

An Anna University-Centric¹ Guide to Applying to Engineering Graduate Schools in the U.S.

version 0.80²

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1 Refer 'Foreword'

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Foreword

Although this guide is primarily intended for student of Anna University, about 80% of it is suitable for use by all international applicants to American universities. If you are not from Anna University and intend to use this guide, please ignore the sections regarding transcripts and the assumptions made on university policy (grading system, research scenario, etc.)

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I also highly recommend you visit <http://www.umiacs.umd.edu/~nmadnani/grefaq.pdf> to compliment this guide. It covers some aspects I have not and if far more professionally done.

This latest version of this guide, if updated, will be available at
<http://greasemonkey.cogia.net/downloads/appguide.pdf>

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0. Introduction

So you want to go to the US to continue your education. From what you've seen of your seniors running around college doing application work, it seems daunting to say the least. Know thy enemy. This guide will give you the general steps you should take to complete your application.

1. Why Pursue an MS or a PhD?

- Deepen knowledge in specialized fields
- Flexibility
- Research
- True engineering status-hood

2. Why in the US?

- Not mark oriented
- Excellence is rewarded.
- True learning.
- The working environment over there is extremely healthy.
- Research facilities available
- Funding

3. Laying the Foundation – Starting Early

Many of you have already passed the stage by which you can do anything about the points I'm about to list out. If so, you can use these to guide your juniors. If not, good for you, and listen up! These need to be done at least a year in advance of your GRE (D. Day) or application work. These are one of the main criterion used in admitting students into the higher ranked universities which seem inaccessible to most. In fact, a weak GRE score can be made insignificant if you follow these guidelines. Many of these will seem banal, I know, but if it works, stop cribbing!

3.1. Projects, Research & Papers

Taking up projects regardless of whether there is a competition or presentation of some sort will display to the selecting committee that you are proactive and engaging when it comes to practical engineering. Also, in the university system to which we belong, with sub-par research facilities and funding opportunities, it is the next best thing to research. Getting hands on experience in a field is not only fulfilling, but it will help you visualize concepts you may have learned earlier or will cover later in class.

Papers over here are slightly different from papers in the US. Most of us who do paper presentations here just collect data from already completed research and present it to a panel of judges. While in the U.S. The paper is merely the publication of what research one does. As it is a full fledged publication, plagiarism is unacceptable and papers are made to undergo detailed scrutiny. Before labeling a presentation as a paper, make sure you actually did some work in the field it covers or use this knowledge as a guideline in any paper presentation you do from now on.

Research opportunities, as mentioned above, is a scarce commodity in our university circles. It is, unfortunately, also the most valued of these three facets. If you have contacts in respected institutes such as IITs and get the opportunity to be an assistant to some ongoing research, please take it up as quickly as possible. Not only are such opportunities difficult to come by, but candidates for the research assistant position have to go through a lot of competition and hence a difficult screening process.

3.2. Internships & Work Experience

This would refer to out industrial training which we undergo during our holidays. Try and rack up as many companies as possible to help you build an impressive resume. If you haven't decided your specialization as yet, try to branch out into as many facets of your department as possible. If you have chosen a field concentration, try as hard as possible to get an internship at a related company. Your resume, when listed chronologically, will then show how you eventually narrowed down your interests to a specific field. Call it maturing of interests, if you wish.

With work experience under your belt, the selecting committee will know that you are pursuing your MS with at least a rough idea of what to expect in a professional environment and your work in the university will not be that of an idealistic student, but a realist.

3.3. Narrowing Down Your Interests

The reason this is point number three is because the two points above aid in doing this. One of the main criterion for selecting a candidate is focus. In fact, you shouldn't even be applying for an MS or PhD if you don't have a specific field of interest in mind. The whole concept of further studies is to cover a specialized field in more detail to an extent that your undergraduate education couldn't fulfill. If you didn't have a specialization in mind before joining engineering, that is no problem. Your courses, projects, research, papers and industrial training would have exposed you to a plethora of fields. Which one was the most intriguing to you? Which ones did you despise? You can either narrow it down in one go or by the process of elimination. Even if you did have something in mind a long time ago, don't be surprised or apprehensive about your interests 'maturing' over the course of your BE.

3.4. Keeping Up Your Grades & Rank

The reason for this is obvious. Since the grading system of American Universities is based on the 'Grade Point Average' system and ours is based on a percentage system, a method for the selecting committee to bridge the gap would be through rank. You can either keep your rank high, or if you happen to be in a very competitive class with similar abilities, try to keep your average close to that of the topper. Do not try to convert your average to the GPA system. The university to which you are applying will do it themselves in whatever method they see fit once they receive your transcripts.

3.5. Forming a Rapport With Your Professors

If you wish to get a great recommendation, you're going to have to interact with your professors on a more personal level. If they are doing their own research (as rare as that may be) ask them about it, and if you are interested, offer to help. Involve them with your own projects or paper presentations. Get them to see the real you and your core driving values, not just your academic side.

4. Long Term Preparation

This is where the actual preparation for the applying process begins. Depending on how well prepared you wish to be, this can start anywhere from 3-12 months before your GRE. As you are allowed to select up to 4 universities to which to send your test scores for free right after the exam, you should also have a rough idea of which universities are out there to cater to your educational needs.

4.1. G.R.E. - The Graduate Record Examination

In case you have any doubts about the GRE, there is an excellent list of frequently asked questions and their answers created and maintained by Nitin Madnani. It is available at <http://www.umiacs.umd.edu/~nmadnani/grefaq.pdf>.

