

Making the Most of Your Postdoc

IHE [insidehighered.com/advice/2017/07/27/how-make-most-out-your-postdoc-experience-essay](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/07/27/how-make-most-out-your-postdoc-experience-essay)

Landing a postdoc, particularly for the social sciences and humanities, is increasingly difficult as [Keisha N. Blain](#) recently noted in *Inside Higher Ed*. Many postdocs are as competitive as tenure-track jobs. But if you are one of the lucky few to receive a postdoc, what's next?

I'm finishing my one-year [National Center for Institutional Diversity](#) postdoc at the University of Michigan. I'm fortunate enough to have a postdoc that requires no teaching or service, and provides a generous research budget. I'm also a sociologist, so my perspective reflects that of a scholar in the social sciences and humanities. Still, no matter if your postdoc is for one year or three, or whether you are teaching, in a lab or on your own, I've developed some tips that I think can help you make the most of your postdoc.

Realize that success -- however you define it -- is your responsibility. You have achieved what many others in life have not: you have earned a Ph.D., and you are no longer a student but a professional in your field. Although mentorship and connections are important, like all jobs -- and much of life -- you must take your career into your own hands. That means focusing on what you can control and what you want to do during this time.

Make a plan. You probably did that as part of your postdoc application. But things often change from the time you apply and the time you begin your postdoc. What are the main things you want to accomplish this year? What are the smaller projects you want to do, time permitted?

Be as explicit as possible, and break it down into months. That is important because often we need to learn to think backwards in academe. For example, one of my goals was to have a manuscript workshop: to invite three senior scholars in my field to read my book manuscript and come to Ann Arbor to provide comments. That meant that I had to think about not only who to ask but when to have the workshop. Since I wanted to have it in April, I had to ask the senior scholars in the fall. It also meant that I had to have a fully revised draft of my manuscript completed at least one month before the workshop, so I could email it to my readers. That helped me set my own deadlines for each chapter.

Meet regularly with your mentor(s). My postdoc provided me ample free time. Some people have difficulty working with so little structure. One way to prevent that is to regularly meet with your mentors to keep them up to date on your goals and progress. You should also have an agenda for each meeting. Your mentors will likely have things they'd like to speak with you about, but make sure you are prepared.

For example, I regularly met with my mentors, and before each meeting, I put together a list of things to update them on and questions to ask. For my first meeting with each of them, I not only made a list of questions I had but also brought a few documents with me. First was a visual diagram of my research agenda. This included a list of each of my papers under a common theme, as well as my broader research agenda and subfields. Second was my list of goals for the academic year. My primary goal was to revise my book manuscript, but on this list, I also included the status of different papers in the queue (e.g., those under review, with a revise and resubmit, or papers that were only an idea) and next steps.

Engage in the intellectual community. A postdoc can be isolating since you are neither a graduate student nor a faculty member, and you are there for a limited period of time. But the benefits of a postdoc extend far beyond the logistics that are covered in your contract: it's being a part of the intellectual community where you are placed.

During my postdoc, I had the time and financial support to reimagine and revise my manuscript. I also had the ability to engage in the intellectual community of the sociology department. I actively and regularly participated in department's workshops -- and workshopped a few of my own chapters -- and made it a point to meet with the majority of the faculty there. I also met other faculty members across the university with whom

I shared interests.

Some people may think that everyone knows you're in the department, so if they wanted to meet with you, they will email you. But that's not taking control of your career. Faculty members balance a lot of commitments: their own research as well as teaching, service and mentoring both undergrads and grad students. They likely want to meet with you, but their schedules are already packed. So you should take the initiative and reach out.

I appreciated the opportunity to be associated with a department with so many faculty members who shared my interests as well as those who do interesting research in other subfields. Therefore, I made it a point to become familiar with people's work (if I didn't know about it already), and individually asked people to meet with me over coffee. Everyone said yes, and very graciously met and talked with me.

The conversations have been invaluable. It was a chance to get to know senior scholars in my field and talk with them one-on-one about my research and make connections with them about their own. Some faculty members - both within and outside the department, and including my mentor -- also provided invaluable feedback on other papers I was working on.

Don't get distracted. I came to my postdoc in an odd manner. I was already on the tenure-track at Bryn Mawr College. They have a generous one-year junior research leave, and I applied to this postdoc as part of that opportunity (although one year earlier than scheduled). As such, I had already spent a year and a half (I delayed my start date half a year due to pregnancy) balancing research, teaching and service.

Learning time management was crucial in making the most of my postdoc and becoming a more efficient writer. It also allowed me time away from my book manuscript, since I was working on individual papers during that time. Because I had previously been writing in focused spurts during the academic year, I learned that things will take as long as you let them.

The unstructured quality of the postdoc, in fact, allowed me to be more productive. I was always writing, to make sure I was taking advantage of the most precious resource we as academics have: time. When I had writer's block or couldn't focus on a given project, I continued to write -- this time, however, on other projects. No matter how I was feeling, I was always moving forward because I was always writing.

Don't forget to say goodbye. Academe is a small place. You should maintain the connections you make during your postdoc throughout your career. Don't forget to reach out to the faculty members whom you've gotten to know, let them know you've appreciated their advice and feedback and that you hope to stay in touch.