

Theoretical Ecology and Evolution Laboratory

Towards predictive biology: from individuals to flocks to ecosystems

How to write an email/application for a short-term or summer research internship/project?

MARCH 30, 2013MARCH 31, 2013 ~ VISHUGUTTAL

About an year ago, I wrote (<https://teelabiisc.wordpress.com/2012/01/12/project-requests-and-email-responsiveness-of-indian-professors/>) on the sort of hilarious to irritable emails that I get from students asking to join our lab (<https://teelabiisc.wordpress.com/join-us/>) for short-term positions (see this (<http://academic-garden.blogspot.in/2013/03/the-season-of-summer-applications.html>) for the experience of another Indian professor). A few days ago I accidentally discovered that the search phrase that brings maximum number of people to my blog is something like “How to write emails to professors for summer internships” or “write an email for internship to professor”. This has motivated me to write an advice post for students on how to write summer internship emails/applications.

Before going on to providing my advice, let me emphasize why it is important to write good emails (which also serve as an application for that position) even for relatively not so significant positions like summer internships. To give my own example, over the past four to five months I have received at least 30 applications asking for various short-term positions. Given the current strength of my lab, I may at the best take only one or two students for the summer (I would like to write another post on costs and benefits of having short-term students, what sorts of projects are suitable for them in another post). Note that number of applications may be significantly higher for other professors, depending on their research work, their accomplishments and the how hot or cool their research is (as perceived by students). How will you make sure that your application catches the attention of the professor?

Your best bet is to write a good email/application (also called cover letter if the position happens to be a more formal one). Based on my experience of last one and a half-years at IISc, most of the emails I receive are of terrible quality, perhaps largely due to the fact that students

in India are never taught how to write good cover letters or emails. While I don't think I can fix that problem, here is my advice to students on writing good cover letters for short-term or summer positions. The broad outline below applies for any position but more formal positions may require additional materials as mentioned in their advertisement.

1) Salutation: Address the professor by "Dear Prof. Lastname". You can write "Dr." instead of "Prof.".

I want to mention an important cultural issue that is relevant to any sort of email you write, not just for summer intern applications: Indian students hesitate to address professors or their teachers by their name. It is considered more polite to say "Dear Sir" or "Dear Madam". Some senior professors even in elite research institutions of India may expect the same cultural norm. Given this here is my suggestion:

(a) If you are writing to anyone in the West (US/Europe/Australia, etc), it is strongly preferable to address them by their name (Dear Dr. Lastname). If you write "Dear Sir" or "Dear Madam", it is considered a generic email that could be sent to anyone and may not be taken seriously. Of course, double cross-check the spelling of their name. It's easy to get them wrong and I think Indians (including me) are very careless in that aspect.

When they respond to you, they usually sign off the email with some name which is either their first name or nick name. It is usually okay to write back to them by the name they use to sign the email, without Dr. or Prof, especially if the person is from the US. Given cultural and individual differences that you may or may not be aware of, it may be safer to continue "Dr. Lastname" unless they tell you otherwise. However, a lot of the time, they may even explicitly ask you to address them by their first name or nick name. If so, you should feel free to do so, although it might seem awkward at the beginning since you are not used to it. If you are not comfortable, let me them know and continue to address them by "Dr. Lastname".

(b) If you are writing to a relatively young Indian professor, let's say < 50 years old [1], I think it is best to address them by their "Dr. Lastname".

(c) If you are writing to a senior faculty in India, I think it may be safer to write "Dear Sir" or "Dear Madam".

Now, let's move beyond salutation!

(2) The first paragraph. Introduce yourself saying your name, where are you studying, which year of which program and your major/minor program, etc. End the paragraph by stating the purpose of your email.

(3) The second (and may be the third too) paragraph(s): This is crucial. You should write a short "story" to convince why you are interested in the sort of research work that the professor is doing. How did you get to know about their work, any previous reference like I attended your talk at so and so conference, I spoke to you briefly on that corridor, or how you found the website of that professor, read one of his/her paper (that is one of the most convincing ways to demonstrate your interest) and found the work interesting. Do you have past experience in research? Or do you have your own idea? Do mention and explain it briefly (or may be even attach a short write up).

Of course, the level and quality of the story expected of you will vary depending on whether you are a first year UG student and a final year student, your background (an ecology student writing to ecologist can be expected to write differently compared to a mathematics student writing to get exposure to ecology). But the main point is, is your story compelling? You should present a convincing story of how given your background and interest, the lab you are applying is an appropriate one.

(5) Logistics: How long do you want the project to be? Tentative dates (note that lot of faculty travel in summer)? Do you have your own funding (Are you any of the KVPY, INSPIRE, IAS fellows)? If not, are you expecting the professor to fund your stay or are you self-funded?

