

James Watson

- Along with colleagues developed an accurate model of DNA
- Worked with Francis Crick

Born in Chicago on April 6, 1928, James D. Watson was clever and bright enough to be admitted to the University of Chicago when he was just sixteen. He finished his baccalaureate degree in zoology in only three years, though he avoided taking classes that he felt were too hard, such as chemistry and physics. Still, Watson went on to graduate studies at Indiana University, earning a Ph.D. at the ripe old age of 22. At IU, Watson studied under the guidance of Salvadore Luria, who had come to the United States from Europe to escape the ravages of war. Luria had been engaged with several other prominent researchers working on trying to understand the nature of genes by studying viruses that infect bacteria. Watson's research at IU had to do with the lethal effect of X-rays on the same type of viruses. X-rays were of great interest to biologists studying molecular structures. The images produced from this process revealed useful facts about the three-dimensional structure of these molecules.



Watson took his research overseas after graduating. After a time in Copenhagen, he landed at the Cavendish Laboratory at the University of Cambridge in England. This is where he met up with Francis Crick, who at the age of 35, was just finishing his Ph.D.

Watson was a ruthless researcher. He was a fierce competitor, and his determination, no doubt, contributed to his success as a scientist. By his own account, he used his friends and family to spy upon other researchers, and he gleefully celebrated with Crick when Linus Pauling's efforts to build a model of the DNA failed.

Watson was not very gracious to his colleagues. The woman who created the X-ray image that sparked the discovery of the double helix, Rosalind Franklin, despised Watson. He connived with a colleague of Franklin's, Maurice Wilson, to get access to her research. Even Francis Crick, his partner in the discovery, threatened to sue Watson for libel when James published his personal account of the time in Cambridge leading up to the discovery.

Resources

Watson, J (1968). *The double helix. A personal account of the discovery of the structure of DNA*. NY: Atheneum

Wright, Robert (1999). The Time 100: James Watson and Francis Crick. Retrieved March 14, 2005, from: <http://www.time.com/time/time100/scientist/profile/watsoncrick.html>