

Finding a Supervisor

There are many aspects to finding a supervisor. You can get lots of useful advice just by searching the internet with the key “finding a supervisor”. These notes are just about the kind of message to send to someone who might be interested in supervising you. They are based on my own experiences, but I know from speaking to other professors and reading web pages that my feelings are widely shared.

I receive several email messages from prospective graduate students every week. During the last thirty years, I have agreed to supervise perhaps half a dozen students on the basis of such a message. When I receive an email from a student, I respond in one of three ways:

1. delete it immediately;
2. read the letter and attached resumé and decide that there is not a good match;
3. read the letter and attached resumé, decide that there are possibilities, and send a reply.

Obviously, your goal is to write a message that does not fall into the first category. Here are some of the reasons that I *immediately reject* a proposal:

- The mode of address is generic: *Dear Professor, Dear Sir or Madam, Esteemed Researcher, hi prof, hello there*, etc. Salutations like this suggest that the message has been sent to many other people, some of whom certainly have more time to answer it than I do.
- The letter is address to *Dear Dr. Smith* even though my name is Jones.
- There is a claim to have read my web page, but it is followed by statements that falsify the claim such as these:

I have read your web page and share your interest in curved differentiable Lorentzian manifolds

or any subject that I know nothing about and have no interest in.

I have read your web page and would like to collaborate with you on how the æther affects the velocity of light

or some field that I may once have been interested in but abandoned a century ago.

I have read your web page and am deeply fascinated by your current research
which strongly suggests you have not actually bothered to read my web page.

I have read your web page

but I do not actually have a web page.

I know that spurious claims to have read web pages are common because some academics booby-trap their sites with statements like

I will consider applications only if the subject line is “Monads rock”.

- Inappropriate quotations from my web page. You might write

By the way, we share a passion for tiddlywinks.

and it might help your case, because people who post their hobbies on their web pages are presumably interested in meeting others with similar interests. However, there is a bigger risk that it would backfire because the point at this stage is to *establish possibilities for research supervision*; if that works out, opportunities for playing tiddlywinks may arise later.

- Vague statements that seem to be intended for a wide variety of readers. From a recent application:

It is my sincere belief that if I have the opportunity to work in your research domain, I can add real value to the knowledge world.

Why not just say something like this?

I believe that if I have the opportunity to complete my investigation of higher-order recursive extensions to heterogeneous generalized algebraic data types, I can add a little something to functional programming.

- There are too many attachments. A CV is fine but there is no need for transcripts and photocopies of degrees. (However, you may need them later for final admission.) I'm not interested in the gushings of your kindergarten music teacher.
- The writing in the message is sloppy and careless. I appreciate that English is not the native language of many students who write to me, and I ignore minor errors of grammar and style. But this is not an excuse for spelling mistakes (use a spell checker!), silly mistakes, basic factual errors, etc.

So now you know a few of the things to avoid, what's the strategy for success? Here are a few pointers, which do not guarantee acceptance but may at least get past the first hurdle — having someone actually read your message.

1. Don't send a formula message to hundreds of professors.
2. Read hundreds of web pages and select a few professors who really inspire you. These professors: are working in fields in which you have experience or would like to acquire knowledge; are active researchers; indicate openness to accepting new students.
3. Write a *personalized* message to each professor you have selected. The messages may have some text in common, but each should have some content that is addressed directly to the particular researcher.
4. Include a CV or resumé (see below).
5. Be specific. Say *I am looking forward to studying in the Department of Scrambling at Egghead University* but do not say *I want to attend your institute*.
6. Make it clear that you have actually read the professor's web page by referring to specific content or even by short quotations from it. (If your target does not have a web page, or has just a basic web page without substantive information, mention articles that you have read.)
7. Think of ways in which you might get your potential supervisor interested in you. Indicate shared interests

I have studied your results in plane geometry and have published a paper in this area

but do not be too specific

My research in scalene triangles would mesh well with your earlier results for isosceles triangles

because I may no longer be excited about isosceles triangles.

8. Say something snappy, unusual, or humorous that will get attention. I accepted a student who wrote

I read “I am too old to consider taking on any more graduate students” but thought I would ask if you can supervise my master’s thesis anyway. I have completed projects in C++, Java, and Python.

This says: (1) I have read your web page; (2) I am cheeky and confident enough to ignore the advice that it gives; (3) I know what I want to do; and (4) I am suitably prepared.

9. Your message should be courteous and respectful, but not obsequious. It’s fine to write

I enjoyed reading your paper “On a Novel Approach to Proving Pythagoras’s Theorem”

but not

Since I was five years old and first became aware of your transcendental accomplishments, it has been my most humble dream to follow in your illustrious footsteps.

10. Mention your financial status. Funds provided by universities vary widely, but are always limited in some way. If you can pay your own way, partly or fully, you stand a better chance of acceptance. If you request full financial support, your application may be rejected, but at least you won’t have wasted anyone’s time.
11. Conclude your message with a complete signature. I’ve read message that seem promising but end with something like *tom* or even no name at all.

Include a CV! There are many ways of designing it, but try to satisfy these criteria:

- Include full coordinates: name, address, email address, telephone number(s), place of residence if different from your primary address, etc.
- The most important part of your CV for academic research purposes is your academic background. Make it easy to find your degrees, grades, scholarships, and other distinctions easily.
- If you have published, list your publications in a standard format. Include co-authors of joint publications.

I once saw a CV that mentioned a “seminal work” in a major field with the implication of sole authorship. Investigation revealed a short paper in a minor conference — and fourteen co-authors!

- Include the names of referees — and choose your referees carefully!
- Once you have the basics covered, you can include a few peripheral items, such as your favourite hobbies and recreations. But don’t overdo this part.

A final point: please don’t ask me to supervise you — I have retired.

Good luck with your graduate studies!