

Academic Job Interview

1. Types of Interviews

- a. Phone: may be screening, with one or more members of Selection Committee
- b. Skype: starting to gain in popularity
- c. Convention: may be at booth, or scheduled later during conference
- d. On-site: those on “short list” are invited to come to campus

2. Interview Questions

- a. Teaching: what classes taught or comfortable teaching, type, former responsibilities
- b. Research: past, present and future; know what is cutting-edge in your area of expertise
- c. Interest in the job: why that college/university/position
- d. Fit with the Dept: greatest fear is you will not fit in, will not be a colleague
- e. Questions you ask them
 - i. Departmental goals in next 3-5 years (unless found on the website!)
 - ii. How they see you fitting into their plans
 - iii. Greatest strengths of this university/students/department
 - iv. “2-body problem”: if not a deal-breaker, no need to mention; if it is, some suggest that you wait until the job is offered; others say earlier is better
 - v. No questions for which answers can be found on the website

3. Screening Interviews

- a. Phone
 - i. Use landline, if possible; if not, make sure you have *excellent* reception
 - ii. Answers should be 2-3 minutes long; prepare both 30-second and 2-minute answers to “tell us about your research” (plus 5-minute answer)
 - iii. Smile when you answer; you’ll sound more animated
 - iv. No non-verbal cues are present; verbalize everything (“that’s an excellent question—let me think about my answer”)
 - v. Speak distinctly and slowly (think Fareed Zakaria, CNN)
- b. Skype
 - i. Prepare for phone interview, plus...
 - ii. Check the background of a Skype call where you’ll be sitting (no dirty clothes piles, no partisan posters on the wall, etc.)
 - iii. Dress professionally; may not require suit, but close
- c. Convention Interviews
 - i. May be in conference room, hotel room, lobby—anywhere
 - ii. Check with your mentors on whether a suit is expected for your discipline/convention
 - iii. Don’t schedule back to back

4. On-Campus Interview

- a. Appropriate Attire
 - i. Suit for interview day; 2 days = 1 suit, 2 shirts/ties/blouses
 - ii. Varies by discipline, geographical location, institution
 - iii. Business Casual for informal receptions/dinner (ask contact for details)
- b. Structure of the Site Interview
 - i. 1-3 days
 - ii. Job Talk: adhere to time requirements, backup on flash drive, take hard copies
 - iii. Formal interview w/Selection Committee
 - iv. Social events: lunch, dinner, mingling, perhaps parties
- c. Meetings: Selection Committee, Dept Head, Dean, students, faculty

5. *Tips*

- a. Be prepared: research the dept/university; take copies of all documents that support your application.
- b. ***Practice, practice, practice Job Talk!***
- c. You are always being evaluated: treat the executive asst who sets up your travel arrangements with great respect, as well as the Dean
- d. Ask questions ahead of time: you will have a contact—ask if you are unsure
- e. Take a snack in your bag (not a backpack)—you may have limited time to eat
- f. Wear comfortable, but professional shoes (NOT brand new); cut tags off suit sleeves
- g. Beware the effects of alcohol!

Additional Resources

Website

The Chronicle of Higher Education: <http://chronicle.com/advice>

- Vanderbilt has a campus-wide subscription; set up an account from any campus computer. However, many articles/columns do not require a subscription.

Books

Vick, Julia Miller and Jennifer S. Furlong. *The Academic Job Search Handbook*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008 (4th ed). ISBN 978-0-8122-2016-2
--all disciplines

Hume, Kathryn. *Surviving Your Academic Job Hunt: Advice for Humanities PhDs*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010 (2nd ed.). ISBN 978-0-230-10946-9

Feibelman, Peter J. *A PhD is Not Enough! A Guide to Survival in Science*. New York: Basic Books, 2011 (rev.). ISBN 978-0-465-02533-6

Reis, Richard. *Tomorrow's Professor: Preparing for Careers in Science and Engineering*. New York: IEEE Press, 1997. ISBN: 978-0780311367



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QUESTIONS ONE SHOULD BE PREPARED TO ANSWER FOR JOB INTERVIEWS

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This is a list of job interview questions I compiled when I was applying for college or university positions in American studies, history, and architectural history. I have kept it up to date; every category of question I have ever been asked at a job interview is represented below. You are welcome to link to and use these questions so long as the above credit line is included and that you do not alter the content if you choose to reproduce this page. I would be interested in receiving feedback about the usefulness of the list and I will maintain and update it as I hear from you. Good luck in your job search.

