

**CHAPTER NINE**  
**LEAVING ACADEMIA: THE POST-ACADEMIC JOB SEARCH**  
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Most PhD students likely assume they are training for a career as a university professor, but there are many alternative career choices for historians. Whatever your field of specialization, employers in a wide range of sectors want someone with your special set of skills. However, many graduate students and scholars don't know how to make the transition to a "post-academic" career. All too often, they are paralyzed by difficult questions. Will the academy be forever closed to me if I take up a post-academic position? What will my peers and advisors think? Does leaving the ivory tower mean I am a failure? Were all those years in school wasted?

Answering these questions is all part of the process of making a career change. This chapter provides some step-by-step strategies for exploring career possibilities beyond the professoriate. Whether you have an MA, ABD (All But Dissertation), or PhD, you were smart enough to get into academia and you're smart enough to find a way out.

**Fear #1: "But what else can I do with my life?"**

You may have never really seen yourself being anything other than a history professor. Envisioning alternative careers can thus feel daunting and disheartening. But once you get started, it can be fun to explore the career alternatives that do exist for students and scholars with a history background. Former scholars who've come from the social sciences and humanities have gone on to successful and satisfying careers in areas as diverse as broadcasting, union organizing, school-teaching, non-profit research, fashion, life coaching, and consulting.

Post-academics differ from other career changers in a few significant ways, but they can begin formulating their career-change plans using the same basic strategies. Attack the crafting of your post-academic career as you would a research project. Start by consulting up-to-date career planning resources for the best advice on making a career change and how to conduct a job search. You can find many of those resources right on campus at the career counseling centre. You'll learn that networking, for example, is a strategy that never goes out of style and applies to all job seekers. Even as you're trying to figure out what other lines of work might interest you, let everyone around know that you'll soon to be on the job market. You may face some raised eyebrows and difficult questions, but remember, there is no need to apologize. You can prepare some replies; tell people in a polite but firm manner that "academia isn't the right fit for me." Or "I'm excited about pursuing my long-time interest in journalism." Or "the academic job market has dried up and I'm assessing my other options."

In some cases, you may be an unemployed contract instructor or a cash-starved graduate student looking for a short-term post-academic job, not a career. Your first post-academic job might not be your dream job, or even in your field of choice. It might be a transition job that helps you to

pay the bills while you research other careers. One of the best places to look for the stop-gap job is in the university sector, even at your alma mater. An administrative job in the dean's office, graduate studies office or alumni office can pay well and allow you to work in a familiar environment. Other jobs that support the university sector can be found in the offices of major funding agencies (including SSHRC), academic recruitment firms, university presses, and so forth. This work can give you the time, money, and breathing space you need before devoting yourself to serious career planning- or you might decide this is where you would like to stay and advance. Historians have found rewarding careers as writers and producers for the CBC, as public and private school teachers, as fundraisers and policy analysts in NGOs and social justice organizations, and so on.

Aside from networking, you can pursue other traditional job-search or career-planning techniques, including conducting information interviews, perusing job postings on the web, consulting a life coach, securing an internship, finding a head-hunter, and joining a job-search club. Another tip that applies to all career-planners is to focus on your passions. Many graduate students sacrifice their hobbies and interests in the name of dissertation research and writing, but returning to the things you loved may help you formulate your career plan.

### **Fear #2: “All I know is nineteenth-century Norwegian textile production,” Or “I’m not qualified for any other job!”**

Telling yourself that you're under-qualified is perhaps the greatest mistake that potential academic-leavers tell themselves. Many academics think the only thing they're good at is working on their narrow topic of specialization. But nothing could be further from the truth. You are armed with a wealth of skills – many that you had before you even set foot in graduate school – that qualify you for a range of jobs.

