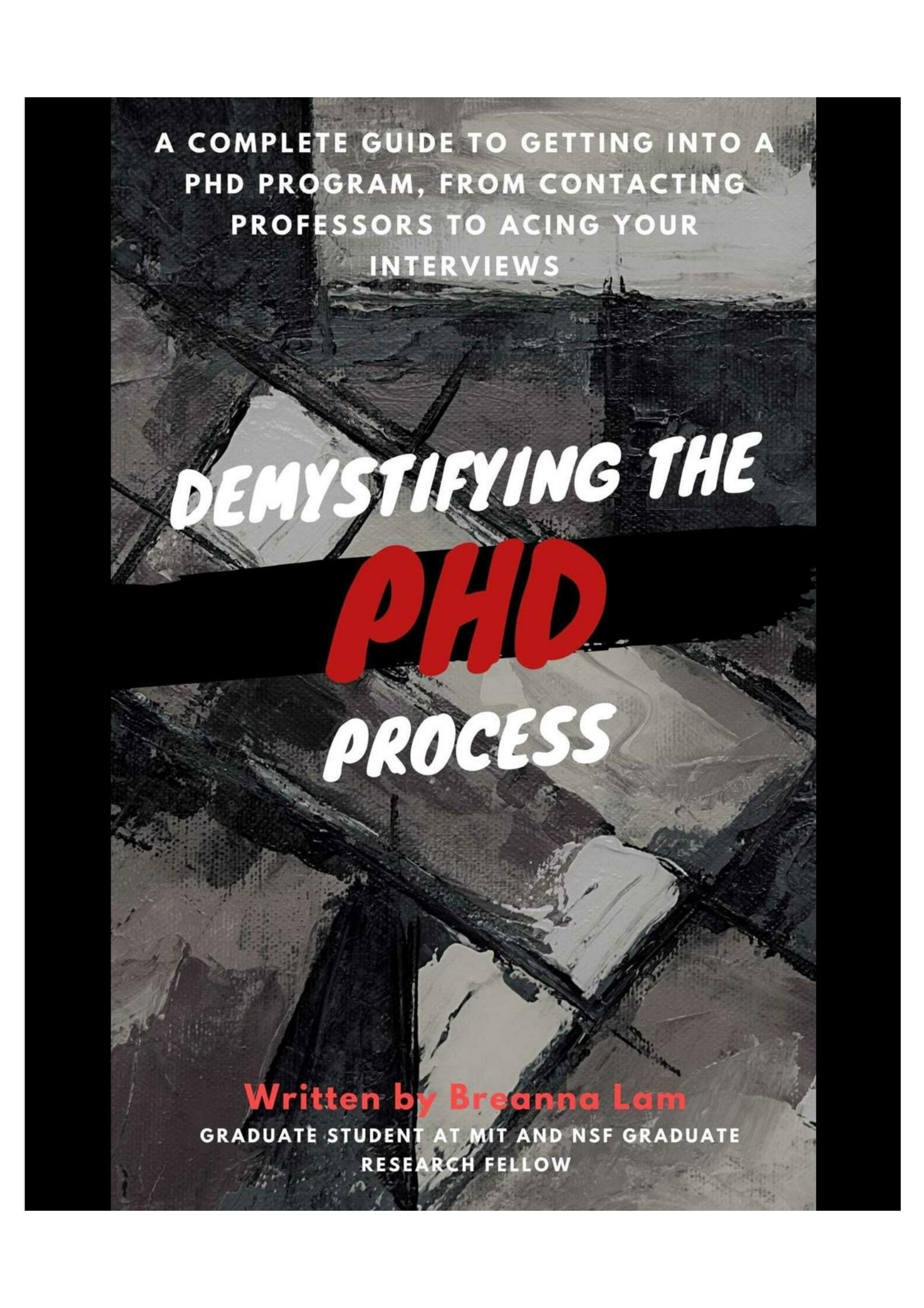




A COMPLETE GUIDE TO GETTING INTO A
PHD PROGRAM, FROM CONTACTING
PROFESSORS TO ACING YOUR
INTERVIEWS

DEMYSTIFYING THE
PHD
PROCESS

Written by Breanna Lam

GRADUATE STUDENT AT MIT AND NSF GRADUATE
RESEARCH FELLOW

DEMYSTIFYING THE PHD PROCESS

*A complete guide to getting into a PhD
program, from contacting professors
to acing your interviews*

Breanna Lam
Graduate Student at MIT and
NSF Graduate Research Fellow

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INTRODUCTION

If you have picked up this book, you are probably considering a PhD program and are well on your way to getting there for taking the initiative to read this.

As someone who has gone through the process, I know full well how hard and confusing applying to PhD programs can be, from researching and contacting professors to writing a statement of purpose.

Luckily, you don't have to figure it out alone.

Through this guide, I hope to fully demystify the PhD process and give you the tips and tricks I used to successfully get into a premier research institution. This book also features real examples, from the statement of purpose that I submitted to MIT to the emails I've sent to professors that have landed me offers of admission.

The goal of this guide is to be a one stop shop for all your PhD questions and concerns.

So, let's get started!

WHO AM I?

The first question you probably have is, “Why should I even read this? Who is this “Breanna Lam?”

I am currently an incoming PhD student at one of the top research universities in the United States – Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I was also selected for the highly competitive and prestigious National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship.



In the fall of 2020, I applied to some of the top universities across the country and got multiple offers from top biology PhD programs such as UCSF, Johns Hopkins, Yale University and more. I have been where you are and I know the feelings of confusion, dread, anxiety, fear, excitement and even relief.

As a first-generation graduate student, I knew nothing about PhD programs coming into college. The things that I share with you in this book are from the many, many conversations I have had with graduate students, PIs, professors and mentors that have guided me along the way.

So many others have helped me, and as a result, I have written this book to guide students who are going through the same process I went through and hopefully make this easier for you!

If you follow my LinkedIn (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/breanna-lam-00/>), you know that I value transparency, and my whole goal is to “Demystify the PhD process.”

WHO SHOULD GET A PHD?

There is a long-standing idea that PhDs are for people who want to become academics, or more specifically, professors and principal investigators (PIs).

Well, that is not true. Times are changing, and graduate programs know that not everyone wants to be an academic. In fact, there is much more diversity in programs and more resources for different careers.

Like any form of higher education, a PhD is not for everyone. It is an excruciatingly long journey during some of the best years of your life.

In my opinion, people who should get a PhD are people who are:



1. Passionate about the field

Unlike with high school and even college nowadays, the people who are attending a PhD program, for the most part, want to be there. They are choosing to spend anywhere from 4-7 years of their life continuing education in a specific field and conducting research.

The people I've met pursuing PhD programs are intellectually curious, passionate, and excited by their field of study. It's hard to feign interest in something you don't like, and if you are not excited by the research work you're doing - if it doesn't keep you up at night - then maybe a PhD is not for you.

2. Want to develop as a professional

Many people also choose to get a PhD because they want to become credible experts in their field and learn valuable skills, like writing, communicating effectively, and more. Getting a PhD is a great way to show future employers that you can troubleshoot, think critically, and research different topics.

The purpose of graduate school is to get the training necessary to become a professional. If you are interested in a specific line of work that requires a PhD and you are truly interested in learning more, then a PhD is a good fit for you.

3. Challenge themselves

The last, main reason people often choose to get a PhD is to challenge themselves. As I mentioned, a PhD is a long endeavor and along the way, you learn a lot about yourself and what you are capable of. In my opinion, getting a PhD is a show of perseverance and grit since graduate school and research are extremely challenging. If you want to do something hard, this is one of those things you can do.

