

Informational Interviewing: 16 Questions

How to talk to people in your field and build your professional network.

1. What are informational interviews?

The term 'informational interview' is just another name for a conversation you have with someone else to learn more about their professional experience. You have probably informally conducted parts of an informal informational interview already, if you've ever asked friends or colleagues about their job responsibilities, their professional or academic background, or their thoughts about something related to your career or professional development.

2. How do they differ from employment interviews?

Even if you are searching for a job, **the purpose of an informational interview is ask for information, not a job.** Imagine you are a fourth-year student considering a career with a pharmaceutical company after graduation. At this stage, you are unfamiliar with the organization's environment, job opportunities for life scientists, what the work expectations are for the different jobs, what type of training/support is common, what the average compensation looks like, or pitfalls to avoid.

In informational interviews, individuals are more likely to share this information and advice if there *isn't* a job. People have greater freedom to be candid about their work, their organization, and suggestions, when the conversation is framed in the context of exploring and discussing their career path.

3. Who should conduct an informational interview?

Everyone! Whether you're in your first year or your last, there is always someone who can share valuable information about how to navigate the next step in your career.

4. How does informational interviewing help me?

Informational interviews help you explore the wide range of career opportunities available to someone with your training, skills, experience and interests.

As a graduate student or postdoc, you can talk to fellow students, alumni, and PhD-trained professionals about their experience of transitioning from student to professional, or what experiences or training may be necessary to break into a different career field. You can get advice about the career titles common for a career path, and types of situations or positions you should avoid.

After several interviews, you'll also have enough data points to draw some conclusions about professional options both now, and 5, 10, or 20 years further along in your career path. You can learn how you should organize your job search, and prepare for the interview and compensation negotiation process.

5. What exactly happens in an informational interview?

After you briefly introduce yourself, the bulk of the conversation (and your questions) should focus on the other person: their position, their background, their career trajectory, and their advice. At the interview's end you can return the focus to yourself, and ask questions about potential contacts, or advice about your resume/CV, etc. But for the most part, consider yourself a journalist, who is curious about teasing out their experience.

6. What five outcomes are common by the time a person completes a successful interview?

1. An understanding of that person's job responsibilities. 2. A sense of their background, how they found the position/succeeded in the interview process. 3. An awareness of future career opportunities for someone in that position. 4. Information about 1-2 other individuals who can share their experiences with you. 5. Information about 1-5 organizations you should explore.

7. How do I ask someone to do an informational interview?

You can approach via email, by phone, or in person. Often it helps to first send an email and then follow up by phone. Your correspondence might state:

What is included in a request?	Sample email: Postdoc
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who you are (including your connection/affinity, if there is one) 2. What you want 3. Why you're asking them 4. A thank you for considering your request 5. How they can find out more about you 	<p>Subject Line: Marie Curie suggested I contact you</p> <p>Dear Dr. Jordan,</p> <p>To being with, my PI, Marie Curie, sends her greetings. She suggested I reach out to you, as I am exploring different types of postdoc opportunities, and I shared with her that UPENN is the type of institution of interest to me. I'm wondering if you might have 45 minutes of time to chat with me about your postdoc experience in Dr. Grayson's lab.</p> <p>To share a bit about my background, I'm studying the role that Tregs play in type 1 diabetes. I've read several of your papers, and Marie suggested that it might be invaluable for us to meet, as you were considering both academic and industry postdocs. I would appreciate hearing more about your experience.</p> <p>I realize that this probably a busy time for you, so I appreciate you considering my request. I am open at any time over the next few months to chat. We could connect by Skype/ Zoom/ Facetime or phone if you are amenable; I can be flexible to your schedule. I've attached my CV to give you a sense of my background.</p> <p>Thank you for considering my request. Barbara Gordon</p>

