

To-Do List for Applying to Graduate School in Physics

Fall 2026 Admission

Overview

This document provides a structured timeline and checklist for applying to graduate programs (PhD or MS) in physics for Fall 2026 admission. The tasks are organized chronologically to support early preparation, strong applications, and informed decision-making.

Now – Spring 2025: Laying the Groundwork

Goal: Build a strong academic profile and clarify direction.

- Decide which degree(s) to pursue (PhD, MS, or both).
- Identify intended subfield(s):
 - Condensed matter, AMO, high energy physics, astrophysics, biophysics, computational physics, etc.
- Meet with faculty mentors to discuss graduate school plans and competitiveness.
- Begin or deepen involvement in a research project.
- Maintain an up-to-date CV including:
 - Research experience
 - Presentations or posters
 - Programming skills
 - Teaching or mentoring experience
- Create a centralized document or notebook to track:
 - Potential programs
 - Deadlines
 - Requirements
 - Faculty of interest

Summer 2025: Exploration and Preparation

Goal: Narrow focus and prepare application components.

- Compile a long list of graduate programs (15–25).
- Identify potential research advisors at each institution.
- Read recent publications by faculty of interest.
- Decide whether to take the GRE or Physics GRE (if applicable).
- Begin test preparation if required.
- Engage in full-time research if possible (REU, thesis, or summer project).

Fall 2025: Application Materials Phase I

Goal: Secure recommenders and draft core documents.

- Narrow the list of schools to 8–15 programs.
- Identify three letter writers:
 - Primary research advisor
 - Additional faculty familiar with academic work
 - Teaching or computational mentor (if relevant)
- Request letters of recommendation early (September).
- Provide letter writers with:
 - CV
 - Unofficial transcripts
 - Draft statements
 - List of deadlines
- Draft a general Statement of Purpose.
- Draft a Personal Statement (if required).
- Obtain and review unofficial transcripts for accuracy.

Winter 2025–2026: Application Materials Phase II

Goal: Polish and customize applications.

- Customize Statements of Purpose for each program:
 - Faculty fit
 - Departmental strengths
 - Research alignment
- Finalize CV formatting and content.
- Take GRE or Physics GRE if applicable.
- Create a master application spreadsheet tracking:
 - Program name
 - Application deadline
 - Letter submission status
 - Application fees
 - Submission status

Winter 2025: Application Submission (October–December)

Goal: Submit complete, high-quality applications on time.

- Submit applications at least 1–2 weeks before deadlines.
- Confirm letters of recommendation have been submitted.
- Apply for fee waivers where eligible.
- Verify all required materials:
 - Statements
 - Transcripts
 - Test scores
 - Supplementary documents
- Save PDF copies of all submitted applications.

Spring 2026: Interviews and Decisions

Goal: Evaluate offers and select a program.

- Prepare for interviews by reviewing:
 - Research projects
 - Faculty interests
 - Departmental culture
- Practice explaining research clearly and concisely.
- Attend visit days (virtual or in-person).
- Ask questions about:
 - Advisor availability
 - Funding guarantees
 - Time to degree
 - Career placement
- Compare offers holistically.
- Make a final decision by April 15.

Commonly Overlooked Points

- Begin writing statements earlier than expected.
- Letters of recommendation often outweigh institutional prestige.
- Research fit is more important than rankings.
- Keep recommenders informed of outcomes.
- Archive finalized Statements of Purpose for future reference.