

How to: Approach a Research Supervisor

Approaching professors to inquire about working with them can take a little courage, but most will welcome a conversation if you are adequately prepared.

❑ Prepare

Arriving prepared will help the conversation go smoothly. Using a polite and respectful tone is better than being overly friendly or casual, this means initially referring to your professor with the appropriate title (e.g. Dr. Smith or Professor Smith).

Read about your supervisor's work, publications, and research interests. Typically this information can be found on the professor's profile page on the university website, or through a library catalogue search. Knowing more about your supervisor's research can allow you to make an informed decision about whether you might like to work with him or her and help you prepare relevant questions and comments.

❑ Time It

It is a good idea to find out when a conversation might be convenient. Some professors welcome speaking to students before or after class, but not always. A good idea is to keep the first contact brief (in-person, by phone, or through email). During this first chat you can then make an appointment for a longer conversation, either during scheduled office hours or at a time that works well for both of you.

❑ Ask

Plan ahead with some open-ended questions specific to what you've read about the professor's area of research. Asking informed questions might sound like this:

- » Are you planning to continue investigating in your current area of interest or are other areas appealing to you right now?
- » What are the next steps in your research?
- » What roles might there be for an undergraduate student? What skills would be helpful to have?

❑ Share

Be ready to talk about your interests in the subject area as well as your academic and career plans. This enables the supervisor to see where he or she may advise and mentor you or refer you to other people who may be of assistance. You might talk about some of the following:

- » A topic or question from class that was particularly interesting to you
- » Information from a lecture, your textbook, or secondary reading material that you found curious or troublesome
- » An idea or question you have related to the material you are learning or the field of study in general

Through this type of conversation you will likely be able to gather information and consider future action; you may even get some additional resources or hear about opportunities. Good luck!