

# Graduate School

Winning Strategies for Getting In  
With or Without Excellent Grades

## Chapter 8 Major Steps that Most Students Miss

Contacting Prospective Graduate Supervisors  
Writing Effective Cover Letters

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## Winning Strategies For Getting In With or Without Excellent Grades

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## Chapter 8

# Major Steps That Most Students Miss

### *Contacting Prospective Graduate Supervisors*

The advice in this section is aimed at students who are applying to a program in which a faculty member will serve as their graduate supervisor. **One of the most important steps you can take is to make personal contact with your prospective supervisor prior to applying.** I find it peculiar that most students fail to do this. As a result, they are still strangers when the time comes for the faculty member to consider their application.

In this section, we will discuss several advantages of making direct contact with your prospective supervisors. By the time we are done, this preapplication contact will seem absolutely essential. In fact, I believe it is so important to establish correspondence with prospective supervisors prior to applying to their program that the topic of this section was the main reason why I originally decided to write this book!

Many students think that it is inappropriate to contact a prospective supervisor or a Graduate Program Director prior to the application period. They reason that it may be perceived as manipulative, and thereby make a bad impression. But in fact, the opposite is

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true. As long as the contact is made for legitimate reasons, like those discussed below, then establishing some preapplication correspondence can be one of the most important things you do to enhance your prospects of being accepted into a program.

*Timing is important when you are contacting a prospective supervisor or a Graduate Program Director. So long as your attempt to make contact comes before the application, then it will likely be seen as a very sensible move on your part. If it comes after you have sent your application and before the selections have been made, it is more likely to be seen as manipulative.*

Some of my colleagues have told me that they would never agree to supervise a student who failed to contact them before applying. Some told me that no matter how good students appear on paper, if they do not possess the good sense to contact them before applying, this indicates that they lack awareness and good judgment, in general. Even if you are applying to programs where you will not have a specific supervisor, you should still know who the faculty members are with interests that match yours and consider directly contacting them.

Surprisingly, contact from potential students is not universally popular among faculty members. Some find these contacts to be a nuisance, and they prefer instead to first screen applicants' credentials and then contact only those who meet or exceed their specific criteria. However, there are at least three good reasons to ignore the fact there are some faculty members who would not be influenced by preapplication contact: First, this is such a minority group that there is a good chance that none of your prospective supervisors belong to it. Second, even if one of them did, you would not know. Third, I have never heard anyone suggest that preapplication contact actually hurt anyone's chances of being accepted.

It is important that you make contact with prospective supervisors in an appropriate way. A phone call can be much more useful than a letter, for reasons that will be discussed later. Still, it is usually best to

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initially contact a prospective supervisor by electronic mail, then follow up a few weeks later with a phone call or more e mail. Students often complain about being unable to reach faculty members, or that they never return their calls. E mail should facilitate this process.

**Why it is so important to make preapplication contact** The correspondence you have with a prospective supervisor has important benefits for both of you. Some of the benefits to you are outlined below. You should realize why this contact is so important for the prospective supervisors, too. They know that they will have to give a new graduate student a good deal of attention over the next few years. In order to convince them that they want you as their student, you need to know what it is that they want in a student.

There are certain qualities that anyone would want their graduate students to possess. But some people's criteria also include other "special" qualities, which may play the biggest role in determining how an applicant measures up. Many professors want to ascertain whether they will *like* prospective students before they make the commitment to supervise their graduate work. This type of priority might seem surprising at first, but it makes perfect sense when one considers that the student/supervisor relationship usually lasts for a few years, and no one wants to spend a few years working with someone they don't like.

With so much at stake for graduate faculty members in selecting the right person to supervise, why would any of them take the risk of accepting a complete stranger, someone with whom they have never spoken, when there may be other applicants with whom they have had some personal contact? Some faculty members will take this risk from time to time, but quite often they end up regretting that they paid too much attention to the student's credentials and too little consideration to the student's personality and other important characteristics. Other graduate supervisors, having made this mistake once or twice, have vowed never to make it again!

The opportunity to develop your own impression of the prospective supervisor is equally important to you. You need to remember that the faculty members in any graduate program are all different individuals. A graduate student/supervisor relationship with each one of them would be different. You want to spend the next

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