Tips for Writing a Contact E-mail

Writing an email to a person you have only met briefly, or not at all, can feel overwhelming. Here is a guide to help you with this process. The best thing to do is to treat this email like any other writing assignment: write an outline, write a draft, revise, wait, proof read, and then send it off!

Remember, researchers at UNC are expecting to be contacted by undergraduates who are interested in conducting research. A thoughtful, well written email will help you make a strong first impression.

The Subject Line

• You want to indicate the purpose of your email. Be brief, be clear, get your reader’s attention:
  
  “Undergraduate research opportunity in your lab” or “Undergraduate interested in research about cell-to-cell communication” (or whatever topic you are interested in)

• Do not write “Hi” or “Research” in the subject line

The Greeting

• Use the recipient’s proper title (i.e. Professor or Dr.) “Dear Dr._____,” is appropriate.
• Do not use “Mr/Miss/Ms/Mrs”. These imply assumptions about the recipient’s identity that may be incorrect.
• Do not write “To whom it may concern.” The email you write should be specific to the recipient. Any indication that you are sending a form letter will decrease the likelihood that you will get a response.

The Opening Line

• Introduce yourself briefly and state the purpose of the email:

  “My name is Akshat Singh, I am a second year biology major, with a strong interest in medical research.”

• Your interest may vary from Akshat’s. In one a few words tell the reader what your broad interests are. For example, interest in discipline specific research (e.g. ecological, marine, biomedical, plant biology, etc.), or acquiring specific types of skills (e.g. Western blot, PCR, fruit fly husbandry, etc.).

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 you address these two questions:
  1) Why are you looking for a research position?
  2) Why are you contacting this researcher in particular?

Question 1:

• Independent research experience is valuable for graduate school or medical school. Many people look for research opportunities as undergraduate to learn more about a discipline and gain skills that are transferable to their next educational endeavors.
• **Do not** say that you are using research to “check a box” for a medical school application, or because you think it will make you stand out.

• Briefly (one sentence), tell the researcher what aspect of science fascinates you. In other words, what larger problem are you interested in trying to solve (or help solve)? Maybe you want to make a contribution to our understanding of a cellular process, a disease, or a conservation question.

• Adding a sentence about what motivates you helps the researcher get to know you personally.

• **Do not** get overly ambitious. You are not likely to cure cancer in one semester, after all!

**Question 2—three to four sentences.**

• Explain why you are emailing this particular researcher: Do you know them from class? Did you hear them give a talk? Do you know their graduate students or postdocs?

• Explain why you believe you will be a good fit in their lab: It is also fine to say, “I am interested in [your topic of interest] and I note from your website that your lab conducts research related to this topic.”

• **Be as specific as possible about your research interests.** Tell them, broadly, what kinds of research questions you are interested in. Follow up, if appropriate, with the types of research skills or lab techniques you would like to improve on or learn about.

• This is where having read one or two of the researcher’s papers will be helpful. 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 a question about their research, ask it! For example, “Is the protein you study 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 a question about their research, ask it! For example, “Is the protein you study also regulated in a cell cycle-dependent manner?”

**Grades/Brief justification about your ability to succeed in their lab**

• If appropriate, make reference to classes or lab skills that you already have as an indication that you have some experience (no one is expecting you to be an expert at this point!).

• It may be appropriate to mention your overall GPA, but do not dwell on it.

• Contextualize your GPA: “I enjoy my class, and am doing well (my GPA is ____), but I am interested in learning more by conducting research outside a classroom.”

• If you choose to include an unofficial transcript (not required!) you may just want to reference it: “I am looking for a research opportunity to complement my classroom experiences, where I am currently doing well (unofficial transcript attached).”

**Concluding sentences**

• Thank the recipient for their time, express willingness to meet with them to discuss matters further. Provide a three days and times to meet in the next two weeks that work with your schedule.

• Your concluding remarks—some options:

  “Thank you for your time and consideration. My attached resume provides details about my relevant experiences. I look forward to meeting with you soon to discuss our shared research interests.”

  “Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to meeting with you to discuss our shared research interests in more detail. I am happy to provide a resume or unofficial transcript, if you wish.”
• Important: you may wish to put off attaching your resume and unofficial transcript until these documents are requested. Presenting them in person, or in a follow up email, will give you an opportunity to contextualize your grades if they are lower in certain areas than you wish.

The Closing

• Keep it brief: “Sincerely”, “Warm regards”, “Thank you,”
• If you have an automatic signature make sure it includes your email address and phone number
• If you do not have an automatic signature, include your phone number
• If you feel comfortable, include your preferred gender pronouns. For example, “she/her/hers”; “he/him/his”; “they/them/their’s”.

Before you send your email:

• Save a draft and proof read before sending it. Better yet, have a friend read it, too.
• The email should be reasonably short. One to two paragraphs max. Edit for clarity and concise writing. Remember, you are indirectly signaling your capabilities as a writer with this email.
• Make sure the email is a true reflection of yourself. The email should be professional, but it should not be bland. You are conveying to the recipient that you are interested in doing some hard work and you are a great person to work with!
• Avoid grammatical and spelling errors at all costs.
• Do not use “slang”, “text slang” or abbreviations. Keep your language professional.

After you send the email:

• You may not hear back for 3-5 days.
• After 7 days with no response, you are welcome to resend the email once, with a brief sentence at the top.

  “Dear Dr.____,
  I am very interested in learning more about your research, and I would like to speak with you about conducting research in your lab. I hope to hear from you soon.
  Sincerely, [your name]”

• Research groups have limited space, so it may be difficult to find a research mentor that is looking for, or willing to take, another student. Do not take it personally if they decline your request. You may go through your top ten (or more) potential mentors before you find a match. Stick with it! You will find someone.