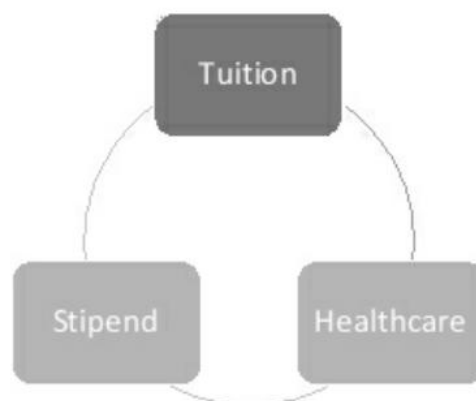
HOW MUCH DOES A PHD COST?

IT'S FREE!

People are often discouraged from pursuing higher education because of the ever-increasing costs. To add on, you can find numerous amounts of horror stories about student loans and how some people are still paying them off in their 40s and 50s. So why on earth would anybody subject themselves to more school and with it, more debt?

If you've picked up this book, you're probably interested in pursuing a PhD. If you don't know this already, PhD programs are completely free!

Most PhD programs will fund students who have been accepted to their program for a certain number of years – this funding can either come from the department or the PI the student will be working with. This funding comes in the form of a stipend that is meant to be used for housing and living expenses. In addition to that, PhD programs cover full tuition and healthcare.



Now, I know that sounds too good to be true and in part it is.

Some programs have a teaching assistant requirement that states that students have to teach/work a certain number of hours to be funded. Other programs have minimum GPA requirements, certain courses that must be taken, etc.

For the Department of Biology at MIT, my stipend will be at least \$41,225 for the 2021-2022 school year (the stipend hasn't been determined at the time of writing), in addition to full tuition and healthcare.

Each program has different stipend levels, which largely depends on the cost of living in that location and the amount of funding the programs have.

Now that you know you can afford to get a PhD, let's move on.

DO I HAVE TO TEACH TO GET A PHD?

When I was applying to PhD programs, I heavily considered the program's requirements, and, more specifically, whether there was a teaching requirement.

I totally understand that not everyone who goes into a PhD program is trying to become a professor. I know that I definitely do NOT want to be a professor.

So, do you have to teach to get a PhD? The short answer is no.

The longer answer is that it depends on the specific program. For some of the schools I was applying to, there were no teaching requirements; however, if you were interested in teaching, there were tons of resources and teaching opportunities available.

For a school like UCSF where there are no undergraduates, there is no teaching requirement for the TETRAD program. In contrast, my program at MIT does have a teaching requirement during the second and fourth years. These requirements have to be fulfilled to graduate.

If you're interested in becoming a professor, then definitely take advantage of the teaching requirements. You can also teach outside of the requirement for more money.

And if you don't want to teach, make sure you find a program that will allow you to focus your time on research, rather than being in a classroom.

HOW TO PICK A PHD PROGRAM

So you've decided that you want to get a PhD...now what? You might be interested in multiple fields. You might want to live on the East Coast or the West Coast, you might want to try something completely new.

Here are some things to consider and ask yourself as you begin looking at different programs:

- Where do I want to go to graduate school?
- Do I care about the prestige and reputation of the program?
- What opportunities do I have for personal and professional development?
- Will I have the time and resources to develop my teaching or mentoring skills?
- Are there any labs at the program that interest me?
- Are there any professors that I would like to work with?
- Will the program support my non-academia career goals?

Now, each of these factors will weigh differently for everyone. While one person may care more about the prestige of the program, another may care more about the first-year curriculum or location. These all depend on your circumstances. It is important to remember that just because you can get into a program doesn't mean it is a good fit for you.

Here is how you can start narrowing down some graduate programs:

1. Decide what field of study you are interested in.

- The best way to go about this is to start broadly with the field of study and once you figure out what you want in a graduate school, you can narrow down the specific field of research or topic you are

interested in. For instance, you might know that you want to do biology research. Once you pick out some institutions, you can get more specific about whether it is molecular biology, neuroscience, etc.

- However, if you already know which topics you want to study, then use this as your main criteria for figuring out the programs to apply to. Not every institution will offer a PhD in technology and global policy so if that is what you're interested in, it'll be easier to narrow down those programs.

2. Figure out the criteria that will make or break your decision

- You want to consider things that matter to you personally for a graduate program, whether that's location, prestige, or something else. This is super important to figure out beforehand. Not all programs are created equal, and unless you do a significant amount of research, you might be in for a surprise.
- For instance, MIT and UCSF are both amazing biology programs; however, if weather is important to you, you might choose one over the other.

3. Look for schools that meet most or all the criteria you have and create a list

- Once you have figured out what factors you find important, start creating a list of the schools that meet these criteria. You can use the format below to stay organized while creating a list of programs you are interested in:

PhD Programs				
Institution	Programs	Professors I want to work with	Criteria that is important to you (ex. TA Requirement)	Notes

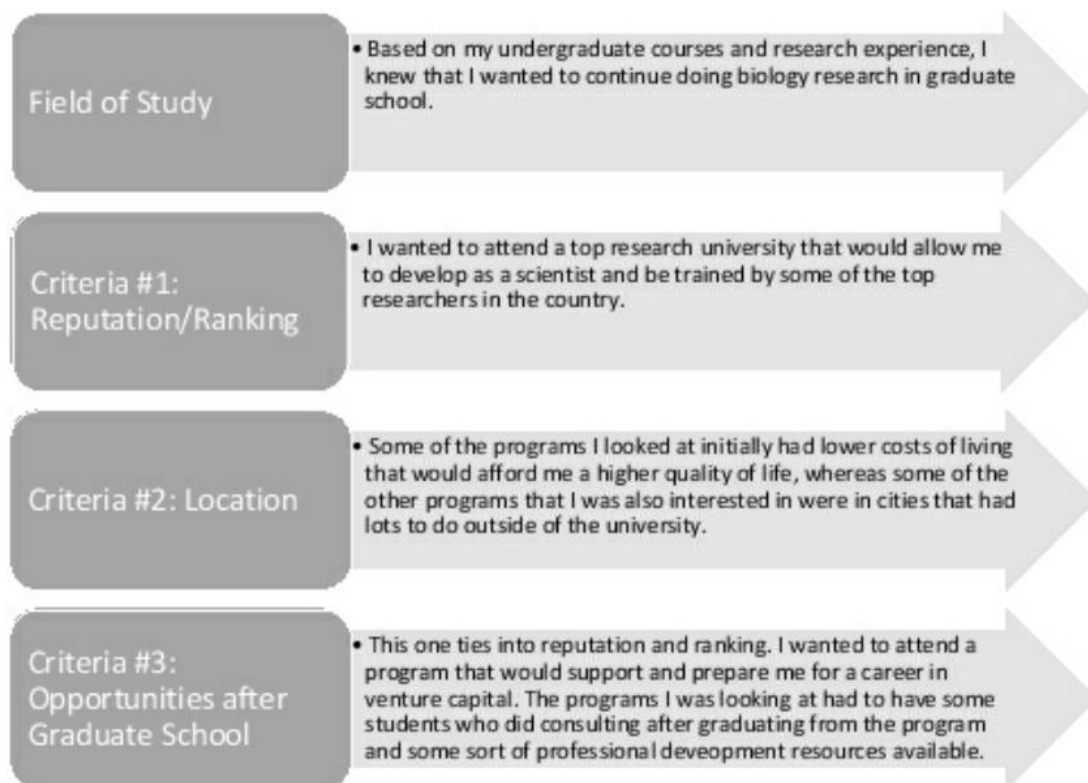
- - It's important to pick out some schools that can serve as your safety, some that are right on your level, and some that are reaches. This will give you a good number of options. The best way to figure out if you're qualified or good enough for the program is to reach out to current students or look at the admissions profile of students who were accepted. You can also use LinkedIn to see the profiles of people who have gotten into the programs you are eyeing.
- 4. Go to the institution/program's website and research the professors/research work going on**
- After narrowing down some choices, it's time to do more research!
 - To learn more about the institutions and programs, go to the graduate website at the institution and look at which specific programs are offered. From there, you can go to the department's website and learn more by going through the pages for prospective students, along with checking out some of the faculty that are part of the program.
 - You will also want to look at the curriculum, if there are any specific requirements for applying, whether there are teaching requirements, etc. The more information you have about the pro-

gram, the stronger position you are in to make a well-informed decision.

