

Faye Hicks

How to  
Write to a  
Prospective  
PhD  
Supervisor

with examples  
and critique

# **How to Write to a Prospective PhD Supervisor**

*with examples and critique*

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Also by Faye Hicks:

*An Introduction to River Ice Engineering*  
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## BASIC SKILLS

I've noticed that many of the letters/emails that I get on this topic are actually irrelevant to me, poorly written, or both. So, I figured it might be a good idea to put a little bit of advice out there to help students who are trying to get into a PhD (or Masters) program. All the same principles also apply for those seeking post-doc supervisors. The material you are reading here is a slightly revised/expanded version you have probably seen on my blog. The difference here is that I follow it up with good and bad examples, along with an accompanying critique of each.

There are two categories of people writing these letters – those who need financial support for their graduate program and those who don't. If you have a big scholarship, or if you're independently wealthy, you fall into the second category and it's important to mention it right at the beginning of your letter. Believe me – that will get you noticed! The reason is that the other 99% of people are looking for a supervisor AND for financial support, and there's just not enough money to go around. Letting a prospective supervisor know that you are not looking for money increases the likelihood that they will read the rest of your letter and, as a result, it improves your chances of getting admitted.

You might be wondering, *“Do I even need to write letters to potential supervisors? Can't I just fill out university application forms?”* The fact is – hundreds of people apply for each spot and if you just fill out the application form without actually contacting any of the professors at the university in question, then you're not likely to get noticed. Furthermore, most graduate students (especially PhDs) and Post-Docs are admitted because a particular professor has expressed an interest in recruiting them, so if you've not been in contact with a professor, chances are, nobody there is going to push to get you admitted.

The next obvious question is whether you have to write an actual letter, or will an email do? The answer is 'both'. You should do it by email, but write it in the form of a proper letter. Specifically: make the subject line informative, use a proper salutation, write in proper paragraphs, organize

your thoughts, make sure the spelling and grammar are perfect, and end it with a proper closing. Essentially, you are applying for a job and so, in a way, your application form is analogous to your resume and your letter to a prospective supervisor is equivalent to the corresponding cover letter. Like those who write a good cover letter when applying for a job, students who write good letters to potential supervisors are more likely to get noticed.

You can go ahead and read about writing an effective cover letter to get some basic advice on writing to a potential PhD (or Post-doc, or Masters) supervisor. Here below are some more specific tips for you. (You'll notice a bit of overlap.)

### **Do Your Research**

It's important to write to a specific person about doing a specific type of research. I get all sorts of emails addressed to 'Dear Sir' (with 20 other people in the address line). They all go right in my trash folder. In the first place, anyone who actually thinks that it is acceptable to assume that all professors are men is living in the 19th century and is probably totally out of touch with the current literature and technology, as well. In the second place, I assume (as does every other prof out there) that if 19 other people got the same email, then you'll be just as happy if one of them answers your email – so I'm not going to waste my time on it. Furthermore, I study river ice – nothing else – I don't plan to do any projects on groundwater, water resources planning and management, construction, chemical engineering or nuclear physics. Yet I get tons of people emailing me, asking if they can come and do research with me on these (and many other completely irrelevant) topics, and they actually expect me to pay them to do it! I delete all of these emails, too. If you're doing this sort of thing in the blind hope that you might get lucky and hit on just one professor whose interests intersect with yours, you are wasting your time completely. Think about it – you're trying to land a research position and you haven't even bothered to do the most trivial research on the topic (i.e. surf the web and actually find out who is doing research that matches your interests and experience). Every professor that reads your email is going to think that you are either totally lazy or completely inept as a researcher (probably both). They're definitely not going to have any interest in recruiting you.

Your best chance at getting someone enthused about recruiting you is to find someone whose interests match your own. Therefore, as an absolute

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minimum, you should check out their website to see if they do anything even remotely related to your area(s) of interest. If they don't, then you're just wasting your time (and theirs) by writing to them. It's also important to keep in mind that all professors have well-defined research programs and they seek out and get money to support those specific research programs. So, it's important to demonstrate an interest in their research projects, not simply to dictate your own research interests to them.

It's true that many people don't have a specific PhD (or Masters) topic in mind and will accept almost any project just to get an opportunity to do a PhD. That's perfectly fine; go ahead and admit it. In fact, I encourage you to write to prospective professors and ask them what they are working on and whether they might have any projects for which they are seeking graduate students. Personally, I am much more inclined to follow-up with an applicant who does this, than with one who tells me what they plan to work on, especially when it's irrelevant to me.

