

The PhD & Master's Application Guide — Free Sample

Start Here, plus Module 6 — how to write an email a professor will answer.

Prajun

Version 1.0 — July 2026

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Start Here

Version 1.0 — July 2026

What this is

A complete system for applying to PhD and master's opportunities by contacting professors directly: finding them, researching them, writing to them, following up, and handling what happens next.

It is written with international students in mind, since they face the extra layers — credential evaluation, English tests, visas, and unfamiliar admission systems. But the core of the process is the same wherever you are applying from. If you are a domestic applicant, everything on finding professors, researching them, writing the email, following up, and handling replies applies to you unchanged; you can simply skip the sections on tests, evaluations, and immigration.

It assumes you are starting from a post you saw online — the kind shared at https://www.instagram.com/_tech_guff/ — and do not know what to do with it.

It is designed as a companion to the opportunities posted there. Those posts tell you *what* is available. This tells you what to do next: how to find the professor behind a post, what to read before writing, what the email should say, and what happens after they reply.

What it is not

It is not a guarantee. Nobody can guarantee admission or funding, and anyone who offers to is selling you something they cannot deliver.

It will not fix a hard barrier. If you are below a graduate school's published minimum, no email can talk you past it. Module 8 explains which of your problems can be outweighed and which have to be solved — read it early, because it may change where you apply.

It is not a template you paste. The templates in Module 7 are scaffolding. If you send them unchanged, they will stop working — for you and for everyone else using them.

The core loop

Everything in this guide is one repeating cycle:

See a post	
↓ Module 2	Triage it – 2 minutes
Find the professor	
↓ Module 3	Verify name, email, availability – 20 minutes
Research them	
↓ Module 4	Three papers, funding, the hook – 30 minutes
Write and send	
↓ Module 6, 7	150–200 words – 25 minutes
Follow up	
↓ Module 9	Twice, then stop
Handle the reply	
Module 10	Or diagnose the silence

Roughly **75 to 90 minutes per professor**, done properly. That is the real cost, and it is why Module 5 exists — you cannot do this for two hundred people, and you do not need to.

Where to start

Find your situation. Read those modules first, then fill in the rest.

If this is you	Start with
I have never applied before	1, 2, 3 — then work through in order
I have a post and don't know what to do with it	2, 3, 4, 6
I can't find the professor's email address	3.6
I've sent emails and heard nothing back	9.7 , then 4 and 6
I'm worried my GPA is too low	8 — before anything else
I have no publications	8.4
I don't know if I can afford this	1.3, 12.8, 13
A professor replied and I don't know what to say	10.2 , then 7.16
I've been offered a place and I'm about to accept	10.6, 10.7, 12.8
Something feels wrong about an offer	12 — immediately

If you only read three things

Module 4 — the research that makes an email worth replying to. **Module 6** — how to write it. **Module 8** — what actually matters about your profile, and what doesn't.

Before you send your first email

Three things, in this order:

1. **Build your tracker.** A plain spreadsheet is fine — Google Sheets, Excel, Notion, whatever you already use. Module 5.7 lists the columns. Everything else depends on this, including your ability to work out later why things aren't working.
 2. **Check your hard barriers.** Module 8.2. Do this before building a target list, not after.
 3. **Send five emails, then stop for ten days.** Module 5.6. Fixing a problem after five emails costs you five professors. Fixing it after fifty costs you fifty, and you cannot email them again.
-

A note on the pace of this

From first email to a confirmed offer is commonly six to twelve months. Silence is the normal texture of the process, not a verdict on you, and one silence tells you nothing at all.

What you control is whether your hard barriers get fixed and whether your emails were properly researched. What you do not control is who replies. Set your weekly targets on the first kind only.

Keeping this current

Application rules, funding schemes, test requirements and immigration policies change, sometimes with little notice.

Verify anything involving a deadline, a fee, or a visa against the institution's own website and your destination country's official government source — never against a guide, a video, or a forum post, including this one.

This edition is **version 1.0, July 2026**. Updates are released to all buyers; check the changelog on the next page for what has changed since your copy.

Questions and corrections: techguff.help@gmail.com

Module 6 — Anatomy of the Email

Line by line, using the research note you built in Module 4.

6.1 The email has exactly one job

Your email is not an application. It will not get you admitted, and it is not the place to prove you deserve a PhD.

Its only job is to **get a reply**.

That single reframe fixes most of the problems in most cold emails. Once the goal is a reply rather than a decision, everything follows: the email gets shorter, the request gets smaller, and you stop trying to fit your entire life into four paragraphs.

