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How to design your academic website

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An academic website serves as both a public-facing window on the world wide web and an important internal laboratory resource. In this 'How to' piece, I outline how to build your academic website, including what content to include, and ways to build and launch your site.

An academic website is no longer a novelty but a necessity. In today's digital scientific landscape, it serves as the first point of contact for collaborators, students and funders, and it can shape how your research and professional identity are perceived. The practical tips and suggestions that I offer here are flexible depending on your own preferences, as well as your level of comfort with coding and internet technology (Box 1).

Whether you are a postdoctoral fellow looking for your next position or a new professor launching your first laboratory, an academic website is one of the best ways of advertising who you are, what you do and the values that guide your work. Your university or research institute may already have a prepopulated web page that lists basic information about you, but chances are it does little to reflect your identity, your values and what makes you or your laboratory unique.

An academic website can have two useful functions. First, it is an outward-facing public portal that communicates your identity, your work and your values to the world. It is often the first contact that a prospective trainee or a prospective employer may have with you and your research and, as such, it is very important to design and build your site thoughtfully so that it communicates what you want. Second, your academic website can serve as an important and useful inward-facing resource for your laboratory or — if you do not have a laboratory yet — as a digital reference space to keep track of your accomplishments.

First steps

Deciding what components to include in your academic website is the first place to start. You can start small, with a few fundamental elements, and build up the site over time (Box 2). Keep in mind that your choices about what to highlight are powerful implicit statements about what you prioritize as a scientist and as a leader.

Content for postdoctoral researchers

An academic website is a great way for a postdoctoral researcher to begin to establish a public-facing scientific identity that goes beyond a list of publications. It is a way beyond your CV to influence how prospective academic or private sector employers form an understanding of you as a scientist and as a potential employee.

Focus on telling your scientific story and conveying the arc of your scientific career so far. It is important to present your research as a coherent, forward-looking programme. Write some text about which

BOX 1

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- Define your dual purpose: use your site to both present your professional identity to the public and provide a useful resource for your laboratory.
- Let your values lead: the structure, language and emphasis of your site convey your priorities as a scientist, mentor and collaborator.
- Highlight people: present current members and alumni in ways that reflect and reinforce your laboratory's culture and mentoring philosophy.
- Craft an accessible research narrative: use clear, accessible language to describe your work and its trajectory, supported by publications and links.
- Be intentional about recruitment: use a 'Join Us' page to articulate not just the required skills, but your mentorship philosophy and laboratory values.
- Promote open science: link to preprints, data and code to demonstrate a commitment to transparency and reproducibility.
- Choose tools that suit you: select a website-building approach that matches your technical comfort level — functionality matters more than complexity.
- Start small and commit to updates: launch with core content, update regularly and expand over time to keep the site relevant.

completed projects you are most proud of and why: what ongoing projects are you most excited about? You should also:

- Include a list of publications with links to the full text;
- Include a link to your Google Scholar profile (and if you do not have one, sign up for one);
- Showcase your commitment to open science by linking to preprints, code repositories (GitHub) and open data repositories; and
- Clearly articulate how your future research programme will be distinct from — while building upon — the work done with your postdoctoral supervisor. This helps search committees to envision you as an independent investigator.

Content for new professors and principal investigators

Launching your laboratory is a daunting task but setting up a basic academic website is not difficult. As a new principal investigator, your laboratory website serves both as an outward-facing public window into your research enterprise, and as an inward-facing resource for you and your laboratory members. The way in which you organize the content and the choices you make about how to present your laboratory will reflect your values as a scientist and as a mentor.

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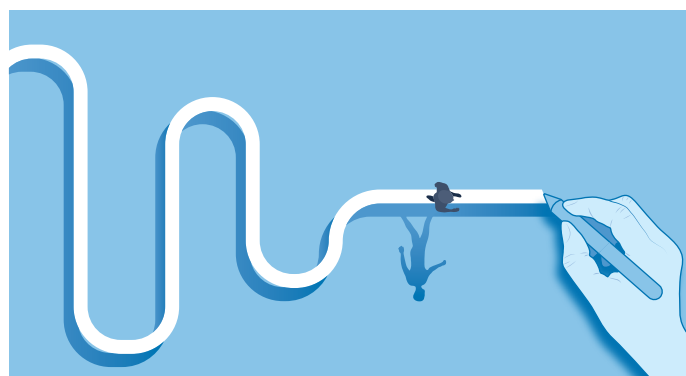
People. An important component of your academic website is a paragraph (or a separate biography page) that describes you, your scientific or academic trajectory, and your values as a leader and as a scientist. This is often the first impression that potential trainees will have of you as a potential mentor.

