

Writing Competitive Applications

7 Tips for Applying to Summer Research Programs, Law School, or Graduate School

Whatever you apply for, you are likely to need:

- 1) **Transcript** official or unofficial. Check out the relevant university website(s) to find out how far in advance you have to order these.
- 2) **Letters of recommendation.** Who are *your* best letter writers? They know you well, you got a good grade in their classes. When applying for an academic program, your letter writers should be your professors, not pastors, friends, co-workers, because professors can speak about your skills in writing and analysis. (But non-academics might be good references for different types of positions). Co-ordinate and communicate with your letter writers. Approach them early so they have time to write a good letter. Tell them why you are applying for each program, and what you will emphasize in each particular application.
- 3) **Personal statement.** Don't be fooled: whatever it is called, this really means "professional statement"; don't make it too personal! Focus on your current interests (research interests, for research programs) and future professional aspirations. You can shift your emphasis for different types of application, according to what each particular selection committee will be looking for. Each scholarship/fellowship web page will describe the program aims, and will list (or at least imply) their criteria for evaluation. For instance, in some cases, they care most about demonstrated community engagement. In other cases, they care about applicants' past research experience. Sometimes you can get a sense of what they are seeking if the web page includes profiles of past students or scholarship winners – what is highlighted in those profiles? Your personal statement helps the evaluation committee to understand how you fit with areas THEY want to support.
- 4) **C.V.** This should be tailored to application. That doesn't mean making things up. It does mean: think about which items belong at the top of page 1. This varies according to whether you are applying for a scholarship, an internship, a research institute, etc. A C.V. for a job should look different than a C.V. for law school or grad school.
- 5) **Start working on all of these early.** That means weeks early, NOT hours ahead of the deadline. Write multiple drafts, put them aside, and come back a few days later with fresh eyes.
- 6) **Get help.** Ask professors, fellow students, & others who have jobs/positions/fellowships that are like the ones you want to get. Show them your draft essays; find out about their experiences.
- 7) **Things that application & scholarship committees look for:**
 - a. **Academic preparation** (good grades; appropriate courses showing a clear interest in the subject area; research experience; statistics courses.)
 - b. **Fit** between your aspirations and the program.
 - c. **Background** demonstrating your long-term interest in the area for which you are applying, such as activities or courses that fit with your stated aspirations.
 - d. **Specific project or professor you want to work with** (especially for grad school, but some summer programs require this). Shows you have done your homework researching them.
 - e. **Enthusiastic and detailed recommendation letters**, ideally from professors who are active researchers. Your best letters will come from professors after you have already completed at least one course with them (so that they know how you did & have more to say), so plan ahead.