PhD Applications: Survive the Process, Stand Out in the Crowd

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Premise

The most important premise of this guide is that if I managed to navigate the PhD application season successfully, it was because I got the right advice and recommendations. These came from mentors, senior colleagues, peers, and even random people I reached out to, many of whom generously shared their experiences and mistakes so I could learn from them.

Later, I found myself being asked for advice about my application process. And my honest opinion is this: there's no perfect recipe for getting into a top PhD programme. The Economics PhD application process is a black box, with significant randomness. That makes it partly terrifying, but also encouraging for those who don't have the stereotypically "perfect" profile.

Your application has to stand out among hundreds of applicants, where everyone has good grades, good schools, and strong motivation to do research. So, the question becomes: *how do you seem special?* That's where this guide starts.

1. Before Applying

1.1. The Decision to Pursue a PhD in Economics

The question I've been asked the most is: *Why did you decide to do a PhD?* This isn't my statement of purpose, but I want to share a question that a professor from LSE once asked me:

> "Do you really want to do a PhD in economics? Because if even one tiny cell in your brain thinks you could reach your life goals without it, then, do not do it."

I sat with that question for two years before applying, trying to answer it as honestly as possible. He was right: the PhD application process is demanding, especially if you're working full-time and balancing your personal life.

You will need to prepare extensive materials, strengthen weaknesses, and invest considerable time, money, and emotional energy. Before you start this process, and even before continuing this guide, reflect carefully on why you want this path. A genuine passion for research (not just interest, but an enduring curiosity and desire to generate knowledge) is crucial. Without it, the challenges of a PhD can become overwhelming. Instead, there are many meaningful careers offering potentially better financial stability and diverse tasks.

Remember, a six-year Economics PhD is not the only option. Excellent shorter programmes exist if you already have strong coursework and wish to focus on research. Also, consider strong programmes in economic history, public policy, demography, urban economics, sociology, political science, and political economy and so on, which might suit your profile better and have different application requirements.

My main advice: Try other work experiences first. Research-related work experience (in academia or policy institutions) often proves crucial. A mentor once challenged me: *"Are you sure? Have you tried anything else first?"* I had experienced banking and consulting, but only working in academia gave me a real sense of fulfillment. That realisation became the core of my motivation, and it was reflected in my statement of purpose. In the end, it worked out well.

1.2. Academic Backgrounds

I may not have followed the most traditional path to Economics, but that's precisely why I believe sharing my experience can be valuable. This section is specifically designed to encourage anyone coming to Economics later or from a background other than a pure Economics degree. While it might seem challenging at first, it is absolutely achievable with determination and strategic planning.

Most PhD programmes in Economics appreciate applicants from diverse academic backgrounds such as Finance, Public Policy, Political Science, or quantitative fields like Mathematics, Computer Science, or Physics. The essential factor is demonstrating your strong quantitative abilities and readiness for rigorous coursework.

Some schools might request a formal "course sheet," where you detail:

- Your most advanced mathematics and statistics courses (e.g., multivariable calculus, linear algebra, real analysis, probability), including grades, textbooks used, university attended, and whether courses were undergraduate or graduate level.
- Your most advanced economics or econometrics courses, providing similar specifics.

Other programmes explicitly require intermediate-level coursework in microeconomics and macroeconomics. As soon as you consider pursuing graduate studies in Economics, proactively enrolling in these foundational and advanced courses can greatly enhance your application. Even if not explicitly required, such courses strongly signal your preparedness to admissions committees and can substantially strengthen your candidacy, particularly at competitive programmes.

In my experience, my undergraduate degree in Finance provided me with solid training in calculus and econometrics. My subsequent two-year Master's in Public Policy further enriched my profile, emphasising policy evaluation methods (particularly quasi-experimental techniques) and political economy (including game theory and modelling). Although I decided to pursue a PhD in Economics relatively late in my master's programme, my academic preparation and subsequent professional experience in an Economics department positioned me well for successful applications.

Ultimately, coming from a "non-traditional" background can indeed be advantageous, bringing unique perspectives and strengths to your profile. The key lies in proactively identifying and addressing any academic gaps early on. The earlier you start preparing, the stronger and more compelling your application will be.

1.3. Gain Experience in Research

It is true that you need to show research potential in your application. The best way to do that is by having previous research experience. This depends a lot on where you are applying. For example, in the United States, people used to apply straight from undergrad. But in Europe, a master's is often a formal requirement before moving on to a PhD.

Again, this really varies by department, and we will discuss this more later, but many places are looking for evidence of research potential. It is not enough to show perfect grades and statistics. One of the most effective ways to demonstrate that potential is to focus on your dissertation while you are still a student and to seek out research opportunities early on.

In my case, the dissertation was a requirement for both my undergraduate and master's degrees. I had to write and defend a proper thesis in order to graduate. So I never had issues showing solo-authored research work because I was basically forced by circumstance to start working on research ideas when I was 20, finishing my *laurea triennale*[1] back in Italy. But I know that is not the case everywhere. So I really recommend doing a final dissertation if it is optional at your institution, or starting to think about a solo-authored paper or long essay you can use later for job interviews or grad school applications.

Another step that I believe has become a standard part of the process, at least before applying to PhDs in Economics, is working as a predoc (pre-doctoral research assistant) for at least a year. This was not always the norm in the United States, where people used to go straight from undergrad. But the field has become incredibly competitive, and now most applicants do a predoc first. Working in research or policy institutions can also be a strong way to demonstrate your research potential.

Personally, I worked as a predoc for two years, and I will explain more about that experience below. I believe there are three main reasons why doing at least one (but no more than two) years of predoc work can be a great idea, regardless of your age or background, before applying for a PhD in Economics:

1. **Understanding the profession** Working full time in academia helps you figure out whether this is really the life you want. For me, spending two years in an economics department—working with a research team and engaging with colleagues, senior professors, and students—made me realise this was the kind of satisfaction I was looking for. At the same time, I had colleagues who, after a year, decided not to pursue this career, and that was a win too. It helped them realise what was not for them.

2. **Financing your applications**
PhD applications are expensive. Predocs are usually paid well. Depending on how many schools you apply to, how often you take standardised tests, and other costs, the process can add up quickly. Application fees, especially in the United States, are not always waived and can be a real barrier. Since predoc roles are often funded by grants, many are well-paid, particularly at top institutions. This gives you the financial space to apply widely.

3. **Getting strong letters and research output**
Letters of recommendation are a crucial part of your application. You want professors to write more than just "she is a good student." The only way to get that kind of letter is to work closely with someone and show them what you can do on real research tasks. I used my predoc years to explore academia, test whether it was the right fit, and pursue opportunities to build research output. I even managed to get a couple of minor publications before applying, which really helped me craft a compelling statement of purpose with concrete examples of my research experience.

