

So you want to go to grad school but can't figure out why no one is answering your emails.

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For more than a decade now I've received hundreds of enquiries from potential graduate students. I've shared information with dozens of other faculty similarly engaged in running research laboratories who also need to recruit trainees to undertake the work that is the output of our research programs. Our experiences are essentially similar and sadly the vast majority - maybe 90% -- of people who contact us looking to embark on a graduate career make the same set of mistakes when they write and most of the applications end up discarded without a reply.

I believe most students simply don't know how they should get started trying to apply to a potential supervisor and since every professor I talk to is as baffled as I am since it seems so simple to us I thought I'd try and present a glimpse at our side of the process as a way to help you in your quest to get our attention.

Be warned there's some sarcasm and humour below. If you find you are offended stop reading. No one is forcing you to read this.

**** If you get bored skip down a page to the Do's and Dont's ****

It is amazing how casual and seemingly disinterested most applicants appear when they first contact a professor about the possibility of obtaining a position within their group. I'll provide a list of do's and don'ts later but analysis of this typical example of an enquiry I received recently should provide the astute observer with a general understanding of the wrong approach and by contrast the kind of approach that is more likely to be successful.

Hello Dr. Delaney

My name is (Insert NameHere) and I'm a student from (a town nearby) who recently graduated from the University of (GoodPlaceFarAway) with a Bachelor's Degree in Zoology. During my undergraduate studies I developed a strong interest in animal physiology, development and functional anatomy and now I'm interested in continuing my education with a Masters Degree in Biology. After exploring the Biology Department Website your field of research caught my attention and I was wondering if you had room for another graduate student? I realize I overshot the application deadline for September entry but I figured I might as well give it a try! If September is out of the question then would you have room in January? If you have any questions feel free to ask!

At first glance this might seem like quite a reasonable first contact. On the positive side the grammar is fine and so is the spelling. This is important! He didn't start with Hey Dude or Hey KD - others have. He went to a university I've heard of and got a degree a field where some of the courses he took would be useful. So what's so wrong with it?

To set a context for the discussion: graduate school is going to be the biggest part of your life for the next 2-3 years (MSc, or 4-6 years (PhD) and will probably determine the course of the rest of your life (whether you are successful in getting a degree or not). It is not the equivalent of buying a new surfboard or booking a hotel on the beach for your next vacation. So don't think that 10 minutes of surfing the web and reading a couple of consumer reports sets you up for the on-line checkout.

Depending on the field of study your supervisor will invest many tens to more than a hundred thousand dollars to support you and your research by the time you complete your degree. Their scientific reputation, their ability to get their operating grants re-funded, their tenure and promotion decisions, that is to say, their scientific career, are defined and depend upon the quality of the research publications and the trainees that come out of their lab.

What has InsertNameHere offered in the first instance of contact to make me think they might be worth this investment? The fact that they were perusing the department website, and my field of research, caught their eye is not a strong start. It hardly makes it seem like they've evaluated my laboratory in any detail and determined that their interests and goals are well-matched to ours.

Well hold on now you say, this isn't how InsertNameHere opened the conversation and you are correct. InsertName Here actually first offered that they live in a town that is about an hour away and that they obtained a degree from a distant university with a decent reputation, *where they developed a strong interest in* Unfortunately those 3 areas of interest are only related in a general way to the actual work of our laboratory. Not bad but it doesn't distinguish them from any other student who would have taken these courses to complete a degree in Zoology. Most disappointing of all, at no point does InsertNameHere mention neurons or neuroscience, which are the particular focus of our laboratory and would be what they would have to study in order to work with us. I'm glad they are interested in animal physiology, but what about neurophysiology since that's what we do?

So what could we potentially conclude from this enquiry so far? Honestly I know nothing about this particular applicant but I can fabricate a possible negative scenario;

InsertNameHere is back at home after 4 years of earning a BSc in Zoology with nothing planned or thought out for the future, probably working at a McJob for the summer. Bored after a day of selling hot dogs at the beach, or because his mother told him to get off his butt, find a decent job and stop living in the basement, he's taken ten minutes to surf the web and found some labs that do stuff with animals in the Biology department at the nearest university (which also happens to be a nice place to live). So in the spirit of *what's there to lose* he tosses out a fishing line with some not too appealing bait attached.

The fact that InsertNameHere didn't specify the *field of interest* probably means the same email message has been sent to multiple faculty which challenges the veracity of any claim he might make now or later to being especially interested in the work we do in our lab. (Yes we do talk to each other and yes we do notice when the same person sends the same application to more than one of us.) So far INH hasn't provided anything to hint that he would be a valuable

investment. He's given no indication that he's investigated recent work we have published or which of our projects he might be interested in continuing.

As your granddad would say *back in the day* it would have taken some effort to get this information but now it requires 2 minutes with PubMed or a click on a link beside my name on the Biology Dept. web-site to reach our laboratory specific web-site that is brimming with information for prospective applicants. In fact, had InsertNameHere spent a couple of more minutes surfing he would have found the detailed advertisement for positions that is posted on our laboratory web-site so he wouldn't be tossing out the question of *is there room* but rather be asking about the positions that are advertised for which I list the qualifications and possible projects.

