



Ask Academic Abby about **PSW** What's bugging you right now? **Send details with a link to the problem to [Academic Abby Submission Form](#)**

Dear Academic Abby,,

I graduated last March with a PhD in theology and culture from an Evangelical seminary. I also received my bachelor's and master's degrees from Evangelical schools. Over the last year and a half, however, I have deconverted, if you will, from Christianity and now consider myself agnostic tending toward atheist. Considering my Evangelical educational background, I feel like this has put me in an extremely difficult position vocationally. On paper, my background is best suited for Evangelical theological schools; but in reality, I could not teach at such places because of the faith commitments those schools expect faculty to agree to, nor do I want to teach at such schools. What do you recommend? Do I try to focus on publishing and making a name for myself in ways that are not constrained by my Christian past (e.g., writing on religion and culture, doing book reviews, presenting papers, etc. from my current perspective)? Do I have a realistic chance at getting hired at a state university or even a nonreligious liberal arts college given the schools I've attended? Please help!

**Yours,
Born Again Agnostic**

Dear Born Again Agnostic,

You are in a tough situation. It's hard to say what your chances are of being hired at the kind of place where you would like to teach, especially in this tough job market.

Probably the best way forward is not so much to deliberately set about publishing articles that counter your education as to follow your genuine interests now. What do you want to be pursuing? Apply for the jobs you would like to have and be forthright about your background. It's entirely appropriate to say in a cover letter much of what you said here: that while your background might indicate that you belong in an Evangelical school, your beliefs and interests have since changed. Then lay out what you do want to study and teach and your qualifications for doing so. If you intend to turn your dissertation into a first book, you might talk about how you intend to reframe it from your new perspective. This would both underscore the ways in which you have changed and help establish a new scholarly trajectory that would be appropriate for a secular institution. As time goes on, your current work will become increasingly important and the significance of your education to employers will recede.

Good luck to you,
Abby

Dear Academic Abby,

Is it inappropriate to submit conference presentation proposals drawn from an article one is also submitting to journals? It seems impossible not to do this, yet what if the article is accepted for publication and the proposal is also accepted for a conference presentation such that the print version comes out before the conference?

This would be an over-the-moon best case scenario for my CV, but I am wondering how it would be received by those attending the conference? Thank you in advance for any response you are able to provide.

**Yours,
Already Worrying about Success Which Has Not Arrived!**

Dear Already Worrying,

It is fine to propose a paper for a conference using material which is under review at a journal. I would not worry too much over the scenario you speculate about — an article actually appearing in print between the time you submit a conference proposal (and have it accepted) and the time the conference takes place. First, journals have long lead times. A year is not unusual from the time you first submit an article for review until it is published, and several months or more can elapse between acceptance and publication. Second, although we like to think that the scholarly world waits on tenterhooks for our pearls of wisdom to appear, the reality is even if your article were to have appeared, most people in a conference audience would probably not have yet read it. In the unlikely event that your paper is published before your conference presentation, you can take steps to build on that achievement rather than merely repeat yourself. Conference presentations typically accommodate up to ten pages of material, perhaps a third the length of a journal article. Thus, it is often the framing as much as the findings that matter. You can allude to the publication (“as I recently argued elsewhere ...”) and then take a slightly different angle on the material, pursuing new connections or implications, possibly expanding into the territory of your next article. In doing so, you introduce your work to those in the audience who have not read the article and bring new ideas to the fore for those who have.

Wishing you success in publications and presentations,
Abby

Dear Academic Abby,

I have an upcoming on-campus interview for a tenure-track position. During the time of the interview, I will be about six months pregnant. How do I inform the hiring committee of my pregnancy? (The initial interview was a very formal phone interview). Your advice is greatly appreciated.

Signed - A Graduate Student in the Southeast

Dear Graduate Student:

I assume that your pregnancy will be obvious when you arrive, so the question is how to tell them in advance. Is that correct? What about just sending an e-mail before the interview saying something like, "I didn't want you to be surprised by the fact that I am six months pregnant. I am expecting a baby in...but plan to begin teaching in the fall."