5. Start contacting people in the program and figure out whether you can see yourself there

- You can contact professors, the admissions office, and current graduate students to get a better sense of the culture of the program and institution. Having these conversations will help you determine whether it's a good fit for you.

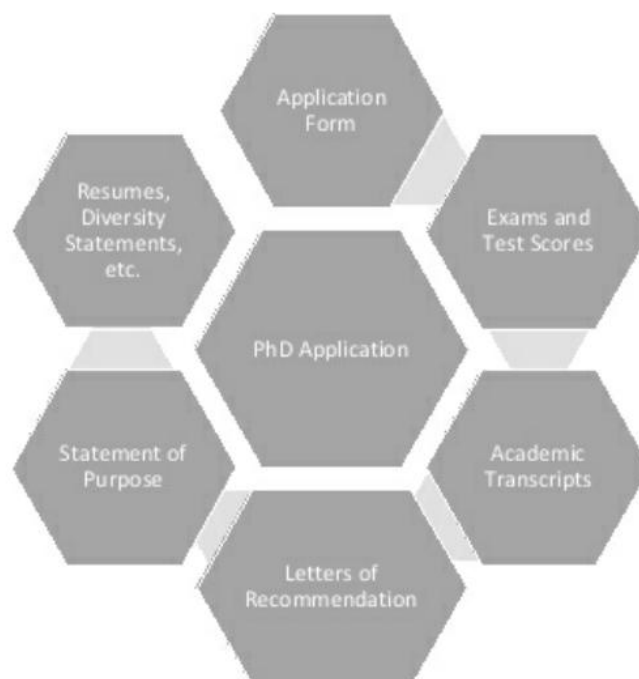
My process for picking out graduate schools:



PARTS OF THE APPLICATION

When applying to a PhD program, you want to show that you are qualified for their program based on your past experiences. PhD programs are funded so you basically want to convince them that you are a good investment.

The parts of the application include:



Application Form

When you apply to a PhD program, the application portal will have the application form that you will need to fill out. Here, you are basically selecting which specific program you are interested in, entering information about your demographics, experience, mailing address and more. This part of the application process is easy since you are just answering basic questions about yourself. The application form for most of the programs you apply to will typically ask you the same questions.

3 Highlighters-
The application form might even ask you to provide information on professors you have been in contact with or are interested in working with. As a result, getting in touch with professors ahead of time is crucial.

Exams and Test Scores

In the past, most PhD programs required GRE scores; however, some programs are starting to phase them out. For instance, there are many biology programs that do not require the GRE. When I was doing my research on programs I was interested in, none of them required the GRE. You should definitely check the program's requirements well before you apply so you can study for the GRE, if necessary.

If you are an international student, you will need to take the IELTS or TOEFL and submit your scores. These exams are English language tests that are required for many programs.

Transcripts

PhD programs are rigorous and one of the ways that programs determine whether or not you'll make a good PhD student is based on your grades and the courses you've taken. PhD programs will often require you to input your grades for relevant courses, or submit your whole academic transcript for all the universities you have attended full time. Unofficial transcripts are usually accepted during the application process.

Statement of Purpose

I personally believe that this is the single most important document that you will submit as part of your PhD application. The statement of purpose is usually 1-3 pages long, depending on the program's specific requirements, and details the research experiences you have and why you are qualified for their PhD program.

Having a strong statement of purpose is essential for getting into a PhD program. This is where the admissions committee can learn more about you as an individual and for you to explain who you are and why you are not only prepared for their program but also interested in it.

Letters of Recommendation

For your PhD application, you will need approximately 2-3 letters of recommendation from people who can speak to your research experiences and character. Some programs allow you to submit more. These letters are very important because it is one thing to say you are qualified, but if others also believe that, then the admissions committee is more likely to be swayed in your favor.

In the application portal, you will usually be inputting the information of the person who is writing you a letter of recommendation, along with their email, so that they can get the instructions to submit the letter of recommendation.

Resumes, Diversity Statement, and Other Supplemental Materials

Depending on the program, they may ask for other supplemental materials and documents. For instance, my applications usually asked me to upload my resume/CV onto the application portal. Other programs may require you to write statements on diversity, link your digital portfolio if you have one, or anything else that may contribute to who you are as an applicant.

Some of these supplemental materials are completely optional and I would suggest doing them if you think they will benefit your application and if you have the time.

Application Fee

Lastly, before you submit your application, you will have to pay an application fee or show that you are eligible for a fee waiver. The application

fee varies depending on the program; however, if you have participated in certain conferences and programs, this can often be waived. For a complete list of how you can qualify for an application fee waiver, visit the program's website.

CHOOSING A NEW FIELD OF RESEARCH!

It can be incredibly scary to venture into something new, especially during your PhD. You might be thinking about either choosing a new model organism, research topic, or even something completely different.

The good news is that it is completely okay, and even normal, to pursue a new field of research!

For me, when I was applying to PhD programs, I was nervous because I was interested in labs and professors who worked with something I have never worked with; however, what many professors told me was that it is more important to understand the fundamentals of research rather than the techniques. So, what does that even mean?

It means that you should know how to propose a research question, think critically about a problem, troubleshoot when things do not work out and draw conclusions from your work. Anyone can learn how to use a pipette or search the literature for information on a topic quite easily, but thinking creatively takes more time and dedication.

The purpose of a PhD program is to teach you how to become a researcher, not how to follow a protocol. So, if you're considering a new field and understand the fundamentals of research, I highly recommend it.

Fundamentals of Research = Scientific Method



How to Get Professors to Accept Your Lack of Experience in the Field

When I tell people they don't have to continue doing the same type of research they did during their undergraduate years or for their Master's degree, they often ask how they should approach it. Most people tell me that even though it is feasible, there are plenty of professors who don't give them a chance because of their lack of experience.

The key to pursuing a new field of research during your PhD is to sell yourself correctly. You need to be able to correctly show that you can contribute your unique experiences to the research work and bring new perspectives.

When talking to professors, you should be able to connect your experiences, no matter how different the subject is. Chances are, the underlying principles of research are the same – and this is what you need to emphasize and get across. For instance, you might find something about their work interesting. In your conversations with them, bring it up and ask questions that someone working on the project might ask. Address gaps in the field that you would like to study and tell them why you're interested.

It is also important to take the initiative to learn as much as possible about the field to not only demonstrate your interest, but also commitment to doing the work necessary to be successful. This can be achieved by doing things that aren't required of you – like reading research papers on the topic, taking online courses or even connecting with others in the field to learn more. By educating yourself on the field, you will have more to talk about with the professor, which can help lead to opportunities to work with them.

Explanation Addressing Change in Field of Research

If you think it might be hard to change fields and want to address it directly,

you should definitely reach out to professors whose work you are interested in to explain why you would be an asset to them before applying.

In your explanation, you should:

1. Introduce Yourself

You should tell the professor what you are currently doing, whether you are working or a student, and what you are currently studying. You should keep the explanation about what you are studying broad because if they are in a different field, they will probably have no idea what you are talking about if you are too specific.

