

Tips for contacting prospective graduate faculty advisors in Russell Labs at UW-Madison

Adapted from Cornell University website. Relevant to most other research-based graduate programs.*

Identifying a faculty advisor** is an important step to attending graduate programs that focus on independent and group research. It can also be intimidating, especially for first-generation graduate students. We recommend exploring potential advisors' websites to read about the research in the lab, publications coming out of the lab, and other lab members. Also, be sure to check if lab websites provide information for prospective students and follow their directions for reaching out.

You can find out which faculty are considering accepting new students by investigating the department website or by *contacting faculty members individually*. Most graduate students enter our programs having already identified the lab(s) that they will join. The exception to this is for the Plant Pathology PhD program, which operates on a rotational basis. During rotation, new PhD students spend their first semester in 2-3 labs before deciding on a lab to join for the remainder of their graduate career.

While an admissions committee reviews all applications and makes the final decisions on acceptances, it is **very important to make connections with potential advisors before you submit your application**, because you will need to identify potential advisors on your application. The purpose of making connections is to begin to find out whether your interests match the interests of the advisor and their lab, and whether the advisor, lab, and program provide good opportunities for you.

Contacting faculty members does not guarantee admission. Rather, in the spirit of building collegial relationships, it serves to initiate a dialogue and establish advisor/student rapport.

When to start? *Be proactive* - many programs adhere to a **standard December 1 deadline**. Note, however, that this is not always the case. Pay careful attention to the admissions deadlines and procedures of the program(s) you intend to apply to. It is a good idea to start contacting potential advisors **several months in advance** of the deadline. This allows for enough time to engage in a correspondence and shows that you are serious about graduate study.

For programs with a December 1 deadline, plan on contacting potential advisors no later than the end of September. Earlier contacts are also fine as long as you are prepared to discuss your research interests and how they relate to the faculty members you are interested in working with. It is better to err on the side of contacting someone earlier rather than later. Waiting until the 11th hour to begin contacting faculty members is a **red flag**. It may come off as desperate and could indicate that you lack the ability to plan ahead.

What to say? In your email, describe your scientific research interests and how they relate to this particular faculty member's lab. If you cannot think of any concrete reasons why you are attracted to this faculty member's research, it may be appropriate to reconsider whether their lab is a good fit for your goals.

You may wish to include information on past work or personal experience, especially if you can clearly articulate how it relates to the type of research you want to conduct. However, it is understood that **research interests can morph and change over time**. Advisors don't expect you to have definite career goals at this stage, so no need to overthink this part!

Many programs have only one application deadline per year (December 1st) and one start date (Fall semester). It doesn't hurt to confirm in your email which term you intend to begin. Some programs allow students to begin in Spring and Summer terms and may even operate on rolling admission, meaning that there is no "hard" deadline.

Follow-ups: If you do not receive a response, it is appropriate to email the advisor again after two weeks. *Do not take it personally* if you do not hear back! Advisors can be very busy and your first email may have caught them at a bad time. For your second email, it is fine to resend the first email, adding to the top something like:

"Dear Dr...[professor's name], I know you are busy and sometimes messages can get lost in the shuffle! I wanted to make sure you received my earlier email inquiring about graduate work in your lab starting in[term]"

If, after two emails, you don't get a response, it's probably best to move on. Assume the professor is not taking students, does not have funding, or does not feel that you would be a good fit for their lab.

As an example, you can adopt the following email structure. Make sure, however, to use your own words to describe your research interests, why you are interested in the advisor's lab, and your background. While past research experience is helpful, it isn't essential for your application. What is essential is that you convey a genuine interest in what you'd like to research!

Be sure to attach a CV or resume

Dear Dr. X,

I write to express my interest and inquire about the availability of [MS/PhD] positions in your laboratory beginning _____. Currently, I am completing my _____ degree at X University, and plan to graduate in _____.

I am broadly interested in researching _____. My past (related research/work/coursework/personal experience) has involved _____. For my PhD, I would like to study _____.

My research interests in _____ align with your own described interests in _____. I am particularly fascinated by your work on _____ because _____.

I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss a PhD opportunity with you by email or over the phone. I have attached my CV, and would be pleased to provide more information upon request. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
X

A blog post on the inquiry email:

<https://contemplativemammoth.com/2013/04/08/so-you-want-to-go-to-grad-school-nail-the-inquiry-email/>

Other tips:

Develop and play up your "soft skills". Navigating graduate school is going to require the ability to talk to people and maintain healthy professional relationships. "Soft skills" include things like communication, conflict resolution, and stress management. Having a sense of humor and a positive outlook will also go a long way. Don't forget to talk about your unique personal traits and how you plan to use them in an academic context.

Connect with peers! Find a network of other prospective students for support. There are several online discussion boards, forums, and social media accounts containing advice on this topic. Additionally, it is common for programs to list current student contact information on their website. Many current students would be more than happy to talk with you about their experiences in the program and give tips on how to be successful in your search.

Find a mentor. Talk to individuals who are current or former graduate students - including professors at your undergraduate institution. They will be able to guide you through the process and talk to you about their personal experiences applying to graduate school.

Talk to your undergraduate academic advisor. Assuming you are a current undergraduate student, don't forget to talk to your academic advisor about your plans to attend graduate school. They should have knowledge and experience working with other students preparing for graduate or professional education and can connect you to relevant campus resources. If it has been a while since you graduated, other professional university employees may still be willing and able to talk to you and give advice. They are there to help!

Connect with professional graduate admissions staff. Many graduate programs hire full-time staff to manage and coordinate their admissions procedures, process applications, troubleshoot technical issues, and answer questions. These individuals may be just as busy as faculty during the peak admissions season, but most will respond to inquiries within a week or will have an automatic reply that contains useful information on how to apply to the programs they manage. You may even be able to make an appointment to talk to staff and ask questions individually.

Take advantage of Q&A, Info Sessions, and Open House events. These are usually great opportunities to meet people and learn about campus resources!

Look up opportunities for fee waivers. Applying to graduate programs can be expensive, especially if you plan to submit multiple applications to different programs. Take advantage of fee waivers if they are available. Often, these resources are limited and proactive students who apply early are given priority.

Take responsibility for your own learning. Attending graduate school requires students to be independent and self-directed. There is also a long-standing tradition of mentorship in academia. This means you will be responsible for finding information on your own, as well as eventually helping and mentoring newer students along the way. Don't expect information to always fall into your lap or be given to you passively. Instead, remember to be an active participant in your own education. If you tend to rely on others to provide information for you, take steps to change this attitude and implement more self-reliant behaviors.

*Research-based graduate programs typically require some coursework, but the primary focus is on conducting research independently and/or as part of a team. This is in contrast to programs that prepare students for specific professions outside academia and may require courses needed to meet state or federal licensure requirements.

** In this document, the terms "advisors", "faculty members" and "professors" are used interchangeably. Some programs also refer to faculty advisors as "PI" which stands for "Primary Investigator".