CAREER KIT

Forensic Scientist Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become a Forensic Scientist

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

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SECTION 1

At a glance

Forensic scientists analyze evidence in a crime lab, for example DNA, drugs, firearms, or trace materials. Most need a bachelor's degree in forensic science, chemistry, or biology, then complete months of lab training before working cases on their own. Voluntary certification from the American Board of Criminalistics (ABC) can help you advance.

Timeline	4–6 years (bachelor's degree plus lab training)
Typical cost	$20,000–$100,000+ (mostly the degree)
Education	Bachelor's degree in forensic science, chemistry, biology, or a related natural science
License	None in most states; some states license or accredit labs and analysts; voluntary ABC certification
Median pay	$72,060 per year (forensic science technicians)
Job outlook	+13% (2025–35), much faster than average; about 2,800 openings a year

SECTION 2

Step-by-step path

1. Know the job: lab scientist, not crime scene investigator

Time: 1 week

Forensic scientists, also called criminalists or forensic analysts, work in a laboratory. They test evidence that crime scene investigators collect and write reports and testify about their results. If you want field work at scenes, look at crime scene investigator jobs instead; if you like lab science, this is your path.

2. Earn a science bachelor's degree

Time: About 4 years · Cost: $20,000–$100,000+

BLS lists a bachelor's degree as typical, often in forensic science, biology, chemistry, or physical science. Take lots of chemistry and biology, plus statistics. A forensic science program accredited by FEPAC (the Forensic Science Education Programs Accreditation Commission) is a strong choice, but a solid chemistry or biology degree is also widely accepted.

3. Take the coursework your specialty requires

Time: During your degree

DNA analysts in labs that follow the FBI Quality Assurance Standards must have coursework covering biochemistry, genetics, molecular biology, and statistics or population genetics. Drug chemists need strong analytical and organic chemistry. Check job postings for your target discipline before you finish your degree.

4. Get lab experience

Time: 3–12 months

Internships at state or local crime labs, medical examiner offices, or private forensic labs give you exposure to accredited lab procedures. Undergraduate research or a job in a clinical, environmental, or pharmaceutical lab also builds relevant skills such as instrument work and documentation.

5. Apply and pass the background check

Time: 2–6 months

Government crime labs run detailed background checks, and many include drug history review, a polygraph, and fingerprinting. Some positions require a graduate degree for advancement. Apply to state, county, city, and federal labs.

6. Complete lab training and competency tests

Time: 6–12 months

New analysts train for months under senior scientists, then pass competency tests before working cases independently. BLS notes that lab specialties usually take less than a year to learn, and that technicians may need to pass a state proficiency exam or be approved by their lab or an accrediting body for independent casework.

7. Earn ABC certification and keep learning

Time: After lab experience · Cost: $325 to apply and sit; $100 a year to maintain

The American Board of Criminalistics offers certification exams including Foundational Knowledge, Drug Analysis, Seized Drug Analysis, Forensic DNA, and Biological Evidence Screening. Certification is voluntary but recognized in court and for promotion. Many labs also require annual proficiency testing and continuing education.

SECTION 3

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Bachelor's degree in forensic science, chemistry, or biology	$20,000	$100,000	Typical range, varies by school
Master's degree in forensic science (optional)	$15,000	$60,000	Typical range, varies by school
ABC application and exam sitting fees	$325	$325	$75 application plus $250 exam sitting fee per ABC fee schedule
ABC annual maintenance fee	$100	$100	Per year to keep certification active
Professional association membership	$0	$300	Typical range; student rates available
Total	**$35,425**	**$160,725**	

Requirements

Education	A bachelor's degree in forensic science, chemistry, biology, or a related natural science. An associate degree may be enough for some technician jobs, while some advanced roles prefer a master's degree.
Coursework	Discipline-specific. DNA analysts in labs following the FBI Quality Assurance Standards need coursework in biochemistry, genetics, molecular biology, and statistics or population genetics.
Background	Government labs run thorough background checks; drug use history and criminal records can disqualify you.
Licensing	No national license. Rules vary by state: some states, such as Texas, require forensic analysts to be licensed by a state commission. Check your state.
Certification	Voluntary ABC certification. Lab accreditation and internal competency testing are standard in accredited labs.
Skills	Precise lab technique, careful documentation, scientific reasoning, report writing, and clear courtroom testimony.

SECTION 4

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Phase 1: Pick your discipline

Days 1–30

Goal: Choose a lab specialty and check your coursework against it.

