

Tips for contacting potential advisors

Identifying a faculty advisor is an important step for attending graduate school. We recommend exploring potential advisors' websites to read about the research in the lab, publications coming out of the lab, and other lab members. Also, be sure to check if lab websites provide information for prospective students and follow their directions for reaching out. You can find out which faculty are considering accepting students [here](#).

Most graduate students in EEB at Cornell enter the program having already identified the lab(s) that they will join. While an admissions committee reviews all applications and makes the final decisions on acceptances, it is very important to make connections with potential advisors before you submit your application, because you will need to identify potential advisors on your application. The purpose of making connections is to begin to find out whether your interests match the interests of the advisor and their lab, and whether the advisor, lab, and program provide good opportunities for you.

When to start? It is a good idea to start contacting potential advisors several months before the December 1st application deadline, to have enough time to engage in a correspondence. Plan on contacting potential advisors no later than the end of September, but earlier contacts are fine if you are ready to describe your research interests. The most effective means of contacting advisors is generally by email, but follow directions on the advisor's website, if provided.

What to say? In your email, describe your scientific research interests and why you are interested in the advisor's lab – which is why it is important to study the advisor's webpage and publications – and provide some information on your background. Advisors do not expect you to have a specific research project in mind but rather will want to know the kinds of research topics you are interested in and why. The ability to articulate why you are interested in a certain research topic, theme, or paper in your own words (i.e. what you find exciting, how your interests grew from past experiences, why that topic is important) is what advisors are looking for. Use your own words in describing your interests and avoid copying/pasting from the advisor's research descriptions on their website. The length should be one to two short paragraphs.

You will also want to briefly describe your educational background and past research experiences, if you have them. If you don't have research experience, you can include information on past work or personal experience, especially if it can be connected to your interests in the lab.

If you know your career goals, such as working in conservation biology, obtaining a faculty position, or working in government, you can include this information as well. However, advisors don't expect you to have definite career goals at this stage.

EEB at Cornell has only one application deadline per year (December 1st) and one start date (Fall semester), but it doesn't hurt to confirm in your email that you are interested in matriculating in the Fall xxxx.

Attach a CV or resume with your email.

Follow-ups: If you do not receive a response, it is appropriate to email the advisor again after two weeks. Do not take it personally if you do not hear back! Advisors can be very busy and your first email may have caught them at a bad time. For your second email, it is fine to resend the first email, adding to the top something like "Dear Dr.I know you are busy but I wanted to make sure you received my earlier email inquiring about graduate work in your lab starting in Fall xxxx...."

If, after two emails, you don't get a response, it's probably best to move on, and assume the advisor is not taking students.

As an example, you can adopt the following email structure. Make sure, however, to use your own words to describe your research interests, why you are interested in the advisor's lab, and your background. While past research experience is helpful, it isn't essential for your application. What is essential is that you convey a genuine interest in what you'd like to research!

Dear Dr. X,

I write to express my interest and inquire about the availability of PhD positions in your laboratory beginning _____. Currently, I am completing my _____ degree at X University, and plan to graduate in _____.

I am broadly interested in researching _____. My past (related research/work/coursework/personal experience) has involved _____. For my PhD, I would like to study _____.

My research interests in _____ align with your own described interests in _____. I am particularly fascinated by your work on _____ because _____.

I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss a PhD opportunity with you by email or over the phone. I have attached my CV, and would be pleased to provide more information upon request. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
X

Also, a blog post on the inquiry email for EEB programs:

<https://contemplativemammoth.com/2013/04/08/so-you-want-to-go-to-grad-school-nail-the-inquiry-email/>