

Hints for writing successful unsolicited applications for internships or PhD projects

Herbert Jaeger, October 2023

I often receive unsolicited emails asking for internships in my group, or for PhD project supervisions. In almost all cases, these requests fail to stir my interest, and I click these emails away without responding. This document is a guide for writing such first-contact emails in a better way.

First of all, put yourself into the situation of the recipient. It is some professor who easily receives 50 – 100 emails a day which he/she however has only limited time to process. This *forces* this professor to quickly click away all emails that upon first glance appear not vital. Thus, the beginning of your message must make it clear to the that it is worth reading to the end.

Here are the most important do's and don't's for crafting a message that might achieve this goal.

- Address your request to a person with a name, typically start with "Dear Professor <name>" or "Dear Dr. <name>". Messages that begin with "Dear Professor" or "Sir" are immediately clicked away, not to speak of messages beginning with "Hi".
- The by very far most important characteristic of a potentially successful application is that the addressee must feel personally addressed – beyond naming him/her by his/her name. That means you have to (minimally) check out his/her research on his/her webpages, and *concretely* refer to that research. You should have read some publications from him/her and refer to them in a way that the prof sees that you actually read them. You won't believe what a big difference this makes. It is not enough to merely state something like "I have studied your research / website and found your research interesting", or "I have read some of your papers and found them very related to my research".
- If you have gotten these two points right, you are already in the top 5% of request messages that congest the professor's email, and likely he/she will be so (positively) surprised that he/she will continue to read!
- Next thing: convince the addressee of your qualification. Qualification has a number of components:
 - *Motivation*: explain why you are particularly eager to work in *this* professor's group. Ideally, you did some projects before that are related to his/her research.
 - *Academic performance*: a short statement of your grades. If you have been awarded with some prize or have done relevant extracurricular, mention it.
 - *Home institution*: Characterize qualities of your home institution or academic program and its ranking within your home country.
 - *Career goals*: why would this position be conducive for your planned career?
 - For PhD requests: outline a topic that you would want to work on, and that likely is of interest to the prof. This is not so important for internship requests.

- For internship inquiries: explain what you want to learn through the internship.
- Restrain from general statements like "willingness to work hard", "honor to work under your supervision", etc. These are redundant, because such a commitment has to be taken for granted.

It is furthermore a good idea to keep attachments to a minimum. A CV (pdf, not MS Word!) is enough, plus (for Phd requests) a brief outline of your dream project. Put additional material (like transcripts, publications, certificates) on a webpage and provide URLs.

Doing all of this right means quite some effort. But the chances of success rise faster than the additional amount of effort! If you don't invest sweat into most or all of the above points, your chances of acceptance are *zero*.

You can furthermore save useless effort if you don't aim too high. Your qualification should match the qualification of the addressee. If you apply at the top places and top professors, your own qualification must be *outstanding*: outstanding grades, top home institution, prizes, perfectly matching background, highly specific motivation etc. If you are more on the average side, don't waste time by writing messages to the famous places or professors. Go for universities and professors whose standing matches your qualification.

A special note on PhD supervision applications: There are only very few such positions to be filled in any group, if any at all. Available positions are typically funded by a project grant. For PhD requests, the standard is to respond to a job opening advertisement; only in truly exceptional cases (when you are *burning* to do research in the targeted group and are *superbly* qualified) does it make sense to apply without solicitation; but be prepared for a significant delay that it takes to secure funding. Very good PhD candidates are rare and professors will want to get to know a super promising candidate even if at the moment there is no funding for a PhD project. You might be invited for a visit or an internship.

I want to conclude with a positive turn. Most professors experience a scarceness of good students in their concrete field, who would become productive (and pro-active) in their working group. There is certainly a market for good (even unsolicited) requests for internships or PhD projects. If you are really motivated and the target research group matches your background well, and you invest the work into writing truly individual requests, your chances of getting positive responses are good.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Herbert Jaeger". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

PS: since my retirement date is approaching, I cannot accept further PhD supervisions. But internships or guest research visits are welcome!