## FINDING AN ADVISOR FOR YOUR PROJECT

Professor Erin McDonnell

Asking someone to be your advisor can be a lot like asking someone to the Prom. It can be a nerve-wrecking experience but with the potential for a great relationship if everything works out. As with any relationship, some preparation and a few careful steps can make everything go smoother.

The first—and most important—intervention is to stop thinking of yourself as entitled to a mentor. Many students have had drilled into them that in research, as in professional life, a mentor is essential to getting ahead. This is completely true, and yet you should no sooner email a stranger and ask them to be your advisor than you should email a stranger and ask them to marry you.

The second major intervention is to stop thinking that an advisor or a mentor is someone who will solve all your problems or give direction to your chaos, who will ride in on their white horse and bring clarity in the midst of confusion. Banish the idea that you are going to get an hour of face to face time every week. Because frankly: you don’t need it. You are the chief problem solver in your life. Exhaust your ability to help yourself until you have whittled down a set of concrete and specific things you need from an advisor, things that you could not figure out even after diligent effort. Be the kind of student who an advisor knows will never waste their time (and yours) asking a question that you could have found the answer to on your own.

“Few mentors have time for excessive hand-holding. Most are dealing with their own high-stress jobs. A mentee who is positive and prepared can be a bright spot in a day.”

– Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In*

Your potential advisors are busy people in incredibly stressful jobs. Advising you is not really an obligation but a labor of love. Many professors never advise undergraduates. And for those that do, frequently the only compensation for the time they have given is the pleasure of seeing that their advice was well used, so they know that they made a difference. This all means that good mentorship is a scarce resource, and there are always more people seeking guidance than there are hours to give it.

“I mentor when I see something and say, ‘I want to see that grow.’”

– Oprah Winfrey

So how do you stand out from the crowd?

Prove yourself worthy of their investment.

How do you prove yourself worthy of an advisor’s investment? In part you prove yourself worthy of an *initial* investment – that important first face-to-face meeting – by demonstrating that you are capable of helping yourself. You demonstrate that you have done legwork to prepare and will get maximum benefit from their time. In part you prove worthy of an initial investment by making a concrete and specific request of someone, something that can reasonably be resolved in a 15-20 minute initial meeting. This shows that you are considerate and will not make overwhelming requests. After you have that foot in the door, you prove yourself worthy of future time by being gracious and manifesting that you have taken their advice. Just as in the corporate world where brief facetime with leaders in the hallway can turn into mentorship; write to thank them for their good advice and tell them what you have done in response. Then use that opportunity to ask for more focused guidance.

As I walk you through the steps of approaching professionals whom you may want to be on the team of people who support your research in one way or another, I will use the metaphor of a romantic relationship, to help you realize that you already know the right answer to many of your questions about what you should do! But I want to be absolutely clear: I am in *no way* suggesting you should have an actual romantic relationship with your advisor. It is *only* a metaphor.

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| Look how well the metaphor can help you answer your own questions: | |
| Should my first email mention that I want them to be my advisor? | If it were a date, would you walk up to a stranger and mention that you want to marry them? |
| Should I talk a lot about myself and not make any effort to learn what they are interested in? | If it were a date, would you talk a lot about yourself and not make any effort to learn what they are interested in? |
| I have someone I want to be my advisor but I haven’t asked them yet. Should I put their name down as the Primary Investigator on my IRB application? | If it were a date, would you announce your engagement online before you actually popped the question to your significant other? |

Thinking Through Your Advising Team

Lets start with the basics, who should be on your team?

* Someone who knows the area or country you plan to do your research
* Someone who knows the method you plan to use
* Someone who knows the subject area of your research
* Someone with experience who helps you orchestrate all the parts (your advisor)

If you are very lucky you already have a close working relationship with a professor who is an expert in your subject area and method, knows your geographic location well, and is going to help you learn to orchestrate all the parts. Even if the fit isnt perfect, you want a primary advisor who makes obvious sense for the project. But more often than not you will put together a team of different people who all contribute different things to your project’s development.

For example, some students find a primary advisor in their major who helps them orchestrate all the parts, advises them on the methods, and ensures that the project will be acceptable within their disciplinary thesis standards, but may have a graduate student who is more of an expert in the particular subject area, and an international student from the country who helps them think through what would be culturally acceptable, or introduces them to contacts in the country.

If you are interested in researching Tanzania but don’t know the first thing about the place, it may be a good idea to meet with a few undergraduates who have gone there on study abroad, or if you are lucky, an undergrad who is originally from Tanzania. This can be a great way to work out some of the rough edges or simple questions you may have before you contact a potential advisor.

Question: Should I have more than one advisor?

