

## 12 Job Market “Vitals”

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I’ve been asked about the job market a lot lately. Some of the questions are those you’d expect (e.g., on pitching/framing, timelines, preparations, logistics, etc.). Fortunately, there are already many resources available with detailed advice on these topics. They’re written by people with many more years of experience than I have and filled with rich wisdom (see my list of favorites below).

But there are also questions around deeper concerns that lead to longer and less conclusive discussions. They increasingly and understandably include things like, “when can, or should, I push back on aggressive comments?” I continue to learn a lot from these conversations, and while there is rarely a single, straight-forward solution that can be applied by everyone or in every setting, several cross-cutting themes have emerged.

This document synthesizes these themes into what I’m currently thinking of as 12 “vitals” for the job market. Some of them are also addressed in other job market resources, perhaps unintentionally borrowing some tips at times, but I found it useful to summarize them in this slightly different format.

**These “vitals”, which are further described below, include:**

- 1) **Be confident**
- 2) **Know what kind of researcher you are and want to be**
- 3) **Be a curious person**
- 4) **Be a good listener**
- 5) **Make others feel smart (or at least not dumb)**
- 6) **Maintain control of the room as often as possible**
- 7) **Handle questions you can’t answer or irrelevant comments like a pro**
- 8) **Handle aggression and mansplaining like a pro**
- 9) **Don’t dwell on the (real or perceived) failures**
- 10) **Don’t obsess over things that are marginal**
- 11) **Take care of yourself (physically and mentally)**
- 12) **Embrace the chaos**

Remember that this document is *not* a substitute for the other fantastic job market resources out there. It just provides some additional (and sometimes not-so-additional) reflections, and I welcome feedback on both content and framing for continued refinements. Also, remember that all advice should be considered carefully in the context of what works best for you personally.

**For what it’s worth, here are also some of my favorite job market advice resources:**

- ◆ Sarah Jacobson’s “How to Learn to Stop Worrying and Love the Job Market”:  
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.4284/0038-4038-2014.156>
- ◆ John Cawley’s long-standing guide to the economics job market:  
<https://www.aeaweb.org/content/file?id=869>
- ◆ Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz’s rules of writing your job market paper:  
<http://web.stanford.edu/~niederle/TenRulesWriting.pdf>
- ◆ Adam Guren’s job market advice: <http://people.bu.edu/guren/GurenJobMarketAdvice.pdf>
- ◆ Claudia Steinwender’s job market insights: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B4gn459Mbb0-YWpoMkJ4SUFkUDA/view>
- ◆ David Laibson’s job market tips:  
<https://economics.harvard.edu/files/economics/files/jobmarketadvicehandout.doc.pdf>
- ◆ There are also a number of wise people offering great advice on Twitter: @jenniferdoleac @SarahJacobsonEc, @DinaPomeranz, @causalinf, @dynarski

## 12 Job Market “Vitals”

**Vital #1: Be confident.** Doing research that excites you, preparing adequately, practicing your job talk, etc., all improve your confidence and thus the chances that you will emanate confidence. Maintaining this is sometimes difficult under pressure but it’s important. It helps convince others that your work is exciting and interesting and that you’re worth hiring—which is all true, of course—and it makes the process more enjoyable for you.

### *Some explicit pointers:*

- ◆ Remember that you have many reasons to be confident. You’re there because others like your work and think you hold promise as an independent researcher. Remind yourself of this. Over and over again.
- ◆ Power pose. It can’t hurt, right? And don’t be afraid to literally take up space (especially women!) when sitting during an interview or meal, presenting, etc.
- ◆ Relatedly and also from Amy Cuddy: fake it until you become it.
- ◆ Wear something that makes you feel like a rock star.
- ◆ Don’t speak too quickly. Doing so makes you sound nervous even if you aren’t.
- ◆ Work on good posture, make eye contact, use a firm handshake, etc. Get the basics down. This seems simple. However, many people get it wrong. Getting it right not only affects how people perceive you but it also can boost your actual confidence.
- ◆ Have prepared answers to every potential question you can think of or that you have received already. Start on this early by keeping track of questions you get during your practice talk(s), conversations with advisors and peers, etc. Write down concise answers—either the answer you gave, if it was correct and worked well, or your ideal answer for next time. You’ll feel more confident if you have responses to most questions already at your disposal.
- ◆ Be excited about your research and why it matters. Find ways to keep this excitement and energy going for each interview—it’s the first time each set of folks will be hearing it, even if it’s the 100<sup>th</sup> time you’ve said it. Excitement signals some confidence.
- ◆ Find other little tricks that boost your mood or confidence going into each interview/fly-out/job talk. For me, I created a playlist of guilty pleasures and other high-energy songs about kicking ass (read: Eminem’s “Lose Yourself”) that I listened to on repeat.
- ◆ **For the women, under-represented minorities, first-gens**—aim for being just a little more confident than whatever otherwise feels right. In most cases, we under-estimate ourselves and the confidence that we project.