2. Mention what you have learned as a researcher

This part is very important. Here, you want to show them that you understand the fundamentals of research. You know the process of asking a question and how to answer it, so show them that. You should talk about the specific skills you have developed, whether that is thinking critically or designing experiments. Make sure to also mention that these skills have made it much easier for you to explore and understand other field of study.

3. Connect it to their Work

In this section, you want to tell them why you are interested in this work and why it's significant. This is critical to show them that you understand what it is that they do. You can also mention any relevant experiences, such as a course you took or a paper you read about the field.

4. Acknowledge Your Lack of Experience and How You can be an Asset

You want to address that you don't have formal experience in the field; however, you should mention some of the strengths you have, such as contributing unique perspectives. You should also demonstrate specific knowledge of their work by proposing a research question that you could study and how you would potentially study it.

5. Thank them for the opportunity

Finally, you want to see if they would be willing to talk to you more about the opportunities available and thank them for their time.

Not every professor will be receptive to these emails. Still, if you are truly interested about the work and have a history of working hard, that will shine through and the opportunities will be easier to get.

Sample Explanation Addressing Change in Field of Research

Dear Professor XXX,

I am currently a student at the University of California, San Diego, studying molecular and cell biology. My research work focuses on exploring quality control mechanisms in the cell, and more specifically, how proteins are targeted for degradation when they are misfolded.

Throughout the course of my research project, I have developed into an independent researcher and honed my ability to think critically and troubleshoot problems. Furthermore, my training in deconstructing research papers has been extremely useful in understanding different fields of study.

A course I took on the physics of the cell by Dr. XXX has really piqued my interest in pursuing a PhD in physics. As I was reading the literature on fluid dynamics of blood flow, I came across your lab's work. I find it really interesting because the dynamics are directly related to wound healing, and there are many applications for this.

I know that my research background is originally in molecular biology; however, I believe that my interests in the field of physics, compounded by the skills I developed in the lab, can be an asset to your lab. My unique experiences and eagerness to explore the dynamics of blood flow through XYZ techniques will help uncover [specific research question].

I know you are busy, and I would appreciate it if we could discuss this further.
Thank you so much for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you!

CONTACTING PROFESSORS

ABOUT MY PHD

One of the best pieces of advice that I was ever given from a professor regarding the PhD process is to contact professors that I want to work with ahead of time.

Unlike with undergraduate admissions, the faculty in the department you are applying to review your application. The faculty are the ones who choose your fate, so it makes sense that it helps to build a relationship with them.

Now, you do not want to just email a bunch of professors in the program you're applying to. Although you can, it is probably not the best use of your time. Instead, you want to choose 3-5 professors at each program you are applying to and reach out to them via email.

So, how do you get started?

The best way to figure out who to reach out to is to go onto the program's website and look at the faculty in the program. Some websites allow you to sort by research interests.

I would highly recommend going through 15-20 profiles of professors to see whether there are some in the program you are interested in and start compiling a list.

A common misconception is that the newer faculty have no pull in admissions decisions; however, that is not true. If a professor likes you and tells the committee they want you, that only helps your application and shows initiative on your end! So, you should definitely reach out to professors whose research and professional background interest you.

Once you have narrowed down who you are going to contact, start drafting the email!

What to Include in an Email to a Professor

In your email, you want to:

1. Introduce Yourself and Your Research Background

In this section, you want to be brief. Start by mentioning your role, whether as a student, research technician, or something else, and where you are currently working or attending school.

After giving that information, you should mention who's lab you are working in. I have often found that people at different universities knew my PI so it's very helpful to name-drop them. The more connections you can build with the professor you're reaching out to, the better.

If they are in your field, you can be a little bit more detailed about your project, but if they might not be familiar with your work, then try to make it understandable. Like us, professors don't know everything, so you don't want to use too much jargon. Being able to communicate effectively means not using big words every chance you get!

2. Tell the Professor How You Came Across their Research and Why You Think it is Interesting

This section is the most important one in your email. You want to show the professors that you have done your research. This part will be personalized for each professor you email.

To do this part effectively, you can read some of the professor's papers, go on their lab website, or even their faculty page. You want to show them that you are reaching out to them specifically because their work interests you.

This is also the chance to show them that you have some knowledge or skills that would help contribute to their research. This could be a class you have taken, a paper you have read, or even something you have done in the lab that relates to their work. This is another great opportunity to use your network to your advantage. For example, suppose the professor you're reaching out to does research on the brain, and you've taken a neuroscience class. In that case, you can talk about that experience, mention the professor you took the class with, and how that relates to your interests in the professor's research.

In this section, you can also ask a question about their research work that you're curious about.

3. Ask about Connecting with them to Learn More about their Research and the Program

Once you've talked about yourself and your interests in the professor's work, you want to ask them if they are taking in graduate students and whether they would be willing to carve out some time for you to talk. I found it incredibly helpful to ask if they are taking in graduate students because they know that you are not just complimenting them on their research, but that you want to join their lab in the future. The value you will add as a graduate student is an incentive for them to connect with you.

In this section, you can ask to learn more about their research, the program, or both! I would definitely leave the option to communicate by phone, video call, and email open. The more options they have to reach you, the more convenient it is for them.

4. Thank them for their Time

Once you've gotten all that, you're basically done! The only thing that is left is to thank them!

Sample Email

Below is a real example of an email I sent to a professor:

Dear Professor [REDACTED]:

I am a student at the University of California, San Diego with a major in molecular and cell biology. For the past two years, I have been working in Dr. Randolph Hampton's lab. My research focuses on finding mutant versions of allosteric proteins that are regulated by ligands. More specifically, I have developed an optical screen for mutant versions of chorismate mutase that can be modulated by its activator and inhibitor, tyrosine and tryptophan, respectively.

I am planning to attend graduate school in the Fall of 2021, with a focus on human disease. As I was researching different faculty at MIT, I came across your faculty page. I think your research work is very interesting and prior to exploring your lab page, I was unaware that intrinsic signaling alterations affect anti-tumor immune response. I think being able to understand and explore the mechanisms underlying this is important to developing and improving immunotherapies that more patients respond to. Your lab's work is highly interesting and I would love to know more about your approaches!

I hope you don't mind my getting in touch, but I'd also like to inquire whether you are currently accepting graduate students. If you are, would you willing to talk to me a bit more, by email or on the phone, or in person if I can arrange a campus visit, about my graduate school plans? I have explored your department's graduate school website in detail, and it seems like an excellent fit for me because of its emphasis on interdepartmental cooperation and collaboration, but I still have a few specific questions about the culture of the university that I'd like to talk to you about.

I know you're very busy so I appreciate any time you can give me. Thank you very much.

Subject Lines That Work

It can be disappointing when you start emailing professors and don't get a reply right away, or at all. Professors are incredibly busy people and they get hundreds of emails each week.

It is super important to write a subject line that catches their attention and makes them want to open the email.

When I was emailing professors, I wrote "Inquiry from Prospective Graduate Applicant" as the subject line. This worked well for me and allowed me to connect with lots of professors at the programs I was interested in.

In hindsight, the simplicity and clearness of the subject line were what made it so successful.

Here are 15 Subject Lines that Work:

1. Student Interested in joining XXX Lab
2. Graduate Applicant Interested in XXX Program
3. Inquiring about Graduate Positions Available for Fall 20XX
4. XXX Said We Should Connect (Now in this case, you can put your mentor or PI's name if they referred you to them)
5. University of XXX's Graduate Program in XXX
6. Inquiry from Prospective Graduate Student
7. Undergraduate at XXX Interested in XXX PhD Program
8. Questions about XXX Graduate Program
9. Meeting About XXX Research Opportunity
10. Prospective Graduate Student – Meeting Request
11. Would Love to Connect – Prospective Graduate Student
12. Student Interested in XXX Program
13. Prospective Student Seeking Graduate Program Advice/
Information

14. Would Love to Know More about XXX Program

15. Accepting Graduate Students?

QUESTIONS TO ASK A PROFESSOR ABOUT THEIR RESEARCH AND THEIR PROGRAM



You've connected with a professor and they have agreed to talk to you about their research and the graduate program you're interested in at their university...now what?

