



A question can take
you anywhere...



Getting started in undergraduate research: How to find a supervisor

I want to do undergraduate research...how do I get started?

There are a wide variety of undergraduate research opportunities at the University of Alberta – from research-based courses to mentored research opportunities with professors. This tip sheet is for students who are interested in mentored research opportunities requiring a supervisor.

Who can be my supervisor for undergraduate research?

For mentored research opportunities, honors projects, and many research-based courses, your primary supervisor will most likely be a Faculty member (professor). A professor is normally your first point of contact about a research project. However, it's possible that your day-to-day work will involve supervision by other members of a research team, such as graduate students, research associates, and technical staff.

How do I find a professor in my area of interest?

The University of Alberta is a large, diverse institution – you'd be amazed at how many researchers are working in your area(s) of interest. Here are some tips for how to find them:

1. Check for research opportunity postings

While not all undergraduate research opportunities are formally advertised, listings might give you some ideas of where to look for researchers in your area of interest. URI's [Undergraduate Research Portal](#) in eClass has both current opportunities and links to other listings on campus.

2. Attend a research seminar or symposium

There are plenty of free lectures, seminars, and research-related events on campus, all of which are great places to discover potential mentors. Watch for URI's annual Festival of Undergraduate Research & Creative Activities in March – here you can meet other undergraduate researchers and their supervisors.

3. Search Faculty or Department research profiles

Most Faculty or Department websites have a research page with profiles of individual researchers and their interests. Keep in mind, your supervisor doesn't necessarily need to be from your home Faculty!

4. Search funding agency databases

Many research funding agencies maintain databases of researchers who receive funding from them. Use the advanced search feature to limit your search to University of Alberta. Here are a few suggestions:

- [Natural Sciences & Engineering Research Council \(NSERC\)](#)
- [Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council \(SSHRC\)](#)
- [Canadian Institutes of Health Research](#) and [Canadian Research Information System](#)

How do I approach a supervisor I'm interested in?

1. First, do your homework!

The most important step in approaching a potential supervisor is understanding **why** you're interested in working with them. Read their research profile, their web page, or some of their recent publications to get a sense of the scope of their research. What interests you about it? What questions do you have?

2. Understand what you're looking for

Are you looking for a paid or volunteer opportunity? A research opportunity for academic credit? Full-time or part-time? Summer research or work during the academic year? Being clear from the start about what type of opportunity you're looking for will make it easier for both you and your potential supervisor to determine whether you're a good match.

3. Make contact

The most common way to approach a professor you don't know is via email. Start by writing a **short, targeted email** describing your interest in their research, and inquiring about whether you can meet to discuss ways for you to get started in this research area.

TIPS FOR WRITING AN EFFECTIVE EMAIL

- **Be specific:** Make sure it's clear why you are approaching this particular person. Generic emails that could easily have gone to multiple professors will usually be ignored.
- **Be concise:** Professors receive a lot of email -- help yours stand out by keeping it short and to the point.
- **Be professional:** First impressions count! Put some thought into your email, make sure you proofread it, and double-check things like the professor's title and the spelling of their name.
- **Let them know what you have to offer:** What particular skills or experience do you have that might be a good match for their research? What's your motivation for doing research? Even if you have no past experience, your genuine interest and enthusiasm can often go a long way to helping you land an opportunity.
- **Get help from URI:** You can book an appointment with URI to review your sample email and get some feedback to help you get started. We also have another tip sheet with examples of effective emails.

I approached a professor. Now what?

Be patient. You may get a response right away, or it may take some time. It's okay to send a polite reminder if you haven't received a response within a few weeks. Most commonly, a professor will either indicate they have no current opportunities (but may recommend other places to look), or they will arrange to meet with you to discuss your interest in doing research. Be prepared with a copy of your CV and transcripts, and be ready to answer questions about your motivation, commitment, and academic background.

If at first you don't succeed...don't be discouraged! Sometimes it takes several tries to find a good match.

Want to know more?

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