**Vital #2: Know what kind of researcher you are and want to be.** It’s useful to have a clear identity as a researcher. This can change over time, but having an agenda that comes together logically helps others see how you might fit into their department. It also shows that you are passionate and focused. You will be inevitably given some identity anyway (for instance, you may be the “innovation policy person” or the “solar subsidy person”), so you might as well take control of it.

### *Some explicit pointers:*

- ◆ Try to have a single field or (at most) two that intersect in a way that you can communicate. Make sure you can pitch your job market paper (and pipeline) to that field.
- ◆ Be prepared to talk about what’s next after your job market paper, and in reasonable detail. You’ll need strong answers to questions about the ideas, their potential contribution, how far along they are, whether you’ve thought carefully yet about execution, etc.
- ◆ Thinking about the big picture is hugely important overall but can be especially helpful for this. Why is your research important for the world and why should your discipline care? Rewrite the introduction to your job market paper, over and over again.
- ◆ The process of writing your research statement is extremely helpful in figuring out who you really are as a researcher, or who you want to be. As a grad student or a postdoc, there may not be a clear link between your projects so far. But if it seems as though they don’t fit

together to you, it certainly will seem that way to others. This is not what you want. Think through how they're related and tell a story of why you chose this line of research, how each paper fits into that objective, and where you plan to take it.

- ◆ Ask yourself what you to be known for in 5-7 years. Let this drive your narrative and make sure your planned projects or those in the pipeline fit within that narrative.
- ◆ Find example research statements that you'd like to emanate in terms of style and structure.
- ◆ Once your narrative is clear, use your research statement as a guide for how you present yourself in interviews. Find ways to tell this story through your answers to questions.
- ◆ It is quite an inspiring and energizing process to crystalize these thoughts, as it reminds you of why you want to be doing this in the first place! When I was stressed and overwhelmed and discouraged, I re-read my research statement. It was great motivation.

**Vital #3: Be a curious person.** Most academics are naturally curious people—we're doing all of this because we like to ask questions. Don't hesitate to be yourself or express new ideas and curiosities. The more ideas people have the more likely they are to have *good* ideas. Revealing your broad curiosity about the world subtly signals that you may have good ideas. Plus, your potential future colleagues could be mildly entertained and excited to have you as a colleague.

***Some explicit pointers:***

- ◆ Take opportunities in discussions over meals or during meetings or even on walks between meetings to express ideas/curiosities that aren't explicitly part of your current research or even in your field. It reveals that you're able to think beyond what you've already prepared or that your creativity doesn't end with what can be ascertained from your JMP, CV, and research statement, which everyone knows has been scrupulously prepared.
- ◆ If you're not someone that likes to share new or premature ideas on the spot, have a few prepared ideas or random topics of discussion that you've already vetted a bit.
- ◆ These ideas don't have to just be research-related. They could be observations about something entirely unrelated but reveal your curiosity about some phenomenon.
- ◆ Show (genuine) interest in others' work. Ask what they're working on and most excited about at the moment, and ask follow-up questions in an attempt to better understand their motivations, the potential contributions, methods, etc.
- ◆ Asking about others' work not only makes the other person feel good and worthy but it also provides you with useful information. It can help you assess whether you'd be a good fit or enjoy being there. Are you excited by their research? Are *they* excited by their research? Would you enjoy having lunch with these people every once in a while? Did the energy of the conversation increase as you got deeper into the topic? If the answer is yes to these questions, you'd probably be happy there, and they're also likely to feel like you'd be a good fit.