All the best to you,
Abby

Dear Academic Abby,

I am a PhD candidate who will be going on the job market this year for the first time. A year or so ago I contributed a book review to a well known journal. I was very interested in the premise of the book, but found it to be unevenly executed and, on the whole, disappointing. When I submitted the review, I worried a bit that it could cost me the goodwill of the book's authors, but I decided that not giving my real opinion would be academic cowardice — so I sent it in. Now (of course) the exact scenario that I worried about has come to pass and there is a job that I want to apply for in the department where some of the book's authors teach. My question is: should I leave the book review off of the CV that I submit to them? I don't have any idea who is on the search committee (it is a large department, and chances are good that none of them are). But if I were on a committee and saw that an applicant had reviewed my book, I would look it up. I don't think I said anything that was unfair, but it was critical, and if I were that committee member it would not favorably dispose me to the young job applicant. On the other hand, taking it off of my CV definitely seems like academic cowardice — if I'm afraid to stand behind my words, then I shouldn't have written them in the first place — and also potentially embarrassing if by some chance the person is on the committee, did happen to read the review, and connects my name to it, then sees that I left it off the CV. What do you think I should do?

Thanks - Regretful Reviewer

Dear Regretful Reviewer,

You articulate very well a dilemma facing young academics: publishing reviews — particularly in prestigious journals — is a good way to begin to build a CV, but there is always a danger of antagonizing a more senior scholar with a critical review.

It seems as if you know what to do. You had the courage and integrity to write a critical review; you should now include the review on your CV. As you yourself point out, if the author in question is on the committee or should see the vita, it will look worse not to include it. Most authors are careful to follow reviews, so it is likely that the person will have seen it. This does not necessarily mean that you won't be considered for the job. Scholars vary in their fairness, their sensitivity to critical reviews, and their enjoyment of good arguments.

One way of avoiding the conflict you're experiencing in the future is to agree to review only those books you honestly think are good. Of course, if everyone followed this policy, book reviewing would be less useful to the scholarly community. But there is nothing wrong with protecting yourself at a vulnerable stage in your career.

Good luck to you,
Abby

Dear Academic Abby,

When applying for jobs when you currently have one, should one use the letterhead of your current position?

Signed - In Letterhead Limbo

Dear Letterhead Limbo,

As a general rule, you should not use your current school's letterhead to apply for a new job. In a similar vein, it's better not to use your institutional e-mail account. (Your CV will show your current position, which of course you should discuss in your cover letter.) However, an exception to both the letterhead and the e-mail rule might be if you are employed in a fixed-term position (one year "visiting lecturer" or post-doctoral fellow) where everyone at your current institution knows you're going to be leaving and expects you to be applying for other jobs.

Abby

Dear Academic Abby,

I have several journal articles (no books), great teaching evaluations, and I just received tenure. The thing is, my spouse and I dislike the area the college is in and the workload is pretty rough. Conventional wisdom says it is extremely difficult to move once you have tenure. Any advice on what to focus on professionally in the coming years in order to open up some possibilities? What do search committees look for in midcareer positions?

Signed - Halfway There

Dear Halfway There,

First of all, congratulations on your tenure; it's exciting to have reached this watershed moment. At the same time, for faculty members who would rather be elsewhere, tenure can undoubtedly feel like a trap.

Especially if you are applying to other teaching-oriented institutions, great teaching evaluations are certainly a plus. But it is very difficult to move to another tenured position without a book. Your professional efforts over the next few years are best focused in that direction. Perhaps one or more of your articles could form the core of a book.

Sometimes, people who are unhappy at their institutions give up tenure in order to move. Obviously, it is a serious drag to begin the process again (although you would normally receive at least some credit for the years you have put in), but it can be worth it to be happily settled for the long haul. Only you can decide on your priorities in this regard. But in this situation too, it would be important to have a book to strengthen your case for tenure a second time.

Good luck to you,
Abby

Dear Academic Abby,

Our institution is in the middle of a teachout. We have employed many adjuncts in the extension that is being closed. Are these adjuncts free to take their course syllabi, remove the name of our institution, and teach them for someone else? Or does my institution “own” the syllabi? Has anyone ruled on this issue in the past?

