



WASHINGTON STATE
UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

Written by:

Emily Burton, L. McKinley Nevins, and Caroline Terry

The School of Biological Sciences Diversity Committee

Updated: August 2023

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1. INTRODUCTION

Applying to Graduate School

This document provides an overview of the steps involved in the graduate school application process. Much of the advice included here is specific to applying to the Washington State University (WSU) School of Biological Sciences (SBS) graduate program. If you are applying to other graduate degree programs, be sure to check for requirements, guidelines, and deadlines specific to those programs.

The School of Biological Sciences at WSU offers graduate programs leading to M.S. (thesis and non-thesis) and Ph.D. degrees in biology or plant biology. To access the SBS application, please visit (<https://sbs.wsu.edu/graduate-studies/apply/>). You can direct specific application questions to **sbs.gradstudies@wsu.edu** or visit the SBS main office in 301 Abelson Hall on the WSU Pullman campus.

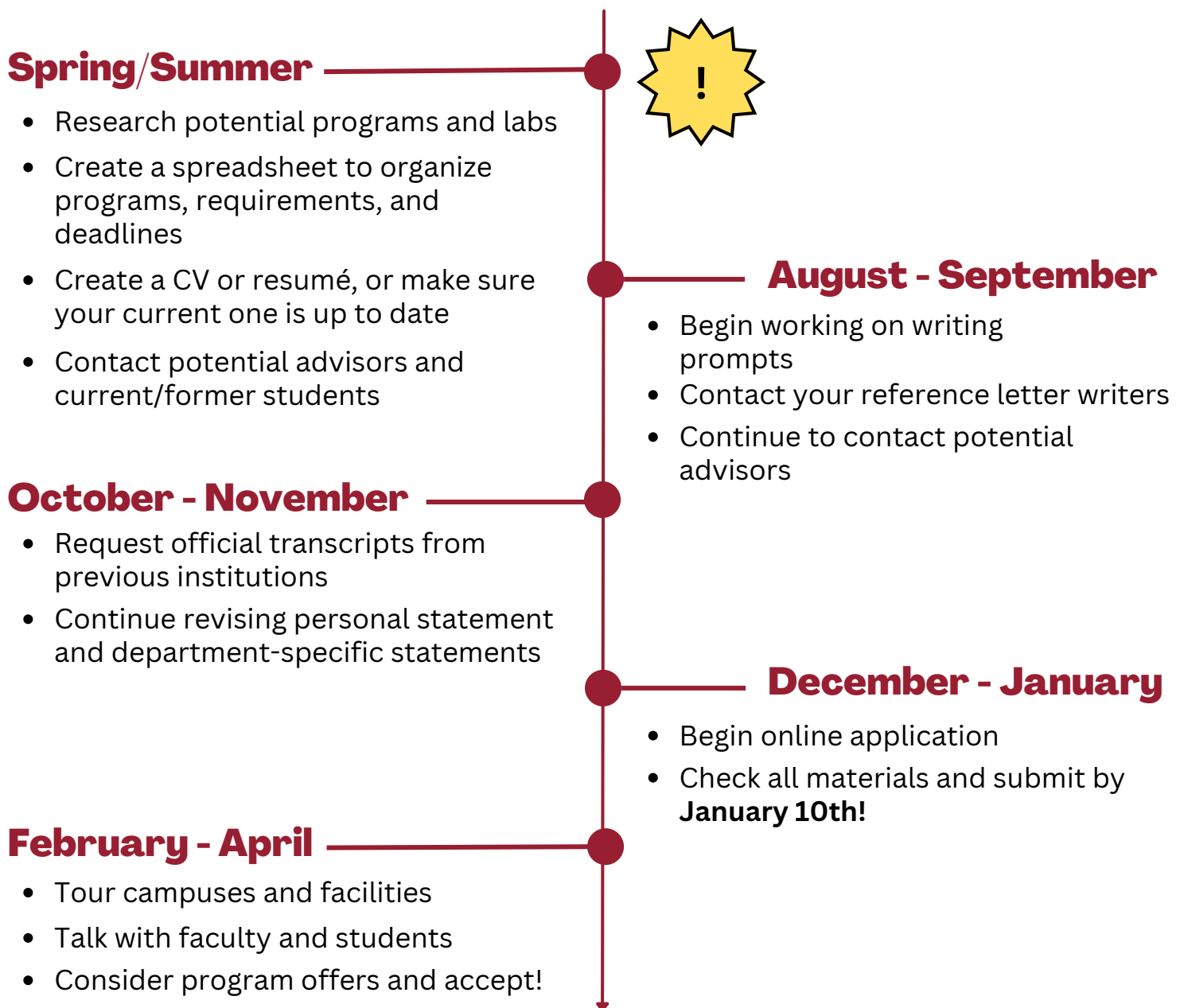


If you are applying to graduate school in the U.S. as a non-U.S. resident, there are some extra steps you will need to be aware of. Throughout this document, key steps that may be different for international students are marked with this symbol, directing you to additional information found on the last page.



2. Recommended Timeline

Bolded dates are WSU official deadlines, the rest of the information included should serve as a recommendation for a smooth application process, but strict adherence is not necessarily essential for success.



3. How to Decide on M.S. vs Ph.D.

Choosing which degree to pursue is an essential decision to make early on in your graduate school application process. It's important to consider your personal goals and the unique characteristics of both degree paths.

Before you decide, ask yourself these questions:

1. What are my future career aspirations? What are the listed required qualifications for people applying to such positions?
2. What is my ultimate goal for pursuing a graduate degree?
3. What are my timeline and funding needs?
4. Do I prefer to be a generalist or a specialist in my field of interest?

Master's Program (M.S.)	Doctoral Program (Ph.D.)
2-3 years to completion	5-6 years to completion
Thesis typically comprises one intro chapter and one piece of publishable research	Dissertation typically comprises one intro chapter and at least three pieces of publishable research
