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Professional Communication (or, how
to write an email to a professor so it
gets a positive response)

Our agenda

- Overarching rules of thumb
- Finding a mentor
- (If time and interest): Nurturing and maintaining the mentoring relationship

Overarching rules

1. Better too formal than too informal
2. Better too polite than not polite enough
3. No typos
4. Make it as easy as possible for them to give you guidance
5. There are ways you can “keep the conversation going” even if they don’t respond.

Overarching rules, cont.

1. Clear subject heading; say what you need, politely
2. Keep it short (2 paragraphs max); use bolding or formatting to make clear the “action items”
3. Summarize in the email; attach or link supplemental information
4. OK to resend after a few days (don’t sound annoyed); after that, follow up in person.

Finding a mentor: 3 routes

- **Apprenticeship programs**
- **Through classes:**
 - go to office hours
 - mobilize contacts
- **“Strategic doorknocking”**

“strategic doorknocking”: 5 steps

- 1) Identify faculty with interests close to yours**
- 2) Check the “grapevine” – what is s/he like to work with?**
- 3) Read an article**
- 4) Meet with top candidates (establish rapport and establish your credibility)**
- 5) Pop the question!**
- 6) Using email as part of this method**

“strategic doorknocking”

1. Find faculty with interests close to yours

- web search (departments, Research Centers)
- networking (faculty, GSIs, other undergrads)
- faculty expertise DB

“strategic doorknocking”

2) Check the “grapevine” – what is s/he like to work with?

What kind of mentor will work best for you?

What to do if this mentor has a different style?

Ask: faculty you know

GSIs or other grads (check with grad advisor)

Undergrads

Check with undergrad advisor

Check lab websites

Get involved w/ student orgs for major

“strategic doorknocking”

3) Read a recent article/chapter by that professor

- **From library**
- **From professor’s web page**

“strategic doorknocking”

4) Meet with top candidates

Agenda:

- Apprenticeship: ask about *their* work
- Independent: solicit feedback on *your* idea
- Both: establish your credibility—
 - resume (w/ reference if possible; see career.berkeley.edu/Tools/Resume),
 - transcript
 - prepare for meeting
 - dress reasonably professionally

“strategic doorknocking”

5) Make the “ask” – spell out “contract” and “fit”

•Apprenticeship:

- How many and which hours you’ll work
- Why this assistantship is a great fit
 - how skills you’ll gain will be useful
 - why you’re interested
 - how this experience will get you where you want to go.

•Independent:

- Spell out mentor’s commitment:
 - How many semesters? How many pages?
 - How many and what type of credits (honors? independent study?)
 - Additional commitments for program?
- What part of the mentor’s expertise will be useful to guide you? Will you have other mentors as well?

Via Email

PRE-EMAIL RESEARCH

- 1) Identify faculty with interests close to yours
- 2) Check the “grapevine” – what is s/he like to work with?
- 3) Read an article/chapter/abstracts

IN EMAIL:

- 4) Introduce yourself, establish credibility (attachments)
- 5) Make clear your motivation (why they’re a good fit)
- 5) Briefly describe the commitment you seek from them
- 6) Request a meeting; tell them when you are available.

Let's see some examples

Subject: Potential summer undergraduate research position

Dear Professor [Name],

My name is {name} and I am interested in doing laboratory research this coming summer. I am currently a 1st year, intended MCB major, undecided on emphasis. Going through the list of faculty in MCB, your research description of developing techniques for brain imaging greatly interested me. I hope to one day study how violent behavior and motivation to commit a crime arise to try to prevent criminal activity. Your lab seems like a good place to learn techniques to study such a thing, especially in regards to what areas of the brain are responsible for specific kinds of information processing to give rise to behavior.

Although this is only my first year at UC Berkeley, I have taken some classes and done laboratory work in the past that might benefit me were I to work in your lab. I have taken Chemistry 1A and 1AL and am currently enrolled in Biology 1A and 1AL and Psychology 1. During high school, I worked for two summers in a Biochemistry laboratory that used yeast as a model organism. Also, I participated in a URAP at The Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. I have attached my resumé for more details.

If possible, I would like to meet with you in person to talk more about your research. Even if you cannot accept me, I would still love to hear about your work tracking neural activity.

Best, {Name}

Subject: Homestead Act; Meet to Chat?

Dear Prof. [name],

I am a student of Economic History at UC Berkeley; I am writing to ask if you would be willing to talk about a project concerning the Homestead Act.

Last year, I stumbled on a source which has, among other gems, a list of names and locations of (~1.5m) Homestead Act beneficiaries. I matched a subset of these data into the 1880 census. The attached figures give a basic idea of how Homestead Act beneficiaries differed from the general population. In each, the “treatment” group is my matched sample of Homesteaders and the “control” group is a random sample from the matching population (that is, non-elderly adults in public land states in the 1880 census). Ultimately, I’m concerned about the outcomes for Homestead Act beneficiaries and their descendants.