This is where you are going to do a substantial amount of research on their work. The best way to go about this is to spend some time the day before your meeting with the professor reading some of their papers and learning more about what they have accomplished in the lab. You want to ask questions that show you've done your homework and are serious about potentially working with them. This is your opportunity to have one-on-one time with the professor, asking the questions you are curious about.

What I typically did was write down 5 research-related questions. These served as a starting point for the conversation, after brief introductions were made. Writing these questions was helpful for me because it helped prompt a more in-depth conversation of the professor's research work.

Sometimes, the professor would have a slide deck about their research prepared or give you a short 5-minute spiel about what their research was all about. Since you have done your research about the topic, you can ask them more specific questions about their work, or even clear up any misunderstandings you had. It is totally okay to not ask all the questions you

prepared. Your conversations should not feel scripted or rehearse. If something comes up that you aren't sure about, ask.

Each professor's research is going to differ so you will have to research and create specific questions for every professor you meet with. Luckily, the questions you ask about the program and institutions can be the same.

Here is your chance to figure out if you will be a good fit before doing all of the work applying to the program. The more information you can get about the program, the better.

I typically asked the following:

- What makes this program different from other programs?
- What support is there for students at the program?
- Are there opportunities for collaboration, internally and externally?
- What do you like about the program?
- What is the culture of the university/program?

Even though you can ask the same questions to each professor, you can also ask specific ones about the program. For instance, if a program does not have a teaching requirement but you are interested in teaching, you can ask about the resources available. You can also ask them more about the curriculum, diversity, or anything else that is important to you in deciding on a graduate program.

Make sure that you are asking questions that you are genuinely curious about, rather than wasting a professor's time just to increase your chances of getting accepted.

Following Up and Building a Relationship

When you connect with a professor, don't think the work is done after you've emailed them and asked them your questions over Zoom or video

call. That's just the beginning.

Do you really think a professor is going to remember you, let alone vouch for you if you talked to them 6 months ago and they never heard from you again?

Building a relationship with a professor is all about following up with them and keeping in contact – from that initial email to well after you've applied and gotten into the program.

After you have connected with them, you should continue to follow up every month or so, so that you are continuing to build your credibility and relationship with them.

Some things you can do are:

- Email if you have a question about the program or their research
- Follow their research work and if they publish something or accomplish a big feat, congratulate them
- Stay updated on the field of study and let them know if you've recently read a paper or saw something that is relevant to their work that they might be interested in
- Connect with them on social media (not their personal one!!!!). You can connect with them on platforms like LinkedIn, ResearchGate or their lab's Twitter and tag them in posts that are relevant
- When you apply to the program, you can also let the professor know and if your program has an interview process, see if you can interview with them.

The more times you can contribute something meaningful, whether that's an idea or sending a paper their way, the more likely they can see the value you provide and want you in their program.

This will make it much easier for them to want to accept you over another student with a similar profile who they have never met or been in contact with.

FAQs about Emailing Professors

How much time/research should I do before emailing a professor?

On average, you should spend about 10-30 mins researching each professor before you email them. Since the only part of the email you are changing is the specifics about their research and why you are interested, it should not take long to write each email once you have the first email written.

I would look at their faculty/lab website and any recent papers they have written and pick out 1-2 things that are interesting. From here, write a sentence or two about why you think it's interesting. I would not spend too much time on this initial email since you want to email a few professors at each program you apply to, and their reply is not guaranteed. If they reply, you can spend more time researching their work.

What if I do not have research experience that directly relates to the professor's research?

It is completely okay to not have any research experience in that field. It's more important that you highlight a key research experience that you have to show you know some research and then tell them why it interests you and how you can relate to it, whether it's a class you've taken or a paper you've read. Initiative goes a long way and when they reply and you have the chance to talk to them, you can tell them more about why you are interested in pursuing this new field of research and how your past experiences can be applied to it.

What if a professor does not reply and I really want to work with them?

If a professor does not reply after you have followed up, you can try to politely reach out to someone in the lab or another professor in the same field/program who can potentially connect you. This professor will most likely know the professor you want to work with and in your conversation with them, you can mention how you would also like to connect with them. This can be a bit tricky, so do not reach out unless you are very interested in the professor's work.

Should I attach my CV/Resume in the email?

When I was emailing professors, I didn't include my CV/Resume, but some professors did ask for it. It is totally up to you whether or not to include it. If you have lots of experience in the field or worked on something the professor might find interesting, I would definitely include it.

How many professors should I reach out to?

I reached out to 3 per program, but this is largely dependent on how much time and effort you're willing to put in. If you have lots of time and want to learn as much as possible about different professors' works, then reach out to as many as possible. Just remember that it does take a lot of time, especially if they reply and want to set up calls or meetings.

Will a professor even remember me?

Yes, if you continue to follow up and build a relationship!

When is the best time to reach out to professors?

The earlier you start, the better. This will give you more time to build a relationship and really get to know them.

If you want to take it a step further and increase your chances of getting a reply, I would check the academic calendar for the professors that teach, or even when grants are due and email when professors would be less busy. During midterms and finals week, professors get even more emails so I

would try to avoid those times. During the summers, less professors teach, but if they have a lab, they are most likely still doing research so it can be beneficial to email then.

ASKING FOR A LETTER OF RECOMMENDATION

Asking a professor to write you a letter can be daunting, especially if you have not taken the time to build a good relationship with them. Most PhD programs require 2-3 letters of recommendation, and some will even let you submit more than that.

So, who can you ask to write you a letter?

For the most part, you can ask anyone who can speak to your research experience and is a credible person. This mainly includes your professors, PIs, and employers. I've heard of some applicants asking graduate students or post-docs, but I would strongly advise against this. Admissions committees are likely to give less weight to graduate students and post-docs because of their academic status and lack of experience.

Timeline for Asking for a Letter of Recommendation

If you aren't applying to graduate school for a while, it's probably best to not ask right away. Instead, you want to let them know you'll be applying in the future and work on building a relationship with your letter of recommendation writers so when the time comes, they can write you a really strong one.

If you are applying in the next 6 months, slowly start talking to your writers to let them know your intention to apply and see if they would be willing to write you a letter. This is really important because if a potential letter of recommendation writer is not very receptive to your request, it might be a hint to find other people who are willing to write you a letter.