<p><u>Great for:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advancing professionally and gaining access to more job opportunities in a short amount of time • Gaining more research experience and seeing if a Ph.D. is right for you • Broadening your scientific skills and knowledge 	<p><u>Great for:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you know you want to pursue a career in research and/or academia, such as leading your own lab or becoming a professor • Becoming an expert in your chosen field • Broadening your scientific skills and knowledge

See the SBS Graduate Student Handbook for more information on degree requirements: <https://sbs.wsu.edu/documents/2023/02/graduate-student-handbook.pdf/>

4. Finding and Contacting a Lab

Finding a Lab

Graduate degrees in the sciences are research degrees. You will be spending a large portion of your time doing independent research, so make sure you choose a lab whose research interests you!

Some tips for finding a prospective lab:

- Use Google Scholar or similar sites (<https://scholar.google.com>) to search for research articles in your field of interest within the past 5 years. Check the author list for faculty active in the field.
- Twitter, job boards (<https://wfscjobs.tamu.edu/job-board/>), and society email lists are great places to find labs seeking graduate students.
- Once you identify a potential advisor, go to their lab website, which is typically linked in the departmental website (SBS Faculty: <https://sbs.wsu.edu/faculty/>). Check what research they are actively conducting and if they are currently accepting graduate students.

Reaching Out

In SBS, and many other biology programs, you will be applying to work in a specific lab where the PI ("principle investigator"; i.e., head of the lab) will be your primary advisor. We recommended that you contact prospective advisors directly via email (see example email on next page), prior to applying to the program. This allows them to get to know you, and you to get to know them. Send them a brief email with your CV, some information about yourself and what you are interested in, and a request to meet via video or voice call (see below).

Some topics for that first conversation:

- Discuss your research interests and career goals with your prospective advisor.
- Ask questions about the graduate program:
 - How easy is it to get funding?
 - What are the degree requirements in this particular department?
 - What is your mentorship style?
- Ask for contact information for current or past graduate students to ask these same questions (plus additional questions on pg. 11).



Remember - this introduction is as much for you as it is for the advisor!

