

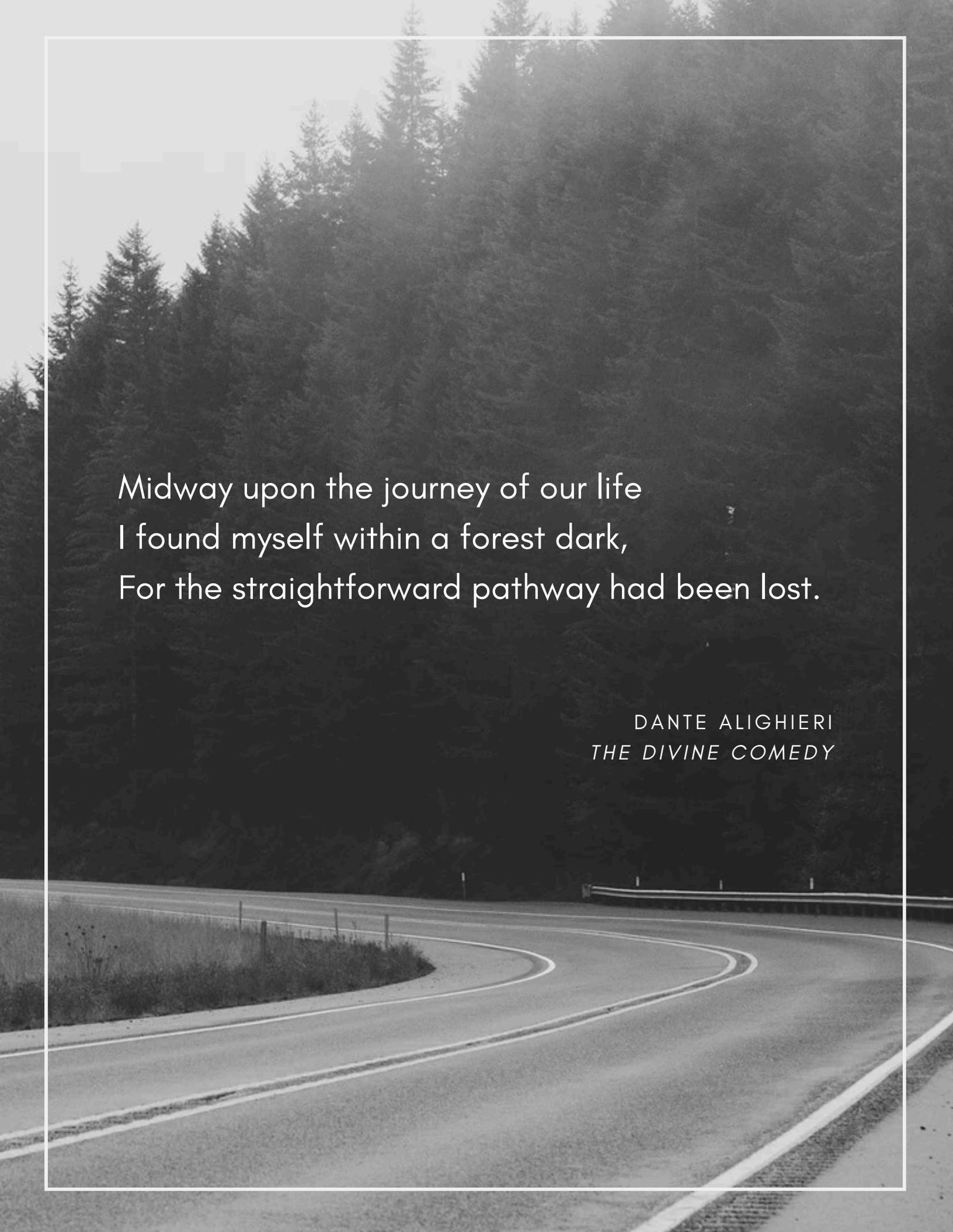
JOURNEYING FROM ACADEMIA TO INDUSTRY

A Guidebook for PhDs

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Health Humanities
CONSORTIUM



Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

DANTE ALIGHIERI
THE DIVINE COMEDY

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Dante Alighieri begins *The Divine Comedy* by writing, “Midway upon the journey of our life / I found myself within a forest dark, / For the straightforward pathway had been lost.” While Dante is describing his spiritual journey, I find these words deeply applicable to my own journey through academia.