[1] The Italian equivalent of a three-year undergraduate degree, similar to a Bachelor's.

Again, I will end this section with a reminder: this was just my personal experience. During visit days[2], I met plenty of brilliant prospective PhD students who applied straight from school, without a predoc or long research background. Everyone is different, and that is okay. The goal is simply to figure out what you can do to stand out in the giant pile of applications each school receives every year.

1.4. Application to Predocs

Nowadays, applying to predocs is becoming increasingly structured, reflecting its growing importance in the profession. Although it can be competitive, this trend provides more clarity and resources to candidates.

One of the most useful strategies I've found is the "law of large numbers": apply widely and broadly. When I first sought a predoc position in April 2023, shortly before completing my Master's in Public Policy, I applied to numerous opportunities without fully understanding the process. Fortunately, through perseverance and reaching out extensively, I connected with mentors who recognised my potential and offered me a position that perfectly matched my interests and aspirations.

Interestingly, when I reapplied for predoc positions the following year with more research experience, the process remained challenging. However, applying broadly again paid off, leading me to another fulfilling role working alongside researchers I greatly admired, conveniently allowing me to remain in my preferred city.

Ultimately, my golden rule is straightforward and encouraging: apply widely, stay open to opportunities, and trust that your dedication will align you with rewarding positions that can significantly enhance your academic journey.

1.4.1 How to Find Them and When

As predocs are becoming a more institutionalised requirement for PhD applications, the process to apply has also become much more systematised over the years. Predoc positions are usually posted on `https://predoc.org`, which is a dedicated website showing job postings from all around the world and offering advice to people interested in applying. I really recommend visiting this website regularly, but also taking time to read all the materials they provide to help young students start navigating this world.

However, each position is also usually posted on university websites and on personal websites of professors. So, if you are interested in working in a specific field or with a specific person, regularly check department pages, Twitter/X profiles, and personal websites, because everything is often posted there too.

Lastly, even though it is becoming a very formal process, another way I have always approached finding research assistant jobs—especially when I was a student looking for some financial independence—was simply by reaching out to my professors or professors I had heard (even through rumours) were looking for an assistant. You will learn that academia is always a world of networks. And this is a good thing: a good referral as an assistant will almost always lead to other opportunities. So, the best way to get started is

[2] Campus visits or open days offered by departments to admitted students, usually before they accept offers.

by doing some work, and then letting that work open new doors. Everything you do to build proof of research potential is useful for your PhD applications.

Timing is also something to keep in mind. Top universities in the United States usually start posting predoc positions in October, and the first deadlines are in December. Top universities in Europe usually start posting around January and February, with deadlines in March.

However, as I was saying, thank God in research there is always an infinite number of questions to answer. And that, in practice, means that there will always be research projects going on, people looking for help, and new brilliant RAs needed. So even if you decide late that you want to do a predoc next year, I am pretty confident there will be job postings open, or last-minute positions because someone got a grant and now has the budget to hire. You just have to be patient, apply everywhere (by applying the rule of large numbers!), and wait for the best to come.

1.4.2 How to Write Your Cover Letter

All positions will ask for a cover letter, and I will take the cover letter of my first job as an example. At that time, I did not have much research experience and I just tried to "sell" my various background experiences as useful skills for working in research in academia.

First of all, I might be a bit maniac with this, but letters have to be well typed and well formatted, without images, weird colours, or typos. So please, please, please put some effort into formatting and reading your letters many times before submitting them. Research is also a job of precision, and people do not like messy outputs, so they care about this kind of detail in any application process you go through.

Usually, a predoc cover letter should be one page long, maximum two if you have many details on previous research projects or relevant ideas that can help show your fit for the position.

I believe that a good cover letter for a predoc has a **3P structure**:

1. **Potential.** The first thing people read is your introduction, and even from that paragraph they should already get a sense of your research potential, or at least the reason why you would be a good fit for that position. If you do not have prior academic research experience, that is not a problem. Any skills or experiences that are useful for teamwork and analytical work on projects can still be valuable.

   For example, experiences outside traditional coursework—like policy work, leadership in student organisations, or analytical writing—can also show strong potential for research. What matters is your ability to demonstrate curiosity, initiative, and your motivation to engage with research questions that go beyond the classroom. Framing your previous work in terms of what it taught you about working with data, evaluating evidence, or contributing to a broader academic or policy discussion can be a powerful way to stand out.

2. **Profile.** This is the main body of the letter and should explain your academic background and what skills you have developed during your studies that are useful for this position. Mention:

- Specific coursework and exams
- Coding skills learned alongside theoretical knowledge
- Projects you have carried out (dissertations, essays, etc.)

Always try to provide quantitative KPIs [3]—your grades, your statistics, where you were in the distribution of your class, and any feedback you received.

Of course, I should assume the reader is expecting a perfect student with perfect statistics, but that was not my case, and this section can also be a good place to explain pitfalls in your transcript and why you were not always able to perform at your best. But always do it in a positive light.

For example: if you were a student during the pandemic and lockdowns were a difficult personal moment, you can explain how that affected your performance, but also how you bounced back—and how the experience taught you resilience in hard times.

3. **Pitch.** Application processes are always about "pitching" and "selling" yourself in the best way possible. I always recommend ending your letter with a few strong reasons why you believe you are a good candidate for the role.

   These skills can vary a lot depending on your background, but they should include:

   - Academic and quantitative skills
   - Practical experience (coding, applying theory in real-world projects)
   - Soft skills

   Yes, I will repeat this a lot in this document, but one of my supervisors once gave me the best advice: *"In these contexts, people are looking first for a nice colleague. So just be yourself—and be nice."*

   Soft skills in academia matter so much. That was also something I really considered during my PhD decision process. Research is a very slow process, and although it can be a flexible job (meaning you can sometimes better manage your work-life balance), it also means there are no real working hours. You often spend a lot of time with the same people. That is why people want to be surrounded by nice people, especially in small environments where you work together for long periods.

   So remember to mention any experience that shows you are good at teamwork and people management. You can develop these skills while:

   - Working on group projects at university
   - Playing sports
   - Working in jobs outside academia (including hospitality or customer-facing roles)

   Academia involves people of all ages and backgrounds. You will interact with students, senior professors, colleagues, and not everyone is having a good day every day (yourself included). So being emotionally intelligent and collaborative is 50% of the job—first as a research assistant, and later, as a researcher or professor.

[3] Key Performance Indicators (like grades, class rank, test scores).

