A quick guide to graduate school applications

General strategy

- Do your best on GRE
  - To re-take or not to re-take?
- Check program’s website and apply
- After you applied (and not before), get in touch with prospective advisers early, but don’t expect them to commit early
- Apply for external fellowships.
  - Even if you don’t get them, having had applied is a big plus

Application components

- GRE
- Personal statement
- CV
- Reference letters

Personal statement

- Avoid cliches, quotes of famous people
- Highlight your strengths, experiences
- I have always been interested in becoming a scientist...
  - That is how 90% of personal statements begin
  - The other 10% begin with a famous quote
  - Make sure that the intent to become a scientist is evident:
    - Participation in research
    - Typical pre-med experiences will need to be explained
Previous Research Experience

• What are your applicable experiences?
• Don’t re-state your CV, instead focus on 2-3 key research experiences
• For each experience, what were the key questions, methodology, findings, and conclusions?
• Did you work in a team and/or independently?
• How did you assist in the analysis of results?
• Did you have an opportunity to present your discoveries?
• Most importantly, what have you learned from all these experiences?

Personal statement, cont’d

• Don’t forget to properly contextualize your previous research experiences
• What issues in the scientific community are you most passionate about?
• Do you possess the technical knowledge and skills necessary for conducting this work?
• How will your research contribute to the “big picture” outside the academic context?

Personal statement cont’d

• Two-dimensionality is important
  – The skills you identify as having must match your actual accomplishments
• Your goal is to give the review committee a feel for YOU.

Curriculum vitae

• Summarize your most relevant experiences
• Beware of the “check box” CV, focus on accomplishments instead
• List your previous jobs even if they seem irrelevant to you:
  – Even minimum wage summer or part-time jobs are important experiences
Reference letters

- Solicit them from academic or professional contacts who knows you best
- Your research supervisor has to be one of your references

Interviews

- Screening
- Behavioral
- Stress
- Informational
- Group meal

Behavioral interview

- Identify your skills that are important to success in grad school and beyond
- 2-dimensional validation of answers
  - Time management
    - Your resume lists membership in 10 clubs, two concurrent part-time jobs and also a volunteering experience. That is impressive! You must have figured out how to multi-task. Please, tell me what your secret of successful multi-tasking.
  - Commitment
    - Please tell me about a project you started and didn’t finish. Why?
  - Dealing with conflict
    - Please tell me about your best boss… and your worst boss.
  - Motivation
    - What is the most boring repetitive task you have ever done. How did you keep yourself interested/motivated while doing it?
- Review committees do not seek uniformity!

Behavioral interview

- Prepare for the interview!
- Don’t over-do on the “background” research (or if you do, don’t show it!)
  - E.g. “RateMyProfessor says that you can be mean. is that true?”
- Bring a Resume
  - Have chronological and skill-based interviews ready
  - List quantifiable, relevant accomplishments
- Don’t say the things you think you should be saying
Group meal interview

• Interview rules still apply
  – To you and to your hosts:
    • Not OK to be abusive, prejudiced, gossipy
    • If you are becoming uncomfortable, say so!
• Be yourself!

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