[Send me mail:](#)

1. Describe your research. (Have a good articulate rap down pat in short and longer versions, for experts and non-experts).

1a. What audiences are you addressing, what are the other hot books or scholars in your field, and how does your work compare w/theirs?

1ai. (Rephrased: what is the cutting edge in your field and how does your work extend it?)

1aii. (Answer this question on your terms, not those of your competition).

1b. How will you go about revising your dissertation for publication?

1bi. (be able to answer this in both general and specific ways).

1bii. Question may imply: do you have an interested publisher and where do you stand in your negotiations w/said publisher?

1biii. Question may also imply: we thought there were some significant shortcomings in your thesis, but we like you, so we're giving you this chance to redeem yourself by indicating that you're in the process of addressing these shortcomings in ways that we think appropriate.

1c. What you've said is all very interesting, but doesn't work in your field sometimes tend to border on the (choose adjective) esoteric, antiquarian, (and if postmodern) ridiculous? What is the broader significance of your research? How does it expand our historic understanding, literary knowledge, humanistic horizons?

1ci. Remember that this is a legitimate and important question--may be the toughest one you get.

1cii. Usually asked by someone outside your field. Can you explain the value of your work to an educated layperson?

1ciii. Asks you to grapple w/limitations in your research. Don't be afraid to acknowledge these, particularly if you can use such an acknowledgement to indicate where you intend to go in your research after this. (My doctoral research, you see, is only the necessary first step...)

2. What is your basic teaching philosophy?

2a. Question might be answered quite differently for the small liberal arts college, state branch university w/heavy service teaching load, or graduate-degree granting institution.

3. How would you teach...?

3a. basic service courses in your field

3b. any of the courses on your C.V. that you say you can teach.

3c. What courses would you like to teach if you had your druthers? how would you teach them?

3d. (many committees will want to know which specific books you would use).

3di. this may be an indirect way of ascertaining whether you already have the course in the can.

3dii. Do you, for ex., know what is and is not in print in pb form?

3diii. Which text would you use (have you used) for the U.S. Survey, for English composition, for Am Lit 101, etc.? (Beware: this can turn into a great test of your poise and diplomatic skills when one search committee member says "I love that book" and the next says "I wouldn't be caught dead including that text on MY syllabus.")

3e. Be prepared to talk about several courses, after having sized up the institution's needs.

3ei. Do your homework to anticipate what the department needs.

3eii. Be prepared to talk about teaching its basic service course(s). If you're applying to a small liberal arts College, this could include things like Western Civilization, Western European art history, Brit Lit., etc.

3eiii. Be ready to talk in detail about an innovative course or two that you think the Department might really go for--something new and w/in your expertise.

3f. Take course X. As you would teach it, what three goals would the course achieve? When students had completed your course, what would they have learned that is of lasting value?

4. Tell us how your research has influenced your teaching. In what ways have you been able to bring the insights of your research to your courses at the undergraduate level?

5. We are a service-based state branch university with an enrollment of three zillion student credit hours per semester, most of them in the basic required courses. Everyone, therefore,

teaches the service courses, How would you teach Hist Or Lit or Art 101?

5a. (what they are asking is are you willing/experienced/ mentally stable enough to teach a heavy service course load to students who've likely read fewer than 3 books in their entire lives).

5b. (they may also be saying) No one on the faculty (much less the students) at Mediocre State U has even heard of the figure/subject/method of your research. How do you think you could fit in here? Could you be happy or at least useful in a backwater? (i.e., can she survive in Timbuktu with idiots for colleagues and morons for students?)

6. Your degree is from Prestige Research University--what makes you think you would like to (or even would know how to) teach in a small liberal arts college?

6a. Depending on the college, this may be one or two questions:

6ai. (can she survive in Timbuktu with idiots for colleagues and morons for students?) same as 5b.

6a.ii. do you understand the liberal arts college mission, are you a dedicated teacher, and will you give your students the time and personal attention that we demand from all our faculty members?

