

Finding the Right Postdoc for You: Advice from Former Postdocs

Nov. 13, Noon-1pm, Graduate Student Center, Room 305

Start Early (~8-12 months from when you think you will defend) – Look for something that interests you greatly, is different enough from your current advisor that it will be new for you, but not so different that you can't actually do it

Aim High – Contact the 5-10 thought leaders in your field - they may already have a sense of the funding they will have available in the next year and how you might fit in their 5-year lab strategy. This also gives you the best chance of **being an asset** to your future PI.

Most of these people will get 5-10 of these emails per week or day

Err on the side of formality rather than coming off as too relaxed

Be familiar with his/her research and suggest ways in which you might work together. Have a sense of the **future** direction of the PI's work. You don't want to suggest something that has already been done.

Be flexible and mention your willingness to apply for funding for your support

Be clear and concise

Include your CV and references (to save everyone time). He/She will be looking for a strong record of productivity. Papers are **most** important. Okay to list papers as "in preparation," keeping in mind that he/she may ask to see the draft!

CC his/her secretary if applicable so that you can follow-up if you don't hear back (and be patient!)

Might want to use a meaningful subject line that reflects your future research interests rather than "job"

Sample Email

Dear Dr. XXX,

I am a doctoral candidate in [Department] at [University] and I am interested in potential post-doctoral research opportunities in your group starting in the [season] of [year] (I will most likely finish my degree in [month]). My background is in XXX and my doctoral work with Dr. XXX has focused on XXX (please see my attached CV). As requested on your website, I have also attached a selection of published papers.

I am very interested in your work with XXX and am eager to continue to make contributions in this area. I would also be happy to apply for fellowships for my support.

Please feel free to email or call me directly and I look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
XXX

1st cut – Phone Interview

2nd cut – In-Person Interview – typically is a 45-min slide presentation with 15-min for questions, followed by individual meetings with group members to assess “fit”

Preparing for the talk

Open up your work to a larger audience by weaving a good “story”

Don’t need to change your slides from your thesis defense, just change what you say about your slides

Practice your presentation in front of people outside your field (small groups of students from other labs – and bring good food or even lunch/pizza for everyone to get the best feedback). It’s really, really helpful to get **lots** of constructive criticism before you interview. No matter how uncomfortable it may be, it’s better than getting slammed during your interview! Don’t be bashful, ask candidly for lots of constructive feedback (can even go through slides one-by-one after you’re done).

The talk

Try to get your schedule from the secretary at least a week ahead of time so you will have a sense of the flow of the day. You might even get a sense of who you will meet with so you can read-up on their papers.

Make sure you have **at least 15-min** to setup your computer, calm yourself, and check for glitches (video playback). Bring your own laser pointer.

Be enthusiastic about your work. You’re pitching yourself, but also your **ability** to pitch. The PI may be thinking: “How well will this candidate present my work at conferences?”

Have a basic idea of a 5-year plan appropriate for your field.

Individual Meetings

Ask the PI: How did you choose XXX University? (Try to gauge if he/she is likely to leave!)
Shared equipment and resources on campus
Teaching expectations or opportunities

Ask future co-workers: How did you choose this lab group?
How much face-time do you get with Dr. XXX?

Ask the same questions to different people. If you get wholly different answers, there may be hidden problems in that group.

The Offer

Typically by email, which nowadays is very close to a written/signed offer. Written/signed offers can take weeks/months as they have to go through the Dean’s office.

Keep the PI apprised of your status on other interviews and if his/her lab is your top choice, say so – both from an ethical standpoint but also to help keep things moving

Negotiating salary – you can check ahead of time at the institution if they mandate post-doc pay, and keep in mind cost-of-living in the area. You **might** feel comfortable asking for a little more pay than what is officially offered, but **don’t** make it seem as if it is a dealbreaker. “You can ask, but be prepared for a ‘No.’” You don’t want the offer rescinded because you piss-off the PI immediately!