**Vital #4: Be a good listener.** Effective communication requires speaking *and* listening. The latter may be even more important than the former. And your speaking will improve if you're a good listener. It ensures that you're answering the right question. You can also learn a lot by listening, such as what the audience cares about most. This will help you steer the conversation accordingly, while also finding ways to demonstrate that you have thought about what they care about.

***Some explicit pointers:***

- ◆ When you are asked a question, always let the person speaking finish entirely before you start to answer. Do not cut them off assuming that you know where the question is going. Not only could you be wrong, but it's also just rude. Everyone in the room will feel (and remember) the awkwardness.
- ◆ Try to read between the lines. What's the real intent behind a comment or question? It's often the case that the underlying concern is something that this person really cares about. When

responding, try to tie in further pieces of evidence or stories that may speak to those points. But of course, first answer the direct question itself.

- ◆ Relatedly, think about questions and comments as a means for learning more about your audience and your potential future colleagues. You can gather insight on what people may think of you, how they see you fitting (or not fitting) into the department, etc. You can also learn whether you would enjoy being in that department.
- ◆ Remember that people tend to like you if they spend a lot of time talking to you about themselves. Ask lots of questions.
- ◆ If you have a short attention span and sometimes have difficulty staying focused on what others are saying (in general, but especially when you're under pressure), just keep reminding yourself to be present and to listen. This may seem silly or obvious, but I often have to do this when my nervousness or insecurities lead my mind astray.
- ◆ Again, do not interrupt.

**Vital #5: Make others feel smart (or at least not dumb).** People tend to remember how they feel during a meeting or seminar, sometimes more than what is actually said. You want people to associate positive feelings with the experience of meeting you. And academics particularly enjoy feeling smart.

***Some explicit pointers:***

- ◆ Don't be dismissive or condescending, ever.
- ◆ Do not expect everyone to know why your research question is important. Clearly communicate the motivation and contribution as early as possible.
- ◆ Do not use jargon or buzzwords and immediately define ambiguous terms that you plan to use frequently.
- ◆ Practice your spiel or the first 10-15 minutes of your job market talk with intelligent friends who know very little or absolutely nothing about your field or discipline.
- ◆ Ask about the expected audience in advance. Remember that it's usually a mix of non-specialists. If the audience is interdisciplinary, you should pay special attention to explain technical terms, but do not insult people's intelligence. If they're not understanding, it's because you've failed to clearly communicate something.
- ◆ At the same time, you need to convince the experts in your space that you're great. Striking this balance is tricky but relying on jargon and over-using technical terms is not the answer. It doesn't make you seem any smarter.
- ◆ Show the technical stuff, but aim to guide the non-specialists through it by providing lots of intuition.
- ◆ In fact, don't be afraid to just use plain language to explain technical concepts as often as possible. Concisely and clearly explaining something in layman's terms shows that you really understand it super well.
- ◆ This all applies for your writing as well, or at least for the abstract and intro of your papers.
- ◆ If a yes/no question is asked, give a little more in the response to make it conversational and to validate that it's a good point (but only if you're not pressed for time). For instance, you can follow with something like "Yes, that's what I do. And I do it because X, which helps us understand Y." You can also rephrase a question or push it a bit further, but make sure you confirm that you know what is intended by saying "by that I think you mean..."

**Vital #6: Maintain control of the room (as often as possible).** This is particularly important for the job talk, of course. You need to demonstrate your ability to communicate your research, deliver in an engaging manner, respond to questions and criticisms without getting flustered, keep to a planned schedule, interpret when it's appropriate to leave discussion for later, and interrupt hostile or irrelevant exchanges without being confrontational. All while maintaining the right balance of confidence and modesty and never getting defensive. But you can also maintain control of the room during interviews and one-on-one meetings. Steer both the job talk and conversations in ways that focus on your strengths.