Like many students, I entered graduate school intending to earn my master’s and doctorate and then get hired as a tenure-track professor. I had this goal since high school, and I was determined to achieve it, no matter how disheartening the academic job market was. However, early in my PhD, I discovered that this goal wasn’t what I wanted anymore. As much as I loved teaching and writing, doing these things in the university setting just wasn’t for me. Instead, I felt a calling to apply my skills and passion for education to industry (often described as alternative-academic or “alt-ac”) work. And just like that, the straightforward career pathway I had envisioned for myself vanished, and I, like Dante, found myself within a forest dark.

Humanities PhDs are often told how bleak the academic job market is and to be prepared to consider “alt-ac” work. However, “alternate” suggests that industry work is a replacement or “backup plan” for academic work, which is what students should prepare and strive for. For this reason, and because many professors have not worked industry jobs themselves, there are often few industry resources for PhDs and perhaps still fewer PhDs who go through their program wanting to go on the industry job market. Yet, like myself, there are industry-minded PhDs out there, as well as PhDs who will be unsuccessful on the academic job market and need to pivot to industry work. And they need help.

This project was born out of me venting to one of my dissertation committee members, Dr. Jessica Howell, about trying to finish my PhD strong while also wanting to get on the industry job market. During that meeting, Dr. Howell, a long contributor to the Health Humanities Consortium, told me she had an idea.



What if I spearheaded an HHC project focused on sharing resources about the industry job search with other PhDs? Long wanting these resources for myself and other PhDs in similar positions, I happily accepted. And thus was born “Journeying from Academia to Industry: A Guidebook for PhDs.”

For this project, I conducted eight informational interviews with academics who have transitioned to industry work in roles including development research, technical writing, consulting, and others. In these meetings, I asked about job searches, transferable skills, and advice they would give to academics going on the industry job market.

One of these interviewees told me he recommends that students “pick a metaphor to guide their [job] search.” I think a journey metaphor is quite apt, since journeys have challenges and triumphs, but always a start and end. The job search, as I’ve learned from my informational interviews, can be hard, unpredictable, and discouraging at times, but when the right job comes along, the feeling of triumph is immense.

Keeping in line with the journey metaphor, I’ve imagined this resource as a sort of map or guidebook for new-to-industry PhDs that includes practical tips and strategies for embarking on the industry job search journey. I’ve grouped information I gathered from my interviews into three “Checkpoints”: Job Market Research and Networking, Gaining Experience and Building Qualifications, and Document Preparation and Interview Readiness. At the end of each “Checkpoint,” I’ve included a reflection prompt titled a “Compass Check.” This term suggests pausing to reassess direction during one’s journey. I hope these reflections aid readers in considering how their progress connects to their intended destination. At the end of the project, I’ve provided some additional resources pages with things like resume and cover letter tips and a sample cold email for informational interviews.

While I’m the guide for this project, I’m also on the same journey. As I finish up my PhD program, I will conduct my own industry job search. However, after talking with other industry-minded academics, the forest has felt a lot less dark for me. It is my hope that, through sharing this project, other PhDs will have a clearer sense of direction for the career pathway ahead. If that’s you, welcome! This is the journey of *our* life – walk with me.

-Allyson Wierenga



PROJECT MAP

**Project
Background**

Checkpoint 1:
Job Market Research
and Networking

Checkpoint 2:
Gaining Experience
and Building
Qualifications

Checkpoint 3:
Document Preparation
and Interview Readiness

**Additional
Resources**



CHECKPOINT #1:

JOB MARKET RESEARCH AND NETWORKING

- **Research potential jobs**

- Write down your skills and interests that you've cultivated in and out of graduate school. (e.g., writing, leadership, etc.). If you're struggling to think of terms, consider taking a career assessment like those offered on ImaginePhD to see what words come up.
- Type your skills and interests into job search platforms, such as Indeed or LinkedIn, or AI like ChatGPT or Perplexity.ai to see which roles show up. For instance, you might ask ChatGPT, "I really like writing, what industry jobs would be a good fit for me?"
- Meet with your university's Career Counselor. They can help you brainstorm different jobs you might be interested in and how to search for opportunities. I've met with a counselor from my university multiple times, and he's been awesome about helping me research jobs and fine-tune my job documents.
- Create a list of 10-15 jobs that intrigue you and that you seem reasonably qualified for.

