



NATIONAL  
**POSTDOCTORAL**  
ASSOCIATION

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# POSTDOC SYMPOSIUM TOOLKIT

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## I. Start planning early

If possible, start planning your symposium approximately eight to twelve months in advance. Speakers often have busy schedules and may not be available on your chosen date. You will also need time to solicit funding and identify postdocs and administrative assistance to help organize the symposium. The symposium will need to be organized in advance with enough time to sufficiently advertise the date, location, and invited speakers, as well as to announce a call for abstracts (if applicable).

You will need to consider the following (covered in detail in this document):

- Decide on the topic/theme – This may be decided in advance or may depend on which keynote speaker(s) accepts your invitation. A topic is not necessary but may be used to bring new information to postdocs (i.e., latest techniques or career information).
- Identify the date – Once you know the date of your symposium, you can begin to build a timeline with benchmarks/deadlines for achieving various planning tasks. An example timeline can be found at the end of this toolkit. You will want to avoid dates of other annual events on campus as well as of national meetings relevant to your audience. The availability of your chosen keynote speaker may also affect the date of your symposium.
- Speaker invitations – The list of speakers is often decided after the keynote, topic, and date are set. The number of speakers you invite will depend on your budget.
- Budget – You should create and maintain a budget from the earliest planning stages. Many of the decisions you make will depend on your budget, with regards to your selected speaker(s) including coverage of flights, accommodation, and honorarium as well as the location of your symposium. Fundraising may also be an option to help support your symposium. Please check with your institution for rules and regulations regarding fundraising.
- Sponsors – Find departments, centers, or even administrative offices (Offices of Postdoctoral Affairs/Graduate Studies/Career Development, Dean of Research) that are willing to contribute to your symposium. Acknowledge their support by mentioning them in the opening and closing remarks as well as listing them as sponsors on flyers and programs.
- Volunteers – A smoothly-run symposium is greatly facilitated with the help of volunteers. There are many “day-of” tasks to manage simultaneously. Solicit help from volunteers and divide the tasks. Flyer design, speaker search, funding requests, and event logistics can be worked on independently to lighten the workload and move things along expeditiously.
- Advertising – You should decide on the most effective medium for advertising your symposium. If you plan to have postdocs presenting, advertise early enough to allow for abstract submission. Advertising should include a date, location, keynote speaker, abstract deadline and submission method, and contact information for questions. More information on advertising your symposium can be found in Section VII.

## II. Make use of your resources

Identify your postdoctoral symposium coordinator. This is a critical person for organizing a successful symposium. S/he will need to be a person that is detail-oriented, well-organized, with exceptional communication skills. This person can assist you with multiple aspects of planning the symposium including the following: getting access to the useful listservs including those specifically for postdocs, sending emails to interested parties, arranging catering for the event, and confirming the keynote speaker. Remember that your keynote will likely be traveling from elsewhere, so s/he will need help coordinating his/her travel plans and potential reimbursement. Also, your keynote may have colleagues that s/he will want to meet with while at your institution. Ensure that s/he will have time on the schedule to meet with these individuals. Furthermore, the postdoctoral coordinator may have access to useful templates of previously organized symposia that can be very helpful to decide on a format for your event.

Identify other postdocs who are willing to donate their time and effort. You will likely need help throughout the planning process, so it is wise to identify a group of dependable volunteers early. As the date of your event approaches, there will be many things to complete before the symposium including transportation/food for the keynote speaker; generating a program book. In addition, there will be many “day-of” tasks like check in, poster board set-up and break-down, etc. for which you will need additional volunteers.

Identify another group on campus or another local institution that may be interested in hosting a joint symposium. This may also be useful in terms of reducing costs.

Identify administrative resources and personnel that may be available to you. Seek administrative assistance (within your department or perhaps with Offices of Postdoctoral Affairs/Graduate Studies/Career Development). Administrative personnel can often provide invaluable assistance with managing the budget, helping with booking the room, arranging speaker travel, etc.

### **III. Have talks and posters**

Organizing the event. How you wish to organize your symposium is institution-specific. Remember that you want to keep your audience engaged! One option would be to have four to five sessions of approximately four 15-20 minute talks (organized by topics). Posters would be presented during lunch and/or during a reception at the conclusion of your event. Depending on the level of interest, consider having a half-day symposium rather than a full-day symposium.

Award best talks/posters with travel award(s) to conference(s). Ask the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs/Career Development, alumni association, or other sponsor(s) (see below) whether they would be willing to support a monetary award.

Identify faculty and (potentially) graduate students who can serve as poster session judges. Start recruiting judges early in the process. Oftentimes, faculty members have very busy schedules and are unable to help, despite the fact that they want to volunteer, because they have a scheduling conflict.

#### IV. Deciding on a Keynote Speaker

Identify a Keynote Speaker. The keynote address can be given by a former alumnus (usually someone with postdoctoral experience) who has pursued an academic or non-academic career. Also note, that the keynote speaker can be an accomplished individual from within your own institution or from a local university and/or organization. Inviting someone local could potentially reduce travel costs substantially. It is often difficult to determine whom your postdoctoral community as a whole will want to invite as a keynote speaker. Oftentimes, it may be someone who has been very successful in the academic arena. A list of speakers should be compiled with the help of faculty, other advisors, and/or postdocs. Do your research and select a speaker who has an excellent reputation as a speaker. Remember, that keynote speakers' schedules are busy, so do advance planning and invite them preferably six months before your event – the earlier the better.

