How to Apply for a Postdoctoral Position

Time spent as a postdoctoral fellow can represent among the best times in one's scientific career—no graduate student coursework or exams to worry about, no faculty obligations of teaching or grant writing, no worries about the success of your students or staff. Postdoctoral training is a time to focus on one's own research, unencumbered by most other responsibilities. As a step along the pathway to full independence, it is a time to learn how to choose a good research topic and to gain additional paper and grant writing skills. It can also be a time to learn how to review manuscripts and begin mentorship of more junior colleagues. Of course, the salary increase from student to postdoc is always appreciated. Moreover, the postdoctoral training period will provide a chance to learn a new research area and new techniques in preparation for your next career stage as an independent investigator.

State specifically what it is you hope to learn as a postdoc and why you have chosen that person's lab.

How to Pick a Postdoc

First, *pick a topic that excites you* and has great potential for fundamental discovery. Don't be afraid to pick a question that will enable you to learn a new area or experimental system, so that you will gain valuable new tools and approaches for the future. Fellowship-granting organizations frown upon applicants who continue their postdoc research in an area close to their Ph.D. topic.

Next, *consider which lab has the potential to do the most important and best work on your chosen problem*—and keep in mind that this is not always the biggest lab or the lab at the most prestigious institution. Seek out a mentor who will be a mentor—working with you to train you for independence and the world of science. If a lab is large, you won't get the same mentorship as in a smaller lab. You will probably be independent for the rest of your life, so don't deprive yourself of the opportunity to build a supportive mentorship relationship at this stage of your career.

How to Apply

Thanks to the Internet, good labs receive postdoc applications from all over the world every day. Your job is to stand out above the rest. Your application will be taken much more seriously if you can *explain to your potential mentor the specific basis for your application to that lab*. Have you chosen a specific research area and sought the top labs in that field? Was there a specific paper you read that really excited you? Make this clear in a cover letter. State specifically what it is you hope to learn as a postdoc and why you have chosen that person's lab.

For example:

- "I am really interested in understanding asymmetric cell division in stem cells, and your recent paper in Journal X on this topic piqued my interest."
- "I would like to learn to work with zebrafish and was really excited about your recent studies of X in this system."
- "I am also considering two other labs that also work on this question."

Making such statements shows that you have taken time to focus your interests in an area for training. *Summarize your accomplishments as a graduate student and be sure to include a list of your publications.* These will show your potential postdoc mentor that you have been productive, have learned how to write papers, and are equipped with the goods to succeed in obtaining fellowship support. Because you have already narrowed your search to perhaps three top labs, ask your Ph.D. advisor to send these folks a letter in support of your application at the same time that you apply. Doing so will show that you sought guidance from your Ph.D. mentor and that you are serious about your interest in a particular lab.

If you have not yet published your work, clearly explain why and ask your advisor to do the same. You will be less competitive in obtaining a position, but a thoughtful letter and a strong reference from your advisor can often

Women in Cell Biology

Seek out a mentor who will be a mentor—working with you to train you for independence and the world of science.

Need a Good Woman?

Women in Cell Biology Speaker Referral

Need a speaker for a meeting you're planning? Concerned about gender representation as well? Contact the Women in Cell Biology Committee (WICB) Speaker Referral Service for recommendations. Your response will be handled expeditiously and confidentially. Email wicb@ascb.org. ■

overcome this limitation. If you still have time to finish papers before applying, by all means do so. Published papers will help you at every stage in your job-hunting process.

The Interview Day

You've been invited to the host lab to give a talk on your graduate work. You've practiced and gone through your slides. But have you read all the papers from that lab published in the last five years? Don't show up having read one review article, only to hear that the lab doesn't even work in that area but that lab members just think broadly. If relevant, bring publications from the lab with you and ask questions about specific experiments.

Consider also asking your potential advisor:

- What do they really want to understand in the next five years and why?
- What are they excited about? [Does this match your own interests?]
- How often do they meet with lab members?
- How backlogged are they in submitting papers?
- Where have recent postdocs gone on to take positions?

Take the opportunity to ask members of the lab about the environment:

- Do lab members compete with each other or help one another?
- Are people happy there and fully engaged in their science?
- Do they have any concerns?

Your visit is a mutual learning opportunity that should leave the lab members feeling that they simply have to recruit you.

Your visit is a mutual learning opportunity that should leave the lab members feeling that they simply have to recruit you—and, hopefully, you will get a clear sense of whether that lab is a place where you can thrive for the next several years of postdoctoral training. Finally, if a particular lab seems like a perfect match, be sure to let your host know. ■

—Suzanne Pfeffer
for the Women in Cell Biology Committee

Coming Next Month: How to Have a Successful Postdoc Experience and Get a Good Job *by Sandra Schmid and Sandra Masur*

Share Your Family Photos

You can have a family *and* a career in cell biology. That's the message of the Women in Cell Biology Photo Montage, available at http://ascb.org/wicb/index.html.

ASCB members interested in participating should share a family photograph for possible inclusion by sending a jpeg or tif file to wicb@ascb.org. ■

Photos, top: ASCB Council member Susan Wente and family; middle: Past President Mary Beckerle and family; and Public Information Committee member Kathy Wilson and family