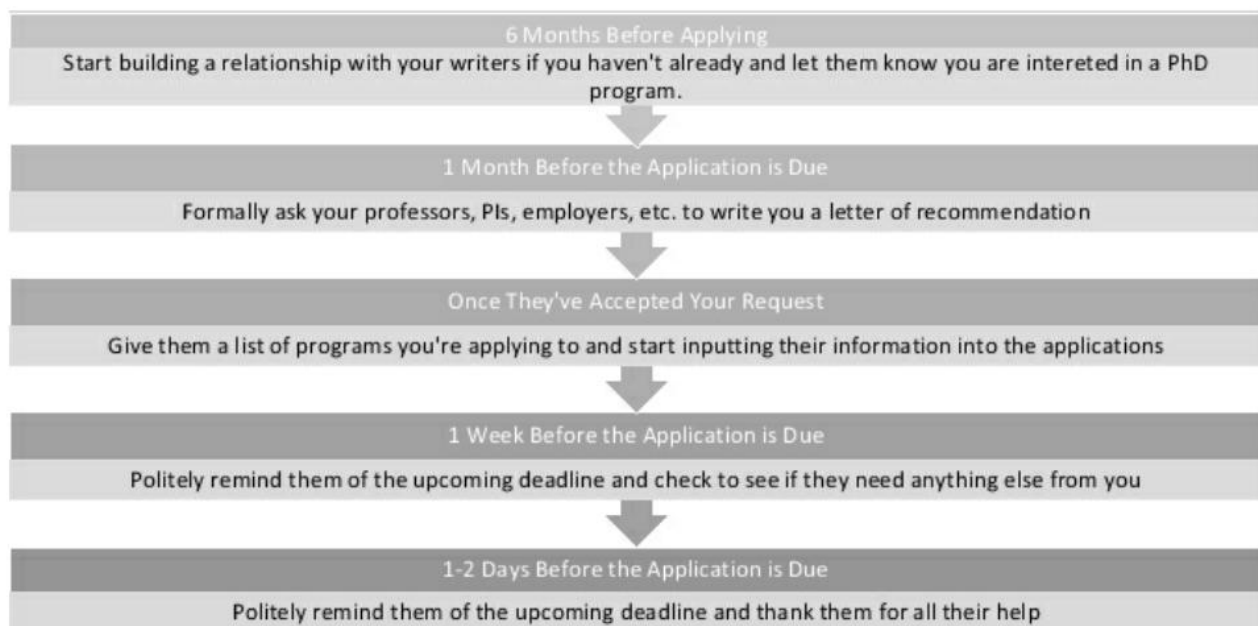
Then, once you start applying, reach out to them and formally request a letter of recommendation. You typically want to give them at least two

weeks to write it, but I usually like to send an email a month beforehand, formally asking them to write me a letter.

You should get them to accept your request before you start filling out their information in the application because once you do, they'll start getting notified by the applications!

As the application deadlines get closer, check in with them periodically to make sure they didn't forget and have everything they need. You should check in with them a week before the deadline and if they haven't submitted anything, check again 1-2 days before the letters are due.***

***DO NOT BE ANNOYING ABOUT THIS. Your letter of recommendation writers are busy and you should be as respectful as possible when reminding them.



Making it as Easy As Possible for Your Writers

If you're applying to a PhD program, you're probably not just applying to 1 or 2. You are probably applying to a few programs and fellowships, and it can get pretty confusing to keep track of everything. Organization is criti-

cal, especially when you are also depending on other people to complete your application.

As a result, you should make it as easy as possible for your letter of recommendation writers to submit their letter and keep track of which ones they need to write for you.

When I was applying, I created an Excel spreadsheet for each person I asked to write me a letter with the following information:

Letter of Recommendation Writer's Name			
Institution (ex. MIT)	Program (ex. Biology)	Website or How to Submit Letter of Recommendation (ex. Email to XXX)	Deadline (ex. December 1, 2020)

I then sent this spreadsheet to them so that they knew exactly how many programs I was applying to, where to submit it, and the deadline. This was really helpful for them since they could refer to it, especially when there were multiple programs at one institution and different ways of submitting for each one. It also helps with fellowships since they have varying deadlines.

You should send them this information after they have agreed to write you a strong letter of recommendation, but well before the deadline.

Sample Letter of Recommendation Request Email

Hi **BLANK,**

I hope you are doing well during these times! Things have been incredibly chaotic in the world lately, but despite this, I hope you are able to find the time to continue running and spending time with your family.

As you might know, I am in the process of applying to PhD programs and fellowships. I have learned so much being in your lab and it is there that I decided that I wanted to pursue graduate school instead of medical school. Being able to work on the chorismate mutase project has allowed me to develop many skills, and I'm looking forward to growing as a researcher in graduate school. I am incredibly excited to apply and see where I end up.

The lab experience and mentorship I have received in the [REDACTED] lab has been extremely instrumental in my decision to pursue this endeavor. Even during the days or weeks where my experiments were not working, you continued to push me and give me guidance, and I can only hope that my future PI will provide me with the support you did. I would be honored if you could write me a strong letter of recommendation for my fellowship and graduate school applications. The first deadline for my fellowship application is October 14th so I hope this gives you plenty of time to write something; however, I know that you are extremely busy and I completely understand if you do not have the time to write me a letter.

Please let me know at your earliest convenience. Thank you [REDACTED] for your continued support! I look forward to hearing from you!

PREPARING YOUR STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Your statement of purpose, also known as your personal statement, is single-handedly the most important part of your application. It is your chance to prove to a program why you are a good investment and should be admitted to the program.

In the statement of purpose, you need to make sure you include 3 things:

1. What Motivates You to Pursue Academic Research and a PhD

In your statement of purpose, you want the admissions committee to know who you are. This part of the essay can be a bit more personal and detail WHY you want to pursue a PhD, whether that involves an incident that caused you to be interested in research or how you feel when you are researching and in the lab.

The admissions committee knows that a PhD is a long endeavor and that it is not for everyone. You should be genuine in your response about how pursuing a PhD will help you in your career goals and why that institution is the place you want to do your PhD.

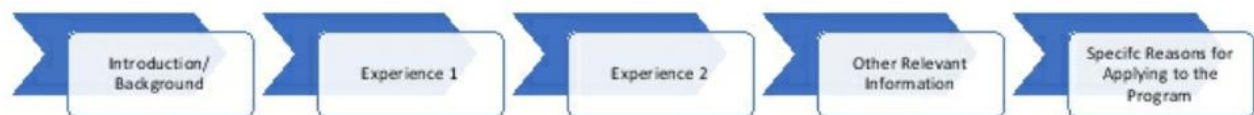
2. Your Passion in the Field of Study

Throughout your statement of purpose, you want to show that you are passionate about the field of study you are pursuing. The type of people who pursue PhDs are often eager to learn and are curious, and you need to show that you are intellectually curious. This is done by demonstrating your research experiences and the opportunities you have sought out.

3. Your Understanding of Research and What it Entails

In your statement of research, you want to convince the admissions committee that you have the skills and traits necessary to be a researcher and successful in graduate school. You want to emphasize that you know how to solve problems and that your experiences have made you a qualified applicant. You should talk about the overall ideas of your project, how you came to the conclusions you did and what you learned from it. Doing so will show that you didn't just do something because someone told you to, but because you were curious and that it was your project.

Outline of Your Statement of Purpose



Introduction/Background

The introduction and background are a perfect place to introduce who you are and an overview of your experiences, along with your research interests.

This is where most people put in personal anecdotes – whether it was a life event or moment that caused them to be interested in their field – and explain their motivation for pursuing a PhD.

This part of your statement of purpose should be brief (5-7 sentences). You should be concise about why you are applying and show your passion for the field of study through adjectives or the way you felt in a particular scenario, contributing to your decision to apply to a PhD program.

Experiences and Other Relevant Information

In your statement of purpose, it is absolutely critical to highlight your research experiences. You should pick a few that made the most impact on

you as a researcher and talk about those ones. The format for highlighting your research experience should be:

1. Research Experience 1

a. Overview

i. How you found the lab

- 1. Did you seek it out by emailing professors?
Was it part of a program?**

ii. What made you interested in it

- 1. Why did you want to work in this lab
specifically? Was it the research topic that
interested you? The techniques?**

iii. Type of work done in the lab.

- 1. What does the lab study?**

b. Research Project

i. Specific Research Questions Addressed

- 1. What questions were you trying to
answer?**

ii. Hypothesis

- 1. What results did you expect?**

iii. Approach

- 1. How did you go about designing exper-
iments and answering questions about
the project?**
- 2. Did you have to learn new skills?**

c. Contribution

i. What did you contribute to the project?

