

10 job-hunting tips for new librarians

By Philip C. Howze

Remember to smile, network, and rehearse being natural

Having served on many search committees and applied for numerous jobs in academic librarianship, my experiences have led me to believe that there are certain “rules” that prospective job seekers, new MLS graduates in particular, should take care to observe. While following these suggestions will not guarantee the reader a position, they can help to avoid having one’s application placed in the out basket prematurely. The longer an applicant remains viable, the better the chances of getting an interview and, hopefully, a job. Here are ten rules to follow.

1. WHIIFM. WHIIFM, or “What’s in it for me?” is probably the most important rule, because it is the single issue that both the applying and hiring parties have in common. Knowing what’s in it for you makes it easier to answer what is usually the first question asked by a search committee, “What interested you in this position?” Many applicants do not understand that a job notice in librarianship begins with the library’s belief that spending money to provide, maintain, or enhance a service is an important and worthwhile expression of its mission. Applicants who become candidates should ask for a copy of the library’s mission statement.

The library gets a talented, skilled, trainable (or at least somewhat adaptable) librarian who graduated from an institution accredited by ALA: the opportunity to help keep the library profession alive by training new librarians to become valued experts in the storage, retrieval, and use of information; and relatively inexpen-

sive labor which is likely to increase in quality over time.

The applicant gets dough-re-mi with which to begin paying back student loans; the opportunity to begin a career, build a reputation, and establish relationships with other professionals familiar with the quality of one’s work and character; and on-the-job training, as well as access to continuing higher education.

2. One rarely gets a second chance to make a good first impression. The cover letter and resume are the means by which the applicant makes his or her first, and sometimes last, impression.

Cover letters. The purpose of the cover letter is to provide the reader with a sample of your writing ability, as well as to introduce yourself (remember, many librarians were English majors, and chances are at least one will be on the search committee). The following tips are suggested. 1) The cover letter should be no more than 1–2 pages, word processed, on clean paper (mustard stains rarely go unnoticed). Preferred paper colors for the cover letter, as well as the resume, are whites, grays, and light shades of blue. Avoid such hues as electric pink or neon-emerald green. 2) Personalize the letter. There is nothing worse than sending a letter to one institution that was meant for another. It is preferable to type out the full name of the library and position title for which you are applying; avoid the appearance of a form letter. 3) Write only to the job announcement (tailor the thing, because the words in the job announcement were not written with everyone in mind except you). 4) Highlight what you have that the library wants. Choose your words carefully, and introduce yourself in the best possible light. Avoid typos and mis-

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spelled words. Yes, white-out is considered a typo.

Resumes. The resume has but one overriding purpose: to get the applicant an interview. Not a job, but an interview. The idea is to tell the reader enough about yourself to make the person want to know more. The search committee member has not been born who, after reading a hundred resumes, did not come to appreciate brevity. The following tips are suggested. 1) The resume should be no more than three pages if possible, word processed, on clean paper. Why a maximum of three pages? It takes about ten years to build a fluff-free resume. Even if you bring to librarianship extraordinary talents from a previous career, it doesn't take much space to indicate that you are a Nobel laureate or a former president of the United States. 2) Use a good resume-writing guide. Recommended is Tom Jackson's *The Perfect Resume*. 3) Write the resume yourself, if possible; avoid the appearance of "professionally done" vitae. 4) Avoid fabrication. 5) Do not be afraid to toot your own horn. 6) Avoid telling your life's story, it defeats the purpose of the resume. If you submit your resume "by the pound" (and I have been guilty of this from time to time), there is no point meeting you to hear it all again. 7) Always number your pages if more than one, and never write on the verso. Remember, you've been to library school! 8) Do not be afraid to use white space. The reader will be grateful (unless you are a Nobel laureate or a former president of the United States). 9) Never fold a resume. Appearance is also a matter of how you look in the pile. Now, what happens next?

Step 1. After the personnel officer determines that all materials for all candidates are in order, they are forwarded to the search committee. Just as a judge instructs a jury on outcomes of guilt or innocence, the personnel officer instructs the search committee on matters of decision-making, including affirmative action mechanisms. The instructions usually come directly from the job description.

Step 2. Some form of nominal group technique is employed to allow each member of the committee to rate your fitness for the posi-

tion. The ratings of each member are usually compiled, averaged, and ranked. All those found to be unanimously unfit for the position will be notified by the personnel officer.

