

How to Apply for Grad School



4 main stages of applying:

1. Figure out, specifically, what your goals are for grad school, then research adviser, program, department and university to see if they meet your needs.
2. Prepare your application packet, take GRE, submit application.
3. Campus visit: in person vetting of potential adviser, lab mates, program, department, university.
4. Shortly after the campus visit you may get an offer letter. Figure out your deadline to make your decision, usually around April. And finally, make your decision!

Overall, you want to feel that the university and most importantly your adviser are excited to have you on board!

*Special note: You want all perspectives – from the potential adviser’s perspective to past and current students. For honesty, you want to ask some questions of past and current students over Skype, a phone call, or in-person. Questions answered over email or on campus won’t get you the full story.

Stage 1A: What are your goals?

- What are your career goals?
 - Government?
 - Industry?
 - Academia?
 - You don’t know? What DON’T you want to do?
- What are your restrictions and needs?
 - Logistic and personal: (e.g. Is this necessary for your career? Where can you move? What are your financial needs? What kind of healthcare/insurance do you need? Will you be happy in the campus/town/city? Family considerations? What other kinds of social and personal support do you need?)
 - Academic and intellectual: (e.g. What kind of work environment is best for you? What advising style? More on this later.)
- What subject are you interested in pursuing?
- What university do you want to study at?

- Where do you want to live? In the U.S., some universities might require out of state tuition if you are not a resident of the state, so something to watch out for - though it's often waivable...

Stage 1B: How to find a university/program/adviser right for you

- This is preliminary research!
 - Generally, if there are any universities, programs, and researchers you already know about, start your search there!
 - Have a mentor/adviser now? Ask them if they know of anyone looking for students or a particular university that would be good for you to check out. Use those connections!!
 - If you don't have any universities, programs, or researchers in mind, start here:
 - Read papers in your field and find potential PIs writing about the science you're interested in:
 - Get a recent review in a good journal (digestible); What papers are mentioned as current and important? Look up those authors.
 - What universities are these researchers located?
 - Save their contact info, along with relevant papers (we'll talk about contacting them in a minute)
 - Take a look at the department websites of the above faculty members. Look at their bios and webpages. Are they looking for grad students? Make a note.
 - Are there other faculty studying similar things in that department? (established research group) Sometimes there will be inter-departmental institutes dedicated to a related group of fields, look at the professors in those institutes.
 - Scientific societies often have job boards (an example of a scientific society is American Geophysical Union, Marine Mammal Society, AAAS, etc)
 - LinkedIn has a surprising number of job listings, including where people have posted they are looking for graduate students! Get a LinkedIn account now (it's free!)
 - Use forums and listservs to find postings for a graduate student position
 - Ecolog-L, TAMU

Stage 1C: Contact the potential PI and questions to ask your potential PI or ask about them

- After you find some potential advisers in mind, it's important to email them about your interest. As we already mentioned, some potential advisers may have special instructions for prospective students on their website. If not, you should still email them. It's a good idea to write just a paragraph and to include your resume/CV (CV is like a long resume, includes everything academic you've done) and any papers you've authored (first-author or co-author) as attachments so it's easiest as possible for them to give you an answer.

- You won't always be able to know 100% that you've chosen the perfect adviser for you, but these questions will help a lot. Remember, they are interviewing you for the position, but you should be interviewing them for the position as well. Also, not everyone will be able to do a campus visit - if you can't, be sure to email and Skype and call and get answers to these questions!
- Questions to ask your potential adviser/PI/supervisor:
 - **Questions about what they might expect from you:**
 - When should I be on campus/in the lab (and what percentage of that should be research?)
 - What is expected of you after the first year? Second year? Etc
 - Expectation of grad student to come up with their own question or is it a collaborative question that is built over the years?
 - How do you respond to your student's making mistakes?
 - What are you looking for in a graduate student? (initiative, consistent check-ins, working independently, etc)
 - **Questions you should ask your potential PI/adviser/supervisor:**
 - What potential projects will you be working on? You should have a general idea of your interests before applying to ensure that your adviser is working on something that aligns with your interests.
 - Ask your adviser what their advising style is – do they check in on you frequently and keep on top of deadlines for you? Are they totally hands off and not really interested in helping with deadlines/papers/etc? How do they help with writing?
 - Do you know what kind of advising style you would prefer? If not, assess!
 - Ask your potential adviser how many graduate students they have had successfully graduate from their lab, average time for a masters or PhD student in their lab, and when was the most recent graduation. Also ask them what recent graduates have gone on to do after finishing their graduate work.
 - Good to do for a variety of reasons: lets you know how successful they are at getting students out of their lab in a timely manner, if they are consistent about doing that, etc
 - What are the most recent papers coming out of their lab & which journals are they publishing in (journals that align with your interests)? Are they mostly from students or just from your adviser or a good mixture?
 - How does authorship work in their lab?
 - How much time do they generally spend with their students? Are there lab meetings, individual meetings?
 - What kind of collaborations do they have; how do they approach collaborations?
 - Is there a lab manual, or lab policies they would share?

- **To ask current students (or past students) in your potential adviser's lab (**Assume everything you say, whether to students, professors, admin, or program directors will get back to your potential adviser**):**
 - *IMPORTANT:* when you ask these questions, do it off campus, out of the lab, preferably at dinner or over drinks (whatever you and they are comfortable with). This will get you the most honest answers.
 - You should ask the current students/past students all the same questions you asked your adviser – are there any differences between how they were answered?
 - How does the adviser handle conflict? Conflict with themselves and their students, themselves and other faculty/administration, conflict between their own graduate students.
 - Is what your potential adviser is offering you (project, equipment, lab assistance, research funding etc) realistic? Ask what the current/past students were offered and how they determined their project etc
 - Would you choose this adviser again if you had to do it over again?

Stage 1D: Questions to ask about the university you're interested in:

- How will you be funded? (Teaching assistantship, research assistantship, other?)
 - How much is the stipend (keep in mind this is often reported before taxes are taken out)?
 - Is this enough to support you in this town/city? Make a budget for yourself and make sure you can realistically support yourself.
- What fees and other costs am I responsible for?
 - School fees (gym, sports tickets, building construction, library etc), parking, books, lab attire, and more
- Are there internal funding opportunities to apply for to support your research?
- Does this program do rotations? If so, how long do rotation last?
- What programs does the university or the department you are interested have in place for graduate students? Like professional development, writing center, statistics help, others?
- What is expected of you after the first year? Second year? Etc? Might be something you can find in the Graduate Student/School Handbook for that university/department.
- Is there a Diversity Center? LGBTQ+ Center? Initiatives to support diversity and inclusion that the university supports (not run only by students)?