4.1.1. Verbal – Your Nemesis

This is what everyone first thinks of when they consider applying to the US for their post graduate studies. And it is one of the biggest obstacles to overcome in your path to the United States. Those who aren't flustered at first, aren't exactly the same after looking at the mammoth 3500 word list in the GRE prep book by Barons'. The best way to overcome this is by being systematic and finding the best way *you* can learn words. Read more in the next sub-section. Another thing to keep in mind is that the GRE verbal section doesn't only test your knowledge or arcane vocabulary, but your ability to find the relationship between words and the common trick of using a secondary meaning of a seemingly ordinary word. There is nothing to worry about with regard to the math section. It only involves basic math skills which you learned in 8th standard and all you have to work on is speed. That's what practice tests are for. The following books can give you a better study regimen.

4.1.2. Books

This is what is going to pull you through the test, so pay attention.

A great starting point to building your vocabulary is *'Word Power Made Easy'* by Norman Lewis. It completely changes your mindset about the approach to learning new words. Plus it has a reasonably sized word list as an addendum. At 99 bucks, it's the best investment you can make in the entire application process.

Another good book to prepare for the GRE is *Kaplan's GRE Exam 2005*³. It has got some excellent test-taking strategies and a reasonable verbal section. I, however, wouldn't rely solely upon it for the quantitative section. Not only does it not cover 'standard deviation' which is a part of the GRE question bank, but its tests are filled with ambiguities and mistakes in the quants section. It comes with a CD with a decent learning program which goes through the content of the book and give you access to tools such as a flash card utility and games to test your skills at the different sections of the test. For all this, you have to pay a hefty price.

For quants, I would recommend the popular *How to Prepare for the GRE Test* by Barons. It has the infamous and comprehensive 3500 word list which is perfect for those of you out there who excel at learning things by heart. It has a large bank of questions from all sections and a decent number of practice tests. You can get it either with or without the CD. Compared to Kaplan, you get it at a very reasonable price.

4.1.3. Additional Resources

ETS CD : If you register for the GRE well ahead of the actual test date, you should receive this complimentary CD with a very minimalistic guide to what to expect on the test day. Since this is from the same people who make the actual test, its practice tests are the closest to the real thing.

³ Varies according to the year you plan to write the exam.

Please note that the format of the GRE is continuously changing and I cannot account for the same.

WordWeb 4 by Antony Lewis : This is a nifty little dictionary/thesaurus tool for your computer. It is free for personal use and can be obtained at <http://wordweb.info/free/>. Its really handy to quickly get the definitions, synonyms and antonyms of a tricky word without having to go through the books mentioned above or referring to a dictionary with equally bizarre definitions. Especially useful when revising an answered practice test.

4.1.4. Booking Test Dates

You should try to book your test date early as slots quickly get filled up during the peak 'testing season'. Also, as mentioned above, you will then get the ETS CD *before* the test. I would recommend you book both your GRE and TOEFL at the same time, spaced about a week apart. Soon the GRE (and maybe even TOEFL) will be changing the system of conducting tests. Tests will no longer be conducted on a daily basis, but only a few times a month on fixed days. This removes flexibility and is another reason to book early. At the time of writing this article, the registration fee for the GRE and TOEFL is \$120 each and registration can be done at <http://prometric.com>.

Also, if you don't have a passport, or if it has expired, now is the time to get/renew it. You need a valid passport to write the test so don't leave its application for the last minute with the current punctuality of the Indian government.

4.2. Selecting Universities

Since the moment you finish the test and receive your tentative scores you get to chose four universities to send your score gratis, you should at least get a vague list of colleges to put down. A good way to start would be to sign up with a service like <http://www.usnews.com>. If you visit it early enough, you might be able to look at the department rankings of the top 50 graduate schools free of cost. Otherwise you will only be able to see the top 3. If you pay, however, you get access to the full list till around April of the succeeding year.. The fee is around \$15 and can be easily split amongst the others you know who are applying to the US. From this list, you can start visiting the university websites. There are a couple of points you should note while skimming through colleges sites.

4.2.1. Courses & Research Offered

This is obviously the most important criterion for selecting a university. If it doesn't have the course you're looking for, don't consider it, no matter how prestigious it is, or how highly ranked it is department-wise. Keep focused on what you are going to the US for. You can worry about prestige at a later stage. Go through the courses offered and see if they have classes related to your field of interest. Research being conducted in your interest is a great way to strengthen your argument of selecting that college both in your Statement of Purpose and during your visa interview.

4.2.2. Location

This may not seem obvious at first, but location matters. Are you a party animal? Do you think you will cope well with a university that is situated in a town of its own with very few urban amenities. Do you think you might be distracted from your work if you studied in the middle of a thriving metropolis? Food for thought. Also what kind of weather can you not stand? Limit its geographical location accordingly.

4.2.3. Costs & Financial Support Offered

Nowadays it is rare for an applicant to receive aid before touching down on American soil. Hence you should be prepared to shell out cash for at least a semester. Hence you should consider both the tuition and living expenses of your prospective university. Highly esteemed institutions will have hinger tuition rates. Universities in metropolitans and along the coasts and the border with Canada can have very high living expenses (some universities' living expenses are higher than their tuition fees). Consider the situation from both the point of aid and otherwise. How long can you cope without aid?

When searching for colleges don't limit it to any specific number at this stage, but do remember to divide them into tiers according to the GRE and TOEFL scores which are sufficient to even consider applying to them. In each tier highlight the four universities you would most prefer to attend. This gives you pools of colleges to select from according to your performance on test day.

