

2020 Graduate Guide

Emailing a Prospective Graduate Faculty Advisor? Things to Think About Before Hitting Send.

In 2019 the previous *CEE* Editor, Phil Wankat, wrote a detailed article entitled, “Is Graduate School Next? Making Informed Decisions About Graduate School.” The article, found at <https://journals.flvc.org/cee/article/view/116808>, is highly recommended for any undergraduate engineering student thinking even the slightest bit about graduate school.

As that contribution was so recent and exhaustive, I thought it would be beneficial to provide my own perspective on a related topic that I feel would be useful for those considering graduate school: email communication with faculty.

There is truth to the old adage that “you never get a second chance to make a first impression.” When you are interacting with faculty at a graduate program where you have interest in attending, most likely through email, your first impression is that first email. Over my 20+ year career as a faculty member, I have received many, many emails from students seemingly interested in working in my research group for their graduate (and, sometimes, undergraduate) studies. Most of the time, those emails are either mail-merged or cut/paste versions of a generic message that they have sent to many other faculty (at my home institution or other institutions). Indeed, I have received emails meant for other faculty at other institutions because a student did not take enough time to check the accuracy of their mail merge. This first email, which is your first impression, is quite crucial, and you should invest a lot of effort crafting your message. To that end, I have compiled a list of a few “do’s” and “don’ts” as it relates to this first email message from a prospective graduate student to a faculty member.

- Do** use a proper and correct salutation. “Dear Dr. Visco” or “Dear Prof. Visco” is fine and expected.
- Don’t** leave this part blank or use something like “Mr. Visco” or “Dr. Donald”. I still remember an email I received 15 years ago that was addressed to no one and started with “Hey!” Also, unless you know for sure, you should avoid gender references.

- Do** tell me why you are specifically interested in working in my research group. The more specific, the better.
- Don’t** be too general (e.g. chemical engineering) or, worse, identify an area where I have never published and have never researched. Clearly you have the wrong person and did not do your initial research on me very well or at all. In fact, the first impression you are making is of someone who has sub-standard research skills (which is not the impression you want to make when looking to join any research group).

- Do** mention that you are familiar with a specific paper I have written and have read that paper. If you comment on that work and how it has confirmed your interest in that topic (and/or in working with me), all the better.
- Don’t** tell me you have read a paper of mine and then, later, I find out you have not. This may come out in the future when you have an interview with me and I ask about this paper and your interest. I am probably impressed that you mentioned the paper in your initial email since most do not. Thus, if I mention it and it is apparent you did not read the paper, then your second impression has badly tarnished your strong first impression.

- Do** proofread your email and have a friend or colleague read it before you send it out. A mistake-free email creates a first impression that you have “attention to detail,” which is a great skill to have and to demonstrate as a graduate research student.
- Don’t** have an email littered with spelling and grammar mistakes. While it is not ideal to make a spelling or grammar mistake despite efforts to prevent this, chances are I may read right past an error if only one exists. This includes making sure the fonts and font sizes are consistent throughout the email.

- Do** make some effort to personalize the email in a concise way. You can comment on your initial interest in chemical engineering, why you want to pursue graduate studies, your career goal, or your interest in my university. If you do, you have likely separated yourself from many others and made a positive first impression.
- Don’t** send me a four-page email that you sent to 100 other faculty that does not separate yourself from the many other students who have contacted me.

I hope that these basic tips will get you started on creating the right first impression as you explore your pursuit of graduate studies. Good luck!

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