

Preparing for the Job Market

A Guide for CCR Students

developed by Collin Brooke and Eileen Schell

STAGE 1: SETTING GOALS (APRIL/MAY)

Your first step in preparing for the job market has already begun. Over the next few months, you'll be meeting regularly with the Placement Committee, discussing strategy, workshopping your application materials, and engaging in the long-term preparation that has already served many CCR students well.

It's important not to panic. We begin this process early so that you have time to work on your materials and are prepared when the application deadlines finally arrive. It's okay, too, if you're not sure about whether you'll be ready in the fall to apply for jobs. You don't need to make that decision until September, and the materials you develop this summer will translate to your search even if you wait a year.

It's a good idea to meet with your dissertation director (and committee) and/or other mentors as you begin this process. You'll be asking several of them for letters, and knowing that you're planning a job search will give them incentive to respond to your work more quickly.

In terms of preparation, in addition to thinking about your "signature" and your search priorities, we recommend reading the MLA Job Information List from the past year or two. It will give you a good sense of what kinds of positions and specialities are appearing recently, and it can also give you some guidance about the vocabulary to use in describing your own work.

The single most important task for you as you prepare to go on the market, though, is to make steady progress on your dissertation. (You'll notice that we return to this theme repeatedly in this document.)

Developing a Signature

Although it may feel reductive, it's important to develop what we tend to call a "signature," a set of terms that best describes you as a scholar, teacher, and potential colleague.

- Think not only about the areas of your scholarship, but about how your work contributes to them.
- Consider how your teaching experiences will translate to other curricula, and how best to capture your strengths
- Translate your administrative work and service into terms that search committees will recognize.
- How would you "tag" yourself?

Setting Priorities

It's a good idea to think about what sorts of priorities you have for the job search. Variables include:

- Type of institution
- Teaching load
- Administrative duties
- Graduate program
- Course types
- Student populations
- Geography/Cost of living

But it's important not to set your sights too narrowly, particularly in this job market. And it's crucial that you talk with those who will be affected by your decisions, such as spouses and/or partners.

Letters of Recommendation

We recommend that you have 3-5 letters, and they should include people familiar with your teaching as well as your scholarship.

As a general rule, we suggest asking your mentors in June if they are willing to write a letter on your behalf, followed by a gentle reminder in August, and then (if necessary) a firmer reminder in September.

It makes good sense to keep your references aware of where you are applying. They may know someone at that institution, and be able to advocate for you.

Important: Recommendation letters have a shelf life. If you end up searching in more than one year, you should *always* ask your references if they are willing to either keep your letter active, or revise it for you. A letter that is two or three years old may not be credible.

STAGE 2: DEVELOPING MATERIALS (JUNE/JULY/AUGUST)

During the summer, you need to continue making steady progress on your dissertation, of course. It may also be helpful to you to look at the application materials from our program's graduates. We keep a job market binder in the Graduate Office that you should browse.

Over the summer, you will develop several pieces of your application packet:

- At least one draft of an application letter
- A revised/updated Curriculum Vita
- Your professional homepage/website
- An online teaching portfolio (your FPP portfolio, e.g.)
- A teaching philosophy statement
- A dissertation abstract, if appropriate

We will provide you with examples of many of these documents, and schedule workshops for feedback on your drafts of them. By the end of the summer, you should also

- Open up your placement file at the Placement Office
 - Solicit letters of recommendation from faculty and/or teaching mentors, including (where appropriate) those from other institutions.
 - Begin to revise/polish your writing sample(s)
-

“Why are these materials so hard to write?”

Application letters, teaching philosophies, and the like can be difficult to write sometimes. They are, for the most part, fairly generic documents. Search committees have dozens of applications to read, and not a single one of them wants to read an application letter that performs a dazzling deconstruction of the notion of application letters. We guarantee this. In the early stages of a search, the committee wants to get a clear sense of who you are and whether or not you are qualified for the position. Your best route to success is to communicate the answers to these questions as clearly and directly as possible. If you do so, you'll have additional opportunities to demonstrate your capabilities.

In other words, consider carefully how to balance your distinctive qualities as a candidate with the generic expectations of the documents you are writing. At the early stages, your emphasis should be on your qualifications. This may mean easing back on dense descriptions of your dissertation, for example, in an attempt to reach the broader audience of the search committee.

STAGE 3: TIME MANAGEMENT/REVISION (AUGUST/SEPTEMBER)



The end of the summer is a *crucial* time for making sure that you are organized. If you plan on applying for jobs, you will be balancing two or three different activities (working on your dissertation, revising your materials for the job market, and/or teaching courses), any one of which can be a full-time obligation. You may not think of yourself as a calendar/schedule person, but you may wish to rethink that, if only for the fall semester.

Pay close attention to the amount of time you allocate to each of your obligations, and block out time on your schedule when necessary; the ratios among these commitments will vary from week-to-week, but it is important to make progress on each one in order to make it through the semester.

It may also be worth thinking about using a notebook or spreadsheet to manage your application process. The advantage of a program like Excel, for instance, is that you can enter in jobs as you find them, and later sort them by deadline, which can help you stay on top of your application process. At the beginning of fall semester, while your courses and the search are relatively quiet, figure out a way to keep them organized that will last you throughout the semester.

September: the Calm Before the Storm

If the summer goes well, you should enter the school year with solid drafts of all your application materials. The first month of the semester is usually not as busy as the rest; it provides you with a good chance to circulate your materials among your mentors, get additional feedback, and really polish them.