5. G.R.E. - Test Day

Well, this is what you've been preparing for the past few months (hopefully!). Even if you managed to study in the last two weeks, don't worry too much about it. Go in with some confidence and you'll do surprisingly well if you follow the test taking tips in the Kaplan GRE book. Of course you will always walk away with the feeling 'what if'. So this is no excuse not to study! The details about what to bring, the address and the timing of the test are all clearly given in an email you receive after registering. From what I remember, all you are allowed to bring into the hall is your passport and a secondary ID (like a driver's license). You can optionally bring the printout of your email confirming registration, but they have never asked anyone I know for it. Some have complained of the test center being too cold, so dress in layers so that you can adjust accordingly. You can also bring a list of universities (the tiered ones). You can't take the list in during the exam, but once its over, they will let you bring it in to report your scores. The staff is very friendly and they explain everything very clearly so don't worry about screwing up.

Oh, and try not to kick the power cord of the system you are working on. It's not as uncommon as one might think.

After you have completed the test and have received your score, select the corresponding tier on your list and send them your scores. You can even chose one or two in the tier above.

6. Short Term Preparation

6.1. TOEFL

To be honest, if you are comfortable speaking in English, you are sufficiently prepared for the TOEFL. With the new Internet based testing (IBT) which is coming up, you are required to actually talk with an interviewer which is recorded. So you should get used to talking to creepy strangers who are recording your conversation. It's goes totally against what your mother told you, I know, but its for your own good, and hers! As with the GRE you will receive a CD when you register for the TOEFL. Apart from this, the book by Barons to get used to the testing procedure should be sufficient⁴. The TOEFL requirements of most universities are easy to achieve and your margin above the minimum requirements is hardly noticed. Only if you get an exceptionally high score and are able to display your comfort level with the language in your Statement of Purpose or your first semester will you be considered for a teaching assistantship (TA).

6.2. Shortlisting Universities

Now that you know your GRE score and your almost inconsequential TOEFL score (from practice tests on the ETS CD) you are ready to shortlist your rather long list of universities. First off, decide the number of universities you are applying to. Keep in mind that applications are a expensive affair to most and you can expect to spend around Rs. 5000/- per university (considering all charges⁵). Also, you should divide your selected universities into three groups. A group which has a list of ambitious colleges (for your profile) and have a low chance of getting into, a practical group which have a 50-50 chance, and a safe group with chances of 75% or more. Once again go through the university websites of the most interesting colleges you have listed. Note down why they interest you and their quirky application details.

I would highly recommend you visit the Edulix message boards at <http://www.edulix.com/forum/>. It consists of a huge database of discussions and information regarding the university selection and application process. If you decide to register and post, please, PLEASE read all the rules (announcements), sticky posts and use the search function to ensure that your doubt has not been asked before. Remember that the senior members are not there to serve your each and every request, nor are they obligated. Most of them take time out of their busy schedules to help out hundreds of newbies a day. So be polite, undemanding and understanding. If you are requesting university recommendations, then remember to post your complete profile (in a format stated in the rules section) in the thread you create. Also remember to state the universities you have selected along with your reasons. The senior members appreciate newbies who do their homework before asking doubts or for recommendations and you will receive serious replies. Also ask them to rank your selected universities within the 3 sections (safe, practical and ambitious). If you are recommended a university you haven't seen before, visit its website and

⁴ Again, with the new testing system, I can't be definite of this recommendation.

⁵ Explained in more detail in a later section.

repeat the steps stated in section 4.2. Update your list accordingly. Before you know it, you will have a finalized list of universities. Remember to keep your selected universities well distributed among the three groups, with the maximum number of universities in the 'practical' section. Remember to keep noting down why you are selecting each college.

7. T.O.E.F.L. – Test Day

This is pretty much the same as the GRE test day as detailed in section 5. Same requirements. The only difference would be *indifference* with your test result. I'm serious, don't worry about the TOEFL, you've got through the GRE for heaven's sake!

8. Additional Score Reports

Assuming you have finalized your list of universities, and not all of them were covered by the four free score reports, you are going to have to send your official test scores to the remaining universities. This can be done either by you mailing, faxing or phoning the ETS center. By far the quickest and easiest method would be over the phone. A regular phone call will turn out to be rather expensive, but there are alternatives. Sify allows you to make phone calls over the internet from their browsing centers. Contact your nearest Sify browsing center for more details.

Another more do-it-yourself alternative would be Skype, for those of you with a decent internet connection (I think it works decently even on 64kbps). Skype is a software which allows you to make calls to phones through your computer over the internet. This is a pay service (similar to prepaid mobile services), and the minimum amount you can get talk time for is €10 viz. about Rs.540/-. Seems steep at first, i know, but if you call countries like the US, UK, etc calls are at the 'global rate' of € 0.017 per minute which works out to less than Rs. 1 per minute. Like a local call. So the €10 can give you unto 10 hours of talk time assuming you call only countries to which the global rate apply. Get the list of countries at <http://www.skype.com/products/skypeout/rates/>. Apart from this, is like a regular phone call. Dial the number and talk through your computer headset. You can use the keypad to enter numbers while requesting additional scores. It is a very convenient alternative if you call the US a lot (or would like to!). Especially since you will be going there in a couple of months anyway it seems like a decent investment. So according to your future usage of international calls, select the method accordingly. Skype can be used for internet voice chat for free, only the phone calling service is requires payment. For more information and downloads, visit <http://www.skype.com>.

8.1. G.R.E.

You need to keep the following items ready.