What is included in a request?	Sample email: science policy
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who you are (including your connection/affinity, if there is one) 2. What you want 3. Why you're asking them 4. A thank you for considering your request 5. How they can find out more about you 	<p>Dear Dr. Kent,</p> <p>I'm in the sociology program at UCSF, and my research focuses on developing community interventions involving technology to tackle preventable diseases. I've been considering health policy and consulting as a career path, and for the past two months have been speaking with different professionals in the field.</p> <p>I was wondering if you would be open to chatting with me for about 20-30 minutes about the field and your career path.</p> <p>I was specifically interested in your background, because it is so diverse – your career path from your LinkedIn profile suggests you someone who has been able to apply their epidemiological expertise in the government, in think tanks, and in the private sector to truly make a difference in people's lives.</p> <p>Thank you for considering my request. My LinkedIn profile is DianaPrince/linkedin.com should you want to learn a bit more about me and my work.</p> <p>Regards, Diana Prince</p>

What is included in a request?	Sample email: Science communication
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who you are (including your connection/affinity, if there is one) 2. What you want 3. Why you're asking them 4. A thank you for considering your request 5. How they can find out more about you 	<p>Dr. Spock,</p> <p>I am a PhD student at UCSF, and for the past two months and have been speaking with UCSF alumni in health and science communications careers. I was wondering if you would be willing to chat with me for about 20-30 minutes about your position as a researcher in at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.</p> <p>I was intrigued by your perspective, as I see on your LinkedIn profile that you have researcher experience both at a governmental organization and in a nonprofit. Thank you for considering my request. Please feel free to learn a little about my background from my LinkedIn profile at linkedin/startrek.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Pavel Chekov</p>

What is included in a request?	Sample email: Academe
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who you are (including your connection/affinity, if there is one) 2. What you want 3. Why you're asking them 4. A thank you for considering your request 5. How they can find out more about you 	<p>Dear Dr. Kenobi,</p> <p>I know it's been a while, and I hope you're well. I'm finishing out my postdoc at UCSF in the next year and applying for tenure track R1 positions next fall. During this COVID-19 break, it seemed a good use of my time to begin working on my faculty application. I wonder if you would consider reading a draft of my research statement in the next few months. It would be extremely helpful to your got perspective on my research program, because of your work on X, Y and Z. I would be grateful for any feedback you find necessary, but in particular, your thoughts on the scope of my work and its potential fundability would be most welcome.</p> <p>If you are able, I absolutely defer to your preferred style of giving feedback (by email, video, phone, etc.) Thank you for considering this, and I hope you're doing well during this unusual time. Please note that I've also attached the CV and cover letter I'll be using to apply, for your information.</p> <p>Leia Skywalker</p>

What is included in a request?	Sample email: Biotech
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who you are (including your connection/affinity, if there is one) 2. What you want 3. Why you're asking them 4. A thank you for considering your request 5. How they can find out more about you 	<p>Subject line for email: Frida Kahlo suggested I contact you.</p> <p>Dear Dr. Rivera,</p> <p>I recently spoke with Frida Kahlo, who suggested that I contact you. I am a third-year graduate student at UCSF, and for the past few months have been speaking with a number of researchers about their experience. Frida briefly mentioned that you also considered industry postdocs that were a good match for your career path in the pharmaceutical industry, and thought that you could share some valuable advice on the subject. I was hoping I could have 30 minutes of your time for a chat.</p> <p>I appreciate you considering my request. I've included the link to my LinkedIn page at XXXXXXXX.</p> <p>Regards, Pablo Picasso</p>

8. What is the content and format of an informational interview?

Informational interviews cover 4 areas: The present, past, future and advice.

A1. Here is the the sample format for a student exploring how to choose a postdoc:

