

An Unofficial Guide to Grad School Applications

by PHAS graduate students Mario Ulises Gonzalez Rivas and Pedro Villalba González

The first step

Make sure you *want* to go to grad school, and that the program you're applying to is the right fit for you. Grad school is a **big** commitment: it spans several years, implies a lot of work, and you're not going to be making as much money as you could if you went to industry. However, it's very rewarding, an investment in your future, and being in the right environment can make a world of difference. Look at the university's institutes, whether the faculty collaborate frequently, and talk to current grad students! Those are all signs of a healthy department.

Planning your application

The following documents are necessary for a complete application to UBC Physics and Astronomy:

- Apply online (The requirement is waived for some countries)
- Academic transcripts in English from all post-secondary institutions attended. For admission an un-official copy is accepted.
- TOEFL results (if English is not your first language, or your undergraduate instruction wasn't in English)
- Statement of interest, addressing: **perseverance, independence, teamwork and community**, and **research experience and fit**.
- Sample of scholarly writing
- CV
- Three reference letters

Applications are due December 1st. Reference letters are to be submitted by December 15th.

Putting together a solid grad school application can be time-consuming. Make sure to keep track of every document you need, its status, and a timeline to have it ready. Not every part of your application requires the same amount of time – finalizing it can take around an hour once you have everything ready, but your statement of interest and reference letters can take a few months. Below, you'll find a reasonable timeline you could follow:

Months before – looking for a supervisor

Whether your program requires you to secure a supervisor ahead of the deadline or not, it's always a good idea to reach out and research prospective supervisors before applying. Email them ahead of time – worst case scenario, they don't respond. If they do, however, you'll get to find out more about their current research projects, know if they're taking new students – their websites are **horribly** outdated on this count –, get to know them as a person (look for any red flags in their supervisory style/research groups!), and get a chance to secure a supervisor!

Months before – language requirement

If English is not your first language, most programs will require that you meet a specific requirement. For UBC PHAS specifically, this amounts to a score of 90 in the [TOEFL iBT test](#). For the IELTS academic test, a minimum band score of 6.5 is required.

Taking the English language tests and getting the results back can take months! Account for this by taking it as early as possible, especially if you're not particularly confident on your English-speaking skills.

Months before – the statement of interest: the centerpiece to any application

Writing a good statement of interest is an iterative process. Make a draft, correct it, write again, repeat. Give your text time to breathe! Don't be scared if you get some 'writer's block' at first.

- Start by writing a first draft in which you can erase/move around paragraphs
- Have your friends/referees read and comment on it
- Repeat! Writing is dynamic and this is one of the most important pieces of your application
- Avoid clichés! Do not start with sentences like 'my lifelong dream is to become a physicist'. The committee will read hundreds of these, make sure to be original, especially in the first paragraph
- If you have secured an advisor, don't be afraid to ask them for pointers! They can help you write a stronger application
- Use your personal essays to show the evaluation committee that you are not just a physicist, but a human being. They want to see that you will be self-motivated, self-organized, driven, and able to persevere. Show them you have diverse interests that will help you stay grounded.
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A month before the deadline – Prepare your CV

Look at the [LaTeX templates available](#) and [examples](#) on what to include.

A month or two before the deadline – reference letters

Once you're determined to apply, ask three referees to send their letters.

- Don't be afraid of asking! It can feel daunting at first, but faculty/supervisors are used to writing them
- Prioritize research supervisors/people who have worked with you. They can provide the strongest letters.
- If in doubt: ask your referee if they would write you a strong letter! Most people will be
- Ask ahead of time. Faculty are busier than they seem! A good rule of thumb is at least three-four weeks before the deadline. Do not hesitate to follow-up with them. Most referees appreciate a heads-up that time's running out
- It is a good idea to send referees your CV and a draft of your statement of intent. The extra information can help them write a better letter
- Don't be afraid of giving your referees pointers on what to highlight in their letters. Most will be happy to oblige, as they'll have an easier time knowing what to focus on. This can also improve your chances of success, as it allows you to build a cohesive application!

Days before the deadline – sample of scholarly writing

This can be anything from a term paper, a piece of a past thesis, or a publication that you wrote.

Prepare your application

Once you've gathered all documents, it's time to start uploading your application! Submit your transcripts (these can be unofficial at this stage), test scores, and the rest of the required documents.

Final thoughts

Do not be scared if some aspects of your application (e.g., grades) feel like they're not up to scratch! Applications are evaluated by looking at the whole picture, and specific strengths (e.g., publication record, strong reference letters), can more than make up for weak spots in other points of the application.

Once your application is done, forget about it for a while! It's no use to stress about what could've been different. Most of us will find more and more to fiddle with if given time, this is totally normal! What matters is that you did your best with the time you had.

Finally, remember that admissions decisions **do not** determine your value! There are a lot of factors beyond your control that go into admissions decisions (faculty members' funding, available lab space, professors going on sabbatical, etc.).

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