# Interviews and expectations: Hiring for the 1980s

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**Editor's Note.** At the 1980 Modern Language Association convention in Houston, the Association of Departments of English sponsored a series of workshops on the job market. At the plenary session of that series, several experienced department heads discussed their interviewing methods. *WPA* invited one of these, Arthur Eastman, then president of ADE and English Department chairperson at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, to write up his informal remarks, because they seemed especially relevant to the needs of WPAs involved in hiring composition faculty. We are grateful to Professor Eastman for responding to our request.

What follows is a description of the interviews we conduct with candidates for bottom-rung assistant professorships in English at Virginia Tech. The point of offering it to the readership of *WPA* is that as far as our English Department staffing requirements are concerned, Virginia Tech is typical of many programs throughout the country, and the people we interview tend to be typical of those applying for college teaching jobs in our field today. Their expectations and ours—and the consequent satisfactions or frustrations of both—bear on the health of the writing programs we administer. Our expectations at Virginia Tech are that, if we are intelligently selective, the faculty we choose will meet our institutional needs and help our students write better. More often than not the candidates' expectations, although they contain a fair recognition of the necessity of teaching composition, include a long, strong hope that the teaching of literature will be all, most, or much of their lot a few years into their careers. Since this will not be the case for most of them, it's important to disabuse them as early as possible, which means during the interview.

Our interviews begin with questions about the dissertation. Candidates usually know more in their special areas than we do, so it is with interest that we ask and with interest, we hope, that they answer. What we are trying to discover is something about the candidates' minds—their ability to handle concepts, to organize an expository essay, to accommodate their communication to an audience. We are thinking ahead sometimes to the possible use of a candidate in a particular course in literature or literary theory. But more importantly, we are thinking of the candidates in composition classrooms. We are trying to imagine the kind and power of thinking that they will embody for their students, the rhetorical stances they will exemplify. If they are inarticulate, can we hope their students will be any different? If they cannot make plain the topic on which they

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have been lavishing months and years of study, will they be able to make plain this week's assigned essay?

Sooner or later we put the dissertation aside and ask candidates what they would do if given a classroom and, within the course of a term, the task of bringing 25 raw freshmen to a significantly higher degree of literacy. We are not especially interested in the branch of rhetoric candidates subscribe to, or even whether they have heard of Hairston, Winterowd, Young, or Hirsch (although we wouldn't fault candidates if they exhibited some acquaintance with names so august). What we hope to see is evidence of the candidates' approach to the problem of teaching. If they've been working as TA's in their graduate institutions, they may have followed set syllabi without exploring them. Would the candidates begin the term by having their students write? If not, why not? If they would, hoping to arrive at diagnoses, what sorts of things would they look for? How would diagnosis bear on their teaching? Do they have in mind any sorts of progression—for example, from word to phrase to clause to paragraph to essay or the other way around, or from topics of immediate and personal interest to those more general? We are less interested in the nature of the approach than whether there is one, less keen on the progression than on whether the organization is principled. We ask about grading. Do the candidates consider themselves easy, tough, middle of the road? What do they think grades should indicate? Do they believe in analytic or holistic grading? Do they take points off for errors? Do three errors make an automatic flunk? Answers to questions about how the candidates grade tell us a lot about what they teach, and how.

There are more questions. Perhaps the two most important are how the candidates see themselves professionally five or 10 years down the road, and what they would like to know about us. The answer to the first question—or the lack of an answer—tells us whether the candidates are clear-sighted, blind, or in between. It may also tell us a lot about whether, in the long run, they will be at home in the profession as we practice it or be imprisoned by it. Whatever they want to know about us (and if it's retirement plans or how soon we grant paid leaves, we suspect we're wasting their time and ours), we try clearly and explicitly to communicate the kind of institution we are.