Choosing a Theme. You may choose to have a general theme for your symposium. This theme should be of interest to as much of the local scientific community as possible. Deciding on that theme can help to narrow your search for speakers. Keynote speakers tend to have very busy schedules, so you will need to contact them early in the process. However, remember to contact them one at a time.

## V. General Budget

Keynote speaker. Travel expenses include hotel, airfare, and ground transportation, if necessary. Meals will also need to be covered for this individual. If your speaker is from outside your institution, s/he may require an honorarium. When inviting the speaker, ask if they require an honorarium. If they utilize a speaker's bureau, it is likely that they will charge a speaker's fee.

Food. This depends on whether the symposium is a full-day or half-day event. You may need a budget for light breakfast (coffee, pastries), lunch, snack/beverages for a poster session and/or an evening reception. Work with the administrative office to find out what catering company to use (sometimes institutions have specific catering companies with whom they have contracts). If you are able to purchase food off site and bring it to the event, this may be a less expensive option.

Renting tables and chairs. You may also need to rent tables and chairs, especially if you are planning on having a poster session with sponsors. If the poster session will be held in a space that normally contains other furniture, you may have to pay a fee to remove, store, and put back that furniture. There may be a cost for poster stands as well.

Advertising. Printing posters (and easels unless they can be borrowed) and advertising on rolling monitors will likely have an associated cost.

## VI. Sponsors

Sponsors may include departments that encourage their postdocs to participate in the symposium. Seek out other strong supporters of postdocs, such as, the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs/Graduate Studies/Career Development and/or the alumni association. Work with your institution's offices to find out what sponsors have participated before, and if they will allow you or help you to contact them. In addition, it may be possible to inquire whether local companies would be willing to sponsor the symposium. Please note that many institutions have regulations preventing sponsorship by outside companies. Please check your individual institution's policies.

## VII. Advertising your Symposium

Start advertising the symposium at least three to four months in advance. Make use of the university newspaper, e-newsletters, listservs, rolling monitors in buildings where postdocs work, and bulletin boards. You can also make use of social media, especially if your institution or postdoctoral office has a LinkedIn, Facebook, and/or Twitter account. In addition, you can specifically advertise the keynote address and symposium on poster boards placed on easels in buildings where there is heavy pedestrian traffic. Use of poster boards should be initiated approximately one month prior to the symposium, since these often get overlooked if they are there for too long. Depending on the culture of your institution, you may be able to ask professors to make announcements at seminars or post flyers in their labs/on their bulletin boards.

Having a symposium website may be helpful for sharing information rather than sending repeated e-mails. Free web hosting sites and templates are available from sources such as Google, alternatively your institution can build a webpage for you. Advertising can start with simple emails to the postdoc community, which also aids in recruiting help and building interest. As more information becomes available, you can begin posting flyers and directing people to the website. Occasional emails can be used to distribute the finalized schedule, to announce the call for abstracts, to remind postdocs of approaching deadlines, and to encourage attendance just before the symposium. This should be sufficient to keep your symposium fresh in their minds.

### VIII. Have fun!

Remember to have fun and realize that your fellow postdocs appreciate all the hard work that has gone into making your symposium a successful one. Organizing a symposium not only brings new information, but also teaches you new skills and helps you make new contacts.

**Best of luck from the NPA!**

### Appendix A.

*Timeline adapted from Materials Research Society (MRS) Education Symposium Planning Handbook*

## Generalized Timeline for Postdoctoral Research Symposium

TIMING & TASKS	NOTES
<b>12 - 8 Months Prior</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Symposium organizers confirmed <input type="checkbox"/> Identify administrative resources <input type="checkbox"/> Discuss topic/theme and keynote speaker(s)	
<b>6 - 8 Months Prior</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Solicit volunteers <input type="checkbox"/> Hold first planning meeting <input type="checkbox"/> Confirm keynote speaker(s) <input type="checkbox"/> Set date/location of event <input type="checkbox"/> Determine budget <input type="checkbox"/> Begin fundraising efforts <input type="checkbox"/> Develop/design website	
<b>5 Months Prior</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Finalize schedule	
<b>4 Months Prior</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Hold second planning meeting <input type="checkbox"/> Send call for abstracts to postdocs <input type="checkbox"/> Confirm sponsors <input type="checkbox"/> Continue fundraising <input type="checkbox"/> Solicit poster judges	
<b>3 Months Prior</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Conclude abstract submission <input type="checkbox"/> Start advertising campaign <input type="checkbox"/> Finalize travel for keynote speaker(s)	
<b>1 - 2 Months Prior</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Hold final planning meeting <input type="checkbox"/> Complete/Print abstract book <input type="checkbox"/> Continue advertising campaign <input type="checkbox"/> Send instructions to postdocs who will be presenting (oral/poster) and to poster judges <input type="checkbox"/> Finalize catering plans	
<b>At Symposium</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Complete "day-of" tasks with help from volunteers	
<b>Within 1 Week After</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Graciously thank all those who helped make your event a success, including keynote speaker(s), volunteers, sponsors, administrative assistants	