- 1. New ideas?**
- 2. New techniques?**
- 3. Describe what you did that was either
novel or help make substantial progress
in the project**

d. Challenges Faced and Lessons Learned

- i. What did you learn from the experience?**
- ii. What challenges did you face and how did you overcome them?**

2. Research Experience 2

- a. Same format as research experience 1.
- b. Be sure to explain why you sought out a new research experience and how it relates to your previous one.**

3. Research Experience 2 or Other Relevant Information

- a. This can be anything that demonstrates your abilities as a researcher and your passion for research/your field of study
 - i. Conferences/Poster presentations
 - ii. Coursework
 - iii. Teaching opportunities
 - iv. Internships that are not directly research related
 - v. Seminars you attended
- b. You should explain why these events and opportunities were impactful and how they contribute to your desire to pursue a PhD

Specific Reasons for Applying to the Program

This part of your statement of purpose should change from program to program. Here, you want to be as specific as possible to show them that you've done your research on their program and think it is a good fit.

I would mention a specific aspect of the program, such as the curriculum, that might make it unique and how it would help you achieve your career goals. You can also mention the type of research you are interested in pursuing in the program and the faculty that you've connected with or know of that work on that research area. By being specific, you are showing them

that you have put in the effort to learn more about their program and think it's a good fit.

Example statements to include:

- "The teaching resources available, such as XXX, will allow me to gain the training necessary to excel as a professor in XXX."
- "The XXX course requirements, compounded by the XXX requirement during the first year of the program will allow me to develop XXX skills and grow professionally."
- "The XXX program's emphasis on XXX research would give me the opportunity to study under renowned scientist, XXX."
- "In my communication with Prof. XXX, I was able to learn more about their research and the projects going on, which have contributed to my desire to attend XXX."
- "My research experiences and interests align well with XXX, studying XXX."
- "Through the XXX courses, I will be able to XXX."
- "The XXX and other program features will give me the opportunity to XXX, preparing me for a career in XXX."
- "At XXX, I know that I will have the opportunity to XXX."

Read The Statement of Purpose that Got Me into MIT

Prompt: Please tell us why you wish to pursue graduate studies in biology at MIT and how your academic and research background have prepared you for a rigorous doctoral program. You should use the "Research Experiences" section of the application to succinctly list your prior research activities, including dates, location, project goals/activities and your contributions. In this section, please provide a narrative describing your personal scientific interests and achievements and how these led to your interest in biology graduate studies. You should focus on your most meaningful research experience or experiences, explaining in your

own words the significance of and motivation behind your project(s). Tell us what you were trying to accomplish, and describe the approach(es) you took and the reasoning behind them. Include a discussion of what you contributed and what you learned. The Admissions Committee also welcomes any information you wish to bring to our attention concerning your academic, work, or life experience.

My research experiences and background in molecular and cell biology have culminated in my interest in intracellular interactions and how these beautiful interactions can contribute to our understanding of diseases. These research interests have served as a catalyst for pursuing graduate school at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where I will gain the training necessary to become a top scientist in my field. As a graduate student, I will be able to enhance my scientific foundation through the courses I take, develop my ability to investigate biological phenomena through the research I engage in and gain new perspectives through the connections I cultivate with my cohort and the faculty at MIT.

Receiving the merit-based Regents Scholarship at UC San Diego allowed me to participate in the Overnight Stay Program. During this event, I went on lab tours and was fascinated by the research work being done on campus, from the use of cryo-EM to study macromolecules to the development of photochemical tools. As a result, when I was presented with the opportunity to do research through the Regents Scholar Research Initiative program, I knew that I had to pursue this opportunity to uncover novel solutions to biological challenges.

When I was applying to this program, I scoured the biology department's faculty pages and was immediately drawn to Dr. Randolph Hampton's research on understanding how cells selectively destroy proteins because the mechanisms seemed elegantly complex. As a result, I joined Dr. Hampton's lab during the first quarter of my freshman year of college. The Hampton lab focuses its research on cellular management of misfolded proteins, lipid signaling and the dynamics of

the ER. Recent findings in the lab showed that yeast HMG-CoA reductase (HMGR) is regulated by cellular quality control pathways that typically degrade misfolded proteins. In the presence of specific ligands, there are changes in folding state, resulting in degradation. This sophisticated process resembles allosteric regulation and as a result, our lab has coined this "mallostery." These findings sparked my curiosity as to whether ligand-induced changes in folding state could arise naturally by modification of an allosteric protein and as a result, I designed experiments to directly test this on chorismate mutase (CM).

Using our lab's novel optical approach that allows for colony level discovery of CM mutants, I was able to find two mutants that undergo proteasome dependent degradation and pharmacological chaperoning. This project and my findings introduced me to the extraordinary ability of ligands to alter the structure of misfolded proteins and allowed me to appreciate the intelligent machinery of cells that modulate function. Moreover, the striking findings from my project provide the platform for developing mallosteric ligands to selectively program degradation of clinical targets, opening a wide avenue of drug discovery.

One of the highlights of this project was optimizing our mutagenic screen by introducing the ligands into the plates, allowing us to simultaneously screen for proteasome dependence and ligand-induced changes. This optimized screen provides us with the platform to screen thousands of colonies, reducing the rounds of screening required. Moreover, this screen has been adapted to investigate other proteins and is currently being used by some members of the lab to study mallosteric variants of HMGR. Being able to optimize this screen during my second year in the lab gave me the opportunity for unhindered innovative thinking and reinforced my appreciation for research.

Within two years, I became an independent molecular biologist, and developed my ability to think critically, design experiments and develop my troubleshooting skills. The enthusiasm that came from making novel discoveries and

investigating biological phenomena has led me to pursue more research opportunities and broaden my scope of research.

My eagerness to explore how basic research is applied in drug discovery led to my internship at Takeda Pharmaceuticals during the summer of 2020. As an intern on the neuroscience *in vitro* pharmacology team, I learned how the researchers at Takeda used basic research findings from academia to further their search for an inhibitor of the NLRP3 inflammasome in microglia. Through the weekly lab meetings, I saw how biological mechanisms uncovered in peer-reviewed articles provided the foundation for creating small molecules, designing experiments and optimizing assays. As an intern working remotely, I read peer-reviewed articles in order to better understand microglia and am currently in the process of writing a review paper on the involvement of microglia in CNS disorders. This positive experience has allowed me to appreciate the significance of basic science research and solidify my desire to investigate biological phenomena in relation to disease.

As such, my desire to learn more about the processes underlying diseases led to a laboratory position at the San Diego Biomedical Research Institute. At the institute, I work full-time in the lab of Dr. Joanna Davies, studying the immune system in diseases. Previously, it has been shown that in healthy adults, 127-hi cells have a Th2 bias, and as such, we wanted to investigate whether the 127-hi cells have a Th2 bias in Type 1 Diabetes. As a result, I designed experiments and showed that 127-hi cells exhibit a Th2 bias in people with Type 1 Diabetes as observed by preferential upregulation of cell surface Th2 markers, intracellular Th2 transcription factors, and secreted cytokines. This research work provides the foundation for developing Th2-based therapeutics to prolong partial remission and is currently under review by *JCI Insight*.

In addition to our Type 1 Diabetes study, our lab is also in the process of submitting a grant to study SARS-CoV-2 and its relationship to the immune system. Our specific aims involve determining which immune responses preclude

the development of protective immunity to SARS-CoV-2 and understanding what the contribution of cross-reactive immunity is to protection. As a researcher on this project, I have designed experiments that have allowed us to identify the virus peptide-specific T cell responses using activation-induced marker assays and measure the intracellular expression of cytokines and transcription factors. These experiments will be crucial to the grant and contribute to our understanding of SARS-CoV-2. Moreover, the exposure to the grant writing process and expertise that I have gained have strengthened my ability to ask interesting questions. This research experience and the questions that arise continue to challenge me, shaping my approaches to solving problems. This experience has also allowed me to understand the power behind investigating processes at a molecular level and how an exploration of these mechanisms can build a more comprehensive picture of the ongoing processes in the body.