- **Narrow to 3-4 jobs you're interested in**

- Of your list of 10-15 jobs, choose the top 3-4 that interest you the most. You don't want to cast your net *too* wide since you will need to customize job documents for each role.

- **Conduct informational interviews**

- Identify people who work in jobs you're interested in (alumni of your program, LinkedIn connections, people who work in companies or organizations you are interested in, etc.).
- Send a message (or "cold email") to someone you would like to interview. Consider working with your university's Career or Writing Center to draft a cold email. You can also read a sample cold email in the "Additional Resources" section below.
- Develop a list of questions you would like to ask (What is your average work day like? Can you describe your job search? etc.).
- Keep detailed notes and records of all interviews so that you remember the key terms, skills, and actions that are valued and used in each role.



Compass Check: How well do your top job choices align with your skills and interests, and what insights have your informational interviews provided for refining your job search? What jobs are you most excited about?



CHECKPOINT #2:

GAINING EXPERIENCE AND BUILDING QUALIFICATIONS

- **Find alternate work, internships, or volunteer opportunities**
 - If possible, identify and apply for work or volunteer positions related to the top jobs you are interested in. For instance, if you are interested in working in a museum, see if a museum near you is taking volunteers. You might also be able to find remote internships related to your prospective jobs.
- **Complete relevant certifications or courses**
 - If there are free certifications or courses related to prospective jobs/fields, take them! Listing these on your resume will let employers know that you're familiar and competent with their work and language. For instance, if you're interested in technical writing, you might want to take a course about software like MadCap Flare or Document360 that might be used in a technical writing role.
- **Keep records of all your experiences and activities**
 - When you participate in a new event (e.g., lecture series, workshop, volunteering, joining a professional organization), write it down, even if it doesn't seem particularly relevant or important. You never know when an experience might come up as useful while you job search, and you don't want to forget anything you've done or important people you've met along the way!



Compass Check: How do your new certifications and practical experiences better equip you for your future interviews? What experiences will you draw from?



CHECKPOINT #3:

DOCUMENT PREPARATION AND INTERVIEW READINESS

- **Create job documents for each job type**
 - Read multiple job descriptions for similar roles and identify terms that repeat. These will be considered key terms that you want to include in your resume or cover letter.
 - Think through how your experiences align with these terms. For instance, if you have used a classroom program like Canvas or Blackboard, these are referred to as an LMS (Learning Management System) in fields like instructional design. (More on transferable terms/skills on the “Resume Tips” page in “Additional Resources”).
 - Create a base resume and cover letter for each role you intend to apply to. You will then be able to customize these documents with different companies’ information. (Resume and cover letter tips included in “Additional Resources”).
 - Stick to 1-2 pages for your resume – don’t just submit your CV when applying. Things that are important in academia (like publications or conference presentations) may not be important to industry employers. You’ll want to research your prospective employers thoroughly to see what kind of work they are interested in/value. More on resumes in the Additional Resources section below.
- **Get another pair of eyes on your resume and cover letter**
 - Take your documents to someone at your Career or Writing Center.
 - Ask for feedback from someone who is working in your prospective field, such as someone you have conducted an informational interview with.
- **Print out examples of your work**
 - Having printed artifacts of your work (like a PowerPoint training module you created) can give prospective employers an idea of your skills and signal your seriousness about the role.
- **Keep a record of all jobs you apply for to stay organized in your search**
 - This will help you see which roles you’re getting the most traction with.



Compass Check: What insights have you gained from aligning your experiences with industry-specific language and expectations? How do you see your academic work in new ways?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES





RESUME TIPS

- **Length and formatting**

- Unlike an academic CV, an industry resume should generally not exceed 1-2 pages.
- Your resume should highlight your prior work experiences, certifications, and skills that directly relate to the job you are applying for, whereas your CV is more of an exhaustive list of all academic achievements and experiences, like publications and presentations.
- Look at examples of resumes for people in the industry you would like to work in. Consider asking someone you conducted an informational interview with if they would be willing to share their resume with you.