- Registration or confirmation number
- Test date
- Date of birth as on your score sheet
- Credit card details (number and expiry date)
- Department codes (can be obtained from http://ftp.ets.org/pub/gre/01736_dcandmfelists.pdf)⁶
- Institution codes (can be obtained from http://ftp.ets.org/pub/gre/01736_iclist.pdf)

The telephone number for international callers is +1-609-771-7290. Call and follow the instructions that follow.

⁶ .pdf files require Adobe Reader to open. Download it for free from <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>. It is required for many college applications as well so download it anyway, as you will use it later.

8.2. T.O.E.F.L.

You need to keep the following items ready.

- 16-digit appointment confirmation number
- Test date
- Date of birth as on your score sheet
- Credit card details (number and expiry date)
- Department codes (can be obtained from <http://ftp.ets.org/pub/toefl/0304dptcod.pdf>)
- Institution codes (same as GRE institution codes but can be obtained from http://ftp.ets.org/pub/toefl/TOEFL_supp_2005.pdf)

The telephone number for international callers is +1-609-771-7267. Call and follow the instructions that follow.

Note that the department codes for the TOEFL and GRE score reporting services are different, while the institution codes are the same.

9. Applying for Transcripts⁷

The earlier you get this done, the faster you will receive your transcripts. If you wait like everyone else for 'application fever' to take affect, you'll end up waiting for your transcripts longer than the estimated 5 days stated by Anna University. You should, however, wait at least till your 6th semester mark sheets are out. First off, take two photocopies of each mark sheet per university you are applying to. Supposing you are applying to 6 universities, that would be

$$2 \text{ copies} * 6 \text{ semesters} * 6 \text{ universities} = 72 \text{ sheets}$$

Make sure that the photocopies are on FULLSCAPE sheets, NOT A4. Use paper clips to group together the originals and the photocopies semester-wise. That is, 1st semester original and copies clipped together, 2nd semester original and copies...etc. Also buy one full scape sized or larger envelope and write your name (as it is on the mark sheet), university roll number and contact number (so they can contact you when the transcripts are ready) on the front. Head to the Controller of Examinations' office in Anna University and ask for the transcript request form. Fill it out. You will want 2 transcripts per university, so fill 2 in the respective field. Show the person you collected the form from that you grouped the sheets semester wise, then put all of the documents into the envelope and return it. You will be assigned a number which you must refer to whenever you call them up to ask if the transcripts are ready or to collect them. Although they say they will call you, after a week you can call them up and ask if its ready. If you are early enough you can get it done in the same day right in front of you.

Anyway, when it is ready, purchase 2 envelopes (full scape or larger) for every university you are applying to and write the department address on one and the graduate school address on the other (both will be available at the university website). If the university asks you to send both the scores to the same place, then put the same address on both envelopes (as counter intuitive as it seems). Head back to the university and collect your mark sheets and photocopies. Rearrange the copies so that each bundle has semesters 1 to 6 in it and then place each bundle in an envelope. Seal the envelopes and return them to the office. Again, if you are before the rush, they will make the seal official in front of you, otherwise it might take 2 days. This time you will also be assigned a professor number which you should quote when picking up the envelopes.

10. Preparing a Resume

If you have been going for campus placements, you should already have a resume ready. You may have to trim it a bit to make it grad-school-ready, but otherwise it should list out all your achievements, projects, posts held, etc. This will be the base for your recommendation letters in case your professors don't know you too well and will be a part of the additional materials required for some universities. It'll also give you points to write in your Statement of Purpose. Preferably, try to fit the graduate school version into one page.

⁷ The details of this subsection are applicable only to Anna University students.

11. Recommendation Letters

The first step with recommendation letters is to find suitable professors to recommend you. As mentioned earlier, you should have a good working relationship with him/her. They should also be in a position to comment on a certain facet of your work, be it academics, a project you may have done or your role in extracurricular activities. It is a good idea to always include the head of your department. Most universities require three recommendation letters.

An excellent post by Popeye of Edulix.com's message boards regarding letters of recommendation can be found at (<http://www.edulix.com/forum/viewtopic.php?p=68547#68547>)

An application speaks to the admission committee on your behalf. While your grades/scores are supposed to represent your intellectual capabilities and your SOP allows you the opportunity of presenting your point of view, recommendations by those who know you give the university an independent assessment of your skills and qualities. We strongly recommend that students should not write their own recommendation letters. In case your recommender is not comfortable drafting the recommendations, you can give him your resume and points you would want him to include. Get a rough draft made from him, it can be polished later. Every school requires a set of 2-3 recommendation letters. Normally the schools have a recommendation format (grading sheet) in their application form, which needs standardized information like rank in class, analytical skills, attendance etc. One can additionally attach a letter (covering other aspects) to the grading sheet.

Choosing the right people:

- You need to make sure that the people who give you the recommendations have known you for a sufficiently long time and on a professional basis.
- Fresh graduates would need recommendation letters from the faculty at undergraduate and/or graduate level. The faculty would be in a position to evaluate the student if they have taught them at least two courses. It would be helpful if the courses were relevant to the study program applied to.
- At work the reporting head interacts with us on a day-to-day basis and hence would be the best person to comment on our performance.
- Personal Contacts are not considered valid.

Credentials of the referee:

- A recommendation from a professor would sound far more impressive than one from a lecturer.
- The remarks of your reporting head who plays an important role in the company and is an experienced person are more valued.
- However a recommendation from the CEO of the company who knows you personally but has not interacted regularly at work would not add any value.
- An alumni from the school one is applying to can give you an additional recommendation commenting on your suitability for the study program.

