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LETTERS TO YOUNG SCIENTISTS



How to find a postdoc position that's right for you

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By [Leah H. Somerville](#), [Jay J. Van Bavel](#), [William A. Cunningham](#), [Neil A. Lewis, Jr.](#) | Apr. 13, 2020 , 10:05 AM

Postdocs make up a crucial component of the scientific workforce. But the application process can be mysterious. In many fields, there is no central bank of job advertisements for postdocs, unlike what is typically the case for faculty positions. And there is no typical “season” when postdoc applications are due, unlike graduate programs. In this column, we try to demystify the application process for prospective postdocs.

Thinking through your options

Those of us who did postdocs have fond memories of our postdoc years. Looking back now, we appreciate it as a time when we had the freedom to devote most of our workdays to research. Our postdoc years also afforded us an opportunity to develop new skills, try new research areas, and ~~forge new professional connections. But the reality is that postdoc positions aren't for everyone. Too~~

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fellowships are highly variable, most are intended to support early-career researchers who already have some specialized training but need more “incubation time” before they’re ready to become independent researchers. To land a postdoc that will help you incubate in an optimal way, it’s important to have a clarity of purpose on what you are seeking from the postdoc experience. Consider your own strengths and room for growth. Are you seeking training in a specialized research area or on how to use a new technique or tool? Do you want a different kind of mentor who will supplement your existing training in a particular way? Or are you simply looking for more time to produce original work? Understanding what you want to gain from a postdoc will guide your search and provide further clarification about why you want to pursue the postdoc path in the first place.

Making a list

Start your search by brainstorming a list of options. For instance, you may want to think about principal investigators (PIs) whom you’d be excited to work with. Perhaps you’ve become a fan of a lab’s papers or attended an interesting talk by the PI. Noting those PIs is an excellent place to start. But keep in mind that doing a postdoc can also be an opportunity to stretch beyond the most obvious places. Some academics use a postdoc as a pivot point to transition to a new research focus. Leah, for example, began to study an almost entirely unfamiliar topic as a postdoc to stretch her expertise in a new direction. Consider your own range of interests and whether there’s a field that you’ve been eager to crack your way into. Identify labs that are doing work in that area and add those to your list, too.

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Of course, adding an option to your list requires thinking about other factors, such as geography. You may be tied to your current location because of family considerations. Or, you may have a personal preference to live in some regions but not others. If the latter situation is true for you, keep in mind that your preferences may overlap with those of other researchers, and that there are often a few places that attract the most interest. Given that postdoc jobs are not forever, we’d recommend broadening the list of places you’d be willing to live—if that’s something that you’re able to do. Geographical openness increases the odds you will land a position.

Finding funding

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Prospective postdocs can seek funding through a host of different sources, such as federally funded fellowships, industry positions, and internal university fellowships. Gaining practice applying for funding can be a great investment of time, and these positions result in substantial freedom to pursue a more independent research agenda. Having independent funding can also look impressive on your CV when you apply for future positions.

That said, we would encourage contingency planning to guard against the possibility that funding does not come through, including exploring other positions. We have heard unfortunate stories about graduate students who were excited by the promise of joining a lab, but found out around graduation time that their grant application was not funded. They invested a lot of effort to essentially end up unemployed.

You may want to look for a postdoc position that is fully funded by a grant awarded to the PI. In those cases, the PI will expect you to contribute to a research agenda that has been (at least partially) determined already by the grant proposal or funding source. These positions can be fantastic because of their stability; the pressure to obtain funding is relieved. However, if you are considering a position like this, be sure to find out the level of scientific freedom associated with the position. At best, there would be space for you to pursue your unique interests by incorporating them into the funded research or through side projects. At worst, these positions could turn you into a glorified technician who executes research that has already been fully specified, which may not align with your goals.

Other funding arrangements are out there as well. Some postdocs earn their pay through teaching or administrative activities, and they may conduct research projects on the side. Others receive funds through collaborations with private industry. Some universities also offer postdoc fellowships that provide additional benefits beyond the ones we have described so far, such as the option to stay at

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professional networking. That's why it's important to think broadly about what positions you might be interested in and to work to establish connections with potential employers.

Even if a PI isn't currently looking to hire a postdoc, we'd recommend sending them an email to introduce yourself. In that email, describe your training and interests, and explain why you are interested in working in their lab or center. Keep the email **brief and professional**, and attach a **polished CV**.

When should you reach out? There's no clear answer, but we'd recommend reaching out to prospective postdoctoral mentors by email at least 1 year in advance of needing a position. This might sound like a long lead time, but PIs often plan their funding years in advance. Moreover, it'll take time to apply for your own funding if you and the PI opt to take that route.

Getting things in writing

Because of the largely unstructured nature of the postdoc search, it's crucial to remember that your postdoc is not confirmed until you secure a written contract. It's surprising how often misunderstandings can arise from casual conversations about postdocs. For example, one of us knows a student who had a conversation with a PI about doing a postdoc in their lab. The PI expressed some vague enthusiasm, which the student interpreted as a verbal offer. A few months later, the student inquired about their start date and the PI didn't even remember having a conversation about it!

Postdocs are usually full-time salaried staff positions with benefits. Prospective postdocs should not hesitate to ask questions about salary, health care, retirement benefits, the length of the position, and other benefits and aspects of the job that are relevant (family leave policies, remote work policies, moving expense reimbursement, etc.). You should also ask for clear expectations about what kind of support you should expect for independent experiments, training experiences, conference travel, publication costs, and other work-related expenses. There is usually **room to negotiate**. Do not hesitate to advocate for yourself before you sign on the dotted line.

Good luck out there!

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Jay J. Van Bavel

Jay J. Van Bavel is an associate professor of psychology and neural sciences at New York University in New York City.

 [Twitter](#)

William A. Cunningham

William A. Cunningham is a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto in Canada.

 [Twitter](#)

Neil A. Lewis, Jr.

Neil A. Lewis, Jr. is an assistant professor of communication and social behavior at Cornell University.

 [Twitter](#)

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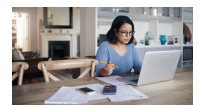
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