

Wishing you success in applying graduate schools in the US or Canada

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In recent years, many students from China write to me seeking for advice on how to increase the chances to go abroad to study. In order to provide some help, I describe the basic requirements of application materials, how they are considered by the graduate admission committee, and some other suggestions on increasing one's chance for success. Emphasize on your own special personality, special skills, and honesty. I urge you to provide accurate information. Any faked information discovered later will be extremely harmful to your stay in a particular group.

I. Before preparing the application materials

It is important to note that the more specifically you prepare your application materials based on each individual program, the more chance you have for being admitted. Nowadays, it is convenient to browse the internet about each graduate program in many universities of the world. If you know specifically what you want to do, you should find the best match of your interest. Investigate the professor's publications, critique his/her works (not just say how impressed you are). Establish an email communication with the professors you have interest in working with them. If you think that you can impress the professor by personal interview, you should make efforts to check if he or she plans to come to China and make plans to meet with him or her in person (don't just say I would like to meet with you; instead suggest a way of meeting, for example showing your work, suggest a tour, if the professor agrees on your suggestion, prepare a meeting agenda before the professor takes off). Prepare yourself by reading the professor's materials so that you can carry out a productive conversation. Across this entire document, emphasize your own personality and prove that you can make a difference with your unique thoughts, design and theory will be critically important.

II. Preparing the application materials

You should know that the primary components of your application consists of (1) a form of application inquiring about your address, age, gender, field of interest, professors of your choice, financial capability, etc. (2) academic transcripts, (3) personal statement, (4) English proficiency test score and GRE, (5) a cover letter, (6) three letters of reference and (7) additional optional materials. You need to prepare a 1 page cover letter with your

application briefly stating your application package, state your preferred field of study, and state some important information you wish the graduate officer to learn (usually the graduate officer is a secretary in the department). Be polite and explicit when communicating with such an officer. It should be tailored around the focus of the particular graduate program you wish to enter. It does not help to use the same letter over and over again by only change the address.

On your application form, it will be helpful if you can prove that you have some self-secured support. This must be supported with proof. It is helpful in preparing your transcripts to state your rank in your class of a specific size. E.g. Ranked number 3 in a class of 20. It is also helpful that you provide an additional sheet converting your grades into the grade system used by the university of interest. E.g. you earn a grade of 90 out of 100. It is supposed to be a grade of A. In the American system "A" "B" "C" "D" corresponds to grade points 4, 3, 2, 1, respectively. You can also put a A- B+ in between A and B. An A- worth 3.7 and B+ worth 3.3. Similarly you can convert the + and - between other grades. The American system only evaluates your GPA (grade point average) for the last two years. Except that the graduate admission committee is aware of other inside information about your school, they are going to heavily rely on your GPA during the past two years. You need to write a well thought personal statement. Usually, Chinese students are not strong in this aspect. This personal statement serves a number of important purposes: show your cultural background, origin, path of academic development, your own thinking and beliefs in life or in the research field, your plan for the future. One personal statement does not need to cover all of the above aspects. It is important to make the letter meeting at least one of the following: telling a unique story, making it hard to forget, show a special spirit. It is used to judge your logical thinking, writing skill, how special and skilled you are. Make sure you support your statement with facts and example. If you are particularly proud of something, such as your university, your own personal accomplishment, don't be shy to tell it out. What makes a statement more convincing is to show how you can synthesize from daily observations more general principles of living and studying. Good English scores will always help. What is common from Chinese applicants are three similar letters of reference. You really need to work more with your professors to impressed them in class or in your project so that they can write you a personalized letter you're your help (sometimes, student write the letter and the professor signs it). Proof of any important prize or recognition is helpful. Additional published papers showing real innovation will help.

III. How are the application materials evaluated?

What is most important is that a professor is willing to take you as his/her first pick. Admission in some universities is completely based on professor's decision provided that you meet with the basic university and departmental requirements.

Some universities have limited quota for graduate admission in each year. Under such circumstances, a common practice among universities is grading the students recommended by each professor and form a recommended admission list by the graduate admission committee. GPA and GRE scores account for about 50-60% of a general evaluation. Between GPA and GRE, for international students some departments make each of them worth 20% and make the higher grade an additional 20%. Personal statement accounts for 10-15%. The three reference letters account for 15% or so. Each individual department may have a different grading system. Suitability to a particular program and evidence of potential scientific and leadership skills are important and sometimes worth 5-10% of the evaluation grade points.