Finally, do not forget to write your availability in the cover letter—when you could start (as soon as possible, or later, depending on personal or academic constraints like exam sessions or graduation). If they really want you and there is no urgent need, people are often happy to accommodate your timeline. Just speak up!

Which Skills to Show

In practice, just because I can be very long when giving advice, here is what I suggest in terms of which skills to highlight when applying for a predoc. My perspective comes from working with microdata in applied projects, but this advice can apply broadly. It is always a good idea to reach out to people who have worked in the position before you to understand what specific skills were most useful and what hiring committees tend to look for.

1. **Theoretical foundations for empirical research**
   Make sure to highlight coursework that is relevant to empirical research. This can include microeconomics, macroeconomics, econometrics, statistics, mathematics for economics, causal inference, and research design. Demonstrating a solid grasp of theory, especially as it relates to empirical applications, is often key to showing your potential as a research assistant.

2. **Coding and data skills**
   Strong coding and data handling skills are essential in most predoc roles. Proficiency in STATA, R, Python, or MATLAB is highly valued, especially if you can work with large datasets, clean and organise raw data, implement quasi-experimental methods, or prepare tables and figures for research outputs. Familiarity with Excel, Tableau, or other tools for visualising or summarising data can also be a plus.

3. **Literature review and analytical writing skills**
   Most research assistant positions require helping with literature reviews, so the ability to read academic papers critically and summarise them clearly is important. This includes understanding research questions, identifying identification strategies, and linking papers to broader research themes. Writing skills, especially the ability to draft short memos or structured summaries, can also make a big difference.

4. **Soft skills and project management**
   Being able to manage your time, work independently, and take initiative is essential. Most research projects move slowly and require patience, but they also demand consistency and communication. Being reliable, organised, and able to collaborate with a team are qualities that are always appreciated. If you have worked in teams, managed deadlines, or contributed to long-term projects, those experiences are definitely worth mentioning.

1.4.3 Coding Task

Many people have asked me how to prepare for a coding task. To be fair, it varies from case to case. Sometimes they may ask you to replicate a paper without providing precise instructions, or they may give you a specific set of exercises to complete.

In general, coding tasks can vary by type:

- Replication of a paper
- Practical exercises

They can also differ by timing:

- You have a long time to complete it (several days or weeks)
- You are given only a few hours

I approached my first task with some prior coding experience, but I did not train specifically for it, and it worked out. The advice I received at the time was:

- **If it is a replication of a paper and you have more time:** Aim for precision and completeness. If the results are not exactly the same as the original paper, try to explain why. Always include economic reasoning and logic behind each decision you make. Your goal should be to finish everything with clarity and care.
- **If it is an exercise with limited time:** Do not stress about finishing everything. Focus on delivering a clean, well-structured output. Even partial results can be impressive if they are clear, correct, and show your understanding of the task.

Of course, there is no universal rule of thumb, but these are some criteria that can help you better navigate this part of job applications. In the end, by doing several of them, you will train yourself and learn how to approach them more effectively.

Personally, I always delivered my results in LaTeX in a professional format, as if I were already working as a research assistant. I tried to be precise and explained every step I took during the process. This habit helped me demonstrate both my technical skills and my attention to detail. Table 1.4.3 summarises what has been discussed so far.

Interview

To be fair, there is no strict rule of thumb when it comes to predoc interviews. However, they remain a critical part of the selection process, both because people want a colleague they can work with and because they want to verify that you are the same person they imagined based on your application.

I did many—really, many—interviews, and they varied a lot in both timing and types of questions. I had easy but long interviews, difficult short ones, and even multiple rounds with different members of the team. So no fixed structure exists. But after a while, I started writing down all the questions I received, both to help myself and to share with others who were preparing. Eventually, the questions started becoming quite similar across different positions.

Here is a list of the most common questions I encountered, divided by type:

Task Type	Long Deadline (Several Days/Weeks)	Short Deadline (Few Hours)
Replication of a Paper	• Aim for precision and completeness. • Try to match original results. • If not exact, explain discrepancies with economic reasoning. • Show clean, reproducible code.	• Focus on core results if time is limited. • Prioritise clarity and logic. • Document steps and explain any assumptions.
Exercise (e.g., data cleaning, analysis)	• Deliver well-commented, efficient code. • Try to complete all tasks. • Demonstrate understanding of methods.	• Do not worry about finishing everything. • Provide accurate and clean partial output. • Focus on clarity and correct logic.

Table 1: Approach to coding tasks based on type and timing

1.4.4 Motivational Questions

1. *Why this position?*
   If the role is in a research centre, highlight your desire to learn from peer collaboration and be inspired by other people's work.

2. *What would you like to do after this position?*
   The "right" answer in most cases is: pursue a PhD (even if you are still unsure about it).

3. *Why do you think you would be a great fit for this role?*
   Emphasise both your technical background and your ability to contribute to the team environment.

1.4.5 Technical Questions – If You Submitted a Paper

1. *What is the main contribution of your paper?*

2. *What is the main takeaway of your paper?*

3. *What are the main limitations of your paper?*
   You can focus on:
   - Model assumptions
   - Causality (and identification strategy)
   - Unobserved confounders

4. *How would you expand the paper? What are the next steps?*

1.4.6 Technical Questions – RA Tasks

1. *How do you approach a data cleaning task?*
   Mention the importance of reviewing the data documentation carefully and, if working with survey data from multiple countries, highlight how you would harmonise variables.

2. *What kind of data have you worked on in the past?*

3. *How do you usually handle missing data?*

4. *What was the most challenging experience you had as a research assistant, and how did you deal with it?*

5. *What do you think is the most difficult part of working as an RA?*

6. *How would you structure a research project on a general topic?*
   For example: "What would be your approach to studying the effect of minimum wages on the quality of employment contracts?"

These questions are general, but your answers should reflect your actual experience. I will not lie: I studied quite a lot before each interview, reading the main takeaways from the professor's research, reviewing basic models and econometrics assumptions, and preparing examples.

Honestly, I have also been on the other side, as an interviewer, and it is really easy to tell when someone is prepared versus when they are just improvising. So, read a couple of the professor's papers before the interview, review your own materials, and make sure you feel comfortable and confident about what you are saying.

2. Applying to PhDs in Economics

2.1. Set a Timeline

As soon as you decide to pursue a PhD in Economics, it is a good idea to start thinking about your application and its various components. However, there is no need to rush. There will be a few intense months during which filling out application portals and preparing materials will become your main focus. Figure 1 shows an overview of the typical application timeline, from September to January or February.

