

How to Find a PhD Supervisor at Freie Universität Berlin and make contact by e-mail

In the search for a professor who is willing to supervise their PhD research in Germany, applicants in most cases try to make contacts by e-mail. Experience has shown, however, that an e-mail enquiry sometimes remains unanswered because the sender made one or more decisive mistakes without even realizing it. This guideline will help you avoid these mistakes.

Please follow it carefully since after a failed attempt to make contact, it is very difficult to try once again with the same person.

1. The e-mail you send to an unknown professor (or any unknown person you are officially contacting) is a formal letter and should be written with utmost care.

2. Take your time to search the internet for possible supervisors. Try to assign a department or a discipline to the topic of your dissertation thesis. The complete list of the departments of Freie Universität may be found here: <http://www.fu-berlin.de/en/einrichtungen/fachbereiche/index.html>. Click on the link to the department on the list that seems most likely to comprise your discipline. A new list opens, presenting all institutes and disciplines assembled under the roof of the department. Chose an institute or discipline and go to the respective homepage. Large institutes / disciplines are subdivided into research or working areas, which are accessible from the page you are actually on. Smaller institutes instead provide direct links to the professors of the institute along with a short description of their specific research interests. Chose those persons or working areas from the list which seem relevant to you. At this stage of your research you should not proceed too fast. Take your time, read carefully through the information offered, ask yourself each time whether description and information are really relevant for your dissertation and do really meet your expectations. Try to gather as much information as possible about the professor's work before you write your first e-mail. Do not send out dozens of low quality enquiries, hoping that by coincidence one or the other will be answered.

3. Never ever send one enquiry to several addressees at a time! Some applicants just write a very unspecific text, which does not refer to any certain addressee or any certain university - and send it out to fifty persons at a time. In most cases, such messages will be deleted immediately since they tell the recipient that the sender is not really interested.

4. Pay attention to the header of your e-mail. The header should tell the recipient what the message is all about. Write for example "PhD research on the topic xxx".

5. Start your message with a formal address. The best way to address a German professor is "Dear Professor [last name]". Never ever address a senior person by his/her first name. This is considered extremely rude. "Hi" or "Hello" is also inappropriate. (Do not get confused, however, when you receive a letter from the student's office starting "Hello xx!". This letter was probably sent by a student assistant who greets you as a fellow student. You are free to answer him/her in the same way, but stick to a formal address when writing to your professor.)

6. Do not start your email by enquiring about the recipient's health and wellbeing. This may be perfectly polite in your own culture, in western countries it sounds a bit strange if you do not know the addressee personally. Westerners appreciate messages which are more to the point, and thus there is no harm in starting with "I turn to you in search for a supervisor for my PhD research in the field of xxx/ on the topic xxx."

7. The next common mistake in contact letters is that the applicant is not precise enough about his/her purpose. It is advisable, however, to say right from the beginning what you want to research upon and why you want to do it at this particular institute. It is also important to link your own research interest to that of the addressee. (For example: "I read your publication xxx, which is closely related to my own field." Or: „I learned from your website that you are leading a research project on the topic xxx. I would be very happy if I could join your team.") Of course you can only refer to publications which you have really read! Please keep in mind that this reference to the addressee's field of research is far from being a ritual act. It is of crucial importance for you to find somebody with a matching research focus. And vice versa, the professor is looking for a talented and motivated research fellow whose project will fit well into the research profile of his/her institute.

8. Always attach a CV and a draft research proposal.

9. Pay attention to the conclusion of your message. Even if you are running out of time, never pressurize the recipient ("Looking forward to your immediate reply")! You may write instead: "I would appreciate if you could consider my application. Please let me know if you need additional documents." Close the message with "Yours sincerely" and sign with your full name, maybe followed by (Ms) or (Mr.) if this is not clear enough from your first name.

10. Make sure you proofread your enquiry before sending it. Try to avoid mistakes in spelling and grammar.

11. Do not

- use colored letters, colored background or an unusual font
- add any pictures or animations
- use any teenage slang or corrupted English ("Hope U R fine.")
- frequently start sentences with "Sir" or "Madam"
- flatter the recipient ("I know that you are one of the most renowned professors in the world, and it would be an honor to work at your highly esteemed institute...")
- beg and plea