

Tips on Applying to Graduate Programs in the USA in Ecology, Evolutionary Biology and Environmental Studies

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These tips are from my own experience and are certainly not the official, end-all-be-all rules of applying to graduate programs. Countless grad students and faculty have written their own guides to applying to grad school and I recommend searching for and reading through a few others online to get their perspectives as well.

Secondly, keep in mind that each department and university has its own requirements. Be careful to only follow the requirements for your department (i.e. Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, School of Forestry, etc) and not other grad departments of that university (i.e. Art, English, Engineering). Also, requirements, including tests, essays, transcripts, letters of recommendation, and deadlines, vary from university to university, so I recommend making an Excel spreadsheet or some other database that will allow you to meticulously organize your application materials and keep yourself sane.

Finally your greatest resource will be friends (particularly from your own country) who have already gone through the process (successfully, of course!). They'll know all the tests and other requirements for international students of which I may not be aware.

General Timeframe for Applying

1. Winter and Spring (Jan-May of the year you apply): Background research and tests

Start to think about what types of degree (PhD or combined MS/PhD, the latter which is rarer), programs (Ecology and Evolution, Forestry, Biology, etc) and universities (size, location, etc) you want to apply to. Talk to grad students and faculty for recommendations on schools and programs. Check rankings (like *US News and World Reports* best grad school programs – www.usnews.com - or the ranking compiled by *Conservation Biology* several years ago) if you need a rough guide on which programs are good, but keep in mind that these rankings are very general and that you should probably apply for the *professor* rather than the program *per se*. People always told me to find faculty by reading journal articles that I was interested in or would want to emulate for my PhD, and then finding their lab profiles online to determine whether their research matched my interests. Ideally prioritize the research over the location because these are the years that will influence the rest of your life, but don't forget to consider the lifestyle of the university town as well as the weather, since they are often meaningful elements of the graduate life experience.

Once you have a list of schools, check to see what tests they require. Specifically, some programs require the GRE Subject Test in Biology (in addition to the GRE General Test), while others do not. They always recommend taking the test, but its not required for the application, so it wouldn't hurt to take the test if you think you're up to it. You can always opt to not send your Subject Test scores.

Figure out a test schedule for yourself. Register, study and take the tests on a timeframe that will allow the scores to be sent to the universities in time. ETS, which proctors the GRE and many other tests, has information on their website (www.ets.org).

2. Summer (June-August): Contact faculty and their grad students

Write up an introductory email and packet that you will send to the faculty members who you think you might want to work with. The first point of contact is *incredibly important* because you need to catch their eye and distinguish yourself from the other hundreds of emails that they receive. In my own experience, I received a great deal of advice about what to write in my intro letter from speaking with my undergraduate professors, and many faculty that I contacted commented on how appreciative they were of how organized I was from the start. Moral: being organized counts.

Your first email should include, briefly:

- How you heard about them (especially if you have a personal connection)
- What intrigued you about their work
- *Specific highlights of their work from articles that you read*
- What you want to study in grad school and why you want to work with them
- A paragraph on your research and education background and accomplishments
- The question of whether they are accepting new grad students
- Your next step for communicating with them. Ask to set up a phone appointment and offer to pay for the call if you are abroad. No need to go into too much detail here; hopefully you will exchange a few more emails before speaking on the phone.

To the intro email, attach a .pdf file that includes:

- A simple title page or cover letter (with a photo of yourself if you want to add a "fun" feel to your packet)
- Your curriculum vitae (CV)
- Your test scores (either listed in your CV or typed on a document)
- Your transcript (unofficial typed in a document or scanned)
- A writing sample (a portion of your dissertation or an article that has been accepted by a journal, or an assignment. Make sure it is no more than a few pages and well written with no typos)

Tips on communicating with faculty:

- Stay professional, but real. They want to see that you are a mature adult who is serious about grad school, but also that you're a "real" person. Ecologists tend to be fun-loving, laid-back people (thank god we are in this field!), so be true to your personality and casual at your own discretion.
- Address your emails "Dear Dr. LastName". *Do not ever, ever write "Dear Sir/Madam,"* as is common in many other countries. If the professor signs his/her emails with his/her first name, or introduce themselves on the phone with their first name, you can address them by that title if you feel comfortable. Most grad students address their advisers by their first names, as it helps establish a relationship of trust and equality.
- Be concise and clear. If you need them to do something, number or bullet your requests. They tend to read quickly and are busy people, so they may miss things if your grammar is poor or you are verbose. Spell check and proof-read each communication before sending.
- Assume that it will take them several days to respond. If a faculty hasn't replied to your initial email within 2 weeks, send a second email and perhaps call them on the phone. Don't feel bad; they are busy and overwhelmed and often appreciate the reminder. My committee member recently said that he would even appreciate a fax to catch his attention (though he was probably joking)! If they avoid your emails and calls beyond 2-3 communications, they're either in the field doing research or may be hinting that they're not interested. If you're really interested in them, call the university department to find out if they're out of town. Otherwise, move on. You don't want to work with someone who doesn't value you and your time.