4. Finding and Contacting a Lab

Example Email to Contact Prospective Advisor

Dear Dr. Coug,

My name is Prospective Student; I will be completing my B.S. in Biology this year at the Great State University and am planning to apply to graduate programs for the upcoming academic year. I have read several of your most recent papers, including "Changes to Intraspecific Interactions Following Competition in an American Football Stadium" and am quite interested in your work on the impacts of disturbance and competition on animal social behavior. My overarching interests are in community and population ecology, competitive interactions, behavior, and coexistence following disturbance. In the past few years, I have gained field work and laboratory research experiences addressing these topics in ecosystems across the U.S. My goal is to pursue research during my graduate degree that furthers our understanding of community and population responses of animals to competition in a sport setting.

Are you planning to take on new students in the next academic year, and is this research direction of interest to you? I've been exploring graduate programs where I can dive even deeper into these research areas and am very interested in what you and your lab are working on, and in the department overall. Would you be willing to speak with me further about the current research in your lab, and the application process to your program?

I have attached a copy of my CV for your consideration, and I would appreciate any chance to discuss possibilities with your lab further.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Prospective Student

Introduce yourself

State your intent

Show that you are interested in this advisor specifically, and familiar with their research

Briefly describe your past experience

Provide a research direction you are interested in pursuing

Request specific information and additional action

Offer thanks and provide additional information about yourself to the potential advisor

** Before sending an email to a potential advisor, make sure to check their website to see if they request for you to include any additional information or materials in the initial email, such as a personal statement or undergraduate transcripts.

5. Application Materials

The School of Biological Sciences does not require the GRE!

The full application to SBS and the WSU Graduate School will contain:

1. Three letters of recommendation
2. A statement of purpose
3. Your written responses to the SBS-specific questions in the graduate school application

Step 1: Letters of Recommendation

Ways to set yourself up to receive the best letters of recommendation possible:

1. Build relationships with faculty, research advisors, or other people who can speak directly to your performance in a research capacity. Ideally, at least two of your letters should come from faculty members, so start building these relationships early!
2. Ask potential letter writers for a letter of recommendation early, at least 6 weeks before the deadline. Most application portals need you to enter names and email addresses of letter writers before they send out prompts and instructions for submission. Make sure all of the potential letter writers have agreed to help you before having the system contact them.
3. Request the letter of recommendation in an email, so the letter writer will be able to refer back to it. In the email, include details such as 1) what the letter is for (include a link to the program or potential advisor's website) and when it is due; 2) any specific things you want the letter writer to emphasize about you; 3) a blurb about yourself, such as an update on your recent activities if you haven't been in touch with the letter writer recently, and details of your research and career aspirations. You can also include your statement of purpose.
4. Offer to send the letter writers a reminder email by a specific date before the deadline, to ensure the letters are submitted on time.

5. Application Materials

Step 2: Statement of Purpose

The goal of the statement of purpose is to provide the admissions committee with more detail on who you are as an applicant, and how you would fit into the program.

Do:

- Write about your research and professional experiences to date, skills and strengths you have developed, and the research plans you would want to pursue if accepted.
- Describe your long-term professional goals and what you would want to do with your degree.
- Write about what you hope to gain from the program, and what you would contribute to the program.
- Demonstrate that you have had conversations with potential advisors in the department about research directions.

Don't:

- Just reiterate what is on your CV. This statement is meant to provide more detail to the roles and experiences you list there.
- Write a generic statement - tailor it to the school you are applying to.
- Miss spelling and grammar mistakes. Seek out proofreading assistance if necessary.

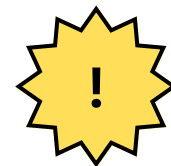
Writing Tips:

1. Give yourself enough time to write and edit your statement multiple times. Starting 6-8 weeks before the submission deadline, at minimum, is recommended. If you want to share your SOP with your letter writers, start even earlier.

2. Research the program and school thoroughly. Be sure you familiarize yourself with the structure and any specific guidelines for the statement.

3. Brainstorm why the program and school are a good fit for you. Make sure you tailor this statement specifically to the program and school you're applying to. It should be very clear why you have chosen to apply here, and specifically how you think you would fit in and contribute to the program.

5. Application Materials



Step 3: SBS-Specific Application Questions

Our department adds several SBS-specific questions to the standard application package you submit to the graduate school. Find the full application here: <https://www.applyweb.com/wsugrad/index.ftl>

Tips for answering SBS-specific questions:

1. Keep your answers concise and direct. For short answer questions (e.g., "Why are you interested in pursuing a graduate degree at WSU?") keep your answer to ~300 words.
2. Have someone else proof read your answers before submitting.
3. If you are not sure how to answer any of the questions, reach out to your prospective advisor for clarification.

