

How to Write an E-Mail to Find a Research Experience

We assume that you are reading this because you're an undergraduate looking for research experience. If you are a BIO major you are required to participate in research, but you are probably also excited about doing science in a lab or field setting.

There is no formal process for matching students to research groups at Wake Forest. The standard procedure is to identify a scientist whose research interests you, and send that person an e-mail. It can seem intimidating to craft an e-mail to a professor who doesn't know you. The newest professor in the Department of Biology, Dr. Josh Currie, remembers what this experience was like for him. Now that he is a professor, he wants to share some tips advice for writing that first e-mail in a way that is sincere and more likely to elicit a response. Here's his list:

Don't start your e-mail with "Yo," "Hey," or "Hi (emoji)." Although most professors are casual, first impressions do matter. Make a good one. "Dear Dr. XYZ" works every time.

Don't write a "canned" e-mail that is generic and impersonal and send it to 10 different professors. Take the time to learn about the research of the lab. In your e-mail, describe one aspect that you find fascinating. Perhaps even ask a question or relate it to a course you have taken.

It's not important to communicate in your e-mail all the techniques or skills that you've acquired. Save that for your resume (which you should send as an attachment).

Briefly (no more than one or two sentences) describe your motivation for doing research. Will it help you work toward your career goals? Do you want to try something new? Are you considering going for Honors? Even if you are mainly doing research to fulfill a degree requirement or get more BIO credit hours, think about your long-term goals and how a research experience fits into your plans. Once you know this, you'll write a good e-mail.

Wrap up by asking for a meeting (F2F or Zoom), and suggest convenient times for you to talk.

If the research group is already at capacity or your e-mail arrives during a busy time (for example, the first week of the semester or during finals) or while the researcher is at a conference, you may not receive an answer. Try one more time by re-sending the original e-mail, then move on. Lack of response is not a reflection on you. Undergraduate research requires a serious time commitment from professors and students alike, and if the professor does not have time when you are ready for research, you'll have a better experience in another research group.

How to Find Undergraduate Research Opportunities

1. On the Reynolda Campus and at Wake Downtown: talk with your major advisor, talk with your professors, talk with your classmates who are already doing research, visit the Biology Department website. Read e-mails sent by the Department of Biology. Attend the annual URECA Undergraduate Research Day and make a list of the names of all of the researchers who are mentoring undergraduates working on topics of interest to you.

2. At the Wake Forest School of Medicine: talk with your major advisor, talk with your professors, and talk with your classmates who are already doing research. Take advantage of cross campus research events sponsored by student organizations such as Tri-Beta. The strategy of attending the annual URECA Undergraduate Research Day event works extremely well as a tool for identifying medical school researchers.

3. Off Campus: the Biology Department forwards all announcements about research opportunities to the list of BIO majors, so read your e-mail. Another great source is a regularly updated list you can access here: <http://users.wfu.edu/peasejb/stem> In particular, follow the link given for NSF Research Experiences for Undergraduates. (NSF is the acronym for the US National Science Foundation)