6b. At our college, teaching is the first priority. Do you like teaching? Would you survive (and thrive) under those circumstances?

6c. What experience do you have teaching or learning in such a setting?

7. This is a publish or perish institution with very high standards for tenure review--what makes you think you would be able to earn tenure here? (see next question).

8. Tell us about your research program. What are you working on currently? (now that you've completed your doctoral work)? What do you plan to look at next?

8a. Having a paper or a talk ready that showcases a topic different from your doctoral research demonstrates research prowess.

9. Why do you especially want to teach at Nameless College or University? How do you see yourself contributing to our department?

9a. (The real answer to this, of course, is "because I need the job, jerk!" But don't be caught without a well-considered answer. This is a hard question to answer if you are unprepared for it. Be sure you've done your homework).

9b. (for small colleges) We conceive of our campus as one large community. What non- or extra-academic activities would you be interested in sponsoring or participating in?

10. Are you connected? (If you were organizing a special symposium or mini-conference on your topic, which scholars could you pick up the phone to call?)

11. For women only: (Hem, haw) What does your husband think about you taking a job in another state?

11a. How long do you (do you really) plan to stay? The correct answer is "at least until my tenure review." These days, no one expects a longer commitment than that.

11b. How will you handle the separation? (This is asking for reassurance that you plan to live at Nameless U rather than commuting from your husband's home base. The last woman they hired did that and it didn't work out; she was never around).

11bi. they may be trying to ascertain whether you have children w/o asking directly.

11bii. you may want to offer a strategy for how you're going to manage your marriage (we've done this before--it's no big deal; my husband has a more marketable career and can't wait to follow me to your wonderful location; it's none of your business).

11biii. if you're not obviously married (if you're straight or gay and have a SO), committees probably will not bother you with these sorts of questions. It will then be up to you to raise them if they are important to you. Would there be any chance, for ex., of landing a joint appointment for my "fiancee" or "companion"? I don't recommend this unless it's a decisive issue for you. If it is decisive, and it's a job you want, then by all means raise it at the time of the campus interview.

11c. An enlightened and clever search committee might raise this question with a candidate, acknowledging that it's a personal matter but will weigh on your decision to take the job, should you get an offer:

11d. Whether you're male or female, a search committee (assuming they find you an especially attractive candidate) may try to ascertain this sort of information to 1) inform you (because they feel it's only fair) what their institution's policy is on joint offers, or 2) see what it would realistically take to land you (is a joint offer the only terms you'll accept).

11di. (As someone who has been stuck in a commuting marriage for 7 years now, I am obviously not the best person to give advice on how to pull this off).

11dii. A wrong answer to such an inquiry may disqualify your candidacy.

12. You've seen our (religious) mission statement. How would you see yourself contributing to our mission and campus atmosphere?

12a. technically, asking about your religious affiliation/ beliefs is an illegal question. Committees will be more or less direct with you about this question and you can perceive the degree of conformity/support they expect according to how they broach the subject.

12b. they are also trying to tell you that character (defined in their traditional, conservative way) counts at the institution and in town as well; they want you to withdraw from consideration if you won't fit in.

For a checklist of all the generic steps in the job application process, see my [Academic Job Application Checklist](#). For some additional advice on job interviews, see [Academic Job Interview Advice](#). Feel free to send me feedback and suggestions for improving this site.

This page is maintained by Mary Corbin Sies (Dept. of American Studies, University of Maryland, College Park). It was last updated on 1 October 1998.

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The First Interview

By Steven M. Cahn

One of the crucial steps in obtaining an academic position is the initial interview. Understanding its dynamics is critical to success.

If you are a new Ph.D. or will soon be one, you may know the basics of the initial interview: The encounter usually takes place at a professional conference, either in a hotel suite or perhaps at one of numerous desks arranged in a large meeting hall. Two or more faculty members will talk individually for 30 to 40 minutes with a dozen or so candidates and choose about three to come to the campus for a second interview.

You may also know some general rules about first interviews: You are responsible for your expenses; check and recheck the location; wear something that, without appearing unnecessarily formal, will place you among the better-dressed attendees at the conference; and don't be late. In addition, you should know basic information about the institution that invited you.

What you probably don't know is what will happen during the actual interview.

