Everything you always wanted to know (But were afraid to ask) about

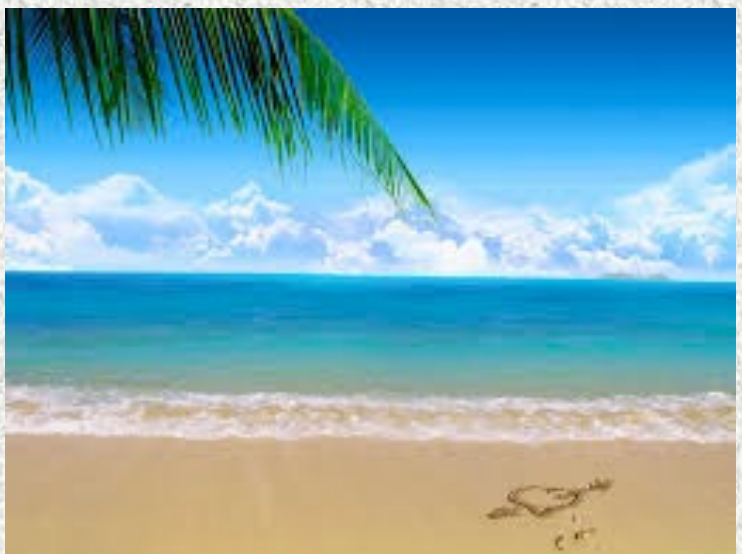
Academic Jobs

Asaf Pe'er

July 2025

One day you will graduate….

And then ???



A Ph.D. is the highest degree that can be awarded.

Now, ***do what you want*** (go find a job)…

1. ***Outside of academia:***

- It's a big world. Many opportunities.
- *You will be very attractive to employers*:

a. You were most likely a better student than your undergrad friends.

b. You have **a VERY SPECIAL SKILL:** *You know how to solve a problem whose solution cannot be found in any textbook.*

This is a very rare ability. → 

- "Sky is the limit"

A Ph.D. is the highest degree that can be awarded.

Now, ***do what you want*** (go find a job)…

2. I like academic life, and I want to stay…

What do people in academia do ???

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What do people in academia do ???

1. Conduct academic research

   Also: Industrial/applied research that can lead to start-up company!

2. Guide / supervise academic research of others

3. Teach

4. Administrative

   Committees, **apply for grants**, etc. …

What do people in academia do ?

	Ideal world		
			
Conduct academic research	60%		
Supervise/guide	25%		
Teach	10%		
Administrative	5%		

What do people in academia do ?

	Ideal world	University authorities	
		 	
Conduct academic research	60%	100%	
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Teach	10%	30%	
Administrative	5%	20%	

What do people in academia do ?

	Ideal world	University authorities	Reality
		 	
Conduct academic research	60%	100%	<10%
Supervise/guide	25%	100%	30%
Teach	10%	30%	40%
Administrative	5%	20%	50% (barnet…)

What is a post-doc ?

- In principle, once you got a Ph.D., you are entitled to apply for an academic job.
- However, practically, these are **highly desirable jobs**. **On every available job, there are typically >~100 applicants.**
- Thus, unless you are an extreme exceptional, unlikely that people will even look at your general direction – there are likely "better" candidates than you!.
- Therefore, a better idea is to apply for a **temporary job.**
- A **post-doc** is *a temporary academic job* (fixed term, typically 2-5 years), which enables you **to establish yourself as an independent researcher.**

What is a post-doc (2) ?

- A **post-doc** is *a temporary academic job* (fixed term, typically 2-5 years), which enables you **to establish yourself as an independent researcher.**

Purposes of a postdoc:

- Establish your name as a ***world leader*** (or, at least, very famous) in a particular field.
- Prove yourself as an **independent researcher**: obtain ground-breaking scientific results *without* your supervisor !
- Show that you are competitive at an international level
- Establish a network of collaborators world-wide

What is a post-doc (3) ?

- A **post-doc** is *a temporary academic job* (fixed term, typically 2-5 years), which enables you **to establish yourself as an independent researcher.**

Purpose of a postdoc (cont.):

- Possibly, reinvent yourself by moving to a new field, and acquire new skills/ knowledge/ experience
- Gain experience in working in different environments, with other people/groups
- → Thus, gain new things beyond what your Ph.D. supervisor could teach you
- →→ Strengthen your file (papers, talks, grants, initiatives, etc.), so that after a few years time, when you apply for a permanent job – **YOU** will be the #1 !.

