



Ten things to keep in mind when applying for postdoc or other training opportunities

Professors at research intensive universities often receive hundreds of emails regarding potential training opportunities. Which request is likely to receive more attention? Which request is likely to be deleted without a response? Here is a list of top 10 things to keep in mind when applying for postdoc or other training opportunities. They are relevant even for job applications.

1. Do not send generic (copy/paste) emails to lots of people at the same time – few people bother to read such mass emails! Such emails convey the impression that you are lazy and cannot write to professors individually.
2. Do not write letters/emails without specifically addressing the professor by name. It is impolite to write for the first time without writing the full name of the professor. In particular, do not write a letter that begins with “Dear Sir or Madam” – this suggests that you haven’t bothered to find out anything about the professor.
3. Always investigate the background and research interests of the professor you are planning to contact (most professors will have their own websites or biosketches with this information). Make it clear in your letter that you are aware of the research focus of the professor. If you are responding to an advertisement, then make sure you meet the eligibility criteria. This issue of “fit” is absolutely critical. Nobody wants to spend time, effort and funding on students that do not work on their area of research focus! On the other hand, you have a very good chance of succeeding if you select a researcher whose interests perfectly match with your own!
4. In general, it is not advisable to contact professors who don’t share your research interests or have a completely different training background. For example, if your research interest is in malaria, there is not much to be gained by writing to a professor whose research program is focused on cancer! If you are interested in laboratory or basic science research, do not write to researchers who do not do laboratory research. In the same vein, if your PhD was in zoology, there is no point in contacting an epidemiologist. If you do decide to write to a researcher whose research focus is very different from yours, then explain your reason for contacting them. Perhaps you want to learn a technique or skill that has broader application? Explaining this early in your letter might help.
5. Publications (even co-authored) in your area of research are very important. If you have no publications, then you have a low likelihood of being accepted into any postdoc fellowship program. Lack of publications suggests little or no prior research experience. If you have publications, attaching them (or at least a few major publications) will make a big impact.
6. Always send your latest CV along with your cover letter. Your CV should be well written, with no typographic errors. It should list your educational degrees, your research work, your publications, awards, etc. Your CV should list the names and contact information of at least 3 referees who know about your work.
7. It often helps if someone else makes the initial contact on your behalf. For example, if your mentor or supervisor writes a letter introducing you, this might get more attention, especially if the professor being contacted knows your mentor or his/her research work.
8. It is also very helpful if you have funding or fellowships of your own that you can bring with you. If this is the case, clearly explain what the funding source is and how much of your training it might cover.
9. Carefully proof read your email before sending it. Typographic errors and sloppy writing can easily put off people!
10. Lastly, if you don’t get a response, try again after a while. Persistence often works!