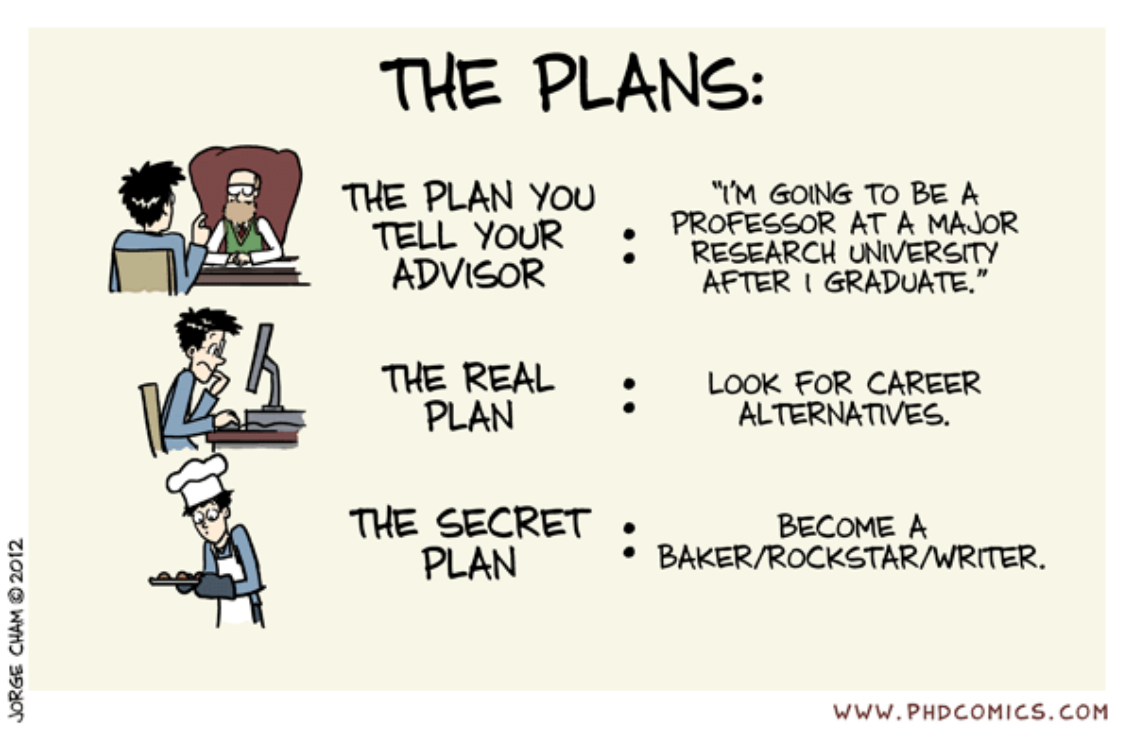
Postdoc job applications: the “don’t panic” guide!



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Welcome to your job hunt!

- **You are all incredibly employable people!** About half of our PhD students go onto postdoc jobs, half to industry

- Today we'll discuss the typical postdoc application process. *Knowing how the system works will help you plan your applications effectively*.

- *Writing effective job applications is a new skill you'll need to learn*. This presentation will provide some tips!

Disclaimer: some of these views are subject to my own bias, other faculty and postdocs will also give you great info!

What?? When?? Why?? (the basics)

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What is a postdoc position?

- Typically, a fixed-term 2-year or 3-year research position
- Some are *independent research positions* (“fellowships”) offered by a university or institute
- Some are *“research associates”* tied to specific projects or investigators (although there is often freedom)
- Some are *observatory*, *software* or *teaching* positions (often with some fractional allocation for research)
- Can also apply for *research council funding* (e.g. ARC prize fellowships), but this is very competitive

How can I find available positions?

- Most jobs are advertized on the *AAS job register* (http://jobregister.aas.org) or for Europe: https://eas.unige.ch/jobs.jsp
- Jobs are also advertised on *e-mail lists* and collaboration *Slack channels*
- You can also find openings by *word-of-mouth* in your networks

If you have specific idea(s) of places where you might like a postdoc job, reach out to faculty there and ask if there are any upcoming opportunities

Which jobs should I apply for?

