

14

Nucleic Acid Hybridization

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Planning a Hybridization Experiment	401
The Importance of Patience	401
What Are Your Most Essential Needs?	401
Visualize Your Particular Hybridization Event	401
Is a More Sensitive Detection System Always Better?	403
What Can You Conclude from Commercial Sensitivity Data?	403
Labeling Issues	403
Which Labeling Strategy Is Most Appropriate for Your Situation?	403
What Criteria Could You Consider When Selecting a Label?	405
Radioactive and Nonradioactive Labeling Strategies Compared	409
What Are the Criteria for Considering Direct over Indirect Nonradioactive Labeling Strategies?	410
What Is the Storage Stability of Labeled Probes?	411
Should the Probe Previously Used within the Hybridization Solution of an Earlier Experiment Be Applied in a New Experiment?	412
How Should a Probe Be Denatured for Reuse?	412
Is It Essential to Determine the Incorporation Efficiency of Every Labeling Reaction?	412
Is It Necessary to Purify Every Probe?	413

Hybridization Membranes and Supports	413
What Are the Criteria for Selecting a Support for Your Hybridization Experiment?	413
Which Membrane Is Most Appropriate for Quantitative Experiments?	417
What Are the Indicators of a Functional Membrane?	417
Can Nylon and Nitrocellulose Membranes Be Sterilized?	417
Nucleic Acid Transfer	418
What Issues Affect the Transfer of Nucleic Acid from Agarose Gels?	418
Should Membranes Be Wet or Dry Prior to Use?	420
What Can You Do to Optimize the Performance of Colony and Plaque Transfers?	421
Crosslinking Nucleic Acids	422
What Are the Strengths and Limitations of Common Crosslinking Strategies?	422
What Are the Main Problems of Crosslinking?	423
What's the Shelf Life of a Membrane Whose Target DNA Has Been Crosslinked?	423
The Hybridization Reaction	424
How Do You Determine an Optimal Hybridization Temperature?	424
What Range of Probe Concentration Is Acceptable?	425
What Are Appropriate Pre-hybridization Times?	426
How Do You Determine Suitable Hybridization Times? ...	426
What Are the Functions of the Components of a Typical Hybridization Buffer?	427
What to Do before You Develop a New Hybridization Buffer Formulation?	430
What Is the Shelf Life of Hybridization Buffers and Components?	431
What Is the Best Strategy for Hybridization of Multiple Membranes?	432
Is Stripping Always Required Prior to Reprobing?	432
What Are the Main Points to Consider When Reprobing Blots?	433
How Do You Optimize Wash Steps?	434
How Do You Select the Proper Hybridization Equipment?	435
Detection by Autoradiography Film	436
How Does an Autoradiography Film Function?	436
What Are the Criteria for Selecting Autoradiography Film?	438
Why Expose Film to a Blot at -70°C ?	440

Helpful Hints When Working With Autoradiography	
Film	441
Detection by Storage Phosphor Imagers	441
How Do Phosphor Imagers Work?	441
Is a Storage Phosphor Imager Appropriate for Your Research Situation?	441
What Affects Quantitation?	443
What Should You Consider When Using Screens?	445
How Can Problems Be Prevented?	447
Troubleshooting	448
What Can Cause the Failure of a Hybridization Experiment?	448
Bibliography	453

PLANNING A HYBRIDIZATION EXPERIMENT

Hybridization experiments usually require a considerable investment in time and labor, with several days passing before you obtain results. An analysis of your needs and an appreciation for the nuances of your hybridization event will help you select the most efficient strategies and appropriate controls.

The Importance of Patience

Hybridization data are the culmination of many events, each with several effectors. Modification of any one effector (salt concentration, temperature, probe concentration) usually impacts several others. Because of this complex interplay of cause and effect, consider an approach where every step in a hybridization procedure is an experiment in need of optimization. Manufacturers of hybridization equipment and reagents can often provide strategies to optimize the performance of their products.

What Are Your Most Essential Needs?

