

# Applying to Grad School 101

This document is meant to serve as a living resource for applying to PhD programs. While this is primarily based on PhD applications, much of the information is also relevant to med school or even vet school!

This resource was put together by many current PhD students and contains our own thoughts and advice. If you would like to add a successful personal statement, please contact [abbymcgee721@gmail.com](mailto:abbymcgee721@gmail.com)

## General Timeline\*

- *Spring/summer*: Start thinking about grad school and researching programs, take GRE if necessary
- *August*: Update your CV, work on fellowships if applying (due in October)
- *September*: Start personal statement
- *September*: Ask for letters of rec (LoRs) from recommenders
- *October/November*: Send recommenders all info in portals, continue working on personal statement, request all other info needed for portals (GRE scores, transcripts, etc.)
- *Early-mid December*: Applications due!
- *December-January*: Starting hearing back from schools
- *January-March*: Interviews (as of 2023, a mix of zoom and in person; see below)
- *April 15*: Decision day!

**\*NOTE:** for medical/veterinary school, this timeline is shifted by several months (applications typically open in May or June). You should plan to ask for LoRs and start working on your essays near the beginning of summer as application due dates can be as early as August or September.

## GRE

Many schools got rid of the GRE requirement in 2020. Some schools still have an optional GRE submission, which you should do if you think it will benefit you (i.e. if you did well).

## Applying to Fellowships

Applying to fellowships is not strictly necessary but is an added boost to your grad app, especially if you are coming directly from undergrad or don't have publications. Fellowships will allow you to conduct research that's not restricted to a specific project in line with your advisor's grants. It will help you get organized sooner and make the actual application process easier since you will have all of the materials more or less ready. While fellowship decisions aren't back by the time schools make admissions decisions, you can often report to schools which fellowships you have applied for. It can be beneficial to have a fellowship when rotating or selecting a lab in grad school, but most programs have courses or resources to help you apply in the first or second year of grad school if you don't get one.

The NSF Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP) is one of the most common ones - more info and examples can be found [here](#) and [here](#). Note that for the GRFP, you can only apply one time once you enroll in graduate school, and will be held to a higher standard so applying prior to graduate school can help you receive some feedback to strengthen your application.

## **CV**

Your CV is a major component of your application. This should be updated, free of any typos, and in line with your research goals as outlined in your personal statement. Here are some [CV tips and examples](#) and some [templates](#) from the MIT Biological Engineering Communication Lab.

## **Personal Statement/Statement of Purpose/Research Statement**

This is another major component of a grad school application. Depending on the program, this may be one or two documents, with slightly different prompts. In general, these statements contain some personal background, your scientific journey, why you want to get a PhD from this program, and a few labs you would be interested in rotating with. There are examples of successful personal statements below.

The key to writing a good personal statement, like any other piece of writing, is lots of iteration. It helps to get other people to read it in order to ensure that the points you are trying to make come across. It can be useful to form a group with peers who are also in the application process and iterate on your statements together over several weeks or months. Your friends and family members can provide additional sets of eyes. Many institutions also have writing labs or comm labs, so check if this is an option. If so, staff usually have tons of experience with CVs and personal statements, and have great advice. We highly recommend finding a comm lab fellow who you like and working with them throughout the process, from brainstorming and outlining to the final edits. A draft is never “too early” to go to them for feedback.

## **Reaching out to Professors**

Whether contacting professors in your desired programs ahead of time helps with admissions or not is highly dependent on the program. This will especially depend on whether the program does rotations only or direct admission to specific labs. Some schools explicitly state that you should or should not reach out to professors, so follow the guidance given on program websites. If you are unsure or there is no guidance provided, you could reach out to someone in admissions to ask.

For schools that do direct admission, reaching out to an advisor is critical. For schools that do rotations only, you should consider contacting advisors as something you have the option to do if you have specific questions whose answers would help you decide whether to apply or not. If you contact advisors just because you think you're supposed to, but you don't really have anything you want to ask that's not answered on the website, it isn't likely to either yield useful answers or increase your chances of admission. Often, professors don't respond to emails at all,

but if they do respond, be prepared to essentially do an informal interview with them ahead of actual interviews and come prepared with specific questions.

### **Letters of Recommendation (LoRs)**

Also an important part of your application! Most schools require ~3 letters. One of these often comes from your PI/current boss, but don't forget to ask with plenty of time! The other letters can come from previous supervisors or collaborators. Be sure to ask your recommenders with plenty of time and be prepared to provide additional information, including your CV, personal statement, or other documents as necessary. Especially for recommenders who don't know you as well, it is also a good idea to offer to meet with them to discuss your academic interests.

