Grad School Application Crash Course

MAGIC Organizing Team

MAGIC

Mentoring Aspiring Graduate students and building an Inclusive Community

Overview I
Application Materials

CV: An “academic resume,” or record of your relevant research, work, or academic experiences

Statement of Purpose / Personal Statement: A 1-2 page essay about why you want to be a graduate student in that program that illustrates who you are

At least 3 letters of recommendation: Preferably from faculty in the field you’re applying to and that you’ve worked with in or outside of class

Transcript: Usually unofficial transcripts for application, and official transcripts upon acceptance.

GRE: Standardized test. Find information about what each program requires on their graduate program website.

CV

- Includes education, research experience, relevant work experience, publications/presentations, volunteering, skills (**can** be more than 1 page)
- Not sure what to include?
  - Start from beginning of college and list all experiences you've had, even if they don't seem relevant
  - Ask friends/mentors when you think you've listed them all
  - Think broadly about your experiences, they might be more relevant than you think
  - Keep this list of experiences even if they don't make it to the CV; you may find they're helpful for later applications

Statement of Purpose/Personal Statement

- An “essay” about your relevant experiences
  - Usual format: Short “thesis statement” about why you would be a good fit for X program & in Professor X’s lab in particular, summaries of your relevant experiences, summary of why you’re excited for this position
- Always explain why you are interested in working in the lab you are applying to
  - What made you interested in the topic?
  - Can be personal or not, but needs to be genuine
- See examples on the MAGIC resources page!

Letters of Recommendation

- Typically, you'll need 3 letters of rec.
  - Recommend finding 4 good letter writers, just in case one of the 3 can't submit for one reason or another
  - If possible, these should be faculty members that you've worked with, or faculty that you've had lots of interactions with during a class
  - Try to secure letter writers by October
- Always be grateful and offer anything you can to make writing your letters easier:
  - Drafts of CV and Statement of Purpose in near-final stages
  - An excel sheet with information about programs and due dates

GRE, Transcripts & Application Fees

- Check if the program requires GRE scores
  - Most do not require the subject test, unless you're switching to a very different field from undergrad to grad
  - If possible, plan to take the test twice; once by August, which gives you enough time to study up and take it again just in case (in 2024, it costs $220 – you may need to save money or look for GRE fee reduction vouchers)
- Lower GRE scores and transcript GPAs can be outweighed by experience, especially if you show an upward trajectory
- Fees: Many schools have (limited) application fee waivers—explore website of graduate program office, or email your potential advisor

Overview II
Grad School Paths: Research, Advisors, and Key Tips

Grad School : Masters and PhD characteristics

Getting Involved in Research: What makes you curious?

Choosing Advisors and Graduate Programs: Consider who you will be working with and what interests brings you together. What are your priorities when choosing a program?

The Search: Take advantage of networking, accessing online resources, and practicing introspection

Tips for your MAGIC meetings: Be yourself!

Graduate School (from a psych perspective)

- **Masters programs**: typically 1-2 years of coursework and some research, often students will need to pay tuition.
- **PhD programs**: In most STEM fields, this is a 5 year program (may take longer) where you may get your masters along the way. Tuition is usually paid for, and you get a stipend for teaching or research.
- Varies by program, but this is a rough timeline for the PhD :
  - Years 1-2: Most of your classes, preparing/running Masters thesis
  - Year 3: Receive Masters degree, prepare for qualifying exams
  - Years 4-5: Pass exams, propose, conduct, write and defend dissertation, receive PhD.

Getting Involved in Research

- Whether or not you plan to go to grad school, getting involved in research is a great way to get hands-on learning and experience
  - Connects you with faculty and grad students who can help further your career, helps you apply what you've learned in the classroom, looks great on CV/resume, and is fun and interesting!
  - Often faculty can provide course credit. Rarely, faculty can pay you instead of providing credit. Sometimes positions are entirely volunteer, but faculty should understand needing to balance job and research work
- Some professors have RA (research assistant) application forms on their website, but most you can email
  - Say a sentence or two about you, how THEIR work interests you, and that you'd like to discuss working with them if they have any openings
- Not too late to do this! Graduated seniors often work in labs.

Choosing Graduate Programs

- Advisor over Institution: Check with your current advisor and grad students in your lab, but this tends to be true for most grad students
- Ask grad students in your field: what would you look for when applying to grad school? What helps you have a better experience?
- An institution can look impressive, but what's more important are the opportunities and research you were able to achieve; advisors can be the key here!

Choosing an Advisor

- Research
  - Read the abstracts or intro/discussion of a few papers. Does their work interest you?
- Mentoring style/environment
  - How many grad students do they already have?
  - Are they a hands-on or hands-off advisor and which do you want?
- Other factors: Publishing history, pre/post-tenure, collaborations, grants, location, etc.
- Personality - do you get along well? What are their expectations? (May have to wait until interviews to find out)

The Search

- Ask professors and grad students that you currently work with
  - Even if you don't think your chosen topic is related to their work, they may know of others in the field
- If you or someone else went to a conference recently, ask for the conference program or book of abstracts (or look for it online!)
  - Allows you to see most recent research being done, and which labs are doing it
- Read an interesting paper? Look into the authors, or who the authors are referencing
- Priorities for picking a school: (1) advisor, (2) potential back-up advisors, (3) program/community and resources, (4) the institution

… Back to MAGIC: Tips for your mentoring meetings!

- Helpful to prepare a short introduction (~1 min) of what year you're in, what research/relevant work you've done, what you're interested in
- For graduate application questions, see if the answers are in these slides (or refer to the slides if you want to ask if they have a different opinion)
- If you have questions about what to pursue, try to think of what has interested you in the past
- Don't be afraid to ask what you may think are "dumb" questions—they are NOT dumb! We're all in the business of learning, and happy to help :)
- If you aren't sure you understand what your mentor is saying, try to repeat what you think they mean back to them to get clarification

Meeting Topics Menu

If you are unsure what to talk about in your meeting, these topics might help you figure out what types of questions to ask! if you feel that none of these topics are relevant to you yet, you can ask mentors 'Is grad school for me?'

Appetizers

Interested in grad school but haven't begun the application process yet?

- **Finding Graduate Programs:** What should you be looking for in a program or advisor, and how can you learn about programs?
- **What You Can Do Now to Make Yourself a Better Applicant:** Tips on gaining skills or experiences to strengthen your application.
- **What Do Professors Look for in a Grad Student:** Insights into what makes a good grad student and how to develop those skills.
- **Getting Your Foot in the Door:** How to make a good first impression and get your application noticed.

Main Course

In the process of applying to grad school and getting ready for interviews.

- **Letters of Rec & Personal Statements:** Advice on asking for letters and what to include in your personal statement.
- **CV Review:** Feedback on improving your CV and ideas on what to add.
- **Interview Advice:** Tips on staying calm and preparing good questions for interviews.
- **Finding a Good Match:** What to look for in a program or potential PI, and red flags to watch out for.
- **I Wish I Had ...** Lessons your mentor wished they had known during their application process.
- **Masters vs PhD:** Differences between these degrees and which one may be right for you.

Dessert

Already accepted into a grad program?

- **Picking a Research Topic:** Tips on finding a research project you're passionate about and engaging your research interests.
- **Work/Life Balance:** Advice on balancing grad school and personal life. Tips for self-care and ensuring you have a healthy balance.
- **Funding:** Guidance on finding funding opportunities and common sources of funding in grad school.

Next Steps

- Fill out follow-up form
- Email your mentor if you haven’t already
- Haven’t signed up for formal mentoring? Not too late!
- You can always use drop-in mentoring…