



ISTA Postdoc Alumni Mentoring Program

Guiding Handbook for Mentors and Mentees

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This document aims to provide general guidance for prospective Mentors and Mentees on how to set up a mutually enriching experience that works for both parties and which each is comfortable with.

ISTA Guidelines for Mentors

Mentoring aims to promote the following aspects concerning the Mentor:

- Development of mentoring, coaching and interaction skills
- Connections with postdocs in the field
- Connection with the ISTA
- Development and expansion of the professional network
- Exchange of ideas
- Appraisal of their own past achievements, current status and future plans
- Stimulation of critical discourse regarding mentorship

What we expect Mentors to do:

- Spend one-on-one time – usually via online meetings – with the mentee, at least twice but no more than six times per year
- Set targets and agree on practical matters with the mentee
- Support the development of the postdoc's working life skills, as a mentor
- Share their knowledge, experience, mistakes, tips, and stories
- Further correspondence/meeting following end of employment at ISTA and start of professional career

What we expect Mentors NOT to do:

- Not engage in advising postdocs on their current research project

ISTA Guidelines for **Mentees**

Mentoring aims to promote the following aspects concerning the **Mentee**:

- Career-development plans and steps
- Evaluation of career plans and prospects
- Feedback on CV and job cover letters
- Advice on career transitions both within and outside academia
- Guidance on how best to invest time and effort

What we expect **Mentees** to do:

- To initiate contact and arrange meetings with your mentor
- To approach your mentor with specific questions and objectives in mind
- To identify areas that you need mentoring for
- To perform a self-assessment prior to meeting the mentor, and to discuss the outcomes with the mentor

What we expect **Mentees NOT** to do:

- Discuss personal problems that do not directly relate to career development
- Discuss personal and professional problems with the PI
- Discuss administrative problems and complaints
- Request mentoring on any of the topics not meant for mentor-mentee meetings

How to start: pick your brains and break the ice

suggested activities and topics

Activities and Activity Goals

- Share and agree on mutual expectations from the start
- Exchange ISTA Postdoc experience
- Exchange individual trajectories and useful occurrences during postdoc
- Evaluate characteristics and abilities: identify strengths and build on areas of improvement
- Create learning experiences as needs are identified
- Coach and/or direct to develop/improve specific skills and behaviours
- Be a sounding board: listen, probe, understand and help to clarify
- Share personal work experiences: share highs, lows, success, failures and what was learned
- Connect at conferences and networking events
- Chat via Skype, Teams, Zoom etc.

Possible Topics to Discuss

- Special training
- Career tracks
- Career exploration
- Types of businesses/employers in chosen field
- Current issues in the profession
- Job market trends
- Organizational culture
- Professional organization membership
- Quality of life in the profession, work/life balance
- Management issues
- Approaches to ethical or professional dilemmas
- Online or social media etiquette
- Job search advice
- Resume and cover letter review
- Interviewing and networking skills
- extracurricular activity benefits

What about THE QUESTIONS

sample questions to start your discussion

Mentees:

- Looking back on your career, what advice would you give your younger self?
- Now that you know more about me, what would you do if you were in my position?
- What used to be some of your biggest weaknesses?
- Based on my interests, with whom else would you recommend I connect?

Mentors:

- What are some of your career goals?
- What skills / knowledge are you hoping to develop?
- What is preventing you from achieving your goals?
- What are some areas for improvement that you wish to develop?
- What will you do differently to meet those challenges?
- How can I help? Where do you feel you need the most help?



Research
FAQs

Failures
FAQs

Private life
FAQs

Practical
Tips

Should we talk about (y)our research?

Can we talk about our research in details?

Some information may be confidential.

Please respect confidentiality and ask permission when necessary.

Sharing an overview of current/past projects can be useful to clarify mentee's goals and allow the mentor to provide a more spot-on professional advice.

When would it be useful to share such details?

Mentors may wish to describe how they exploited the research output for their career goals, and different channels and venues this was achieved.

The topic of the discussion can primarily linger on how the research was promoted, how much networking helped with this, and at what stage it is advisable to start making it more visible.

Do I really have to share my failure(s)?

What is the value of sharing failures?

Whether from job applications or competitive selection processes in Academia and industry, endless efforts and tentative approaches for collaboration or potential investment, failures can represent a resourceful learning experience.

How do I embrace failure?

The impact that certain setbacks had ultimately on an eventual success can never be underestimated.

Some useful tips on how to overcome consequences of a failure on an emotional and practical terms can emerge from sharing personal journeys through moments of struggle, reflection on feedback, and the application of the lesson learned to the next step towards success.

What about my private life?

Am I allowed to share details or ask questions about private life?

More often than not, personal life choices and career decisions can inform and affect each other.

The effect of such choices for Mentors who experienced them first hand may give Mentees planning to embark on a similar chapter a valuable prospective within each individual journey and circumstances.

What aspects Mentees could be potentially be interested in?

Starting a family, the desire to maintain or improve a certain quality of life, moving country, family issues, cultural background etc. - these are just a few topics that Mentees could have already experienced.

Always taking mutual respect and confidentiality into account, Mentors have the opportunity to share the impact these had while either planning or enjoying the next career phase.

Am I a good Mentor?

Practical tips

- Get to know your mentee(s) (e.g. how they work, their goals, their strengths, and their areas for growth) while maintaining respectful boundaries.
- Share your knowledge, experiences, and insights, but remember that you are not expected to be an expert.
- Connect mentees to resources if you aren't sure of the answer.
- Build them up. Provide constructive criticism in a caring way.
- Establish clear expectations.
- Be open to learning from your mentee. Learning is a two-way street in mentoring relationships, and the relationship can be just as fruitful for the mentor.
- Listen well. Be attentive and actively listen.

Am I a good Mentee?

Practical tips

- Get to know your mentor's professional background, while maintaining respectful boundaries.
- Be willing to share your hopes, fears, and goals, so that your mentor can understand you best.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions. Mentors may not always know what you want, need, or seek, so don't shy away if you have concerns.
- Follow-up. Keep in touch with your mentor and share any updates about previous conversations.
- If your mentor provided you with helpful advice or resources, then you may want to send them a quick Thank You note.
- Stay engaged with your mentor.
- Keep in mind that your mentor may have a busy schedule; however, feel free to reach out if you would like to meet.
- Be willing to share new knowledge with mentors. Learning is a two-way street in mentoring relationships, and the relationship can be just as fruitful for the mentor.
- Listen well. Be attentive and actively listen.

ISTA Postdoctoral Office 2025

Further reading, listening and watching

MENTORS IN SCIENCE

<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02440-7>

MENTORING RESOURCES IN SCIENCE

<https://www.nature.com/collections/lhgrijpydm/content/mentoring-content-from-nature-journals>

CAREER AND FAMILY

<https://www.science.org/content/article/balancing-career-and-family>

FAILURE:

<https://www.wired.com/story/scientists-need-more-failure-talk/>

<https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/overcoming-sense-academic-failure>



The best mentors still have mentors
because they know they have to keep
learning.