Recommenders will need to be added to online portals, and will likely be inundated with emails from each school. To make this process easier on them, we recommend making a google sheet with the name of each school, program, and the letter due date.

For medical/veterinary schools, there may be more specific requirements for who your LoRs need to come from. For example, when applying to veterinary school you are required to have at least one recommendation from a veterinarian. Make sure to check with each program that you are applying to.

### **Online Portals**

Don't underestimate the amount of time it will take to accurately fill out all of the biographical/educational information on each program's portal. Even though you usually upload a CV, most portals still require you to copy/paste this information into a bunch of separate fields. Some portals will make you calculate different iterations of your GPA or other dumb things, so give yourself enough time for this.

For medical/veterinary school there is a centralized application portal (AMCAS or VMCAS) where you can submit a general application to all schools. In most cases, each school will also have a supplemental application which may or may not be accessible through the portal. Make sure that you triple check which schools require a supplemental application and their individual submission requirements.

### **Application Fees**

Each application also requires a fee, usually ~\$100-\$150 per school. Some schools will have information sessions in the fall, where they will give a fee waiver or discount code to attendees, so be sure to attend any info sessions. Depending on the program and your current income, you also may be eligible for fee waivers, so check out the fee waiver information on each program's website. The final option for getting fee waivers is certain national clubs, especially STEM clubs for historically-marginalized communities, so keep an eye out for that. Note that if you get a fee waiver, the application deadline is often a few days earlier than usual to allow for fee waiver processing.

If you are submitting the GRE (which a few schools still require or allow), this will also cost ~\$30 for each school (unless you submit your scores at the test center on the day of your exam - you can usually send scores to up to five schools for free).

In all, you should expect to be paying hundreds of dollars for your applications, unfortunately, so plan ahead!

### **Interviews/Recruitment**

Depending on the school and the COVID situation, interviews and recruitment may be combined in person or split (interviews first on zoom, followed by recruitment in person).

Interviews generally entail a set of one-on-one interviews with faculty, ranging anywhere from 15 mins to 1 hour each. The number of interviews can also vary a lot, ranging from 3-10 ish per school. Usually the faculty interviewing you are a mix of faculty that you are interested in and admissions committee members. It is important to engage equally with all faculty members, even if you are not interested in their work.

Interviews often follow the same general format, but sometimes professors have a specific structure in mind that they will communicate to you at the start. Usually you introduce yourself and your research experience and interests, then the professor discusses their research. You are expected to engage with their work (i.e. ask questions, pose ideas, etc.) in a back-and-forth, not a one-way lecture. This is usually followed by time for general program questions. A general overview and some advice can be found in the attached pamphlet. A few tips:

- Be prepared with a 3-5 min elevator pitch of your story, including any relevant personal background, research experience (the why is more important than the how here), and future goals. Here, be prepared to answer questions about anything you mention in your application or interview, including nitty gritty details about the technical aspects.
- Be prepared with questions about their work. If you know your interview schedule ahead of time, familiarize yourself with the lab website and general research goals of the lab. Reading papers is probably overkill, unless you really want to work with this professor. Read until you have a few questions to ask!
  - Questions about their work are usually the safest bet.
  - There are certain questions that are better posed to grad students - things like stipend, grad housing, work-life balance, etc.
  - Some useful lists of questions can be found [here](#) and [here](#).
- Be prepared to answer questions about why you want to attend this school/program. Remember, you are also trying to get information out of these interviews! They want to make sure you are a good fit for their program and that, generally, you seem like a person they would enjoy working with. Some other common general questions you might get asked:
  - What are you looking for in a mentor/PI?
  - Describe a recent book or scientific paper that you read.
  - Why grad school vs. industry?

- Occasionally, an interviewer will totally grill you. Stay calm and remember it's okay to say you don't know (or "thank you, that's an interesting direction"). It's better to be honest than pretend like you know details that you don't! It's also fine to say you will circle back with someone, but then actually follow up. If this happens to you, don't worry! They probably have a reputation for being tough on interviewees and the admissions committee may take this into consideration.
- For medical and veterinary school interviews, also be prepared to answer ethical and situational-based questions. Some examples can be found [here](#) and [here](#). The multiple mini interview ([MMI](#)) format is relatively common, and can be somewhat difficult to prepare for, so if you have one of these read up on the process itself!

After interviews, don't forget to send an email thanking the professors for their time. It's also nice to email the admin who coordinated the interviews.

