# Guidelines/Tips on How to Approach Faculty about Writing

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The purpose of this guideline is to assist Graduate students of the Rehabilitation & Counselor Education Department at the University of Iowa. Many graduate students do not want to become like Carl – unpublished. So they seek mentorship and co-authorship from faculty. The following guidance is designed to help you better understand the responsibilities of authorship and provide you with successful strategies in approaching faculty to co-author a publication.

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## Responsibilities of Publication

“Authorship credit should the individual's contribution to the study. An author is considered anyone involved with initial research design, data collection and analysis, manuscript drafting, and final approval. However, the following do not necessarily qualify for authorship: providing funding or resources, mentorship, or contributing research but not helping with the publication itself. The primary author assumes responsibility for the publication, making sure that the data is accurate, that all deserving authors have been credited, that all authors have given their approval to the final draft, and handles responses to inquiries after the manuscript is published.” (APA, 2014 <http://www.apa.org/research/responsible/publication/> )

Resources:

APA Science Student Council (2006). A graduate student’s guide to determining authorship credit and authorship order. American Psychological Association. <http://www.apa.org/science/leadership/students/authorship-paper.pdf>

## How to Approach a Faculty Member

If you'd like to get involved with research activities with a faculty member, it's as simple as contacting them! Consider that most faculty members don’t advertise widely (or at all) for research opportunities. In fact, they all get more student requests than they can handle, so focus on those faculty members whom you are truly interested in working with.

Two questions should guide you through the process of selecting an appropriate faculty mentor. First, what do you want to research? When you think about your research focus, do so in a very specific way. You will find that the more specific you can be about what your research is, the more confident you will feel about approaching potential faculty mentors. Remember, at some point during your conversation with a potential mentor, faculty will ask you to define your research focus and explain to them why you have the interests that you do. This is not the faculty’s way of testing you, but it is a way for them to gauge how serious you are about research and how much independent homework you’ve done on your own prior to meeting with them. It’s also a way for them to engage in some meaningful conversation with you.

The second question to ask yourself is if you have a faculty member(s) in mind that would make an excellent mentor. Maybe you’ve gone out of your way to develop a relationship with a professor in your field whom you admire and trust. This person would be an obvious option for a mentor professor. If you aren’t in this position, take some time to think about the courses in your major or minor that you’ve taken and really enjoyed. Who taught these courses? Why did you enjoy them? There is a good chance that the reasons you enjoyed these courses were because the professor went above and beyond what you expected and presented materials in interesting and dynamic ways. He or she may have had a great sense of humor and made even the hardest material fun to learn. Perhaps you appreciated how organized and logical they presented material. What are the qualities you not only admire but absolutely need in a mentor?

Locating faculty

Once you have decided on a research topic or focus the hard work begins. Solidifying what you want to research is a great first step, but this is only one part of your goal. Now it is time to actively seek out a mentor. If you haven’t already secured a mentor, or have potential mentors in mind, begin by researching the faculty members listed on your department’s web site. All departments on campus have a web site listing all faculty members and instructors. Along with names, most department web sites also list what areas of research they specialize in. This is where having narrowed down your research focus is invaluable. The more you know about your research the easier it will be to narrow down potential faculty mentors.

Making contact: E-mail approach

Once you’ve compiled a list of potential mentors you will next want to make contact with each and set up an appointment to discuss your research.

Making contact: In person approach

E-mail has become an accepted and standard way to contact people. It can be particularly helpful in contacting faculty if you cannot make their office hours or getting to campus is difficult. However, it is not the most comfortable way for everyone to communicate. Initiating a first contact through a face-to-face meeting has some definite advantages over e-mail. First, there is less of an opportunity for your e-mail to go unanswered. Like all of us, professors receive countless e-mails every day. Some messages are important, many are not, and some get overlooked in sheer volume of messages. If being overlooked is a concern, find out the office hours of the professor you would like to interview and make it a point to be there when office hours begin. The second advantage of taking the face-to-face approach is that you know that you will have the opportunity to have a more thorough discussion about your research and why you’ve come to meet with your chosen professor.

## How to Approach a Faculty Member (Owens)

Ashley Owens, Ohio State University <http://undergraduateresearch.osu.edu/documents/How_to_Approach_a_Faculty_Member.pdf>

We’ve all heard it a million times: “It’s not about what you said, it’s about how you said it!” When it comes to contacting faculty members about your desire to get started on a research project, this statement couldn’t be truer. Sometimes, the “etiquette” for contacting an expert in your field can be mystifying… and sometimes, the whole prospect is downright intimidating. Here are some to ease the pressure *and* increase the chances that you get the kind of response you’re hoping for.

The Do’s and Don’ts of Contacting Professors About Research

**DO…**

**Identify yourself!** Don’t write a generic message and then sign it with a first name only. Tell them who you are! Include your major and year in school. If you took a class with this person, mention that. If you were referred to this person by someone else, mention that, too.

**Address the individual you’re emailing.** Don’t just say “Hi” or “Dear Professor;” this can appear as if you sent out a mass email message, which in turn indicates that you haven’t thought carefully about what kind of research you want to do and who would be an appropriate faculty mentor for your project. It’s also a little casual in tone: addressing the recipient by name instantly sounds more serious.

