



A question can take you anywhere...



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

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 e-mail that expresses your passion and interest in a professional way is key!

Let's check out a couple of examples:

### Example A: What not to do!

**(no subject)**

Good Morning Joe,

My name is Steve Y and I'm a U of A student.

Your health research is very interesting to me.

I enjoy the classes I am currently taking and would like to see how research works.

I'm interested in getting involved in research because I know that it is important for professional school applications.

I would like a paid summer research position and was wondering if your lab was hiring students.

Looking forward to your reply,

Steve Y

**Comment [CS1]:** Having no subject or a non-descriptive subject can send your message straight to the spam folder!

**Comment [WU2]:** This is very informal. Err on the side of using formal titles instead (eg. Dr.X).

**Comment [ID3]:** This is informal and does not describe any relevant courses, what field of study they are in etc.

**Comment [ID4]:** This statement is very vague and could apply to any number of researchers. What exactly interests you about this person's research?

**Comment [WU5]:** Be sure to proofread!

**Comment [ID6]:** Even if you are interested in going to professional school, be sure to convey your interest in the research itself – it will be difficult to find a good match and have a positive experience if you are not genuinely interested in the research.

**Comment [ID7]:** If you've never met this person, asking them directly for a paid position can come across as presumptuous. Also, it's quite common for your initial email to lead to referrals to other professors – your goal at this point is only to start a conversation about possible research opportunities. Suggest something more open-ended, such as "I'm very interested in getting involved in this kind of research, and would like to meet with you to learn more. Would it be possible to meet to discuss possible research opportunities?"

**Overall Comments:** In general, the tone of this e-mail is not professional, it is very vague in its details, and it conveys the message that they are just looking for any research opportunity they can to put on their resume. It sounds like a "copy and paste" message. It is unlikely the student would receive a response or offer from this message.

## Example B: A better example:

**Subject:** Getting Involved in Cardiovascular Disease Research

Good Morning Dr. X,

My name is Steve Y 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.

Steve Y

**Comment [CS8]:** Specific, descriptive subject line

**Comment [ID9]:** Mentioning relevant classes in the field you are interested in applying to is effective.

**Comment [CS10]:** Very brief but effective introduction to what you are hoping to gain and what your longer-term goals are.

**Comment [CS11]:** Being specific about what interests you about this person's research shows you've spent time learning about what they do.

**Comment [ID12]:** 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 e-mail 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 e-mail is personal and therefore will be more likely to connect and resonate with the faculty member. The student asks to meet with the faculty member and they set a precedence that they want to be a strong, contributing member of the research team.

**TIP:** Keep your e-mails short and specific. Long, generic e-mails are often ignored.

**TIP:** Be prepared! Research the professor thoroughly.

**TIP:** No reply to your e-mail? DON'T PANIC! It's okay to send a reminder after a couple of weeks

**Need more help?** The Undergraduate Research Initiative (URI) provides one-on-one advising for students who are seeking research opportunities.

Visit our website ([www.uri.ualberta.ca](http://www.uri.ualberta.ca)), contact us via email ([uri@ualberta.ca](mailto:uri@ualberta.ca)) or drop by our office (2-701 SUB) to learn more!