

Emailing Potential Supervisors: A Practical Guide

One **common misconception** is that emailing professors is a universal requirement. In psychology and related social science fields, contact expectations vary significantly by country, department, and advisor. In some programs (especially in the US and Canada), faculty contact can strengthen an application but is not always required. In others (particularly many European, Australian, and funded project-based PhDs), supervisor contact is often expected before applying.

While reaching out to potential supervisors is often an important part of the PhD application process, many students send generic cold emails that fail to stand out. Messages such as, *"I have read your work and am interested in working with you"* are extremely common and rarely leave a lasting impression.

The key is **specificity**. Instead of simply stating that you have read a professor's work, identify one or two specific papers, projects, or research findings that genuinely interest you. Explain what you found compelling, how it connects to your own research interests, and what questions or ideas it has inspired. A strong email demonstrates intellectual engagement rather than admiration alone.

At the same time, avoid trying to summarize an entire research program or pretending to be an expert on every aspect of their work. Professors do not expect prospective applicants to know everything. They do expect applicants to have a basic understanding of the research being conducted in the lab and to communicate thoughtfully about it.

Before sending an email, spend time researching:

- The professor's recent publications (focus on work from the last 3-5 years)
- Their lab website and ongoing projects
- Current graduate students and their research
- Available funding opportunities
- Whether the faculty member is accepting students for the cycle in which you plan to apply

Remember that many professors do not recruit new PhD students every year. A concise question about whether they anticipate taking students for the upcoming admission cycle is entirely appropriate.

What Should the Email Include?

A strong initial email should generally contain:

1. A brief introduction of who you are and your current academic position.

2. A concise description of your research interests.
3. A clear explanation of how your interests align with the professor's work.
4. Relevant research experience, if applicable.
5. A polite inquiry about whether they are accepting PhD students.
6. A CV attached as a PDF.

Keep the email concise. Most initial emails should be no longer than 200-300 words. Professors receive dozens, sometimes hundreds, of inquiries each year.

Timing Matters

For programs with fall/winter application deadlines, many applicants begin contacting faculty between July and September. This gives professors sufficient time to respond before the admissions cycle becomes busy. However, timelines vary across countries and institutions, so always check program-specific information.

Managing Expectations

Do not expect an immediate response. Faculty members often receive a large volume of emails, travel frequently, and have competing responsibilities. A lack of response does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest.

If you do not receive a reply after 7-14 days, a brief and polite follow-up is acceptable. If there is still no response, move on and continue exploring other potential supervisors.

Finally, remember that the purpose of these emails is not to convince a professor to admit you on the spot. Rather, it is to determine whether there is a potential research fit and whether the faculty member may be recruiting students during the cycle in which you plan to apply.

Your goal is not to contact as many professors as possible. Your goal is to identify scholars whose research genuinely resonates with your interests and with whom you can envision building a productive mentoring relationship over the next several years.