Finding an SIR Advisor: How-to Guide

Students in the Student Inquiry and Research (SIR) program work independently, doing research to answer significant questions in areas of STEM, the arts, and the humanities. New for this year, we are requiring meetings so that students prepare well and in advance for SIR. You are more likely to be successful in finding an advisor if 1) you can demonstrate that you have specific knowledge of a potential advisor’s work; and 2) your first contact with a potential advisor is professional and presents you in the best possible light. There are potential advisors who will disqualify you if your email has typographical and/or grammatical errors! The best way to ensure success is to plan in advance.

The first step of the program is to find an advisor and an investigation or research topic. As with research, the SIR student is expected to independently accomplish this task, with guidance from the SIR staff. We offer workshops on finding an advisor in which you can ask questions about the program, get tips on finding potential advisors, and work on crafting potential advisor emails. Whether you attend a workshop or not, when you are ready to choose a topic, please follow the instructions below and complete the attached form. You will be assigned a week during the spring semester in which you will meet individually with an SIR staff member to review your work. After receiving feedback, you will be given approval to contact potential advisors. The more thoughtful and prepared you are, the better your SIR experience will be.

Sophomores:
You must follow the process described here to be enrolled in Summer or Academic Year SIR.

Juniors:

   a) If you are returning to the same advisor for your SIR, you do not need to follow this process to be enrolled in SIR. Please email Dr. Schepppler and let her know your status.

   b) If you are changing advisors or have never done an SIR, you need to follow the process described here to be enrolled in Summer or Academic Year SIR.

1. Choose an area of interest that you want to study. SIR tries to honor all students in all disciplines and fields. You can find ideas of investigations by searching past SIR abstracts on the SIR website: https://www3.imsa.edu/learning/inquiry/Outcomes/SIR/Abstracts. You can also get ideas from talking with students currently in SIR or with Dr. Schepppler.

2. Identify 5-10 potential advisors at IMSA or in the Chicago area that have a current interest in your area of interest. Again, you can use past SIR abstracts and look at university websites by department to help you. We are unable to bus to all locations; common SIR sites have been: Adler Planetarium, Argonne National Laboratory, Aurora area businesses, downtown Chicago businesses, Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, Field Museum, Illinois Institute of Technology, Loyola University, Northwestern University (Evanston and downtown), University of Chicago, University of Illinois at Chicago, and so forth. If you have another location in mind, please check with Dr. Schepppler.

Once you have identified names, find each potential advisor’s institution website. Do a literature search to see what each investigator has recently studied. Become familiar with each potential advisor’s research by reading a few of his/her papers.

3. Please do the following depending on where your first choice of advisor is located:

   a) Off campus: write a brief paragraph summarizing his/her work. This demonstrates that you know some specific information about the research investigation that you are applying for.
b) On campus: write a brief outline of your investigation plan and state why that person would be a good advisor for your investigation.

c) If you are interested in pursuing an SIR at Argonne National Laboratory (ANL) or Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory (FNAL), skip to #10 for special instructions.

For “back-up” advisors, you don’t need to write a complete paragraph, but will need 6-10 facts in bullet form about their research.

4. Write your introductory email. Your email should introduce you, your ideas for the investigation, and why the potential advisor is a good advisor for you and your investigation. This document should contain the following information:

   a) succinctly introduce IMSA and the SIR program;

   b) introduce yourself briefly;

   c) indicate what specific research skills you have obtained, and how you obtained them (IMSA class - name it, no acronyms; science fair project; and so forth);

   d) include specifics about the type of investigation you want to do, for example, computer analysis, bench experiments, literature analysis, data review and analysis, surveys, if applicable;

   e) describe your ideas for the investigation;

For off-campus advisors: there may be more than one person in a research group who could advise you. You should state politely that if the person you are contacting is busy, you would be willing to work with someone else in the group and ask whether the person could recommend someone.

For on-campus advisors: In addition the information in b- e above, please ask for an appointment to meet in person and talk.

Make sure your introductory email flows and reads well; for example, blend sections b-d so that the information about you and your skills combines with the information about the investigation you want to do. There is a SIR Sample Prospective Advisor Letter on Moodle that you can read for ideas, but you need to make your introductory email represent you and your work. DO NOT copy this document or even have it open when you write your own introductory email!