When you're called in and introduced to your interviewers, look them in the eye, shake hands firmly, try if you can to remember a name or two, and, most important, smile. In fact, throughout the interview, you can't smile too much. When smiling, all of us look more approachable and amiable. You'll also put the interviewers at ease, a vital goal.

After all, an interview is not akin to a doctoral defense. You are not being questioned to reveal in your work whether you overlooked an obscure reference or failed to grasp a subtlety in someone's argument. Consciously or unconsciously, interviewers are asking themselves: Do I like this person? If they find you appealing, then those interviewers will give you the benefit of the doubt when they assess your answers. If they don't feel comfortable in your company, the details of your answers won't matter. (Of course, if you exhibit a flagrant lack of knowledge or fundamental unsuitability for the position, even the most charming personality won't help.)

At a doctoral defense, you can be personally obnoxious, yet impress the members of the committee with your grasp of the subject; at an interview, obnoxiousness is fatal. At a defense, you can express yourself with timidity and still win admiration; at an interview, your own lack of confidence leads others to lack confidence in you.

Why are the two situations so different? The members of your doctoral committee are only interested in the quality of your

scholarship, whereas interviewers are concerned not only with your research but with your potential as a teacher and colleague. To award someone a doctoral degree doesn't require anyone to enjoy working or socializing with that person; your interviewers, however, expect to see you often in both formal and informal settings, and they want to enjoy your company.

As to the questions you'll be asked, the first is almost a certainty: "Tell us something about your dissertation." Prepare by having practiced a two-minute answer that explains the essence of your work. The temptation is to go on at length, but resist that impulse. The interviewers have limited time, and if they want to hear more, they'll ask.

Do not assume they are specialists in your area of research, for almost surely they are not. If they were, they wouldn't be searching for someone in your field. The challenge is to convey as clearly as possible the reason your topic attracted you, the insights you gained, and the relevance of your work to broader interests the interviewers might have. Don't use arcane terminology or refer to obscure sources. Your primary goal is not to show off your profundity but to demonstrate how effectively you can communicate. If you can't express yourself clearly to your interviewers, they will doubt you can do any better with students.

After your two-minute summary, you may be asked questions that test your ability to defend your views. Even if an interviewer's inquiry seems elementary, take it seriously. The most simple-sounding question can turn out to be challenging. Moreover, an apparently naïve query may be a test of how well you can respond to uninformed students.

If an interviewer's manner is pugnacious, stay calm. Some like to test how you perform under stress, so even if provoked, don't display annoyance.

When a decision is made regarding whom to invite for a second interview, even a single negative vote can be decisive, for if several candidates are acceptable to all, why choose someone who isn't? For that reason try to remain on good terms with everyone, regardless of the tone of their remarks.

If you're questioned about a controversial issue, don't offer your views in a manner that suggests no reasonable person could possibly disagree. Some of your interviewers probably see things differently. You don't know where they stand, so the safest course is to have your say without scoffing at contrary viewpoints.

You are likely to be asked how you would teach a course in an area of your competence. Be prepared to respond in detail. You might even have available multiple copies of syllabi that you can distribute on request to the interviewers. For each course listed on your vita, you should know the texts you would use, the topics you would cover, the readings you would select, and the methods of evaluation you would employ. After all, you have claimed to be able to teach particular courses; you should, therefore, be prepared to explain

how you would do so.

If you have experience as a teacher, you can rely on it as a basis for answering questions about pedagogy. If you haven't had classroom experience, your answers can nevertheless be effective so long as you have prepared carefully. The decisive factor is not how many courses you have taught but how detailed and persuasive you can be about your approach. Suppose in responding to a question about how to teach a particular course, a candidate replied, "I'm not sure. I'd have to think about that." Now contrast that answer with this one: "I'd use the new, third edition of Smith and Dale and concentrate on the readings in sections two and four." Which candidate would you prefer?

You may be asked whether you could teach a course you haven't listed. If it lies completely outside your areas of interest, say so. But if, given reasonable notice, you might be willing to try, then an effective response is, "I'd like to do it, but I'd need a few months to prepare."

Why are you being asked about that particular course? Obviously because someone is needed to take it on. If you appear ready to accept the assignment, that willingness might be crucial to your being offered the position, particularly if the course is one with which few applicants are comfortable.

