

Best foot forward

Part 1: Interviewing Skills for Postdocs

Pre-workshop assignments

You must complete Assignments 1 and 2 below to participate in the workshop.

Assignment 1: Prepare a Pitch

Prepare an “elevator pitch,” a one to two-minute story that you use when you meet people at a scientific meeting or at a networking or social event or when someone says “tell me about yourself” at the beginning of a job interview or over the phone. NEVER EXCEED TWO MINUTES AND IT’S BETTER TO STAY CLOSER TO ONE MINUTE. Give them a broad picture of who you are so they can follow up with questions about the parts of what you said that are of interest to them.

Your pitch needs to be tailored to the person you’re talking to. You may need to do this on the fly. Choose what to emphasize based on their interests. This isn’t about data transfer it’s about relationship building. Watch your body language. Be alert for what they’re interested in and follow up on that.

For this exercise, pick one scenario for yourself - looking for a position in academia, industry, or just meeting people at a networking or scientific event. Tailor your pitch to one of those.

In one minute or so you need to convey:

- Your current position (Message: I have a responsible job that’s very interesting and I love it.)
- VERY Brief history of your career (Message: I’ve advanced in my field and have been recognized for my contributions.)
- ONE SENTENCE about your expertise and passions.
- Why you are at this here or talking to them (Message: I want to meet people, explore opportunities and broaden my horizons. NOT: “I’m looking for a job.”)
- Connect with them: “I’d love to hear about your company/organization and what you do.”

- (At a networking event) As the conversation is winding down...“Can I follow up with you? Can we get together for coffee? Is there anyone you know you think I should talk to as part of this process? I’d love to meet some of your connections just to educate myself.”

Assignment 2: Mock interview preparation.

Work on answers to each of the following questions. It’s best to say the answers out loud so you get used to hearing yourself say the words. You will get a chance to answer these questions during an exercise in the workshop.

General Questions

- A. You and your passions**
 1. Tell me about yourself.
 2. Give me a brief outline of your career.
 3. What are you passionate about?
 4. Tell me about your current job.
 5. What do you love/hate most about your current or previous jobs?
 6. What accomplishment are you proudest of in your career?
 7. What’s your ideal job?
 8. Where do you want to be in five years, career-wise?
- B. Mind Games**
 1. What are our greatest strengths?
 2. What is your biggest weakness?
 3. How would your current boss describe you?
 4. How would your friends and colleagues describe you?
- C. Why us, why now?**
 1. Why are you looking for a job now?
 2. What do you think are the key skills that you bring to this job/opportunity?
 3. Why are you interested specifically in this job/company/position?
 4. What questions do you have for me?
- D. Questions not to answer during an interview.**
 1. What salary are you looking for?
- E. Questions you shouldn’t be asked and if you are asked don’t need to answer.**
 1. How old are you?
 2. Do you have children?
 3. What is your current salary?
- F. Personal Characteristics**
 1. Tell me about a work-related challenge you faced and how you handled it.
 2. Have you ever screwed up or done something you regretted in your job? Tell me about it.

3. Have you ever had a disagreement with your boss? How did you handle it? What was the outcome?

G. Management skills

1. Tell me about your management style.
2. Have you ever had to discipline or deal with a poorly performing employee? How did you handle that?
3. Have you ever mentored someone? Tell me about that experience. How did it work out?

Domain-Specific Questions

Academic job

1. Have you ever chaired a committee? Have you even been on a committee? Tell me about it. What did you contribute/accomplish?
2. Tell me about your teaching experience. Have you ever had to create a course or teaching unit on your own? Tell me about that.
3. What experience do you have mentoring students?
4. Have you been involved in diversity, equity or inclusion efforts? Tell me about that.
5. Why are you applying here?
6. Which of our existing courses can you teach? (You need to have read their course catalogue!) What new courses could you develop?
7. Who will you collaborate with?
8. What will your first grant proposal be on? Where would you apply for funds?
9. How much space will you need? Do you need specialized equipment?
10. Why do you think you are a good fit for this department?
11. How does your research address the big unanswered questions in your field?

Industry or private sector job

1. Be able to talk about your experience working in a team setting.
2. Show you understand the need to drop underperforming projects.
3. Be able to tell them why you are applying to THIS company.
4. Be able to talk about why you think you will be happy in a company vs academia.

Assignment 3: Read the article “The Interview Game” included with this material.

Interviewing tips:

- During a job interview, don't assume they read or remembered your resume!
- If it's an academic job say why you love this institution ("I've followed this department closely and think it's really on the cutting edge of basic neuroscience research.")
- If it's an industry job say why you love the company ("I'm really excited about the work you're doing in the area of neurodegenerative diseases and would love to learn more about what you do and where you're heading.")
- Say something about your transition ("I'm really looking forward to moving into the private sector because..." or "My goal is to set up a lab in an institution with opportunities for scientific collaboration and teaching" or "Right now I'm open to a range of opportunities and not limiting myself in my conversations.")
- For networking, as the conversation is winding down..."Can I follow up with you? Can we get together for coffee? Is there anyone you know you think I should talk to as part of this process? I'd love to meet some of your connections just to educate myself."

More resources:

A terrific and comprehensive guide to all phases of the job interview process from Stanford University: https://beam.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj10361/f/stanfordphd_sg_17-18_singlepg.pdf
(easier to get this by Googling "Pursuing Meaningful Work" – look for the pdf link)

A short article on questions you may get asked and for you to ask them:
<http://web.eecs.utk.edu/~azh/resources/facultyinterviewquestions.html>

Great tips on phone/Skype interviewing:
<http://theprofessorisin.com/2011/10/31/thephoneorskypeinterview/>