A post-doc can be fun !

- A **post-doc** is *NOT* a Ph.D. – You are not a student any more, you are expected to be independent !

A post-doc can be fun! It should be fun! If it is not fun, you may have made the wrong choice…

- ✓ You see the world – exposed to different culture, different people
- ✓ Meet new friends – from all around the world
- ✓ Work in a different academic environment than BIU
- ✓ Can focus on scientific research – away from many disruptions
- ✓ You are already independent – free to do what you want !

A post-doc is very hard time.

- A **post-doc** is *NOT* a Ph.D. – You are not a student any more, you are expected to be independent !

A post-doc can be an extremely difficult time.

- ❑ Away from home – friends, family
- ❑ The famous ‘two body’ problem
- ❑ Very vague future (unless in exceptional cases)
- ❑ Low salary & very hard work
- ❑ Unforeseen circumstances (Covid...)

OK, say I want to go for it….

- Most important thing: **PLAN AHEAD** & ***begin early*** !!

- Clearly, there are more prestige places than others. Getting a postdoc in a big & prestige place puts you in a better position (BUT DOES NOT GUARANTEE ANTYTHING) towards applying to a permanent job a few years later.

Because:

- ✓ You are “more competitive”
- ✓ You “know the right people”
- ✓ More people know you in person (for the good & for bad)
- ✓ In many places in EU, in order to get a permanent job, you must show international experience !

*Five key points:**

- Stay enthusiastic; the process can be very frustrating, don't forget that science is cool !
- Take initiative.
- You must have self awareness / self critiquing
- Do NOT rule out jobs based on location
- Prepare your application well in advance – at least a month (better 2-3) before your first deadline.

* Adopted from Sera Markoff

Job search is very much like dating…

- “Follow your heart”; Many people can give you bad advice (but many could give you good advice as well..).
- You are looking for the right “match”
- Timing is everything.
- You are being judged, at the same time that you are judging
- First impression is very important
- You don’t want to seem desperate, but you don’t want to seem uninterested either

Job search is very much like dating… (cont.)

- People talk to each other! Its your personal reputation.
- Bad experience teaches valuable lessons for next time.
- Do NOT rule out too many possibilities too early!. What doesn't look appealing today, may look very appealing when you are facing unemployment!
- A negative response might hurt your ego, but it doesn't say much about you & your skills. Don't let a rejection letter discourage you from trying again! At the end, one positive response is what counts !

Strategic plan

- ***A postdoc is temporary.*** In a few years time, you will apply for a permanent job. What people will look then is to see that you are:

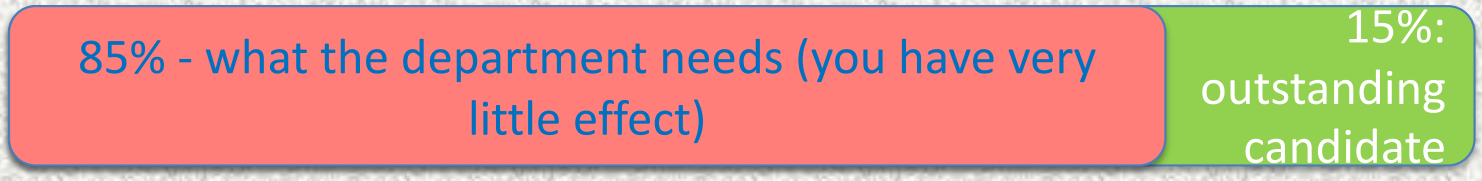
✓ ***Independent researcher:*** Have several important 1st author papers; write papers without your supervisor; broaden your scientific horizons to different areas.

✓ ***Scientific Leader:*** You are invited to give talks; PI on proposals; Many people cite your works; You are asked to write a review…

✓ ***Take initiatives:*** You can get independent fellowships; initiated projects with new collaborators; did things in a novel way…

✓ ***Attract funding*** / write competitive grants (even small ones – like travel scholarships, grants for school, awarded time on computers… People know you have to start somewhere.)

Strategic plan: the sad truth



- Departments decide on a **field** (85%). If you are in the right field- you win. Fields of interest change annually.
- Of all the candidates in a specific field(s) people look for the **outstanding** one.

