

## **Applying and Interviewing for Graduate School – Intelligently!!**

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### Overview

So you've made the decision to attend graduate school in the biomedical sciences. Congratulations! You have chosen an exciting and rewarding career that has a great many options: basic research in the academic or pharmaceutical/biotech settings, teaching, publishing, patent law – maybe even eventually starting your own biotech company. The first step on this career path is getting accepted to graduate school. This step should not be taken lightly! You have to do your homework before applying (what are your interests and who has the program you want?) and, after being offered the opportunity to interview (what faculty would you like to meet and what are their research programs?). This primer highlights a few points you should be aware of as you go through the process. Addressing these issues can make the difference between just getting into graduate school or getting offered a slot in the program of your choice at an outstanding institution.

### Your Application

The application you submit to just one or to ten different graduate programs is the first impression you make on the admissions committee. A poorly prepared application can kill your chance for an interview, even if you have good numbers (GREs and GPA). A well prepared application will leave the admissions committee anxious to meet with you and hopeful that you have their institution high on your list of programs you want to attend.

### Your Personal Statement

Your personal statement is the first opportunity the admissions committee has to gain some insight into your love of science. Passion for science is what the committee wants to see – why should the committee choose a student to train for an advanced degree if their interest in science is lukewarm or unclear based on the statement? This is where you make it clear to the committee how much you enjoy science and what scientific experience and training you've had to date. Tell the committee about your summer science project, your thesis work (if you did a senior thesis or have a master's degree), or the project you worked on at a biotech company. Make it clear in the statement what you did technique-wise and that you understand the technical aspects as well as the broader picture of your efforts. This makes it easy for the committee to determine if you really were into your project or were simply a cog in the machine. We are looking for evidence of perseverance, initiative, creativity and independence in your science training. The statement is also the place to tell us about any scientific presentations and publications you may have. These are important aspects of your scientific training and will score high points with the committee. Make sure you tell us about these achievements!! Finally, your personal statement is also the place to address problems encountered during the course of your undergraduate career. If you flunked out of a class or had a bad semester grade-wise, don't hide it, it will be seen in the transcripts or maybe heard about it in one of your reference letters. We don't need the gory details, just enough to know that there was a problem and that you handled it.

It is well worth your time and effort to hone your statement into a well-written essay. A hastily written statement will always come across as just that to the admissions committee and will stand out poorly against those where the applicant took the time to do a good job. Enlist your colleagues and mentors to help you with the statement to improve both the writing style and content. A little effort here will make you come across as a thoughtful and interesting candidate worthy of interviewing.

### Your Reference Letters

Reference letters are an important, if not critical, part of your application. Strong, enthusiastic reference letters can bolster the committee's desire to bring you in for an interview even if the rest of your application is mediocre. For this reason alone you need to carefully consider whom you ask for a reference. The best references are going to be the scientists and science faculty that you have worked with in your undergraduate training, or, in the case of someone already in the workforce, your current employer. Refrain from asking your English professor to write a letter for you. They may provide a nice character reference, but it will be difficult for them to evaluate your aptitude and ability in the lab. The admissions committee will not likely view their letter with much weight. Nor will the committee put much stock in letters from post-docs, fellow lab-mates or lab technicians. Such letters may be viewed as supportive, but from a writer with insufficient experience to critically evaluate your potential as a scientist.

Remember also that the admissions committee will look for consistency between your personal statement and your reference letters. Make sure you are accurate in your description of your science experiences and any other issues as discrepancies will raise red flags.

### GRE/GPA

The GRE score and your overall GPA are the only quantitative measures of your previous training the committee will have to evaluate you. Obviously, the higher the numbers the better. Generally GRE scores below 1000 (or even 1100) and GPAs below 3.0 are viewed as too low for several reasons. Scores in that range suggest that you simply aren't cut out for science or that you failed to apply yourself in college. Numbers in that range are also deadly for institutions that have training grants to support their students. These numbers have to be reported on training grant applications and progress reports and low numbers are not well received by review committees that evaluate these grants. For this reason, admissions committees at these schools may reject your application on these numbers alone. If you score poorly on the GRE, it is well worth your while to take a class on how to improve your scoring and then retake the GRE. Admissions committees will always use your highest GRE scores in their evaluation of your application.

