How to write an email to someone who could help you develop your career (grad school, mentorship/internship, job, just gathering information, etc).

Prep before writing the email!

1. Find the name and contact information of the appropriate person of contact. If you want to go to grad school and work in someone’s lab doing research with them, you would contact the professor directly (same if you want to do an internship/shadowing experience with someone). If it’s general information regarding a specific program, you can contact the director of that program.
2. Read up on the person/program, etc, so that you seem well-informed when you write your email. If it’s a professor that you want to work with, make sure you’ve read at least one of their most recent publications and know something about their work. Also check out their research web page, as that will also have additional information on it that will be useful. If it’s someone you want to shadow, google them and see what the internet has to say about what they do and what their specialties are. If it’s general information you’re seeking about an organization/department, make sure you have done your research online and that you are pretty sure your question can’t be answered by reading the organization’s website.

Writing your email

1. When constructing the body of your email, your first sentence should tell the person something about yourself and about where you go (or went) to college. For instance,

“Dear \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

I am a senior Biology major at Birmingham-Southern College (BSC), a nationally ranked liberal arts college in Birmingham, AL.”

Obviously, if the person you’re writing to lives in Bham, you don’t need all of this extra info describing what BSC is, but I would not assume that everyone in AL has heard of BSC. Literally, anything out of Bham, I would probably put in information like this, just in case.

1. Next, give the reason for your email. For instance,

“I am interested in the research that you conduct in butterfly pollination behavior and I’m wondering if you are planning to take any new graduate students (you may want to indicate masters/phd, although you could leave that open) in Fall 2021.”

1. Now, you need to demonstrate that you have actually researched this person/organization, so that they know you’re not sending a “form” letter to lots of different people. Also, make sure you are indicating that you find their work important, or super interesting or whatever. People want to know that you’re informed about their work and that you are genuinely interested in it.

“I read your 2019 paper published in the journal Nature on the ways in which butterflies can detect profitability of nectar reserves in flowers before they land on them, and I found that research fascinating! I was especially impressed by your innovative use of wildlife camera traps to collect your data”.

1. Now give some reason for that person to be interested in you, and that your experience would work well in their lab.

“As an undergraduate at BSC, I conducted a 2-semester project with Dr. Pete VanZandt, investigating the impacts of moth pollination on the Cahaba lily *Hymenocallis coronaria*. We found that, in Bibb County, only two species of moth seem to pollinate this plant. Since completing that project, I’ve become more interested in pollination biology, and I think that my experience and interests align perfectly with the goals of your research lab”.

1. Repeat your request and offer to send more information or attach additional information to this email.

“I would greatly appreciate it if you could let me know if there are any potential spots for new graduate students in your lab for the upcoming year. I am attaching an unofficial copy of my transcript and a copy of my resume in case you’d like more information about me before you respond.”

1. Politely thank them for responding to your email and sign off.

“Thank you in advance for your response. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Your name”