

Interview Questions for Applicants

It is important to ask all applicants the same basic set of questions, but follow up individually. Use open-ended questions, directive questions, and reflective questions – allow the candidate time to offer an answer. Do not ask personal questions (see InterviewDosAndDonts.pdf).

- 1 – What do you see yourself doing in 5 years?
- 2 – What are your long-term career goals?
- 3 – Why do you want to work in my lab? What are your expectations of what you would learn in this (postdoctoral) experience?
- 4 – What technical skills do you hope to learn? What other professional skills?
- 5 – Describe your graduate/previous research project. What did you particularly enjoy about this project?
- 6 – What is your favorite aspect about research? Your least favorite?
- 7 – What is your working style – do you prefer to have a lot of supervision or to work independently?
- 8 – Do you consider yourself organized? Neat in the lab? Is your notebook carefully and clearly kept?
- 9 – How quickly would you say you learn new techniques, concepts?
- 10 – How would you rate your problem-solving ability? Can you give me an example?
- 11 – What is your greatest strength? Your greatest weakness?
- 12 – Do you like chocolate? (recommended as a good way to break the ice)

Some PIs recommend that you tell the candidate that you are very passionate about your science and work better with members of your group who feel the same way.

Look at the CV very carefully to make sure dates are contiguous and there are no missing time periods. If there are, ask about them.

How to Handle Recommendations

Interpreting a recommendation letter

- Look for strong statements:
 - Gets along with others
 - Self-starter
 - Staying power
 - Creativity
 - Asks the right questions
 - Good experimentalist
- Look for statements of weakness:
 - Moody
 - Loner
 - Tried hard
- Look for a cool tone, or half-statements.
- Look for certain key phrases, depending upon what you would like. For example, hard working vs. productive is good to distinguish. Hardworking is good, and is acceptable as a technician. Look to see (or ask) if hardworking is coupled with productive.
 - Or gets along with others vs. takes a leadership role, another subtle distinction.
 - Or responsible vs. independent vs. won't take orders.
- Note points that must be clarified by phone. Okay, the candidate is independent- but will he/she accept suggestions?

Phone conversation with references and recommendation writers.

One thing you learn pretty quickly is that advisors have a vested interest in moving a student or postdoc on. They are judged on their own grant applications by what their students and postdocs are doing, so it is in their own self-interest to get their people into a good lab. You have to ask questions such as “If this person applied for an NIH fellowship, would he get it?”...If you hear people hemming and hawing, you'd better stay away.

You can't trust recommendations on paper, but in person, someone will usually answer questions truthfully.

- Phone calls to references and writers of recommendations will be very similar. With a letter of recommendation in hand, you will have particular questions to ask (“When you say he is stubborn, what do you mean? Is there a negative side to that?”), but you still need to have a broad conversation.
- What do you say? Just talk. You are listening to tones, and to what isn’t said. If you can establish a rapport, you will be able to have an honest conversation about the candidate.
Hello. This is xx, of xxx. I am hiring a technician, and am considering xx. I know he worked with you for xx years, and I’d like to know what you think of him as a technician.
- Keep in mind the written recommendation, if there is one. (Sometimes names are given as references, and those people are called directly, without a letter of recommendation.)
- A good start to a discussion of personality is asking about how the person got along with the other people at the job.
- It may be that a recommender gives a negative view of the candidate’s ability to get along with others in the lab. Don’t accept the statement “He just didn’t get along with anyone”, or “He was disruptive”. Ask for specifics: “Can you give me an example of a disagreement he had with another lab member?”
- Try to get a feel that the recommender has for the lab group dynamic. If the recommender turns out to have no feel for the interpersonal relations within the lab at all, he may be relying on the opinion of a jealous or incompetent lab member. Or the problem may be a boss-employee one, attributed to a personality defect in the candidate. And in a dysfunctional lab, blame is often inappropriately portioned out to a strong, intelligent and ordinarily well-liked person.
- If a referee is withholding information, he or she will usually do this only by omission: when asked a direct question, few people will lie about the candidate, but will give the truth.
- If two independent references say the same negative thing about a candidate, you probably should not choose that person, no matter what your own feeling is.

Secondary references. Through one reference, you may get the name of another reference you can call, one who has not been primed by the candidate.

A simple request will usually bring a name and a number from a reference (“Do you know someone else x worked with, someone that would also talk to me?”) You may also know or find someone in the candidate’s workplace or school that you could call. Due diligence is not excessive.

For foreign applicants

- Call overseas numbers as well as local or national. If there is a language problem, do the best you can. Consider finding someone familiar with the language that you trust to make a call for you since there can be risks in this. One P.I. spoke (or thought she was speaking) with someone abroad, and had a clear and good conversation; however, when the lab worker arrived to take the job, he could actually speak no English.
- Sometimes you can find a friend or colleague actually working at, or passing through, the institution a candidate has applied from. This person may be persuaded to do an on-site interview for you, and this is the best way to examine a situation you can’t assess.
- Your best contacts are probably fellows from that institution, or country, whom you have met at the NIH. Ask them to help you out.

Questions for References

Call every reference! And speak on the phone, do not email. Ask for examples when you get a yes or no answer.

- 1 – Does the candidate think independently?
- 2 – Is the candidate motivated?
- 3 – Is the candidate a good lab citizen? How does he/she get along with others?
- 4 – Does the candidate keep good records? Is he/she organized? Neat?
- 5 – How are his/her writing and speaking skills?
- 6 – What are the candidate’s strengths and weaknesses?
- 7 – What were you most disappointed in with respect to this person?
- 8 – Is he/she reliable? Would you hire the candidate again?