- **Best strategy:**
  1. Be **flexible** in place / time. One year you may get nothing, next year you may have plenty of offers… (long postdoc is better).
  2. Identify **"hot"** topics and try to become famous.
  Best: ***invent*** a hot topic…

Strategic plan:
What makes a candidate outstanding ?

4. Excellent communication

3. Excellent technical skills

2. Creativity

1. Very deep and broad understanding of your research area

Strategic plan:
What makes a candidate outstanding ?

Committees know `outstanding` candidates when they see them!!!

They are identified in **minutes** (or less) !!

Files: papers (quality & quantity), invitations, grants,
research statement, letters…

In person interview: how you explain physics,
how you answer questions,
your future plans ….

If you work hard and practice, you WILL BECOME outstanding !

Types of postdoc jobs

- **Roughly two types:**

1. "Prestige" – named fellowships (national or institutional)

- typically, offered once per year.
- VERY competitive – 200-300 applicants.
- A whole committee decides on the winner
- Very independent – do what you want.

Examples:

USA - National*: Hubble, Einstein*, NASA NPP, NSF, Janski (radio), Carl Sagan

USA- Institutional: Harvard – Clay, ITC; Princeton – Spitzer ; IAS; Caltech – Fairchild; Berkeley- Miller; MIT - Papalardo, CITA

EU - National: Marie Curie, ITN, STFC (UK), Humboldt (Germany) , Max Planck (Germany), IRC (Ireland)

ESA postdoc fellowship, ESO, NWO (The Netherlands)

2. "Regular" – paid from someone's grant. More flexible. Have to convince "only" one person to take you.

Plan ahead

- Most job offers are advertised in the fall **(Sep –Oct.)**, for jobs that begin the following year (Sep. 1st).
- Deadline for applications: **Typically Dec. 1st** (but some are earlier – Mid Oct. onward). Especially competitive fellowships have earlier deadlines.
- Committees meet before / right after Christmas. Committees make "short list" of 5-10 people. If your name is not there, you are out.
- First round of offers – typically ~mid Jan.
- Response expected by Feb. 15 ("US standard decision time")
- "Second waves" of offers – late Feb., March
- Typically, final decisions are made by ~April / May (but sometimes later!). This leaves time to prepare for the physical move in August – Visa, etc.
- "Regular" postdocs can appear at any time.
- Applied postdocs are great opportunity to work closely with industry.

Where do I find the available jobs ?

- **Depends on your field.** A few suggestions:
- AAS job register (http://jobregister.aas.org), for all astronomy-related positions, from PhD to Faculty
- EU EURAXESS “mobility portal” (http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/index.cfm/jobs/index)
- Academic jobs online (https://academicjobsonline.org/ajo)
- INSPIRE (http://inspirehep.net/collection/Jobs)
- Websites of specific institutes or national professional societies (e.g., optics jobs, IEEE photonics society..)
- Mailing lists of collaborations
- In publications like PRL, Physics Today, Nature, Science,
- etc... → **consult your supervisor !**

Writing a good application

- Rule number one: **ALWAYS MEET THE DEADLINE**.
  Applying for a job is VERY time consuming, plan ahead !

You normally have to provide:

- ✓ Cover letter
- ✓ CV + list of publications
- ✓ Research statement – typically **two**:
  1. Summary of your past & present research
  2. Future research plans.
  Each should be 2-3 pages maximum ! You MUST follow the rules !
- ✓ 3 academic reference letters.

Cover letter

This is your first impression – the most important one !.

Make sure it is :

1. **In proper English** !

2. **Polite**! Always begin with:
"Dear Prof. (ensure you spell the name correctly!)"
Never begin a letter of that kind with "Hi Asaf !"
You are writing to your potential boss!
Similarly, you end the letter with "Sincerely, XXX"

3. Explain briefly **who you are and why you write the letter**
(Dear Prof. XXX., My name is YYY, currently a final year graduate student in BIU. I write to apply for the advertised job….

Cover letter (2)

4. Explain **WHY you want this job**, and what makes you (to your opinion) the best candidate for the position.
Briefly mention your scientific achievements, your future scientific plans and any additions that you think could help (teaching experience, outreach activities, etc. But don't make these seem more important than your research !).

