

Postdoctoral Job Offers: How First-Author Publications Help Shape Research Careers

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Post Url

<https://www.enago.com/academy/are-first-author-publications-indispensable-to-bag-your-first-postdoctoral-research-job/>



What does being the first author (or lead author) actually mean? In most cases, especially in [academic publishing](#), the author listed first on a published article is the one who has done the research and has written and edited the paper. He or she is also most likely the contact person for the targeted journal's editors after their review. Co-authors have usually contributed in a lesser capacity; however, this is not always the case for all disciplines. For example, in the [field of mathematics](#), authors are listed alphabetically because "in most areas of mathematics, joint good-quality research is a sharing of ideas and skills that cannot be attributed to the individuals separately." Some academic journals require a "statement of contribution" to indicate how much each author contributed to the research and writing.

So what does all this mean to the recent PhD recipient who is looking for a postdoctoral career position?

Publishing Can Be Difficult

According to the American Psychological Association, the [rejection rate](#) for their various journals in 2013 was between 70 and 90 percent. At [Elsevier](#), one of the world's largest academic publishers, "between 30 percent to 50 percent of articles don't even make it to the peer review process." This is especially discouraging to the PhD student who is near completion of his or her academic studies.

In addition to struggling with the reality of rejection rates, students often face struggles with advisors who are not willing to help. In a 2005 blog written in *Science*, a PhD candidate wrote about the difficulties he was having with his advisor, who had taken on new responsibilities and appeared to be less interested in helping him achieve his goals, especially those to get his research published. [In response to this issue](#), Dr. Luis Echegoyen, a chemistry professor at the University of Texas, stated that advisors should help students in any way possible to get their research published. If anyone faces that kind of situation, it is reasonable for you to either submit the manuscript without the help of your advisor or present your case to his or her superiors.

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Remember that your future might depend on this collaboration, whether publishing or other support and this should be taken seriously.

So Is Publishing Important?

Some believe that your publication record will be your greatest asset when applying for postdoctoral positions because it is a testament to your ability to effectively and correctly create and carry out a study. Some disciplines even require that a specific number of first-author papers be published before you apply for a position. For example, according to Dr. Robert Ross, a panelist at the seminar entitled "Life after the PhD: Finding the Right Postdoctoral Position," in psychology, prospective universities look for applicants who have published at least 10 papers, although it is not a requirement that the applicant is listed as the first author. According to an article in [Neurowire](#), the Scientifica blog site, you should "publish as much of your PhD work as possible and offer to help on other projects during your PhD to get your name on the paper and gain valuable experience."

In the science disciplines, in particular, your recognition as a major contributor to a study is a good way to catch the attention of prestigious labs to which you are applying. Some use this information upfront, especially the first author designation, to "weed out applicants, looking for at least one first-author paper to signify that a junior scientist can complete a project from start to finish"; however, this is not always the case, so if you have not published, don't be discouraged—there are also other characteristics that employers look for in a candidate.

In Lieu of Publishing, What Can You Do?

So, is publishing important? Absolutely! Is it necessary to land a job after receiving your PhD? No! When applying for a postdoctoral position, whether a postdoc research job or postdoc academic career, there are several dos and don'ts. In a [2010 article](#) written by Kendall Powell, a freelance writer, and published in *Nature* entitled "A foot in the door," a "postdoctoral application should present a person's best scientific self on paper." Information on all your important research and a personalized cover letter will help ensure that you are granted a review and possibly an interview.

Another huge advantage is previous funding. Be sure to mention that you have had funding for your research. According to Phil Baran, an organic chemist at the Scripps Research Institute, "If a postdoc has their own fellowship, they can write their application to me in crayon and I'll take them." If you have not been funded for your research, be sure to mention to which postdoctoral fellowships or funding sources you intend to apply.

Keep in mind the following points to consider when searching for your first postdoctoral position or career job:

- Start searching early; don't wait until you receive your PhD.
- Network with senior scientists and attend seminars, lectures, and conferences in your field.
- Read several research papers by those at your prospective place of employment.
- Know your goals and strengths and narrow your postdoc application to those positions/openings that meet them, including personnel.
- Be prepared by knowing all you can about the position and/or lab.
- Avoid negative remarks about your past or your experiences.
- Research other employment opportunities besides a career in academia, such as private postdoctoral researcher jobs or other fields that could use your analytical skills.

In your application, highlight what you hope to accomplish in the right postdoctoral position for which you are applying. State your accomplishments in the field but avoid specific details. Personalize your letters to the prospective reviewer or interviewer and, by all means, state how your experience sets you apart from other applicants for postdoctoral jobs.

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