DEAR LABBY: I am a new graduate student at an “impressive” university. I come from a small, well-known liberal arts college. We had great teachers who involved us in research. In my graduate program, I have decided to work in a laboratory with two postdocs and four graduate students. The research and learning culture here is really different from my experience as an undergraduate. Lab training is accomplished by watching and learning techniques from “my” postdoc. As a first-year student, I only interact with the PI during lab meetings, and we all seek input from her on our projects at that time. In our lab meetings, we discuss our results, lab issues, and our shared reading for the week. The meetings often turn into exercises to point out the holes in the work presented by our lab mates. I find it troubling because I know that my postdoc likes to “nail” or even ridicule others in the group. The PI has not intervened so far. I understand constructive criticism, but this does not seem like that to me. I am not looking forward to my upcoming presentation, which will be based on the work that I have done with my postdoc. This is not how I learned science was done! But is it?

—New Kid on the Block

DEAR NEW KID ON THE BLOCK: Congratulations on your new adventure. Yes, there are a cultural differences between liberal arts colleges and research-focused institutions, the major one being the mission of the institutions! One focuses on developing young people to reach their academic and professional goals, while the other is focused on pushing the boundaries of knowledge and training others to do the same. Developing critical thinking skills is one of most important things that one learns in graduate school. Your postdoc seems to be overzealous in this exercise, as ridicule, condescension, and sarcasm are indeed inappropriate. It is essential to get strong constructive feedback during these group meetings, with a stress on the word “constructive.” Perhaps you could engage your postdoc in your presentation as you develop it. This may help him or her feel a partnership in your presentation. Also, Labby suggests that you have a heart to heart talk with your postdoc, letting him/her know how these derisive comments make you feel. In addition, you should schedule a one-on-one appointment with the PI, who may also want to be aware of the effect that this person may be having on the lab culture. An environment that allows ridicule as a normal and acceptable way to interact may become hostile. So, no, this is not the way science is done! Ideally, science is carried out in a supportive and open environment where new ideas can be examined and explored.

—Labby