- **Transferable skills**

- In your informational interviews, ask the interviewee which skills are essential or useful for their job. Take notes and consider how your own skillset matches those skills.
- When reading job descriptions, think about how your own experiences can be described using the job description's language. For instance, if you are applying to a role in Project Management, you might describe your dissertation or thesis experience as "Managing a [insert number] page writing project over [insert number] years."
- Transferable skills from academia highlighted by my interviewees:
 - Research
 - Clear and concise writing
 - Providing feedback on writing from different fields and genres
 - Data Analysis
 - Synthesizing information
 - Leadership
 - Teaching, including translating concept ideas to non-specialists

- **Quantify as much as possible**

- Quantifying is useful because it gives employers an idea of the scale of your work. If you're still in graduate school, work on maintaining a record of the number of things you do (how many classes you teach, how many students you teach, how many hours you teach, how much money you're awarded in grants and fellowships, etc.) If you've already graduated, make a rough estimate of these numbers.



COVER LETTER TIPS

- **Length and formatting**

- A cover letter should be 1 page.
- It should be formatted as a business letter. There are several helpful guides online about business letter formatting: just google “business letter format.” I like Purdue Owl’s guide!

- **What to emphasize**

- I like to think of cover letters as a form of persuasive/argument writing. You are attempting to persuade the reader that you are a fit for the role and should be interviewed. Thus, you should emphasize why you are the right fit for this position (you can even think about this as your “thesis statement” for the letter). Some questions to help you consider fit include:
 - Why do my experiences make me qualified?
 - Why do I want to work at this particular company? Is it because of their mission? Values? I find the line of work intriguing? etc.
- Providing specific examples from your professional experiences is useful for giving employers a better picture of your prior work experiences. Rather than simply repeat your resume points, you might choose to go into more detail about one of them. For instance, for a corporate training role, you might describe a specific lesson you designed and delivered that was particularly effective and why it worked. Doing this can illustrate your success at training others.



SAMPLE "COLD EMAIL" FOR INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Subject: [Your University] Student - Informational Interview Request

Dear [Alum Name],

I hope this email finds you well. My name is [Your Name], and I'm currently completing my PhD in [Your Field] at [Your University]. Although I've worked in academia for the past [number] years, I've become passionate about pursuing non-academic work. As I've researched different roles, I've become particularly interested in exploring opportunities in [Industry/Field of Interest].

As a [Your University] alum who works in [Industry/Field of Interest], your career at [Company/Organization Name] caught my attention. I would love to learn more about your journey from [Your University] to your current role, your experience working in [Industry/Field of Interest], and any advice you have for someone looking for similar work.

This being said, I was wondering if you would be open to scheduling a 20-30 minute informational interview? I'm happy to accommodate your schedule, whether it's by phone, video call, or email.

Thank you so much for considering my request. I look forward to the possibility of connecting with you and learning from your experience.

Best regards,

[Your Full Name]

[Your Email Address]

[Your Phone Number (optional)]

Your LinkedIn Profile URL (optional)]



ASSOCIATIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Professional Associations and Organizations

- Most industries are connected to professional associations or organizations. These groups often have job boards and hold conferences and other events that have the potential to be fruitful networking experiences.
- JobStarsUSA has a compiled list of associations and organizations categorized by industry: <https://jobstars.com/professional-associations-organizations/>

Health Humanities Related Associations and Organizations

- **Narrative Mindworks**
 - A global nonprofit committed to professional development, interdisciplinary collaboration, and networking for professionals in narrative practices.
- **Gold Humanism Honor Society (GHHS)**
 - A society that unites healthcare professionals committed to empathy and humanism, providing a platform for leadership, community support, and participation in compassionate care initiatives.
- **Schwartz Rounds**
 - A program that provides healthcare professionals with a dedicated space to openly discuss the emotional and social challenges of patient care, fostering teamwork, reducing stress, and enhancing compassion in their daily practice.

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