

The Job Interview Experience

baked; cover it very close, and let it simmer very gently for six or seven hours; then stir it together, and let it simmer till it is a very rich jelly, which may be known by the same rule as is mentioned in the pocket soup; then take it and strain it through a coarse hair bag. ... Instead of tin boxes, put it into stone jars, keep it close covered in a dry place free from damp.

The soup is to be boiled gently until “the jelly is as thick as glue”. Portable soup was useful for home storage, a precursor to modern instant broth cubes. It was also a staple of sailors and explorers. The Royal Navy began contracting cooks in 1756 to prepare it for voyages, where it was used both as a dietary staple and medicinally. The Lewis and Clark expedition brought along 193 pounds of it for crossing the Rocky Mountains.

Pineapple Cake

6 eggs, separated. 1 cup sugar. 1 cup Zweiback crumbs. 1 Tablespoon baking powder. 1/2 cup of nuts. 1 medium-sized can crushed pineapple, drained. 1 cup XX cream, whipped.

Beat egg yolks and sugar together. Add Zweiback, baking powder and nuts; then fold in stiffly beaten egg whites. Bake in greased 9-inch cake pan at 375° for 30 minutes or until done. When slightly cooled, remove from pan, pour the pineapple over it and serve warm or cold, topped with whipped cream. Serves 6 to 8.

Much has changed in recipes in the past 200 years, from the early 19th-century development of canning to the standardization of food products and baking temperatures to the staple ingredients which were the products of the Chemical Revolution. Baking powder was one of these, a chemical leavener developed in the mid-19th century to replace pearl-ash, a refined form of potash, and as an alternative to yeast. XX cream, a standardized unit in America at the time this recipe was written, is whipping cream. Zweibacks are rusks or, as the supermarkets label them, “French Toasts”. Whether in metric or Imperial, recipes now specify temperatures at which foodstuffs should be baked since oven thermostats can now be taken for granted.

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Please see the Viewpoint webpage for full bibliographic details of the recipes.

Aileen Fyfe follows her advice on job applications with an introduction to the next step...

There’s plenty of advice about **interviews** to be found on the web, with suggestions ranging from what to wear to what to ask. With British academic job interviews, you can expect a panel of interviewers (I’ve faced anything from three to eight) who will have agreed questions in advance. The easiest questions will be those specifically about your research, and you’ll also be asked about your teaching experience and plans if appointed. And then there’ll be a question or two about your wider contribution to the university, possibly asking about civic engagement or interdisciplinary possibilities. Two of the most interesting questions I’ve been asked are: ‘What has been your greatest achievement?’ and ‘What’s been the biggest challenge you’ve faced in your teaching, and how did you deal with it?’ When asked if you have any questions for the panel, take the opportunity to raise any other relevant experience, skills or areas of interest which have not yet come up. It will all be over in somewhere between 20 and 40 minutes, and if successful, you may well get a phone call later that day or the next morning.

Yet the interview itself is only part of the ‘interview experience’. There will be a **presentation** of about 20 minutes, usually in the morning with the interview in the afternoon. You will probably be asked to talk about your research, but you may be asked to include 5 minutes on your teaching. It is a difficult transition to make effectively, but easier if you can show how your teaching reflects or engages with your research. I personally found it easier to do a job presentation earlier in my career, because when you’re straight out of your PhD, it’s obvious what you should talk about. Later, you have to be wary of seeming superficial if you try to show off all the projects you have done since then. It is astonishing how much the reception of what is essentially the same talk can vary between institutions, depending on the interests of the people in that department. Sometimes you get chuckles in the right places and plenty of questions, and elsewhere you get polite silence... It doesn’t necessarily mean your talk was lousy, it may just be that your interests aren’t a good fit with that particular institution.

There are other, informal, elements of the interview experience: dinner the night before, lunch on the day, and perhaps a tour of campus. One of the key things about all these events is that they are opportunities for you to gather information about the department, the institution, and the town, so that you can decide whether you would actually want to live and work there. Such information may

also make your answers at interview more informed or pertinent.

Most institutions offer to take all the candidates out for **dinner the night before**, and people often imagine this to be such an uncomfortable event that they decline the invitation. In my experience, it can be a perfectly enjoyable and certainly very useful occasion. It works best when the dinner is hosted by staff members who are not on the interview panel. Usually, such hosts are very willing to talk about what it’s like to live in the area, what the department’s concerns are, and how the institutional politics work. Some dinner hosts will even volunteer interview tips based on the personalities on the panel!

Lunch on the day is certainly awkward, but usually unavoidable. It typically involves a buffet lunch attended by all the candidates and as many members of staff as care to turn up. I still don’t know how you’re supposed to eat enough to keep you going through the afternoon, while trying to make polite conversation with whoever decides to come up and talk to you – and at the same time, relax before your interview.

A **tour of the campus** may not be offered, but will usually be provided if you ask in advance. Of course, you could do your own tour of campus in your spare time in the morning, armed with an appropriate map. Doing it yourself is more relaxing, but having a guide (usually a junior member of staff, but sometimes a postgrad) will ensure you get to see the most relevant parts of campus – and, also, gives you yet another opportunity to access local knowledge.

I would also recommend finding time to **see the town** itself, before catching your train home. Even if you’re not in the fortunate position of having to choose between this position and another one, it helps to have an idea of the sort of a place you’re agreeing to move to, both for yourself and for any other family members you may have to convince.

If your interview experience is not successful, remember that it’s still useful experience (try to think up better answers to the questions you were asked, for use in the future!). And remember that you may not have done anything wrong – it may be that someone else was particularly outstanding on the day, or simply that someone else better fits the teaching or research needs of the department.

Good luck!

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