- ☐ Read 10 crime lab job postings and list required degrees and courses
- ☐ Choose a discipline: DNA, drug chemistry, toxicology, trace, or firearms
- ☐ Compare your transcript against FBI QAS coursework if you want DNA
- ☐ Look up FEPAC-accredited programs
- ☐ Check whether your state licenses forensic analysts
- ☐ Contact a crime lab about internships

Phase 2: Build lab experience

Days 31–60

Goal: Get hands-on lab work and close coursework gaps.

- ☐ Apply for crime lab or medical examiner internships
- ☐ Join a research lab or take a lab job
- ☐ Enroll in any missing courses such as biochemistry or statistics
- ☐ Practice keeping a detailed lab notebook
- ☐ Learn quality assurance and accreditation basics
- ☐ Attend a forensic science webinar or meeting

Phase 3: Apply

Days 61–90

Goal: Submit applications and prepare for interviews.

- [ ] Write a resume listing instruments, techniques, and courses
- [ ] Apply to state, local, and federal crime labs
- [ ] Prepare for interviews and practical exams
- [ ] Gather transcripts and background documents
- [ ] Practice explaining a lab result to a non-scientist
- [ ] Plan for ABC certification after you gain experience

SECTION 5

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- [ ] Official transcripts
- [ ] Course descriptions or syllabi for key science classes
- [ ] Resume and cover letter
- [ ] Lab internship or research letters
- [ ] Professional references
- [ ] Valid driver's license
- [ ] Background investigation documents

SECTION 6

Exams & how to prepare

ABC Foundational Knowledge Exam

What it is: Covers general forensic science knowledge such as evidence handling, quality assurance, and ethics.

How to prepare: Use ABC's study guidance and review your degree coursework.

ABC Forensic DNA / Biological Evidence Screening

What it is: Discipline exams for DNA analysts and biology screeners.

How to prepare: Review casework protocols and the reading lists on the ABC exam pages.

ABC Drug Analysis / Seized Drug Analysis

What it is: Discipline exams for drug chemists.

How to prepare: Review instrumentation, identification criteria, and lab procedures.

State forensic analyst licensing exam (where required)

What it is: Some states require it. Texas, for example, has required forensic analysts in accredited disciplines to be licensed since 2019, including passing the General Forensic Analyst Licensing Exam.

How to prepare: Check your state forensic science commission's website.

SECTION 7

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to work in a crime lab?

Tip: Talk about science and fairness, not TV.

2. What instruments have you used?

Tip: Name each instrument and what you used it for.

3. How do you prevent contamination?

Tip: Describe PPE, clean technique, and controls.

4. What would you do if your results did not match the investigator's expectations?

Tip: Report the results as they are; objectivity matters.

5. Explain a lab result to a jury.

Tip: Use simple terms and avoid overstating.

6. How do you document your work?

Tip: Mention notes, chain of custody, and review.

7. Tell us about a mistake in the lab.

Tip: Show how you caught it and fixed it.

8. What is quality assurance?

Tip: Explain controls, proficiency tests, and accreditation.

9. How do you handle repetitive tasks?

Tip: Show patience and attention to detail.

10. What discipline interests you most?

Tip: Match it to the lab's openings.

11. Where do you see yourself in five years?

Tip: Mention ABC certification and independent casework.

SECTION 8

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Earned a B.S. in Chemistry with coursework in instrumental analysis
- Completed coursework in biochemistry, genetics, molecular biology, and statistics
- Operated GC-MS and FTIR instruments in an undergraduate research lab
- Completed a crime lab internship assisting with evidence intake
- Kept detailed lab notebooks following quality procedures
- Presented research findings to faculty and peers
- Participated in a mock trial testimony exercise

SECTION 9

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Choosing a criminal justice degree without enough lab science
2. Missing required DNA coursework
3. Confusing CSI and lab jobs
4. Skipping internships
5. Ignoring state licensing rules
6. Overlooking background check issues

SECTION 10

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

SECTION 11

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **BLS: Forensic Science Technicians**

https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/forensic-science-technicians.htm

- **American Academy of Forensic Sciences**

https://www.aafs.org

- **American Board of Criminalistics**

https://www.criminalistics.com

- **AAFS: FEPAC-accredited programs**

https://aafs.org/find-school

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than $48,250	**$72,060 per year ($34.65 per hour) for forensic science technicians**	More than $117,250

Outlook: BLS projects 13% growth from 2025 to 2035, much faster than average, with about 2,800 openings a year. The field is small, with about 20,100 jobs in 2025, so competition for crime lab jobs is real. BLS combines lab and crime scene technicians in this occupation.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, Forensic Science Technicians, May 2025 wage data; projections 2025–35 — https://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/forensic-science-technicians.htm

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.