In some cases, your academic area of interest will parlay itself into your post-academic career, but this is actually seldom the case. Miuccia Prada, head of the Prada fashion house, has a PhD in political science. Working in fashion might require her to use her research skills, but she probably does not consult her methodology chapter when designing the new spring line. Canadian novelist Camilla Gibb's PhD in social anthropology likely helps her bring fictional characters to life, but it's doubtful she frequently consults her dissertation's bibliography. Debbie Stoller's PhD in the psychology of women probably fuelled her desire to start *Bust* magazine and to write her line of Bitch N' Stitch books, but she probably did not heavily consult her thesis for either enterprise.

In other words, your qualifications for a new career may not have anything to do with the actual topic of your doctoral research. What is usually more important is that you can transfer skills cultivated in graduate school to the new job. On the post-academic job market, you will be judged not by academic standards – how much do you know about this topic? – but on how well you can do the job. Does this mean graduate school is a big waste of time? Absolutely not! At the very least, graduate school allows you to hone a wide range of skills, sometimes even without

noticing it!

### **Fear #3: “Skills? I don’t have any skills!”**

The fear that you have no skills for life outside the academy poses another huge barrier for potential academic-leavers. Thinking about your PhD in terms of transferable skills can be very difficult because graduate students are accustomed to thinking of their skills in terms of intellectual attributes or scholarly achievement. But you can shift your thinking by breaking down the steps you took as a student and scholar, and recognizing the skills that were required to meet challenges and to progress through the stages.

As a graduate student, you are engaged, essentially, as a professional researcher. You handle huge chunks of information – uncovering it, analyzing it, synthesizing it, finding holes in it, speaking and writing about it, and so on. In the information economy, people who do exactly what you’ve spent years doing are in high demand. Not only do you have a wealth of experience in this regard, but it is second nature to you to the extent that you may not even regard your abilities as a set of skills!

Doing what the career-planning books call a “skills inventory” may seem an either daunting or dull exercise, but it is by far the most important thing you can do for yourself as an academic career changer. To secure a post-academic job, it’s imperative that you reframe your work experience in a way that employers can understand. By articulating all the skills you used in academia and beyond, you will help your potential employer to grasp just what it is you can do. You’re also affirming for yourself just how talented and able you are. And as you consider what your transferable skills are, more and more career possibilities will bubble to the surface.

Take the example of teaching. Ask yourself, what exactly is involved in my weekly engagement with my students? It may feel like second nature to you but you are using countless skills when you teach. If your resume states, “Teaching Assistant, 3 Years, Introduction to History; Course Director, 1 Year, Eighteenth-Century European History,” you’re not telling your future employer very much. But if you think about the actual tasks performed, you might find skills like the following:

- facilitated large and small group discussions
- provided oral and written feedback on a weekly basis
- planned and delivered weekly presentations
- conveyed complex information in a clear, accessible way
- used a variety of audio-visual technologies to present information
- developed and implemented grading and evaluation criteria
- responded to student and course director feedback in a timely fashion
- exercised resourcefulness without supervision
- wrote documents tailored for specific audiences (e.g., student handouts)
- set and met weekly, monthly, and yearly goals

This is only a partial and general list to help you start your own teaching skills inventory. Consider the other skills involved in teaching – those you use when attending a course director’s lecture, working with a TA team, reading the textbook, drawing up a lesson plan, grading papers and exams, meeting with students, and teaching students how to write an essay. You will end up with quite an extensive list of skills that are in high demand on today’s job market.

You also developed other practical and marketable skills in your academic life. For example, you didn’t only write a Master’s thesis, course papers, or a doctoral dissertation. You also managed large volumes of information, established a data-storage system (both electronic and hard copy), and edited manuscript copy. You were a creative thinker, you adapted and navigated your way around unanticipated barriers (of the intellectual variety), and saw projects through to completion. You worked independently but consulted others for their expertise. And don’t forget all those "soft skills" that a PhD helps you cultivate:

- you are a master/mistress of time management and meeting deadlines
- you have superior organizational skills
- you learn things quickly and grasp complex ideas easily
- you are disciplined, motivated, and a self-starter
- you enjoy a challenge

Once you learn how to articulate your transferable skills, you will be able to explain in a job interview how well your background – graduate school and all – prepared you for the line of work described in the job ad. Thus, you might not have specific experience working in the not-for-profit sector, but your teaching skills demonstrate the creativity you used to communicate complex ideas, something that not-for-profit organizations need when consulting stakeholders and the media. You might not have the background called for when applying for a job with that multi-national software producer, but your experience shows you’re a quick learner.

