Preparing Your Application

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Graduate Sisters
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Plan for today:

- Part 1: cover the application process
- Part 2: reading and editing your applications
Before the application...

- Find what you want to work on
- Find people who work on these problems: ask your thesis advisor, professors, your Graduate Sister...
- Studying their lab’s website, reviewing the list of publications
- Apply to schools where these professors work
Your Application

- Transcripts & grades
- GRE & TOEFL
- Personal statement
- Recommendations
- Awards, outreach, volunteering

Reviewed by 3+ faculty members
Grades

• Do grades matter?..

• Average admitted CMU grad student GPA: 3.8

• 3.5 - 4.0, but could go much lower

• Can boost grades during a Masters

• What really matters: research

• Graduate classes in your research area, with a decent grade
Some schools ignore GRE scores, some require it

Math + English

www.gre.org — a couple of month to prepare, take in the last year, before sending applications

Lots of study guides!

Do it while still in school (it’s good for 5 years)
TOEFL

• Test of English as a foreign language (only for non-native speakers)

• Prepare and do well on it :)

• Tells your future school if you can communicate effectively

• Sometimes students with lower scores are offered to take an English class
Personal statement

- A very important piece of your application!
- Personal statement == research statement
- What research have you done?
- What research you want to do?
- Why do you like research?
- Need to answer these questions + tell the committee that you have the right skillz
Personal statement

1. Describe areas of research that you want to explore

2. Describe research projects you worked on
   - what problem were you solving?
   - why is it important?
   - what did you try?
   - did it work? if no, why? alternatives?

3. Why you want to pursue a PhD

4. Why you want to apply to this school: why is it a good fit for you — change for each school
Personal statement

- **Avoid** talking about yourself too much; talk about the project(s) you have worked on

- **Can include** course projects that turned into something bigger

- **Mention** your teaching experience (TA, tutoring), your outreach efforts

- **Be selective**: do not list everything, instead, put your best foot (i.e. project) forward

- **Respect** page limits
Personal statement

• Just start writing
• Make an outline — thesis words and sentences, fill out later
• Write bits and pieces, then move them around, fill out the rest
• Tailor to each program, OK to reuse pieces
• Revise & polish, have someone else read it (like today)
• Publications? Tech. report? **Include** them.
Recommendation letters

• Another **very** important piece of your application!

• 3-4 letters from people who know your research well
  • professors you did research with
  • professors who know your work and know you
  • your manager at work (esp. if you did research-related work)

• People who will say good things about you: *self-motivated, independent thinker, creative, vast knowledge of X, Y, Z*

• People who can talk about your research abilities
Recommendation letters

- Ask in **advance**

- If they are not-so-familiar with your research, prepare a little packet: your personal statement, transcript, description of research projects, courses w/ grades

- Indicate due dates; where to send the letter (URL)

- Keep track in a spreadsheet

- Follow up w/ school that letters were sent & received

- Thank your recommenders

- Let them know of your progress
Awards, outreach, volunteering

• Can mention some of these at the end of personal statement, e.g. “looking forward to TA a grad course”

• Can list on a separate page in addition to your statement, or as part of a CV

• Tutoring, TAing, running a workshop for fellow students, co-teaching, giving lectures — good to include
Fellowship applications

- Apply to many and early
- Can apply as a senior undergrad, 1st and 2nd year PhD student
- Check eligibility: US citizen/PR, minority groups
- Check conditions of award: some fellowships require you to work
- Mostly PhD, but some open to MS — check with your school
Fellowship applications

• Why apply to fellowships?

  • It’s very cool to have on CV

  • Easier to choose an advisor since you have your own funding

  • Can include in your grad school applications — shows that you are self-motivated ;)

  • Some pay for your conference travel

  • Networking opportunities w/in the program
Fellowship applications

• Similar to writing a personal statement

• May require a more detailed research/outreach plan

• May ask you to write about a specific question

• Require recommendations, transcripts, GRE scores
Resources

• CMU’s Global Communication Center: http://www.cmu.edu/gcc/

• Purdue’s OWL: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/48/

• Graduate fellowships: http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~gradfellowships/

• Mor’s write up on graduate school, section 3: http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~harchol/