Step 3. Some form of active group technique is employed to further shorten the list. It is at this point that your advocate (yes, by now you have a friend on the committee) argues for your continuance in the pool. If your candidacy complies with the personnel officer's instructions (remember the job description), your advocate has a good chance of keeping you in the pool. If not, then your candidacy is discontinued. All persons meeting minimum job requirements continue in the pool, and nominal group technique probably begins again to further shorten the list.

Step 4. During the second round of nominal group, candidates are rated for quality, meaning the relative strength of their applications to the "fit" of the position. It is at this point that "preferred qualifications" are often considered, and a new ranking is established for the pool.

Step 5. Group activity begins again for two purposes: last arguments by advocates for their candidates, and to decide which candidates will enter into the next phase of the search, checking references.

References. The search committee seeks references to avoid risk, by asking your references whether you are all you appear to be in your resume. There are no ALA-accredited library schools in Transylvania, for example, but if you list the Count as a reference, it is bloody likely he'll be called. Risk avoidance includes identifying your behavior in stressful situations, interpersonal transactions, job performance, and creative, independent environments. References offer informed opinions about your ability or

potential to do the work desired by the hiring agency, as well as how well you work with others. The bottom line is that there is an active exchange about you, your accomplishments, and your character.

Telephone interviews. The telephone interview is given to

shorten a short list, based on the irrational criteria of how you sound over the phone. It is sometimes given before references are checked, or not given at all.

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Actual interviews. The actual interview does two things: test your stamina, and give you the opportunity to continue building advocates for your appointment. Librarians often decide whether or not you should be hired based on the most irrational of reasons: because they like you. How long does it take interviewers to decide if they like you? Usually, about five minutes.

The rest of the rules are for the applicant who has been invited to campus for an interview. Note that the steps mentioned above do not necessarily occur in the order presented; still, most processes are variations on this theme.

3. Lunch is not lunch, it's an interview with food. Again, some more tips. 1) If given the opportunity, ask to be seated at a round table so that everyone can see you. 2) Do not feel free to smoke or order alcoholic beverages, even if your hosts do so. 3) Do not feel free to order first. Also, do not feel free to order the last supper. After all, it's a job interview, not a crucifixion. 4) Mind your manners. Emily Post or Letitia Baldredge may be watching. 5) Small talk is an art not to be taken lightly.

4. Be willing to travel. The wider the net, the more likely the catch. Remember to do your homework. Check uniform crime reports, cost of living indexes, *Places Rated Almanac*—you know the drill.

5. Be flexible. A not-so-positive experience with the AACR2 in library school does

not necessarily render an applicant permanently unfit for a cataloging position. As a reference librarian, however, I might wonder about the applicant who cannot hold his or her own in a game of Trivial Pursuit. Apply anyway. Do not limit your applications to directorships, particularly in the first year.

6. Smile, though your head is aching, smile, even though you're quaking. Remember these maxims:

A kind word and a gun will get you farther than just a kind word.—*Al Capone*

A good resume and a pleasant disposition will get you farther than just a resume, even if that resume is Herbert S. White's.—*Phil Howze*

A positive attitude is worth its weight in gold. Know when to smile and not to smile. A newly graduated MLS holder who, during an interview, is asked by some sadist to explain the history of the relationship between GPO and NTIS, and smiles through the clearly forthcoming bout of incontinence would definitely arouse suspicion.

7. Be teachable. It is not uncommon, in the Sea of Irrationality, for an interviewer to advocate for a new librarian because he or she thinks that training such a person will be easier than training say, a rottweiler, or an experienced librarian.

8. It never hurts to rehearse being natural. Fear comes naturally; confidence often does not. To appear naturally confident, practice interviewing with another person. If a presentation is required, practice before you make your presentation, even if it's on the plane. So what if the flight attendant refuses to serve you any more drinks? Rest soberly assured that reading word for word from a prepared paper rarely benefits one's candidacy.

9. Exercise extreme caution when asked to techno-speak. There are three reasons for this rule: 1) there is always someone who can do it better than you; 2) there is always someone who actually understands it better than you; and 3) running into either, during an interview, is only a matter of time.

10. Network your little heart out. How? Join ALA. Join ALA's New Member Round Table! Who knows? You may meet your future employer. ■

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