Applying for a Ph.D.? These 10 tips can help you succeed

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Few things mark the return of the academic year like shorter days, falling leaves, and inquiries about applying for graduate school. For those nursing ambitions of pursuing a Ph.D., the prospect of navigating the labyrinthine guidelines posted on university websites can be daunting. The fact that many programs receive hundreds of carefully crafted applications for just a handful of positions in their Ph.D. programs can make a stressful process downright terrifying.

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No single article can cover every element of applying to grad school. Requirements vary among programs, schools, and countries, and there isn’t one “right way” to present yourself—even within the same program, faculty members can disagree about what constitutes a strong application.

Yet the process of applying for and getting into graduate school is far from a mystery. The key is knowing what to do to prepare and how to compile and submit a strong application. We hope these 10 tips will help you get started.

1. **Be true to yourself:** First and foremost, consider your goals. Many students are initially interested in pursuing a Ph.D. because they want to become a professor. What you may not know is that landing a tenure-track faculty job is fiercely competitive. The Ph.D. journey is probably only worth it if you are deeply passionate about scientific research and open to a variety of careers. Thankfully, a Ph.D. prepares you for numerous exciting—and often more lucrative—jobs outside the ivory tower.

2. **Define your interests:** Once you’ve decided that a Ph.D. is the right step for you, you need to identify places where you see a strong fit—essentially meaning that your research interests and goals line up closely with those of the program and your future mentor or mentors. The first step on that road is to nail down your own interests. Think about the topics, courses, projects, and experiences that pique your curiosity enough to spend a half-decade or more studying them. Your interests will likely evolve over time, but defining them now will serve as a compass guiding you in the right direction.

3. **Do your research:** Now that you have a handle on what you want to study, it’s time to identify spots that will be good fits. For those applying to departments or programs (as opposed to positions with specific mentors or projects), look for places where there is more than one faculty member aligned with your interests. This will help ensure that you have access to a diversity of mentoring.
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To get started, look up programs and labs that are prominent in your field, and ask your current mentors for their suggestions. There is a lot of information to sort through—some faculty members may have hundreds of papers. Instead of trying to read all of them, focus on the recent ones to find out whether the current work interests you. (If a faculty member has not published much in the last few years or has not published with graduate students, that may be a red flag.) It is also worth your time to try to find out what jobs students have landed after completing their Ph.D.s and consider whether these directions match your own goals.

This handy template we’ve used with our own students (and designed by June’s former student Razia Sahi, now a Ph.D. student at the University of California, Los Angeles) can help you keep track of the information you compile.

4. Look for openings: Don’t waste your time and money applying to work with people who are not accepting students. In some fields, the program or faculty members will describe the application process and any openings on their websites. In other cases, you may need to email individual faculty members to find out whether they are taking on new students. (Just because a program is accepting students doesn’t mean that every faculty member affiliated with that program has room for new people!) A few months before the application deadline, send a short email to prospective faculty mentors, briefly describing your academic background and any work in their lab that inspires you, and asking whether they are taking any new students (some faculty may wish to see a copy of your current CV). Don’t be offended if you do not receive a response—many faculty get more than 100 emails a day and some slip through the cracks. You are still free to apply to the program.

5. Apply broadly: Although the norms vary across fields, we advise our students to generate a list of roughly nine programs: three where they are likely to gain acceptance (“safety schools”), three where they are on par with the typical incoming Ph.D. student (“competitive schools”), and three where they would love to attend (“dream schools”). To get a sense of your chances, check out the CVs of current Ph.D. students in the programs or try to find information from professional societies. The American Psychological Association, for example, publishes the average GPA and standardized test scores of most psychology programs’ incoming graduate students. Now write down the deadlines for these programs and start preparing your materials. If application costs are a barrier, ask the program contact person whether they offer application fee waivers.

6. Make your application stand out: Many programs receive more applicants with stellar grades and test scores than they can admit. Therefore, top applicants set themselves apart by putting great care and attention into all the other elements of the application package. This includes a thoughtful description of their research experiences, a carefully crafted statement of their current interests, and personalized reference letters. In some fields, applications may even include samples of your work or publications. So stay organized and give yourself enough time to carefully craft every part of the application.

7. Make the research statement shine: Perhaps the most important element of the application is the research statement. Faculty members use the statement to get a sense of your writing ability,
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Your goal is to show that you are a deep thinker who is ready to become a scientist. Read some of the papers your potential advisers have published, think critically about them, and offer specific ideas for extending the work in new directions. Look at sample statements from graduate students in your field. Ask for feedback from as many relevant people as possible, including graduate students and faculty members in the field (not your roommate or your parents). It may feel tedious, but the practice of writing and rewriting is one of the most essential skills you will hone in graduate school.

8. Ask for reference letters early: Request reference letters at least a month before the first deadline. Try to get letters from professors who know you well and are connected to your field. Ask whether they can write a strong letter on your behalf. If a professor is reluctant to write you such a letter, they may have some reservations that could sink your chances, so don’t push it—try to find another letter writer. Give them all the information they need to write a strong letter, including: the deadlines and mailing address for all your programs, a copy of your CV and research statement, and a few bullet points highlighting your work for them. These materials will help refresh their memory about all you accomplished under their guidance. Ask whether they need anything else.

9. Update your mentors: After everything is said and done, tell your letter writers what happened. Nothing gives us more joy than learning that one of our students has landed an exciting position.

10. Breathe: This process can be time consuming, stressful, and expensive. Remember to take care of yourself along the way. Carve out time for your family and friends, and give yourself a breather after you have submitted your last application.

Seeing the brilliant young people applying for Ph.D. programs each year renews our hope that the future of science is in good hands. And remember that setbacks are the rule in science, rather than the exception. Even Albert Einstein’s initial application for a doctorate at the University of Bern was rejected. If you find yourself in that boat, you can apply again the following year, just like the famous physicist.

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