

Going through the job application was exhausting, stressful, and all-consuming, but I found it extremely useful to hear/read about the experiences of others. Clearly each person has a unique path through it, but I hope this document can provide just one more data point that can be useful to others. These are just my personal opinions and experiences, I'm no expert.

**Highly recommended overall resources:** Kara McKinley's [write-ups](#), Steve Ramirez's [materials](#), Laurel Gabard-Dunham's resources [page](#)... Future PI [slack](#) could also be great (I found this a bit late and didn't really end up using it; the volume of posts felt a bit overwhelming to me)

**Context for my job search experience:** I'm in the systems neuroscience field, where (my sense of) the general expectation is one first author paper from phd and one from postdoc at minimum, and each tends to take a long time (5+ years). I was in year 6 of my postdoc. I did **not** have a CNS paper; I **did** have a Neuron paper that came out right before I started applying, and I definitely think that timing helped. I had received a K99, previous postdoc funding, and phd funding, and I'm coming from a well-known HHMI lab at a prestigious school. I had little teaching experience. I'm white, female, unmarried, no kids. I had the help of a technician for the first few months of my job market time. Obviously, many of these factors will have impacted my experience and worked in my favor.

Apps submitted	First round interviews	Heard back with a "no"	Never heard back at all	Second round interviews	Offers
37	14	10	13	5	3

First application deadline	First round interviews	Full interviews	Offers	Committed
Mid-sept 2021	Dec-March	Jan-April	March-April	May 2022

## 1. Leading up to the year on the job market

- Get your work published (or at least on bioRxiv). I had initially planned to go on the job market for the 2020-2021 cycle, but decided to hold off because I didn't have a first author paper from my postdoc even on bioRxiv yet. It didn't seem worth the time investment to try and apply without one.
- Get a twitter account. I only did this because of covid, and would never have predicted how impactful it could be. Yes, it's a huge time-suck, but it's also a powerful tool to showcase your work, raise awareness of your expertise, build connections with other researchers across the globe, and learn a TON about academic culture. IMO, totally worth it. You don't have to tweet often (I don't) to reap these benefits.
- Present your work wherever and however possible (conferences, journal clubs, local groups, seminar series). This makes you practice and get comfortable "telling your story", lets you take questions from a broad audience, expands your network/connections, and looks good on your CV. There's an excellent list of external postdoc seminar series [here](#).
- Prepare to not have a lot of time to do science once app season starts. I found the application process to be almost a full time job. Because my experiments are time-sensitive and long (6 week time commitment of daily work), I could only get experiments done when I had the help of a technician, and was not able to do experiments when I did not have that option. This was because of the time I needed to spend prepping materials, practice, and

for the interviews and travel itself. Thankfully, my PI was fully supportive of this allocation of my time.

## 2. Preparing application materials

For the most part, all schools wanted the same main components: cover letter, CV, research statement, diversity statement, and teaching statement. Some had different length requirements (ie 2 vs 4 page research statement, 1 vs 2 page diversity statement) or required slightly different organization – but the content was always essentially the same.

***How to find out about positions?*** I set up ScienceCareers, NeuroJobs, HigherEdJobs search filters that would send me new postings daily. I often saw postings on twitter.

***Which schools to apply to?*** I was pretty broad in my search, but was set on R1 institutions in the US. I applied to both med school and undergrad departments. I found positions that sounded promising in a wide range of departments: neuroscience, neurobiology, biology, bioengineering, anatomy, physiology, psychiatry, psychology, etc. I did not apply to positions that were located in places I knew I could never live, but if there was even a small chance that I thought I could make it work, I applied.

***Getting feedback on the basic materials:*** After getting feedback from my advisor on my draft research statement, I sent it out to 5 faculty that I knew at other institutions to get their feedback. Choose people you trust and ideally folks who aren't directly in your field. This feedback helped me to a) lay out my vision more clearly and accessibly and b) hit the right level of ambitiousness – you want your plans to sound big and impactful and 10-yr scale, but also attainable.

***Letters of recommendation:*** Ask EARLY to give your recommenders plenty of time. In choosing your recommenders, those who really know you and your work best take priority, but if you're debating between options, consider also prioritizing someone **outside** your current/past institutions, to show that you have a network beyond your immediate training. Feel free to provide bullet points about the experience/qualities you think they might particularly be able to speak to in their letter. Most application sites let you check whether recommenders have submitted their letters. Be on top of checking this and make sure to follow up to remind them if necessary.