Signed - Wondering about Syllabi

Dear Wondering,

I'm not sure from your question whether your institution has made an issue of this, but professors bring syllabi from one institution to another all the time. It's hard to imagine not continuing to use at least parts of syllabi that have been successful. Even in the case of a common syllabus that a professor is assigned, unless there are specific copyright stipulations (which would be highly unusual), there is no reason a teacher cannot teach a course elsewhere. People regularly share their syllabi and borrow from those of others. That's part of the point of the AAR's Syllabus Project, which will soon be merged with the Wabash Center's Internet Guide to Religion. See [http://www.aarweb.org/programs/Syllabus Project/](http://www.aarweb.org/programs/Syllabus_Project/).

Abby

Dear Academic Abby,

Do you have any advice on how much overlap is appropriate in publications? For instance, I have just given a paper that will likely be published in two years but want to make use of the material as part of a longer article for a journal. Should I rewrite this material or can I keep it reasonably intact? Also, knowing that response times for submitted articles can be long, what is the best strategy to prevent articles from sitting on my desk while avoiding submitting the same article to multiple journals?

Signed - Quizzical about Publishing

Dear Quizzical,

I don't think there is any rule about overlap. There are people who publish significant sections of articles or books over and over, and there are people who try to frame things differently or use different language even when they are dealing with issues they have addressed before. I have always felt that if you are citing yourself verbatim, that ought to be acknowledged. If you are untenured and your published articles contain substantial repetitions, then that could be held against you. Also, given the lead time at many journals, a paper appearing in two years might come out roughly the same time as a journal article, which is potentially awkward. You can always summarize your argument in one place and footnote the other.

It is not acceptable to submit the same article to multiple journals simultaneously, but it is an excellent idea to have a list of three or four journals that might be appropriate for a particular piece. Then if the first journal rejects it, you can see whether the readers offer any advice that you want to implement and, rather than stewing, quickly send the article on to the next journal on your list. You want to be clear in each case, however, that you meet the submission guidelines — in terms of length, notation, topic, etc. — for each particular journal.

Some journals have reputations for quick turn-around, others for keeping people waiting. You may want to consult with colleagues about the journals you have in mind. If you do not hear from a journal within three months, it is entirely appropriate to politely inquire when you might hear from them.

Abby

Dearest Academic Abby,

I am an MA student and new to the field of religious studies (I hold a BS). I am overwhelmed and frustrated by the demanding writing standards in the field and find myself at a loss and in the dark most of the time. English is my second language and the combination of reading and writing is beginning to be disheartening. Other than annoying my professors with this matter, what other resources or suggestions would you advise me to pursue in order to improve my writing for this field specifically?

Signed - Losing Hope

Dear Losing Hope,

You are right to be concerned about the importance of reading and writing for the field of religious studies. Kudos for taking steps to address your lack of preparation so that you can excel in your MA program. There are many excellent references for things like grammar, which will be helpful to you as a non-native speaker (and reader and writer) of English. One standard work is Kate Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, Seventh Edition: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers* (University of Chicago Press, 2007). Another good choice is Jay Silverman, Elaine Hughes, and Diana Roberts Weinbroer's *Rules of Thumb: A Guide for Writers* (4th edition, McGraw-Hill Companies, 1998). But as a first step for writing in the humanities and social sciences, you may find Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's guide *"They Say / I Say": The Moves that Matter in Persuasive Writing*

(2nd edition, Norton, W. W. & Company, Inc., 2010) a good place to start both for understanding readings that are assigned to you and in crafting your own papers. Another great reference for writing is William Zinsser's

On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction

(HarperCollins Publishers, 2006).

As for not bothering your professors with your concerns, that is precisely what you should do as it is part of their job. They will have noticed your difficulties with writing and will appreciate your taking steps to improve your skills. You can ask whether they are willing to discuss paper outlines with you or read drafts of your papers and make suggestions.

You should also find out whether your university has a writing center where help is available to students. Many universities have these centers where students can bring drafts of papers or talk through conceptualizing them. Writing center staff members can help you with individual assignments and, in doing so, teach you how to approach the process.