INH finishes by asking if there is room in the laboratory (as though he were booking an airline flight or a hotel) and wondering if he could start in a month and a half, having missed the normal application date by a mere 6 months. But hey why not ask eh? After all, deadlines and you know, things like application forms and transcripts and university regulations and graduate admissions committees are no big deal right?

What is so **ironic** is that in fact professors can work minor miracles with regard to deadlines or finding alternative interim solutions like hiring you as a research associate so you can get a head start on your work before you are formally enrolled, IF there's a good reason for them to make the effort.

News Flash: There's almost always *room* for a good new graduate student to join the group - there's never room for a poor one. So yes there could be *room* and it isn't too late provided this is a person worth investing in. Aye, but there's the rub.

Did InsertNameHere attach a curriculum vitae/a *resume* -- of their accomplishments, a transcript of their grades and description of courses completed that would indicate some pertinent details of their training?

No, but he generously offers to answer any questions I might take the time to write and pose now that he's whetted my interest to the possibility that he might offer his services to us.

Unfortunately this is not likely to happen. More likely the message will be deleted and I will move on to the 100 other things I have to do today.

I suppose all this is fine assuming that InsertName Here is simply trying to get his mother off his case by being able to say he's looked for a position but nobody's hiring so it's not his fault that he has to sit here playing Halo3.

BUT, I can imagine a more likely scenario than the ungenerous one I outlined above: What if InsertNameHere finished his degree and was totally burnt out and needed to retreat home to recover his equilibrium. Now, after he's caught his breath and doesn't have to worry about his next exam he's realized that he's deeply interested in science as a career but has no clue as to how to go about making it happen?

If so then it's really sad that enquiries like this one end up being ignored most of the time.

For those of you who think I (and other professors) are being unfair by not following up on every casual enquiry we get, imagine the following:

You are applying for a job at a company you really want. The job requires highly specialized skills so the employer is going to have to first train you for a year before you can even begin to produce anything and thereby provide some service for the salary you are being paid. Then after a year you'll be operating a piece of equipment that costs \$100,000 and can be broken by doing something stupid. You'll be building something that will take several years to complete and if you get bored and quit or fall asleep and screw up one day it will have to be destroyed and started again from scratch by the next person to be hired.

You really want this job so you send an unsolicited email to the president of the company with your name, location and the fact that you saw an advertisement for one of their products on TV and thought it was cool. In it you ask them to get back to you if they have a job available and tell them that if they do you'd be happy to take the time to whip up a resume and send it to them. Would you be surprised if you didn't get a reply?

Does this sound like an excellent way to end up 42 years old and living in your mother's basement?

Emails like this one sometimes get a reply from faculty desperate for a pair of hands in the lab. And why are they desperate enough to reply? **Beware:** Sometimes faculty who respond positively to an enquiry like the example above and offer you a position straight up with little investigation have little or no grant support, have no other trainees in their lab and will not be able to offer a stimulating environment to undertake your studies. They desperately need a warm body to do some work to get their research career going again and are willing to pursue any enquiry they receive.

Remember: If a laboratory is a good place to train it is likely going to be discriminating about who it takes on as trainees. This is not elitism, it's just good business. So you need to use good bait to catch a decent fish.

For those of you wondering what happened to InsertNameHere, I gave him a second chance and sent the following reply:

January is possible.
there is always room for an appropriate candidate.

Why all of a sudden do you want to go to graduate school?
Why do you think completing a research study under my supervision will further your career goals?
Based on the work we do in our laboratory what would be a possible project for your thesis?

Please forward an unofficial copy of a transcript and names and contacts for 2 to 3 referees.

He never wrote back.

DO'S and DON'TS when making an inquiry about grad student positions

1. Number one, **DO YOUR homework**. **DON'T** expect the professor to do it for you. Success in graduate school requires passion, initiative, perseverance, tenacity, curiosity, commitment, intelligence and perseverance. Notice that perseverance was mentioned twice and intelligence, while necessary is not at the front of this list. You are not going to make it through the long haul if you are not passionate about the field you are studying and willing to do a lot of work, so expect to do a little at the beginning. Show that you know what the professor's lab does - or at least that you have tried to figure out what it does and tell them why this interests you. Be **SPECIFIC**. Which leads to number 2.

2. **DO provide a statement of your research interests**. **DO** some research in the area, read some of THEIR papers and take a stab at presenting an idea for **YOUR** thesis project. Heck it will probably be unworkable or will already have been done or won't match well to the current work in the lab since published papers lag at least a year behind what is going on now, **BUT THAT'S NOT THE POINT!** Demonstrate that you have some initiative and provide the professor with some demonstration that you've actually read their work and thought about why the two of you would be a good fit.