Roughly speaking, you should aim to have your standardised test scores (such as the GRE and TOEFL) ready by the time of the earliest deadlines, which are usually in early December. Ideally, you should sit for these tests by October or early November to ensure you receive your official scores in time.

I started writing my statement of purpose in October, right after taking the GRE for the final time. I asked for feedback and revisions multiple times and ultimately wrote about four drafts.

Setting aside GRE preparation, the main application period typically runs from October to January. During this time, you will finalise your materials and complete the application portals. The earliest deadlines—mostly for US universities—are at the beginning of December, while the latest fall in late January or early February.

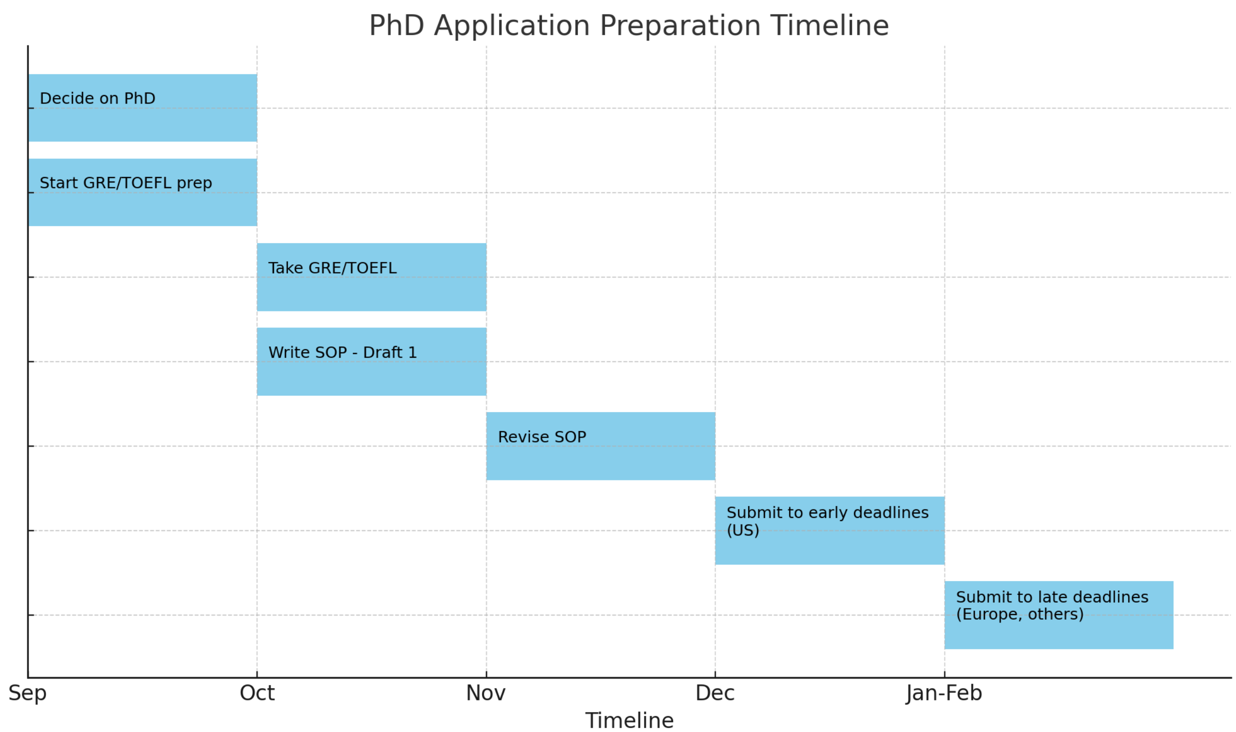

Figure 1: PhD Application Preparation Timeline

2.2. Set Your List of Universities

Once you decide to apply for a PhD, one of the most important steps is setting a realistic and thoughtful list of universities. This is not just about prestige. It is about where you will actually be happy spending the next five years of your life or more. You should only apply to places where, if admitted, you would seriously consider going. Geographic preferences matter. Personal well-being matters. These factors are just as important, if not more, than rankings or name recognition.

There are three main constraints I suggest keeping in mind when selecting schools:

- **Rule of large numbers:** The PhD application process is unpredictable. Even if you are a great candidate, many outcomes depend on timing, committee preferences, and luck. Apply widely. A broad strategy increases your chances of getting an offer.

- **Economic constraints:** Applications are expensive. Between standardised test fees, transcript orders, and application fees, especially for US schools, the total cost adds up quickly. Be realistic about your budget, but also consider investing a bit more if it increases your chances of getting funded.

- **Time constraints:** Each application takes time. You will have to tailor your statement of purpose, upload documents, follow different formatting rules, and sometimes complete school-specific questions. Make sure you can realistically complete and submit all of them with care.

There is no magic number of schools to apply to, but I would say a good benchmark is at least fifteen, especially if this is your first time applying. Include a mix of schools where you are a strong fit, some that are more competitive, and others that are safer options.

Personally, I applied to many more than fifteen, probably too many. I was very motivated to get an offer that year. If you are open to applying in future years, you might choose to be more selective. It depends on your own situation, your goals, and how flexible you are with timing.

At the end of the day, the most important thing is that you feel excited about the places on your list. This process is hard enough, so you want to make sure that if an offer comes, it is from a place where you would be happy to go.

Letter Writers

Letters of recommendation can make a real difference in your application. What matters most is what your letter writers can genuinely say about you: their specific insights into your research potential, academic strengths, and overall fit for a PhD. A strong, detailed letter from someone who knows you well is more valuable than a vague or generic one, even from a well-known name.

That said, prestige does matter, especially when all else is equal. A letter from a respected scholar at a well-known institution can carry additional weight, particularly if admissions committees recognize the name or have confidence in the recommender's judgment. Ideally, your letters will come from individuals who both know you well and have standing in the field.

You should aim to secure at least three letter writers before starting the application process. This is the number required by most PhD programmes. The ideal combination includes:

- At least one person who has worked with you on research and can describe your ability to do original research and your potential as a future academic.

- One professor who has taught you and can speak to your intellectual maturity and engagement with economic ideas, ideally in the context of research or advanced coursework.

Ask your letter writers early, ideally several weeks before deadlines, to give them enough time to write a thoughtful letter. Once applications open, create your portal accounts and add your recommenders promptly. This gives them access to the system and avoids last-minute pressure.

If you have more than three potential letter writers and the portal allows a maximum of three, choose strategically. Prioritise relationships where the letter writer can say something meaningful and relevant to your field or to the specific school. This might include someone who has co-authored with faculty there, who shares research interests with the department, or who is an alumnus of the programme.