Good luck,
Abby

Dear Academic Abby,

I am beginning my second year as an adjunct instructor of ethics at a small, private — but not religious — college. Last year I covered gay marriage as one of six current ethical issues in American life. I hold in-class debates on the issues, assigning students to the “pro” or “con” side, so that many students have to take positions that they do not personally hold. Due to a student complaint, I have been asked to remove this lesson from my curriculum because “gay marriage should not be a debatable issue.”

I feel censored for several obvious reasons, but my tenuous position as a semester-to-semester professor does not leave me confident to oppose the dean. I have discussed with my program director that I am an enormous advocate for gay rights and that I personally agree with gay marriage; but it nevertheless remains a current ethical issue in America — hence the forty-five states that do not allow gay marriage — and should therefore be discussed in class if we want to change people's minds.

Additionally, I feel the classroom is a safe environment to discuss differences, and at this particular school the male student body is not necessarily tolerant of different sexualities. Studies show that individuals who personally know a gay person will tend to favor gay rights, but the suppression of such a topic is only driving the issue underground, and has been the cause of at least one student leaving the school on account of his sexuality.

What can I do to keep the gay rights conversation alive, without violating the dean's wishes?

Signed - An Activist without a Platform

Dear Activist without a Platform,

First of all, let me affirm your view that the classroom is precisely the right environment to address controversial issues and that it is absolutely appropriate to ask students to debate the question of gay marriage. I agree that debates are an excellent way to get students to open up to positions that challenge their previously-held beliefs. It has been my experience that students are more willing to do this when they feel that a variety of perspectives are being presented.

That said, as an adjunct — and especially a relatively new adjunct — you are certainly in a very vulnerable position. It seems as if your dean is more concerned with avoiding complaints than with defending values fundamental to education. You mentioned that you spoke with your program director — a wise move. What was her/his response? Perhaps, if the program director thinks your argument makes sense, the next step would be to have a conversation with the dean to see what was in his or her mind and to share your own point of view in a nonconfrontational way.

You will want to weigh carefully the dangers and possible benefits of speaking with the dean. If you decide to do so, it might be useful to frame your argument for using same-sex marriage as one of your case studies in a way that highlights your educational rationale rather than activist objectives. You might emphasize the importance of using a contentious topic about which there are widely diverging basic assumptions as a way of teaching students that differences of opinion can be approached in a rational, empathetic, and above all informed way. You also could share the AAUP report on “[Freedom in the Classroom](#)”, but be aware that it might well cost you your job. Do you want to continue teaching at this institution? How difficult would it be to find another adjunct position?

There are possibly extra-curricular ways that you could keep the conversation alive without violating the dean’s wishes. Are there student clubs, for example, that might sponsor a speaker or a conversation? Is there a club on LGBT issues? Are there students interested in starting one? Might your department be willing to invite someone to speak? Of course, you need to decide whether, as someone who is probably being underpaid to teach a particular course or courses, you want to be involved in activities outside the classroom. There is nothing shameful about seeking other forums to express your activism than the one in which you’re trying to earn a living.

In short, there is no easy answer to the question you raise, but there are avenues to explore. Good luck to you.

Abby

Dear Academic Abby,

I am nearing the point in my doctoral education at which I will need to begin the job search. In some ways, I am very excited. However, I have one pressing concern. I am a lesbian, and my partner and I have recently married.

Up to this point, I have never disclosed anything about my personal life to anyone in my academic department. As of now, I do not plan on being “out” during my job search, especially since my academic work does not involve LGBT issues. However, I am concerned that once I find a job, the need to be out in my new academic community will be more pressing — especially since my partner and I intend to have a child within the next few years, and it will be difficult to hide an entire family from my colleagues. Could you offer me any advice on being an out lesbian within the religion academy? How concerned should I be about the potential effect of being more open about my sexual orientation once I find a job?

Signed - Concerned Scholar, Wife, and Mother-to-be

Dear Concerned,

Congratulations on your recent marriage. Especially since you make clear that you are not generally out in your academic life, you are probably correct that it makes sense not to come out at a job interview unless you receive clear signals that it is fine. But being out once you have a job is a different matter. You don't say anything about your graduate program or the kind of job you are looking for. If you are seeking work at a conservative Christian institution, you may have to remain closeted. But at any liberal seminary, most secular institutions, and probably many Catholic colleges and universities (though certainly not all), being out in itself is unlikely to be a problem. (This is not to say that people who write on LGBTIQ issues or who are gay activists do not face repercussions.) Indeed, once you are hired, colleagues may well want to get to know you as a person. Informal gatherings can be important to institutional socialization, and people who aren't forthcoming about their families can appear “uncollegial.” (See Stacey Floyd-Thomas's article on the problems surrounding collegiality in the [October 2009 RSN](#).)