If you are asked about your interests in the discipline apart from the subject of your dissertation, be sure to have a couple you can discuss. Even though specialization is the heart of graduate school, interviewers appreciate a breadth of concerns.

Most interviewers realize the inappropriateness of asking candidates personal questions that have no bearing on performance as a faculty member. For example, no one should ask you, "Will your spouse be living with you?" If such a question is posed, be noncommittal. Few interviewers will probe further.

Toward the end of the interview, you will be asked if you have any questions. Because having none suggests a lack of interest, have one ready, but don't use the occasion to embarrass your interviewers by calling attention to a weakness in their program: "Any reason the library holdings are so meager?" Nor should your question suggest that you are concerned with trivia. My favorite of this sort was posed by a candidate who inquired seriously: "Does the school provide free pencils?" He never had the opportunity to find out.

Here's a more promising query: "Do you have a visiting lecture series?" If the answer is positive, you can offer to help administer it. If the answer is negative, you can indicate your willingness to try to establish one. Either way you appear to be an interested colleague, to have the welfare of the department at heart, and to be prepared to do your share of the work.

Ask one or two questions but no more. Time is limited. If you're called back, you'll have the opportunity to raise as many issues as you like. Furthermore, don't ask about salary, benefits, moving expenses, travel money, and other matters involving dollars and

cents. You're being presumptuous by assuming you've already been chosen as a finalist, and you're also asking the wrong people in the wrong setting.

One additional warning: Don't go out of your way to tell jokes. Spontaneous humor can relieve tension and be helpful to you, but you're not auditioning to star at a comedy club. What one person finds funny, another may consider silly.

Before leaving, you're entitled to ask when you might hear something further about the progress of the search. Regardless of the answer, express your appreciation for having been invited, and, as you shake hands, acknowledge by name as many of the interviewers as you can while you do one other thing: smile.

If you've rarely been interviewed, your first attempts are apt to leave you dissatisfied with your performance. Don't despair. As in so many areas of life, practice helps. For that reason, assuming you have even slight interest in a position, you should accept any interview offered. Gradually you'll become more at ease, and eventually you'll know the most likely questions and be able to relax and even enjoy the interaction.

One final suggestion. When nervous, some people become passive, displaying little energy or enthusiasm. Others become aggressive and try to seize control of the situation. Both approaches lead to failure. Just be friendly and display enthusiasm for whatever the interviewers want to discuss. Your goal is to persuade them that you present no problems and can make a positive contribution to the success of their mission. If you succeed in conveying that impression, you'll be on your way to a campus visit.

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The Academic Job Interview Revisited

By Mary Dillon Johnson

Interview season is upon us, so now is a good time to review the ins and outs of that piece of the hiring process.

The Preparation

You've heard it before, but it's worth hearing again: The first step in preparing for an academic job interview is to do a little research on the institution and, if possible, on the people who will be interviewing you.

At the very least, you need to know whether the institution is a large research university, a selective liberal-arts college that values good teaching, a midsize institution with a heavy teaching load and a mixed student body. With the minimum of research you will avoid the mistakes that come with not knowing your audience. You will be able to lead with your own experiences that match the emphasis of the institution.

In making the case for gathering some advance information, let me share the following incident: A department chairman, talking to a group of graduate students, advised them to do what he noticed that good candidates coming through his department did -- namely to be familiar with the fields or major work of the department's faculty members, and certainly of professors in their particular subfields. He noted that one candidate seemed "manipulative" because he had read the recent publications of everyone on the search committee and managed to "drop" something about each person's work during the interview. Manipulative or not, the chairman said, that candidate was the one who got the job.

The Goal

When you walk into an interview, your goal is to convey an image of yourself as a colleague. After all, a colleague is what your interviewers are looking for.

What that means is for you to express your excitement and enthusiasm for your work, for the work of members of the hiring department, and for the institution. You want to convey the feeling that you are already comfortable as a member of the academic profession.

When I say that to a group of graduate students, someone invariably asks, "How can I show enthusiasm without seeming silly?" I'm not talking about being cheerful (though that's not a bad thing) but about showing how invested you are in your work.

Often the next question is "How can I seem comfortable in this

professional role when I still think of myself as a graduate student?" For current graduate students on the academic market, shaking the student identity can be especially challenging.