These tips may apply to department-specific questions for other universities, but check individual requirements.

Step 4: Prepping your CV

CV's are essentially long resumes that will include all of your academic achievements, as well as relevant work experience, skills, and awards. There is no page limit on a CV, but try to be concise.

CV's should include sections for:

- Your name and contact information
- Degrees earned with the major and year earned (or expected to be earned)
- Research experience
- Research papers, talks, and presentations
 - Not including those given as a class requirement
 - If you are early in your career you may not have publications or public talks, this is okay! If you have papers that have been submitted or are in prep, or upcoming talks and presentations feel free to include those with a note describing their status
- Awards, honors, or society memberships (this includes scholarships, dean's list, honors societies, etc.)
- Volunteer and outreach activities


WSU has some helpful resources for building your CV:

<https://ascc.wsu.edu/channels/mastering-the-cv/>

6. Interviews - What to Expect

Within the normal application timeline, if a PI is interested in having you join their lab, you will be invited to interviews and/or a recruitment event in the early Spring. This may be conducted virtually or in person. Remember that this is a time for you to assess the fit of the research program for your interests and for department members to evaluate how you will contribute to the research environment.

Interviews often include meetings with your prospective advisor, current graduate students, and other faculty in the department, as well as tours of relevant facilities and the general area.

 **Note for international students:** You will likely conduct interviews online. The following advice still applies, but you may have additional questions for your PI and other grad students (see pg. 15).

Questions you May be Asked:

- What research questions would you be interested in pursuing if you were admitted?
- Why do you want to pursue a graduate degree?
- What makes WSU and the School of Biological Sciences right for you?

Questions to Ask Other Grad Students:

About the area

- How do you like living in the area? What is the weather like?
- What are fun recreational things to do?
- Do you need a form of personal transportation to get around?
- What is the cost of living like?

About the school and department

- How involved are you in activities or events outside of the department?
- How is the culture in the department? Are there often social events?
- Is there opportunity for collaboration across labs?

About your lab and PI of interest

- What does a typical day working in this lab look like?
- How hands on or hands off is the PI?
- Do you enjoy working in this lab with this PI?

6. Interviews - What to Expect

It's important to make a good impression during the campus visit and interview process, with not only your prospective advisor and lab, but also the department overall.

Here are some recommendations for things you can do to help make a good impression:

1. Do your research before meetings. Show that you have done a bit of prior research to prepare for meetings with other faculty and students in the department. A quick search of their website or Google Scholar page is better than going into a meeting knowing nothing about them!

2. Prepare good questions in advance. There will be lots of time to ask questions of faculty, students, the department, and Pullman in general. Try to prepare a few questions in advance to show you have prepared beforehand and that you're interested in learning more about the school. Try to avoid asking questions that could be very easily answered with a quick search of the department or university website, but any question is better than having no questions to ask.

3. Be a good listener. Showing that you are listening attentively can go a long way. Carrying around a small notebook and pen can be really helpful to keep track of conversations throughout the day and show you're serious about what is being said.

4. Dress comfortably, but professionally. Check the itinerary beforehand to see what activities to expect each day, and dress appropriately for the weather and to walk outside on campus or around town. Comfortable shoes are a must as the visit days are long!

5. Demonstrate that you can talk science. Part of our department's campus visit is a symposium for graduate research currently ongoing in our department. This is a great time to meet and chat with students outside of your primary research focus, so try to ask them questions and learn more about the other research going on in the department.

6. Treat any activity like part of the interview. Consider any interaction you have, or any activity you do during the visit to be part of your interview. Be sure to act and speak accordingly.



7. Finding Funding

If you're accepted to our program, SBS guarantees 2 years (4 semesters) of assistantship support for thesis-MS students, 5 years (10 semesters) of support for PhD students with an MS degree, and 6 years (12 semesters) of support for PhD students without an MS degree. Extensions are possible. The majority of the time, this support will come in the form of a teaching assistantship at 20 hours per week.

