

How to find a graduate supervisor

If you're applying to a thesis-based master's or a doctoral program, you will need to identify a graduate supervisor – a faculty member who guides and oversees your research and thesis, while providing mentorship and academic and professional development support.* Below is some information to guide you in your search.

** Supervisor requirements for admissions vary. Some programs ask you to identify a potential supervisor before applying, while others assign one after admission. Check your program's graduate information page or contact the department directly to confirm what you need.*

Start early

Supervisor availability and funding cycles vary. Many supervisors plan their graduate student intake well in advance, often 9 to 12 months before a program's start date.

Check the [Faculty of Graduate Studies Application deadlines](#). They vary based on citizenship and in some cases by program.

Factor the early deadlines for Tri-Council awards—Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)—and other major scholarships into your application timeline. Many of these deadlines fall well in advance of graduate program deadlines. You should review [entrance scholarship opportunities](#) offered through the Faculty of Graduate Studies.

Start by browsing the faculty directory

Browse the faculty directories in your program of interest. Some faculty members indicate when they're accepting new students. Others prefer students contact them directly by email before applying – in many programs, this is a normal and expected step. You may reach out even if a faculty member has not announced that they are accepting students.

Learn about faculty research and determine if the lab would be good fit

- Review each faculty profile and research lab website carefully. Develop a clear understanding of your potential supervisor's research areas, recent publications, and current projects. Focus on finding those that best align with your research goals.
- Consult additional online sources like Google Scholar, conference presentations, etc.
- Discuss your research interests with other professors and ask for recommendations.

- Connect with current or past graduate students to learn about the research environment.
- Create a shortlist of several potential supervisors whose research and teaching approaches match your interests and learning preferences.

Prepare a thoughtful first email

Reach out by email. Do not send a generic email. Be polite and professional. A strong email is clear and concise (3-4 paragraphs). It typically includes:

- Subject line: Prospective MSc/PhD applicant – *Your Topic*
- Salutation and close: Use a formal greeting and sign-off (“Dr./Professor”)
- Introduction: Briefly state who you are and the program/term you’re targeting.
- Fit statement (1–2 short paragraphs): Explain your interest in their area of study. Describe your research interests, relevant experience, and how you connect to their work.
- Attachments: CV and official/unofficial transcripts (PDF).
- Clear ask: Inquire about graduate openings, potential projects, and whether your background is a good match.
- Optional: Brief note on funding (e.g., external scholarships, plans to apply, or interested in discussing funding options).
- Thank them for taking the time to review your email and materials.
- Final Check: Proofread for spelling and grammar. Confirm you’re using the correct salutation.

Contact more than one potential supervisor

It’s appropriate to email two or more potential supervisors whose research fits your interests. Each email should be tailored to the individual supervisor.

Follow up if needed

If you don’t hear back after two weeks, you may send a brief, polite follow-up email. In some cases, faculty may forward inquiries to colleagues who are a better fit or who have current openings. It is recommended to send only one follow-up email.

Talk through the key details

If you hear back and they are open to connecting, here are some details to ask about:

- Research directions and available projects
- Expectations (meetings, authorship, fieldwork/lab commitments)
- Funding (sources, amounts, duration, any tuition coverage)
- Training environment (team size, lab culture, collaborations, co-supervision options)
- Timelines (start date, typical time to degree completion)
- Program-specific requirements

Check in with the program's graduate office

- If your program requires supervisor commitment at application, obtain the required confirmation (e.g., email or letter) and follow the program's instructions for submitting it.
- If prior contact with a supervisor is strongly recommended (it will strengthen your application) name the faculty member(s) you consulted and describe the research alignment in the personal statement section of your application.
- If your supervisor is assigned after admission, your graduate coordinator will discuss options with you.

More resources

- [Application to Graduate Studies](#)
- [Dalhousie Faculty of Graduate Studies](#)
- [Explore Programs](#)
- [Guidelines for the Supervision of Graduate Students](#)