My advice is to think of yourself in your future role from the time you start applying for jobs, if not sooner. If you are actively engaged in research and teaching and in collaborations with other scholars, it will be easier for you to identify as a colleague. The way you convey your professional comfort in the interview itself is through your discussion of all the things you are doing. You show that you are productive, have had some classroom experience, and have thought about what it means to be a faculty member.

If your job interviews feel a lot like an exam -- with the interviewers asking the questions and the interviewee giving the often qualified and hesitant answers -- that is a telltale sign of a graduate student who still sees himself as a student.

The other extreme can be just as telling: a job candidate pontificating at great length to the interviewers about how a subject should be taught and what faculty members should do. Keep in mind it's a junior colleague they want.

Demonstrating a generally pleasant manner throughout the interview may help you convey your suitability as a colleague. Yes, faculty members want colleagues who will build up the reputation of their department or attract more students or spark their best work. They also want a nice, maybe funny, person in the office next door. Even at top research universities, where excellence is clearly the main criteria, turning on the charm can't hurt.

The Questions

A graduate student I know, in describing a recent interview, told me how surprised she was to be asked a question about how she would teach the introductory course in her field. I was surprised that she was surprised.

There are some standard questions -- and that is one of them -- that you should anticipate. I am not suggesting that you write out a set of answers, memorize them, and deliver on cue in the interview. I am suggesting that you think about the typical questions and decide what points you want to make, what stories you want to tell. Stories drawn from experience are excellent answers to many questions, and it can be hard to pull up the right one on the spot unless you have thought about it ahead of time.

Generally, common interview questions fall into three subject areas: research, teaching, and what I can best label "general." Use the information you find out about each institution and department as the guide to the questions you anticipate.

For example, if you are interviewing at a foreign-language department, be sure you check the department's course offerings to decide whether to lead with your literary research interests or with your solid experience teaching all levels of the language. Be aware that research universities may also ask some questions about your teaching, and teaching-oriented institutions may ask about your

research.

Under the "research" category, "tell us about your dissertation" is a standard question that should never take you by surprise. Be prepared to talk about the work of others in your specific field and compare it with yours. You may well be asked about your next projects.

A few examples of common "teaching" questions: "Tell us about your teaching experience." "How have you used technology in the classroom?" "How do you feel about teaching students of mixed abilities?" You may be asked to talk about your teaching philosophy or to describe a course that you are eager to teach.

Under the "general" category come broad academic questions like "tell us about your long-range plans and commitment to this department," as well as questions about your comfort level in the region or a certain type of institution.

For example, if you are from a major university in a big city and are interviewing at a liberal-arts college in a small town, you should expect to be asked how you feel about such a transition. If you are interviewing at a religious institution, you may get a question about how comfortable you are teaching at such a place -- especially if there is nothing in your vita that shows a connection to that college's particular religious affiliation.

Practical Tips About Your Answers

Give yourself a moment after each question before you answer. Take a breath, collect your thoughts. You want to avoid rushing down a path with an answer, only to find that you didn't want to go there.

At the start of the interview, answer questions with specifics -- a concrete example of a classroom strategy that worked or a course you taught, a specific description of your research focus. Make sure the stories you tell have specific details.

You are most nervous at that point of the interview, and focusing on specifics will ground you. You know about these things; you have experienced them. It's not the time to take flight with generalizations and hypotheticals. Throughout the interview, keep drawing on specifics. They will make every answer more interesting.

That does not mean to avoid "framing" an answer. Some questions really call for you to begin by laying out the principal ideas or goals before you describe particulars. Structure your "tell me about the dissertation" answer by giving an idea of the whole, and perhaps tell the story of how you got interested in the topic before you elaborate on any part.

For the question about how you would teach an introductory course in your field, start with what you want students to learn from the course, and how that determines the curriculum and evaluation, and so on. In short, don't jump right in with a list of texts.

Whenever possible, use the present or past tense when you speak. Talk about what you do and did, not about what you might or would do.

The Telephone Interview

The special challenge of the telephone interview is that you have only your voice to use to convey your collegiality. To help your voice do that work by itself, sit upright, smile, lean forward, and even gesture as you talk into the phone, just as you would in person. You may feel a bit odd, but that activity will energize your voice and make it expressive.

Good luck.

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