	Present	Past	Future	Advice
Focus	What their role is now?	What prepared them and positioned them for their postdoc?	What opportunities open up for them 5-10 years in the future b/c of the postdoc	What advice to they have for people seeking to succeed in their career path or their specific role.
Sample Questions	<p>1. Why did you choose this lab? How was it a good fit with your interests and career goals?</p> <p>2. What is a typical day/week like?</p> <p>3. What do you enjoy about your work/this lab?</p> <p>4. What is most challenging about this postdoc?</p> <p>5. What do you appreciate about our PI? Can you describe the ways they have helped you meet your training and career goals?</p> <p>6. In what ways do the PI and others in the lab support each other?</p>	<p>7. How did you organize your postdoc search?</p> <p>8. What skills/experiences/support do you recommend developing before starting your postdoc?</p> <p>9. What factors helped you determine which postdoc was right for you? (mentors, etc.)</p>	<p>10. What opportunities open up for you based on the skills and experiences you developed here?</p> <p>11. What seems to be the typical career path after people finish this postdoc?</p> <p>12. How long do postdocs seem to stay in the lab? What's the main source of funding?</p>	<p>13. What do you wish you had known before choosing postdoc?</p> <p>14. What types of research/levels of experience does a person need to have to really succeed in this lab? (Are they prepared to teach new skills? Does the PI have time? Etc.)</p>

A2. Here is a sample format of a conversation of student exploring how to choose a postdoc:

Focus	Length	Language
Open	3-5 minutes	<p>Thank you so much for meeting with me. Let me start by saying that Dr. X says hello, and how much I appreciate them for connecting us. As I shared in my email, I'm in my last year at the biochemistry program at UCSF, and for the past two months, I've been speaking to people who chose postdocs in the areas of X and Y and located on the east coast. I've also been trying to make a specific point to meet fellow UCSF alums.</p> <p>I was appreciative when you agreed to meet with me, as I see you've been able to be productive (I've read your papers), be involved in leadership activities as the head of the Postdoctoral Scholars Association, and seem to be on an academic career path. So, thank you for agreeing to talk with me today.</p>
Present	3-5 minutes	<p>1. Why did you choose this lab? How was it a good fit with your interests and career goals?</p> <p>2. What do you appreciate about your PI? Can you describe the ways they have helped you meet your training and career goals?</p>
Past	3-5 minutes	<p>3. In what ways do the PI and others in the lab support each other?</p> <p>4. How did you organize your postdoc search?</p> <p>5. What skills/experiences/support do you recommend developing before starting your postdoc?</p>
Future	3-5 minutes	<p>6. What factors helped you determine which postdoc was right for you? (mentors, etc.)</p> <p>7. What opportunities open up for you based on the skills and experiences you developed here?</p>
Advice	3-5 minutes	<p>8. What do you wish you had known before choosing your postdoc?</p> <p>9. What types of research/levels of experience does a person need to have to really succeed in this lab? (Are they prepared to teach new skills? Does the PI have time? Etc.)</p>
Close	1-2 minutes	<p>Thank you so much for taking the time. I have a much better understanding. Thank you also for recommending that I also look at the work of Dr. Y and Dr. Z. Could you suggest someone who's a postdoc in either of those labs who might have 30 minutes to chat with me as we have?</p> <p>I'll definitely keep in touch. If I can ever return the favor – please do not hesitate to contact me.</p>

B1. Here is the content for a postdoc exploring science policy:

	Present	Past	Future	Advice
Focus	What their role is now?	What prepared them and positioned them for their current position?	What opportunities open up for them 5-10 years in the future?	What advice to they have for people seeking to succeed in their career path or their specific role.
	<p>1. What does your role as a legislative analyst for the state's committee on science policy entail?</p> <p>2. What is a typical day/week like?</p> <p>3. What do you enjoy about it?</p> <p>4. What is most challenging about it?</p> <p>5. What do you think most people don't realize about your work?</p> <p>6. What qualities do you think are essential to succeed in this role</p> <p>7. How would you describe the people and organizational culture here?</p> <p>8. What is your understanding of the average starting salary range in R&D for those with a PhD degree?</p>	<p>8. How did you transition into this career path?</p> <p>9. What activities prepared you for this role?</p> <p>10. You mentioned that you were also looking at governmental affairs opportunities in private sector organizations before you took this position. What about that work resonated with you?</p>	<p>11. What opportunities open up for you 5-10 years down the road because you took this position?</p> <p>12. Are there any additional skills that you'd like to develop to remain competitive in your field?</p>	<p>13. What advice do you have for someone considering this career path?</p> <p>14. It would be interesting to learn more about science policy positions in the private sector. Could you recommend someone who might be willing to speak to me as you have?</p>

