

## Applying to Graduate School: How, Where, When, What?

**\*\*NOTE\*\* -- I consider this document a useful cheat sheet for applying to graduate school, but if any of the advice or recommendations contradict what your advisor(s) say, please listen to them! I simply hope for the following information and advice to help demystify, break down, and make slightly less daunting the application process.**

### Where to apply

In considering where to apply, you want to keep a few things in mind: 1) the nature of the academic job market right now is, to put it bluntly, rough; tenure-track assistant professor positions are fewer and thus more competitive to attain. In order to be in the best position to attain a job upon completion of your graduate degree, you want to attend the strongest programs in your discipline; 2) top graduate programs are competitive to get into, and while you will be a strong candidate for each program, factors beyond your control (for example, how many of your peers are applying with the same research interests or how many people they accepted the year before in your subfields) could impact your chances of receiving an offer of admission. Thus, you want to apply as widely as you can--I recommend applying to 10-15 programs, if possible; 3) Most top programs are fully funded PhD programs--this means your tuition is covered, you receive a stipend, and typically have health insurance and benefits. I highly recommend only applying to fully funded programs.

In terms of finding programs to apply to, I recommend going to the US News & World Report rankings, looking at the top 25 programs in your discipline, and then whittling down your list from there. Go to each department's web page and check out their faculty (sometimes these pages will be searchable by research interest, sometimes you have to click through individually)--are there multiple faculty working in areas of interest to you? Check out their graduate student page--are there groups or programming that excite you? Can you tell what kinds of projects students are working on? What courses are being offered? This will help you figure out which places might be potentially good fits. Check out which institutions are homes to the scholars and experts in your field who are interlocutors for your research. And of course, consult with your advisor(s).

PhD programs are typically 5-7 years, so when considering where to apply, it's perfectly reasonable for geography to be a factor--you will be here for a significant amount of time and want to be in a place that will allow you to be your best self!

Once you've made your list, I recommend making an Excel spreadsheet that includes: deadline; application components (take especial note to whether or not they require the GRE and/or GRE Subject Test, whether they require official or unofficial transcripts, the page # of the writing sample, and whether they require any documents beyond the personal statement and writing sample--for example, some schools require a diversity statement); the price of the application fee and whether or not there are ways to obtain fee waivers; and website/login info for each school's submission portal.

### Components for Applying

**Personal Statement/Statement of Purpose:** This is the single most important document in your application and more aptly called a research proposal. You should include your research focus, detail the work you've done at Bryn Mawr that prepares you for graduate level research (this will be your thesis/Mellon project, as well as any additional research projects you may have engaged in here), discuss your future project, and then briefly say why that school's program is a good fit for you. This document is not a contract and most people deviate from what they say they will study in their personal statement as they proceed in graduate school. The point is to show that you are in command of your research and discipline and can conceive exciting, innovative, field-relevant questions and have plans for pursuing answers to them. This document will require a lot of drafting and redrafting (and redrafting some more)--do your best to get feedback from a few professors, if possible, as you draft and revise. Stick to all word limits and formatting requirements specified by a program--most programs call for a 1,000 word statement, and you have exactly a 100 word grace limit in either direction (i.e. don't submit anything under 900 words or over 1100 words).

**Writing Sample:** This is the next most important document in your application. This writing sample is ideally an excerpt from your thesis or other relevant research project. If your thesis isn't written at the time of application, a paper that most closely aligns with the work you propose to do in graduate school is appropriate. This sample should demonstrate your command of the field, the innovation of your research topic, and the finesse with which you can execute both. Be sure that this document is fully polished (e.g. no typos, abiding by the citational practices of your discipline) and is the strongest representation of your work. You may need to go back and edit, expand, and/or revise this document. Consult with your advisor(s) about what would make the best writing sample if you're unsure. Most places call for 20-25 page writing samples--be sure to stick to this limit and note if this is inclusive or exclusive of works cited, endnotes, etc. Note that there are some anomalous programs that only require a 10-15 page writing sample, so be prepared for that possibility.