#### **Fear #4: “But how can I turn my ten-page cv into a one-page resume?”**

It can be an emotional, even demoralizing, process to “gut” one’s scholarly cv and convert it into a resume. But writing a skills-based resume (rather than a chronological one) that highlights those transferable skills you’ve worked hard to identify will demonstrate just how “hirable” you really are in a range of employment sectors. To find out more about crafting a solid, up-to-date resume, consult one of the many job resume books, websites, or writing services available.

Thorny issues will come up, so best to be prepared. For example, some ABDs wonder if they should mention the years spent in graduate school, or explain why they left without earning the PhD. If you’ve converted the time spent in graduate school into transferable skills, then by all means mention it. But you do not owe a potential employer an explanation for why you left without a doctorate.

The matter of references can be difficult, even for the most successful graduate student. Non-academic employers will typically ask for names of people to whom you directly reported, which may – or may not – make your doctoral supervisor the best person to provide a reference. If you left academia largely or partly because of a difficult or destructive relationship with your supervisor, you will not want this reference. But do not despair; there are others you can ask. Remember, you need referees who will speak to your ability to show up on time, grasp concepts quickly, stay focused on tasks and meet deadlines, rather than to the strength of your scholarship. If you don't have recent non-academic experience, you can use faculty for whom you conducted research and with whom you established a good rapport. You can ask a course director for whom you TA'ed. You could even go back to professors from your BA days if you're still in touch with them.

However, you should inform your references in advance that the job for which you are applying is not an academic one so that they can shift the standards of praise and evaluation – for example, from “she was in the top 10 percent of my class,” to “she always came to meetings on time and spoke in an informed and intelligent manner.” As with academic letters, it is always a good idea to ask potential referees if they will be able to provide a strong reference for you. If you sense any hesitation, move on to someone else. If necessary, you might call upon a colleague with whom you edited a collection or worked on a journal. This is not a senior person to whom you reported but he or she can testify to your work ethic and organizational skills.

Here are some additional tips:

- Whether you are consulting someone in an information interview or being interviewed yourself for a position, be gracious and say thank you. It will help get you remembered.
- Be bold. You'll distinguish yourself from the rest of the pack, prove how courageous you really are (especially to yourself) and affirm that you can take charge.
- Be persistent. When you've applied for a job you're really interested in and you don't hear back right away, don't be afraid to call. If you get turned down for your dream job, reject rejection; with persistence, you will land in the sector you want.
- Consider self-employment. If you have a flair for writing, why not try freelancing? If your line of study is marketable, consider consulting.
- While you might not need it, consider training in a totally different field. You might decide history is not for you and that your true passion is to become a social worker or an actor or a chef. Consider taking the plunge.

Making the transition from an academic to a post-academic career can be frightening. The process of transferring to a new and satisfying career can take one or two or even several years. You need to deal with the emotional and psychological issues as well as focus on the concrete work of re-tooling your career. The good news is that very few former academics regret leaving academia after re-establishing themselves in a line of work that rewards them for doing what they enjoy or love. Post-academics in new careers relish the guilt-free leisure time and the freedom from having to constantly turn to funding agencies and apply for research grants. Others

earn salaries that are higher than that of an assistant professor. Still others cherish the opportunity to pursue a life-long passion. If you decide that you want or need to pursue a career outside that of university professor, a certain amount of planning, networking, self-reflection, and, yes, luck, will help you to establish a new and rewarding career.