SBS also has multiple endowment awards (see below) available for graduate students in good standing, including a research and training fellowship that can be used for research supplies and summer support (cumulative cap as of 2023: \$12,000 for PhD students and \$3,000 for MS students).

External Funding Sources

- Many students apply to the National Science Foundation's Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP) during their senior year of undergraduate education and/or first or second year of graduate school (<https://www.nsfgrfp.org>).
 - Winners benefit from a five year fellowship period with three years of financial support, as well as tuition coverage.
 - These fellowships are very competitive, consider applying as an undergraduate so you have the chance to apply twice!
- Ask your prospective PI about additional fellowships available in your field

Internal Funding Sources

- SBS offers various funding opportunities within the department, usually with two application cycles per year (<https://sbs.wsu.edu/graduate-studies/funding/>)
- The WSU Graduate and Professional Student Association (GPSA) offers a variety of funding support, including for dissertation projects and travel to conferences (<https://www.gpsa.wsu.edu/funding/overview/>)
- College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) internal funding opportunities (<https://cas.wsu.edu/gfs/internal-funding-opportunities/>)
- All students are eligible to apply for WSU General Scholarships (<https://admission.wsu.edu/cost/scholarships/>)

8. What's Next?



Congrats, you were accepted!



You did it! Take a deep breath, relax, and consider these things to be best positioned to start graduate school:

- If you were accepted to multiple programs, decide which is a best fit for you based on funding, location, research interest, PI relationship, department atmosphere, etc.
- Stay in contact with your future PI. Discuss any remaining questions you might have and how you can start preparing for your time in their lab.
- Prepare for the move to your new school. Ask current students in the program for housing advice. Identify any state residency requirements for the program.
- Continue investigating funding sources. Applying for funding now is great practice for later in your degree, and securing funding looks great on your CV! Chat with your future PI about potential options.

I didn't get in. Now what?



That's okay! Graduate school is competitive. The good news is there are lots of ways to continue building your CV and research experience until the next application cycle.

- If you liked the potential advisor or program, stay in contact and ask how you can improve your application for the next cycle.
- Think about skills or experiences you can improve on to be a more competitive applicant.
- Investigate research experiences for undergraduates (REUs) if you are a current undergraduate or just graduated.
- Lots of labs and some government agencies offer seasonal research positions - check Twitter and sites like the Texas A&M job board (<https://wfscjobs.tamu.edu/job-board/>).

Good luck on your graduate school journey!

9. Notes for international applicants!

Application

Applying to graduate school as an international student requires some extra steps and materials. Here are things to keep in mind in addition to the other information in this guide:

- It may take a while to gather all additional materials, so start early!
- You will need to provide TOEFL, IELTS, or MET scores, or another measure of English proficiency
- Confirm that you have funding via a RA- or TA-ship and that your PI has funding for research - international students are not eligible for federal financial aid or direct funding from federal granting organizations
- Discuss with your potential PI any special accommodations you may need as an international student, like assistance with finding housing or making payments before arrival

For more on WSU (not specific to SBS) requirements for international student applicants:
<https://gradschool.wsu.edu/international-requirements/>

After Admission: Visa Documents

Before arriving at your new school, you'll need the proper documentation (i.e., F-1 Visa). To do this, you will need to:

1. Get your I20 from the university
2. Contact your US embassy (<https://www.usembassy.gov>) to apply for a F-1 visa, using your I20
 - a. This process may vary, depending upon your home country
 - b. There will be a ~\$350 SEVIS fee for the F-1 visa. You may need a contact within the US (e.g., your PI) to facilitate this payment, so make sure to identify this person.
 - c. Spouses and children also need visas, this will be an F-2

More detailed information for WSU international students about visa documents can be found here:
<https://ip.wsu.edu/future-students/admitted-students/new-student-checklist/>

Finding housing:

You will need to arrange housing prior to arrival in the US. At WSU, you can apply for WSU graduate student housing (<https://housing.wsu.edu/prospective-students/families-grad-students/>). You can also find housing in Pullman online. Ask your advisor or other graduate students where to find housing. **Note:** you may need to pay security deposits and other fees up-front prior to arrival.