Answer: What would you do if this was a relationship? You wouldn’t marry another spouse without talking to your primary spouse first. Academically, it might make sense to have more than one advisor in some cases, but you want to be sure your primary advisor is aware of it, comfortable with it, and understands your rationale. You would also want to clearly articulate to both what you hope they will contribute to the team and how their strengths will complement, so you avoid a “too many cooks spoil the soup” problem.

If you intend to eventually use your research for a thesis within your major: it is *strongly* recommended that you find at least one professor from within your major to serve as your advisor. Most majors require that the primary advisor be a professor in the department. Beginning this relationship early will not only give you a great head start on collecting interesting and unusual data for your senior thesis, but it will allow you to take advantage of your advisor’s input before and while you are abroad. Once you have collected your data abroad it is generally too late to go back and change anything. A close relationship with an advisor in your major will help ensure that you conform to their expectations for a senior thesis and greatly facilitate your transition once you return.

Special Note on finding an Overseas Advisor: If you are doing international research it is strongly recommended that you obtain an overseas advisor. This could be a professor at a local university or someone in an NGO who does work related to your topic on the ground in the area of your fieldsite. Begin this search early and work diligently. It will likely take longer than you think. Selecting and approaching an overseas advisor is very similar to the process detailed here for an ND advisor. If possible you will want to write your email in the language of the country, and you should expect to follow up via email or possibly phone.

**Step 1. Identifying Potential Academic Advisors**

**1. Searching for possible candidates**

* At this point you want to make a short list of potential advisors. First write down anyone whose class (or classes) you have taken and really enjoyed.
* Approach faculty or TAs whom you know. Briefly explain your project and ask if they have any suggestions of whom you should try to work with.
* Begin searching ND department webpages looking for professors who list interests in areas topically or methodologically related to your own interests.
  + Example: if you are interested in the contemporary practices of archeological preservation of ancient markets in Rome, you may look in the classics department for people who do work in Rome, or the anthropology department for people who are practicing archeologists. You may even scan the economics department or Business school to see if anyone is particularly knowledgeable about ancient economic markets.
  + You can try a limited google search by typing in some key words from your project topic and limiting the search to things on the nd.edu domain, for example entering “ancient markets Italy site:nd.edu” (without the quotes) into Google.

**2. Evaluating your Choices**

* Now look at your list. Are there any people who stand out as particularly good choices? Consider:
  + Research interests are particularly strongly related to your project?
  + You have had a [small seminar] class with them before?
  + The professor is in your major [or minor] department?
  + The professor has experience in the method you intend to use?

**3. Researching your Favorite**

* Read through the professor’s bio the department webpage. Spend some time looking up work the professor has published (e.g. Google scholar, JSTOR etc). Be familiar with the topics of the last few published works. This will give you a sense of the professor’s current research interests. If this still seems in line with what you want to do, yay! If not, reconsider your short list and repeat.

Top of Form

**TO DO:** If the topics seem in line with your interests, you now want to download one or two articles or chapters and read them through. You want to be familiar with the way this person works and thinks. As you read be sure to note both the main substantive argument and how the research relates to your own. Go beyond the paragraph listed on their faculty webpage: Remember, you want this person to invest their time in you, so it isnt asking too much for you to take the time to at least read the abstracts of their research.

Bottom of Form

**Step 2: Making Your First Contact**

There are important DOs and DONTs of communicating professionally to Professors and others you may later contact for your research, such as organizations you hope to work with in the field. Your first contact with someone sets the tone, and ideally gives them the impression that you are capable, competent, willing to work hard, and worth whatever time they invest in you.

When you approach someone, try not to think you are entitled to their time. It is true that professors have to hold office hours for students enrolled in their classes, and may feel obliged to help out a student from their major department. But what it will take to get the most out of an advising relationship is really more than meeting an obligation, it is often a labor of love. So try to think about how to persuade someone that they should make that effort for you.

If you were just starting out a potential romantic relationship with someone you barely knew, you would want to put your best foot forward, learn about what they are interested in, and highlight all the interests you share. You would not want to come off as overly needy, unfocused, and only into yourself.

Should you start your first email to your potential advisor by asking them to be your advisor? You probably would not email a potential date out of the blue and ask them to marry you, both because it would likely freak them out and because if you don’t really know them yet, you don't know if you would have a good working relationship. Get to know each other first.

✔DO provide your best reasons why they should give you time and attention right up front. This might include a recommendation from one of their colleagues, that you have taken their class before, that you are a major/minor in their department etc. This is almost never your name.