***Some explicit pointers:***

- ♦ Oftentimes questions will focus on what you bring up, so don't say things that lead to questions you don't want to answer or can't answer.
- ♦ End the job talk on time and without a massive rush in the end. You never want to be in the situation where you're jumping through 20 slides in the last 5 minutes because you allowed the audience to lead you astray.
- ♦ The most obvious way to avoid this is to practice, practice, practice (and preferably with audiences that are particularly chatty and critical).
- ♦ Plan for the type of audience that will ask a ton of questions. You can then use buttons generously that jump to appendix slides throughout the talk if you have a quieter audience and thus more time for the details.
- ♦ Have a sense of where you ideally should be at different points throughout the job talk (20 mins, 40 mins, 60 mins, 80 mins, etc.), so you can speed up or slow down accordingly.
- ♦ Signpost as much as possible.
- ♦ Don't oversell.
- ♦ People will argue with each other in the middle of your talk or interviews. One way to prevent this from happening is by answering each question or point directly in a satisfactory manner so that others don't jump in (which, of course, requires sufficient preparation).
- ♦ But it most likely will still happen at some point anyway. Try to intervene and take back control of the conversation as quickly as possible (but without interrupting anyone mid-sentence). Politely jump in by addressing the most recent remark and then saying that it's an interesting conversation you'd love to continue later.
- ♦ Remember, this is your time. Protect it.
- ♦ Decipher which questions deserve the most detailed and careful responses versus those that can be addressed with just a quick answer, but **never** be dismissive.
- ♦ Questions that deserve the most attention are probably the ones that, on average, you have been getting frequently. This may be in regards to a known weakness or an area that perhaps is clear to you but which you're not communicating well. If it's the former, be transparent about the limitations and implications. If it's the latter, blame yourself for being unclear and find a better way to explain it.
- ♦ Other questions that deserve attention are those that could derail your story or conclusions. Hopefully you know your research well-enough to identify these.
- ♦ If you have a good response for these, be sure to take your time to convince the audience. If you don't, you may be in trouble. But be concise, precise, and non-defensive. These types of questions and answers are make or break moments.
- ♦ Acknowledge limitations as transparently as possible (this applies to the paper itself as well). Not only is this good practice for accurately communicating the contribution of your research but it also earns you credibility and can disarm the audience a bit.
- ♦ In regards to interviews and one-on-one meetings, steer the conversation in a way that helps highlight your strengths. Spend time, in advance, reflecting upon which strengths you'd like to convey as well as what the department may need.
- ♦ Have a few anecdotes handy that you can weave into responses to different questions as suitable in order to reveal those strengths.

**Vital #7: Handle questions you can't answer or irrelevant comments like a pro.** And by a pro, I mean—in a way that reflects best upon your own knowledge of the problem while also not making the other person feel dumb. And always take the blame when possible.

***Some explicit pointers:***

- ♦ Never, ever get defensive. I can't reiterate this one enough. Remind yourself of this before just about every response.
- ♦ Do not be condescending or dismissive. Yuck. Remember these are all extremely smart people. Appreciate that they're engaging with your work and blame yourself for being unclear, always.

- ◆ Don't be afraid to admit when you don't know something. If you don't have an answer or you know a comment or question highlights a limitation of your work, be transparent and direct.
- ◆ At the same time, do not back down immediately to tough criticisms or questions. There will be times when the confidence of the person speaking will make you want to believe whatever it is that they're saying. That doesn't mean they're right. Take a moment to think. Take a breath, or start your response with "that's an interesting point..." to buy yourself a few seconds. You've been thinking about your own paper for a long time and have adequately prepared, so there's a good chance you do have a good answer.
- ◆ Do not be afraid to disagree with non-defensive and respectful confidence.
- ◆ Avoid getting into a back and forth situation from giving a half-assed answer. It's better to either pause before responding so that you're clear and concise, or say that you don't know.
- ◆ Sometimes questions may seem irrelevant but aren't, and if this is the case, you've probably missed something (which may or may not be nontrivial). This is unfortunate, as it can signal that you don't know your own research well enough. It's hard to recognize if this is happening because you wouldn't be in the situation if you knew the relevance. But think twice about seemingly irrelevant comments or questions to make sure you're not missing anything. Consider asking: "I'm sorry, I don't think I understand. Can you rephrase?"
- ◆ With that said, if there is a way you can reveal a bit more about something you *do* know that's related to a question or comment, take this opportunity to do so (but only if it's directly related). For instance, you can begin a response by recapping your understanding of why that question or comment matters and then taking it a step further.
- ◆ At some point, someone will ask "well, what about X?" and you've already addressed X earlier in your talk. You might be annoyed and have a natural inclination to respond with "I already addressed X." Don't do this. It's better to blame yourself. Those in the audience who were paying attention already know that you did in fact already address X.
- ◆ One approach is to concisely repeat the point, perhaps while referring back to a previous slide/table/graph ("right, good point, and that's exactly what that first table told us") or saying something like "I didn't do a good job of explaining this, let me rephrase".

