

New User Guide for Flow Cytometry

Pre-Appointment Information

Controls

Flow cytometry is a reference based science. This means your flow cytometry data is only as good as your controls. These should ideally be made from the same cells as your samples, but other cells of the same type or even beads can be used effectively when sample volume is limited.

Negative control: *Cells with no staining of any kind.*

Used to define the background fluorescence inherent in your cells. You should have a separate negative control for each cell type, because auto-fluorescence differences can be substantial. It is especially important that you bring a negative control to your first appointment, because this is what we use to set detector voltages for light scatter properties (see below). If you don't bring a negative control, we will use your fully stained sample for this (effectively wasting some sample), which could be an issue for your data if your sample volume is limited.

Single color controls: *Cells stained with only one color (fluorophore).*

Used to determine how much the fluorophore spills over into other detectors, so that we can compensate for the spectral overlap. The usefulness of these is dependent on having both negative and positive populations for every color. Therefore, consideration should be given to whether an experimental reagent is appropriate for single color controls in situations where target cells are rare; substitution of common markers works well for this (e.g. in immunology use CD3 for single color controls instead of a rare marker which wouldn't show enough positives to be useful for compensation.) Even when using beads, utility is dependent on having distinct negative and positive populations for every color.

Fluorescence minus one (FMO) controls: *Cells stained with all but one color, using the same reagents as the sample. (Only for assays with 3 or more colors)*

Used as the "gold standard" gating control to determine how much all of the colors interact together with natural auto-fluorescence to spill over into the detector for the missing color. Many clients forgo these controls in simple analyses with consistently distinct populations, but FMO controls will always improve the reliability of your data by eliminating any false positives. In multicolor staining protocols, FMO controls are required, especially where populations are not consistently distinct and/or signal is dim. We recommend using these controls until convinced they are no longer necessary for your experiment. However, these are not necessary for every experiment.

New User Guide for Flow Cytometry

Experimental/Biological controls: These are fully-stained controls specific to your experiment, e.g. stimulated vs unstimulated, treated vs untreated, wildtype vs KO, etc. For mouse immunophenotyping of any tissue, it is almost always useful to prep and stain some spleen cells as an internal control. Spleen is also a good source of cells for single color and FMO controls in cases where sample volume is limited.

Isotype controls: *Cells stained with isotypic reagents* (same fluor and isotype as experimental antibody, but irrelevant specificity) were widely used in the past before being replaced by FMOs as the “gold standard” for gating controls. Currently accepted best practice is to avoid isotype controls unless there is a suspected problem with target cells binding the constant region (e.g. poor blocking of Fc receptors on myeloid cells) or reason to believe reviewers unfamiliar with current standards may request them. In the rare case they are used, they are usually only run once.

Analysis Strategy

Knowing which populations you are interested in and how they are defined through various markers is extremely important. You know your research far better than we do, and having a clear idea of what you are looking for will save you both time and money. We typically begin all cellular analyses with discrimination based on physical properties, before moving on to fluorescence information. We also highly recommend a viability stain.

Debris Removal: In a cellular analysis, we typically remove signal that is too small and uniform to be cells using a forward scatter (FSC) vs side scatter (SSC) plot.

Singlet Discriminations: Based on the area, height, and width of the FSC and SSC signals, we can remove signals likely the result of two or more cells stuck together or passing through the detector simultaneously.

Live/Dead Discrimination: Typically, researchers are interested in living cells. There are several live/dead (viability) stains available as well as ones that allow for viability staining and then fixation without losing the viability information (e.g. for intracellular staining protocols). The core will provide DAPI stain at cost to users in a convenient dropper format on request.

Populations: Basic experiments (up to 4 colors immunophenotyping, annexin/PI, typical cell cycle, GFP+/-, etc) will be routine for us to set up. However, when running multicolor experiments and/or novel assays for the first time, it's helpful to bring a reference with gating strategy, if available. Otherwise, please be ready to instruct us on which populations are of

New User Guide for Flow Cytometry

interest and how you want the analysis done. Consultation is always free, so please set up a time to come speak to us well before the experiment if you are unsure of your strategy.

Sample Preparation and Staining

Cells harvested from cultures: Use of enzymes to loosen cells from plastic growth surfaces can result in loss of target epitopes from cell surface molecules, a classic example being a loss of mouse CD86 signal after trypsinization. Please be aware that this is a possibility and that alternative reagents/methods can be deployed to avoid it. More information on this is available on the protocols section of our website.

