

Comments on Grad school emails to professors: (Lauren Lilley, Hellmann, Hollocher, Schafer Vaughan)

1. From current grad student, ND Biology Alumni:

If we were including the professor directly in our personal statement, we emailed them before applying. They usually responded something along the lines of "Yes, I'll be taking students next year. We can talk more during the interview and when you get accepted." We just thought it was a good idea to make sure the people we were putting in our statements were actually going to be at the school next year, would be taking students, etc. Anyone else we emailed after getting an interview.

2. Professor

a.. what is the best time to send an email to professors who could be potential grad school advisor?

IN ECOLOGY, IT'S A GOOD IDEA TO EMAIL BEFORE YOUR APPLY. ASK HER/HIM IF SHE/HE IS ACCEPTING GRADUATE STUDENTS AND IF SHE/HE HAS ANY GUIDANCE ON ADMISSION. IN OUR CASE, FOR EXAMPLE, IT'S HELPFUL TO KNOW THAT WE HAVE UNIVERSITY FELLOWSHIPS AND THAT ITS GOOD TO GET YOUR APPLICATION IN A BIT EARLY TO COMPETE FOR THOSE. I THINK ITS ALSO GOOD TO EMAIL IN ADVANCE BECAUSE WHEN I GO TO LOOK AT THE APPLICANT FILES, I TAKE A LIST WITH ME OF STUDENTS WHO HAVE ALREADY CONTACT ME -- I'M ALREADY ON THE LOOK-OUT FOR THOSE FILES. IT'S ALSO REALLY HELPFUL TO HAVE A POTENTIAL ADVISOR CONTACT TO APPLY FOR NSF AND EPA FELLOWSHIPS. IN THOSE APPLICATION, YOU WRITE ABOUT A POSSIBLE PROJECT THAT YOU MIGHT PURSUE AS A GRADUATE STUDENT, AND I THINK IT'S COMPELLING TO WRITE ABOUT SOMETHING THAT FITS IN WITH THE LAB THAT YOU MIGHT JOIN. I'VE EVEN EDITED FELLOWSHIP STATEMENTS WRITTEN BY PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS, AND THAT HELPS US LEARN MORE ABOUT EACH OTHER. SURELY IT INCREASES THEIR CHANCES OF ADMISSION BECAUSE I'M ALREADY INTELLECTUALLY INVESTED IN THEM (ASSUMING THAT THEY'RE GOOD!).

b. what is best to include in the email? What have you seen that is impressive versus not when considering a student for your lab?

I THINK THAT THE EMAIL SHOULD INCLUDE INFORMATION ABOUT YOURSELF, INCLUDING YOUR GPA, YOUR GRE SCORES (IF YOU HAVE THEM) AND ANY RESEARCH EXPERIENCE THAT YOU HAVE. YOU MIGHT

ALSO INCLUDE HOW YOU FOUND OUT ABOUT THIS ADVISOR -- "I READ ONE OF YOUR PAPERS IN A CLASS... MY UNDERGRAD ADVISOR RECOMMENDED YOU TO ME..." YOU CAN ALSO INDICATE YOUR INTERESTS BUT BE OPEN TO POSSIBILITIES THAT THE POTENTIAL ADVISOR MIGHT SUGGEST. IN OTHER WORDS, DON'T SAY "I DEFINITELY WANT TO WORK ON THE EFFECTS OF DEFORESTATION ON MONKEYS IN MADAGASCAR" BECAUSE IF I DON'T DO THAT THEN YOU'RE NOT GOING TO BE ADMITTED TO MY LAB. INSTEAD, INDICATE RESEARCH THEMES AND WHY YOU THINK THAT WOULD FIT WITH THE ADVISOR. ALSO ASK IF THE ADVISOR EXPECTS TO ACCEPT NEW GRADUATE STUDENTS INTO HER/HIS LAB THIS YEAR. BE KIND, BE EXCITED, BE SMART, DON'T BE ARROGANT OR DEMANDING.

