

Cold-emailing a research lab

What has to be true before you send it

The email is the easy part. Everything above the template is the reason it works.

Before you send

1. **Read the paper.** Not the abstract, not the project page. You are looking for one specific thing: an assumption the authors state, a limitation they admit, a case they call out of scope. It is usually in the remarks, the discussion, or future work.
2. **Have something of your own that touches it.** A project, a build, a competition, a course assignment you took further than you had to. It does not have to be impressive. It has to be real, and it has to connect to the thing you found.
3. **Ask for something small.** Ten minutes. Advice. An opinion. Not a position, not an internship, not “any opportunity”. Give them room to say a smaller yes.
4. **One lab at a time.** Thirty identical emails is spam, and academics talk to each other. If you cannot name what is specific about this lab, you are not ready to write to it.

The email

Subject: *the paper, the problem, or the question. Be specific*

Dear Prof. *Surname*,

I am *name*, a *year* student at *institution*. I currently work on *one line: what you actually do, and where*.

I recently read your *paper or framework (venue, year)*, where *the assumption, remark, or limitation you found*. For *your project* I *the thing you built that touches it* instead.

Would you be open to a brief ten-minute call to explore whether there might be a fit, or to share advice on where a student like me could contribute? I have attached my resume at your convenience.

Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,

name LinkedIn website or GitHub

Five sentences. Attach a one-page CV. Nothing else.

The part nobody tells you: volume

One email is not a strategy. Over a couple of years I have written to more than a thousand professors. The yes rate was a fraction of a percent, a few hundred said no outright, and most never replied at all. Two of those conversations became research positions.

That ratio is normal. It is also why most people conclude cold emailing does not work: they send five, hear nothing, and stop.

1. **Start six months early.** If you want a position in January, begin writing in July.

2. **Write to assistant professors and recent hires.** They are building groups and reply far more often than established names.
3. **Write to the lab head, not the department.** A general enquiry to a department address goes nowhere.

How to read at that volume

You cannot read a thousand papers and you do not need to. For each lab, read the **limitations and future-work sections only**. That is where the openings are stated by the authors themselves.

Use an LLM to check whether an idea has already been done and whether it is feasible for you. Do not use one to summarise the paper, or you will write to a professor about a version of their work that does not exist. Once someone replies, then you read it properly, end to end.

On payment

Remote positions are generally unpaid. That is the trade: you reach a group you otherwise could not, and they get work without a budget line. Decide whether it is worth it before you start.

If they do not reply

Wait two weeks. Send one short follow-up on the same thread, with something new in it: a result, a question, a paper you have since read. Then stop.

Silence is almost always a calendar, not a judgement. Move to the next lab and keep going. The one that answers will not be the one you expected.