Tips for Academic Library Job Seekers

Résumés/Cover Letters/Applications

Top Mistakes
Typographical errors and grammatical mistakes, recycling documents from other job searches, listing your hobbies (unless directly related to the job), not reading the job posting carefully and matching your qualifications or not following specific directions. Ask an experienced career-minded person to review your documents before sending.

Desirable Length
The résumé should be one to five pages, or as much as it takes to adequately describe your RELEVANT work life. Conciseness and reading ease are important. Organize employment history in reverse chronological order and make sure sentences have parallel construction. Make it very clear where you were employed, for how long, and provide a brief job description. For example:

May 2004 - August 2005
Whatsamatta University
Frostbite Falls, Minnesota [if necessary to identify]
Bullwinkle Library
Reference Librarian
Answered reference questions. Created library guides. . . . .

Tailor the résumé to the job, depending upon your level of experience. Search committees find career objectives listed on résumés trite—put them in your cover letter.

Always address the cover letter to the person listed in the job ad. If no one is listed and you cannot figure it out from the institution’s website “Dear Search Committee” takes precedence.

Use a formal tone. Tailor every cover letter to the job by specifically addressing why you are qualified. If there are gaps in your employment history, explain them succinctly in your cover letter. There should be no fluff or flowery language in the letter. If more than one job is being advertised by an institution, apply for more than one of them only if you are qualified for both (e.g., entry level positions) and you’ve explained so in your cover letter. Search committees may consider the cover letter to be more important than the résumé.

Interviewing/Follow-up

Dress
The applicant’s appearance should be conservative; dark suit for women; dark suit and tie for men. Women should wear hose, low heeled pumps with closed toes, very simple jewelry, no perfume. Your contact may tell you to be casual, but stay on the conservative side.

Attitude
Be alert, courteous, interested, and rigorously punctual. Beyond these, be yourself.

Do your homework. Research the library and the position you are applying for exhaustively. Study the institution’s website so that you know the organizational structure. Most academic interviews last a minimum of one day. Prepare for the interview by compiling a notebook of each person listed on the interview schedule with their biographical information listed on the website. This information puts you at ease and helps you to find a place to begin conversations. Find a connection with every person on the interview schedule. Further prepare by jotting down specific questions you wish to ask that person about the job and the culture of the organization.

Expect several “canned questions,” such as

- What makes you angry?
- What is your working style?
- Describe a time when you had a difference of opinion with a co-worker and explain how you resolved the issue.
- What would you do if a patron asked a reference question about x? (Coolness under fire is generally more important that absolute correctness.)
- Don’t speak negatively about anybody from your previous work experience. The academic library world is a small one.
Salary/Benefits

Ask no questions about salary or benefits until you are offered the job. To get an idea of the salary parameters look at the AALL salary survey and judge where the salary should be by the description of work and the geographic location of the institution.

Follow-up

Write thank you notes to every member on the search committee soon after you get home. Whether the note is by paper or email depends on what format they used to communicate with you. Keep your tone formal and respectful. Immediately after the interview, write down as much as you can remember about the members of the committee and what they each specifically said about the job responsibilities. Use this information to personalize the thank you note by expressing interest in specific projects that were mentioned.

At the time of the interview it is permissible to ask when they expect to make a decision. If that time passes and you have not heard anything, it may mean nothing at all. Academic libraries are tethered to the semester system and action may not take place due to pressing responsibilities. If an extraordinary amount of time has passed it is customary in academia to contact the Search Committee Chair directly to inquire about the final hiring decision.

The right attitude to have when going into an interview is that even if the job isn’t a good fit or the salary doesn’t turn out to be what you need, the interview itself is a networking experience. Do not take it personally if you don’t get the job. Make such a good impression that even if this job doesn’t work out, they will think of you for future openings.