✔DO be brief and concise

✔DO demonstrate unmistakable evidence that you have taken time to get to know what they do and explain how their research area and expertise relates to what you hope to learn from them

✔DO demonstrate unmistakable evidence that you have taken time to help yourself already, for example rather than asking them to suggest any relevant literature, you might briefly (1 sentence) mention what you have already found in your lit review and highlight a particular area you are having difficulty finding work on.

✔DO demonstrate that you are considerate of their time and preferences, for example by contacting the department assistant in advance to find out when that professor holds office hours.

✔DO ask for a concrete and specific thing you would like from them, in a meeting that will realistically take approximately 15-20 minutes.

✖ DON’T open with a littany about yourself and your interests with no particular connection to the professor you are emailing

✖ DON’T convince them you havent put in any effort by giving them an email so generic you could have sent it to anyone.

✖ DON’T come off as needy and unfocused by asking for big, vague assistance

✖ DON’T say you only want 15 minutes of their time but then make a request that could never reasonably fit in that time, like “help making my work more academic” or “what research question I should focus on”

**1. Initiating Email Contact**

Using those guidelines, let’s first take an example of an email similar to ones I frequently receive from undergraduate students.

As you read this, try to think like a Professor: you are very busy, you love working with students but you have piles of your own students already. You are a Sociology professor who does research on the state in Ghana.

Hi Professor McDonnell,

My name is Jane Doe, and I am a sophomore Psychology major at Notre Dame hoping to pursue a research project in Thailand this summer. Particularly, I am interested in the gender and economic implications of a law passed in July, which now allows women to sell handicrafts tax free. I spoke with [an undergraduate student], who spent last summer doing research in Tanzania, and she recommended that I get in touch with you, as you teach the "International Research Design" course. I am finding the process of structuring a research project a bit overwhelming, and was hoping you might have some time this week to meet and discuss what steps I should take next. Let me know if there is a convenient time for you! Thanks so much for your time!

Best,

Jane Doe

Let’s unpack some areas where Jane’s communication could have been stronger, giving her a better chance that when I read her email I really want to help. First, she opens with her name and her year and major at the school. Unfortunately, none of those things explain why I should want to help; indeed it makes me wonder why she isn’t contacting a professor in her own department.

Next she mentions her research focus, which is pretty reasonable. It shows she knows some details about the case she is interested in. Unfortunately it is not really related to anything I study, so I’m still left wondering why this student is contacting me.

Next the student mentions she spoke to another undergraduate. This is as close as we get to a referral. Jane Doe indicates that she knows from this student that I teach a semester long three-credit course that helps students design a research project abroad. Though she doesn’t say it, I finally infer that this is why she is writing to me.

Now we get to a real doozey. Jane tells me she finds the process “overwhelming” and leads into a vague ask for help. Although she just admitted she knows that I teach an entire course that takes a whole semester to teach students the most important parts of designing a project and writing a grant proposal, Jane just vaguely asks to meet with me so I can give her some direction. That is, she seems to want me to unpack everything I teach in a semester into a meeting in my office one-on-one.

The closing lines have a lot of exclaimation points, which are unconventional in professional communication. But there’s more: By saying “let me know if there is a convenient time for you” she indicates some concern for my time, but she also obliges me to an inevitable back and forth whereby I suggest a time that works in my schedule and we discover it doesn’t work for her.

Once again put on your professor hat, and consider the following alternative:

Dear Professor McDonnell,

Your colleague Steve Reifenberg, Director of the Kellogg Institute, suggested I contact you. I am a Sophomore Sociology major and a minor in International Development Studies. I am currently enrolled in an International Research Design class in which I am designing a research proposal to submit for funding, to carry out fieldwork next summer.

My project will look at what civil servants in Mali do for extra work to supplement their low government salaries. I was fascinated by your “Interstitial Bureaucracy” article that looks at civil servants in Ghana, trying to understand why they are willing to work so hard despite tough working conditions and poor salaries. I know you don’t work on Mali, but I think your experience with West African civil service would help inform how I approach my potential participants.

I would like to talk to you about advice you have to how to recruit civil servants into my study and put them at ease so they feel comfortable talking to me. If it is convenient for you, I would like to stop by your office hours this week on Wednesday at 10am for a quick 15-20 minute conversation. If there is another time that works better for you, I am generally available on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons after 2pm

Sincerely, Rebecca Doe

Wow, what a world of difference! Rebecca opens up with a referral from a valued colleague, the Director of the Institute where I work. She also mentions up front that she is a major in my department. Now she’s really got my attention. I already feel at least obligated to help her. She also mentions up front that she has taken proactive steps to develop her skills, enrolling in a class to teach her the basics. This tells me already that I am working with someone who is trying to help herself, and that she will have a pretty good level of preparation already.