Fresh Preps: These often contain more debris than cells from culture and, depending on the tissue, may require additional steps to remove for best results (e.g. myelin removal in neural tissues). Experiments targeting rare populations often benefit from enrichment of the samples prior to analysis, depending on specific goals.

Sample concentration, cell number, and volume: The maximum volume for a 5mL tube to load on our instruments is 3.5mL and the minimum would typically be 200-300 μ L. For immunophenotyping, concentration should ideally be about 10^6 cells/mL, not to exceed 10^7 cells/mL. It is best to bring additional sample buffer to dilute your samples as needed; however, the core will provide non-sterile PBS to dilute samples if necessary. More information on sample preparation is available on the protocols section of our website. In some situations, cell numbers for flow are limited by the small yield of the prep. In other cases, there is an abundance of cells available and only an aliquot is needed for flow; to estimate how many total cells you'll need per sample, consider the relative rarity of your target population(s). Keep in mind cell loss can be up to 25% at each wash step during staining. If unsure about the concentration to bring the sample cells in, err on the side of too concentrated. We can dilute easily, but concentrating a sample will take more time.

Panel design: Designing an appropriate panel is of utmost importance when setting out to analyze cells by flow cytometry. The flow core recommends using the Fluorofinder panel designing tool or EasyPanel in order to optimally match receptors, fluorophores, and cytometers at the core to best identify your cells of interest. See our instruments at <https://app.fluorofinder.com/creighton> to begin building your panel today. And don't forget, consultation with the core is always FREE and highly encouraged.

Titration of antibodies: Titration is the process of identifying the optimal concentration of antibody to use that will produce the best discrimination between the positive and negative cells. At the same time, nonspecific antibody binding is minimized. The most important

New User Guide for Flow Cytometry

measurement is the fluorescence intensity of staining (signal) vs. nonspecific binding (noise), the signal-to-noise ratio. Typically, antibody manufacturers will over-estimate the required amount of antibody required for staining. We usually recommend starting at the manufacturer's recommended concentration and diluting down from there.

Clumpy and Sticky samples: Clogs and partial clogs can greatly slow down data collection, and worse, have a huge impact on your data. There are several ways to prevent them.

Filter your cells: Passing your cells through a 40µm mesh filter will typically prevent clogs. We highly recommend you filter all your samples immediately prior to analysis. The core will provide filter-capped 5mL flow cytometry tubes at cost upon request.

Media: Keep protein concentration at 2% or lower. Calcium-free formulations and HEPES buffer can also help reduce aggregates and avoid pH rise (as is possible in culture media) in problematic samples.

EDTA treatment: Some cells are notorious for clumping together. Many of these cell-cell interactions require divalent cations which can be removed using EDTA. The usual suggested concentration is 1-5 mM of EDTA.

DNase treatment: Sometimes clumping may result from the presence of DNA (usually released from dying cells). DNA issues frequently result in viscous and sticky samples. Cleaving the DNA by adding DNase can resolve this issue. The usual suggested concentration is 200 µg/mL of DNase.

Sample Tubes

It is most convenient to bring your sort samples in 5 ml FACS tubes, and the packs can be purchased from the core upon request.

- [Falcon 5mL Flow Cytometry Tubes with caps \(352054\)](#)
- [Falcon 5mL Flow Cytometry Tubes without caps \(352052\)](#)
- [Falcon 5mL 35um Filter Cap Tubes \(352235\)](#)

Catch Tubes/Plates

New User Guide for Flow Cytometry

If sorting, the following can be used to catch the sorted cells. Be sure to label the tubes and to bring more tubes than you think you will need, as well as appropriate catch media (will depend on what you will do with the cells next). 15-mL conical tube (max 2 tubes sorting at a time)

- 5-mL round bottom tubes (max 4 tubes sorting at a time)
- 1.5-mL Eppendorfs
- 50ml conical (max of 1)
- Plates (6 wells to 96 wells) (fill plate wells as high as possible to help the cell land in media instead of the side of the well)

If you plan to culture the cells after sorting, include 1x Penicillin, Streptomycin, and Neomycin and/or 50ug/ml gentamicin in the culture media. Further consultation and additional start-up procedures may be implemented if additional sterilization of the fluidics system is required.

Length of Time per appointment

Determining how long it will take to run your samples will highly depend on a few different factors including: concentration, number of cells you want to collect, abundance of target population, number of samples, how many events you would like to record, etc. To get a better estimate, please speak with the core before your first sort. It is generally better to book more time than you need for your first appointment.