What we are is a very common kind of institution, a state university. Virginia Tech is not the oldest in the state nor the most prestigious. But it is a big, comprehensive, land-grant university with 20,000 students and seven separate colleges. Every college requires freshman English coursework and some require electives in the humanities. Among the electives allowed by most colleges are courses in English and American literature. The number of our majors is not great—about 40 in each graduating class. And we have perhaps 50 graduate students; the M.A. is the highest degree we grant. Since our graduate operation is small, we lack the large numbers of teaching assistants that many state universities have. This means that we staff most of our courses with regular faculty, the people we interview, their predecessors, and their successors. Between 55 and 60 percent of our courses in any one term are freshman composition. Another 10 percent are courses in exposition for business majors or technical writing for engineers, somewhat arbitrarily placed at the junior level but open to all. And between 20 and 25 percent of our courses are sophomore-level introductions to literature.

These are significant statistics. They define the shape of our academic reality. They constitute the mortgage on our pedagogic energies in the years ahead. They mean that year in, year out, assistant professors *and* associate professors *and* full professors will teach more composition than anything else. They mean that during most terms the load will be two courses in composition and one course in literature. Far more often than not the literature course will be at the introductory level—a survey of English, American, or world literature, or an introduction to the genres: science fiction, fantasy, the Bible as literature, and so on. The staff will teach these courses to students who, by and large, are in class not out of heart's desire, but out of curricular necessity. More than half of them will have chosen muteness as their chief classroom strategy. This last point is one we probably won't stress in describing ourselves, but it is an important aspect of our reality and of institutions like ours, nevertheless.

Otherwise, by being as clear as we can be about ourselves, we try hard to help our candidates understand what we are, what in fact most big and middle-sized state institutions are, particularly those without doctoral students to provide a broad, exploitable under-population of teaching staff. And we try no less hard to make clear our expectations: good teaching and genuine scholarship realized in significant publication.

Aware of the cynicism with which such expectations may be viewed, we risk being repetitively explicit about both of them. The teaching must be good or the candidate will never last. Teaching is our first line of activity. We visit classes. We require student evaluation. Good teaching, we tell our candidates, is necessary for tenure and promotion.

Necessary but not sufficient. We expect scholarship as well, research that matters (or its equivalent from poets, novelists, playwrights), research that is brought to completion, that stands the test of rigorous examination. We mean articles or books that illuminate our understanding of literature in any of the scores of ways we all know—historical, sociological, philological, linguistic, new critical, structuralist. We mean investigation into matters pedagogical and rhetorical, into the processes of composing and interpreting. And we mean not simply the beginnings of accomplishment in these realms, but evidence of staying power, of continuing growth.

It is the more important to make these two levels of expectations very clear, very early, because to many people in our profession, they seem at odds with each other. Freshman composition is at one end of the scale (traditionally, the bottom end); significant scholarship at the other (traditionally, the top). And tradition has it that professionals develop their scholarship in tandem with their teaching. Research feeds the classroom, and the excitements and questions of the classroom incite and stimulate research. Generally, according to the tradition, this happens most often, most fruitfully, when the courses taught are advanced and in the area of the young faculty member's particular interests. It simply cannot be that way with us, unless the research relates to writing. At Virginia Tech, as at most state universities, it may be years before the Miltonist can do much more than wave a passing greeting to one of the master's sonnets or odes in the classroom, before the Shakespearean sails again down the Cydnus with Cleopatra, before the dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon glides into the assistant professor's Victorian section. So we work to make clear that although faculty members here will labor in the composition vineyard part of the time, they will be laboring in the scholarly vineyard another part of the time, but on their own. They will not experience the



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traditional reciprocation of teaching and research, but they will be expected nonetheless to grow in scholarly stature. The life of the mind, we propose, is available to us, and a genuine community of teacher-scholars is what we can be, if we have the vision and discipline to bring it to pass.

That this is a challenge, we recognize. We do our best to help our young faculty obtain grants and achieve worthy publication. We read their articles, review their grant proposals, write letter upon letter of recommendation. Thus far we've had a fair measure of success. And our success, begins, we think, at the interview, when we put our questions carefully, and even more carefully analyze the answers, when we frankly describe the kind of institution we are and what we expect of our faculty.



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