3. Fall (September-November): Prepare to Apply

Form a list of faculty and universities in which you are interested. From the grad students I've spoken with, it sounds like applying to 5-10 schools is a good range. Communicate, preferably via phone call to ensure that you and the faculty member connect well, to seal the deal on you applying. They will have to speak up for you within their department during the acceptance process so you want to make clear that they will support and represent you. Ask them for tips on applying, and they may even offer to edit your application essays; if so, count your blessings and write them a thank you letter.

Email the faculty's current and recently graduated students. Ask them specific questions about the faculty and program to get a sense of whether the professor is a good match for you. Find out what sort of research the grad student is working on, whether they've published yet, what sort of job they want after they graduate, and ask them about the personality of the faculty member. They will provide the best insight you can get on what its like to work in the faculty's lab.

Check and recheck the department program websites for deadlines. Email the grad admissions staff if you have any questions or perhaps to introduce yourself, since

you'll be dealing with them frequently, particularly if you are an international student.

Write your essays. Tailor each one to the particular school and describe unique features of the program to prove to the admissions team that you actually want to attend and know what you're getting yourself into. Ask people to edit your essays (including native English speakers).

Request your transcripts and score reports to be sent (be careful to request the correct number wanted by each school!). Prepare packets for your recommenders well in advance (a month at the bare minimum). To make sure they include what you want to be written, I suggest that for each recommender, you write a letter reminding them of your relationship with them, your accomplishments, how you demonstrated certain skills and strengths, what sort of programs you are applying to, and with what future goal (e.g. why you want your PhD). To help them stay organized, make a table that shows what schools you are applying to, their requirements (i.e. 2 copies of the letter of rec), the deadline, and whether they need to snail mail the letter or whether they can submit it online. Provide all necessary paperwork (forms from the schools, envelopes, stamps). This (almost) guarantees that they can't screw up, but remind them a week before the deadline anyway just to make sure.

4. Winter (December-February): Apply!

Deadlines can occur as early as the first week of December and as late as February. The websites get bogged down with traffic during the days around the deadline, so try to submit your application at least 1 week before. You can usually begin to work on the applications 1-2 months before the deadline, so I recommend opening accounts as soon as you are sure you'll be applying to the school. Keep track of your usernames and passwords – another Excel spreadsheet can help you stay organized.

Check the online application site or email or call the departments to confirm that they receive your mailed transcripts, test scores, essays and letters of recommendation. They will not process your application until all materials have been received.

Each application will cost between \$50-150. Test scores and even transcripts cost money, as well. In total, it cost me about \$800 to apply to 8 schools. Be prepared and suck it up. It'll be worth it in the end, especially if they offer to fly you out for a visit!

Once you've finished the application, email the faculty member to let them know that you've completed your end of the deal. Thank them for their assistance with the process and tell them that you look forward to hearing from them and their

school in the near future. Often times, they are the ones that will contact you with the final decision about your admission.

Also thank the people that wrote you letters of recommendation. Chances are that you'll need recommendations in the future, so let them know you appreciate their time and effort.

5. Spring (March-April): Interview and then cross your fingers and wait for decisions

With domestic applicants, most schools narrow their pool and then offer to fly you out for a round of interviews or personal visits. Especially with the smaller schools, most faculty and departments want to meet their prospective students before accepting them to ensure that they are intelligent and nice people. I'm not sure how it works with international students, although I know they're usually happy to contribute some money for domestic flights, hotels and food if you will pay for your flight from your country. You'll probably want to inquire when applying and speak with your potential adviser as to how they arrange interviews for international students.

Grad schools in the US have to legally inform you of their decision in early April. You have to legally respond to their decision by April 15. Some tell you early (like February), others late (April). I recommend waiting for all the decisions to come in before finally choosing, since financial award offers can often influence your decision. Also, I discourage discussing with potential advisers where you were accepted and where you were not because it may hurt your application and reputation in their eyes. However, they love gossiping about the faculty that you applied with, and you should use these conversations as a chance to get the dirt on people and programs!

6. Beyond (the rest of your life): Stay positive

No matter what comes of your applications, remember that you are an intelligent, unique individual and that your goals *are* attainable.

I found that interacting with potential advisers was enriching and exciting, and allowed me to network with many people for future projects. But it was sometimes very draining. Many professors have big egos and can trample over yours in order to protect themselves or keep themselves inflated.

Additionally, just because you don't get in to a particular school doesn't mean that you aren't qualified. The application process is extremely competitive, particularly now because of the depressed economy. More students are applying to grad school to avoid the job market for a few extra years, while many programs are simultaneously accepting fewer grad students because of their decreased

endowments...a bit of quick math will tell you that making it into graduate school is not easy these days.

With all that in mind, I believe that if you're reading this essay, you likely have a chance of getting accepted. I wish you all the best for applying.