

Tips for writing a contact e-mail

When looking for research opportunities, it is often necessary to directly contact lab directors to inquire about potential openings. Because a contact e-mail stands alone, it is important to write it carefully. You will want to highlight the attributes that will make you a good addition to the recipient's lab – you are selling yourself as a good fit. However, you do not want to create a detailed, multi-page biography that will go unread (when in doubt, keep it short and sweet). Where to start?

- ***The subject***

Choosing a good e-mail subject is an important first step – you certainly don't want the recipient to ignore your message completely. Be short, but be clear what you are writing about. Something like "Undergraduate research opportunities in your lab" or "Openings for undergraduates in your lab" should work. Do not simply use "Hi" or "Research" as a subject.

- ***The salutation (greeting)***

Always address the recipient directly, using a proper title. When contacting lab directors or postdoctoral fellows, "Dear Dr. _____," is appropriate. You may converse on an informal basis later, but for now, go with a formal greeting. If you are contacting someone without a doctorate or M.D., "Dear Mr. _____," or "Dear Ms. _____," is called for, depending on the recipient's gender. If you are unsure, always err on the side of using "Dr." (it never hurts to mistakenly enhance someone's title!). Never open an e-mail with "To whom it may concern" or any similarly vague phrase. This e-mail should be sent to ONLY one recipient; do not carbon copy every professor in the department.

- ***The opening line***

Identifying yourself in the first line of an e-mail is good practice. A quick greeting such as "Hi," and some basic information about you (your year in school and your major or anticipated major) are a great way to start things off.

- ***The text***

After you have identified yourself, the next step is to explain why you are writing. Your e-mail will carry the most weight if it addresses this explanation at two levels: **1)** why you are looking for a research position in general and **2)** why you are contacting this lab director in particular.

- 1)** In most cases, independent research experience will make you more competitive for graduate school or medical school. Gaining such experience is the primary reason that most undergraduates want to perform research. If this is the case, it does not hurt to include a

sentence mentioning your career plans. However, do not simply mention that you are a pre-med using research as a way to boost your CV – that will turn off many recipients. Think more about what is motivating you to do research. Are there aspects of science or medicine that fascinate you? Do you want to be able to contribute to the understanding of some cellular process or disease? If there are broader motivations that drive you, include a sentence in your e-mail explaining them. This will add a personal touch to the story and may resonate with the recipient. Take care not to sound too ambitious, though – it is unlikely that you will cure a disease during your time in the lab. Also, keep your statement brief; it will make your e-mail a little more personal, but it should not take up too much of the recipient’s time to sort through.

- 2) Now that you have described your desire to perform research, you should explain why you are e-mailing this lab director in particular. First, it helps to mention how you know the recipient or where you got their contact information. If you took a class with the professor, or have spoken with someone working in their lab, say so. If you are contacting them based on their profile on the department website, it is fine to say something like “I came across a description of your lab’s research on the department’s website.” Now, most importantly, explain why you are interested in the recipient’s lab **in particular**. Saying that you have always been fascinated by the cell cycle is good start, but don’t stop there! Pick a recent paper from the lab and read it. Be able to mention something more detailed than the general area of research. You should not feel like you have to be an expert, but it certainly helps to mention a recent finding from the lab that interests you. If you can come up with one, ask a question about their research (e.g., “Is the protein you study also regulated in a cell cycle-dependent manner?”). Be sure to describe any experience or completed courses that would make you well suited to do research in the recipient’s lab (here is your chance to sell yourself as a great addition for the lab).

- ***Grades***

While grades are certainly not the only factor that a lab director will consider, you may wish to include your GPA if you feel that it merits mentioning. However, refrain from making it the focal point of a sentence; instead, you can bring it up in the context of wanting some experience outside of class (e.g., “I am enjoying my classes so far and doing well (my GPA is 3.7), but I feel that I will learn a lot more by exploring science beyond the classroom”).

- ***Concluding sentences***

Now you are ready to wrap up with a brief concluding statement. Thank the recipient for their time and express willingness to meet with them to discuss things further. It is also helpful to attach your CV to the e-mail to provide more information about your qualifications. If you have attached a CV, mention the attachment in the e-mail. If you do not feel that your academic

qualifications are as great as you'd hoped (for example, your GPA is on the lower end), you can put off attaching the CV for now and just state that you would be happy to send a CV or any other material if needed. Down the road, as you exchange e-mails, you will have the chance to put your academics into context. If you are in this situation, don't fret! If you can demonstrate your good attributes and a desire to put in a solid effort, that will go a long way.

- ***The closing***

A warm but simple closing ("Sincerely," or "Best regards,") is fine. It may help to include your e-mail or phone number under your name if you have invited the recipient to contact you. Also, let them know a couple of times when you are available to meet.

Here are a few final suggestions to keep in mind: First, remember to keep the e-mail reasonably short. Two small paragraphs should cover everything you need say. Also, remember to proofread carefully (you could have someone else look over the e-mail before you send it). Repeated spelling and grammar errors will reflect negatively on you, as they can make it seem that you did not put much care and effort into your e-mail, even if you did. Do not use slang or abbreviations common in texting (steer clear of "C U L&R"). Think of the e-mail as something you would turn in for a grade. Lastly, be yourself! While it is best to be formal, the e-mail does not have to be cold and bland; let some of your personality show through.

These suggestions should help you write a well-received contact e-mail. Best of luck!