How to Help Your Letter Writers Help You

Professors are busy, and writing strong letters takes time and context. Make it easier for them by providing:

- Your updated CV
- Your transcript
- A short summary of your research experience and academic interests
- A list of schools you are applying to, and any relevant information about those programmes

If there is anything specific you would like them to mention (such as a low grade that needs context, your interest in a particular research area, or even a personal circumstance), explain it politely and clearly. Professors were once applicants too. They understand how much these details matter, and they will usually appreciate your honesty and clarity.

Important: Letters of recommendation are confidential. In the US, you are typically asked to waive your right to view the letter. Always waive it, and never ask a professor to let you read their letter. This process is based on trust and confidentiality, and admissions committees expect that letters are written freely and honestly.

Finally, do not underestimate how much a clear and well-organised request can help your letter writers. Some professors appreciate a short bullet-point list of your achievements, goals, and anything else you would like them to touch on. The more you support them with relevant information, the easier it is for them to write something that truly supports your application.

Writing the Statement of Purpose

The first time I sat in front of my laptop to write my statement of purpose, I had to force myself. The page remained blank for a long time. It was not because I had nothing to say, but because I did not know how to say it.

I asked people who had gone through the process before me to share their statements, and I quickly realised that everyone used different styles and formats. The main reason is simple: everyone is different, and an effective statement of purpose is a clear representation of who you are as a student, as a researcher, and as a person.

General Structure (If You're Stuck)

There is no fixed formula for writing a statement of purpose. Some of the most compelling and memorable statements break conventions entirely. That said, if you are completely lost and need a starting point, here is one possible structure that you could use. This is just a scaffold; adapt it freely, or ignore it entirely if you already have a clearer vision. A personal statement is, after all, personal.

1. **Introduction:** A short paragraph explaining who you are and the programme you are applying to.
2. **Main Body:**
   - Your academic background
   - Your research experience
   - Your research agenda or interests
3. **Conclusion:**
   - Why do you want to do a PhD (for example, to pursue a career in academia or policy research)
   - Tailor this part to each department if possible, mentioning why you are applying there and which faculty members you would be interested in working with

Ultimately, your statement should reflect your motivations, your intellectual path, and your potential as a researcher. Let your voice and reasoning come through clearly, and do not be afraid to take a different approach if that suits you better.

How Much Should You Tailor Each SOP?

There is no definitive answer. Some people say it does not matter, but personally, I think it can make a difference, especially in cases where I was truly interested in the work of specific faculty members. When I was able to make specific and meaningful references to their research, it often strengthened my application.

In any case, the first version of your statement of purpose should be a general one, around 1000 words, which you can then adapt for each university. Word limits typically range from 500 to 1500 words, so it is essential to start early to have enough time to refine each version.

Send it to your letter writers and peers for feedback. Make sure it is compelling and conveys clearly why you are a strong and unique candidate in that application round.

Clarifying Your File

The statement of purpose is also your chance to clarify parts of your application file. For example:

- If you did not perform well in a course, explain why, but always with a positive perspective.
- If you took a different course than the standard one, explain what you learned from it and why it was valuable.
- If your academic background is different from the typical one, describe why you chose it and how it prepared you for a PhD in Economics.

What matters is what you know and what you can do, not the label of your degree. However, admissions committees are not familiar with every educational system, so take the time to explain. Be clear, be positive, and consider using footnotes to clarify grading scales and your position within the class. If possible, ask your university to provide percentile rankings or class distributions to help readers understand your academic performance.

How Specific Should You Be About Research Interests?

Many people ask how specific the SOP should be when it comes to research interests. I received mixed advice on this. Some told me to stay general, others to be precise.

In my case, I had some specific research ideas, but I made it clear that the main reason I wanted to pursue a PhD was to learn more and expand my horizons. I showed that I was open to change and that I understood how research interests evolve over time.

What mattered was showing research potential. I included a plausible research agenda not because I was committed to it forever, but because it showed that I was curious, thoughtful, and ready to engage with big questions. In any case, a statement of purpose is not a lifelong commitment, and once you are in the programme, I truly believe most people forget about it. In the meantime, present yourself well and find a way to stand out from the crowd.

The CV

I had doubts even about drafting my CV for applications, since a research CV is quite different from one used for corporate jobs. The focus shifts completely. You need to prioritise research experience, academic training, and anything that shows your potential as a researcher. Be synthetic, but make sure to provide meaningful details on each project, especially your role and the skills or tools you used.

Based on how I structured mine, here are a few pieces of advice:

- **Start with Education:** Include all your degrees in reverse chronological order. Mention your final grade (if relevant), specialisations, and a few key courses, especially if they are quantitative or directly relevant to your research interests.

- **Highlight Research Experience Early:** This section should come before industry or non-research work experience. List every research assistant position or predoc, your supervisors, project titles, and what you contributed to the work. Be specific: mention if you worked with microdata, ran regressions, wrote literature reviews, or helped publish results.

- **Include Research Output:** If you have a master's or bachelor's thesis, working papers, conference presentations, or journal articles (even if forthcoming), include them under a dedicated section. Describe your contribution clearly.

- **Add Relevant Advanced Coursework:** If you audited or took PhD courses (like real analysis, public economics, or labor economics), list them clearly. It helps show that you are already familiar with the level of rigor expected in a PhD.

- **Private Sector Experiences:** You can include consulting or finance experience, especially if you gained analytical skills there, but put it in a separate section. The priority should always be on academic readiness.

- **Conferences and Public Engagement:** If you presented at a conference, participated in workshops, or helped organise events related to economics or public policy, include those. It shows initiative and professional engagement.

- **Keep It to 1–2 Pages:** Be concise. A PhD CV is not the place for long descriptions. Just enough detail to show the value of your experiences.

- **Technical Skills and Languages:** Include coding languages, software (like Stata, R, or Python), and languages you speak. These are especially relevant if your PhD research will rely on empirical work.

- **Optional: Add a Link to Your Website or Google Scholar Page:** If you have one, this is a good place to include it.

In the end, your CV should be clear, clean, and tailored to what a PhD committee is looking for: proof that you are ready to do research, already engaged in the field, and have the foundation to succeed in a rigorous academic environment.

The Personal / Diversity Statement

Some PhD applications, mainly in the United States, ask for both a statement of purpose and a diversity statement. These two essays serve different purposes. The statement of purpose focuses on your academic background, research experience, and future goals. It explains why you want to pursue a PhD, what research topics interest you, and why a specific programme fits your academic trajectory.

The diversity statement, on the other hand, is more personal. It invites you to reflect on your identity, background, and lived experiences that have shaped your perspective, especially in the context of diversity, inclusion, and equity. It is less about your research and more about who you are as a person and how you might contribute to the academic community in a broader sense.

