Sample Topics for the Academic Year

Here is a sample progression of topics for the monthly meetings. There is no need to follow this schedule – it is best to use it as a fallback, especially in the first months when the flow of your group's discussion has not been established.

October – What is a mentor useful for? Describe what you are looking for, and then brainstorm about what might future students and postdocs would expect from you when you form your own team.

November – Balancing work and life. Many postdocs have families, and hours may be inflexible. A professor's duties are even greater than a postdoc's. What are strategies for balancing all of your responsibilities?

December – Subconscious elements in presentation. Choose a presentation medium, and then find a short presentation online or have someone in the group present. Discuss how small details such as body language and illustration order can affect the listener's understanding of the presentation. How can you utilize presentation design to decrease the likelihood of using crutch words?

January – How do you plan an effective job search? How does your network affect your chances of success? If your dream university doesn't have a position open, what options do you have?

February – Networking. How do you build and maintain your network? Do you typically reach out during conferences, or just email people? What are the benefits of having a network?

March – Pick a [case study or two](#) and discuss.

April – Becoming a PI. What is the difference between a postdoc and a professor? How does your mindset change, and how does the scope of your project change? How will a postdoc know that they are prepared to become independent? What is the best way for a postdoc to discuss the next step with their advisor?

May – Managing a lab or team. What are some challenges in building a lab from scratch? How do you connect with your team every day? Discuss the appropriate distance to maintain between yourself and your team. How does the size of the team affect group dynamics or cause problems?

The Faculty-Postdoc Mentoring Program officially ends in May, but there is no reason not to continue meeting if so desired. On the next page are more topics if discussions run dry!

List of Potential Topics for Discussion

Career
- What made you decide that academia was the right path for you? What qualities do you find in prospective postdocs and graduate students that reveal that academia is not right for them?
- Is there a right time to decide to change career paths?
- What other careers are available outside of academia?
- What are the best places for research, whether it be at specific universities or in non-academic positions?
- How do you maintain stress levels when aiming for a tenure position?
- Are faculty job interviews different from postdoc or graduate student interviews?
- What options do you have for negotiating a job offer from a university?
- What kinds of postdocs should look for positions at liberal arts colleges?
- How long should a postdoc stay in one group? Is it wise to find a second postdoc sometimes?
- What are some red flags in your CV to avoid?

Independence
- How do you deal with imposter syndrome?
- How should a postdoc approach their PI to talk about becoming an independent researcher?
- When should a postdoc seek to become a PI?
- What is the difference between a postdoc-level project and a PI-level project?
- What makes a good scientist? What makes a good PI? Are these qualities the same?
- What resources did you use to learn management and leadership skills?
- How do you branch of from your PI's research field?

Collaboration and Networking
- How do you expand and maintain your network?
- In what ways do you utilize your network?
- How do you handle a collaboration with another lab? What are some unique challenges that appear in a collaborative project?
- Which social media outlets do you use? What information do you broadcast?
- How do you find conferences? How do you talk to people you don't know to build your network?
- How does being an introvert or an extrovert affect others' perception of you?

Time Management and Prioritizing
- What strategies do you use to handle your email inbox?
- How do you smoothly shift from lab work to desk work as your non-lab responsibilities grow over time?
- What are some productivity tricks that you use?
- How much time should be taken from research when applying for grants and searching for jobs?
- What are some rules that you set for yourself to prioritize professional, personal, and teaching responsibilities?
- What are useful strategies to balance work with family life, especially when there are young children and inconvenient work hours?
- How do you keep up with current literature in your field?
- What are signs of burnout, and how do you keep yourself from it?

Running a Lab
- How did your previous advisors manage their labs, and what did you like or dislike about their strategies?
- What were your biggest challenges when starting a lab?
- How do you budget your expenses, especially at the beginning of your lab? How do you not run afoul of the EHS?
- What aspects of your mindset did you have to shift when becoming a professor straight after a postdoc?
- What do you look for when choosing your first lab member, whether it be undergraduate, graduate, or postdoc? Do you advertise a position for a technician as well?
- Managing Up – what are some aspects that you appreciate in your lab members?
- What is the balance between allowing independence and micromanaging your team?
- What are various strategies that you have seen for organizing regular lab and personal meetings, and what are their pros and cons?
- What are good ways to socialize with your team in a balanced manner?
- How do you manage paper and digital data in your lab?
- How do you spend a grant?

Conflicts
- What can a postdoc do if their PI prevents them from becoming an independent researcher, intentionally or not?
- When should authorship for a manuscript be decided, and what if the order of authors is changed?
- How do you deal with lab members who don't fit into the lab or are unproductive?
- What if you and your PI are stuck repeatedly wrestling back and forth over a manuscript?
- What if your PI talks too much and you can't get a word in?
- What can be done if a PI decides to move to a different university, retire, or has an accident?

International
- What are good universities or companies outside the US to consider after a postdoc?
- How do you conduct yourself when going to a conference in a foreign country where you do not know the local language?
- What can international postdocs do to integrate better into the American academic culture?

Writing and Teaching
- What are the key elements in a grant proposal that you look for when reviewing?
- How much feedback is too much when reviewing a submitted article, especially when it comes to "more figures?"
- Should you write a book, or a chapter in a book?
- What options are available for influencing what basic courses you teach when becoming a professor for the first time?
- What major challenges did you face when designing your own course? Is there an outline to follow?
- What are key aspects of an effective presentation or poster?
- What makes a chalk talk less scary?
- How do I write a reference letter? How do reference letters defer in different countries?

Activities

- Volunteer a CV or other document and discuss it critically
- Record a chalk talk or find one online, and look for small things that have unexpected positive or negative impacts on the presentation
- Try out an active listening exercise from somewhere online
- Have everyone stand at the edges of the room (or a large circle), and have one person give a small presentation in the center, using the space visually as much as possible.
- Discuss what people actually want from their mentor. This article may provide inspiration.