As you interview for jobs, you will want to look carefully at the options open to you, weighing the need to have a job with the desire to be out and comfortable. Would you want to be at an institution where you can't be out? Do you need to temporarily take a job at a place where you can't be out while hoping for a job where you can be out? As you speak informally with students and faculty members at different institutions, what sense do you get of the diversity of the campuses and of the norms and expectations concerning sexuality and family life? It would be helpful to contact LGBT centers or organizations at the schools you are considering to discuss the environment for LGBT people and to get the names of queer faculty members with whom you might speak. Stress the need for anonymity as you talk with such people.

There are also a couple of legal issues that it's important to be aware of. As you undoubtedly know, your marriage is not recognized by most states or by the federal government. That means that, unless you find a job in one of the few states that recognizes gay marriage, your partner would not necessarily be eligible for health and other benefits. If you are depending on your job for health coverage, you will need to check out whether any institution you are considering has domestic partner benefits. Sometimes you can find such information on a school's website. You can also do a bit of advance digging by calling the Human Resources office without mentioning your name and saying that you are thinking of applying for a position (no need to say in what) and would like to know if they have domestic partner benefits. You can also raise the question with Human Resources after you are offered a job and before you decide to accept it. Moreover, even if a state and institution recognizes your marriage, you will still have to pay federal taxes on any benefits given your partner. Thus Human Resources at least will need to know of your situation.

Best of luck with job search.

Dear Academic Abby,

Graduate guides often advise students to start early in “networking” and “getting involved” in professional organizations. How and where do you do this? What’s the point of networking anyway? And how are students supposed to have time for this extracurricular activity in the midst of demanding graduate programs?

Signed, Overworked and Underpaid

Dear Overworked and Underpaid,

In my view, an MA student needs to focus on courses, preparation for exams, and perhaps a Master's thesis. Sometimes MA students are ready and willing to submit papers for conferences, but most are not, and really at this stage it is not necessary. I do think MA

students should talk with professors about which conferences they attend, and should get in the habit of checking conference websites, reading calls for papers, and even attending association annual meetings, if possible.

PhD students really do need to begin submitting paper proposals, attending conferences, and networking, because at this stage the job market is palpably looming. Conference participation and networking are ways of establishing yourself as a serious thinker and gaining the friends and peers who will help you throughout your career. There are many graduate student conferences every year, many of which will be relatively local for you; these are great for introducing you to conference culture, and for meeting colleagues at or near your own level of intellectual development. But I also encourage you to take the plunge into the national conferences that best platform the kind of research you are preparing yourself to do. Again, I suggest you choose conferences in consultation with professors you respect.

Why network? Because this is how you will meet other established and new professors in your fields of study, as well as other graduate students like yourself. Networking is not some abstract “good” in and of itself, but refers to the vibrant, strenuous, and inspiring relationships we have with other intellectuals who are interested in the kinds of things we are interested in. Sometimes the overlapping interest is directly tied to the books we hope to write; other times, the overlap lies more in our shared concerns about gender or race, or in shared administrative obligations, such as developing undergraduate curricula, departmental policies, or the like. The academy, like our seminar classrooms, operates through dialogue, and through the push-pull between interest and need. Networking is, in a sense, developing your own ongoing “seminar of the academy.”

Finding the time for conferences and networking is difficult. But, then, juggling the multiple demands of academic life will always be difficult. In part, your ability and desire to attend conferences should align with your career goals. For some teaching positions the institution will expect you to be active professionally; figuring out how to juggle this expectation in graduate school will thus serve you well in obtaining such a position. For other teaching careers, institutions will praise you for attending conferences, but will not necessarily expect it, and for still others the institutions will discourage you from spending your time in that way.

Let your own career goals help you decide how to parse your time, then.

To ask a question without having it published in *PSA*, please e-mail it to

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