

How to Find a Mentor by Amber Hess

These are the steps Mary Lou O'Donnell's students take in order to find a mentor (these are also the same steps that some of my friends from Intel STS took). With a little modification, these steps can also be used to contact a mentor who is not nearby (do a phone interview instead of a meeting, and so forth). And, Ms. O'Donnell adds, "Advice for teachers: Students must find their own mentors! It's the only way they'll appreciate the mentor. This advice comes from many times when I've mentored kids and they come back complaining about my choice, the lab, etc. Mentors respond when contacted by motivated students, not by motivated teachers."

1. Determine your general areas of interest: physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, astronomy, etc.
2. Search nearby research university websites for scientists in the departments of these schools. Ms. O'Donnell states: "We steer our students to university professors. We have had private psychologists, doctors, and engineers work with students, but find that the level of research is usually not high enough." You want someone who is actively publishing research in his or her field, or in engineering, someone working directly on cutting-edge products or techniques in the area.
3. At the department webpage for the university, bring up the faculty biographies. Read through them all, noting the email addresses or contact information for those you are interested in.
4. Once you've gathered 20-30 professors' biographies, research them one by one. Prior to contact, you must find recent articles written by the potential mentor. This is extremely important. You don't want to look like an idiot when you contact him or her, and it will also help you determine if the person is involved in research that is similar to your project.
5. Draft a personalized email in which you identify yourself, your school, and identify specifically what interested you about the scientist's research. In the email, you should *never* directly ask "to be my mentor." Instead, you might want to mention that you are interested in doing research, in general. Request a meeting so you can speak more about his or her research. You might also ask him or her to distribute your request throughout the department if he or she cannot help you. One of his or her colleagues might be looking for a student with whom to do research. (This is actually how one of my friends from Intel STS got a mentor. The person she emailed was nice enough to send her request to others in the department, and someone else replied.)
6. Have someone proofread and edit the letter.
7. Mail it out and hope for the best. Note that you might go through numerous rejections until you find someone who wants to help you. Some of the people you contact might not even respond. When I emailed judges, there were always a few who never replied. Keep meeting and calling people! Eventually, you should be able to find a potential mentor. Often, the response to the email alone is only 33%-50%, so don't lose hope if only a few potential mentors reply. Positive responses range from less than 10% to as much as 33% (determined by asking a few fellow students involved in research).

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