that is, you) connection (see note at the end of Tip #5).

Tip #8: If you have an interview, go as hard as you can with practicing

Set some other applications off to the side. If you got an interview that means they're already interested at a high-level in you! And you only need ONE offer. This is the time to invest!

Some schools (usually smaller universities) will have a Zoom interview at first. This is more straightforward and usually pretty short, just prepare a short elevator pitch about yourself and answer questions about your work, what classes you might want to teach, etc., also be prepared with questions to ask too. For Zoom interviews, it's the time to show you're actually interested in going (see Tip #7).

Others will jump straight to a flyout (this was the case for me with UCI). For a flyout:

- Practice explaining your research to *NON-ACADEMIC FRIENDS*: most of the people you'll meet on a flyout will not know about your dissertation or your subfield, or your methods. You need to be able to explain your work in an interesting and engaging way to intelligent adults who know nothing about it. Practice with family, friends, your dentist/doctor, *ANYONE NOT IN ACADEMIA/OUR DEPARTMENT*.
- Make your job talk amazing. Read this book—[Better Presentations: A Guide for Scholars, Researchers, and Wonks by Jonathan Schwabish](#) and internalize everything about it. Even after doing 2 practice job talks in the department (do not recommend), when I got the flyout at UC Irvine I completely redid my talk based on this, and practiced it maybe close to a dozen additional times or more. I spent the most of my time on this, but felt so great about the job talk after it was worth it. Read the book! It has a lot of advice we are not taught in graduate school and completely changed the way I feel about presentations. I can send you the slides I used for my two separate job talks I did at the two flyouts I got and you will see it makes a world of difference. I don't link/attach them here because I don't want those slides to be shared widely, but you can ask me personally if you have a flyout, and I'll be happy to share.

Additional job talk tips: (1) building off of the previous bullet point, give your job talk to a non-academic audience to mimic the random people in the room who know nothing about your research (e.g., a theorist if you're an empiricist or vice versa), they should be engaged by your talk too, (2) your job talk does not and actually I would even say *should not* have the same structure as your job market paper. This really unlocked a lot for me and gave me more freedom! I took out a mechanism test that I think was clear in the paper but felt like a lot in the talk and overall made the talk easier to follow, and (3) take handwritten notes during the Q&A section (see thank you note bullet later on).

- Look up each person in the department and make a cheat sheet about them. When in doubt, just ask people questions about their work (everyone loves talking about themselves), but don't make it seem like you don't know anything about them.
- This should be obvious, but don't suggest literally anything negative about the school, the location, etc. at a flyout. Even if you are not 100% excited about the opportunity you should be at least a little excited (see the end of Tip #2), but for the purposes of the flyout you should be 100% excited. You are thrilled to move to XYZ city, you can't wait, etc.
- Send thank you notes to everyone you met in a one-on-one capacity or who asked you a substantive question in your job talk (take notes during your one-on-ones and during your job talk, noting down names, you should be an expert with your cheat sheet!). Apparently not everyone sends thank you notes, and this is an easy way to get brownie points. In your thank you note, bring up something personal that they mentioned, e.g.:
 - "I'm also deeply grateful for your thoughtful question during my talk about your student [REDACTED]'s experience in drug enforcement in the United States because it really helped me reflect on alternative explanations for my results."
 - "I meant to ask you more about your public opinion research grant on improving relations between police and the LGBTQ+ community. In other parts of my dissertation, I'm exploring how experiences with law enforcement shape public opinion and political behavior, so I would love the chance to discuss our overlapping interests further in the future."
 - "The parallels between marginalization in your work on police contact and stop-and-frisk in the U.S. and my research on Colombia's drug policy were especially thought-provoking, particularly the idea of individuals being willing to sacrifice the rights of people they don't know for perceived security."

Final Note

Thanks for reading! I hope something here helps you feel a little more prepared or a little less alone. Feel free to reach out if you want to talk through things or vent. I am happy to read cover letters, attend practice job talks, meet to mimic a one-on-one at a flyout, or to just chat. This process is hard, but you don't have to go through it by yourself. Rely on loved ones for care and support. And remember: neither your worth as a scholar and certainly not your worth as a person are determined by the outcome of this process.