A professor reading your email is answering one question: *is this worth ten more minutes of my time?* Write for that question and nothing else.

6.2 The conditions it will be read in

Be realistic about what happens to your email.

It arrives in an inbox that receives dozens of messages a day. It is opened on a phone, probably between meetings. The first pass takes **ten to twenty seconds** and decides everything.

Three consequences:

- **The subject line and first two lines carry the whole email.** If those fail, the rest is never read.
- **It must make sense without opening any attachment.** Your CV is supporting evidence, not the message.
- **Long paragraphs get deferred, and deferred means forgotten.** Three short paragraphs, with line breaks between them.

Target length: **150 to 200 words** in the body. Shorter is usually better. Longer is almost never better.

6.3 The seven parts

Every effective cold email has the same skeleton:

1. Subject line
2. Salutation
3. One sentence: who you are + what you want
4. The specificity paragraph – why THEM
5. The evidence paragraph – why YOU
6. The ask – one clear, answerable question
7. Sign-off, signature, attachment note

The rest of this module goes through each part.

6.4 Subject line

If they stated a format, use it exactly. Some professors ask for a code, a reference number, or a specific phrase. This is often a deliberate filter to identify who read their instructions. Following it puts you ahead of most applicants before they read a word.

Otherwise: informative, not clever. It should tell the professor what this is and who it is from, in the part visible on a phone — roughly the first forty characters.

Formulas that work:

PhD application Fall 2027 – [your subfield] – [Your Name]
 Prospective PhD student – [specific topic] – [Your Name]
 [Reference number] – Application – [Your Name]
 MSc thesis on [topic] – PhD enquiry – [Your Name]

Subject lines that get deleted:

- Application — about what?
 - Hello Professor — no information
 - Inquiry / Request — vague
 - Request for PhD position under your kind guidance — long, and reads as a template
 - URGENT or anything with exclamation marks
 - Blank
-

6.5 Salutation

Use: Dear Professor [Last name],

This is correct almost everywhere in the world and cannot cause offence. If their faculty page shows they are not a professor — a lecturer, a research fellow, a group leader — then Dear Dr [Last name], is right.

Never use:

Wrong	Why
Respected Sir/Madam	Signals a mass mailing immediately, and shows you do not know their name
Dear Sir	Assumes gender, and roughly half the time it is wrong
Dear Prof. Maria Fernandez	Title plus full name reads as a mail merge
Hi Maria	Too informal for a first contact in most countries
Dear Professor Maria	First names are not used with titles
Greetings of the day	Reads as a template

Two practical notes:

- **Get the surname right.** For Spanish and Portuguese names, people publish with two surnames but are usually addressed by the first one. For Chinese names, the family name often comes first. Check how they are referred to on their own faculty page.
- **Do not guess gender.** Dear Professor [Last name] avoids the problem entirely. This is one reason it is the safest default.

6.6 The opening sentence

One sentence. Who you are, what you want, and when.

No throat-clearing. Delete “I hope this email finds you well” — it costs you your most valuable line and says nothing.

Weak: > I hope this email finds you well. My name is Ahmed and I am writing to you today because I have long been fascinated by the field of machine learning and have always dreamed of pursuing a PhD abroad.

Forty-five words and the professor still does not know what you want.

Strong: > I am a final-year MSc student in Computer Science at [University], writing to ask whether you will be taking a PhD student for Fall 2027.

Twenty-six words. The professor now knows your level, your field, your target intake, and your question. If they are not taking students, they can reply in one line and you both save time — which is a good outcome, not a bad one.

6.7 The specificity paragraph — why them

This is the paragraph that decides whether you get a reply. It comes straight from your Module 4 research note.

Two to three sentences. The structure:

[Something specific and current about their work] + [your honest connection to it]

Draw on one of these, in order of strength:

1. **A limitation or future direction they named themselves** — strongest, because it proves you read past the abstract
2. **A recently funded project** — strong, because it signals you understand their situation
3. **A specific technical detail from a recent paper** — good
4. **The paper title only** — weak; this is what everyone else does

Example:

In your 2025 paper on protein structure prediction, you noted that accuracy dropped for membrane proteins because of limited training data. I worked on a closely related data-scarcity problem in my MSc thesis, using augmentation strategies for heavily imbalanced medical imaging datasets.

Apply the specificity test from Module 4.9 before you keep it: *could this exact sentence be sent to any other professor in this field?* If yes, rewrite it.

What does not belong here:

- “Your groundbreaking / pioneering / world-renowned work”
- “I was deeply impressed by your excellent publications”
- Praise of any kind that is not attached to specific content

Professors are not persuaded by admiration. They are persuaded by evidence that you understood something.

