

How to approach a faculty member

If you are interested in collaborating with her/him on research, scholarship or creative projects

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What should I do to prepare before approaching a faculty member to work with her/him?

Learn about the work that the faculty member does. Review his/her website, read her/his articles/books (or at least the article abstract or book summary), attend talks the faculty member gives and/or search the internet to see if any of the faculty member's talks are posted.

Think about how the faculty member's work intersects with your interests. Think about how you will talk about this intersection when you meet the faculty member. Are there research questions that interest you that are compatible with the work the faculty member is doing? Use your classes to start developing research questions that interest you. When a class topic of discussion sparks your interest, write down your questions.

How should I reach out to or contact a faculty member to work with her/him?

Faculty members have different preferences when it comes to how they prefer to be contacted by students who want to work with them, but, in general, your first contact should either be via email or by introducing yourself to the faculty member after s/he has given a talk that you have attended. In both cases, you should address the faculty member formally and professionally, i.e., "Dear Professor Jones" or "Hello Dr. Smith." Never use the faculty member's first name in your initial contact.

If you use email, use your college email address to contact the faculty member. Personal email addresses (e.g., sweetiepie@yahoo.com) can send the wrong message. If you are interested in doing scholarly or creative work with a faculty member, you want to present yourself in a professional manner. Spam is also less likely to originate with a college email address than with some other email providers.

Personalize your message so that it is clear that you've done your homework and you know the faculty member's areas of interest. Indicate your specific interest in working with this particular faculty member. Attach your CV and unofficial transcript or a list of the relevant courses you have taken.

What should I do if the faculty member doesn't respond to my email?

Be persistent. Send your email again if you haven't received a response within two weeks. If you don't receive a response to your second email, send a third email. Faculty are not only busy, they can receive hundreds of emails a day, so it is possible that they just missed your first or even second email.

In addition, persistence is usually considered a positive quality in research, scholarly and creative work. When sending a second or third email, it is not a good idea to point out that the faculty member neglected to respond to your earlier email.

If you don't receive a response to your third email, don't send a fourth. Try to stop by the faculty member's office during office hours. If that is not possible, try contacting another faculty member instead.

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What are some examples of flawed/effective emails to faculty?

Example of a Flawed Email

Hey Professors,

I am looking for an honors thesis sponsor for this semester. Would one of you please be my sponsor?

Sincerely,
Jane

“Don’t put off until tomorrow what you can do today.”

Example of an Effective Email

Dear Professor Miller,

I am a Hunter College junior and psychology major interested in going to graduate school in social psychology and would like to obtain research experience. I am very interested in learning more about your research examining how mental representations of important relationships affect emotional functioning in young adults. I was intrigued by your recent findings (published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology) on gender differences in how young adults apply significant-other representations in their daily lives. Do you have any volunteer research positions available in your lab?

I would be very interested in meeting with you to discuss potential involvement in your lab. I am attaching my CV to give you more information about my previous experience. As you will see, I have taken courses in experimental psychology and statistics, which your website lists as a requirement for volunteers. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Jane Doe
Hunter Class of 2015

How should I introduce myself to a faculty member after her/his talk?

If you plan to introduce yourself to the faculty member after her/his talk, you want to convey your knowledge of the faculty member’s work, why you are interested in working with this faculty member (be specific) and your qualifications. In order to be able to do this in 2 - 3 minutes (don’t plan on much longer than that), write out what you want to say ahead of time and practice, practice, practice. This is referred to as your “elevator pitch.”

What do I need to do to prepare for an interview with a faculty member?

Most faculty members will want to interview you to determine whether you are a good fit for their work. Faculty differ in terms of the specific qualifications and experience they require, but most look for evidence of curiosity and the ability to think critically, analytically and creatively about issues. Be prepared to talk about:

- The reasons you want to work with the faculty member.
- Your specific research interests.
- Your career goals and how working with the faculty member will help you achieve those goals.
- Your coursework and experience and how it is relevant to the work you’d like to conduct with the faculty member.