

## Quick Tips: Potential supervisors

### Transcript

Let's take a look at some quick tips on the topic of potential supervisors for graduate school applications. Be sure to read all of the information in the "What you need to know" and "Master's and PhD programs" sections to get you started on planning for graduate studies.

Graduate programs in academic subjects can encompass a wide variety of options. There are course-based master's degrees that are usually a year in length and you will complete courses instead of research and a thesis. Sometimes there is a major project included that may have a research component – but usually it is not as research intensive as a thesis, and would only be a report and potentially a presentation on the results. A research-based master's is where you complete fewer courses and have more research time. Generally in Canada, students will complete 3 to 4 courses in about 2 semesters and spend the rest of their program time completing their research. Some programs offer entrance into a PhD directly from an undergraduate degree, but they are very academically competitive. Sometimes a university will not advertise this option, so if this is of interest to you check with the program that you want to apply to. If you are applying to a graduate degree in the US it is quite common to only be able to apply to a PhD from your undergraduate degree. If you go the traditional PhD route, the degree will take you at least 6 years to complete (around 2 years for your masters, and 4 for the PhD degree). It can take longer depending on funding, the way your supervisor works, the results that you get in your research, or other reasons, so prepare for a minimum of 6 years.

For a research-based program, choosing the right supervisor is very important.

- You will be spending a lot of time with this person, and you are choosing them as a mentor—choose wisely!
- As with the university and program, reputation is not necessarily everything—just because someone is a "big name" doesn't mean that they will be a good supervisor (in fact, in some cases, these people are so sought after that they make BAD supervisors because they are so busy and never have time for you)
- Consider the AVAILABILITY of the person—if you are doing a 2 year Master's program, your supervisor can't be going on sabbatical halfway through your program, for example.

For course-based programs, you don't need a supervisor. It doesn't hurt to look into the faculty that will be teaching you and to consider their industry connections and experience, but you most likely do not need to contact a supervisor a head of time as you will not have a major thesis to write or research to complete under the guidance of a faculty member.

Usually, you cannot escape research entirely even in a course-based program – there will be a research methods class and major project or paper but nothing on the scale of a research-based masters.

Sometimes you even get to conduct the research project in pairs or groups.

Sometimes, although rarely, you do need to contact potential supervisors for a course-based masters as is the case for the Master of Biomedical Science at U of Guelph – but this is not common practice.

If applying to a research-based program, find a graduate supervisor that will allow you to complete research in your area of interest. In most cases, the graduate department website will provide a list of potential supervisors and their areas of research. Be aware that the list of graduate supervisors may include those who are or will be on sabbatical and those who are not currently willing to supervise students. Top researchers should be approached early as they allocate their research support well in advance.

It is strongly recommended that applicants contact potential supervisors to ensure alignment of research interests and personality fit. Contact the graduate department(s) of interest and ask questions in order to make an informed choice about where to apply and whom to approach. In some cases, the program website will advise an applicant not to contact potential supervisors, so follow this advice.

In order to identify which professors you are interested in conducting research with read their journal article; attend conferences; connect with current professors, T.A.s, graduate students, alumni and talk to people in the field. While reading journal articles you might find other potential supervisors conducting similar research. ALSO: Faculty members have colleagues at other institutions and attend conferences where they meet people in their field all the time. Volunteer in a lab to gain experience, show a professor your skills, and build your network.

Sometimes graduate program websites are not up to date and so do not list the most current faculty research, so review other sites to find potential graduate supervisors' research such as:

- Community of Science
- academia.edu
- NSERC, SSHRC, OGS, and CIHR, and the
- Canadian Research Chairs

Unless you are explicitly told NOT to contact potential supervisors, you should contact them—this is your first impression, so think about how you frame your experience, as well as what you are asking. Professors WANT to work with motivated, engaged graduate students, so reaching out to them is not a bother (!). Use your network of professors, TAs, and other students to identify potential supervisors (the best case scenario—one of your professors facilitates an introduction). A personal connection will also increase the likelihood of a response when you reach out to them, as well as increase the potential of acceptance to the program. Remember that many professors are very busy and may not respond to your email, so make sure to follow-up with a phone call. If you meet with potential supervisors months in advance of your application submission, you might want to keep in touch.

When you initially reach out to them, you want to send a short email (200 words) that serves as an introduction to you and your area of interest, paying special attention to how it aligns with THEIR area of interest

- Make explicit connections that DEMONSTRATE you have read their work and know what you're talking about (they will be able to tell immediately if you're making it up)
- You want to focus on what value you have (in terms of skills, knowledge etc.) rather than focusing on what they or the program can do for you

Try to set up a time for you to actually talk to them—even if you can't get there in person, see if you can set up a Skype or phone appointment (a conversation is the best way to assess your personal fit with a person who looks perfect on paper—if you can't have a relatively pleasant phone conversation with them, will you want to spend the next x number of years meeting regularly with them?)

- If you CAN get there in person, ask to tour the facilities and speak to current grad students if you can.
- Remember you are trying to determine if the supervisor and research being conducted is a good fit for you.
- We recommend that you set these meetings between your 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year as graduate applications are due beginning in December.

When you send your initial email to a potential supervisor attach your résumé and an unofficial transcript *if your marks are competitive*. HOWEVER: If your marks are a little lower, you might want to wait until you have established a relationship with the potential supervisor. If your marks are too low and you are accepted into a program, you may struggle because you do not have the academic background to be successful in a graduate-level program.

The Canadian Association for Graduate Students: [cags.ca](http://cags.ca) has a publication called: “your future: a guide for potential graduate students” that includes some questions to ask potential supervisors and admissions’ staff.

Applicants need to provide a list of supervisors and areas of research interest in your grad school application even if you decide not to contact potential supervisors, so start your faculty research early.