If your GPA is low you should take additional classes to boost your average. If your GPA is terrible, it may be worth holding off on applying for your PhD and getting a master's degree first. This will likely improve your GPA and, importantly, show the admissions committee your dedication to a career in science.

### The Interview

If you received a call requesting an interview, you are well on your way to obtaining an offer to join their graduate program. Getting this call means that the admissions committee is very interested in you and, more than likely, is now at a point where they want to convince you to join their institution. But – you are not there yet and despite a great application and adequate lab training, you can lose a potential offer by interviewing badly. Don't be terrified by your interview, losing an offer as a result of a bad interview is rare. You can enhance your chances of obtaining an offer by paying attention to a few common sense issues. One point you should keep in mind for your interview – you are being evaluated throughout the entire visit – be professional and courteous at all times! It is also important to talk with your colleagues about the interview process. Your own science mentor may serve on the admissions committee at your current institution and can tell you what he or she likes to see during the interview. If there are post-docs in your current lab, talk with them as well. They have been through the process recently and have had the additional experience of interviewing for their current position. They can be most helpful. There are also a number of books that

discuss the best way to prepare for an interview. Most of these are designed for the corporate world, but many of the basic principles apply to your situation and the sooner you learn how to interview well, the better off you will be. Who knows, in a few years after you have completed your PhD, you may find yourself doing a “corporate” interview with one of the big pharmaceutical or biotech companies.

### Preparation

Do a little homework before you show up for your interview. Check out the details of the program and the faculty via the web. Determine if there are faculty members you would like to meet during your visit (you may well be asked for this information when you are offered an interview). Most graduate programs are delighted to accommodate your request to meet with specific faculty – it increases their chance to recruit you. If you know the field well enough, look through a few papers and reviews from the faculty you will meet. Even if you don’t know the field very well, looking through a couple of review articles will make it much easier for you to follow the descriptions of ongoing science you will hear from most faculty members. This will give you more to talk about during your interview and will impress them once they realize you have taken the time to prepare for the interview. Some faculty may ask you about their recent data as a way to determine if you can think on your feet. If that is the case, a little homework may go a long way in handling these questions.

### Ask Questions!

Remember that the interview is a fact-finding trip for you, especially if you are evaluating several graduate programs. Don’t be afraid to ask hard questions about the science, but also the inner workings of training at the institution. How successful are they at training their students? Where do their students go after completing their degree? What is the average time to degree? It is important to ask the students in the program these same questions. The students are often the best source of information about many of these topics since they are experiencing it first hand. You also need to watch for discrepancies between student and faculty descriptions of the training – could be a red flag!

Remembering to ask questions also shows that you are interested and engaged in learning about the graduate program. Good faculty and graduate programs want out-going, inquisitive students. The alternative approach - sitting like a bump on a log during your interview, not engaging faculty and students alike could cost you an offer.

### The Finer Points

Although it might seem obvious, you need to be on your best behavior throughout the entire interview – from the time you get off the plane until you leave. You leave many first impressions since you will meet with numerous

faculty, students and staff. Keep in mind that sometimes students are part of the admissions committee and will report unusual or anti-social behavior to the committee. Being a little geeky around the dinner table is expected of someone with an interest in science, but talking about your past drug problem will cost you the offer you came to get. Accordingly, you should dress somewhat conservatively – too casual and you will leave the impression you aren't serious. This is a situation where overdressing will not hurt your standing. Leave as many "bad" habits behind as possible. Remember that modesty is always the best policy – don't drink too much at dinner (for obvious reasons) and don't order the most expensive items on the menu. Your host is happy to treat you, but you don't want to wear out your welcome with a really big dinner bill.