Consider your needs before you delve into the many hybridization options. What criteria are most crucial for your research—speed, cost, sensitivity, reproducibility or robustness, and qualitative or quantitative data?

Visualize Your Particular Hybridization Event

Consider the possible structures of your labeled probes and compare them to your target(s). Be prepared to change your labeling and hybridization strategies based on your experiments.

results are unsatisfactory, a point at which it might be too late to determine incorporation efficiency.

Before skipping any control steps, consider the implications. Minimally, measure incorporation efficiency when working with a new technique, a new probe, a new protocol, or a new kit. Radio-labeled probes need to be purified or at least Trichloroacetic acid (TCA) precipitated to determine labeling efficiency, as discussed in Chapter 7, “DNA Purification.” Determining the efficiency of nonradioactive labeling reactions can be more time-consuming, often involving dot blots and/or scanning of probe spots. Follow manufacturer recommendations to determine labeling efficiency of nonradioactive probes.

Is It Necessary to Purify Every Probe?

Unincorporated nucleotides, enzyme, crosslinking reagents, buffer components, and the like, may cause high backgrounds or interfere with downstream experiments. Hybridization experiments where the volume of the probe labeling reaction is negligible in comparison to the hybridization buffer volume do not always require probe cleanup. If you prefer to minimize these risks, purify the probe away from the reaction components.

While there are some labeling procedures (i.e., probes generated by random primer labeling with ^{32}P -dCTP), where unpurified probe can produce little or no background (Amersham Pharmacia Biotech, unpublished observations), such ideal results can't be guaranteed for every probe. When background is problematic, researchers have the option to repurify the probe preparation. Admittedly, this approach wouldn't be of much use if the experiment producing the background problem required a five day exposure. (Purification options are discussed in Chapter 7, “DNA Purification.”)

HYBRIDIZATION MEMBRANES AND SUPPORTS

What Are the Criteria for Selecting a Support for Your Hybridization Experiment?

Beyond the information listed below and your personal experience, the most reliable approach to determine if a membrane can be used in your application is to ask the manufacturer for application and or quality control data. Whether a new membrane formulation will provide you with superior results is a matter that can usually be decided only at the bench, and the results can vary for different sets of targets, probes, and detection strategies.

Physical Strength

Nitrocellulose remains popular for low to medium sensitivity (i.e., screening libraries) applications and for situations that require minimal handling. The greater mechanical strength of nylon makes it superior for situations that require repeated manipulation of your blot. Nylon filters may be probed 10 times or more (Krueger and Williams, 1995; Li, Parker, and Kowalik, 1987). Even though nitrocellulose may be used more than once, brittleness, loss of noncovalently bound target during stripping, and decreased stability in harsh stripping solutions make nitrocellulose a lesser choice for reusable blots. Glass supports and chips can be stripped, but stripping efficiency and aging of target on these supports may impair reuse of more than two to three cycles of stripping and reprobing. Supported nitrocellulose is sturdier and easier to handle than pure nitrocellulose, but remember that it needs to be used in the proper orientation.

Binding Capacity

Nylon and PVDF (polyvinylidene difluoride) membranes bind significantly more nucleic acid than nitrocellulose; hence they can generate stronger signals after hybridization. Nucleic acids can be covalently attached to nylon but not to nitrocellulose, as discussed below. Positively charged nylon offers the highest binding capacities. As is the case with detection systems of greater sensitivity, the greater binding capacity of positively charged membranes could increase the risk of background signal. However, optimization of hybridization conditions, such as probe concentration and hybridization buffer composition, will usually prevent background problems. If such optimization steps do not prevent background, a switch to another membrane type, such as to a neutral nylon membrane, might be required. If your signal is too low, try a positively charged nylon membrane. Positively charged nylon is often chosen for nonradioactive applications to ensure maximum signal strength. The quantity of positive charges (and potential for background) can vary by 10-fold between manufacturers. The lower binding capacity of nitrocellulose decreases the likelihood of background problems under conditions that generate a detectable signal.

Thickness

Most membranes are approximately 100 to 150 μm thick. Thickness influences the amount of buffer required per square

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