B2. Here is a sample format of a postdoc exploring policy careers:

Focus	Length	Language
Open	3-5 minutes	Thank you so much for speaking with me. Let me tell you a little bit about why I asked for this half hour of your time. As I shared in my email, I'm currently completing my PhD at UCSF and am considering the next stage in my career. For the past two months, I've been speaking to as many scientists who have moved into policy careers as possible about their positions, to learn more about opportunities in the field.
Present	3-5 minutes	1. What does your role as a legislative analyst for the state's committee on science policy entail?
Past	3-5 minutes	2. What is a typical day/week like?
Future	3-5 minutes	3. What do you enjoy and what do you find most challenging about it?
Advice	3-5 minutes	4. What do you think most people don't realize about your work?
Close	1-2 minutes	5. What qualities do you think are essential to succeed in this role?
		7. How did you transition into this career path?
		8. You mentioned that you were also looking at governmental affairs opportunities in private sector organizations before you took this position. What about that work resonated with you?
		9. What opportunities open up for you 5-10 years down the road because you took this position?
		10. What advice do you have for someone considering this career path?
		Thank you so much for taking the time. I have a much better understanding of the legislative director role. Thank you also for recommending X group – I'll join it. And thank you for recommending I chat with Selena Kyle. I will reach out to her.
		I'll definitely keep in touch. If I can ever return the favor – please reach out.

9. With whom should I conduct an informational interview?

Anyone who you feel could give you another perspective or good advice. This includes fellow students, alumni, senior professionals in your area of specialty, individuals who are working in positions of interest to you, or someone who works at an organization of interest to you (in any position).

10. What two things should I do after the interview?

1. Remember to write and send a thank you note in 24-48 hours! You are building your professional network. There are sample thank you notes on the OCPD website.
2. Keep in touch! Send a follow up email a few weeks later touch base. If they suggested that you contact someone, let them know when you do and why it was valuable. If they suggest that you alter your resume, or ask a particular interview question at an employment interview, and you found the advice useful, thank them for that as well.

12. What would I include in a thank you note?

The note is a brief (6 lines at most!) statement once again thanking them for their time, additional reflections about what you appreciated, and a request to keep in touch. A sample letter might look like:

Subject line (if email): Thank you so much for our conversation this week.

Dear Dr. Mozart, wanted to write you a quick note to thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you about your experience as an Editor at PLOS . After our conversation I have a much better sense of the rewards and challenges of working at a scientific journal. As you suggested, I will get in touch with Scott Joplin at AAAS next week. I greatly appreciate your time and do hope to keep in touch as I go through my job search next year. Please let me know if I can ever be of service to you.

Warm regards, Aaron Copland

13 Should I write a handwritten note or email my thank you?

Actually, either is a nice gesture, and both are appropriate - consider if your recipient seems to prefer hand- written correspondence, or is comfortable with email.

14. If informational interviews aren't about asking for a postdoc/job, how could the lead to a postdoc/job?

...because you're basically networking. Keep in mind that you're building your network to gather information, but *before* you need the job. If you conduct a series of informational interviews during your time at UCSF, all of these individuals will serve as your network when you really are on the market. By then, they will have met you, and probably be more responsive to your later requests to think of them if a position becomes available.

15. So as a student or postdoc, when should I begin informational interviewing?

Consider beginning informational interviewing after your second year, or as late as 3 months before graduation. Perhaps conduct one interview a quarter with people you meet at conferences, professional meetings, or through recommendations of friends, advisors, mentors or colleagues.

16. And if I have more questions about informational interviewing?

If you have questions about informational interviewing in particular, or networking in general, schedule an appointment for a 1:1 consultation at career.ucsf.edu/appointments. To schedule an appointment, call 476.4986 or visit us at career.ucsf.edu. We can: Discuss how to build your professional network, use the Graduate Division Career Alumni Network (GD CAN) database to connect you with alumni, practice a mock informational interview and help you prepare to network at a conference.