Relationship you share with the person:

Make sure that the person shares a positive relationship with you to ensure you get a good recommendation and within your time frame. Start approaching the people a month ahead of time to run through 2-3 drafts before finalizing on it. Prepare an initial draft and check with them if they are comfortable mentioning the same.

Writing Tips:

Following points should be kept in mind while drafting a Letter of Recommendation:

1. The letters should ideally be taken on the college/institution/organization letterhead. If not a letter head then the name, contact details and designation of the person should be clearly mentioned. Refer to the sample format.
2. Have focus on fewer qualities in each recommendation so that it stays in the mind of the reader at the end of it. Divide the points between the three letters.
3. Do not include too many adjectives or superlative degree remarks in the recommendation. The statements should sound positive but not flattery.
4. Avoid redundancy in the style of writing. For example starting every sentence with "She has been very active in class, She has above average analytical skills etc". The letter should have a flow and not seem like a list of statements about you.
5. Get a third person opinion about the draft before finalizing it. There are cases when statements that might sound positive to us might be interpreted in a different manner by others.
6. Avoid structural mistakes and use simple language. Do not manipulate facts. For example: If your professor puts you in the top 5% in every category that he's been asked to rank you, and your transcripts show that you averaged in the bottom 25% of your class, it's bound to raise some eyebrows.
7. The letter should be crisp and to the point. Avoid repetitive stuff and irrelevant details.

Personal Qualities that can be mentioned in the LOR:

You don't have to include all points mentioned below, choose the relevant ones.

- Academic Performance
- Attendance and class participation
- Analytical skills and problem solving ability
- Communication skills
- Teamwork Ability
- Leadership Qualities and Decision Making
- Organized and particular about deadlines
- Crisis Management and working under pressure
- Achievements like being a class topper, winning the best project prize etc, playing a strategic role in a company project
- Interpersonal skills, relationship with peers.
- Suitability of the applicant to the study program

Remember that recommendation letters have to be on the college letterhead.

Very often, universities have their own recommendation forms to accompany the letter. It isn't always required, but it is preferred. Fill out as many fields you are able and allowed to fill out on your own (no filling of evaluation tables!). Sign the waiver found on the form stating that you waive your right to access the recommendation letter once you are admitted. Then take the forms to the professors and go over all the fields with them and make sure they understand what each field means. Before leaving the rest to them. Also provide them with a labeled envelope for them to seal the letter and recommendation form in. The envelope flap must then be signed over and stamped with the college seal.

Most professors are more comfortable with sending the recommendations through you, but if they offer to mail it themselves, then let them as long as they use a reliable mail service. In that situation make sure the envelope has sufficient identification (like an application ID) on it to allow the receiving university to identify it as yours and place it in the file which is created when you submit your online application⁸.

12. Statement of Purpose

This is the crux of your application. Its even more important than your GRE score or your academics. This provides you a platform to present yourself to the selection committee. You can use it to explain low grades or your motivating factor. Consider it your two pages of fame. Although some universities ask specific questions and expect very specific answers in a limited number of characters, most allow you to write whatever you want and merely recommend limiting your length between one and two pages. One common mistake people make when writing their SOP is just writing a long list of accomplishments and ones own attributes. As the name implies, what the professors expect from you are your intentions for graduate study and possibly even your professional goals. Of course, it is possible to state that the motivation for the future lies in the past and then connect the two.

Another mistake is to make an SOP for each college one is applying to. A much more efficient method would be to lay down a common framework for all your SOPs and then fill in as many common details as possible before branching off into college-specific statements. A guideline to creating a framework is well explained by Edulix forum member Popeye once again in the same thread as mentioned above. (<http://www.edulix.com/forum/viewtopic.php?p=68554#68554>)

SOP BINDER

For all graduate and undergraduate applicants to US schools, SOP is an important part of their application packet. The admission committee gives the applicant a chance to, project one's best qualities, justify the inconsistencies in the academics or test scores and convince the committee that one has the spark, the thirst for knowledge that could add value to the existing student community.

Writing a reasonably good Statement of Purpose is not an impossible task. It requires care, attention and patience. It is necessary to put in this hard work to come up with an essay that is uniquely yourself.

⁸ Discussed in section 13.

SOP contains: (The order of the content varies from student to student)

1. A mention of your career goal or future objective

The schools seek to admit candidates who have an informed interest in the subject and will successfully apply their education in challenging jobs. The study program should add value to your current profile.

2. Description of your personality as a person and more importantly a student

Some of the Qualities that one could speak about are:

- Creativity and Curiosity
- Pride in your work and an enthusiasm for learning
- A capacity for teamwork
- The ability to think independently
- Show yourself as a well-balanced person

3. Reflection on your undergraduate education, learning, your research interests and research work

- Academic performance
- Courses that interested you beyond class
- Class participation
- Readings through journals

4. Description of projects and seminars done beyond the course curriculum

- Internships and Summer projects
- Workshops and Seminars attended
- Learning from the above

5. Work experience details

- Role in the Company
- Important Projects in line with your research interests
- Contribution to research

6. Reasons for choice of the university for further studies.

- Faculty Profile
- High intake of international students
- Research areas the university is active in
- Low cost of living
- Cultural diversity
- Resources for students
- Low student faculty ratio

7. Concluding with a conviction of proving an asset to the university.

- Sound confident about successful completing the course
- Demonstrating your motivation and determination
- Integrity, common sense, reliability, and personal capacity to excel in a challenging program

Background work Required to be done to write an SOP:

1. Fill up the SOP worksheet provided to you sincerely.
2. Research on schools you are trying to apply and learn about the school and the work in areas of your interest.
3. Write to students at the universities and find facts about the school and the requirements.

