

# Applying to Graduate School in the Life Sciences

This document is meant to help you apply for Graduate School. It is built on a lot of experience. The process seems daunting but you'll get there OK if you take it step by step.

The application process is different depending on whether you are applying in the US or in Europe. If you are applying both in the US and in Europe, you will need to follow both procedures.

## In general (valid for wherever you apply):

**Leave ample time beforehand.** Prepare your application well in advance. Inform yourself first about the deadlines for any programs you are interested in. Typical deadlines for US graduate schools are December 1st, December 15th, or January 15th; UK and European graduate programs can have deadlines anytime between November 15th and March 1st. You need two weeks for mailing your application, and another two weeks before that to get your letters of recommendation. If you are applying to individual laboratories it is a good idea to start the process during the January break. By leaving a lot of time you also avoid putting your referees under time pressure (see below) which can lead to sub-optimal letters of recommendation.

**Prepare your CV.** Most important: your personal history, the initiative with which you have followed your interests (in- and outside science) so far, and the depth and quality of your theoretical and practical training. Your CV should tell about these things. Especially, it should have a brief description of the contents of courses and your practical laboratory experience. Further information on writing a scientific CV is [here](#). The best way to writing an excellent CV is to use (but not to copy slavishly) those of senior students, and to have faculty look it over before you send it.

## Identify a list of programs.

For this, use the following resources and information:

- Where you went for your internship. Did you like it? Did they offer you a position already? Where there other labs there that you liked?
- In your area of interest, find other places that it might be worth applying to. See [How to find an area of science that interests you, and a research group or internship program](#).
- Use the [Life Sciences Alumni Space](#) to find out where the Life Sciences Alumni are and what they are doing. Write to them.

## If you are applying for graduate school in the US,

**Think about the visa you will need.** You must find out about the type of visa that you will need for graduate school. After admission, universities will help you obtain visas but they are sometimes inefficient, and you may in the end be unable to get one. It is useful to have a backup option at hand. First, ask students who have been to the same country (or countries) that you are interested in. But rules change surprisingly fast, so often the advice even of students who did an internship in the same country last year do not apply anymore, and IUB's Careers Office cannot keep track of all the changes. It is therefore a good idea to check with the US consulate or embassy.

**Identify the programs you want to apply to.** This should be based on your interests, your qualifications, but also some realism. If you have not-so-excellent grades, it would be wise to apply not only to Ivy League universities. After all, you would like to have a choice. Programs that IUB students have been admitted to are listed [here](#).

**Consider taking the GRE.** The 'Graduate Record Exam' is a test like the SAT. It is desirable, but not usually absolutely necessary. There is a general subject test, and a test for Biochemistry, Cell, and Molecular Biology (which people rarely take). There are practice books in the IRC, and some test exams [here](#). The GRE is taken in the summer or fall of the year *before* you go to graduate school (i.e., sometime before or during your fifth semester). Also see whether the programs of your choice will require you to take the **TOEFL** (if you are a non-native English speaker).

**Prepare your motivational essay** (graduate school essay). There is some specific information about this [here](#).

**Prepare the package for your referees** (see [Cooperating with your referees for Graduate School Applications](#)) and let them have it about four weeks before the first application deadline.

When you have everything together, **send in your applications with plenty of time**.

## If you are applying for graduate training in the UK or Germany,

you usually have to get in touch with individual group leaders (professors), convince them that you are the right person to work with them, and then see whether either they have funding to pay you, or whether you can together apply for money somewhere.

Exceptions: Some graduate programs do exist where you apply through the program office, for example Max Planck International Research Schools, the EMBL PhD program, or BioRec (Jacobs University's Molecular Life Sciences graduate program).

Applications to individual laboratories should consist of a cover letter, a CV, a transcript (copy is enough), and a sheet with the addresses of two or three referees (professors who will write a letter of recommendation for you). This is pretty much like an internship application, and the process is very similar (see [How to apply for an internship in the life sciences](#)).

If you apply to individual laboratories, you need not include letters of reference in your first letter. It is usually enough to enclose a sheet with the addresses of two or three referees. The principal investigator will contact them if she or he is interested, and ask for a reference. There should be at least two referees, and they should know you, i.e. you should have interacted with them in an academic setting. Contact them about two weeks in advance of when you require the letters, and bring all your own application materials. This is so they can make their letters more personal and convincing, and raise specific points which emphasize your specific strengths.

## If you are asked for an interview on the phone or in person,

see the page on [Mastering Interviews for Internships and Graduate Schools](#).

## **Additional information:**

- [A report on application experiences](#) by a member of the BCCB class of 2004.

**Lots of success with your applications!**

---

© Sebastian Springer 2005-14. Please contact me with suggestions for improvements.