**Sell yourself!** You are, in a sense, trying to advertise yourself a little bit in the initial email to a faculty member you might like to work with. Without going overboard or writing an excessively long message, identifying what sparked your interest in doing research is a good way to personalize your message and give them a reason from the outset to believe that your interest is genuine.

**…Your homework!** This is probably the most important piece of advice we can offer to students are sending out that first email to a professor. We really encourage students who seek our advice on getting started in research to spend some time looking over what a faculty member’s current research interests are. You may know what field he or she is working in, but knowing whether he or she is specifically focusing on “X” instead of “Y” says that you are already committed enough to the idea of beginning research do some reading on your own. It also suggests that you have a better sense yourself of what kind of research would keep you genuinely interested, and that you aren’t necessarily willing to do anything that comes along. You can find a list of what a professor has recently published by accessing his or her *curriculum vitae* (basically, an academic resume), which should be accessible the faculty member’s profile on any departmental webpage. Find out what this person focuses on, how long he or she has been investigating that subject, or even what classes he or she has recently taught that relate to the research. Then, go to the library and find one of the recent listed publications, and check it out!

But… the research that faculty members publish is difficult to understand, right? Sure it is! Do you have to understand everything you read? Definitely not! But you CAN look for some of the key terms of the study that would catch someone’s attention in that initial email. Make a list of questions as you read… professors will be impressed by your curiosity and the time you’ve taken to investigate their

work, as much as they would be impressed by your comprehension.

**Make it easy to set up a meeting.** We suggest that you close your email by saying “I am available on such-­‐and-­‐such days of the week at such-­‐and-­‐such times.” Then, this professor has to do is check his or her own schedule and say, “Ok, meet me at THIS time.” It reduces the number of email exchanges that are required to get to that face-­‐to-­‐face conversation.

**DON’T…**

**Send generic emails.** You may be reaching out to more than one professor at one time, as you begin searching for a faculty mentor… and, if there are lots of faculty members doing research in the field that interests you, or if your interests are diverse, that’s a perfectly appropriate strategy to help you find the ideal opportunity! It can become a problem, though, when your email messages look like form letters. Here’s a great rule of thumb, or litmus test of sorts, that you can use as you begin this process of making contact with professors. Ask yourself this question: “Could I change the name of the addressee in the salutation of my message and just as easily send it to several people?” If the answer is “Yes,” then you haven’t done it right! You want to *personalize* your emails (especially using the suggestion above about doing your homework!) and raise questions around which you can build a more in-­‐depth conversation. These initial conversations should all be uniquely framed for the person to whom you are writing.

**Neglect proofreading.** Silly grammar errors? Just don’t make them.

**Give up!** Finding the *right* faculty mentor for your graduate research project may take some time. Professors are busy… but they also have enough experience to know when they are perhaps not the best person to sponsor and direct your work. Sometimes, it’s not about you or your credentials— it may just be about the “fit.” You may not get a positive response the first or second or fifth time you send an email. Keep trying! Also, don’t be afraid to get back in touch with professors who turned you down and ask them if they have suggestions about other people you should contact; even if they aren’t able to help you with a research project personally, they might be willing to help you do some networking.

When approaching a faculty member, send them an email introducing yourself. Let them know:

* What specific aspects of their research interest you. Ensure you have reviewed their online CV or website to brush up on their past and current research projects; to find this information, start on their Department homepage and see if they have a profile or website link. Try googling them. Use the U of I libraries to read their published journal articles online. One of the best ways to impress a faculty member is being able to discuss their specific research projects and why they interest you, even if you don’t understand all of the content or process.
* Any previous experience or skills you can offer. This may include research methodology courses, lab experience or just plain enthusiasm. Include incomplete courses that you are currently taking.
* What you are asking for. Are you requesting part-time or full-time research experience, paid or volunteer opportunities, supervision by this particular faculty member or are you open to working with any colleagues or graduate students in the field?

After emailing, be sure to also approach the faculty member during their office hours:

* Remind them of your previously-sent email and the points you included. Don’t assume they’ll remember what you wrote.
* Be prepared to answer questions about your grades, courses taken, what you can offer and why you're interested in getting involved.
* Ensure they know how to contact you about any possible opportunities.
* Always be professional and courteous.

While this handout does not encompass the countless experiences you might encounter when looking for a faculty mentor, it does help create a broad guideline for you to follow that makes the process accessible. Again, the more you know about your research, the easier it will be for you to have a meaningful conversation with potential faculty mentors. Knowing what kind of research you want to do allows you to ask the important questions that will lead you to the right mentor.

## Resources

Cott, D. (2005) A graduate students guide to publishing scholarly journal articles. PSOnline <http://www.uiowa.edu/~gaps/publishing-articles.pdf>

Reis, R (2000) Getting published as a graduate Student in the Sciences. The Chronicle of Higher Education. <http://chronicle.com/article/Getting-Published-as-a-Grad/46335/>

Kendall-Tackett, K. (n.d.). Writing for publication: An essential skill for graduate students with disabilities. American Psychological Association. <http://www.apa.org/pi/disability/resources/writing.aspx>