Also key is a section in which you showcase your current and past laboratory members, including a list of laboratory alumni and where they are now. The most compelling academic websites I have come across put this up front and highlight each laboratory member and their ongoing work. Think about how a prospective trainee will interpret the way you present your laboratory members.

Research. When describing your research programme, use accessible language so that you can engage a broad audience, not only specialists. Give both a high-level overview of major research themes as well as specific examples of recent and ongoing research projects. This can help to attract trainees who may not yet have the ability to parse the fine details of your research. It also conveys your values for public communication. Include links to published papers that have resulted from the projects you highlight, as well as links to the laboratory members who led or contributed to the work. In a separate section or a distinct page, list all laboratory publications and links to the full text of the papers.

'Join Us'. A section or page about how to join the laboratory is a great way to help to direct qualified trainees to apply to work in your laboratory. Describe the kinds of qualifications or skills that are expected of new laboratory members. Describe who to email as a first point of contact, and what pieces of information to send (for example, CV, statement of interest, transcript and brief biography). Include your mentorship philosophy, and a description of the shared values of the laboratory. These elements influence how prospective trainees will think about the laboratory they are considering joining.

Laboratory manual. It is increasingly common to see a laboratory manual on an academic website. This is an internal laboratory document that typically includes sections that codify laboratory culture and expectations, and describes standard operating procedures including onboarding for new laboratory members. Laboratory manuals create transparency, establish fair processes for authorship and conflict resolution, and hold laboratory members (including the principal investigator) accountable to its stated values. Sometimes (as is the case with my laboratory manual), these are also publicly viewable. This can help prospective trainees to get an even more detailed view into what it is like working in your laboratory, and what the expectations

BOX 2

Elements of an academic website

Core components

- Home page: choose one or more images that reflect yourself, your laboratory and/or your work, and write one or two sentences that introduce you and your work and contextualize your website within your institution.
- Bio: a short biography that describes your personal journey, your values as a scientist and your vision for your laboratory.
- People: current and former laboratory members and a phrase or sentence about their research project.
- Research: short (1 or 2 paragraphs) descriptions of the research projects or themes currently underway in your laboratory.
- Publications: your publications (peer-reviewed journal articles, preprints and book chapters), including DOIs and/or URLs so that papers are readily accessible to your website visitors.
- Join the laboratory: who you looking to recruit to the laboratory, including expected qualifications and skills, and instructions for what to provide when contacting you about open positions. Include your values as a supervisor, your mentorship philosophy and the shared vision of the laboratory, including a statement about equality, diversity and inclusion.

Elements to develop over time

- Laboratory manual: once your basic site is up, start developing a laboratory manual and link to it. This may be a longer-term project.
- Teaching and mentorship: highlight courses taught, and list course syllabi and resources for students
- Media and images: use graphics — diagrams, figures from papers, photographs, and artwork — so that visitors are not faced only with text. Include photographs of laboratory events and life.
- Open science and resources: list data, code and tools to encourage transparency and reuse. Include GitHub links, OSF projects, protocols and software packages.
- Outreach and public engagement: communicate impact beyond academia. List articles for the general public, community events, school visits and podcasts.
- Funding and acknowledgements: recognize supporters and funders. List granting agencies, institutional support and industry partnerships.

are at different stages of training (for example, undergraduate versus graduate versus postdoctoral researcher). As such it can be another important recruitment resource. Laboratory manuals can take considerable effort to develop, and can also change over time, so as – with your academic website – starting small and adding features gradually is a good strategy.

Maintaining your site. It is important to keep your website current and up to date. An outdated site can be counterproductive, as it does not communicate the current state of your research priorities, your published articles or your current laboratory members. An annual check to keep your site up to date would be a good habit to adopt.