I thought the topic might appeal to you given your expertise in historical US immigration. The data and salience of the Homestead Act in US economic history seems to warrant attention per se, but I am very curious what insights you might have.

Would you be willing to meet to talk in the next couple weeks? If so, I’d be very happy to make the trip to [place].

Respectfully yours, [name]

Subject: Meet after your talk 2/16?

Dear Prof. [name],

I'm a student of economic history at Berkeley. Your 2013 paper with [name] motivated my interest in the late nineteenth century US; and, of course, your work with [name] is seriously cool. Since then, I've begun work on a project looking at occupational mobility among homesteaders. Neat data I stumbled across allows me to link beneficiaries of the Homestead Act into the 1880 census, from which I plan to match fathers back into the 1850 census and sons forward into the 1920 census.

Would you have time to meet around your presentation on Thursday? If you are at all available, I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to introduce myself and perhaps discuss directions for future work on occupational mobility in the exceptional latter half of the 19th c. US.

Respectfully yours,

[name]

Subject: Meet briefly re: comments on my honors thesis data?

Hi Prof. [name],

I hope this email finds you well and enjoying the summer break;

I'm the undergraduate who was in your [course title] class a year ago. I was wondering if you had 15 min in the next couple weeks to talk over a few questions. I'm getting closer to finishing the data-work for my honors thesis, and I'd very much appreciate comments.

Thanks in advance for your time!

Yours,

[name]

Salutations [name],

My name is [name] and I am currently a third year transfer student majoring in both Comparative Literature (with an emphasis in English and French Literature) and Film. I am also a first generation African-American queer identifying student.

I was recently admitted into the McNair Scholars program (and am applying to the Haas Scholars program), and am now seeking a mentor to guide me on my project and my applications to PhD programs.

The purpose of this email is to ask if you would be willing to meet with me and discuss whether you could potentially take the role as my designated mentor. I have chosen you because I am deeply fascinated by your contributions to queer theory and its subsequent applications in twentieth century Francophone literature. In this time, I would like to offer you a brief synopsis of my potential research topic as well as list a few of my other research interests before your decision is made.

[Continued]

[continued]

In the past few years, I have developed a growing appreciation for Allen Ginsburg's poetry, particularly his most notorious piece "Howl". I am hoping to use my interest in Ginsburg as a point of departure to further develop a formal research project on Ginsburg's overall oeuvre. As I have previously mentioned, I am very interested in queer theory and its literary applications. Through my research, I will be working toward comprehending the development of the queer subject in Ginsburg's poetic oeuvre. I am also hoping to use this opportunity to lay the foundation for a future investigation through a Marxist lens in order to conceptualize the formation of Ginsburg's queer subject and its impacts in the construction of a nationalist identity.

I am aware of the arduous demands of creating quality research and I promise I will work diligently to ensure that I am able to adequately contribute to each session we may potentially have with each other. If you would like to see a sample of my work in advance, I would be more than happy to forward you it. I hope this email finds you well and I very much look forward to hearing back from you.

Cordially,

[name]

Subject: Research Position

Dear Prof. [name],

My name is [name] and I am a sophomore undergraduate here at UC Berkeley. I am currently an intended public health major with a [GPA] GPA. I have significant interest in your research and I am writing to inquire about a possible research opportunity in your laboratory.

I am very interested in your research with the pathogenesis of salmonella. I found your paper indicating that extracellular ATP may have a role in bacterial physiology very fascinating. Additionally, I plan to do an honors thesis research project in my senior year and hope to seek your mentorship.

I would like to learn more about your research and if we are mutually interested, I would also like to know if there are open slots in the lab. Please see my resume and cover letter enclosed for more information. I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you again for your time and consideration.

Sincerely, [Name]

Now you try it!

PRE-EMAIL RESEARCH

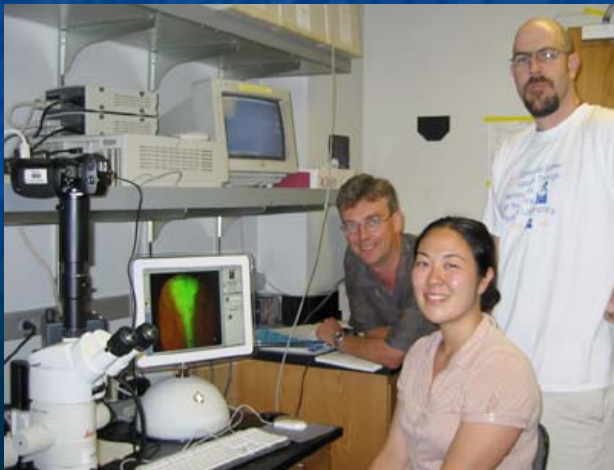
- 1) Identify faculty with interests close to yours
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**Next steps: Hints for a good
working relationship with your
mentor**

What is the ideal mentor-advisee relationship for you?



How do you make it happen?
What's worked for you?