TOP 10 RULES TO WRITE BY

- 1 DO strive for depth rather than breadth; narrow your focus to one or two themes, ideas, or experiences.
- 2 DO tell the reader what no other applicant could honestly be able to say.
- 3 DO provide the reader with insight into what drives you--what makes you "tick."
- 4 DO be yourself rather than pretending to be the ideal applicant.
- 5 DO get creative and imaginative, particularly in your opening remarks.
- 6 DO address the particular school's unique features that attract you.
- 7 DO focus on the affirmative in the personal statement itself; consider using an addendum to explain deficiencies or blemishes.
- 8 DO evaluate your experiences rather than merely recounting them.
- 9 DO enlist others to proofread your essay for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage, and style.
- 10 DO use a highly readable typeface with conventional spacing and margins (if you're submitting a paper-based application).

TOP 10 PERSONAL-STATEMENT PITFALLS

- 1 DON'T submit an expository resume; avoid merely repeating information that you've provided elsewhere in your application.
- 2 DON'T complain or whine about "the system" or about your circumstances in life; however, constructive criticism is fine as long as it relates directly to your career goals.
- 3 DON'T get on a soapbox and preach to the reader; while expressing your values and opinions are fine, avoid coming across as fanatical or extreme.
- 4 DON'T talk about money as a motivating factor in your plans for the future.
- 5 DON'T discuss your minority status or disadvantaged background unless you have a compelling and unique story that relates directly to it.
- 6 DON'T remind the school of its ranking or prestige among the various programs of its type.
- 7 DON'T waste your personal statement opportunity with a hackneyed introduction or conclusion.
- 8 DON'T use a gimmicky style or format.
- 9 DON'T submit supplementary materials unless the admissions office requests them.
- 10 DON'T get the name of the school wrong!

Wes Huang Assistant Professor
Department of Computer Science

Statement of Purpose Advice

I've read many applications to our graduate program, and I've seen a lot of statements of purpose that, frankly, aren't very good.

Here are some thoughts and comments that will hopefully help you write a better statement of purpose. These are merely my own thoughts and should not be construed as official guidelines of any sort.

What the statement of purpose is not

Many students (particularly foreign students) think that the statement of purpose is about character. While honesty, sincerity, conscientiousness, etc. are important attributes, I assume students with good academic records applying to graduate school have these traits.

Many students think that the statement of purpose should be an autobiographical sketch. Believe me, the story of your first computer when you were 10 years old and how it inspired you to devote your life to Computer Science does not make particularly interesting reading, nor does it tell me the things I want to know.

Questions that your statement of purpose should answer

When I read a statement of purpose (which I think is one of the most important parts of a graduate application), I have the following questions in mind.

Don't structure your statement with these questions! (I can just see the applications pouring in now with my questions used as section headings.)

Your statement of purpose should be a cohesive piece of prose. (Some use of section headings is OK, but not with my questions.) It should present yourself to the reader. One way you can think of your statement is as an extended (and somewhat more formal) answer to the interview question, "Tell me about yourself..."

While some of my questions below can (and should) be answered directly, the rest should be addressed by relating relevant experiences and accomplishments.

Why do you want to get a PhD (or MS)?

What are your research interests?

Be as specific as possible, but keep in mind who will be reading your application.

In the Rensselaer CS department, research groups read applications — the one(s) you specify on your application. At other schools, a department committee may read all applications and decide upon admissions on behalf of the whole department.

For the Rensselaer CS department, unless you are an exceptional student with a broad range of experience/accomplishments, you should target your application to just one research group — a student who specifies interest in robotics and networking, for example, may not be taken seriously by either group.

Multiple faculty within a research group will read your application.

Why are you interested in these research topics?

Don't write an autobiography!

Do you have the motivation/perseverance to complete a PhD?

If you have an undergraduate degree in something other than Computer Science or Computer Engineering, then another question is: **do you have the background to pass the PhD qualifiers?**

The statement of purpose is also an opportunity to describe some of your accomplishments and their significance. The reader will not be familiar with the programs, competitions, examinations, etc. for all parts of the United States, not to mention other countries.

Other things to keep in mind

Format: Single spaced (or maybe even "one and a half" spacing, but definitely not double spaced) with at least a 10 point font and reasonable margins (at least 1 inch on all sides, preferably more on the left and right with a 10 point font).

Length: Definitely not more than 2 pages! (Who has time to read more than that?)

When I was applying to graduate schools, I was advised to keep my statement of purpose to a single page. I now think that this was not good advice — one page tends to be too short if you're covering everything you should.

Don't try to "cram" more into your two pages using typographical tricks (line spacing, font size, margins, etc.) You're not fooling anyone. Inability to write a concise statement of purpose indicates a lack of critical thinking skills.

I should duly note that most undergraduate Computer Science students confuse "concise" with "short". "Concise" means that you have given thought to the composition of your statement to make it a clear and cohesive piece of prose (with a natural/logical flow) that covers all the necessary points and doesn't cover unnecessary points. "Short" pieces of writing are usually too short because they omit important points, aren't cohesive, etc.

Spell check it! Get someone else to proofread it!

Special note to Chinese (and some Indian) faculty...

Fer cryin' out loud, stop saying that every student is your favorite student!

I never really believe it anyway...