- **Your life and personal goals are obviously the most important thing. What are your criteria?**
  (location, environment, type of work, collaboration access, type of institution, academia vs industry)

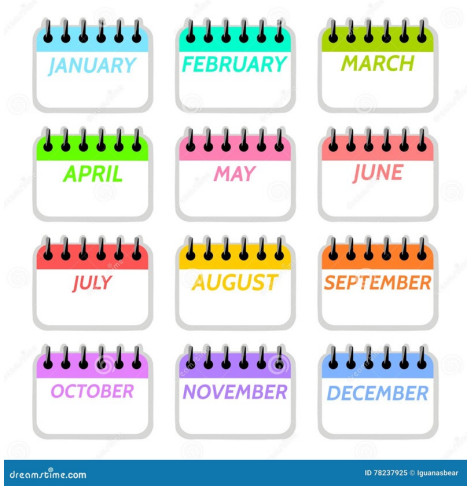
- Because of competition, you will need to *apply for multiple positions* (typically 10-20, sometimes more or less)

- *Don't rule out things too quickly*, since flexibility is often required, and you cannot count on your "dream job"

- However, don't apply for jobs you wouldn't accept!

When should I apply?

- Many variations are possible, but typically you would:



- Apply for postdocs Oct-Jan (75% of jobs)
- Receive interviews/offers Dec-Mar
- Start new positions Jul-Nov

Where are you in your PhD, and when will you realistically finish?

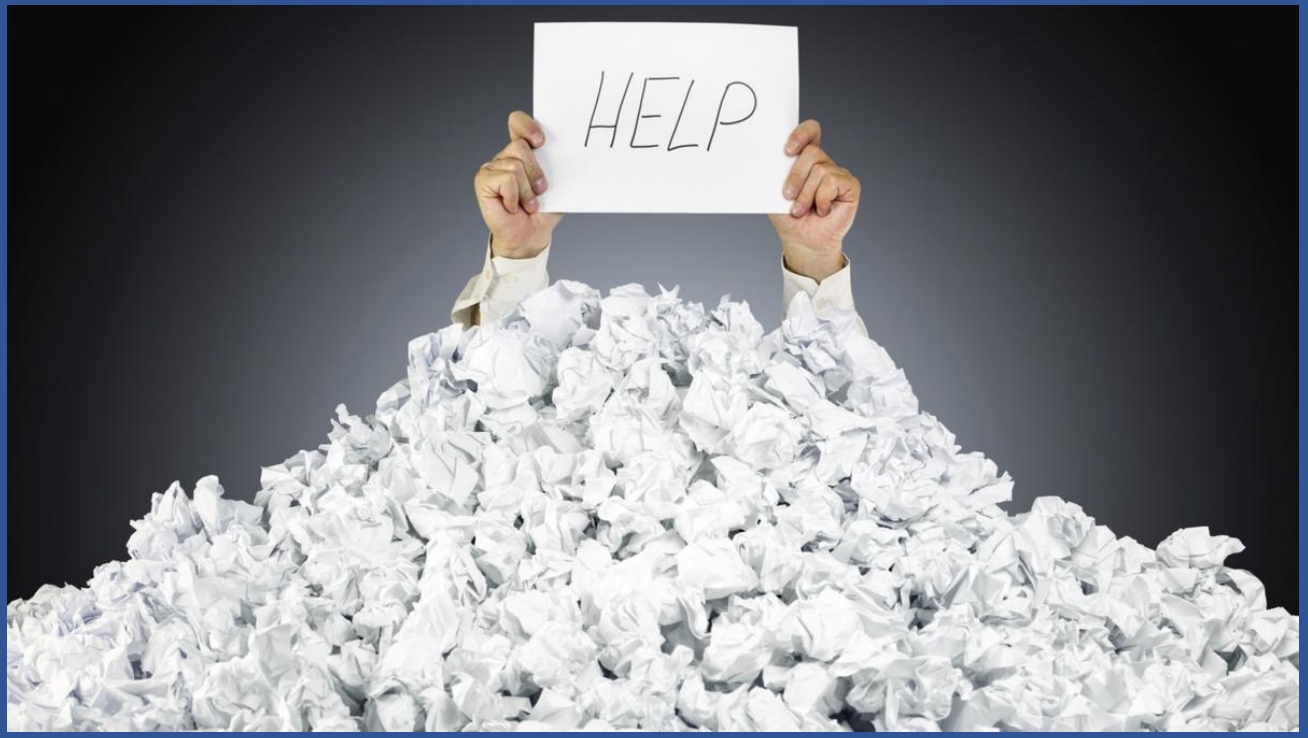
Is it worth waiting until you submit a particular paper before applying?

What you should know (the basics)

- **Postdoc job applications are very time-consuming!** (1 month's work in total? Start preparing early!)
- Each position is very competitive, rejection is normal
- More opportunities to find a position if you are able to move (internationally), but is that what you want?
- Communication from employers to applicants during the process is usually poor (or you could check out the job "rumour mill": https://www.astrobetter.com/wiki/Rumor%2bMill)

It is easy to increase your chances of success by following some simple tips and guidelines!!