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Creating a website

There are many options for how to create your website. The fastest and easiest way to get going is to use an online website design service that provides a word processor-like environment for creating your site (Box 3). If you are savvy with technology and/or you are interested in learning more about the nuts and bolts of how web pages are coded and how websites are hosted, there are many other options as well.

My current approach is to code my website in plaintext HTML using the Bootstrap CSS framework, and host my site on GitHub Pages. A more common approach is to use an online website creation tool (Box 3), and this would be a rational place to start.

For the beginner. If you have minimal or no experience with HTML or CSS or coding in a modern programming language, then there are many options for creating websites using WYSIWYG editing systems that resemble modern word-processing programs such as Microsoft Word (Box 3). These sites typically have an option to host the website for you (usually at some relatively small monetary cost), which makes them a one-stop shop for getting a website up quickly and easily.

Static site generators. So-called static site generators (Box 3) compile plaintext into HTML and CSS. You write the content of your site using markdown tags to denote sections, boldface, URLs and other style-related elements, and then plaintext files are compiled into HTML

or CSS for you. An attractive feature of this approach is that you do not have to deal with the complexities of HTML or CSS styling – the static site generator does that for you. These systems also come with many example templates you can choose from to produce websites with different designs. What is more, your content always remains in plaintext, and so you could use versioning systems such as Git or GitHub to manage your plaintext files, and collaborate with others to edit or add to your website. An interesting new option is Quarto, which is a markdown-based system that creates not only websites but also manuscripts, presentations and books. Quarto also allows for easily creating dynamic figures and data visualizations directly within a website or manuscript – a highly relevant feature for data-driven scientific fields. A more bare-bones option is to use a tool such as Pandoc to convert plaintext markdown into HTML or CSS.

HTML and CSS frameworks. If you know a bit about HTML and CSS, it is not difficult to code a website by hand using basic HTML or CSS elements. In fact, one does not need any CSS to have a functioning website, but the styling will look rather basic. There are many tutorials and online courses available on the web.

However, to produce a modern-looking website with stylistic elements such as a menu bar, a good option is to use a CSS framework. These are systems that allow for what is essentially a grammar of design, much like markdown, in which you add commands and tags to your

HTML to style your site and add functional elements such as menu bars or buttons. These systems also typically provide many examples and templates that you can modify to produce the look you want. A great advantage of these systems over coding HTML or CSS by hand is that they automatically provide responsive web design, which means that the design elements of your page (font size, margins, images and menu bars) automatically resize and reorganize when your site is viewed on devices with differently sized screens (for example, a desktop or laptop versus a tablet phone).

Hosting your website. If you use one of the online services such as WordPress.com to create your website, then they will have an option to host it for you on their computers, making it available to the world. This is an attractive option as it removes the responsibility from you to maintain a server and protect it from malicious internet attacks.

If you use one of the static site generators to produce your website, then you will still need to host those files on a web server to make them viewable to the public. There are many options for doing this that vary in complexity and cost (Box 3). My current preference is to use GitHub Pages to host my website. Many academics already use GitHub to maintain code and/or data files, and the service is free for public repositories, which is a considerable advantage for those with limited funds. Hosting a website using GitHub essentially boils down to placing your HTML and CSS files in a dedicated GitHub repository and then activating the GitHub Pages feature. Then your website will be visible to the world.

Custom domain name. Many academics choose to purchase a custom domain name to use when hosting their website, and linking it to a hosting service such as GitHub Pages (for example, mine is gribblelab.org; other examples are poldracklab.org and campbellstaton.com). This provides an easy shorthand address for your website. Another advantage is that if you change institutions over time, you do not have to inform people that the address of your website has changed. There are many online services for purchasing domain names (Box 3).

Conclusion

Creating your academic website is more than just a technical task. It is a chance to shape how you present yourself – as a scientist, a mentor and a leader. The process can be deeply rewarding, as it prompts you to actively reflect on your personal scientific story, your mentorship philosophy, and the values that define your laboratory's culture. Start small and focus on the essentials. Let your site grow and evolve over time alongside your career. In today's open and connected academic world, your academic website is more than a digital CV – it is a space to share your science, your values and your vision for your laboratory, including for training and mentoring the next generation of scientists.

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