

Putting Your Best Foot Forward: Self Advocacy for Scientists

What does it take to get that next job, a spot in graduate or medical school, or a research position?

Convincing others that you have what they are looking for

This publication is all about doing just that by

1. knowing what you have (identifying your skills and strengths),
2. figuring out what is being looked for,
3. [adding to your skill set, if necessary], and
4. convincing those who are making the decision that you are the perfect fit.

1. Start by taking stock of your skills and strengths. Think about your achievements, in your personal, work, and school life. What are you good at? What do you like doing? Make a list of your strengths and skills, focusing on ones that will be important to your career in the sciences.

Now provide evidence that will demonstrate to others that you actually have those strengths and skills. An employer or admissions committee will not take your word for it that you are a good leader. You will need to be able to describe a real situation that shows your leadership. Your examples should be concrete and relevant.

Are you pleased with the list you have generated? Take a look at the skills listed on the next page. Do these lists suggest additional strengths that you would like to add to your own list? It is important to think broadly when you are assembling your skills list.

Types of Skills*

Transferable (or Functional) Skills

[Note that these are expressed as verbs.]

Building
Synthesizing
Calculating
Motivating

Editing
Writing
Analyzing
Leading

Memorizing
Planning
Organizing
Creating
Communicating

Managing
Collaborating
Translating

Subject (or Knowledge) Skills

[These are expressed as nouns.]

Mathematics
Languages
Fashion
Music
Computers
The stock market
Biochemistry

Food and Cooking
Medicine
Pharmacology
Interpersonal relationships

Personal Trait Skills

[These are expressed as adjectives.]

Punctual
Self-reliant
Courteous
Out-going
Responsible
Dependable
Adaptable

Organized
Independent
Thoughtful
Intelligent
Creative
Persistent
Accurate

* Adapted from Richard Bolles, "What Do You Have to Offer the World?"

2. What are graduate/medical school admissions committees and companies that employ scientists looking for?

Below, we have provided examples of skills we think are important for scientists. The list is neither exhaustive nor perfect. You may think that we have omitted important skills or have included skills that a scientist would never use. Also, we admit that no one list can capture the precise mix of skills that all jobs or programs will require. Create a customized list of the skills you think would best prepare you for the next position you are aiming for.

Important skills for scientists

Creativity
Problem-solving
Organization
Attention to detail

Analytical acuity
Ability to synthesize information
Mathematical competence
Ability to work in a team
Optimism
Resilience
Outstanding communication skills: written and oral
Energy
Enthusiasm
Determination, stubbornness
Strong ethical sense
Good interpersonal skills
Flexibility
Good time management
Ability to lead
Intelligence
Insight
Technical knowledge
Good judgment
Leadership skills

3. Compare your list of personal skills/strengths with the list of skills that will be important in the next position in your scientific career?

Do you have all the skills that you are likely to need? If not, consider developing some additional skills. The ability to work successfully as part of a team is highly valued in some disciplines. If this is a skill you think you will need, figure out a strategy that will enable you to acquire the skill and demonstrate that you have acquired it. For example, you might volunteer for a student group that is fund raising for a community project you believe in. The details of the volunteer project become the evidence of your ability to work in a team.

4. Convincing an admissions committee to offer you a position or an employer to offer you a job requires that you (a) get your thoughts in order, that is, decide which skills to emphasize in a particular situation and (b) learn to write and speak convincingly about your skills.

Prioritize! By now you should have a rather substantial list of skills/strengths. When you apply for a job or to medical school, you will have to decide which of your skills to emphasize in your application materials. How does one decide which skills to include and in which order?

Choose skills that are important to the particular position or situation.

Suppose that you are applying to a graduate program in chemistry. What skills would the admissions committee be most likely to value?

How would you rank the following?

Courteous

Adaptable

Intelligent

Creative Choose skills that will demonstrate your (good) uniqueness.

Not all skills are equal.

For example, would you emphasize punctuality or independence? What about leading versus memorizing?

Choose skills for which you can provide concrete evidence.

Problem-solving and creativity are both important skills. If you recognized and resolved a problem with an assay that had everyone else in the lab stymied, then present problem-solving as one of your skills. If you developed a model to explain your results and that model has revolutionized the way your entire lab thinks about its research, then discuss your creativity.

Correctly identifying your skill set will not do you much good unless you are able to communicate your knowledge

convincingly to others. The following suggestions are designed to help you do that.

Use the Situation – Action – Result (SAR) format to provide evidence for the skills you want to claim.

People will remember your personal statement or interview more intensely if you communicate with them via stories. Aim to present each skill that you want to discuss in terms of a situation or task you faced, the actions you took to resolve the situation or complete the task, and the result that followed. Suppose that new graduate students at your institution were having a difficult time settling into campus life. You might assemble a committee to discuss ways in which to assist them, which might lead either to a handbook discussing how your campus works or an orientation program at which providers of various campus services describe their offices and how to access their services. Presumably the result would be that new graduate students adjust more easily to their environment, but an additional benefit might be a more cohesive entering class since members had an early chance to get to know each other. Depending on the details, a story like this might be used to demonstrate leadership or editorial skills or project management ability or team-building.

Solicit input from someone whose judgment you trust before you take your show on the road.

It is always a good idea to solicit input from

someone you trust when you are writing an important document or developing a presentation. Personal statements and interview strategies are no exception. Seek out someone who can advise you on whether your identification of your skills is on target, whether the evidence you use to present them is convincing, and whether the skills you say you have are actually relevant and important for the position you are seeking. You want to seek out individuals who will have sufficient experience to provide valuable advice. In addition, you need individuals who will provide critical feedback in a positive way, people who will not only help you identify areas that need additional work but will also direct you to the best approaches for improving your written or oral presentation. Finally, you may want to solicit their opinions about the tone of your presentation. There is a fine line between accurately describing your skills and sounding pompous.

Practice! Edit! If you are preparing for an interview, it is a good idea to practice out loud. At the NIH you can make an appointment with a career counselor for a mock interview. If you do not have this service available at your institution, practice – out loud – on your own and then ask a friend or mentor to conduct a mock interview for you. The object is to become comfortable with talking about your skills but not to sound as if your responses have been memorized.

If you are writing a personal statement, be certain to edit it carefully. It must be grammatically perfect! Ask a friend or advisor to review it for you to ensure that it communicates the information you intended in an absolutely grammatically correct fashion.