Recruitment is the fun part! Some schools hold recruitment for admitted students only, but sometimes it's in tandem with the interviews, pre-decision. You may or may not be matched with a host student. This is your chance to explore campus, have fun, and ask grad students questions (see below). They will usually give you pretty unfiltered answers, so take advantage of this and try to find out if the program is a good fit for you! As a heads up, these days are often 12+ hours long, so take care of yourself during them.

Also, there is often a mix of grad students and faculty at these recruitment events. More often than you would think, a recruit assumes that a young faculty member is a grad student or an older grad student is a faculty member, which can be super awkward! Don't make assumptions!

### **Example Questions to Ask Current Grad Students**

Grad school is a long time (5+ years) and life keeps happening during grad school. It's a good idea to ask *lots* of questions to current grad students, including about the nitty gritty, "boring" things like stipend, benefits, and what happens if something goes off course (e.g. you have to switch labs, you get sick, you need your wisdom teeth out, etc.).

#### *Stipend*

- What is the yearly stipend?
- What is the typical yearly stipend increase and has it historically kept up with inflation/cost-of-living in the area?
- Is there a graduate student union? If so, is there a current contract and where can I read it?
  - A contract will have a lot of information about stipend, benefits, etc.
- Are there any other fees that grad students are required to pay? If so, how much are they per year?
- What is a typical graduate student's budget in the program?

#### *Benefits*

- Does the program pay the premiums for your health insurance? If not, how much does it cost per month? What is the coverage like? How much are the copays?
- Can you see doctors outside of the university health system?
- What specialties are available at the university health system?
- Does the health insurance plan cover therapy? If so, what is the copay and how many sessions/year are covered? Are you allowed to see providers outside the university health system?
- Does the program offer and/or pay the premiums for your dental insurance or vision insurance? If so, what is the coverage like? Can you see providers outside the university health system?
- Are grad students offered paid parental leave? If so, how many weeks?
- Are grad students offered paid medical leave? If so, how many weeks?
- If the department normally pays the premium for your health insurance, will they continue to pay the premium while you are on medical, parental, or personal leave? If not, what is the premium cost per month?
- Are there any other benefits offered? For example, subsidized transit pass, gym membership, etc.

#### *Funding*

- How many years are grad students guaranteed funding? If there is a limit, what happens if a grad student reaches that limit and isn't done with their dissertation?
- Is it common for funding to be a source of stress for grad students?
- What happens in the case where an advisor no longer has sufficient funds to pay a grad student?
- Are there differences in your funding if you decide to join a lab outside of the department?

#### *Program Policies*

- Is it possible to join a lab outside the department?
- What is the process for switching labs if you want to switch to a new advisor? Are there any restrictions on whether this is allowed? If you decide to find a new lab, will your stipend continue to be paid while you search for a new advisor?
- How would you describe the quals process? Do students normally take time away from research to prepare? How common is it for students to fail their quals and what happens in this case?
- What is the process like for choosing a lab? Are there rotations and if so how long are the rotations?
- How common is it for students to not get into their top choice lab?

#### *Program Culture*

- Are there regular department socials or a speaker series? If so, how well-attended are they?
- Are there internal department seminars or data clubs? Do people present unpublished work?

### *TA-ing*

- How many terms are you required to TA?
- What is the typical TA experience like? Are you teaching mostly undergrads or grad students?
- How many hours per week do you typically spend on TA work?
- Are there circumstances under which grad students are required to TA more than the typical amount?
  - For example, in some programs, if an advisor runs out of funding for a student, that student will be required to TA for funding (which can really slow down your progress towards a degree), whereas in other programs, the department will pick up the tab.

### *Housing*

- What fraction of your stipend do you pay for housing/rent?
- Where do grad students usually live? What is the typical commute?
- How common is it to live on-campus vs. off-campus?
- What are the conditions like in on-campus housing? Off-campus housing?

### **Choosing a Program**

Hopefully by this point, you have lots of wonderful options to choose from! There are many factors that go into choosing a school - just a few are listed here:

- Rotations
- Teaching requirements
- Logistics (location, stipend, etc.)
- Faculty with labs you are interested in (should have at least a handful)
- Some useful [advice](#) for choosing a program
- Some useful [advice](#) for choosing a graduate advisor

All schools have a shared decision day, April 15, by which you must commit to a program, although most programs like to know sooner if possible!

As a final note, grad school interviews can be intense. You are repeatedly asked deep questions about what you want to do with your life and you have to make a decision about the next 5-6+ years. It is totally normal to start feeling imposter syndrome/doubting your decision to apply. Pretty much everyone has experienced this too, so it can be helpful to talk to current grad students who also felt this way. Just remind yourself that you are doing this because you love science!