This diversity essay is usually short, with a 500-word limit, and sometimes even less. It is not used to exclude anyone, and it does not need to follow a specific format. Instead, it is a chance to present yourself as a person, not just as a student or researcher.

Writing a diversity statement can feel daunting, especially if you do not see yourself as part of a traditionally underrepresented group. But this is a common misconception. The idea is not to compete in hardship or compare identities. Everyone has a story shaped by family, culture, community, education, or privilege. What matters is your ability to reflect on your experiences and show how they have influenced your path and your perspective.

Even if you have not personally faced systemic barriers, you can still write a meaningful statement. For example, one applicant who identified as a white, heterosexual male wrote about how he recognised the importance of diversity in academic spaces, and how he aimed to be respectful, supportive, and aware of the challenges faced by others. This honest and thoughtful reflection was well received. The key is to show empathy, awareness, and a commitment to fostering inclusive environments.

You can include volunteer work, personal anecdotes, or pivotal moments in your life. If possible, connect these to your research goals or the broader field you are entering. For example, maybe your interest in public policy grew from seeing social inequality up close, or maybe your experience as a tutor or community organiser helped you realise the importance of inclusion in education.

If you feel stuck, ask yourself questions like:

- *What are you the first to do in your family or community?*
- *When did your privilege result in different treatment from others?*
- *Have you ever uncovered a bias in yourself, and what did you do about it?*
- *Have you seen bias or exclusion in school, work, or everyday life, and how did you respond?*

The goal is not to write something dramatic, but to be honest and reflective. Show how your lived experience has helped shape your values and how it may inform your future as a researcher, a colleague, and a contributor to academic and public discourse. It is also a space to show your potential to create inclusive environments and work across differences, skills that matter in academia and beyond.

Prepare Coursework Documents

Some schools, especially in the United States, will ask for detailed information about the advanced coursework you have completed in subjects like mathematics, statistics, econometrics, and economics. This often comes in the form of a separate section on the application portal or a required course sheet that lists each course along with the title, grade, textbook used, and a brief description of the topics covered.

If you are still in school or have recently graduated, this might be easy to gather. But if you finished your degree a few years ago, tracking down these details can be more difficult, especially remembering which textbook was used or the exact topics covered in a course.

That is why it is a good idea to prepare this document in advance, even before opening the applications.

Also keep in mind that filling in this information takes time. It is often one of the most tedious parts of the portal, especially if you are applying to many schools. Some platforms will ask you to input each course manually, including whether it was undergraduate or graduate level. Having a well-organised list ready will save you a lot of stress during the application rush.

My advice: Go through your transcript and syllabi ahead of time and build a spreadsheet or a simple document where you note:

- Course name and level, undergrad or grad
- Final grade, and grading scale if not standard
- Textbook and authors
- Key topics or concepts covered
- Institution and year taken

Some schools might allow or request that you upload this document directly, while others will require you to copy the content into their portal. Either way, being ready will help you complete the applications more efficiently and show that you are organised and academically prepared.

The Writing Sample

The writing sample is one of the most important parts of your application. It is your best tool to demonstrate research potential and show the committee that you are capable of thinking, writing, and working independently on an academic project.

The writing sample must be a solo-authored piece of research. Ideally, this would be your undergraduate or master's dissertation, but it could also be a strong university essay, term paper, or any original piece of work that reflects your ability to engage with research questions in a rigorous way.

While it does not need to be methodologically advanced or feature perfect causal identification, it should clearly relate to your field and demonstrate solid reasoning and engagement with economic questions. If your paper has methodological limitations, such as a simple empirical strategy or concerns around causality, it is important to acknowledge them and show that you understand the issue. Providing a thoughtful discussion of potential weaknesses and how you might address them in future work can strengthen your application. You should avoid giving the impression that you have overlooked a key problem.

It is not necessary for your writing sample to fall squarely within your proposed research interests, but it should reflect the kind of work you want to do or the skills you wish to build.

Length and Adaptation

Different universities ask for different lengths, so be prepared to adapt your sample accordingly. My advice is to prepare three versions of your writing sample in advance:

- **Full version:** Around 25 to 30 pages. This can be your complete dissertation or most developed research paper. You can include appendices, robustness checks, and extended discussions in this version.
- **Mid-length version:** Around 10 pages. This should include the introduction, methodology, main findings, and a brief discussion. You can trim data sections, literature review, or supplementary material to fit the page limit.
- **Short version:** Around 2 to 3 pages. This should be a very well-written introduction that includes the motivation for the project, a clear statement of the research question, your contribution, and a brief preview of your findings. This version is useful for departments that request short samples or for application portals with limited space.

Final Advice

Do not worry if your writing sample is not publishable or lacks a fully developed identification strategy. Admissions committees understand that most applicants are submitting student-level work, not peer-reviewed articles. What matters most is that you demonstrate strong motivation, original thinking, a clear understanding of economic reasoning, and intellectual maturity.

Be sure to proofread the document carefully. Structure your writing clearly, and include tables, figures, or appendices only if they add real value. If you are using non-standard datasets or referencing specific institutional contexts, ensure your writing is self-contained and understandable to an international audience.

This is one of the few parts of the application where your voice and ideas can stand out. If a faculty member reads your writing sample and sees potential, that can make a real difference.

Research Proposal

Some universities in Europe require a research proposal as part of the application, especially for PhD programmes that are research-intensive from the beginning and less focused on coursework[4]. In these cases, the research proposal becomes a very important part of your application, and sometimes you are expected to address it directly to a potential supervisor. The typical length is between 1,500 and 2,000 words, though some schools may have specific formats or page limits.

My advice: Take the research proposal seriously since it can be a key element in the selection process, especially for programmes where faculty members choose students to supervise based on alignment with their interests.

If you are asked to submit a proposal, here is a general structure that I followed and found helpful:

1. **Title and Abstract:** Start with a clear title and a short abstract (around 200 words) that outlines the motivation, main questions, methodology, and contribution of your project.

[4] Structured classes usually taken in the first 1–2 years of US-based PhD programmes.

2. **Introduction and Motivation:** Briefly explain the problem you want to study. *Why does it matter? What are the real-world or academic implications?* Try to relate it to ongoing policy debates or gaps in the literature.

3. **Literature Review:** Identify key papers and theories relevant to your research question. This section should show that you are familiar with the field and aware of how your work would fit in. You do not need to cite everything, but focus on the most influential and recent work.

4. **Research Questions and Contribution:** State your main research questions clearly. Highlight what is new or original in your approach, especially if you are extending an existing model or dataset. Explain why your work matters and how it adds value to the literature.

