

# Some advice on grad school applications

By Logan Pearce

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Just some of the things I learned going through the grad app process.

Remember that the admission committees are reading hundreds of these. They will appreciate if you make their job easier for them. Highlight in bold sentences or phrases you want to make sure they see. Avoid the word "passion" or its derivatives (I bet 90% of the essays they read have that word...).

Figure out a way to make your essay memorable while keeping it professional. Allow a bit of your personality to show through in your words (while keeping it formal language). For example, I once was giving feedback to someone on their essay in which they talked about how much they enjoy word play and puns as a hobby, yet there was no word play in the essay at all! That seemed to me like a no-brainer way to make your essay stand out and show your personality. Remember they are reading hundreds of them, they will appreciate it if your essay isn't boring!

Tell the story of your life, but it's not necessary to start with gazing at the stars with your grandfather when you were 10 (again, I bet 90% of them start that way...) . Especially if they ask for a "statement of purpose" rather than a personal statement (aside: some schools ask for "statement of purpose", some ask for "personal statement", some ask for both. What exactly they are looking for from these essays is often opaque to you, but try to navigate best you can. Often a personal statement should be more of the story of your life, while a statement of purpose should be more professionally focused and focused on what you intend to do at their institution and with your career.) . It should follow a narrative structure and be a coherent argument, with the thesis being "Your institution is perfect for me, and I am perfect for your institution, you need to admit me" (obviously this is colloquial, don't put this sentence in your essay, but your essay should definitely communicate this idea!). (aside: although apparently health professions programs really do want the story of going to the hospital with your grandfather when you were 10... they want to see you are emotionally invested I suspect. But that is not the norm for

astronomy or physics, and most science programs from what I understand. Find out the norm in your field.)

A personal statement is the time to tell the admissions board what you want them to know about you. Use it to explain things like a low grade in a course or why you took a year off in the middle or anything else that might stand out on your resume/cv. Especially since astronomy in particular is moving towards a "holistic admissions" focus, help them see you as a whole complex person beyond a gpa.

**MAKE IT SPECIFIC TO THEM.** Tell the institution why they are the only place at which you can pursue your dreams. Show them that you are perfect for them, and they are perfect for you. Tell them what you would bring to their program. Highlight specific faculty you would like to work with and why, and specific programs you are interested at their institution (even things outside the department, such as maybe you've heard the school supports LGBTQ community well or they have an awesome glee club or whatever (remember, holistic admissions)). Show that you have done your homework and know why you're applying to that school specifically. I even tried to throw in a sentence on why I would like living in that location, such as it's close to the mountains and I like to hike.

Get people to read your essays! If your university has a writing center, get them to read it and give feedback. I used to work at UT's writing center, that's where I learned all of this; about 50% of the consultations I did there were with folk's application essays, so we became experts on them real fast. Also ask peers and faculty at your institution (who also become experts because they read so many for admissions and they know what they are looking for in an applicant).

Remember that the admission committee is trying to select applicants for which their institution is the best fit for them and for you. Rejections often aren't personal, or necessarily aren't because of some flaw in your application. For example, I got a rejection from one institution because the faculty there in my chosen subfield within astronomy weren't taking any students. It would be a disservice for me to attend their school, and they can offer my slot to someone for whom it's a better fit, even though they liked my application. So don't be overly discouraged by rejections. Remember, all you need is one admission and you're going to grad school! And even if you don't

get any, there will be more opportunities to apply again, and you can use the experience to strengthen your application next time.

#### My decision process:

If you get multiple offers, it can be super duper hard to make the final decision. Here I just wanted to write about how I made the decision, because learning about the things that were important in others' decision-making process was helpful for me. I hope this helps some.

I got offers to five top schools, which was so encouraging and a little overwhelming. How do I say no to these big names?? All of them had good reputations, so I knew I couldn't make a bad decision, I just wanted to make the best decision \*for me\*. I ended up visiting four of them. I had spent a lot of time researching who was at each school and who I wanted to be sure to meet on my visit. (Oh, and definitely do the visit if you're considering a school!).

I also looked into the housing market in each city, and the availability of affordable housing near the school, because I wanted the option to commute without a car if possible. It was also important to me to be able to live alone. Three of the four locations were in high-priced housing areas. In the fourth, I could afford to actually buy property, which is the best option actually since I'm going to be there for 5-6 years, enough time to get some return on that investment. That was a big part of the decision, I'd say I weighted the location around 40% in the final decision.

All of the visits were fantastic, and I was impressed with all the schools. I weighed the feel of the department - did I feel welcomed? like they really wanted me to come there (some schools really did a good job making me feel like they badly wanted me to come there)? were the grad students happy? do they seem like a group I'd really like to be a part of? would I like spending a lot of time with other students in my visit group? All of these are important, but weren't major parts of the decision for me.

In the end I narrowed it down to two schools based on all of the above. The final thing that tipped the scales for me was who I would work for and what I could pursue as a PhD thesis if I went there. At school #1 there was one person I was very much interested in working with who

was doing very exciting things. At school #2, there were more like 4 or 5 people. I was excited by the possibility of building a thesis project with several of them, covering many different aspects of my subfield. It felt like there was a lot of room to try things out and change my mind and shift around. I very much hope to work with the faculty at school #1 at some point, but this ended up being the deciding factor in my ultimate decision for school #2.

It was a very hard decision that I agonized over for weeks. I also processed the decision with my UG faculty advisor and a few other folks at my UG institution.

\*one last piece of advice:\* . It's so so tempting to look around as your peers are getting offers, and to compare your grad school admissions story to theirs. Just remember, their story is not your story. Their success does not take anything away from you. Try your best to consider just the options in front of you, and not compare them to your peers who maybe be doing "better" or "worse" than you are in this process. Everyone has a long and grueling process in this grad school thing. Let's try to build each other up and celebrate and encourage each other. Your story is your own. <soapbox>

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