

Advice to prospective graduate students
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So, you're interested in graduate studies under my supervision. That's great! I'm honoured and I am delighted to consider the possibility. But you should know that I accept 0-3 graduate students a year, and I receive many more inquires than I have positions. I wrote this document to provide some guidance, both to help you maximize your chances of success and to make the process easier for everyone. I was motivated to do so in part out of a concern that differences in mentorship that prospective students receive may contribute to ongoing disparities in who I accept, thereby perpetuating the underrepresentation in my field of certain groups. I want my lab to be open and welcoming, and to foster diversity, equity and inclusion. My hope is to try to level the playing field somewhat by providing some mentorship to prospective students. As much as I'd love to do this one-on-one, there are simply too many applicants and not enough time. In lieu of this, I hope this document will be of some use.

Before proceeding, a warning. Graduate programs, supervisors, and universities vary. The advice here is 100% applicable to my lab, somewhat less so but probably still quite useful for other potential supervisors in my department, and likely a reasonable guide to similar departments at other Canadian institutions, but there will undoubtedly be some differences. It will be less applicable, potentially even incorrect or misleading, for those in other fields and at non-Canadian institutions, where systems vary. In brief, **you need to do your homework as to the requirements at different places.**

So on to my advice:

1. **Do your research on professors.** The most important step is finding a supervisor who works on a topic you are interested in and who is willing to take you on. Research potential supervisors via their webpages and publications, seeking to identify those with interests that align with yours. The supervisor and their lab group are much more important than the institution. A poor supervisor at a famous institution can be a horrible experience, whereas a great supervisor in a small or less famous department can be perfectly fine.
2. **Contact potential supervisors.** Use email and be formal. A lot of good advice has been written about this. Here are two resources. You can easily google more:
<https://www.sciencemag.org/careers/2015/05/dear-dr-neufeld>
<https://suebertram.ca/student-advice/email-etiquette>

Your email needs to stand out from the crowd of emails that many professors get. **Fewer, better crafted (i.e. higher effort) attempts are far more likely to succeed than many, low effort (and hence low quality) attempts.** A 'form email' is near useless (these go straight to my trash folder; many colleagues tell me the same). You need to customize your email. This shows interest and effort, which can help get the recipient's attention. You should summarize your background briefly, outline your research interests, and explain why you contacted them in particular. **Include a copy of your CV and transcripts** (an unofficial copy is fine at this stage). You should demonstrate that you know something about their work, and this does not mean cutting and pasting a phrase or two off their website or from one of their papers. You could make a brief

comment, in your own words, about a paper of theirs you have read that excited you, for instance. The prospective students that interest me the most are those that show they have a reasonable idea of the sort of work we do and that this aligns with their interest. A background of courses relevant to the work they do is also a positive, and if you have this you should highlight it. If your background does not include relevant courses, then I suggest you address this directly (i.e. explain why you are contacting them when your past choices do not suggest an interest or background in their research area).

3. **Start early.** Programs have varying deadlines and there may be other deadlines of which you are not aware (e.g., awards, scholarships, grants prospective supervisors are working on which could include a new student). Scholarship application deadlines from funding agencies like NSERC and OGS (see #5 below) are typically in the autumn of the year before you would begin your graduate program, and it's often helpful to have spoken to a prospective supervisor before developing your scholarship application. I have NEVER experienced an issue with a prospective student contacting me too early, but have repeatedly had to turn down strong students, who I otherwise may have taken, because they contacted me too late, after a scholarship deadline had passed or I had already agreed to take on a different student. If you don't get a response to your initial email after ~10 days, send a polite reminder. If you still don't hear back, you probably don't want to work with someone like that anyway.
4. **Apply to graduate school (after finding an interested supervisor*).** Getting accepted into the graduate program often isn't the issue, so don't waste your money applying unless a potential supervisor has indicated you should*. At uOttawa, many applicant dossiers are circulated among professors from candidates who have applied to the program without first contacting a potential supervisor. I believe these are rarely successful (I don't even look at them, nor do some other colleagues I have asked). This is another reason why #3 is important.
*this may NOT be the case in other programs/universities, so take care.
5. **Find out about funding.** Having external funding, like an Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS) or NSERC scholarship, or having a strong chance of obtaining such funding, makes you a more attractive candidate to many prospective supervisors, whose research budgets are limited. So, **do your homework and don't miss deadlines.** Many departmental websites include information about various grants and awards. If you contact potential supervisors early enough, they may be willing to give you feedback on an application, and they may know of other options to which you could apply. If your grades are strong such that you might be competitive, point this out in your first email. This being said, you can still get a position without external funding. Many students do, as some professors have sufficient funds to support one or more students that lack external funding. Many also recognize that grades (which have a strong influence on the outcome of scholarship applications) are not everything, and that there can be mitigating circumstances.

¶With helpful input from my excellent colleague, [Prof. Jessica Forrest](#).