**Recommendations:** Most schools will require 3 letters of recommendation. You should consult with your recommenders as soon as you've decided on applying to graduate school and share with them your list of potential schools as well as drafts of any application materials you have. When you've set your list, email them the final list, indicate each school's deadline, and the manner in which the recommendation will be requested (most application servers will generate a link for a recommendation, but there are some anomalous methods). Also send them the final version (or close to final version) of your personal statement when you have it. Write them a thank you note once your applications are in and keep them posted on your news!

**Transcripts:** Some places will require official transcripts--try to get those requests in early through Bionic so they're taken care of. For places that require unofficial transcripts, order a copy to your BMC mailbox, scan it, and save it as a PDF so it's ready to go when it's time to submit your applications.

**GRE General Test and Subject:** Most places still require this test. Be sure to check out your programs' pages to see if they specify a minimum GRE score (some do, but it's in the old GRE

score format -- here is a [conversion table](#)). Also see if they require a subject test. You should take the exam(s) by October of the year in which you are applying to graduate school to ensure your scores arrive in time for the December application deadlines. Taking it earlier allows you to see your scores and decide if you want to retake the test. Be sure to note the day that scores are released so you can submit the scores to the schools to which you're applying promptly.

PROTIP: Scores are valid for five years, so taking them shortly after doing a prep course may be ideal, even if you don't plan on applying to graduate school that cycle. ADDITIONAL PROTIP: If you know what schools you are or even might be applying to, you can send your score to up to 4 institutions of the day of the test for free. (Sending scores after this comes at \$27/recipient of score). I recommend taking advantage of this, but be sure to not waste sending a score to a school that doesn't require the test.

CV/Resume: If you're coming straight from undergrad, it is perfectly acceptable for this to be a resume that includes your educational background, fellowships and awards, conference presentations, activities, jobs, and any additional skills/languages you may have.

Application Fees: Some schools note on their website that they will waive the fee if you are on financial aid. If applicable, contact your financial aid officer and ask for a letter confirming you're on financial aid (let them know it's for grad school apps). Scan/make copies of this letter and upload/send accordingly. Additionally, some [MMUF schools](#) may waive the fee, so be sure to see if this is noted on their website.

Actually Applying: Give yourself more time than you think you will need (for example, I gave myself all of Thanksgiving Break--four days--and still needed an additional two to finish).

Uploading, checking documents (i.e. making sure you don't send a statement that says "I will thrive at UT Austin" if you're on the Stanford application), unexpected snafus (e.g. a transcript file being too big for a particular server) eats up lots of time.

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### **Theoretical Timeline:**

Summer/Fall:

- 1) study for GREs
- 2) take GREs
- 3) overhaul and polish writing sample

September:

- 1) set the list of schools you're applying to and create a spreadsheet
- 2) contact and confirm recommenders
- 3) give list of where you're applying to recommenders and let them know you'll be in touch with specific deadlines and app materials (CV/resume, draft of statement of purpose, writing sample, transcript)
- 4) once list is set, send GRE scores (if you have them) to those schools
- 5) order transcripts for yourself
- 6) scan transcripts and have PDF on hand
- 7) start drafting statement of purpose

8) finalize writing sample

October:

- 1) keep drafting statement of purpose
- 2) share drafts of statement with your advisor/profs
- 3) study for subject test GRE if applicable
- 4) take subject test GRE if applicable
- 5) set up accounts on whatever server for each school applying to
- 6) enter each school's app link and login info on your spreadsheet
- 6b) create a folder on your email to funnel grad app emails to
- 7) fill out what you can of each application (e.g. name, address, upload transcripts) -- this can be time consuming and you can save your progress and return to the apps later
- 8) figure out which schools want hard copies of transcripts (sometimes in lieu of electronic, sometimes in addition to) and put in these requests
- 9+10) find out which schools accept waivers for the application fee
- 9+10) if applicable, contact your financial aid officer and ask for a letter confirming you're on financial aid
- 11) polish writing sample

November:

- 1) keep drafting and ultimately finalize statement of purpose
- 2) send your recommenders a list of organized links/instructions for each school you're applying to and its deadline
- 2a) if you haven't already, send all materials to your recommenders; if it's a prof you've taken a class with, include final paper or midterm you wrote for them
- 3) get GRE subject scores and send them to schools that require it if applicable
- 4) APPLY!

December:

- 1) Finish applying
- 2) Wait.....!

*Prepared by Mary Zaborskis '12, Fall 2016*