5. **Theoretical Framework or Conceptual Model:** If relevant, briefly describe the models or economic frameworks you are using. In your case, for example, the non-cooperative household bargaining models and the "separate spheres" theory framed your analysis nicely.

6. **Data and Methodology:** Explain the dataset(s) you plan to use, how you will construct your variables, and the empirical strategy. For example, you described the use of time-use surveys and a pseudo-event study method. Be specific, but avoid unnecessary technical detail.

7. **Preliminary Results (if any):** If you have already conducted some analysis, summarise your key findings. Even if they are exploratory, they help show feasibility and your research potential.

8. **Limitations and Next Steps:** Be honest about the limits of your current data or methods and outline how you plan to address them. Show that you are thinking critically and realistically about what the project will involve over time.

9. **Bibliography:** Include full references to all the papers and sources you cited, in a consistent format.

Finally, tailor the proposal to the institution when required. If the school expects you to name a potential supervisor, make sure your topic connects clearly with their research and explain why they would be a good fit. You do not need to propose something groundbreaking or perfectly identified, especially at this stage, but your ideas should be clear, well motivated, and intellectually serious. Be bold in your thinking but humble in your assumptions. Most importantly, use the proposal to show how you think as a researcher.

Organise Everything in Folders

After preparing all these materials, I organised everything in clearly labeled folders in my Dropbox. This helped me stay calm and efficient during the application period. Having a systematic folder structure made it easier to find the right version of each document quickly, fill out application portals accurately, and avoid simple but costly mistakes like uploading the wrong SOP or using the wrong school name.

I had one main folder titled `PhD Applications`, and within that, I created subfolders for each key component: CVs, personal and diversity statements, SOP drafts, research proposals, GRE and TOEFL materials, writing samples, portal questions, interview preparation, and offer letters. I also had dedicated Word or Excel files to track deadlines and school-specific notes.

Each folder had its purpose, and I kept track of every version of my statement of purpose or writing sample that was tailored to a specific programme. I also stored feedback from my mentors and final PDFs for upload. When it came time to submit applications, everything was one click away and easy to cross-reference.

My advice: treat the application like a long-term project. You will be juggling dozens of documents across months, and staying organised will save you from stress and mistakes. Use folders, clear file names, and back everything up.

Take Time to Fill Out the Portals and Answer All the Questions

Filling out the application portals is not a quick task. Each school has its own system, and many ask for slightly different materials and questions. My advice is to open each portal at least two weeks before the deadline. This gives you time to familiarise yourself with the platform, check exactly what is required, and make sure you have all your documents ready.

It also gives you time to generate the recommendation letter requests. Once you add your letter writers, they receive a link to upload their letters. The earlier you do this, the more time you give them to upload everything on time without last-minute pressure.

Keep Track of Portal Questions

Many portals ask for extra short-answer questions in addition to your statement of purpose and CV. These questions often cover similar topics, such as your motivation for pursuing a PhD, your past research experience, or your long-term goals. This is especially common in US applications.

Start collecting your answers to these questions as you go. You will notice that your answers become more polished and easier to reuse across applications. Since you are the same person applying to all these schools, a lot of the content overlaps. Reusing and adapting previous responses will save you time and help keep your answers consistent.

2.2.1 Prepare for School-Specific Materials

Some universities will ask for extra or unique materials. For example, I had to record a video explaining why I wanted to pursue a PhD for one application. Others might ask for short essays on teaching experience or departmental fit.

If you know this in advance, you can plan your time better and make sure you produce high-quality materials. The last thing you want is to find out about an extra requirement the night before the deadline.

Final tip: Treat each portal as its own mini project. Keep a spreadsheet or checklist with what each school requires and when. This will help you stay on top of deadlines and avoid missing any components.

Ask for Feedback and Advice from Faculty and PhD Students

One of the best things you can do throughout the PhD application process is to ask for feedback and advice. Reach out to people who have already gone through the process such as PhD students, postdocs, or even junior faculty. Many of them are happy to share their experience, review your materials, or simply help you navigate questions about specific programmes.

If you are working with professors or research supervisors, they can often give you valuable feedback on your statement of purpose or research proposal. They might even help you understand which schools are a better fit for your background and interests.

Be Respectful When Reaching Out

Be careful when reaching out to professors before applying, especially in the US. Some faculty members do not want to be contacted before decisions are made, and they might not respond to unsolicited emails from applicants. Respect these boundaries and do not take it personally if you do not hear back. If a department clearly states on its website that you should not contact faculty, follow that guidance.

In Some Cases, Contact is Expected

In contrast, some departments, especially in Europe, expect applicants to contact potential supervisors in advance. This is especially true if the application requires you to name a faculty member you would like to work with. In these cases, it is not only acceptable but important to reach out, explain your interest, and ask whether they would be open to supervising your project if you are admitted.

My advice: Ask people who have successfully applied to the same programmes about their experience. They often know the culture of the department and whether contact is encouraged. Reaching out in the right way, at the right time, can make a positive impression, especially if you have a genuine reason to connect and are respectful of their time.

PhD Interviews

Some PhD programmes in business schools and some universities in Europe include interviews as part of the application process. These interviews are often a critical component of the final decision and are especially important in smaller programmes that admit only a few students per year. When I was first invited to one, I panicked. There was very little information online about what to expect, and I felt unprepared.

A colleague and friend gave me a piece of advice that stuck with me and turned out to be completely true: *"They are not just looking for a good student. They are looking for a nice person. And you are nice. So just be yourself."* After receiving the offer, I asked for feedback, and they confirmed that the interview helped them see me as both a capable and collegial future researcher. These programmes are often very small, with close interactions between students and faculty, so personality and fit matter just as much as academic credentials.

What to Expect

Below are some example questions I was asked or prepared for. They are not technical but rather focused on understanding your background, motivation, mindset, and fit for the programme.

General and Background

- *Tell me about yourself.*
- *Tell me about your research.*
- *Why do you want to pursue a PhD? What do you hope to achieve with it?*
- *Why this programme? What specifically drew you to apply here?*

Problem-Solving and Strengths

- *How do you handle obstacles? What would you do if you encountered a major challenge during your PhD?*
- *What are your strengths and weaknesses?*
- *Describe a conflict you have experienced and how you resolved it.*

Academic and Program-Specific

- *Which class have you enjoyed the most and why?*
- *What aspects of your research excite you the most?*

Tips to Prepare

Honestly, by the time you reach the interview, you have already spent months thinking deeply about your research ideas, motivations, and background. So most of the preparation is already done. Still, here are a few tips I found useful:

- **Know your writing sample well:** Be ready to discuss it clearly and in depth. Expect questions about your motivation, methods, limitations, and next steps.
- **Be ready to defend your research proposal:** If you submitted a research proposal as part of your application, make sure you can present it clearly, explain why you chose the topic, and respond to detailed questions about your methodology, data, and potential limitations. Be prepared to expand on your ideas and think aloud through extensions or adjustments. It is a good sign if they ask questions since they are trying to imagine working with you.

