



NOTES ON APPLYING TO SCHOOLS & WORKSHOPS

(as a PhD student in Astronomy)

S. Tsilia

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Astronomy schools/workshops

- Important especially in the PhD stage, even more in the first years (practice skills you may have never practiced before, e.g., observing, using specific software)
- Offer nice networking opportunities
- Yet many people struggle with the applications or ignore them altogether
- School/workshop proposals vs research/observing proposals
 - Usually specific application fields (textboxes) to fill in
 - **Shorter form** - could be 200 words, or 800 characters, or 10 lines (be careful with that, especially when copy-pasting)
 - Should not typically use 2 paragraphs per textbox, even without a limit

Approaching an application

- Check eligibility criteria, inform supervisors before you start writing application
- Keep track of deadlines in your agenda, allocate enough time to write (most demanding ones might require diving into literature and could take multiple days)
- Keep a folder of your applications and recycle their good parts whenever possible

Preparing an application

- Make sure all your personal/contact info and referee info is correct, and that you have any additional documentation in the correct format
- Make sure you are within word/character/line limit
- Be concise - all the writing rules and good practices apply here, check grammar/spelling/punctuation
- Careful if application process is anonymous
- **Make it relevant to YOU** - Why do you need this school? How will your project benefit (and if/how you will pay it forward)? E.g., if you have zero previous experience on a topic that is relevant or required to your work, say it explicitly. Be specific!

Preparing an application

- Don't tell them how great they are, they already know
- Again, you are telling a story, try to make it interesting and enjoyable to read (among hundreds of other applications)
- Project positivity and confidence (but don't overdo it)
- Be aware of your audience
- Consider adding **science communication experience** (but make it short, and don't outbalance the science part)
- Add **references** to other work if it will enhance the application

Using ChatGPT

- Useful for rephrasing, translating, finding synonyms, summarizing or shortening text
- BUT produces mistakes, text often dry and not pleasant to read or too generic
- **The IDEAS should come from your human experience and creativity**
- Think of it as a calculator but for words instead of numbers, it is there to make your life easier and help you be productive but if you are bad at forming ideas it won't be of much help
- If needed, try giving it your mostly fleshed-out ideas and let it produce some text, but still get in there and revise
- Another useful tool: Formalizer by GoblinTools

Finishing an application

- Ask for input - people from within or outside astronomy/academia, good idea to also ask your supervisor to proofread (shows you are serious about attending the school and makes sure what you are saying is accurate and should be in your application)
- Reference letter needed in most cases, let referee know you require it asap and give a kind reminder 1 week in advance of the deadline, make sure you get confirmation that the letter was sent. Do not assume the school is going to contact the referee, often you need to let the referee know of the email to send
- Don't wait until last minute to submit - timezones can be confused, computers can break, servers can go down

Things to consider

- Some schools may fund part of your costs, usually ask to explain why you need the support
- **Observing schools:** especially useful (learn in an environment where the focus is on the observing process/practices and less on the quality of the observations itself), some of the most competitive - make sure to mention why they are relevant to you, e.g. if you will need to plan follow-up observations and reduce data as part of your project, using specific telescopes

Things to consider

- Allocate time specifically to looking for new opportunities, while keeping in mind schools that repeat with more or less known dates
- **Spaghetti method:** throw it against the wall until something sticks (within reason, if a school is completely irrelevant to you or you won't get any value out of it do not apply)
- Some schools are very competitive, need to manage failure and reframe rejection, acceptance rate could be very low and sometimes purely based on luck, reapply to schools that repeat themselves

Example - good or bad?

Throughout my studies it has been observational astronomy that intrigued me the most, as I prefer the direct interaction with the cosmos over the more abstract constructs of theory. I have worked extensively with observational data during research projects in university. However, even though I have visited telescope sites and watched demonstrations, I have never had the opportunity to prepare and carry out observations myself, or reduce data. [...] As a new PhD student, this Observing School presents an extremely valuable opportunity, and I expect it to set some strong foundations for me and my future career. I anticipate that this experience will grant me a thorough comprehension of how raw instrumental data is treated, enabling me to identify and address potential issues more effectively in future research endeavors. At the same time it will facilitate my collaboration with more young professionals in my field, broadening my professional network.

Example - good or bad?

Despite my previous work with observational data, and my PhD project being predominantly observational, I have zero experience using professional telescopes or treating raw data. I have never prepared, carried out observations, or reduced data myself. I am eager to rectify this gap in my knowledge, and this Observing School presents an excellent opportunity. A very crucial part of my PhD will be planning and executing follow up observations with big telescopes like the ELT and VLT (spectroscopy in the IR or optical, wide-field imaging). I wish to learn best practices regarding the observing process, specifically in ESO facilities. I hope to enhance my prospects for success in securing observing time and to optimize its value for my project, propelling my research forward.

RESOURCES

<https://www.iac.es/en/postgraduate-training/summer-and-winter-schools>

<http://www.europlanet.tfa.lt/homepage/summer-schools/>

<https://www.eso.org/sci/meetings.html>

<https://www.orp-h2020.eu/training>

<https://www.iau.org/training/iau-hands-on-workshops/>

<https://www.cadc-ccda.hia-iha.nrc-cnrc.gc.ca/en/meetings/>

Hope this was helpful. Have fun applying! - S. Tsilia