

Forensic Scientist

Hours: 37 per week

Salary: £20,000+ Per year

If you enjoy science and want to help solve crimes, this job could be perfect for you. This type of scientist prepares traces of physical evidence for use in courts of law.

Before you can start as a trainee you are likely to need an honours degree in a biology, chemistry or physics-related subject.

As well as a degree, you will need to have an enquiring mind. You'll need to have a high degree of accuracy and attention to detail. Often you'll have to meet deadlines and work under pressure.

The work

Forensic scientists use principles of biology, chemistry and maths, and a range of techniques, to obtain and analyse evidence from a variety of sources - including blood and other body fluids, hairs, textile fibres, glass fragments and tyre marks.

As a forensic scientist, your main role would be to look for evidence to link a suspect with a crime scene. However, your duties could vary depending on your specialism, and may include some or all of the following:

- blood grouping and DNA profiling
- analysing fluid and tissue samples for traces of drugs and poisons
- identifying, comparing and matching various materials
- examining splash patterns and the distribution of particles
- analysing handwriting, signatures, ink and paper
- providing expert advice on explosives, firearms and ballistics
- researching and developing new technologies
- recovering data from computers, mobile phones and other electronic equipment
- attending crime scenes, such as a murder or fire
- giving impartial scientific evidence in court
- supervising assistant forensic scientists in the laboratory.

Hours

You would usually work 37 hours a week, Monday to Friday. Some employers operate a shift or on-call system for dealing with high priority work. Flexible or part-time hours may also be available.

You would be based mainly in a laboratory, however you may also visit crime scenes, which could be unpleasant and challenging. You would wear special clothing to prevent contamination and protect you from hazardous substances.

Income

Starting salaries can be around £20,000 a year.

With experience, earnings may reach £25,000 to £35,000 a year. Senior forensic scientists may earn £45,000 or more.

Figures are intended as a guideline only.

Entry requirements

To start work, you would usually need a degree or postgraduate award in forensic science. You can also get into this career with a science-based degree. Degrees related to chemistry, biology, life sciences, applied sciences or medical sciences are likely to be the most appropriate, depending on the type of forensic work you want to do.

If you want to specialise in electronic casework (recovering data from computers, mobile phones and other electronic equipment), you may be accepted with experience and qualifications in computing, electrical engineering, electronics or physics.

There may be opportunities to start with a company as a forensics lab support assistant if you have qualifications, such as HND, BTEC or A levels in science, together with relevant work experience. As with all forensics vacancies, there will be tough competition for jobs.

It would also help you to have at least six months' relevant work experience, for example as a medical laboratory technician in a hospital or a research centre.

Normal colour vision is usually required.

It is important to check potential employers' exact requirements as not all science-based subjects provide the right level of knowledge needed for the work. You can find more information about how to become a forensic scientist and a list of courses on the Forensic Science Society (FSS) website.

Training and development

Once working, it is important to keep up to date with developments in technology and practice through continuing professional development. This could be in-house training through your company or organisation and by attending external training courses, seminars and workshops.

You could go on to take further specialist qualifications, for example the Forensic Science Society Diploma course, in an area such as Identity Documents, Fire Investigation or Firearms Examination.

Skills and knowledge

To become a forensic scientist, you would need to have:

- an enquiring mind
- a logical and analytical approach
- patience and concentration
- highly developed observation and scientific skills
- objectivity and personal integrity
- a high degree of accuracy and attention to detail
- the confidence to justify your findings when challenged
- strong written and spoken communication skills
- the ability to work alone and in a team
- the ability to meet deadlines and work under pressure.