Just Press Send: Tips on Emailing Professors
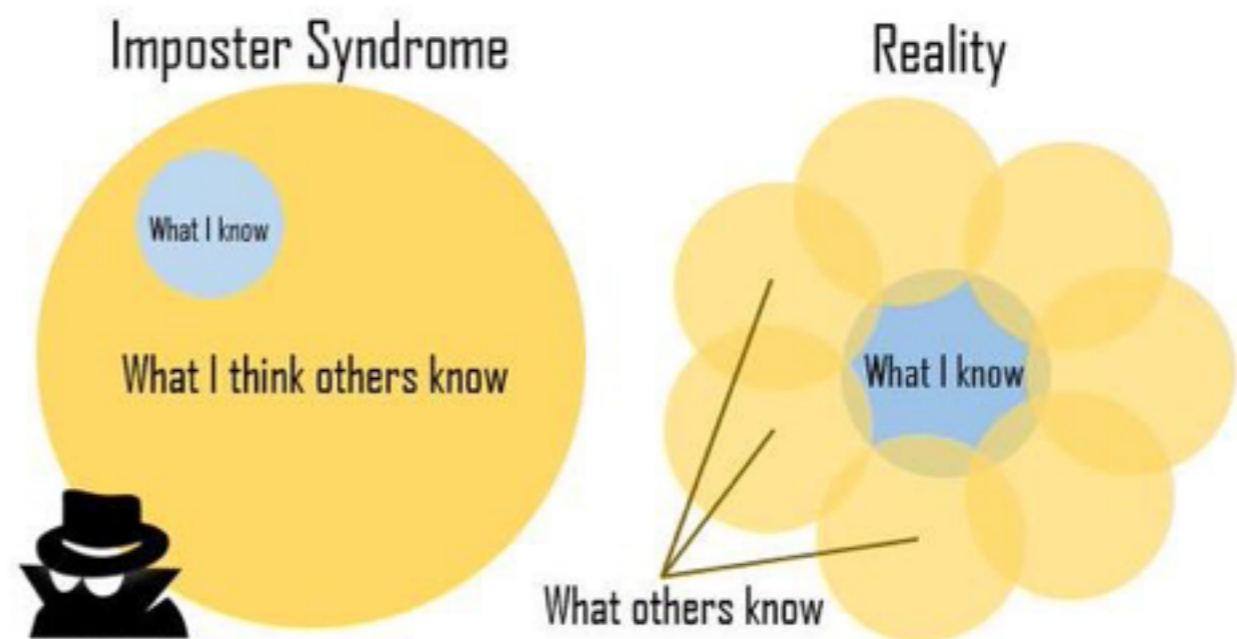
Ada's Team Talk Winter 2017
Leah Hackman

So you want to…

- Ask for a reference letter

- Apply for an NSERC USRA

- Inquire about any open research opportunities (these exist and are often unlisted!)

… but you don't think you're good enough

- everyone feels this way

- every time you do this, it will be easier. Think of this as practice!

- remember your own bias: no one wastes their time cataloging your "flaws" but you

- What's the worst that could happen?

- Treat yo-self!

image: https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/happy-trails/201511/feeling-fraud

Who to ask?

- Do they know you?

  - how long ago were they your prof?

  - what was your main form of interaction? Did you leave a mark?

    - memorable class project?

    - asking/answering questions in class?

    - posting to the forums?

    - visiting their office hours?

- For references: reflect on what they **can** say about you

Who to ask: References

- Are they the right "type" of reference for this application?

  - Need a PhD? Not all instructors are Professors or Doctors

  - industry vs. academic reference

  - character vs. skill reference

Who to ask: Research

- Do you like their research?

- Do they have a group you'd fit well into? (small vs. large, theory vs. applied, etc.)

- Look at their research page — don't need to read their papers (though looking at one/some might help!) but have an idea of what they do and why you find it interesting.

- Do you know anyone who has worked with them before? Ask them about it!

Hey You…

- Check your profs homepage. Some will list their email contact preferences (including name)

- Otherwise, Dear Professor <Xavier> is a safe bet

- Avoid first name unless you **know** it's ok

- Do not use Dr. unless you know they have a PhD

- Never use Mrs. or Miss

It's me!

- Help a prof out: remind them of who you are and why they know you.

  - What class were you in?

  - Remember when I asked about class projects/asking questions/posting to forum/etc? Yeah, briefly bring that up now.

  - "My name is Leah Hackman, I was in your CMPUT 250 class last Winter — you may recall you described my final project as 'a colourful explosion of just enough unicorns'."

  - or "… I am currently in your CMPUT 301 class — you may recall I me as the slack evangelist from the class forums who created the custom "unicorn photos" plugin."

  - or "I was the student who stopped by your office hours to talk about approximation algorithms for transit route planning" (and unicorns)

Get to the point

- Be up front about what you want. A long preamble will get ignored (and typically be unappreciated)

- Don't worry, you get to state your case after but be clear and upfront right away what exactly this email is going to be about

- "I am currently applying for grad school and looking to secure reference letters."

Why you: Reference

- Be clear on why you think they'd be able to give you a reference letter

    - think about what you demonstrated in their class and remind them of it. **Remember: profs have hundreds of students and limited memories. Do not expect them to remember.**

- Offer to provide a cv or some other document with more details (could also include as attachment)

    - Include things they may not know first hand but can reference — point them to a personal project you're proud of, tell them about clubs you are part of, etc. Let them see where your passion lies.

