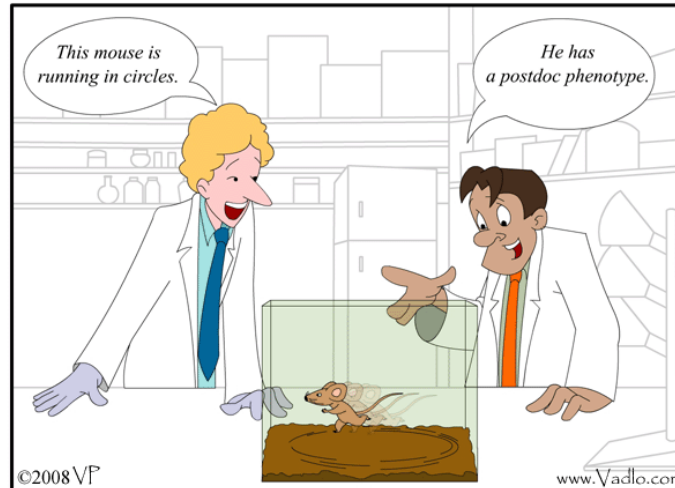


## Tips for making the most of your postdoc fellowship and getting ready for the transition to an independent position

### Key assumptions:

1. You already working with a good mentor – a person who cares about your growth
2. Your mentor is part of a good, productive research team/group/center
3. You have a reasonably good stipend/fellowship and are not living on the edge
4. You are serious about an independent position after fellowship (and not content in being a cog in the wheel)



### How do I make the most of my fellowship training?

1. **Plan:** Make a clear plan about exactly what you want to get out of the postdoc training
  - a. What skills, knowledge or expertise are you lacking?
  - b. Is there something unique/valuable that you can learn and will make you more 'marketable' when you finish and look for jobs?
  - c. If you are a clinician-scientist, do you also need to pick up specialized clinical expertise?
2. **Publish:** Publications are critical for the next phase, and send a signal that you can finish what you start. So, get heavily engaged in research and publish like crazy
  - a. You should aim for at least 5 – 10 publications each year of your postdoc (some as lead, and other as coauthor)
  - b. Continue to work on your scientific writing skills - take workshops, if necessary, but mostly by writing a lot and getting feedback – writing is not only important for publications, but also critical for getting grants
  - c. Make sure all your PhD related projects are quickly submitted (ideally, they should be published already)
  - d. Take on new projects (that you lead) and quickly convert them into manuscripts – these should be first-authored papers and will be *most valuable* for your job application and job talk (without a few first-authored papers, there is no point in applying for faculty positions)
  - e. Join your mentor in writing reviews and invited editorials, etc. A productive mentor should be able to give you these chances.
3. **Keep training:** attend specialized workshops and advanced trainings, especially in areas that you have not had much exposure (e.g. modeling, cost-effectiveness, impact evaluation, causal inference)

4. **Acquire skills:** Improve your data management and analysis skills (scientific computing – e.g. Stata, Python, TreeAge), as well as project management skills (time management, ethics, personnel, supervision, budgets, etc)
5. **Peer review:** manuscripts for journals (by now, you should be doing this independently; at least one per month will be good – not just to keep up with the field, but to also see how others are “selling” their work, or not), as well as grants, if you get the chance (perhaps with your mentor)
6. **Apply for fellowships:** such as Banting, Tomlinson, CIHR postdoctoral awards – these look very good on your CV and send a strong signal that you are capable of raising money (which is a key ingredient of independence)
7. **Submit grants:** Write and submit at least one grant every year
  - a. Grant writing is a big part of any academic career – so, get a head start
  - b. As a postdoc, you cannot be PI on grants, but your mentor can be the PI (if successful, she/he should give you plenty of freedom in how the grant money is spent/used)
  - c. Learn grantsmanship skills – working with a successful PI is critical for this
  - d. Take time to investigate the competition, committee, peer review process and instructions (follow them to the letter)
  - e. If you are responding to a specific RFP or call, make sure your grant is a good fit for that RFP
  - f. Look at recent grants that scored high and use them as templates
  - g. Get clarity on the research questions/specific aims early
  - h. Finish the first draft at least 4 – 6 weeks before the deadline
  - i. Get feedback from as many people as you can and go through multiple versions before submission [the more versions you go through, the more polished your grant will look]
  - j. Your grant should impress reviewers in the methodology section (not literature review)
  - k. Learn to prepare budgets and budget justification
  - l. When reviews come back, learn from them, and re-apply, if not successful [most grants do not get funded on the first round; persistence is key]
8. **Attend conferences/meetings** and present posters/oral talks
  - a. Use the chance for networking and get known
  - b. Accompany mentor on visits/meetings, if opportunities arise - again, great for networking
  - c. Contribute to guidelines (e.g. WHO, ATS or other policies/guidelines), if opportunities arise; or at least sit in on guideline meetings, if you can (again, your mentor can make this happen)
9. **Teach and give talks:** Get some teaching exposure, if you did not get it during PhD
  - a. You should have done some teaching during PhD. If you did not, and if you are serious about a faculty position, then you **MUST** get teaching exposure (otherwise, your first teaching assignment as faculty will be a nightmare!)
  - b. Give invited seminar presentations (as many as possible) – they force you to clearly articulate your ideas and help improve public speaking skills
10. **Prepare an ideas bank:** Keep a running list of ideas/projects that can be carried over into the faculty phase of your career
  - a. You need a pipeline of interesting ideas that derive from your PhD and postdoc work
  - b. What will your first grant as independent researcher/assistant professor be on?
  - c. When you begin your independent/faculty position, you should, ideally, stop working closely with your PhD or postdoc mentors – this is expected; if you continue doing the same research as your mentors, it will be tough to convince tenure reviewers that you are truly independent
  - d. Mentors are for life – so, while you should achieve scientific independence, you can always seek career advice from your PhD and postdoc mentors