**Vital #8: Handle aggression and mansplaining like a pro.** And by a pro I mean—in whatever way feels right to you for a professional setting. You may be hyper concerned about offending someone when facing this on the job market, but you have every right to shut it down (respectfully, of course). And doing so will almost always earn you points rather than hurt you. I personally aim to push back in a way that attempts to make clear to the other person, and certainly the rest of the audience, that the behavior is inappropriate/condescending/patronizing. I usually try to use some humor (especially if it's the first instance), as it's a great tool for diffusing tension while also allowing the point to be made. Depending on the situation, I sometimes call it out directly, especially if it's recurring behavior. But this approach doesn't work for everyone and can be risky in the interview/job market setting. Politeness and respect are critical either way.

***Some explicit pointers:***

- ◆ Stay calm and confident! Try to not let it fluster you. Literally take a breath before speaking. Do not get defensive but do not be afraid to address inappropriate or disrespectful behavior.
- ◆ Consider delivering the response in an almost painfully polite manner. It can be quite entertaining. But be firm.
- ◆ Use humor when possible, if it's natural for you. It can lighten the mood and diffuse tension while also showing confidence and allowing you to send a message. See below for one specific example of this approach.
- ◆ If there's a way to halt a mansplaining diatribe by communicating something that you know (with respect to the topic), such as by elaborating on related points or your relevant expertise, that's super. See below for some specific starts to such an approach.
- ◆ If you know that what is being explained to you or an aggressive comment is just flat out wrong, firmly respond with "no, that is not correct".

- ◆ Use your outdoor voice. I'm not kidding. This is helpful for projecting confidence (Vital #1) and especially useful if you're stuck in a situation where you need to regain control of the room and others are speaking or arguing (Vital #6), but it also can in turn reduce aggression.
- ◆ Prepare by having a really good understanding of your work's limitations and have many prepared responses to the questions you know are toughest. It will reduce the chances that you'll get flustered and lose your ground. See Vital #7.
- ◆ Since facing this type of behavior can really catch you off guard, it's useful to have a few go-to comments/responses prepared, so that you can whip them out when needed. Some that I keep handy include:
  - "Your comment makes me wonder if it would be helpful to discuss my background" or "your comment makes me wonder if we should discuss my research on this" (or another variation of something like this, depending on context). This is especially useful for interviews or one-on-one meetings.
  - "You are right, and that is exactly why I mentioned that I..." (i.e., claim ownership when necessary, and you can remind them that you already explicitly addressed whatever it is, if it's clear that your comments have gone ignored)
  - "Yes, that's exactly the point I'm making. As I was saying, ..."
  - "Thank you for explaining that. As I was saying, ..." or "Thank you for reiterating my point. As I was saying..."
  - "I know, that's why I..."
  - "In what ways is that different from what I already mentioned when I explained X?"
  - One that I like to use in meetings when I'm interrupted or someone is speaking over me is "Not that I typically enjoy taking the stage, but I need to steal it back to finish making my point." This may be too confrontational for the job market setting, but you get the point. Some humor or sarcasm is useful with the right delivery.
  - If someone is explaining something to you about your own experience, you can start your response with "In my experience, it's..." (or a more direct approach could be "yes, well of course I know my own experience best, and what I learned is...")
- ◆ You may naturally worry about offending someone by responding strongly, especially when in an interview or job market setting. If someone is offended, this just reflects poorly on that person, not you. And if others don't see it that way, do you really want a job where pushing back against inappropriate and toxic behavior isn't respected?

**Vital #9: Don't dwell on the (real or perceived) failures.** Not every meeting or conversation or response to a question during your job talk will be as great as you'd hope. In fact, many will not be. But it's likely the case that your mistakes are not as terrible as you're imagining. It's natural to remember the things that we would have liked to handle differently more than the things that went well, but dwelling will only hurt future performance. Let it go. Quickly.

