Tips on Getting into Grad School

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Why grad school?

- Think hard about why you might want to do a Ph.D.
- Ph.D. Can be a lot of fun, and open many doors.
 - Do exciting research
 - Learn new things
- But, it is not for everyone:
 - Very unstructured
 - Can be quite long (5+ years typical)
 - Work is often boring: Running experiments, publishing papers, taking classes
 - Lots of competition
 - Disconnected from reality
 - Low pay
- Ph.D. does not guarantee a better job or salary

Job market for Ph.Ds









WWW. PHDCOMICS. COM

Overview of the process

- Most grad school applications due in December/January
- Admissions committees meet in the early spring (March)
- Decisions mailed out late March-early April
 - Note: Different schools have different dates no news is good news

Expectations

What are admissions committees looking for?

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- One thing only: Talented students that will be able to do research.
- In the end, nothing else (really) matters.
 - It does not matter if you have a 4.0 GPA, 99th percentile on all GREs, etc.
 - GPA, GREs, etc. only used as **indicators** of potential nothing more.

The Prof's Point of View

- Every member of the admissions committee is given a huge stack of folders to read. (Dozens to hundreds)
- Goal is to find the very few folders that stand out, and should be looked at more carefully.
 - This number will be quite small
- These folders are then pushed to the next level
 - Usually a committee meeting
- ALL folders must pass quality check in the final committee meeting.

The application

- Application to grad school consists of several parts, which come from different places.
- 1) General information about yourself: application form
- 2) Transcript and grade point average (GPA)
- 3) GRE scores
- 4) Letters of recommendation (usually three required)
- 5) Personal statement
- 6) Anything else you mail in as part of your app
 - We'll talk about this later

Basic evaluation process

- Ideally, we want to see research experience.
- But, not many undergrads have research experience.
 How to evaluate?
 - Grades and GRE scores only a (weak) indication of potential
- Grades: Like to see 3.5 GPA or higher (87.5%)
- GRE: Like to see 90th percentile or higher
 - Many, many applicants have 3.8+ GPA and 95th+ GREs
- These are not hard cutoffs!
- Letters count a lot probably most important thing.

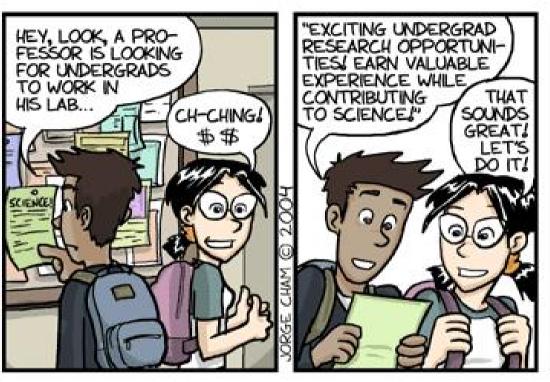
Your recommendation letters

- These matter a LOT. More than anything else.
- Best recommendation letters have the following properties:
 - From someone (reasonably) well known.
 - A professor in academia letters from industry count a lot less.
 - Have something substantial to say.
 - (Not just, "So-and-so made an A in my class.")
 - Say strong things about your potential as a graduate student
- How to get these letters?
 - 1) Write them yourself?(Don't do this!)
 - 2) Ask 3 profs to write a letter and just hope for the best?
 - 3) Establish a **relationship** with some profs who can say good things about you when it's time to write a letter.

Establishing relationships

- Grad schools want students who can do research.
 The best way to demonstrate this is ... well, do some research.
- Need to get started early: research takes a while to get rolling
- Goal is to get a good recommendation letter when you graduate!
 - It is a lot less important whether your research is a "success"
- You do not need to publish a paper as an undergrad.
 - Publishing a paper can help ... but only if it is a good paper!

Undergrad research





www.phdcomics.com

Priming your letter writers

- To write a good letter, a prof needs to know a lot about you
- I strongly recommend meeting with your letter writers before asking them to write a letter.
 - If they are on your team, they will do a better job when they actually write it.
- You also need to get a read on your chances of a good letter.
 - Need to ask directly, "Can you write a strong letter for me?"
- Keep in mind that most profs are overloaded with letters to write.
 - Give them a packet with everything they need. Don't ask them to hunt it down.

The personal statement

- I tend to ignore these.
- But, some people read these carefully! So need to do a decent job.
- Non-goals of the personal statement:
 - NOT to tell your life story
 - NOT to explain why you want to be a Ph.D. Student
 - NOT to kiss up to the faculty at the school you are applying to
 - NOT to explain how you are going to solve the world's problems
- Better set of goals:
 - Outline a single research problem that interests you
 - Give background: show you know the area
 - Talk about how you would approach solving the problem.
 - Think of this as a "mini project proposal"
 - You will not be held to this project, of course.

Other materials

- Generally speaking, anything you send in as part of your application will get added to the folder, somehow.
- Although not requested, I usually like to see in a folder:
 - A resume
 - Any papers that the student has written or published
- Don't abuse this. Send additional materials only if you have them.
- Don't send a photograph (unless requested by the school)

Pitfalls to avoid

- Sappy personal statement
- Any typos or grammatical mistakes anywhere in the application
- Weak recommendation letters
 - Prime your letter writers!
- An unexplained black mark on your record.
- Spamming professors
 - (We all get way too many emails.)

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