### When should you transition from postdoc to an independent position?

Whenever you feel you can jump off the airplane and survive on your own! Before you jump, make sure you acquire all the skills, expertise and training you need in order to make it on your own.

A postdoc is not a long-term position. It is more like staying in the base camp for a while to get acclimatized and train, before making a push for the summit. Most people should be done in about 2 - 3 years (although, this depends heavily on the field). Beyond that, people will wonder why you have not transitioned into an independent position. Some do postdoc fellowships for 4 – 5 years [bad sign!] and that suggests more of a research assistant phenotype rather than postdoc. Some do multiple postdoc fellowships – again, not a good sign.

1. **Make an early start:** About 6 – 12 months before you plan to finish your postdoc, start planning your transition into an independent researcher position:
  - a. Ask yourself what type of position will make you happy and go for the gold standard!
  - b. Do not settle for weak and convenient positions (e.g. soft money or temporary spots), even if it is easy and tempting
  - c. Getting a good faculty spot takes time and you can always negotiate the job start date – so, start early
  - d. Look for job ads in leading journals in the field and also via online searches
2. **Application package:** Learn how to submit a strong application package:
  - a. Apply far and wide – without worrying about location, country, school, etc.
    - i. Generally, it is best to apply to schools other than where you trained (you get more respect and are less likely to get low-balled!)
    - ii. Many people apply to positions in the same area/city or school, and this essentially takes away all leverage/ability to negotiate
    - iii. Even if you want to stay in the same place, you must still apply to other places and get short-listed; only then will your stock go up in your home institution
  - b. Fit is critical! Carefully read the job ad and target the right place/position
    - i. Calling or emailing the search committee chair is good idea and, in fact, a smart thing to do – you are now on their radar
  - c. Your cover letter should address the key requirements for the position and hit the right notes (buzz words in the ad) - See examples of good cover letters
  - d. Include a detailed, full CV - strong CV is necessary to be short-listed
  - e. Outline your research area/program and what you have done and plan to do
  - f. Attach publications (as many as you can) – they make a big impact
  - g. Include a teaching statement– your experience, interest, and types of courses you can offer

