Applying to Graduate School

Worksheet 2: Applications to Graduate School

Once you have decided to apply to graduate school and have talked with your advisors and professors about which programs are best suited for your interests and well-being (Worksheet 1), you are ready to begin the process of applying to graduate school.

1. Organization is crucial.
   1) Make a spreadsheet of the schools you are applying to, the application due dates, and the application material required (e.g. a check list for each school). Most graduate schools do online submissions, so keep a record of your user name and password for each school. While you may not have all the application material prepared, often it is useful to go ahead and open accounts at the schools of interest. It takes time to fill in the personal information content (address, current classes, etc.), so you may want to do this earlier rather than later in the application process.

   2) Most applications will require 3 recommendation letters. As you are applying to graduate school in the sciences, the letters should be written by those that can write about your abilities and potential to conduct scientific research. If you have done independent study, honors project, or summer research with a faculty member at Bowdoin or elsewhere, you should ask that faculty member for a letter. If you have done well in a science course and the professor can describe your abilities to learn and apply new scientific material, consider asking the professor for a recommendation letter. Always ask the professors if they are open to writing recommendation letters on your behalf before you submit their names as references on applications. Please be aware that professors will be writing multiple letters for multiple students, and they will need your help to be organized. Some professors may ask for a spreadsheet with the school names, department programs (e.g. Chemistry versus Environmental Science), and the due dates. Others may have a google document online. Every professor appreciates organization and plenty of notice in writing your letter.

   3) Most schools require both the general and subject GRE (www.Ets.org/gre and https://www.ets.org/gre/subject/register). If you have not taken the tests, schedule the dates. Please note that there are fewer test dates available for the subject exam (September, October, and April), while the GRE tests are offered year-round. You will have to have completed the tests before your application can proceed.

2. How do I write a personal statement?

Many schools will require you to submit a personal statement. As the personal statement is part of your application to a graduate school program in science, the reader, i.e. your potential research advisor, is most interested in learning more about your development and potential as a scientist. Have you ever conducted scientific research or worked in a lab/industry? What did you do for your research/work? What skills did you develop? Have you ever presented or published your scientific research?

The reader may also be interested in which areas of science you would like to continue your independent research study. What topics interest you and why? Did your research or work experience influence your view? If not, did you have a class, read a journal article, or hear a seminar that changed your perspective?
Please do not be afraid to express interest in learning something new. If you already were an expert in the field, you would not be going to graduate school to learn more about the research topic. If your interests are part of a larger plan (i.e. to work in industry, government lab, university), include that as well.

Finally, the reader may be trying to determine whether your research interests can be accommodated by the resources and faculty available at the school. If there are professors you are interested in working with, go ahead and list them. If there are particular factors about the department that appeal to you, include them as well (e.g. large number of faculty working on your problem of interest, geographic proximity for environmental studies, international aspect, ongoing collaborations, etc.). Students may ask how individualized the personal statements have to be for each graduate school application. If you are applying to different departmental programs, the personal statements can vary a bit, yet among similar programs, they will be the same, except for this paragraph. **This is your opportunity to express why you think you could succeed as a graduate student and scientist at their specific program.**

*Students are highly encouraged to share drafts of their personal statements with professors, so they can get feedback on their writing, and they can help professors better understand their decisions to apply to graduate school. If you would like to read sample personal statements from former Bowdoin graduates, a binder of samples are available in the Chem Office.*

3. **Is there an interview as part of the application process, and if so, how should I prepare?**

Many chemistry programs do not include an interview process as part of the application process; many biochemistry and related engineering programs, however, do. If you are invited for an interview, you should receive a schedule listing the professors or research groups that you will be meeting. Look over the groups and become familiar with their research. **If you have difficulty navigating their research website/papers, ask a faculty member to help you.** At your interview, be prepared to talk about your research experience and your interests in ongoing projects at the graduate school of interest. The interview helps both you and your future advisor decide whether your research interests can be supported by the graduate program.

4. **Is the fellowship application process similar to the graduate school application process?**

The deadlines for graduate school fellowships are often **earlier in the fall** (October) than graduate school applications. Again, organization is crucial, and if you are interested in submitting fellowship applications, it is strongly recommended that you develop a separate spreadsheet for fellowships. While each fellowship may have different requirements, you will find that you can use your personal/research statements from your graduate school applications as a starting point for many of the required fellowship statements. The biggest difference may be that many fellowships will ask you for a broader impacts statement. Beyond how your science may potentially help society, think about how you as a graduate student can make an impact on society. You may have done some outreach activities with organizations on campus, such as the Kamerling Society in the Chemistry Department. You may have helped teach a course that has inspired you to help students in the future. Finally, you may have had experiences that have inspired you to start doing outreach events when you enter graduate school. These experiences may come from leaderships activities in non-science groups. They may come from your experience from having a strong scientific mentor. Remember the broader impact statement include both past and future activities. *Students are highly encouraged to talk to their professors about the fellowship application process. Professors can provide valuable feedback on the statements.*