5. Show **enthusiasm** about the job !

6.Over all, the letter should show that you are confident in your skills, yet reasonable.

7. All this should go in ~1 page (no more than 2!).

CV – general structure

Page header& page number

Asaf Pe'er

CURRICULUM VITAE - March 2016

Contact Address:

Physics Department
University College Cork
Cork, Ireland
Tel: (353)-21-490-2594
Fax: (353)-21-427-6949

E-mail: a.peer@ucc.ie
URL: http://www.physics.ucc.ie/apeer/

Citizenship: Israel

Field of Research:

Theoretical astrophysics, with focus on high energy astrophysics, relativistic plasma astrophysics, astroparticle physics and radiative transfer problems. Multi-wavelength and multi-messenger emission models in compact objects, in particular the prompt phase of gamma-ray bursts (GRBs), X-ray binaries (XRBs) active galactic nuclei (AGNs) and tidal disruption events (TDE's); Nuclear processes and sources of high energy cosmic rays; Relativistic gas dynamics.

Positions:

2012 -	Lecturer (equivalent of assistant professor), Physics Department, University College Cork (UCC), Cork, Ireland.
2014:	Long term visitor, Space Telescope Sciene Institute, Baltimore, Maryland.
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In US: **No need for**
- Date of birth
- Marital status
- Picture

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A few “buzz words”
of professional interests
discriminating you
From anyone else

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From anyone else

Academic positions
In reverse order !

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- University degrees only
- List Ph.D. thesis title & name of advisor

Education:

2004 Ph.D. High energy Astrophysics, Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot, Israel.
Thesis subject: "The emission of radiation from Gamma Ray Bursts"
Adviser: Prof. Eli Waxman

1999 M.Sc. in Physics, Weizmann Institute of Science, Rehovot, Israel.
Thesis subject: "Optically stimulated chemical HBr laser - summary of simulation and spontaneous emission experiments"
Advisers: Prof. Moshe Shapiro, Weizmann Institute of Science; Dr. Yehuda Nachshon, IADA; Prof. Uri Oppenheim, Technion.

1993 B.Sc. in Physics and Mathematics, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel.

Selected Grants, Honors & Award

2013 Marie Curie FP7-PEOPLE-2013-CIG #618499 (P.I., €100.000)
2013 IRC GOIPG/2013/315 (project leader, €96.000)
2011 Fermi cycle 4 proposal #41162 (P.I., $80.000)
2010 Fermi cycle 3 proposal #31014 (P.I., $80.000)
2009 Fermi cycle 2 proposal #21267 (P.I., $70.000)

2015 Chandra cycle 17 proposal #17500753 (Co-I, 120 ks; P.I. Fruchter)

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List all awards, grants, Computer time, etc. you ever got.

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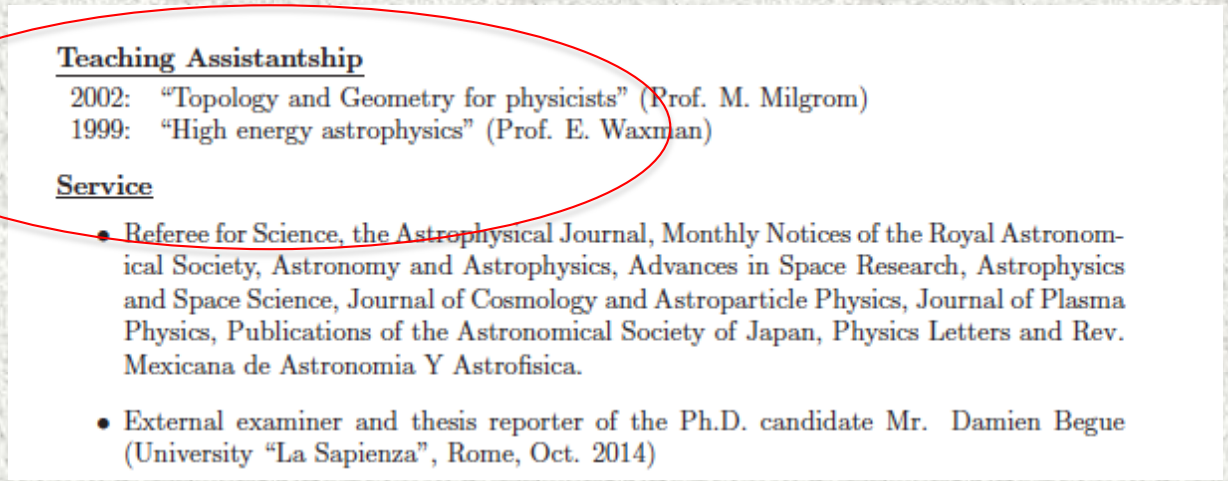
This could discriminate you from other good candidates !