***Tailoring the application:*** I only minimally tailored my application materials at all to each school. I'd received advice along the lines of "Share your plan for what you really want to do; if a school didn't want that plan, then you don't want to be there". I put the school/dept name in my research statement, mentioned DEI/teaching opportunities if I knew of them (I often didn't) and tried to craft a few sentences in my cover letter about some particular aspects of the position that I found appealing (for instance, if they had an aging or alzheimer's research center, a relevant behavioral core, or an existing collaborator of mine in the dept). I have no idea how much these sentences mattered and I found them very hard to write – I found it nearly impossible to get a real feel for a department based on website alone and it takes forever. So many websites are terrible and full of dead links!!

***Reaching out to search committee members/people you know at that institution:*** I did not do this, although some have recommended it. If I knew someone in the department, most of the time they weren't on the search committee, and if they were, I felt weird about asking them too many questions. I never cold-called or emailed search committee members, and my advisor did not either.

**Diversity statements:** This was a useful resource/rubric from [UCBerkeley](#)

### 3. First round interviews (Zoom)

These were usually 20-30minute zoom meetings with the search committee. For about half of them, I was asked to give a brief overview of my past work/research plan (5-15mins). I was usually given some clues as to the structure of the meeting beforehand. I always found these interviews somewhat unsatisfying and never really knew how they went – it's such a short period of time! I didn't send thank you follow-up emails after these zooms.

**Preparation:** You'll probably never have as much time to prep as you would like, so prioritize. I think it's more important to have good answers about yourself and your work and less important to know all about them and try to cram in reading a bunch of websites/papers. For almost all of these interviews, I knew ahead of time who would be on the call. For one, I was sent the interview questions ahead of time. I always looked up the websites of the committee members to broadly know what kind of science they did (to the level of "studies AD/protein aggregation in flies") but honestly I often forgot these details in the interviews and I didn't do more digging than that. If there was someone who did work related to my own, I did more (like read at least the abstracts of their recent papers or have a question or two about their work prepared). If you aren't given details of whether they want a presentation from you (or if you want more info about format, content, duration, etc), it's very reasonable to ask.

#### **Questions I got asked:**

- Always: some form of "tell us about your science"
  - How did you get into science?
  - What has been your most exciting discovery? What is the significance of this work?
  - What is your dream experiment?
  - What key approaches will you use?
  - What's your vision for your lab? How will you implement it?
  - Where do you see yourself in 5/10/20 years?
- Always: essentially, why this department & who would you collab with?
  - What drew you to our department / What makes you excited about coming here? / How do you see yourself fitting in to our department?
  - Who would you be interested in collaborating with?
- Often: some form of lab/ leadership strategy
  - Why is now the right time for you to apply?
  - How do you want the department to support you? What resources will you need?
  - How will you set yourself apart from your current PI?
  - Where will you apply for funding?
  - What does success look like to you? What characteristics are needed to achieve such success?
  - Who will you hire first? What is the first experiment your team will do?
  - How will you grow your lab and how big will it be?
  - Where do you see the field in 5-10 years?
- Often: teaching/mentorship
  - What's your mentoring philosophy/strategy? / What kind of PI would you like to be?
  - How does diversity play into your research/mentoring/teaching? What DEI initiatives in this department/at this university would you be interested in participating in?
  - What types of courses would you be interested in teaching?
  - Tell us about a particularly rewarding teaching/mentoring experience that you had

**Questions I asked them** (you'll always be given time for a couple, be ready with them)

- How do you support your faculty? How are new faculty mentored?
- What are you looking for a new faculty member to bring to your department?
- How are students/trainees in the department supported?
- What is the community like? What types of events support a sense of community (seminar series, retreats, happy hours, etc)
- How do collaborations tend to form?
- What is expected of a new faculty member? What does success look like for a new faculty?
- What are the biggest changes the department has seen over the past few years and where do you see it going next?
- Which programs can faculty get students from and what types of skills/interests do they tend to come in with?
- What are the most common hurdles/struggles that new faculty encounter?

