

How to Approach a Faculty Member

We've all heard it a million times: "It's not about what you said, it's about how you said it!" When it comes to contacting faculty members about your desire to get started on a research project, this statement couldn't be truer. Sometimes, the "etiquette" for contacting an expert in your field can be mystifying... and sometimes, the whole prospect is downright intimidating. Here are some tips from the URO to ease the pressure *and* increase the chances that you get the kind of response you're hoping for.

The Do's and Don'ts of Contacting Professors About Research

DO...

Identify yourself! Don't write a generic message and then sign it with a first name only. Tell them who you are! Include your major and year in school. If you took a class with this person, mention that. If you were referred to this person by someone else, mention that, too.

Address the individual you're emailing. Don't just say "Hi" or "Dear Professor;" this can appear as if you sent out a mass email message, which in turn indicates that you haven't thought carefully about what kind of research you want to do and who would be an appropriate faculty mentor for your project. It's also a little casual in tone: addressing the recipient by name instantly sounds more serious.

Sell yourself! You are, in a sense, trying to advertise yourself a little bit in the initial email to a faculty member you might like to work with. Without going overboard or writing an excessively long message, identifying what sparked your interest in doing research is a good way to personalize your message and give them a reason from the outset to believe that your interest is genuine.

...Your homework! This is probably the most important piece of advice we can offer to students who are sending out that first email to a professor. We really encourage students who seek our advice on getting started in research to spend some time looking over what a faculty member's current research interests are. You may know what field he or she is working in, but knowing whether he or she is specifically focusing on "X" instead of "Y" says that you are already committed enough to the idea of beginning research do some reading on your own. It also suggests that you have a better sense yourself of what kind of research would keep you genuinely interested, and that you aren't necessarily willing to do anything that comes along. You can find a list of what a professor has recently published by accessing his or her *curriculum vitae* (basically, an academic resume), which should be accessible the faculty member's profile on any departmental webpage. Find out what this person focuses on, how long he or she has been investigating that subject, or even what classes he or she has recently taught that relate to the research. Then, go to the library and find one of the recent listed publications, and check it out!

But... the research that faculty members publish is difficult to understand, right? Sure it is! Do you have to understand everything you read? Definitely not! But you CAN look for some of the key terms of the study that would catch someone's attention in that initial email. Make a list of questions as you read... professors will be impressed by your curiosity and the time you've taken to investigate their work, as much as they would be impressed by your comprehension.

Make it easy to set up a meeting. We suggest that you close your email by saying “I am available on such-and-such days of the week at such-and-such times.” Then, this professor has to do is check his or her own schedule and say, “Ok, meet me at THIS time.” It reduces the number of email exchanges that are required to get to that face-to-face conversation.

DON'T...

Send generic emails. You may be reaching out to more than one professor at one time, as you begin searching for a faculty mentor... and, if there are lots of faculty members doing research in the field that interests you, or if your interests are diverse, that’s a perfectly appropriate strategy to help you find the ideal opportunity! It can become a problem, though, when your email messages look like form letters. Here’s a great rule of thumb, or litmus test of sorts, that you can use as you begin this process of making contact with professors. Ask yourself this question: “Could I change the name of the addressee in the salutation of my message and just as easily send it to several people?” If the answer is “Yes,” then you haven’t done it right! You want to *personalize* your emails (especially using the suggestion above about doing your homework!) and raise questions around which you can build a more in-depth conversation. These initial conversations should all be uniquely framed for the person to whom you are writing.

Neglect proofreading. Silly grammar errors? Just don’t make them.

Give up! Finding the *right* faculty mentor for your undergraduate research project may take some time. Professors are busy... but they also have enough experience to know when they are perhaps not the best person to sponsor and direct your work. Sometimes, it’s not about you or your credentials— it may just be about the “fit.” You may not get a positive response the first or second or fifth time you send an email. Keep trying! Also, don’t be afraid to get back in touch with professors who turned you down and ask them if they have suggestions about other people you should contact; even if they aren’t able to help you with a research project personally, they might be willing to help you do some networking. Read the bios on our “[Research Spotlights](#)” page to find about the some students have taken to find research projects and positions... we guarantee that those paths have not always been straight.

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