### **Demonstrate Your Relevant Merits**

Here again, it's important to do your research. There is no point in applying to a graduate program if you don't have the grades to get in, yet a surprising number of people do. Most universities post their academic requirements on their web sites – check them out and keep in mind, these are minimum requirements. Meeting these minimum requirements will not necessarily get you admitted, especially if you don't have a specific professor asking for you. You should be aware that academic requirements may also vary by program. For example, at most Canadian universities, you need a Master's degree to get admitted to an engineering PhD program, whereas that might not be the case for PhD programs in science. In your letter to the prospective supervisor, make it clear that you have checked these academic requirements and that you exceed them all. If you have done a Masters, be sure to mention the title of your thesis and the name of your thesis supervisor in your letter.

You also need to demonstrate that your academic background is relevant to that professor's research program. For example, as a hydrotechnical engineer who specializes in river ice, I am not likely to recruit someone who did a Masters in environmental engineering. We may both be civil engineers, but that's not a particularly relevant background for a PhD in

hydretechnical engineering. In fact, relevant skills can be as specific as the type of research experience you have. In this context, you really should download and read a few of the professors' journal papers to get an idea of what types of expertise they might be seeking. For example, if someone is doing numerical modeling and you have experience in that (even if only a single graduate course) then be sure to mention it in your letter. You're far more likely to spark their interest than someone who has absolutely no experience or expertise in modeling. The research experience expectations tend to be quite a bit less rigorous for prospective Masters students. A relevant undergraduate degree is typically essential and any sort of research experience (e.g. a summer or co-op research job) is an asset but often not essential.

Doing research on the professors that you'll be contacting not only ensures you'll be approaching the appropriate people, it will increase your chances of attracting their interest, since it's a very real demonstration of your initiative, curiosity and resourcefulness.

### **Keep it Brief**

Many of the letters I get from prospective PhD students are excessively long (i.e. a couple of pages or more). If I open an email to find such a long letter, I usually close it for the moment, with the intention of looking at it later when I have more time. However, I receive over 100 emails a day, so it's usually forgotten by the next day. Sometimes I mark them for follow-up, but I've got about a hundred emails flagged at any given time – so it still might get lost in the shuffle. In contrast, if an email is only a few paragraphs long, I read it right away. I'm not unique in this; in fact, many professors get several hundred emails a day and read only a few of them. Keep that in mind as you write your letter and make a concerted effort to be brief. Aim to get your message across in two paragraphs at the most. The goal is to spark the professor's interest in order to initiate a dialog; you don't need to tell them your whole life's story in the first contact.

### **Put Something Meaningful in the Subject Line**

Most people who receive excessive amounts of email, like professors, prioritize what they read based on the subject lines. If your subject line is blank, simply says "c.v.", or even worse says "hey professor" – it may be ignored indefinitely. For obvious reasons, the subject line that would

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catch my eye immediately is “Prospective PhD student seeking to study river ice engineering”. In my 24 years as a professor I never received a single email with this subject line (until I posted this information in a blog).

### **Offer Supporting Material**

Scan copies of your transcripts and attach them to the email along with a copy of your resume. You’ll have to send official paperwork for the application process, but it takes time for a professor to go hunt that up. If you save them that time by providing the info for them, they’re more likely to follow-up. Remember though, all unofficial transcripts are eventually compared against the official versions. Any discrepancies, no matter how minor, are guaranteed to kill any chance of admission.

If you have published any journal or conference papers, include them as attachments to your email. This not only shows evidence of your research productivity, it gives the professor a better idea of your research background and some indication of your writing skills.

### **Do you need to do this to get into a Masters program?**

What if you’re an undergraduate seeking admission to a Masters program? Should you write letters to prospective MSc supervisors? That depends upon whether there is a particular topic you’d like to study. If yes, then it makes sense to contact professors working in that research area to see if they are willing to take you on.

### **Examples**

On the next few pages I’ve provided both bad and good examples, illustrating what I like and don’t like about each one.



### Example 1 – example of what not to do:

*This is an example adapted from an actual email I received – I've changed and added content to illustrate some extra points and revised it to mask the true identity and interests of the applicant.*

**To:** [fhicks@ualberta.ca](mailto:fhicks@ualberta.ca), [drobson@umanitoba.ca](mailto:drobson@umanitoba.ca), [pjones@ubc.ca](mailto:pjones@ubc.ca); [aeinstein@stanford.ed](mailto:aeinstein@stanford.ed), [inewton@cambridge.uk](mailto:inewton@cambridge.uk)

**Date:** February 14, 2017

**Subject:** Need Research Opportunities Information

Dear Sir:

My name is Jerad Humes and I am currently studying biomechanics at Yoban University of Technology. Recently, I am planning for pursuing PhD degree with a focus on robotics and prosthetics. I worked on robotic research project in my undergraduate period and also worked in some rehabilitation projects during my job career.