A special thanks to Popeye for the great work he did with the thread.

As mentioned earlier, some universities ask you to write extremely short statements. If your regular SOP is sufficiently comprehensive, you should be able to create these mini SOPs by copying and pasting the required paragraphs or by paraphrasing paragraphs into long sentences. Remember to use your earlier notes to specify why you are selecting that university. You can optionally write your name, contact and application details on the top right corner of the page in the form of a header.

13. Online Applications

Nowadays, all American universities have the option of filling in the initial application over the internet. Some request only basic information like contact details, courses completed, department and degree you are applying for, etc. Others go as far as to allow you to submit your Statement of Purpose and recommendation letters online as well. However, detailed the online form may be, keep as many details as possible at hand. This could include

- Aggregate score for the past 6 semesters
- Aggregate score for each semester
- Class rank or percentiles
- Percentage of class/college/university topper
- Courses taken in the past 6 semesters or detailed course description of upcoming courses
- GRE General Test scores and percentiles
- TOEFL test scores
- The names and contact details of your recommending professors
- Resume
- Statement of Purpose/Intent/Professional Objectives

This is by no means comprehensive, but should give you an idea of what to expect when filling out forms. Don't worry about not having all the answers in one go. You can start filling it out at one time, leave it aside and return to it later. All entered information will be stored in a database so nothing will be lost. This is especially useful for continuously updating an SOP submitted online.

When you start an online application, you will usually be asked to create an account first. Different colleges have different requirements for your user name and password selecting schemes, so you are bound to end up with multiple login ids and passwords. Create a file containing all this data for future reference.

Again, do not fill out any field requesting your GPA unless it allows you to specify what grading system you are using, which in our case is a percentage. The universities will calculate it from the transcripts.

Remember to keep a valid credit card at hand. Once you submit your application (when everything has been filled out) you will be requested to enter your credit card details. The online application fee seems to predominantly range from \$40 to \$50 but occasionally goes higher or lower. Once the payment has been cleared, some colleges provide you with an electronic receipt which you can print out for future reference of the transaction. You should also receive an email stating that your application has been successfully submitted. You should also receive a student/application identification number at this time. If you have not, wait a couple of days for an email. If you still have not received it, you can email the grad school to send/assign you one. This student id will be the method by which you refer to your application in any future correspondence or application material you send to the university, so keep it safe.

Some universities have a list of the additional material to be sent to them listed on the site. Some list it in the online application and some send it in the post-submission email. Where ever it may be, it is your responsibility to find out the requirements of each university and where what has to be sent. Most universities require you to send some material to the Graduate School Admissions Office and the remaining documents to the Department Admissions Office. This, however isn't always the case. Some grad schools just require you submit the online application and registration fee and any further correspondence is with the department. Other grad schools handle all the paperwork and nothing goes to the department. As I said, you have to find this out for yourself. Make sure you document the requirements of each university in a file.

Where ever you find the list of additional requirements, there are usually links to the additional forms which accompany them. Download the ones that apply to you and print them out. I'd advise you to clip all related forms together to make it easier for the admissions office to handle.

A *common* distribution of additional documents is something like this:

<i>Graduate School</i>	<i>Department</i>
Print out of online application (<i>optional, rare</i>)	Department application form (<i>if not submitted online</i>)
1 copy of your transcripts	1 copy of your transcripts
Your official GRE and TOEFL test scores (sent by ETS)	A photocopy of your GRE and TOEFL test scores
Financial certification/Visa application form and respective supporting documents (bank statement and affidavit of support).	3 Letters of recommendation Statement of Purpose Resume

I reiterate, this is *not necessarily* the actual list. It varies from college to college.

14. Financial Documents

This is one of the last few step you can do in a short time frame before dispatching your application package. Basically, if you are an international student, American visa law states that any inbound student should show a satisfactory supply of funds to support him through his education. Only upon receiving this proof, will the university be allowed to issue you an I-20 form to allow you to book a visa appointment. Of course this is all assuming you have been admitted into the institute. For this reason it is optional to send the financial certification forms and its supporting documents at the time of your application. You are also permitted to send it upon receiving confirmation of your admission into the university. Sending it along with your application, however, saves time for both you and the university where there is no waiting for the financial forms on their end and I-20 on your end. Additionally, you save on postal charges.

14.1. University Financial Certification/Visa Application Form

Both these terms refer to the same form as financial certification is required for issuance of a visa application. Most universities have one of these forms on their website, while others request you to just send a bank statement and an affidavit of support. If they do have one, print it out and fill in the necessary details. For the form of funding, most often it is your parents, relatives or close family friends who will be either funding you, or showing funds ready to support you in case of need. Accordingly, fill in the corresponding row in the table. As for the amount of funding, write the annual costs for attending the university (includes tuition, residence, living expenses, books and medical insurance). Usually an estimate of this value will be printed on the form, or on the web page you downloaded it from. Get your sponsor (your earning family member, relative or family friend) to sign in the required places.

14.2. Bank Statement

Obviously, stating that your sponsor is funding you isn't sufficient. You will have to prove that they have adequate funds to do this. This requires a bank statement with the account balance in Rupees and its equivalent amount in American Dollars at the current exchange rate. Sometimes the bank manager will add a line stating that the account has been in good standing and maintained by so-and-so since such-and-such a date. Needless to say, the account should belong to your sponsor.

14.3. Affidavit of Support

This is a legal document stating that your sponsor is, in fact, willing to sponsor you through your education. It is attached with the bank statement and sent to the university. It is to be made on a Rs. 20 stamp paper, signed by your sponsor and notarized by a suitable official. An easy way to get this done is through an auditor. The general format of an affidavit of support is as follows, though some people may prefer to include more legal jargon in it.

