

Careers in Academia: Introduction to the Academic Job Search

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Editor's note: this document was originally created for the general field of classics, but much of what it has to say is applicable to the academic job search in a variety of fields.

Many classicists who earn Ph.Ds spend part or all of their careers in higher education, whether as full- or part-time faculty, academic librarians, or administrators. Here, we provide an introduction to the academic employment process for new (and soon-to-be) Ph.Ds in classics and affiliated fields who will be seeking faculty positions at colleges and universities.

Introduction: the basics

The two largest North American professional organizations for classics, the [Society for Classical Studies](#) and the [Archaeological Institute of America](#), hold a joint annual meeting and cooperate on placement. For literary classicists in particular and for the general field as well, the SCS Placement Service acts as a useful (though by no means exclusive) clearinghouse for the academic employment process in the US, and for many positions in Canada as well.

The Placement Service facilitates the job-seeking process in several ways. It registers institutions and candidates and provides guidance for the interactions between them. It also collects and disseminates advertisements for positions.

Does this mean that you will never need to look outside the Placement Service for classics positions? No: if you are interested in working (for example) in Canada, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, or elsewhere in the world, you will need to cast your net more widely to look for positions for which you can apply, and you would do well to join and communicate with the professional organizations in your proposed destination country. If you plan to apply for positions at two-year, junior, and community colleges, you should know that very few of these schools tend to advertise with the SCS. If your academic background is particularly diverse--so much so that you might be able to consider employment, for example, in a department of art, comparative literature, religion, or modern languages--you will need to venture into those fields to explore their job listings as well. Finally, ancient

historians in particular should be aware that many history departments will advertise with the AHA (the [American Historical Association](#)).

The general curve of the academic application process as experienced by classicists typically moves through three major stages:

- Online application.
- First-round or preliminary interview, almost always online.
- On-campus or finalist interview.

Assembling a portfolio for academic job applications

The application represents a candidate's first response to an advertised job opening. In classics, the precise anatomy of this response will vary slightly from position to position. Some institutions, for example, require even an initial online application to be accompanied by all supplementary materials; others ask for a very basic initial submission and prefer to request additional information later in the process. (To learn more about finding jobs to apply for, skip down to the "Professional associations and job listings" section, below.)

In order to be ready to respond to the diverse application requirements you may encounter, you should ideally have the following items polished and ready to upload (in any combination) at a minimum by the beginning of the (ordinarily fall) semester in which you are planning to start your job search.

- **Cover letter draft or template.** This will need to be altered, even rewritten, for each position you apply for, but you should still begin organizing your "talking points" and overall presentation. Two pages is a reasonable length for a finished letter, but no longer (the closing and signature may verge onto pg. 3). *The cover letter is one of the most critical parts of your job application.* It is essentially the "essay" in which you present a coherent summary of your career to date and outline your qualifications for the opening you are seeking. It is also the easiest part of your application for search committee members to digest quickly, and so it needs to present you at your very best.

The general expectations for an academic cover letter in the humanities are well-established, and so you should read job-seeking advice, look at examples, and talk with faculty mentors before you begin preparing your letter. Breaking the proverbial mold may not come across as looking original, but rather unprofessional.

- **Academic curriculum vitae** (not a resume). There is a great deal of wisdom out there about what constitutes a strong CV, but you would do especially well to consult the CVs of current and former mentors to learn more about presentation within our specific discipline. Make sure to review a draft of your CV with your advisor at least once before sending it out--and make scrupulously certain that it contains no typos, inconsistencies, or errors.

- **PDFs of publications** (or clean manuscript copies of publications in progress). You may not have produced any publications while you are in graduate school. If you do not yet have any publications, make sure that your dissertation materials (see below) are in excellent shape and present your research to its best advantage.
- **Dissertation chapter** (even better, two chapters) that demonstrates both breadth and depth of technique. This chapter should be fully complete, with no gaps, omissions, or typos; it will serve as your primary writing sample unless you have already published extensively. The second dissertation chapter will provide additional information if any institutions ask for further evidence of your work (or of your dissertation progress to date). Ideally, your dissertation sample chapter should *not* be dominated by a review of literature or history of scholarship.
- **Letters of recommendation from academic faculty.** You should solicit letters from about 4 individuals; most job applications will require about 3 letters, and you may be able to ask specific faculty to address particular features of your career. One of your letters should address your teaching abilities in detail, although that need not be its only topic of discussion.
- **Teaching portfolio.** This is a collection of the “evidence of teaching effectiveness” requested in many job advertisements. In more recent years the trend has been not merely to submit sample course syllabi or evaluations, but rather to present this and other evidence *along with* polished summaries to help digest it, such as descriptions, charts/graphs, and collections of student comments. Here are some of the likely elements that you can move in and out of your teaching portfolio according to the requirements of a given job advertisement.
 - **Syllabi of courses you have taught.** Ideally, these should be courses you designed yourself and taught alone, rather than courses for which you served as a TA. If the latter are all that you have, you should also gather and polish some supplementary course materials that you yourself created, such as review sheets or handouts.
 - **Course evaluations.** The summary sheets that many universities generate are useful, but you should also include comment sheets that record remarks from your students, and a brief covering summary for each course, generated by you, that lists the final enrollment and the percentage of students who actually submitted evaluations. You might also use your cover summary to offer a one-paragraph description of the course itself and the demographic from which it drew its students (e.g. majors, non-majors, freshmen, upperclassmen, etc.).
 - **Teaching philosophy.** This is a one- to two-page essay that not only describes your perspective on teaching, but also articulates your priorities as an instructor and provides some insight into your technique both inside and outside of the classroom. What do you want your students to be able to do, and how do you challenge them to achieve it? How do you encourage participation? How do you assess? How do you see what you do as helping advance your students towards their personal and professional goals? What

