

Email Template: Enquiry to a Prospective PhD Supervisor

Subject line:

[Keep it short and specific, e.g. "PhD Enquiry – Soil Nitrogen Cycling / Prospective PhD/MSc Student.]

Salutation:

["Dear Dr./Prof. [Surname]," — check their preferred title. Avoid "Dear Sir/Madam/ or Respected Sir/Madam" or generic greetings.]

Paragraph 1 — Introduce yourself:

State your name, your most relevant qualification (degree, field, institution, and grade/CGPA if strong), and any relevant research experience/affiliation. Say clearly why you're writing — e.g. enquiring about PhD opportunities and the intake period you're targeting (season/year). If you're asking whether your background fits their research direction, say so here. (max. 40 words)

Paragraph 2 — Show you've read their work:

Reference the professor's research area in your own words — their broad focus and, ideally, one specific paper or project of theirs you found genuinely interesting. Briefly explain what stood out to you and why it's relevant (this shows real engagement, not a mass email). Keep it to 2–3 sentences and avoid restating their abstract. (max. 50 words)

Paragraph 3 — Connect it to your own interests and experience:

Describe your research interests and explain how they align with the supervisor's research. Mention only the specific skills and experience that are directly relevant to their work, such as laboratory techniques, field methods, data analysis, software, or relevant publications that would allow you to contribute meaningfully to their research group. Do not list all of your skills or provide a general summary of your CV. It is very important to identify the skills and experience that closely match the professor's research. For example, if the professor's research focuses on N₂O and N₂ emissions from agricultural soils, you could highlight your experience with soil nitrogen cycling, field gas measurements, static chamber methods, gas chromatography, and statistical analysis in R. In contrast, general skills such as being good at Excel, mathematics, or communication may be useful, but they are not as relevant unless they directly relate to the professor's research. Focus on the strongest overlap between your experience and the professor's research rather than describing everything you have done. (max. 80 words)

Paragraph 4 — Make your ask:

Ask your specific question(s) clearly — e.g. whether they are accepting PhD students for the intake you're targeting, and whether funding/scholarship opportunities may be available under their supervision. Keep this to one or two direct questions. (max. 25 words)

Closing:

Mention any attachments (e.g. "My CV and transcripts are attached for your consideration"). Thank them for their time, then close with "Kind regards," followed by your full name. Optionally add your current institution/contact details beneath your name. (max. 15 words)

General tips:

Keep the whole email under ~230 words — professors receive many of these.

Personalize every email; never send the identical text to multiple supervisors.

Always attach your CV and transcripts as pdf rather than in another format.

Proofread for the correct name, title, and university before sending.