How to write a postdoc job application



How to write a postdoc job application

- For most jobs, you will need to prepare 3 documents!
  (yes, academia is very old-fashioned)

"Covering letter"

"CV" or "Resume"

"Research statement"

- You will also need to identify some *reference writers*
- Some jobs require a *response to selection criteria*

Covering letter

- **What is this??** A 1-page formal letter introducing yourself and explaining why you are a good fit for the position
- Make sure you get the contact details right ☺
- *Paragraph 1:* introduce yourself, your current position, and what position you are applying for
- *Paragraph 2:* briefly, what are your top skills and research achievements you would like the panel to know about
- *Paragraph 3:* why you want to move to this organization, and how yourself and your research would enhance it **(include specific details, not just hollow platitudes!)**

CV (also known as Resume)

- 2 pages, but can be longer if needed **(short is good!)**
- *Contact details* at the top
- *Short bullet point lists* of academic record, research experience/skills, publications, awards/prizes, talks, conferences, teaching, outreach, roles/responsibilities

Hints

- Skills include computing, statistics, management …
- Leave out hobbies, photo, pre-university record
- Do not pad publication list with "in prep" papers. Highlight your name in long author lists, give astro-ph links
- Restrict to specific examples, not generalities

Research statement

- **What is this??** A 2-3 page document describing your science plans and why you're the best person to do them
- **This is a sales pitch not a research paper!**
- Clearly state *aims* and *significance* at the beginning
- *Not too dense*: include spaces, sub-headings, figures, images, bullet points, timelines
- Demonstrate you can carry out future science plans by describing your successful *past and current research*
- Has to impress both *expert* and *non-expert* astronomers

Research statement

- Here is a potential layout of a 3-page research statement:

Eye-catching science title

Opening paragraph explaining the importance of your science to a non-expert astronomer

Bullet-point summary of the aims of your proposal

Describe your previous research outcomes as evidence of success

Nice image or figure

Your vision of the current state of the field, and how this motivates your work

Why you are positioned to address these questions (collaborations, tools)

Project 1 of your proposal

Project 2 of your proposal

Project 3 of your proposal

Concluding statement summarizing how this research benefits the field

References

Should I tailor each individual application?

- Yes, in a limited way – tailor *one paragraph of your covering letter* and a *small part of the research statement*
- Explain why you are good match to this specific job
- Explain why you want to join the specific organization
- Provide a science plan fitting to the position

Tailoring the application, even in a small way, helps the job committee rank you highly since it demonstrates to them that you have thought about these questions!

How to choose referees

- Usually nominate **3 referees** to write recommendations
- As well as supervisors, you can ask *national or international collaborators* from other institutions
- People *familiar with you* who will write a good letter ☺

Hints

- Academics are very comfortable with receiving requests to write references, so don't worrying about asking.
- It is O.K. to have the conversation "are you able to write me a good reference for job X?"
- Share your CV and application materials with your referees and give them plenty of time to prepare a reference

How do I make my application stand out?

What happens in an application process?

- ~30 applications received for each job (10-100?)

  → you will need to *apply for multiple positions* and prioritise applications for which you stand the best chance.

- Applications are reviewed by a committee of ~4 people including both experts and non-experts in the field

  → *You are addressing 2 audiences: expert and non-expert*. Explain the significance of your work very clearly, but also provide some detail an expert will appreciate.

- Initial review will be swift, producing a ranked shortlist

  → *You need to make your key points very clear to someone skimming your application in a few minutes*. Repeat them!

