

Finding a Research Mentor - Guidelines for Cold Email

Most professors will have a faculty website that you can go through to learn a little more about them. You should figure out what areas of research they specialize in, and browse through a few of their abstracts if possible! (Tip: Google Scholar is definitely a lifesaver at this stage!!!)

THE EMAIL:

Step 1. Introduce Yourself:

Address the Professor “Dear Professor So-and-so”. In just a sentence or two, you should mention your name, year, and major. Keep it simple!

“My name is Blizzard Husky, and I’m a second year student majoring in ____.”

Step 2. Explain why you’re emailing them about THEIR research:

Here, you need to show that this isn’t just-another-research-email. You should use the work you did researching them to provide some good evidence that you’ve at least looked them up!

“I was looking at your website and found the idea behind your ongoing project on [x] to be very [x].”

You don’t need to be CRAZY specific — you just need to show them that you have a genuine interest in what they do.

Step 3. What do you want from them?

Here, it’ll usually just be “any available position in your lab.” Modify it as necessary. You’ll also need to touch on the timing of this position. Are you looking for a fall position? A spring position? If you’re already thinking about the summer, you can mention that here too!

Step 4. What is your availability?

General availability for working in the lab: A general rule of thumb is to have 8-10 hours free in your schedule if you want to add on a research position. It helps if you have these in 3-4 hour blocks. You should let the professor know how many hours you’re willing to dedicate to the position, and sometimes they’ll actually ask to see your semester schedule.

Availability to meet: If the professor has office hours, say you plan to come to their office hours on X day. If they don’t have office hours, request a meeting, and describe your availability for the next week or so, e.g. “I’m generally free Tuesday and Thursday afternoons as well as Friday mornings”. That way the professor, with a single email, can give you an appointment time.

Step 5. Why should they pick you?

This is a little tricky, since you might not necessarily have prior research experience. That’s okay though! Think about what you’ve done that could demonstrate that you are a strong candidate. Challenging coursework? Genuine curiosity?

You can also rephrase a lack of experience as motivation to learn, telling the professor that regardless of your lack of experience, your deep motivation to grow and learn would make you a dedicated and hardworking member of their team.

Step 6. Resume

Just attach the resume to the email, and mention you've included it: "I've attached my resume ...". If you are unsure how to write a resume, a great tool is the Career Services Example Resumes. Format your resume to the research position (the Biology resume is a good template for this).

Step 7. Review

Review your email before sending it out. Is the tone professional? Is the closing appropriate? Ask a friend to look it over, or maybe save it as a draft and come back to it later-sometimes you can be surprised at the small mistakes you overlooked!

Step 8. Follow-up

So now what? You should have a little game plan for what they should do following this email if they're interested in you. Perhaps suggest meeting for coffee to discuss their research further, or just end the email saying that you look forward to hearing from them soon.

Cold emails are definitely a bit weird to send out the first few times, but if you spend some time on them, they can be a very effective manner of getting research positions. Though many professors might not even respond as they are extremely busy, all it takes is one yes!

It's okay to follow up after about a week with a faculty member - just resend the email. After that, follow up by dropping by their office to talk.

Sample Letter:

Dear Professor [Name],

My name is {name} and I am interested in doing laboratory research this academic year. I am currently a first year in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. Going through the list of faculty in Biology, your research description of developing techniques for brain imaging greatly interested me. I hope to one day study how violent behavior and motivation to commit a crime arise to try to prevent criminal activity. Your lab seems like a good place to learn techniques to study such a thing, especially in regards to what areas of the brain are responsible for specific kinds of information processing to give rise to behavior.

Although this is only my first year at Michigan Tech, I have taken some classes and done laboratory work in the past that might benefit me were I to work in your lab. I have taken Chemistry #####, and am currently enrolled in Biology ##### and Psychology #####. During high school, I worked for two summers in a Biochemistry laboratory that used yeast as a model organism. Also, I participated in a URAP at The Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. I have attached my resumé for more details.

If possible, I would like to meet with you in person to talk more about your research. Even if you cannot accept me, I would still love to hear about your work tracking neural activity.

Best, {Name}