

Practical Tips for PhD Applications*

Adapted from a talk given at MSR India in May 2022

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* I applied to CS/HCI programs, but most tips are general

<Timeline>

Pardon the text-heavy slides. I want them to be complete in and of themselves for your future reference.

Research Phase May to Sep

May

Sep

Oct

Nov

Dec

Feb+

- Do you want to pursue a PhD?
 - Figure out your community
 - **Research Methods**: Qualitative, Quantitative, Mixed-Methods
 - **Intersection Area**: NLP, Systems (e.g., input modalities), etc.
 - **Application Area**: Health, Misinformation, Education, etc.
 - Know your community/ies
 - **People**: Which prof is where (school + dept)? Who collaborates with whom? Industry researchers? PhD students?
 - **Venues**: Which profs prefer which venues? Which venues does the community respect?
 - Expand your collaboration network
 - Strike collaborations with PhD students/post-docs/researchers who work in the community you identified
 - Or with folks who have **contacts** in the community
- Build your **personal** website
 - Build it now, not later (**SEO**)
 - The first thing profs will do is **Google** you!



App Prep Phase Sep to Oct



- Applications Open
 - Read application **information** (deadlines *including time and timezone*, requirements, GRE/TOEFL, etc.)
 - **Make an Excel sheet**
- Ramp up talking to Profs and/or PhD Students
 - Websites don't always reflect their **current research interests**
 - Are they **recruiting**?
 - Which **areas** are they looking for students in? What **terms** they use repeatedly? Write those in your SoP.
- Start deciding Programs
 - Are you allowed to apply to **multiple programs** in the same university?
 - Top choices? Medium priority? Safe schools?
 - **Non-academic factors**: weather, safety, etc. [more important than you think!]
 - The advice I got: Apply to **at least 10 programs**, ideally ~15
 - Start filling in the boring stuff in application portals (name, address, educational/work history, etc.)

SoP + Resume Phase Oct to mid-Nov



- Write a draft
 - Deadlines will seem far
 - Motivation will be low
 - **Do. Not. Fall. For. It.** ⚠️⚠️⚠️
- Pre-Application Mentorship Programs (PAMS)
 - UW, Cornell, CMU, MIT, etc.
 - Most **deadlines** 15th to 30th October
- Feedback, feedback, feedback
 - **Mid-October** onwards
 - Collaborators, professors (you don't need to have worked with them), PhD students at labs you're applying to, Ex-MSR Rf's and PhD Interns
 - **Collate** feedback. Don't get overwhelmed with feedback, incorporate things that multiple people suggest.
 - I got feedback from **~10 folks** (+ PAMS)

Also, a good time to **ask for LoRs + submit their names on portals**

Grunt Phase



mid-Nov to mid-Dec

May

Sep

Oct

Nov

Dec

Jan+

Feb+

- Deadlines
 - 28th November to 15th December
 - **Too many deadlines** on certain days == not much time to work on SoPs anymore
 - Keep work light. Managers at MSR understand!
- Submission
 - In many applications, you can **submit and still continue** making changes
 - Save **credit card** details in browser (privacy allowing). Ensure credit limit in cards. 😊
 - Double check SoP/Resume files after uploading
 - Ensure **LoRs** have been received

Post-Submission mid-Dec onwards

May

Sep

Oct

Nov

Dec

Jan+

Feb+

- Ask past collaborators to **email** profs they know (even if they wrote you an LoR)
 - “My student Dhruv has applied, could you please see his application packet?”
- Check your **junk** mail once in 2-3 days
- Wait, wait, wait 🤔



</Timeline>

Other Tips

- Decouple what you want to do and what you write in your SoP
 - Write your **strengths** that are relevant to a certain prof (even if you don't want to pursue those strengths)
 - Avoid writing things they're definitely **not interested in**
 - "SoP is the art of avoiding being both too general and too specific"
 - Once you get in, you can always switch fields if you really want to
- Save Application Fees 💰
 - Read the "Application Fee Waiver" pages of all programs
 - Diversity-based application fee waivers
 - Membership-based waivers
 - Especially due to COVID, many of these programs are virtual and inexpensive
 - I saved ~\$600 (Rs. 45k)
- IMO, admits depend **very highly** on who your advisors know
 - If you strategize well (unlike my 2021 applications), you'll likely get at least a few admits