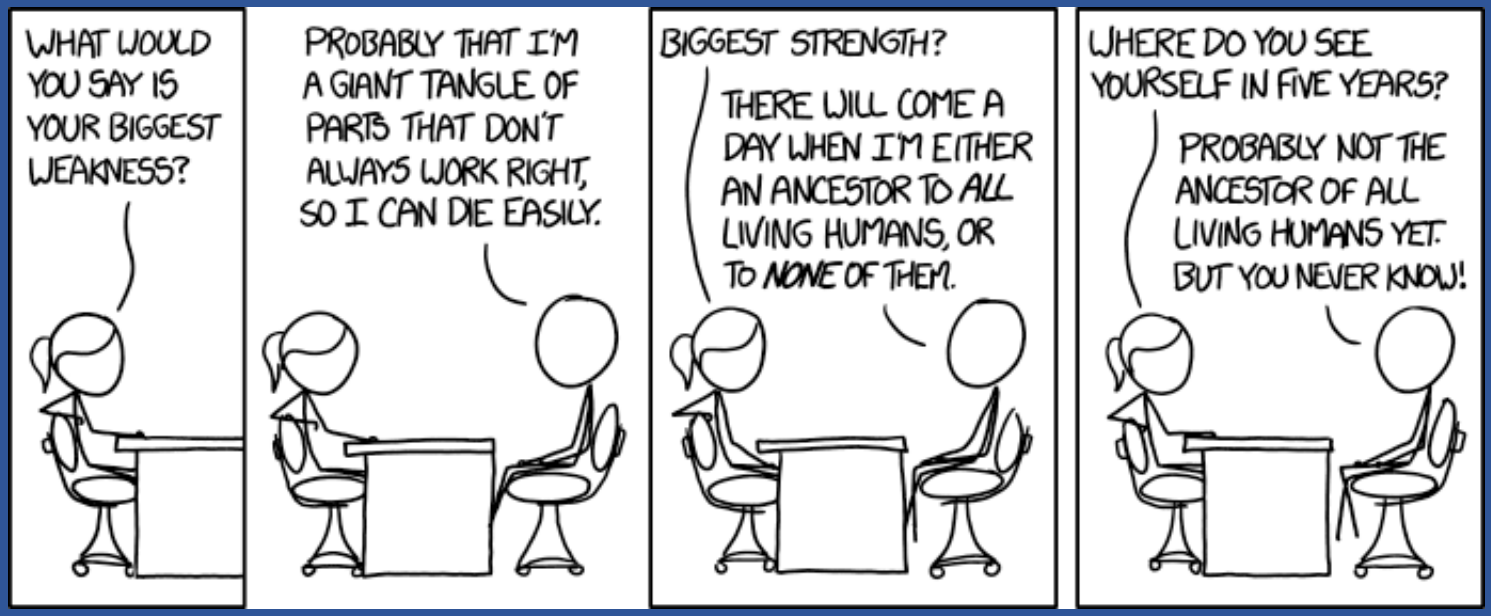
How do you improve your chances?

- Be a *good fit to the position* if possible (this can be in terms of skills as much as the precise science topic)
- Write a *good application* tailored for each position (stating why you're a good fit – do not assume the reader knows)
- *Contact your prospective boss* with sensible questions
- *Use your network* of existing collaborators and contacts, are any of them offering positions?
- *Increase your profile* by presenting at useful conferences
- Get *papers submitted or on astro-ph* before applications

Am I competitive for a particular job?

- **Don't be put off too easily, but do realistically consider your chances of success**
- You might feel you are under-qualified when in fact you have the skills needed for the position (this feeling can be gendered) – do ask for feedback from your mentors
- Papers count – need to demonstrate a publication record for a research position – but *papers are not everything*
- *Skills and fit to position* are equally or more important
- Competition for U.S. postdoc positions can be tougher for students from 3-year vs. 6-year PhDs

Preparing for job interviews



https://xkcd.com/1545/

Key points about interviews

- *Good news, you got shortlisted for an interview!*
- Usually, you'll have a 20-30m video interview with a panel using a set of fixed questions (talk not usually required)
- **Preparation is key!** Interview questions are highly predictable (see next slide)

Hints

- Rehearse answers to typical questions – but do not read from a script
- Use these answers to tell the panel why you are the best candidate for the position. Give informative but concise answers, try not to waffle
- Ask sensible questions demonstrating your knowledge. For example: independent research, collaboration access, computer/travel funding
- Arrange a practice interview beforehand!

List of predictable interview questions

- Why did you apply for this position? Why do you want to move to university X / country Y?
- Tell us about your PhD / biggest research achievement
- [If the position is tied to an existing project:] What skills and experience do you have in area X?
- [If there is some research freedom:] What independent science plans do you have for the position?
- How will this position help with your career ambitions?
- What are your strengths/weaknesses as a researcher?
- In your opinion, how can we make academia / collaborations / research groups a better place to work?

If you get a job offer!

- **Hurray!!** Typically, you might first receive an "informal offer" by e-mail, contract follows later
- *You are in a strong negotiating position*. It is fine to take some time deciding and negotiate on the start date.
- *Get in touch with existing postdocs / PhD students in the group* (ask potential employer for contact details)
- *Get in touch with the other places you have applied*, asking for updates (especially if you prefer them ☺
- Clarify the position plans, salary and benefits, travel funding, funds for computers, relocation expenses

Concluding thoughts

- A postdoc can lead to a rewarding career path in academia or elsewhere, opportunities to travel etc.
- Postdoc job applications are daunting and time-consuming. Uncertainty about life and the future.
- It is not easy to write good applications or compelling research proposals. Do seek advice and feedback.
- Your current supervisors and mentors can give you feedback on your plans – ask them!

There are simple steps of preparation you can take to increase your chances of success

Good luck!


A POST-DOC IS ALMOST A REQUIREMENT FOR AN ACADEMIC CAREER THESE DAYS.
EMPLOYERS WANT TO SEE HOW WELL YOU PERFORM AS AN INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER BEFORE THEY HIRE YOU.
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DO I REALLY HAVE THAT MUCH INDEPENDENCE?
IN THEORY, NO...
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