6.8 The evidence paragraph — why you

Two to three sentences. Concrete, and preferably measurable.

The rule: show, do not claim. Delete every adjective you have applied to yourself.

Delete	Replace with
I am a hardworking and dedicated student	I completed a six-month thesis on X, supervised by Prof. Y
I am passionate about research	I presented this work at [conference/departmental seminar]
I am a quick learner	I taught myself PyTorch and implemented Z
I have excellent programming skills	I built a pipeline in Python that processed 40,000 images

Example:

My thesis achieved a 12% improvement over the baseline on a public benchmark, and the code is publicly available. I have two years of Python and PyTorch experience and have worked with clinical imaging data under supervision at [Lab/Hospital].

Numbers, named tools, real outputs. That is all this paragraph needs to do.

What to leave out of the first email:

- Your GPA, if it is not strong (see Module 8 — the cold email is not where you explain weaknesses)
- Your full academic history
- Family circumstances or financial need
- Visa questions
- Salary or stipend questions
- “I will work very hard and not disappoint you”

6.9 The ask

One question, and one only. It should be answerable in a single line, because an email that requires effort to answer gets postponed.

Good asks:

Would you be taking a PhD student for Fall 2027?

Is the position described in your recent post still open?

Would you be open to a short call to discuss whether my background fits your group?

Bad asks:

- “Please consider my application and grant me admission to your esteemed university” — you are asking for a decision they cannot make by email
- “Please review my attached documents and let me know your valuable feedback” — you are asking for work
- Three questions in a row — the reply gets postponed and then forgotten
- No question at all — surprisingly common, and it leaves the professor with nothing to respond to

6.10 Sign-off, signature, attachments

Sign-off: Best regards, or Kind regards, — both are correct everywhere. Avoid Yours faithfully (dated), Thanks & Regards (reads as a template), and Warm regards (too familiar for a first contact).

Signature — four lines, no images:

```
Best regards,
Ahmed Rahman
MSc Computer Science, [University Name]
[Google Scholar or GitHub or LinkedIn – only if it helps]
+00 000 000 0000
```

No logos, no quotes, no coloured text, no “Sent from my iPhone.”

Attachment line — one sentence, immediately before the sign-off:

I have attached my CV and transcript. I am happy to send anything else that would be useful.

6.11 Attachments

What to attach:

Document	When
CV (1-2 pages, academic format)	Always
Transcript	Usually — check if they asked
Test scores (GRE / IELTS / TOEFL)	Only if strong, and only if relevant to that country

Two or three files. Never six. A long list of attachments is a reliable signal of someone applying everywhere at once.

Rules:

- **PDF only.** Never .docx — formatting breaks across devices and it looks unprofessional.
- **Never .zip.** Many university mail servers block them.
- **Name them properly:** `Rahman_Ahmed_CV.pdf`, not `cv final final2.pdf`.
- **Keep the total under about 3 MB.** Some institutional servers reject large attachments outright, and your email disappears without either of you knowing.
- **Do not send a cloud link that requires an access request.** Most professors will not click “request access” and wait for you to approve it. If a file is genuinely too large, use a link that works without permissions.

6.12 The complete email

The name, professor, and paper below are invented. The structure and the word count are the parts to copy.

Putting it together:

Subject: PhD application Fall 2027 – computational biology – Ahmed Rahman

Dear Professor Fernandez,

I am a final-year MSc student in Computer Science at [University], writing to ask whether you will be taking a PhD student for Fall 2027.

In your 2025 paper on protein structure prediction, you noted that accuracy dropped for membrane proteins because of limited training data. I worked on a closely related data-scarcity problem in my MSc thesis, using augmentation strategies for heavily imbalanced medical imaging datasets.

My thesis achieved a 12% improvement over the baseline on a public benchmark, and the code is publicly available. I have two years of Python and PyTorch experience and have worked with clinical imaging data under supervision at [Lab].

Would you be taking a student for Fall 2027? I have attached my CV and transcript, and am happy to send anything else that would help.

Best regards,
 Ahmed Rahman
 MSc Computer Science, [University]
[github.com/\[username\]](https://github.com/[username])

Body: 148 words. Four short paragraphs. One question. Two attachments.

Notice what is absent: no life story, no praise, no GPA, no promises about how hard he will work, no apology for taking their time, and no mention of visas or funding amounts.

Module 7 contains the full template library — variants for low GPA, career changers, applicants with publications, European funded positions, follow-ups, and replies.

6.13 Your sending setup

Your email address matters. Use `firstname.lastname@gmail.com` or a close variant. An address you created at sixteen will undermine everything above it.