Job advertisements often begin to appear in September, but they don't arrive in earnest until early October. As you find positions you will apply for, prioritize them according to your preferences and according to application deadline.

By now, you should also be checking with the placement office to make sure your letters are there. September is also the time to send out firm reminders to your references, before they get busy with the semester.

And of course, keep working on your dissertation!

“How much of my dissertation should be done?”

There is no hard and fast rule, but we have always recommended that you have at least three chapters drafted before you send out application letters. At the very least, you should have defended your prospectus.

There are three very good reasons for the 3-chapter rule, though. First, the more you've written, the more concretely you will be able to speak/write about your project. There is a substantial difference between talking about what you've done and what you will do, and most search committees can tell the difference. Second, the more you write, the more your references can say about what you've done. Finally, schools are more likely to interview and/or hire a candidate who will devote their time to their new position rather than finishing up their degree.

STAGE 4: APPLICATIONS (OCTOBER/NOVEMBER)

The first installment of the paper version of the MLA Job Information List comes out in October, and while it has been superseded by the Online version, application deadlines still take it into account. In other words, most of those deadlines will occur between October 15th and November 15th. It is also worth keeping an eye on other venues, such as the Chronicle of Higher Education, and the H-Rhetor and WPA-L listservs. As ads come out, prioritize them according to your preferences, and begin preparing your applications.

At some point during the fall semester, MLA will send out information about its annual conference, which is where face-to-face interviews will take place. Make plans to attend. The CCR program will do what it can to subsidize this trip, but the amount of our assistance depends on our budget, so we cannot guarantee support. MLA offers nominal stipends for graduate student travel as well.

If you attend MLA, you will need professional attire. If you have an upcoming birthday, it can be a good opportunity to do a little shopping. Also, keep an ear open for sales, both for clothing and for airline prices.

Towards the end of the semester, the Placement Committee will organize three different activities designed to help you prepare for the interview stages of your process. In each case, we try to simulate the experience you will go through as you hit these later stages:

Phone Interviews: Increasingly, schools are turning to phone interviews as an alternative to MLA; in recent years, we've provided practice interviews for our students.

Face-to-face Interviews: At MLA, you are most likely to hold interviews with committees that can range from 2 to 8 people. You'll practice this with a group of CCR faculty, and perhaps a faculty member from a neighboring program as well.

Job Talks: We will schedule you for a practice run of the research presentation that you will give on campus visits. You'll have a chance to receive feedback both on the content of your talk and its form.

How Many Applications?

This depends a lot on how you plan to represent yourself; as a general rule, though, you should cast your net as widely as you can. It is hard to predict how others will read your materials, or what positions you will interview for. The more applications you send out, the more potential options you give yourself.

Focus on the Things that You Can Control

It is tempting to spend a great deal of time, especially early in the process, researching institutions, fantasizing about positions, etc. Try to keep this to a minimum, as best as you can.

You have control over two important aspects of the process: you can put out carefully designed and thoughtfully written materials, and you can make sure that your applications arrive on time. These should be your primary focus during the application process.

Try Not to Fall in Love

This may sound a little silly, but it's important not to become so enamored of what you think might be the "perfect" position that you ignore the others that you're qualified for. You may believe that you belong in a particular part of the country or type of program, but you can't know whether they'll see it that way.

STAGE 5: STAYING THE COURSE (DECEMBER THROUGH...???)

MLA happens during the winter holidays, but the job search marches on. Even if you don't end up with the results you wanted for MLA, there are plenty of additional opportunities: searches that aren't approved until late, searches that are frozen and reopened, late replacement hires, etc. There are many people in our field who have received excellent offers at CCCC or even later. Keep checking the MLA list, as well as the disciplinary listservs, and keep your materials handy.

The ideal result of your phone and MLA interviews is the campus visit, which is an extended, on-site interview. Schools will invite you to their campuses, usually for 1-2 days, where you will have an opportunity for meetings with the search committee, faculty, students, administrators, et al. Most campus visits involve at least one presentation, usually about your scholarship, your teaching, or some combination of the two. Some campuses will also ask you to do a teaching demonstration, where you take over someone's class for a day, and do some sort of mini-lesson related to your own work. Campus visits can be grueling, especially if you have more than one in a short period of time, but they're also a good opportunity to see the campus, meet your potential colleagues, and show yourself off in the best possible light.

Our advice for campus visits is mostly common sense: be yourself, try to maintain a good mood about it, and show an interest in the campus and the people you talk with. And bring comfortable shoes, because you'll spend a lot of time on your feet.

“Is this a good sign?”

It can be tempting to interpret phone calls or inquiries about your materials, or the absence of such, as good or bad “signs” of your success. Try as best as you can to resist this--there is no “standard” process or timeline for searches, and each school will have its own procedures and timelines. It may feel like you've waited an eternity to hear back, when in fact they've just been going through their approval procedures. There is no “right number” of interviews or campus visits; the fact is that it only takes one: a great interview or visit might lead to a fantastic offer.

“Should I negotiate?”

It is always a good idea to ask for everything that you think you will need to start your career--from research and travel funds to computers and software. You may not get everything you ask for, but there is no harm in asking. If you receive more than one offer, or have one offer while you're waiting for another, be up front with the various schools. Be honest about the situation, and honest with yourself about it.

FINISH THAT DISSERTATION!