3. Professor

I always tell my students to e-mail before they apply to test the waters. They should be choosing schools based on the researchers there in addition to the program. At the grad school level, very few apply blind and go without having a couple of target advisors already in their pocket. The earlier they start the communication process, the better. It can make all the difference between whether or not they are even interviewed. Once you are on a faculty member's radar, the process becomes more personal and easier for the professor to imagine admitting you (and overlooking possible weaknesses in your file) and easier for the student to decide if that university is right for them (is this someone they can communicate with easily? are they excited about the research prospects?). Often I have had my students wooed by schools even before they apply because the relationship develops through the e-mail contact in advance. The application process becomes more of a formality. Bad communication by a faculty member early on, may mean that is not the school for you.

In terms of the letter, the first one is relatively simple and more an inquiry as to whether this professor is even looking for students. Not all professors accept new students every year for every project -- so it is best to find out if someone the student is interested in is actually interested in taking on new students. In this initial letter the student indicates their interest in the general research being done in that lab with reference to papers that have been read (good to show that you are familiar with research, but no need to be too specific -- often the research projects have moved on from the pubs and the students wouldn't be aware of that). The student also introduces themselves briefly and relates their past research to what the faculty does and their own future goals (again, rather general). This first letter does not need to be very long, but should highlight

these key points. A relationship may develop from this point (getting into more detail on both ends) or it may be that the faculty member says go ahead and apply and things develop more once the interview draws nearer. In either event, it's good in the application to then reference the faculty with whom the student has had correspondence --specific names help ensure the file is seen by the right people and increases the likelihood of an interview. Funding for students is often tied to specific laboratories, so it is important to get someone in your corner early in the game. It is also wise to have multiple potential options at each school (i.e. be careful about putting all of your eggs in one basket).

Things not to do:

don't be clueless about the faculty members research (too open spells naive)

don't be clueless about your own research (need to be able to describe succinctly what you did, why it was important, and how it has moved the field forward)

don't be too specific about what you want to do (nothing kills an application like saying you have always wanted to work on alligator nesting behavior and nobody in the department does this type of research -- if you seem too wedded to a particular project of your own or a particular system (e.g. I simply MUST work on poison dart frogs), which is different from your potential advisor's, then faculty feel you won't be happy working on something more along the lines of their own research goals) -- there has to be a mutual meeting of the minds, so show some flexibility, but don't be so open you come across as not knowing anything about research

along those lines, it is always best to have some ideas of your own about possible future directions along the lines of the potential research advisor -- shows you are thinking, even if that does not pan out to be the direction the research is going.

{{I also have advice about how to decide among different schools once you get in, but that is for another time.... :-}}

4. Professor

1. what is the best time to send an email to professors who could be potential grad school advisor?

I think this will be highly discipline-specific but I did not contact potential thesis advisors until I showed up on campus to begin grad school. The vast majority of cell/molecular programs will have a rotation system in place and thus prior to an interview, they will ask you for a list of faculty you would like to meet. After you ultimately decide on a program, you can then contact individual faculty members about setting up rotations. Many people will do what I did and wait until a couple of weeks before class starts, but there does seem to be a growing trend of starting this process earlier. I do not think there is any harm in contacting people ahead of an interview, but I also don't think there is a major advantage to do so.

2. what is best to include in the email? What have you seen that is impressive versus not when considering a student for your lab?

I always like to see evidence in the email that the student has made an effort to understand what my lab does and what our research questions are. If it looks like a form email that was sent to multiple professors, that decreases my interest big time. I think it is also important that students understand there is not an obligation of the faculty member to take a particular student and thus say things along the lines of: "Based on your very interesting research program, I was wondering if you would consider allowing me to do a rotation in your lab?" I know that I was naive to this point when I was in grad school.

5. Professor

I think it would make sense to contact a Prof. if they have a specific interest in joining that lab. I'd say they read a recent paper and to know if they are taking new students. If there are multiple programs, which program should I apply to?

After they apply, I would recommend sending a brief e-mail indicating that they have applied and would look forward to meeting the Prof. if invited for an interview.