University address or personal address? A university address helps credibility and deliverability slightly. But you lose access when you graduate, and application cycles run long — replies can arrive months later. If you are close to graduating, use a personal address, or set up forwarding before you lose the account.

Send plain text. No coloured fonts, no background images, no HTML signature graphics. Fancy formatting triggers spam filters and looks like marketing.

Do not use read-receipt trackers. Some corporate and university mail systems flag them, they can land you in spam, and knowing that your email was opened four times will not help you — it will only make waiting worse.

Timing: Tuesday to Thursday, in the professor’s morning, is a reasonable default. Avoid Friday afternoons, weekends, and the professor’s local holidays. Check their time zone before sending. This matters far less than content, so do not agonise over it.

6.14 The pre-send audit

Read this list every time. It takes ninety seconds and prevents the errors that cannot be undone.

- ☐ Correct professor, correct university — **the copy-paste error is the most common fatal mistake**
 - ☐ Name spelled correctly, in both the salutation and the body
 - ☐ Subject line follows their stated format, if they gave one
 - ☐ Body is under 200 words
 - ☐ The specificity paragraph passes the “could I send this to anyone else?” test
 - ☐ No “Respected Sir/Madam”, no “kindly do the needful”, no “revert back”
 - ☐ Every self-describing adjective removed
 - ☐ Exactly one question, answerable in one line
 - ☐ Attachments actually attached — you mentioned them, so check
 - ☐ All files are PDF, correctly named, total under 3 MB
 - ☐ Read it aloud once. Anything you stumble over, rewrite.
 - ☐ Send yourself a test copy and read it on your phone
-

6.15 Mistakes gallery

1. **The copy-paste disaster.** The previous professor’s name still in the body. Unrecoverable.
2. **The life story.** Six paragraphs beginning with childhood.
3. **The wall of text.** No line breaks. Unreadable on a phone, so it is not read.
4. **The attachment dump.** CV, transcript, three certificates, IELTS, a photograph, a cover letter.
5. **The missing attachment.** Mentioned, not attached. Now you must send a follow-up that says nothing else.
6. **Empty flattery.** “Your esteemed and groundbreaking research.”
7. **The pre-emptive apology.** “Sorry to disturb you, I know you are very busy.” Do not open by framing yourself as an imposition.

8. **The demand.** “I need your response by Friday as I have other offers.”
 9. **Money and visas up front.** Both are legitimate questions, and both belong in a later conversation.
 10. **The obvious AI draft.** Long, fluent, enthusiastic, and containing no specific fact. Professors identify these quickly, and the cost is not just one lost reply — it makes them more sceptical of the next genuine student who writes to them.
-

6.16 Checklist

Before moving to Module 7:

- ☐ Research note from Module 4 open in front of me
 - ☐ Subject line drafted, following any stated format
 - ☐ Salutation uses `Dear Professor [Last name]`
 - ☐ Opening sentence states who I am, what I want, and when — in one sentence
 - ☐ Specificity paragraph built from a limitation, future direction, or funded project
 - ☐ Evidence paragraph is concrete, with numbers or named outputs
 - ☐ Exactly one clear ask
 - ☐ Signature is four plain lines
 - ☐ Two or three PDF attachments, properly named, under 3 MB total
 - ☐ Body under 200 words
 - ☐ Pre-send audit completed
 - ☐ Tested on my own phone
-

Next: Module 7 — The template library. Fourteen situation-specific templates, plus annotated before-and-after rewrites of real emails.

That was one module of thirteen

You have just read **Module 6** — how to structure the email itself.

The full guide covers the rest of the process:

Module 1	How PhD funding actually works, and who really decides
Module 2	Reading a post: is it real, funded, current, open to you?
Module 3	Finding any professor — including their unpublished email
Module 4	The 30-minute research that makes an email worth answering
Module 5	Shortlisting, fit scoring, and tracking forty applications
Module 6	<i>You just read this one</i>
Module 7	14 templates — cold outreach, low GPA, follow-ups, replies
Module 8	Low GPA, no publications, gaps: what helps, what cannot be fixed
Module 9	Follow-up timing, and how to diagnose silence
Module 10	What a “yes” actually commits them to, and preparing for the call
Module 11	CV, transcripts, statement of purpose, research proposal
Module 12	Scams, agents, and protecting your documents
Module 13	How destination countries differ

133 pages. 13 modules. 14 templates.

What it will not do

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It is not a set of templates to paste. The templates are scaffolding; the specific paragraph is always yours to write.

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\$12 launch price — then \$19.

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Questions: techguff.help@gmail.com