How to Join the Conversation

Dear Labby,

I am a second-year PhD student who joined a large lab full of confident and opinionated senior graduate students and postdocs. I find the environment stimulating and my lab-mates interesting and funny, and I love my research project. However, I was raised in a non-confrontational environment that prized modesty and reserve—and I am uncomfortable speaking up in the boisterous, loud atmosphere of my lab.

In the months since I’ve joined the lab, I have realized that it is important for me to engage actively in the scientific conversations that take place daily, but I don’t know how to gain the confidence to jump into the lively discussions and arguments that characterize my lab. Can you help?

—Quiet Junior Scientist

Dear Quiet,

Many early-career scientists find themselves feeling as you do. Labby certainly did.

You are right that it is important for you to learn to engage in the scientific dialogue in your lab. Only if you speak up will others know that you are engaged in thinking about the science and begin to appreciate your ideas and intellectual contributions. It is also a key component of your training to be able to effectively describe your ideas and defend your conclusions, and conversations with your lab-mates is one of the best ways to hone your skills in this area.

One way to start entering the scientific discourse is in the more formal setting of group meetings. Challenge yourself to ask a question or offer a comment during every group meeting. You may be intimidated by feeling that everyone else is more knowledgeable and smarter than you, but even asking for clarification when you are unfamiliar with a technique or item of lab lore will show that you are engaged and actively thinking about the project being presented.

Labby relates the following anecdote to remind you that you will recover even if you say something at group meeting or journal club that is less than brilliant. At one group meeting Labby attended, an acknowledged star graduate student asked the presenter to perform an obviously impossible experiment. Speechless silence followed. After recovering from a bout of not-so-gentle ribbing, this graduate student went on to become a tenured faculty member at a top university and a member of the National Academy of Sciences.

As you gain confidence, start jumping into the day-to-day lab conversations. You may have to raise your voice more than is comfortable at first, or even interrupt to be heard, but once your lab-mates realize that you want to, and can, contribute to the conversation, they will listen. Do not lose your instinct to be well-mannered in these conversations—a thoughtful, respectful approach to voicing your ideas and asking critical questions will be of immense value as you progress in your career and you become the senior voice that will seem intimidating to others.

Good luck with your research. Labby hopes that you have many fun and productive discussions in your lab.

—Labby

Got Questions?

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