***Some explicit pointers:***

- ◆ Try to reset between each interview or meeting. Remember that the past person will not be present for the next meeting, so you have the opportunity to start fresh.
- ◆ I also try to "chop up" my seminars (metaphorically) in ways that allow me to reset and let go of whatever I perceived to have gone wrong at different points. Creating symbolic barriers helps me break negative thought patterns or rumination. You can do this at natural breaks, such as between sections, or even within sections but between different explanations of methods or results if helpful.
- ◆ You can apply the "chop up" method within an interview as well. If you aren't happy with your answer to one question, you don't want this to trickle over to how you handle the next question. Things can spiral. Try to separate the experiences as much as possible as though it's a fresh start with each question (but without creating unnatural breaks in conversation).
- ◆ Remember that weaknesses in your work are not failures, and do not try to hide them. Be transparent and be the first to criticize your own work. Show that you understand the limitations.

**Vital #10: Don't obsess over things that are marginal.** It seems like a lot of people worry excessively about things that just don't matter much at the end of the day, like whether it's appropriate to order a glass of wine at dinner or what shoes to wear. It's especially common for women to worry about attire. While it's important to remain professional, try to not overthink the little things. They're mostly irrelevant or out of your control and it's a waste of your scarce energy that can be used more productively in other preparations that matter more.

***Some explicit pointers:***

- ◆ Focus your preparations and direct your worries towards the things that matter most—your research, the job talk, your pitch, etc.
- ◆ Remember that the small things will not determine whether you get the offer. It's really your paper and job talk.
- ◆ In regards to attire, just wear what makes you feel the most confident (while being professional). This confidence can boost your performance. Don't waste energy worrying about whether it's "appropriate" to wear a skirt vs pants, heels vs. flats, etc.
- ◆ Do not stress about things that you can't control. There's a lot of randomness in this process.

**Vital #11: Take care of yourself (physically and mentally).** Some people adopt the mindset that you can "just survive" these few months and make up for it later. This strategy doesn't work for everyone, and probably not for most people. Do not sacrifice your physical or mental well-being. Protect it. Not only is it simply unhealthy not to, but neglecting your health will hurt your performance. You can't give a great job talk if you've lost your voice after Day 10 of a cold that's gone ignored nor can you think clearly after zero hours of sleep.

***Some explicit pointers:***

- ◆ Continue doing whatever it is you typically do in your daily routine.
- ◆ Do something that uses another part of your brain, or very little of your brain in total. Binge-watch Netflix, chat with friends about non-academic things, etc.
- ◆ Although it doesn't use a different part of your brain, you can avoid losing excitement about your job market paper by procrastinating with other papers and projects. It'll also give you more to talk about during interviews. But don't burn yourself out.
- ◆ See many of the other job market tips resources for some practical advice (i.e., carry hand sanitizer everywhere, take vitamins, try to have at least one full open day between fly-outs, get proper nights of sleep, etc.)

**Vital #12: Embrace the chaos.** Things will go wrong. You will have horror stories. They become funny stories for dinner parties later. Try to remain flexible amidst the chaos. Don't be afraid to laugh at yourself and the ridiculousness of it all.

**Some final thoughts**

- ◆ **Read the other job market tips that are out there.** They are super useful for planning out your timeline, preparing for each stage, and providing practical guidance. Some of them are also quite funny. But keep in mind that not all advice is perfect for everyone or every situation (including everything herein).
- ◆ **Be polite.** I shouldn't have to say more here. Just be a decent human being.
- ◆ **Be open minded.** You may really like a place that you didn't originally know much about once you interview with them.
- ◆ **Be confident.** This was just worth repeating again. And again.
- ◆ **Be yourself.** Don't be a robot. Be a human. Be thoughtful and deliberate but don't be afraid to reveal your personality. It's extremely exhausting (not to mention deceiving) to pretend to

be someone else. And can you imagine needing to maintain that façade for the rest of your career once you land the job?

- ♦ **HAVE FUN!** This is your coming out party. People are actually reading your paper (!), perhaps even with genuine interest. They will have super useful feedback that will improve your work. You're meeting people you've admired for years, and it's an absolute privilege to have the opportunity to pursue your own research agenda. Enjoy meeting your future co-authors, colleagues, and friends!