#### **4. Full interviews (seminars, chalk talks, one-on-ones)**

There was a range of formats across schools here, and covid played a big role. Each interview usually took up two days. These ranged from:

- No first round interview, straight to a zoom seminar and several 1:1 zoom interviews with faculty
- "Symposium-style" seminar day where 5 candidates all joined a zoom together, listened to each other's talks, and then had 8ish 1:1s with faculty the next day
- More traditional in-person campus visits: 8-10 1:1 meetings in person, a seminar (given in person or on zoom from one of their conference rooms), breakfasts, lunches, and dinners with faculty, sometimes a chance to meet students/postdocs, and in-person chalk talk. In-person visit days were super long. Make sure you have comfy clothes/shoes, eat a big breakfast (I was constantly hungry, because it's hard to eat when you're constantly talking, and there often were no breaks). Unless you expect to need it for something specific, don't bring your computer (it's heavy to lug around all day). Do whatever you can to make sure you get good sleep before/during/after the visits. I was often so exhausted that I needed a day off (or more) to recover afterwards. Be kind to yourself!

**Seminar prep:** Practice lots, and practice to folks outside your specific expertise. I gave 4 practice talks (to my lab, to my postdoc peer mentor group, to my phd advisors, and to some other faculty in my dept). Make sure your talk is accessible to a very broad audience. Stay within the time limit and make sure you leave time for questions. Make sure you have a place that you know the internet is good and the background noise is minimal. Make sure your videos play without being laggy. Prep for the obvious questions. Make sure folks come away with a clear understanding of your trajectory – how your research interests have evolved over your training, where you're going next, and why it's super exciting and compelling.

**1:1 prep:** I usually found out who I'd be meeting with only a couple days ahead of time, and there were so many meetings, I definitely never felt well-prepared for these! I always at least looked at the person's website to find out broadly what they did, read more closely if it was related to my

work, and always prepped some questions for them. Depending on their position/research, these could be science questions or questions about the department (like if it was the department chair, for instance). Because interviews were often back-to-back with no breaks, I often forgot the details that I'd read up on, so it was useful to always have a few questions that would work for anyone in my pocket (like those in the section above). Sometimes the conversation would stick to science, sometimes it would be more department-level, sometimes it would be extolling the virtues of the city, even. I didn't usually go in with a specific goal for these meetings other than to keep the conversation rolling and non-awkward and demonstrate my overall excitement for science and the position.

**Chalk talk prep:** Chalk talks are so hard, and so unpredictable! I always had a few mins beforehand to write some things on the board, which was useful for framing all the content I wanted to cover (like writing headings and putting placeholder bullet points to later fill, and drawing out any particular complicated diagrams). I prepped a ~15 min intro which recapped some key background info from my seminar, gave some big picture motivation, and introduced my main research questions. I gave five practice chalk talks. Unfortunately, all my practice sessions were over zoom (with computer propped up facing the whiteboard...) while the real ones were in person. It definitely made a huge difference for the feel and interactivity of the whole session, and I strongly recommend practicing in whatever format you'll eventually be using. Again, practice with people who aren't right in your field and don't know your work in – you'll get much more useful, representative questions from them. Some groups are super interactive and will bombard you with questions right from the beginning; other groups stayed eerily quiet, politely let me finish, without any interruptions – only asking questions when I got worried and asked for them. If you get too many questions, or one person gets hung up on something, feel free to steer the conversation back to your narrative as needed – the time goes by really fast and you want to get through all your content. At the same time, be EXTREMELY polite and appreciative of all questions: people are going to use this one stressful presentation to judge what kind of colleague they think you'll be. Be extremely openminded to their ideas and opinions (remember, you aren't committing yourself to actually doing them!) All the chalk talks were an adrenaline rush and I always came away feeling like they'd gone terribly (but I think that's just how it goes).

**Additional resources:** UCSF has an example chalk talk [here](#) and gladstone has one [here](#). More and more programs (not UCSF, sadly) are starting to open up candidate chalk talks to trainees – definitely go!

**Meetings with students:** Many visits will include lunch or coffee with students. Often they had questions about my science, but I also tried to use these as opportunities to ask more about how students were supported by their programs, etc, to get a feel for the culture of the department. This was useful, but I wish I had also asked students more about their OWN work. When later trying to compare the strength of different grad programs, these types of conversations would have been useful data points to gauge the skillsets of the students, the depth of thinking, passion for their science, engagement of their mentors, etc.