My meaningful research experiences have confirmed my desire to attend graduate school and pursue a career in research. These experiences have undoubtedly provided me with a strong foundation to excel in MIT's rigorous PhD program. Notably, my research interests align well with the faculty who are a part of the Molecular Medicine and Human Disease program. I am interested in Dr. Stefani Spranger's research work on the co-evolution of the anti-tumor immune response and cancer. Dr. Michael Herman's research on cancer and drug resistance is also of great interest. Aside from the faculty that are a part of the program, many of the program features have drawn me to MIT. The computational and quantitative biology course will undoubtedly help me strengthen my computational skills and serve as a powerful tool for my research work. The faculty mentor during my first year will provide me with exceptional guidance in my graduate school career and the teaching assistantships will provide the platform for me to improve my ability to communicate clearly and concisely. Conclusively, I hope to uncover the biological mechanisms that underlie intracellular interactions and contribute to diseases, thereby providing the scientific foundation for therapeutics. Overall, the

Molecular Medicine and Human Disease program at MIT will provide me with unparalleled graduate training and research opportunities, allowing me to continue contributing to the scientific community.

FAQs about Statements of Purposes

Do I have to write one for each program I am applying to?

No! You should figure out which program has the longest page limit and start with that one. You want to create a detailed draft that you like, and then you can start shortening it depending on the program's specific page length limits.

The only thing that really changes program to program is your specific reasons for why you want to go there. Your research experiences and motivation for getting a PhD should be the same throughout.

What if I have a lot of research experience?

If you have a good amount of research experience, you're in a great position. You should highlight the ones where you learned the most and developed as a researcher. I would not just mention a bunch of different experiences, but rather, you should highlight the most important ones.

Your resume will be a good place to list the other experiences you have that are shorter.

What if I have no research experience?

If you have no research experience, it will definitely be a lot trickier to get into a PhD program because these programs want to make sure you know what you are getting yourself into.

I would strongly advise against applying to a PhD program without experience. Still, if you are extremely committed to it, you can write about the

extracurriculars you are involved in that have allowed you to develop skills or assignments in the classes you've taken that are more research-oriented.

How personal should the statement of purpose be?

You should keep personal anecdotes to a minimum because although they demonstrate who you are and are important, the main purpose of the statement is to demonstrate that you are a capable researcher and to highlight your research experiences. I would keep the personal aspect of it to the introduction/background. You really want to focus on why you are a good investment and the skills you can contribute.

Should I mention that I want to go into industry?

I get this question a lot because there is a common misconception that PhDs are mainly for academics, and people who go into industry aren't viewed as highly. This is not true!

You should be honest about what you want to do. Many programs want diversity in the types of careers the graduate students pursue and even have the training to help with this. Many people also recognize that there are not enough positions for everyone who wants to pursue a PhD to become a professor.

I would be clear about what you want to do and specific about the program's resources to get you there.

What if all my experiences are drastically different?

This is completely okay! I addressed this a bit in the section about pursuing a new field, but to reiterate that, it is more important that you understand how to do research and the fundamentals of it.

If your experiences are drastically different, you should be able to explain why you chose to explore a new field and how your experiences are somehow connected. For instance, in my statement, I talk about wanting to learn

more about other industries and how, through my varied experiences, I gained a deeper understanding of the significance of basic science research.

It is more important that you have some form of experience and learned something from each one than the fact that they were all similar. In your statement, you are telling your story, and as long as you can justify your decision, what you gained and how they are connected, you won't appear "unfocused." It's all about how you sell yourself.

What if I am pursuing a new field of research?

If you are pursuing a new field of research, I would definitely emphasize how the skills you learned at each research experience can be applied to broad things and other fields. For instance, being able to deconstruct a paper can be helpful in allowing you to understand a topic that was previously foreign to you.

You should also use your statement of purpose as a space to explain why you are changing fields and what motivates you to do so. Additionally, any relevant experiences should be included.

Being able to effectively demonstrate your passion for the new field and your WHY is critical to standing out as an applicant.

Should I mention the professors I've connected with?

Absolutely! Showing that you've taken the initiative to connect with professors will help your application, especially if those professors are looking at your application directly.

I would mention them as part of the reasons for why you are interested in that specific institution. The more specific you are, the better.

How technical should the statement of purpose be?

When you are writing your statement of purpose, you don't want to be too technical. You want to demonstrate that you understand the purpose of the project and the research question but writing techniques that you used usually isn't helpful. Techniques can be easily learned, so I would focus on the bigger picture and the application of your work.

The faculty of your department are the ones reviewing your application so you can be a bit specific since they will most likely be somewhat knowledgeable about the topic, but don't use terms and phrases that are extremely specific to your niche without explaining them.

How long should I spend on writing my statement of purpose?

You should spend as much time and get as much feedback as possible. You want to make sure that you write something that is strong and demonstrates your ability to succeed in a PhD program.

I would write my statement of purpose and then not look at it for a few days so that when I reviewed it, I could look at it with fresh eyes. Make sure you leave yourself and anyone you want feedback from enough time to go through it and make edits.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

So you have gotten to the point that you've applied and now you're anxiously waiting for a decision. Depending on your program, after hitting the submit button, the work is mostly done. For some programs, like math and physics, you will either be notified of your acceptance, rejection, or a wait-list decision.

Other programs have an extra step, which is the interview process. Many life sciences programs have an interview.

The interview process, although it might seem scary and intimidating, is one of the easier parts of the whole PhD process. The interview process is usually conducted in-person, on campus, or there are virtual options for students who cannot attend, mainly international students.

The interview process is usually held over a few days, and there are many recruitment and informational activities planned, in addition to the faculty interviews. As much as it is a chance for the program to get to know you and determine whether or not you will be a good fit, it is also a really great chance for you to see if you like the culture there and ask any questions about the program that you haven't had a chance to previously. During the interview process, you'll get to meet faculty, graduate students, and others in your program.

How To Prepare for the Interview Process

You will normally be notified of whether or not you made the cut and got an interview in December or January.

Once you have determined whether or not you can attend, the next thing to do is normally figure out which professors you are interested in talking to.

Most programs will ask you to rank anywhere from 5 to 12 professors in the program, and they do their best to pair you up with them for the interviews.

Although this may seem daunting since there are so many different faculty in every program, I would start by going through the faculty page and looking for professors whose research interests match yours.

If you have already contacted some, this will be easy since you can request to interview with those professors.

Some programs will let you know the itinerary for the recruitment event a week or two before the event. Sometimes this will include who you will be interviewing with.

Now, it's not mandatory that you research your interviewer's work ahead of time (some don't even expect you to know what they do and will present their work), but if you do want to research them, I would suggest making a few notes on their work and some questions you have about it.

The interview process is a great chance for you to ask the professor any questions you have about the program. You should definitely take advantage of this.

Some questions you can ask are:

- What resources are there for XXX?
- Are the graduate students happy?
- What makes this program unique?
- What are some traits that you see in successful graduate students?

The interview itself is more conversational than interrogative.

You should definitely be prepared to talk about your research and to answer any questions about it!

FINAL WORDS

If you've made it this far, congratulations! You've read all the tips and tricks I have for getting into a PhD program and you should be well on your way.

I hope you found this guide to be helpful and if it was, let me know on LinkedIn!

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this and I really hope I "Demystified the PhD Process" for you. Good luck with all your future endeavors!