True story: I got admitted to graduate school at Princeton University 4 months after the application deadline mainly because I was excited about trying to do a really bizarre experiment that I learned afterward was impossible. I had never taken a course in Neuroscience - but the professor I contacted was impressed by the fact that I had thought about this idea, taken the time to flesh it out, write it down and seek him out as someone whose laboratory would be a good place to try it based on papers of his that I had read. He pulled some strings and I got in, which led to postdoc positions at UC Berkeley, New York University, AT&T Bell labs and finally I got to come home to B.C. as a professor to the job I really, really wanted. So point 3:

3. **DO make the professor feel special** by asking a specific question or two about their work, based on what you've read in one of their papers or on their web-site. Not only does this flatter them but it also demonstrates that you are curious about the subject you are proposing to work on for the next few years or maybe the rest of your life. This is not pimping yourself - you need not bat your eyes or fawn all over them saying what an honour it would be to work under their esteemed tutelage. **DO** Ask a question about the work they do, which is the thing that consumes most of their waking thoughts. This shows them you are genuinely interested in the field and have the intelligence to come up with a good question. Being able to come up with good questions, questions that you can design an experiment to answer, is a key element of success in research. Show them you can do this.

Beware! You will probably get back two pages of excited discourse on something your friends think is weird. If you think it's weird too then you know this isn't the area for you. If so be thankful you didn't ask this question in person at a party where you would have been trapped for half an hour in a corner with the professor waving their arms wildly, flecks of foam on the edges of their mouth, spilling their drink on you saying *isn't that cool* every five minutes.

4. DO make contact sooner rather than later. There's almost always *room* for another graduate student, the questions are whether there are funds to support you and if so is it worth spending the funds on you. By contacting the professor well in advance it gives them time to line up funding for your salary and to work with you to find your own support. I can't count how many times I've had applicants with good GPAs contact me a month or two after the deadline for various scholarships has passed. A good supervisor is concerned that you will have funds for your salary and your research. In the famous words of Jerry McGuire: *Help me help you!*

Currently (2008) there are many more positions open in biology, biochemistry, biomedical science and many other areas than there are good applicants. Most universities are experiencing dramatically declining graduate student enrolments. The blunt fact is this: If you have a GPA sufficient to meet the entrance requirements and you can't find a position as a graduate student then you are not applying properly. If you aren't getting replies to your enquiries you need to change your approach because virtually every well-funded laboratory that I know of is currently understaffed and looking for someone who is worth spending the money on to train. We want to find new graduate students but experience has shown us time and again that a poor student is far more work in the long run than they are worth. Remember we are all looking for good students to work in our labs. Your first task is to give us the confidence to give you a chance to prove you are one.

5. Even if you were surfing the web looking for a music download and stumbled on the professor's website when you misspelled *Nirvana* and then got interested when you saw the cool green neuron picture, **DON'T** tell them that's how you found them and that's why you are contacting them. **DO** mention the cool green neuron picture though!

6. **DON'T** leave out anything from that first email contact that you can think of that would help us to decide to keep the conversation going. Include names of referees who will vouch for you. **DON'T** expect us to write back asking for your university transcript, include it as an attachment. Even if it isn't straight A's you can only go wrong by not sending it at the start since eventually we have to see it. Everyone likes to see lots of good marks because it means it's likely the student can get some of their own salary support through fellowships. But we're also interested in a transcript that shows success in areas that matter to the work we do, even if the overall GPA is not great because of some poor marks in Beginner German and Quantum Physics. Some of my most successful graduate students have had average transcripts - except where it mattered. **DO** discuss the courses you took and elaborate on the ones that inspired you and don't be afraid to explain why despite an average transcript you think you are capable of doing well in graduate school. Grad school is not the same as undergraduate school - see number 7.

7. **DO remember you probably get one 30 second shot at catching the interest of the professor you are applying to.** Remember that the professor you are writing to went through at least 5 years of grad school, probably 5 more years of postdoctoral work and was one of 100 applicants for the faculty position they now have. Remember they have to write long complex grants with 20% success rates in order to pay for the materials and equipment and the salary that YOU need to do your work. Consider that their research is probably the most important thing in their life or it runs a close second to their newborn child or their drooling labradoodle. **DON'T** treat their time with the same lack of respect that they are used to receiving from undergraduates in their classes. **DON'T** leave your phone number and ask them to ring you back to chat about the possibility of your being a student with them. **DO** hope that they ask you for your number so they can call you to discuss the possibility of your being a student with them.

Being a graduate student is a world away from being an undergraduate . As an undergraduate you were told what to do and when to show up to do it. That won't happen as a graduate student and the sooner you demonstrate you are ready to make the transition the better your chance of getting to do so.

8. Finally, **DO** imagine the shoe is on the other foot and you are looking for someone to carry on your research in your laboratory. What would you like to hear from a potential applicant that would make you want to immediately write them back and invite them to visit the laboratory and meet the other researchers in it?

Good luck! Good fishing!