How do you prepare for the first meeting with a potential mentor?

Realize that meeting with your prospective mentor for the first time is just like having a job interview. For all practical purposes you will be interviewing that person as a prospective mentor for your senior practicum (deciding if this will be a good fit for you and your research ideas/needs). You must conduct yourself as you would in a professional setting. Dress appropriately, prepare by reading the mentors publications, understand the mentor's work, and have whatever questions you may have ready. The key words are “PREPARATION and QUESTIONS.”; it is vital that you are fully prepared for your mentor meeting.

Some tips for interviewing:

- Always bring a notebook and a pen
- Bring a copy of background research
- Maintain good posture
- Dress appropriately
- Be polite and respectful
- Knock on the door (even if it is open). Do not just barge in because it's 4 p.m. and that's when you were supposed to meet.
- Write down the office number and time you are supposed to meet. Laboratories can be confusing.
- Arrive at the building early. You may want to do a quick walk-by to make sure you know where the office is.

Always be professional when working with a mentor; it is of the utmost importance to be so during your first contact with him or her. Your goal is to convince your prospective mentor that you would make a valuable team player to his/her lab.

- Do not pursue mentors, labs or projects in which you are not truly interested, nor settle for a research effort simply because the lab is willing to accept you as labor. Focus on people and situations that match your career goals.
- If a potential mentor does not respond to an initial email, contact them again after about one week or so. Getting in touch with a mentor often takes several tries. Don't be discouraged if you don't hear back immediately or cannot reach them right away. Keep trying! Mentors invariably are extremely busy people, but usually happy to talk to students about their research and professional development, particularly during office hours. Once you contact the potential mentor, restate your real interest in the kind of work they do and your fascination with becoming
involved in a research project in that area. Ask if they need help on a research project in which they are currently engaged. Even if they say no, meet with that person anyway. Their personal impression of you may change their attitude. At the least they will likely know of other persons involved in the same area of research you can contact.

- Be certain to do your homework before you go to office hours; study the faculty member’s research interests, areas of specialization and publications. Be able to state why you are seeking out this particular person’s advice.

- Don’t go empty handed – bring background information about yourself including your name, address, phone number, email address, your area of research interest, your educational background, any previous research experience. You may also want to include a paragraph or two summarizing your research interests. In effect, go prepared with the Curriculum Vita (CV) (aka Resumé) that you develop in this seminar. Many mentors also like to see a copy of your academic transcripts. Take along a list of specific questions/requests for guidance.

- Bring along some potential senior practicum project ideas you have thought through. This will demonstrate to the mentor that you have critically thought about key questions, and developed corresponding hypotheses to test your ideas. Realize that your mentor will likely find flaws in your potential research effort and suggest modifications or alternatives. Be open to these approaches; this is what a mentor is for-putting you on a viable track.

- Do not walk in and say "So, I want to do research in your lab," with no clue what the researcher is doing or what part of his or her work you would be involved in; you need to prepared! Under no circumstances give the impression that you will be just another drain on your potential mentor’s time. Rather make it clear that you will be exactly the opposite, a contributing facilitator of the mentors research team.

- Before leaving, think about the follow-up you should have with the potential mentor. If you have established a good rapport and can develop an ongoing relationship, make arrangements for the next meeting to continue the process. Ask what you can accomplish in the interim period.

- If there isn’t a good match between your interests and those of the potential mentor, remember to ask that person to suggest other colleagues you might approach. Even if this particular individual has been very helpful, it will likely be useful to speak with those people as well, the more input you get in finding a mentor, the better.