

Getting started in undergraduate research: How to approach a potential supervisor by email



Undergraduate
Research
INITIATIVE

Often, one of the first steps in undergraduate research is finding a professor or other potential supervisor to work with. When approaching a potential supervisor, making a good first impression – especially when communicating by email – can go a long way toward helping you get your foot in the door. Sending an informative email that expresses your **passion** and **interest** in a **professional** way is key!

Some useful things to keep in mind when sending emails to supervisors:

- **Short and specific is key.** Long, generic emails are often ignored.
- **Do your research.** Look at faculty/department web pages (most professors have a profile online) to get acquainted with your potential supervisor's research interests. Demonstrate your own interest in your supervisor by mentioning what you find interesting about their research. This helps communicate to the supervisor why you chose them specifically.
- **Be professional.** Your email is your first opportunity to make a good impression. Make it count by:
 - Using a specific subject line for your email.
 - Using your potential supervisor's formal title (e.g. Dr. X) until you know their preference.
 - Double-checking spelling and grammar.
 - Using your university email address (this will also help you avoid spam filters).
 - Including an email signature that includes your name, major/minor, and expected graduation year.
- **Don't panic!** Have you not received a response to your email? It's okay to send a gentle reminder email after a couple of weeks. Professors are busy, and your email might have gotten lost in their inbox. If you still don't receive a response after a reminder, don't take it personally -- move on and explore alternative supervisors.

Remember, if you put in the time and effort to craft a specific email that demonstrates your interest in your potential supervisor's research, the supervisor will be much more likely to respond to you!

To give you an idea of how these tips can be put into action, let's take a look at an example of a well-crafted email:

Subject: Getting Involved in Cardiovascular Disease Research

Good Morning Dr. Coolresearcher,

My name is Promising Undergrad and I am currently in my second year of a Bachelor of Science degree in Biological Sciences. I have taken many introductory science lab courses, and am looking for opportunities to gain more experience through undergraduate research.

I am fascinated by the complexity and interaction of body systems, and I want to develop research skills relevant to a career in clinical sciences. Your research, especially in the realm of cardiovascular disease and insulin release, are of great interest to me as my family has a medical history of diabetes and heart problems. After reviewing some of your recent papers, I am very interested in the drugs you are currently testing for heart failure.

Could we please meet to further discuss your lab's studies and opportunities for students to contribute in this field? I bring a positive attitude, strong work ethic and eagerness to learn to the table.

Thank you for considering my interests.

Regards,

Promising Undergrad

Major/Minor, Class of 20xx

Commentator
A specific, descriptive subject line captures attention and lets your supervisor know exactly what you want to talk about

Commentator
Using a formal salutation and addressing your supervisor with their appropriate title highlights your professionalism and makes you stand out

Commentator
Explaining your background (and relevant coursework if applicable) is helpful

Commentator
Being straight to the point prevents your supervisor from guessing what you want. Also it's good to word it in an open manner to demonstrate your flexibility

Commentator
Very brief but effective intro to what you are hoping to gain and what your longer-term goals are.

Commentator
Being specific about what interests you about this person's research shows you've spent time learning about what they do.

Commentator
Asking for an opportunity to meet in person with the professor is very important. It is ineffective to ask for a paid position right away. This message opens the door to discussion and conveys what the student has to offer.

Overall comments: This email is effective in conveying why the student wants to be involved in research with this faculty member. They convey their interests, relevant experience and how they could benefit from a lab experience for their future career. It has a descriptive beginning and tells a story. This email is tailored and specific, and therefore will be more likely to connect and resonate with the faculty member. The student asks to meet with the faculty member, and create an impression that they want to be a strong, contributing member of the research team.

Need more help? The Undergraduate Research Initiative (URI) provides free, one-on-one advising for students who are seeking research opportunities. We also review and provide feedback on email drafts. Contact us via email (uri@ualberta.ca) or drop by our office (2-701 SUB) to learn more!

You can also visit our website (uab.ca/uri) for more information and resources on getting involved in research.