- h. Strong reference letters are hugely important – usually two referees, but more will not hurt; having your mentor call on your behalf may also be helpful [advocacy is necessary!]
  - i. Send the package via email (PDF) and follow up via courier/FedEx
  - j. Stay in touch with search committee chair – they need to know that you are interested in them [but don't pester them too often!]
3. **First interview:** If you are short-listed, you will get a call or email from the Chair. They will ask if you can come for a visit/interview.
- a. If you are short-listed, that is a good sign- departments screen many applications to short-list their top 3 – 4 candidates
  - b. Usually, visits are 1 – 2 days long, and departments invest time and money in this
    - i. If you are not very keen, it is still OK to go and check out the place; at least, you will learn how the process works and be better prepared for the next one
    - ii. Visits are entirely paid by the institution (including limo pick up at the airport!)
    - iii. Dress smartly
  - c. Visit begins with a meeting with the Chair and then there will be a long list of people you will meet (including students), including search committee members and committee Chair (who may be different from the department/division Chair), and you will give a job talk, and end with a fancy dinner (which you will hardly eat because you are excited and talking a lot!)
    - i. Visits, especially the two-day affairs, can be very tiring – you will feel completely drained (and excited); make sure you get enough sleep before and during
    - ii. You will be asked about yourself, your PhD and postdoc experience, what you work on, what your research focus is, what your first grant will be about, and why you want to join that school [everyone you meet with already have your CV]
    - iii. If are being recruited as a clinician-researcher, then you will meet with high level hospital leadership and will have to work out issues like what % of your time is protected for research versus clinical service
    - iv. Show interest in the work of people you meet and find out about them before you go; ask them questions about their department, environment, living conditions, etc
    - v. Look up the faculty list online and ask to meet with people you might enjoy collaborating with (in your field)– who might be your new mentor or senior colleague there who can take you under their wing as you begin as junior faculty?
    - vi. After the visit, email and thank all the people you met
4. **Job talk:** This is big deal. Don't blow it!
- i. Make a good impression
  - ii. Prepare well for your talk and do not appear nervous or insecure (even if you are!)
  - iii. Begin by thanking the Chair and the department for inviting you
  - iv. Pick a topic that you are strong in and shows off your talents and your previous work/papers or your unique expertise; you can present a sequence of studies (tell a story)
  - v. Citing the work of researchers in the department (if relevant) is always nice to do
  - vi. Do not get defensive during Q & A – some faculty members may be pressure-testing you to see how you deal with that
  - vii. Light banter and jokes always work well
  - viii. Be honest about the limitations of your work but say how you will address them in future work
  - ix. End the talk with a plan for your next few years of research and that your topic is important and is “fundable”
  - x. If you have already written grants, mention this during your talk

5. **Second visit:** For a few weeks after your visit/interview, you will not hear anything. Do not get alarmed or dejected. Chairs need time to get feedback from everyone you met with and for the search committee to meet. They may also decide to finish interviews of all short-listed candidates and then rank order their top choices. This can take weeks or months.
  - a. If the department ranks you as their first choice, the Chair will usually call you and ask if you are serious and want to come back for a second visit
  - b. Second visit is a big sign – you are on the verge of getting a written offer
  - c. If you are not serious, definitely do not go! It is a big waste of their time and yours.
  - d. Now is the time for you to really start worrying about the place, your family, living conditions, etc.
  - e. Second visit is when you take your spouse/partner and they too should begin searching for positions [Chair should make this happen and might therefore take time to arrange]
    - i. Good schools will always worry about spousal recruitment and will make a serious effort to help (if they don't, then it is a bad sign)
  - f. If you go for the second visit, go prepared with all the big questions you need answered
  - g. Second visit will end with a candid discussion with the chair on what the offer might be, and what are your critical asks (spouse, salary, tenure-track, clinical work, timelines, etc.)
6. **Negotiating the offer:**
  - a. If all goes well, you will get a written offer letter. But it may take time – these letters often need approval from the Dean's office
  - b. Read every line carefully – it is a hugely important letter and is actually a contract
    - i. If you really need something (e.g. lab equipment or space), it must be included in the job offer; once you take the offer, you lose the ability to negotiate/ask!
  - c. Letter should be clear about your job title, tenure track or not, what % of your salary is covered and how much you are expected to raise, protection from teaching or clinical work in the first 1- 2 years, support with immigration, space, medical insurance, start-up funds, space, job start date, relocation help, etc.
    - i. If the Chair offered something during the interview, make sure it is in writing! Verbal promises are not good enough.
  - d. Never accept the first offer!
    - i. First offer will generally be a low-ball.
    - ii. Counter it with asking for stuff that are missing (e.g. space, secretarial help, medical insurance) and stuff you are not happy about (e.g. salary, start-up)
    - iii. Competing offers are enormously helpful in negotiating/leverage – do not hesitate to use them!
    - iv. Be polite but firm on issues that you will not compromise on (e.g. if your spouse does not get a good offer, then the deal is off)
  - e. The Chair should work on the offer and come back with a revised offer
  - f. If the revised offer is good (you may not get everything!), then accept it
  - g. Then the relocation process begins and may take weeks to months
    - i. Good schools will help with relocation – movers, travel, housing, etc.
    - ii. Take your time and do it right [schools will wait; they know a move is not easy]



*Good luck! May the odds be ever in your favor!*