### **Interview follow-ups**

After the visit, I always sent thank you follow-up emails to the faculty members that I met with. These can be super short, but I tried to personalize them at least a little bit. Try to do this as soon

as possible so that your memory of the conversation is still fresh and you can reference what you talked about. Thank folks for their time. Also thank the admin who arranged your schedule and logistics – it's a lot of work!

## 5. Offers & negotiations

My offers came by email or phone, and usually concluded with an invitation for a second visit to discuss details and examine potential lab space. Before this second visit, I was asked to prepare a startup budget. I also highly recommend preparing a wish list (see below). Use your second visit to meet with people that YOU want to (you're more in control now!), such as potential collaborators, core directors, etc. When it comes to touring lab space, take pictures of everything!! It can be very hard to remember details later on.

**Startup budget:** This is much easier to create if you have examples to work from. The best examples are those doing techniques/experiments similar to yours, ones that are recent, and ones that are from the department you're considering. I asked former lab members from my postdoc lab for theirs, and appreciated that two wonderful folks at one of the places I was considering offered me theirs. Some folks are cagey about sharing these. I'm happy to share mine, just ask! Start high. Assume that prices will go up, that you will forget to budget for things, that your needs will change and you'll need to buy additional things, and pad your estimates accordingly. Bounce this off faculty who have been on search committees recently so that you know you aren't lowballing yourself - it's really hard to ask for more once you've given a number. I got quotes for big items (10k+) on my budget, but this ended up just being useful for my own knowledge, because no one else asked for them. Include some expensive things that would be useful and nice but maybe aren't absolutely required (could be useful in negotiations).

**Wishlist:** One school requested that I write up a wishlist, and it became an extremely useful document that I later used for all the schools. It's handy to have everything you want written out in detail so that everyone's on the same page about what you need to have in order to succeed. It becomes an easy guide for conversations (making sure you don't miss anything), and the schools can refer back to it as they try and line up all the aspects of your offer. For instance, my wishlist covered lab space (amount, type, location, proximity to others, etc), startup funds, computational resources, animal facility resources, and personal items (like access to a loan program and moving funds). Things like job assistance or financial support for a partner, daycare/school stuff for kids, etc would be totally appropriate to put on here too. Whatever you need for your life.

**Negotiating:** Have a sense of what you absolutely need and a few things that you would be willing to sacrifice. Anything on the wishlist can be negotiated for, not just the startup budget. I felt that I could be honest with the dept chairs about the things I was really concerned about needing, and it was clear that they were trying to find what I was asking for. Asking for more funds (without super watertight justification) was not successful in my case. Ask your mentors for their help in this. The office of career/professional development may also have counselors that can help.

### **Offer letters**

I had several experienced department chairs look at my offer letters to help me identify strengths/weaknesses, to make sure they covered all the important points, and to compare them. If you have a K99, make sure to also get your offer letters reviewed by your program officers at the NIH – they've seen a lot and may also have some useful feedback. It's also important to get their approval to ensure smooth transition to the R00.

## 6. Making the decision

Having multiple options to choose from was an immense privilege but also threw me into internal turmoil because it wasn't an obvious choice! Every visit introduced me to awesome folks doing inspiring science who would have made stellar colleagues. Each department had unique opportunities and drawbacks. Each location/city also impacted my excitement about a place. A wise mentor told me "you will grieve every opportunity that you don't take," and I really did. It was helpful to hear that that's normal!

***How to choose:*** I made pros and cons lists and talked to many peers and mentors about my options. I set up MANY additional zoom meetings with faculty at each of the schools to try and figure out who my community would be and hear about their experiences. I was lucky that only one school put any time pressure on me; the others were very generous in giving me as much time as I needed. It is worth pushing back against the time pressure, requesting more information, making edits to the offer letter, until you're comfortable – this is a big deal!

I was very nervous about declining my other offers; I only did it after I'd signed the paperwork to accept a position. I felt best doing it by phone and was relieved to find that all the department chairs were understanding and supportive. I also sent emails to the folks at each school that I'd particularly connected with to tell them my decision and thank them for their support along the way.

Don't forget to follow up with the mentors who provided support and guidance through the process, they'll want to hear how things turned out.

Please reach out with questions, clarifications, anything. Happy to help if I can. Good luck!