

## **Grad School Application Guide**

1. Identifying programs and Labs
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### **1. Identifying programs and Labs**

When looking for programs, there are many aspects you should consider, as grad school can be a very long journey in the case of a PhD. Some important questions to ask yourself are:

- i. Research fit: Is the research that the labs are doing interesting to you, and would you want to commit 2 or 5 years to doing that kind of research?
- ii. Lab culture: Is the lab diverse (racial, gender, religion)? Does the work culture promote a healthy work-life balance? What do alumni and current students say about the PI and the Lab? Does the lab have a tendency to only accept people who identify as a certain group/identity? If you are a member of a marginalized community, will the lab provide an environment that allows you to grow as a scientist?
- iii. Cost of living: Will the stipend be enough to support you (and/or your family)? Is rent going to be consuming more than 50% of your stipend? Ask students the exact amount of take-home pay after taxes and fees. This makes the city where the school is an important factor. And if you are willing to live with roommates for 5 years or stay alone and potentially have zero savings after graduating.
- iv. Is the city or state politically polarized and not friendly towards certain groups of people? The culture of a city/state can greatly impact your experience during a PhD; racism, sexism, and homophobia are valid concerns. The diversity of a city can also hugely impact one's experience so as not to feel isolated or disconnected.
- v. Is the school/department reputable for your field? Will a degree from this university be beneficial to your career? Are alumni from the program working jobs that you see yourself doing down the line? Ask alumni what they are doing and how the program helped them get connected to either industry or academia.
- vi. Does the program help get students connected to industry or academia through co-ops?
- vii. Does the program provide funding for 9 or 12 months and do they have dedicated funding for conference travel? Does the lab push for students to go to conferences and where do they usually publish their research? (What is the quality of the journals they publish in).

Many of these questions can be asked of grad students in the lab on LinkedIn or via email. Please do not spam alumni or current lab members. One message or email is enough, and you can follow up once after two weeks. After that, just accept it as it is and move on. Always be polite and cordial in these messages and start off with a salutation! Do not demand answers! You will most likely get blocked and blacklisted by the lab if you are rude or spamming.

## 2. Reaching out to Professors

After you have determined what labs, you are interested in, you should email professors to ask them if they have openings in their labs for the coming year. The best way to approach professors would be to familiarize yourself with their current research, read at least 2-3 of their current publications, and then email them. Cold emails with 'Dear Sir/Madam' are an easy way to get your email deleted forever. You should customize your email to the lab. You should mention the professor's research and how your skillset would be a good match for their lab. Also ask if they have time to meet over zoom or in person. This is where you can ask questions that can determine the kind of work culture they have and to determine the kind of projects that would be available to you. Another way is to ask a current mentor. You may have to reach out to their network and advocate for you in other labs. You would also want to attach your CV to the email so that the professor knows about your work history. If you are an international student, you should also attach your transcript.

There is no definite template for success, but looking through examples might give you a good idea of how it should be structured. Some things are consistent, though: be formal and polite, refer to the professor using 'Dr.' followed by their last name, and again, do not spam a professor with multiple emails. I would wait at least two weeks before sending a follow-up email, and after that, I would move on if they do not respond.

If you want to meet the deadline of December 1<sup>st</sup>, I would advise you to reach out to professors earlier in the year, from January to March. Many professors would have already committed to students by May so it would be good to have a head start, and I would actually suggest reaching out to professors the year prior (Sept-Nov). For MS, it is more forgiving as many programs will have rolling admissions or two application cycles, and this is very program-dependent. For PhDs the deadline will usually be in December but anywhere from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 31<sup>st</sup>.

## 3. Preparing your application materials

This is probably the second most difficult part of the process. Your statement of purpose (SOP) will take a lot of time and you **should** customize your SOP to each grad school application (prompts for each school will usually be unique with some repeating elements). Mostly your SOP should let the admissions committee know:

- Why you want to pursue grad school
- How prepared are you for grad school
- What professors and labs you are considering (it's best to mention more than one lab)
- Why this specific school
- Throughout the SOP tie in your skills from courses and job/internship/research experience to the skills the school wants out of you for their program (e.g: the lab you are interested in does a lot of data science so you should mention your skills in that area)

You may also be required to submit diversity essays or a personal statement (PS) (not the same as an SOP; follow instructions from the school). Your PS should be more about you as a person and how you can contribute to the culture of the school and lab. Talk about extracurriculars, volunteering, or leadership roles. Again, the instruction for PS can vary widely, so this may not apply, so it is best to follow instructions.

Then comes your letter of recommendation (LOR); most programs require at least 3 LORs and optionally up to 5. Reach out to professors with whom you have a good rapport and are relevant to your desired program; this means:

- You got good grades and were involved in the class to make an impression on the professor so that they actually remember you and write a letter that is unique and not a cookie-cutter recommendation that they might send out for everyone
- The professor should be in a subject that is relevant to your PhD goals (gen-eds are not that helpful, if you want to apply to Molecular Biology PhDs seek letters from professors relevant to that field or adjacent to it or at a minimum in biology or science-related subjects)
- Always ask if a professor is willing to write a “**positive letter of recommendation**”. You do not want to end up with a bad recommendation letter, that would almost certainly raise red flags about you.

Remember to ask professors at least 3 months in advance before submitting your applications.

One final tip is to apply as early as possible to be considered for fellowships.