    - **Don't over-filter and sell yourself short. Edit, but don't filter.**

Show that you did your homework: Reference

- Give them details on what they have to do!

  - Exact deadlines

  - Required letter format — how long? Electronic submission or physical copy? Where/how to submit

  - What is the **context** of the reference? What should they **emphasize**? Specific tech skills? Teamwork capabilities? Leadership and extracurricular involvement?

Show that you did your homework: Research

- Prove that this isn't a form letter. Be specific about what you find interesting about their work

  - "In class, you mentioned ____ and it got me thinking …"

  - "Your paper discussing ____ made me curious about…"

- You don't need to know what you want to **do**, but do be clear on what you find interesting

Why you: Research

- How will this position help you? What are your goals? Are you set on grad school or wanting to explore it as an option? Are you really interested in heading into industry <X> and believe ties to research make our economy stronger?

- What is your background? i.e. what classes have you taken? Are you in CS, or do you bring knowledge from another discipline?

- What unique perspective do you bring to the table?

- **Remember: you are always bringing something unique to the table. If you can't see what you offer, ask a friend to help you brainstorm.**

The final hard ask

- Remember to be **clear and explicit** on exactly what you are asking for:

  - "Can you provide me with a **strong** reference letter?" "To ensure I can secure letters in time, I ask that you let me know **by next Thursday** …"

  - "Could we meet next week to discuss your posted USRA opening/<open research question X>/opportunities for undergrads to join your research group? I am free to meet on …"

Stick the landing

- Remember to thank them for reading

- Now that you're done, go get a treat, take a walk, and then come back and cut it down until it's as short as you can get it. **Ideally readable on one screen**

- **FIX THAT GRAMMAR/SPELLING!**

Follow-up!

- If you haven't heard from them within a socially acceptable amount of time (this depends on your timeline and your stated deadline), reach out again

- Don't worry, you aren't being rude. They'll likely appreciate a gentle reminder

- Remember: your prof is juggling many things. Don't take it personally

- Story time: Once upon a time, Leah was a tiny baby undergrad…

Plan for the future

- No dice this time? Put yourself in a better place for next time:

  - Find a class interesting? Engage with the prof. Come up with a project to work on and don't be afraid to show it off.

  - Ask if you can attend research group meetings and/or attend departmental talks on the topic

  - Talk to grad students in the area (ask your TA!). Join a reading group!

  - Don't be afraid to look outside of CS department — follow your interests!

Computing Science

About the Department +

Undergraduate Studies +

Graduate Studies +

Research

  Research Areas

    Advanced Man-Machine +
    Interfaces

    Algorithmics

    Artificial Intelligence

    Research Profile:
    Computational Linguistics
    and Natural Language
    Processing

    Student Profile: Adam
    Metcalf

    Bioinformatics +

    Communication +
    Networks

    Computer Games +

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence research at the University of Alberta is strong in both the basic and applied aspects leading to the development of computational theories of intelligence.

Research Groups

- **Board Games Research Group**: develops high performance search algorithms and game playing programs such as Fuego, the first Go program to beat a top human player in 9x9 Go.
- **Games Research Group**: engages in the design, analysis, and implementation of artificial intelligence technology that is suitable for use in high-performance game-playing programs.
- **Intelligent Reasoning Critiquing and Learning (IRCL) Group**: conducts Artificial Intelligence research on real-time heuristic search, interactive story-telling and cognitive modeling. Our recent applications have been with video games. We have on-going collaborations with the Department of Psychology, UBC Okanagan, Reykjavik University and Disney Research.
- **Medical Informatics Group:** is involved in a wide range of projects, in collaboration with many teams of medical researchers/clinicians, to produce systems that effectively learn classifiers that make accurate predictions about future patients. We are now dealing with various cancers (breast, brain, leukemia), transplant, diabetes, stroke, and depression.
- **Planning Research Group**: develops planning algorithms and state of the art

People

Denilson Barbosa

Michael Bowling

Vadim Bulitko

Michael Buro

Renee Elio

Randy Goebel

Russ Greiner

Rob Holte

Greg Kondrak

Martin Mueller

Jonathan Schaeffer

Dale Schuurmans

Eleni Stroulia

Rich Sutton

Csaba Szepesvari

The Artificial Intelligence (AI) Seminar is a weekly meeting where researchers interested in AI can share their research. Presenters include both local speakers from the University of Alberta and visitors from other institutions. Topics related in any way to Artificial Intelligence, from foundational theoretical work to innovative applications of AI techniques to new fields and problems, are of interest.

If you would like to present, please contact the current organizer Dr. Colin Bellinger.

GOOGLE CALENDAR   **ICAL**

AI Seminar Speakers

Today ◀ ▶ February 2017 ▾   🖶Print Week **Month** Agenda ▾

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
29	30	31	Feb 1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18

12pm AI Sem

Further Reading

- https://ugr.ue.ucsc.edu/email_examples

- http://theprofessorisin.com/2011/06/30/hello-world/

- http://web.wellesley.edu/SocialComputing/Netiquette/netiquetteprofessor.html