(5) CV: Attach your updated CV (in pdf, not MS word). And mention that CV has been attached!

End your email thanking the professor for their time, and that you look forward to their reply.

(6) Waiting and Reminders: Once the email goes, the best thing to do is to wait. As this article (at the bottom of the page) says (<http://cs-test.ias.ac.in/cs/Volumes/102/01/0009.pdf>), Indian professors are less likely to respond to your emails compared to Western counterparts. So do you remind them about your email? Yes, you can and you should if that lab is of interest to you – **but wait for at least a week**. After waiting for a week or so you can gently remind your about previous email and ask if they received it, and that you would greatly appreciate their response.

(7) Strictly avoid the following (see this satirical note (<http://phylogenomics.blogspot.in/2011/12/dear-potential-post-doc-or-phd-student.html>) to applicants by Jonathan Eisen):

(a) Copy paste key words or phrases or worse, entire paragraphs, from their website or their research papers when you talk about research interests.

(b) Spelling errors of professor's names when you address them.

(c) It is extremely irritating to refer to the reputation of the research group or the institute and use that as a reason to apply for any position.

(d) Write "Dear Sir" (assuming that all faculty are male) or "Dear Sir/Madam" (let the faculty chose their gender!).

(e) CC'ing your email to multiple faculty at the same time.

Would you as a student or a faculty like to add any other points?

[1] This is an arbitrary cut-off that I came up with. I am pretty sure most faculty at IISc would prefer to be addressed by their name, but if it is a general to any senior faculty in India, I am not so sure.

[2] Related article (<http://www.indiabioscience.org/blogs/calling-all-teachers-please-help>) by Prof. Shubha Tole, TIFR

POSTED IN UNCATEGORIZED
ADVICE

17 thoughts on “How to write an email/application for a short-term or summer research internship/project?”

1. **gk**

SAYS:

MARCH 31, 2013 AT 9:54 AM

“I think Indians are very careless in that aspect.”

It's possible no harm was meant by this statement, but I wish you wouldn't make condescending generalizations of this kind which are based on nothing more than anecdotal.

Reply

1. **vishuguttal** □

SAYS:

APRIL 2, 2013 AT 7:34 AM

@gk – my comment was meant to be harmless! Even otherwise, I do not think it is condescending. By the way, this comment of yours was marked spam!!! I checked spam folder after seeing your new comment.

Reply

2. **dhaval**

SAYS:

DECEMBER 20, 2013 AT 4:13 PM

what do you mean by indians ..?? , i wish u get harm after this statement & its your good luck that u only wrote because if u gonna say in front of any Indian definitely u will get burge.

Reply

2. **Ankur Kulkarni**

SAYS:

MARCH 31, 2013 AT 3:52 PM

Dont mean to quibble, but it should be Shubha T*o*le not Tule.

Secondly, I irritated by the utterly fake flowery language that students write. “Respected, esteemed, prestigious, superior,...” and sundry stuff that sounds like “I bow to thee, you are the greatest, an internship at your feet is all that desire in this life and the next”. It makes me cringe. I suggest, if nothing else, write emails that are more natural and self-respecting.

—

@Ankur – thanks and fixed.

Reply

3. **og**

SAYS:

MARCH 31, 2013 AT 6:33 PM

<http://www.cse.iitb.ac.in/~soumen/APKGKAH/illiterate/Applications.html>

Reply

4. **gk**

SAYS:

APRIL 2, 2013 AT 7:06 AM

I'm the guy who wrote the other comment. Sorry if I sounded a bit upset but let me try to expand on what I was trying to say the other day.

I have a fairly simple two syllable, 6 letter name first name, yet it is misspelled regularly and sometimes the misspellings utterly unbelievable. For example a recent one introduced multiple new syllables! (It wasn't by an Indian, in case you're wondering.) I don't really mind it and I find the more esoteric spellings amusing. But coming back to the point, in terms of absolute quantity, yes more Indians have misspelled my name than others. But that's entirely because the overwhelming majority of my e-mail is from Indians. My unscientific impression is that people who aren't Indian misspell my name slightly more often than Indians, which isn't at all surprising because my name is an Indian name and so is unlikely to be familiar to these people.

I don't know why we do this but anytime some Indian does something that is vaguely worthy of being criticized, not only do we all jump in and criticize that person, we assign blame to our entire nationality, as if that failing is a genetic trait passed on to all Indians! The more people I meet the more I am convinced that us human beings are all mostly identical and there isn't really anything that Indians do better or worse than other people.