4. If you are doing an off-campus SIR, identify an IMSA faculty member who knows you well and ask him/her to digitally complete an SIR Recommendation Form. This form can be found in Section 2 (Getting Started - Finding Topic and Advisor) on the SIR Moodle page. Your teacher should email this recommendation directly to Dr. Scheppler. (Make sure you give the teacher a digital copy NOT a paper copy.) You do not send a recommendation if you are pursuing an on-campus SIR.

5. During the week of your SIR advising session you will meet with an SIR staff member to go over your advisor list, advisor research information, and advisor email. Bring a hard copy of this work as well as your computer to this meeting. Note: Please proofread your work prior to the meeting. If there are errors or gaps in your work, you will be sent on your way and will need to reschedule.

6. Once approved, email a final copy of the “IMSA SIR Advisor Research” form to the SIR staff member with whom you worked.

7. After you receive feedback and approval from an SIR staff member, send an email to your first choice potential advisor ONLY. Please copy Dr. Scheppler on your emails to potential SIR advisors so she can
forward your recommendation to him/her. When Dr. Scheppler is copied on off-campus advisor emails, this can help get a response from a potential advisor (not necessarily a “yes” response, but it makes the email more credible). Use your IMSA email address (not gmail!) for additional credibility and use a good email subject line. Give the potential advisor 24 to 48 hours to respond. If there is no response, then you should follow up with either another email or a phone call. Be persistent but polite. Remember that potential advisors would be investing a significant amount of their time (and possibly supplies) if they agree to take you on as an advisee.

8. If the potential advisor says “yes,” you MUST also say “yes.” It is not appropriate to tell the advisor that you have changed your mind, or that you will get back to him/her after you follow up on some other leads. Don’t fish! At this point, you should get all of the contact information for the advisor (name, institution address, phone, email) to Dr. Scheppler (quella@imsa.edu). Good background information and preparation should ensure a good fit.

9. If the potential advisor says “no,” respond with a brief “thank you for your consideration” email, and move on to the next person on your list.

10. For those interested in working at Argonne National Laboratory or Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory: Please complete the specific application found in Section 2 (Getting Started- Finding Topic and Advisor) on the SIR Moodle page. These institutions have very specific application procedures that you must follow. Please make your advising appointment with Dr. Scheppler. Do not directly contact staff at these facilities. Application does not assure placement, and if you apply to either of these places you are expected to accept that placement if offered. You may not apply elsewhere until you have a response. If you are not placed, we will do our best to assist you with finding another placement.

11. If you haven’t found an advisor by late April, you may be able to use IMSAlquium to find one. The abstract book describing the investigations that IMSA students are currently undertaking will be posted on the SIR web site in early April. Use it to review areas of interest. Many off-campus advisors are present at IMSAlquium, and this is an opportune time for you to make an initial face-to-face approach, but you should email the potential advisor in advance to set up a meeting time at IMSAlquium.

12. At the latest you should begin approaching potential advisors in May and June. Make an appointment to visit them over the summer, and perhaps spend a week (or more) working with them during the summer to increase your familiarity with their work. This can be especially important with lab-based investigations, as one day each week is not optimal when some experiments require multiple days to complete.

12. Summer SIR credit is available, providing you meet SIR standards and program requirements. Details about Summer SIR requirements, which are basically the same as during the academic year, are found on the SIR Moodle site. See Dr. Scheppker with questions.
IMSA SIR Advisor Research

Please save this document as LastnameFirstnameIMSAID# (eg. JettTaylor99999). Email the final approved document to the SIR staff member who worked with you. If you are applying to ANL or FNAL, complete the appropriate application, found on Moodle, and meet with Dr. Scheppler; this document is not needed.

Name_________________________________________ IMSA ID # ______________________

Partner name if applicable________________________________________________________

Check one:  Summer SIR ☐  Academic Year SIR ☐

Topic(s) of Interest:

1. Potential Advisors

a. Top Choice________________________________________ Institution____________________

Off-campus- Write a brief paragraph (~100 words) about potential advisor’s research.

On-campus- Write a brief outline of your investigation plan and state why the person you indentified would be a good advisor for your investigation (~100 words).

b. List 4-9 other potential advisors, their institutions, and 6-10 bullet points about their research.

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2. Biography and introductory email:

3. Name of IMSA teacher who is doing your SIR Recommendation________________________