

Grad School Application Timeline

As with any goal, the key to securing an acceptance offer into a graduate program that is a good fit for you is planning. Consider this timeline as you plan.

Freshman - Sophomore year

• Engage in research

Many graduate admissions committees will look for applicants to have undergraduate research experience. Explore the website at your school to find professors who are doing work that you find interesting and reach out to them to see if they have availability in their labs. Seek opportunities for REUs, independent study, sustained research, and research credits as possible avenues to gain this experience. Prolonged research with one professor allows for that person to write you a stronger letter of recommendation. Research experiences outside your home institution can assist you in exploring new geographic areas and academic settings.

• Explore a wide variety of career interests

The most common outcome for an undergraduate with an undergraduate degree in physics is to immediately enter the workforce. Speak with alumni and professors about where graduates from your department have gone. Job shadow with people that you meet who have positions you find interesting. Attend career fairs and department talks to speak with potential employers and industrial physicists. Take on an internship one summer rather than research to see what that experience is like. Don't be afraid to explore options you've not seriously considered. Now is the time to investigate as many options as possible.

Junior year

Spring

• Research graduate programs

Identify programs that you find interesting. The goal is to make a list of potential programs to *consider* applying to. You should only apply to programs you actually want to attend. Use the road map on the previous pages to think about various factors that will influence your decision. It's perfectly fine if you are unsure about what subfield within physics you want; it might be helpful to pick a top three and base decisions on that. It's important to consider program size, geography, program culture, and even proximity to research/cultural centers. Within physics, most of programs suggest/require the same courses but if you are looking at specialty fields (such as medical physics or engineering) prerequisites can vary.

• Prepare for the GRE and Physics subject test

While it might not be the most important element of your application, many physics and astronomy departments use the GRE as a criterion for admittance. Consider taking these tests this Spring, even if you've not had all the material that will be on the exam. Studying for the exams can improve how you do! The exam does require a fee.

• Plan your finances

Most PhD programs in physics and astronomy in the US have financial aid options that cover most, if not all, tuition costs. Additionally, the majority (~98%) of recent self-reported Bachelors enrolled in PhD programs one year after degree for the years 2013-2014 are financially supported by their program. A smaller percentage, but more than half, of self-reported Bachelors enrolled in Masters programs one year after degree for the years 2013-2014 are financially supported by their program. Specific program information for financial aid, teaching assistantships, and research assistant positions on www.GradSchoolShopper.com. The statistics reported here can be looked up: www.aip.org/statistics/reports/physics-bachelorsone-year-after-degree.

Additionally, applications are usually not free. Application fees can be in excess of \$100 at some locations. Be sure to budget accordingly, as it is common to submit applications to 6 or even 10 programs.

Summer

• **Craft your personal statement**

Your personal statement is one of the most important parts of your application. A personal statement should be tailored to the prompt asked by the institution. Often, specific questions are posed but in general, you will be asked to explain why you want to attend that specific institution. Take the time to personalize it and receive critical feedback from those you trust: professors, advisors, and trusted friends.

• **Apply to take the Subject GRE and General GRE if you haven't done so already**

Identify the test location you prefer and schedule a testing day and time. Don't forget to prepare for the exam. The exam does require a fee.

Senior year

September

• **Work on your personal statement**

Continue to work on your personal statements. Each program should have a separate, tailored statement for their prompt. Be sure to include any information specific to that institution.

• **Review the application requirements for each school**

Create a spreadsheet to track deadlines, requirements (e.g., transcripts, GREs, recommendations, etc), and other information about potential applications.

• **Ask for recommendations**

Most programs require written recommendations, either through the physical mail or online. Ask professors, research advisers, and/or employers for their recommendation letters. This is best done in person, so that questions can be asked. Give potential recommenders a copy of your C.V. so they can speak to everything you have done. Provide them with ample time to write and submit their recommendation.

October

• **Take the Subject GRE and General GRE**

This is the ideal time to take your exams, if you didn't do so already or if you wish to improve your score. Remember, October is usually the last date the Subject GRE is offered before grad school applications are due.

• **Prepare to pay the application fees**

Applying to each program can cost in excess of \$100 at some locations, so plan accordingly. Many schools offer application fee waivers for students with financial need. Be sure to ask about this option.

November

• **Send professors/employers a friendly reminder about recommendation letters**

It is your responsibility to make sure letters are submitted on your behalf. It is best to confirm with letter writers that letters and recommendations are completed on time.

• **Get your transcripts**

Make sure they are sent directly to the departments you're applying to. It is often a good idea to order an extra copy for yourself.

- **Update your C.V.**

Consult the SPS Career Toolbox <https://www.spsnational.org/sites/all/careerstoobox/> for a detailed guide on how to craft your C.V. and resume.

December

- **Finalize your application packets**

Use your tracking spreadsheet to keep track of application components and make sure deadlines are met.

- **Send your applications**

Many graduate programs process applications as they come, which means that the sooner you send yours in, the sooner it's processed.

January

- **Verify receipt of application**

After submitting, if you haven't received an electronic confirmation, contact the program administrator to verify that your application and all letters of recommendation were received.

- **Prepare for your interviews**

Some departments have department visits or pre-selection interviews. Start preparing for these by reading about the department's offered programs, professors, and research specialties on www.GradSchoolShopper.com. Interview tips and advice can be found at www.spsnational.org/sites/all/careerstoobox/.

- **Focus on financial aid or options for financing**

If you are a U.S. citizen, you're eligible for Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and should fill out the forms as early as possible (federalstudentaid.ed.gov/). There are also many scholarships and fellowships you may be eligible for, even as an international student.

February-March

- **Learn about graduate school life**

Speak with current graduate students who can share their experiences and offer free advice on what it takes to succeed. Sigma Pi Sigma alumni can be a great resource. Take advantage of these opportunities!

April

- **Go over the results**

Statistically, there will be some rejection notices, but celebrate acceptances and, provided you have a choice, take the time to review your options and weigh the pros & cons of each. If you have not received any acceptance letters, don't be discouraged: you can always try again in the future. Once you've accepted a program, notify other institutions of your decision.

- **Thank your professors/employers**

Update anyone who helped you along the way and send thank you notes to the people who took the time to write recommendation letters for you.