CV – general structure

List all academic experience

- List all talks you've given
- List schools you've attended



Teaching Assistantship

2002: "Topology and Geometry for physicists" (Prof. M. Milgrom)
1999: "High energy astrophysics" (Prof. E. Waxman)

Service

- Referee for Science, the Astrophysical Journal, Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society, Astronomy and Astrophysics, Advances in Space Research, Astrophysics and Space Science, Journal of Cosmology and Astroparticle Physics, Journal of Plasma Physics, Publications of the Astronomical Society of Japan, Physics Letters and Rev. Mexicana de Astronomia Y Astrofisica.
- External examiner and thesis reporter of the Ph.D. candidate Mr. Damien Begue (University "La Sapienza", Rome, Oct. 2014)

- List all relevant skills (e.g., computer programming)
- List Languages, level of fluencies
- **Do not list** external interests, hobbies, etc.
- **Publications**: Latest one first. Ensure to discriminate between "refereed journals" and non – refereed proceedings.
  Also, discriminate between "submitted" and "published".

Research statement

- Follow closely all the rules !!
  (In particular: page limit !).
- It should show that you understand “the big picture”: what are the interesting questions in your field? How does your research promote knowledge/ help solving these questions? How is it related to other state-of-the-art research ?
- Taylor it to the desired job (if you can). If you intend to work with someone, explain how your research relates to this person’s research.
- A good figure worth a 1000 words.
- It should read that you understand what you write, rather than copy. Experienced people can tell in **seconds** how much you understand !!!
- Focus only on your personal scientific achievements and goals, not on un-related things.

Reference letters

- **This is the most important, yet tricky part.**

- You typically need 3 reference letters, from people who know your scientific work, **AND** are known themselves.
  "He is a nice guy" CANNOT be accepted.

- The letters are confidential. You will not know what is written in them.

- One of these letters must be from your supervisor. It is best to have an open discussion with your supervisor way ahead of time, to get feedback and see his/hers opinion about your progress. This way, you can have time to fix issues that could prevent your supervisor to write a strong letter to you.

- Ideally, you want as a referee a person that is **BOTH** well known, knows your work very well, and thinks you are excellent.

Reference letters (cont.)

- There is no “winning strategy”. Generally, it is likely better to get a letter from someone who knows your work very well, than from famous guy who is not well-familiar with your work. In the later case, you might be one in a few, and your letter will not necessarily be the best.

- No need to provide more than 3 letters, unless asked.

- Since you need 3 letters: **you must interact scientifically with several people in addition to your advisor**! A good way: grab people in a conference, show them your poster, ask them questions, etc.

Reference letters – the most important part of your application

Strong letters:

" There is this very interesting problem that people have worked on for many years and didn't solve, until Bob came, and found this extraordinary way of solving it".

Or

"Everybody thought that the origin of this phenomena is this, until Bob came and showed that it can be explained in a completely different way"

(Very) Weak letters:

"During his Ph.D., Bob worked on this project very hard, and found this and that."

"Bob is a nice guy, and I am sure he will contribute to your department".

Ensure that your referees have enough time to prepare their letters !
(at least a few weeks – don't tell them on Wednesday when the deadline is Friday !)

Job talks

- Not required for postdocs **(necessary if you are shortlisted for a faculty!)**; but visiting department(s) could be a useful way for people to know you (for the good & bad).
- Prepare very good presentation – you are trying to "sell" yourself ! Obviously, practice your talk!.
- Do your homework – know who the people that you will be talking to and what they do. Prepare questions for them !
- Dress code: casual/business.
- Many people will ask for skype/zoom interview.

Tips for modern days

- Google yourself
- Work on a good URL.
- Hide your weird issues and fetishes from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Google+, etc.
- Picture of you drunk in a party is ***not*** going to help you get an academic job (or a job at all…)
- Consult chatGPT (?)

The End → (open discussion)