In the second paragraph she briefly tells me what she works on, and because it is so close to what I do, I can tell already what the connections are. She then shows me that she has taken the time to download one of my articles and provide a short summary that shows the connections between my work and hers.

She closes her note with a concrete and specific “ask” so I know what she wants from me. This also gives me some time to think in advance about what I might want to say to her on that topic, so I feel prepared. By showing that she knows when my office hours are, she further establishes in my head that this is a thorough and prepared student who is willing to put in the time to help herself. She is also considerate of my time. She asks for a specific and short window of time, which is also appropriate to the scope of what she is asking me for.

In short, I am already prepared to love this student and inclined to want to help her.

**TO DO:** Draft a concise and interesting email to a potential advisor. Put your best foot forward, which may mean highlighting slightly different things depending on the particulars of you and the professor. But the following is a general guideline to get you started:

Dear Professor [INSERT NAME],

[Best reason why they should give you their attention]. [Other brief relevant information that lets them know who you are, by focusing on relevant things about your identity that will also make them favorably inclined to you].

[Pithy and gripping short description of your project. Pithy means brief, but it does not mean vague]. [Genuine explanation for why they should care about you and your project given what you know about their research interests. Be sure to display deeper knowledge about their research than what can be gleaned on the bio in 30 seconds]. [Articulation of how their research connects to your research]

I would like to talk to you about [short, specific, and concrete request]. If it is convenient for you, I would like to stop by your office hours this week on [insert date and time that you have figured out by contacting the departmental assistant where all office hours are listed, as evidence you are diligent] for a quick [X] minute conversation. If there is another time that works better for you, I am generally available [short and sweet indication of other times that work for you, but be sure you can make it if you offer these alternatives].

Sincerely, [Your Name]

Contacting the department to find out their office hours in advance is a concise demonstration that you are a serious and diligent student capable of helping yourself—in short, the kind of student professors love to work with!

If for some reason the department does not list the office hours, or despite your diligent effort you have been unable to obtain the office hours, try something like this: *I contacted your department about when your regularly scheduled office hours are held but have not heard back from them. I would, of course, want to meet with you at a time that works best in your schedule. I am available any of the following times: X, Y, Z. Are any of these convenient to you?*

**2. Meeting with your potential advisor**

You have someone who has agreed to meet with you. Great!

* Show up punctually.
* Come prepared to concisely discuss your project and how it relates to their own interests (aka “why you are a good match”).
* Be open to their feedback. You selected this person because you thought they were a good fit for your project. Be willing to hear their feedback, even if it is hard to hear – for example if someone says that they think your topic is too sensitive and you will have a really hard time recruiting participants, or getting approved by the IRB. That person is speaking from a wealth of experience. Hearing hard news in time can save you a wealth of heartache down the road.
* If you say “Can I have 15 minutes of your time” hold yourself to that time, don’t then talk for one hour. If the conversation really takes off and you both seem to really be enjoying yourself, it may be appropriate to say “I know I said I would only take 20 minutes and it has already been 20 minutes, and I want to be respectful of your time. I would love to continue this conversation though. Would you rather I set up an appointment to come back another time?”
* Make sure you follow through promptly if you promise to do anything during the conversation, for example sending them the abstract of your proposal, or the list of potential questions for your interview guide.

**3. Sealing the Deal**

* When you believe you have found someone who is a good intellectual fit and with whom you can work well, take time to strongly consider exactly what you want or expect out of your advising relationship. Be prepared to be honest and up front about the amount of contact, but also be prepared to reduce your expectation. You want to be very clear about expectations. Consider the following areas with a few examples:
  + **Duration of contact**: “I would like to work with you this semester on my project, which I plan to submit for [CUSE, Kellogg etc] funding. I hope that when the semester is completed you will be willing to serve as a contact for advice while I am abroad in Thailand and as my senior thesis advisor when I return”
  + **Extent of contact**: “I am hoping to meet with you twice this semester for thirty minutes each time, during your office hours or some other time convenient to you, to discuss the progress on my project proposal. At the end of the semester I would like to submit my rough draft proposal to you for your feedback.”
  + **Extent of IRB responsibility:** “I intend to submit my project to IRB for approval. I anticipate that my project will qualify for expedited review. IRB requires that all student projects have a faculty Primary Investigator. I would like you to serve as my Primary Investigator. I will prepare the IRB submission in consultation with someone from the Office for Protection of Research Subjects and will bring the draft to you before submission.”
  + **Extent of Letter Writing responsibility:** “I intend to submit for both the CUSE and Kellogg grant opportunities. Both of these require a letter of recommendation from a faculty member familiar with the project. They would be due at the end of February, and I would provide you my complete proposal two weeks prior to the deadline so you have time to write the letter.”