lasting skills and dispositions do you try to convey? What methods and resources do you tend to deploy, and why? Try to read some other teaching philosophies and some professional advice on this subject as you write up your own document.

- **Interest statement.** Institutions may request a one- to two-page essay that describes how your teaching fits into their particular campus environment (for example, at a religious institution). Depending upon the circumstances under which you have taught in the past, you may or may not be able to draw upon directly analogous experience. In all cases, however, your response should be articulate, honest, and unforced, even when you must necessarily talk about what you *would* do, rather than what you *have* done.

All of these materials, taken together, will comprise your dossier, also known as your "credentials file" or "job file." It is easiest by far to deposit this with a third-party provider and simply request that copies be sent out on your behalf (at CUA, this is often done through [Interfolio](#), but you might also consider e.g. the [Chronicle of Higher Education Community](#)). Even if you do use a credentials service, however, you will still need to submit your own separate, up-to-date cover letter for each position to which you apply.

Professional associations and job listings

The sub-disciplines of most classicists (broadly defined) are covered by the following professional organizations and associations. If your areas of specialization are sufficiently interdisciplinary (e.g. you could also qualify for a position in a medieval studies program or a religion department), you may want to join more than one of these organizations, monitor their positions listings, and perhaps attend their annual conferences.

To see how your portfolio materials align with the requirements for academic job applications, it is recommended that you begin your explorations at the [SCS Placement Service](#). You can then learn about the other professional organizations using some of the other links below.

- [Society for Classical Studies \(SCS\)](#)
- [Archaeological Institute of America \(AIA\)](#)
- [American Historical Association \(AHA\)](#)
- [Modern Language Association \(MLA\)](#)
- [American Academy of Religion \(AAR\)](#)
- [Medieval Academy of America \(MAA\)](#)
- [Byzantine Studies Association of North America \(BSANA\)](#)

Additional advice on job-seeking

The academic job-seeking process is complicated, and much useful advice has been composed to assist candidates in negotiating the various steps and stages. The first two links address the concerns of classicists in particular, and discuss the process of "going on the market" (also Connolly's title). They contain timeframes, step-by-step guidelines, and checklists for each phase of job-seeking.

- ["Advice for Candidates" \(SCS\)](#)
- ["Going on the Market" \(J. Connolly\)](#)
- [Chronicle of Higher Education](#)
- [Interview questions and techniques \(J. R. Beebe, SUNY Buffalo\)](#)
- [MLA Career Resources](#)

Enhancing your experience

Graduate students planning to seek careers in academia today need to become as *diverse* and *flexible* as possible. Classics departments in both the US and Canada (with a few notable exceptions) tend to be on the small side, and so their faculty members generally need to be prepared to teach a wide variety of courses: ancient languages at all levels, literature in translation, mythology, history, material culture. Faculty also need to be able to collaborate, both with one another and with colleagues in other departments and programs and even at other institutions, to keep programs energized, to design new endeavors that will continue to attract students, and to enhance opportunities to pursue their own research.

As a graduate student, then, one of your goals should be to train yourself in more than one subfield by selecting courses, paper topics, exam specializations, reading list entries, and summer experiences that comprise a coherent narrative of your developing expertise. At least one of your subfields should be in an area that is significantly removed from your dissertation topic, and your teaching experience should ideally reflect this diversity as well. If you are a specialist in language or literature, teaching a course in history or even mythology will strengthen your portfolio; if you are an archaeologist, teaching Greek and Latin courses can be an opportunity for you to highlight your language skills.

Apply for as many special opportunities as are feasible for you: summer institutes, excavations, study abroad, research assistantships, dissertation fellowships, and awards demonstrate not only the quality of your work as a student, but the potential you may hold as a professional. You should also participate in conferences and try to start publishing while you are still in graduate school.

Finally, no matter what the topic of your dissertation is, it should be something that you can stay focused upon for a long period of time; excite others about; discuss with confidence, conviction, and energy; and point to as the foundation for future research projects. Choose your dissertation carefully--it will be a part of your life and your career for a long time to come!--and in consultation with

trusted advisers. If possible, select a topic that can demonstrate your breadth as well as your depth, and that touches upon multiple different areas within the wider discipline.