Anyway, the summary is that I think it would have been sufficient to say, "I get a lot of e-mail that misspells my name. This is very annoying." There is no need to blame an entire country, especially when that blame is being placed without any evidence supporting it. These types of statements are harmful because they reinforce the prejudices of racists who already consider us inferior human beings. And I certainly don't see any benefit at all to blaming all Indians in comparison to the more neutral statement that I suggested above.

Reply

1. **vishuguttal** □

SAYS:

APRIL 2, 2013 AT 9:49 AM

I am not sure if I agree with you entirely, but since this post has a very different purpose, I don't want to get into debate on this. Anyway, thanks for posting.

Reply

5. **GC**

SAYS:

JULY 3, 2013 AT 11:56 PM

Thank you for writing a useful article for students. I want to ask you something from a student's point of view. Many of undergraduates don't get into good institutes and don't have attractive CV (nothing more than a good CGPA or small awards). Some of them, in the early years of graduation (1st or 2nd year) develop an interest in particular area of research. So

they work hard to study as much as possible and try to do some small project, but cannot do enough research to get published by themselves at the same time are highly motivated to work hard.

How could these student who are in 1st or 2nd year of graduation and doesn't belong IITs or NITs, who have gain substantial knowledge in the field but lacks experience because they have stepped in college and has CV which doesn't tell more than his/her CGPA can apply to professors(when it is likely that they will never receive a reply)?

PS-Provided they don't write useless/irritating e-mail.

Reply

1. **vishuguttal** □

SAYS:

AUGUST 1, 2013 AT 8:42 AM

GC – Apologies, I have had no time to visit this thread back and respond to your comments. Will do sometime soon.

Reply

1. **LM**

SAYS:

SEPTEMBER 9, 2013 AT 11:30 PM

Looking forward to your reply sir, really wish to know your take on this.

6. **aabhakpr**

SAYS:

JULY 24, 2013 AT 12:33 AM

Yes sir, you have absolutely struck the right chord here! Even people like me (who think they have email etiquette) will find this article helpful.

Also, even though I am equally hopeless and full of despair as @GC is (the comment above), I'd still like to think that strong CVs pale in front of inappropriate emails. And is the vice versa true? Please say no!

Reply

7. **Siddharth Gupta**

SAYS:

SEPTEMBER 9, 2013 AT 11:34 PM

Nicely written,Sir. But the major problem with the Indian researchers are that they don't even open the mails. In my case only, I have sent emails to 20 different researchers in the my field. I am working in the field from past two years and have submitted a paper related to it but I haven't got a single reply. I have sent them a remainder two-three times but they don't even care to reply back.

Reply

8. **Mohit Goyal**

SAYS:

SEPTEMBER 10, 2013 AT 1:48 PM

Thank you for the advice sir

Reply

9. **Pratibha R**

SAYS:

SEPTEMBER 12, 2013 AT 12:53 AM

Really good post! Thank you very much Sir!

Reply

10. **Varun Vasudevan**

SAYS:

DECEMBER 24, 2013 AT 1:01 AM

Prof. Vishwesh Guttal,

Could you mention what could be a good subject line for the email?

Thank You

Varun Vasudevan

Graduate Student,

Purdue University

Reply

11. **prasad gupta**

SAYS:

FEBRUARY 28, 2014 AT 5:36 PM

It is better if you give info about subject line, and points to be kept in subject.

Reply

12. **Heather Jackson**

SAYS:

MARCH 29, 2014 AT 5:17 AM

Tips:

1. It's better to make contacts strategically through networks you already have – you already have something in common with the person you're trying to reach, and you're likely to know more about them to facilitate your conversations with them – their research interests and current projects, where they currently work and where they got their education and training, even simple things like whether they are a man or a woman (hint: don't address your emails to "sir").

Cold-contact a random scientist, and you are likely to get key facts about them wrong simply because of incomplete or outdated information you find on the internet. This just annoys the scientist and makes you look clueless, even if you worked really hard on your email and outdated webpages are not your fault.

I published some papers as a postdoc, then left research to work in private industry. IIT students must have found my email on a paper, because they regularly email "Professor Jackson" requesting an internship in my lab. I've never been a professor at any university, and a quick Google search of that email domain would reveal it is not a university and we don't do science research.

Anyway, I'm sure it's a numbers game, and if a student sends out 500 generic emails and gets even 1 or 2 positive responses, then they've succeeded. But annoying hundreds of other scientists, multiplied by however many students are doing this...that just gives all the

students a bad reputation.

2. I would suggest not sending your CV with an initial cold-contact to a random scientist. First, protect your personal information – you have no idea who you're sending it to. If you receive a response and continue the conversation with them about an internship, great, send your CV then.

Reply

BLOG AT WORDPRESS.COM. THE PENSCRATCH THEME.