<p><<applicant's address>></p> <p><<Date>></p> <p>Subject: Affidavit of support for <<applicant's name>></p> <p>TO WHOMSOEVER IT MAY CONCERN :</p> <p>This is to certify that I, <<name of sponsor>>, will undertake the educational expenses for <<relationship with applicant>>, <<name of applicant>>, for pursuing his major in <<major name>> at <<university name>>, <<location of university>> until the completion of the course.</p> <p>I understand the liability to be incurred is approximately <<TOTAL cost per year>> per annum.</p> <p>I am submitting this affidavit of support and the attached bank statement to assure you of the credibility of our financial position.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p> <p><<Name of sponsor>></p>
--

Clip the above three documents together and keep them ready for the application package.

15. Dispatching Application Packets

Finally, the run to home base. Before you seal everything in its envelopes, remember to double check that you have ALL the requirements for each university. Also make sure you have the correct addresses and applicant ids at hand.

15.1. Packing Methodology

Despite the fact that universities request you to send the packages to their respective addresses (grad school and department), there is a more efficient method of doing this without making it much more inconvenient for the grad school. Place all the documents to be sent to the graduate school in one envelope and address it to the grad school. Place all the documents to be sent to the department in another envelope and address it to the department. You can also place a 'Please forward to:' above the department address. Then place both these envelopes into a larger envelope with a covering letter and a checklist (if provided by the university). This envelope is addressed to the graduate school. The covering letter basically states that this is the application material for so-and-so (remember to state your application id), the contents of each envelope, instructions to forward it to the respective offices and to inform you of any missing material. The format of the covering letter is on the next page. It varies according to whether or not you have to actually send material to two different addresses.

<<name and contact details as a header>>

<<applicant's address>>

<<Date>>

Subject: Covering letter for application package contents

To Whom It May Concern:

This is with regard to the application of <<**applicant name**>> (Applicant No: <<**number**>>). The application package has been separated into two envelopes. One contains forms for the graduate school, while the other is intended for the department (mechanical engineering). Kindly forward the envelopes to the respective offices. Please find enclosed the following documents for your perusal:

I. Application Checklist for International Students

II. Department Envelope:

1. Transcript x 1 – Transcript of semesters 1 to 6 of my undergraduate studies duly attested and sealed by my university.
2. Statement of Purpose
3. Letters of Recommendation x 3 – Sealed. My professors felt more comfortable sending these along with the main application.
4. Resume

III. Graduate School Envelope:

1. Transcript x 1 - Transcript of semesters 1 to 6 of my undergraduate studies duly attested and sealed by my university.
2. Financial Documents
 - a. Affidavit of Support
 - b. Bank Statement
 - c. Form on university website
3. Copies of GRE and TOEFL Scores – For reference only. Official score reports have been requested to be sent to the mechanical engineering department.

The International Graduate College Application form has been submitted online.

I would be grateful if I would be informed of any missing documents at <<email address>>

Sincerely,

<<applicant name>>

This is for the multiple envelope format. It can be suitably edited to cater to a single envelope format.

Make sure all the envelopes are sealed well and use tape to reinforce the flap. On the outside of the large envelope write the return address and that the envelope is an application package for so-and-so name (with application number), for whichever department and semester (eg. Fall 2006).

15.2. Dispatching Options

There are a variety of ways to dispatch your package depending on your budget. Keep in mind that the package contains almost irreplaceable documents and how much time you spent on putting it together.

15.2.1. Regular Postal Service

Rs. 35/- onwards based on weight. You would have to be either crazy or plain broke to go with this option. Not only are you not guaranteed a safe delivery or a time frame, but who knows what condition the documents will be in *if* they get there.

15.2.2. Registered Post

Rs.400/- for the first 250 grams and about a rupee more for every gram of additional weight.

15.2.3. Speed Post

Rs.425/- for the first 250 grams and about a rupee more for every gram of additional weight. Usually charge you an flat Rs. 100/- extra if it exceeds 250 grams. Estimated 5 days delivery time, but not guaranteed. Time varies from 5 to 15 days. Very reliable and efficient for the price. Once it reaches American soil, it can be tracked at <http://www.usps.com/shipping/trackandconfirm.htm?from=home&page=0035trackandconfirm>.

15.2.4. International Courier Service

This includes the likes of FedEx and DHL. As far as DHL is concerned:

DHL University Express - Rs. 850/ - for first 500 grams. However, as there are different deals available at different times, call up 1-600 111 345 (Toll free) for details. Guaranteed to be delivered on the 5th working day and the package is insured. Can be tracked at <http://www.dhl.co.in/publish/in/en/eshipping/track.low.html>.

16. Post Application Communication

This is popularly known as 'prof-lettering' or 'prof-letting'. It is a powerful tool when used correctly, but plain annoying in ordinary hands. Make sure you are up to it before pursuing it further. It involves communicating with a professor whose research interests match your own.

A detailed explanation can be obtained from <http://www.edulix.com/application/Prof-letting.html>

17. The Admissions

18. The Visa

19. Conclusion

Much of this document is incomplete and will remain so until I'm in a position to give advice in the respective topics. I would like to thank the members of the Edulix community for helping me through my application and for generously providing me with content for this guide. I hope it will make the application process easier for the readers than it was for me and save at least one or two sleepless nights ahead. Good luck with your applications and see you in the U.S.!