I have reviewed your faculty profile. I am very interested to work with you and would like to get involved in your current research.

I hope you do not mind my getting in touch, but I would like to inquire whether you are currently accepting post graduate students. If you are, would you willing to talk to me a bit more by e-mail or Skype? I am looking forward to hear from you.

With regards,

Jera Huraes

[Jera-Huraes@gmail.com](mailto:Jera-Huraes@gmail.com)

*Things I like about this letter and applicant:*

- Polite, brief and to the point
- Written in proper letter format – professional
- Although the English is not great, it is comprehensible with only minor errors

*Places where the letter fails:*

- S/he says that s/he has taken the time to research me but has written to multiple professors with a generic salutation (“Dear Sir”) and her/his research area is wildly different than mine. So – not only is the email irrelevant to me – it tells me that s/he not always truthful (a huge negative) since, if s/he really had researched me, s/he would know that our research interests lie in completely different disciplines (and that I am not a “Sir”).

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- I don't know this university and no city/country is given so I can't really tell what her/his background is.
- No information is provided regarding past degrees or GPAs, nor is there any indication that s/he has checked to see if s/he meets our admission requirements.
- No timelines are provided – is s/he currently doing a Masters, has never done one, did one 20 years ago? This information would significantly affect my interest in an applicant.
- There is no indication of whether funding is needed or not.

***DECISION: I would probably not reply to this email.***

## Example 2 – an example of a good letter:

**To:** Dr. Hicks [theprof@fayehicks.com]

**Date:** February 14, 2017

**Subject: Prospective PhD student interested in River Ice Engineering**

Dear Dr. Hicks:

My name is Jane Doe and I am a civil engineer specializing in water resources engineering. I am currently completing my Masters with Dr. Jon Winters at the University of Manitoba, and expect to complete this program before Sept 2017. I have reviewed your university's PhD admission requirements and I meet them all easily, having earned a GPA of 3.8/4.0 during my undergraduate degree (also done at the University of Manitoba). I have taken 6 water resources engineering graduate courses for my Master's degree, earning a cumulative GPA of 3.9/4.0 on those (with 3 A+, two A and one A-). I currently hold an NSERC PGSA scholarship. I can email pdf copies of my transcripts if you are interested.

The topic of my Master's project is two-dimensional modelling of physical fish habitat. This involved extensive field work as well as application of the River2D numerical model. I have written and presented one conference paper with my supervisor on this research so far:

Doe, J and J Winters (2016) "An analysis of physical fish habitat in a shallow gravel bed stream", Proc. Canadian Society of Civil Engineering Annual Conf., Hydrotechnical Division, Winnipeg, MN, pp. 353-364.

I can email you a PDF copy of this paper if you like. We are planning to expand this into a full journal paper which will be submitted to the *Canadian Journal of Civil Engineering* this summer. I am currently completing my research analyses and will start writing my thesis in March. My defence is planned for early August.

I would very much like to expand my river engineering expertise by studying river ice engineering. With a background in both field research and numerical model application, I believe I could quickly be a very productive member of your research team as a PhD student. I have applied to NSERC for PhD funding, and I am also interested in any recruitment scholarships or research assistantships I might be eligible for. I'd appreciate the opportunity to discuss my application further at your convenience.

Best regards,

Jane Doe

MSc student, University of Manitoba

[Jane.Doe.2607@gmail.com](mailto:Jane.Doe.2607@gmail.com)

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*Things I like about this letter and applicant:*

- It is well written, organized, has all the essential info, and the applicant sounds very mature and professional.
- The MSc supervisor's name is provided – which means that I could call him to ask about this student before replying.
- She lets me know that she has taken the time to research me (knows my research interests) and our university (has already checked on the PhD admission requirements) – both are good indications of initiative and investigative skills.
- She currently holds a major scholarship and has good GPAs – this means that she has PhD scholarship potential, which is good news for me since funding is always an issue.
- She has already applied for one scholarship and is obviously keen to apply for others.
- She has already written and presented a conference paper and plans to write a journal paper from her MSc work – shows initiative and also increases her chances of winning a PhD scholarship.
- She has provided timelines so that I know when she is available to start the PhD and how recent her Masters is.
- She has background and interest in both field research and computer modeling on rivers – my two main research focuses.
- She offers to send copies of transcripts and the conference paper.

***DECISION: I would definitely feel lucky to have received this email!***