- **Be specific:** Avoid general answers. Use concrete examples from your experience and your academic work.
- **Balance academic and personal motivation:** Speak with purpose. Show that you are intellectually curious but also personally committed.
- **Be yourself:** The most consistent advice I got, and now give, is to be genuine. These programmes want to admit someone they would enjoy working with for five years or more. Being transparent and kind matters.

Bonus tip: Prepare a few questions to ask them. You can ask about their research, how the programme is structured, what kind of funding or collaboration opportunities exist, or how they foster community in the department. Interviews are a two-way process, and good questions can show that you are thoughtful and well-prepared.

Submit All the Applications and Wait for Answers

Once you have submitted all your applications, the waiting begins. Most universities will start reaching out between February and March, but timelines vary widely. Do not panic if you do not hear anything for a while, it does not necessarily mean a rejection. The review process takes time, and departments operate on different schedules.

To be honest, by the time you finish submitting everything, you will likely feel exhausted. That is completely normal. My advice is simple: take a break. The best way to handle the waiting period is to let go of the process for a while. You have done your part. Now it is time to relax, recharge, and shift your focus to something else. You deserve it after months of hard work.

3. Applying to External Scholarships

In the European context, it is still possible to receive a PhD offer without guaranteed departmental funding. This situation is important to consider, especially if you have strict personal or geographic preferences and are applying to programmes where funding is competitive or not automatically included. Not only can it be financially unfeasible to pay PhD tuition and living expenses out of pocket, but in some cases, universities do not allow students to begin their PhD unless they have confirmed external funding.

For this reason, applying to external scholarships is a key part of the application process for many candidates. There are a number of public and private institutions that provide funding for doctoral studies. Some are specific to certain countries, fields, or universities, while others are open to international applicants across disciplines.

My advice is to research these opportunities early. Some scholarships have deadlines that are even earlier than university application deadlines, or that run on different timelines. Make a list of all the scholarships you are eligible for based on your nationality, research topic, and destination country. Start collecting the necessary documents and prepare each application with the same care you would give to a university application.

When applying, remember to indicate clearly on the university's application portal that you are applying for external funding. Some departments consider this during the selection process and may offer conditional admission that depends on securing that funding. In other cases, being able to secure an external scholarship might increase your chances of receiving an offer at all, or allow a programme to accept one more student.

In practical terms, getting external funding can also improve your quality of life during your PhD. It can provide more financial stability, additional travel or research allowances, or flexibility in choosing supervisors and projects.

If you are considering or expecting an unfunded offer, or if you are applying to highly competitive programmes, having a list of external scholarships ready can give you a backup plan and open doors that might otherwise be closed. Like everything in this process, preparation and timing make a huge difference.

4. The Decision

There is no real advice anyone can give you about making the final decision, because in the end it is your decision. I spent eight months thinking about what I wanted in life, trying to prepare myself for this exact moment. I imagined that once the offers came in, everything would fall into place. But the truth is, when the decisions arrived, everything was unpredictable and nothing happened the way I expected. I had to start over and completely re-evaluate my plans and priorities.

This is one of the hardest parts of the PhD application process. It is a black box, and until you receive an actual offer letter, you cannot predict how things will turn out. That is why, when you apply, you need to remain open. You may start the process with clear preferences, but be ready for those preferences to shift once outcomes start arriving.

Apart from a few clear exceptions, there is no universal best department. There is only the best department for you. This is a programme you will likely commit to for five or more years during a very formative part of your life. You need to feel satisfied with your choice and motivated to work hard, because this is just the beginning of your career.

One of my mentors encouraged me to get out of my comfort zone and visit every programme I was seriously considering, even if it was not one of my top choices at first. I followed that advice and traveled between two continents in three weeks. It was exhausting, but it was also incredibly helpful. The visit days were pivotal. They completely shifted my preferences in ways I did not expect. Being on campus, meeting people, attending talks, and feeling the atmosphere of each place helped me realise where I could truly see myself. I will always be grateful to that person, because sometimes we create boundaries for ourselves without even knowing what is outside waiting for us.

No one can make this decision for you. You are the one who will move to a new city or country, often without any personal connections, and start building a life from scratch. There is no right choice. There is only the choice that makes the most sense for you as a person.

I cannot imagine doing good research without being happy where I live. Since work occupies 80 percent of my week, I care deeply about spending the remaining 20 percent in a place where I feel fulfilled, connected, and surrounded by like-minded people. In the end, you will not know whether your decision was the right one until you experience it. So take your time, reflect deeply, and make a decision that feels honest and true to you.

5. Conclusion

I will close this guide by returning to the premise that shaped every section. Every person is different, with their own journey, strengths, and challenges. What I have shared here is simply what worked for me this year. It is not a universal formula but a personal reflection meant to guide and encourage others navigating this uncertain and often overwhelming process.

If there is one thing I truly believe, it is this. Your application must tell a compelling story about your potential and about who you are, not just as a student but as a person. That is what makes your file stand out. Find the version of that story that feels honest, strong, and true to you, and build your application around it.

This field is extremely competitive, and the truth is that much of it is beyond your control. About 40 percent depends on your preparation and effort. The other 60 percent depends on timing, fit, luck, and the people reading your file. Knowing this early on can help you approach the process with less self-doubt and more balance.

If you do not get in this year, maybe next year will be your time. Or maybe you will take a step back and revisit your motivation, and that is perfectly valid too. If that happens, go back to section one. Reflect. Recalibrate. Keep growing.

Above all, never compare yourself to others. This is your path. Stay grounded, stay kind to yourself, and trust that the right programme, the one that fits you, is out there. It might not be what you expected, but it will be a place where you can grow and thrive.

During the application season, it may feel like this process is your entire life. It will occupy nearly all your time and thoughts. But it is not everything. You are still a person outside of this. There is still a world outside of this. And your value does not depend on a single outcome.

If you stay true to yourself, reflect honestly, and put in the work, you will not only survive the PhD application season. You will stand out.

Appendix A: PhD Application Checklist

Before You Apply

- Reflect on your motivation to pursue a PhD (revisit this throughout the process).
- Explore alternative career paths and gain research-related work experience if possible.
- Decide which field(s) best match your research interests (Economics, Public Policy, etc.).

Timeline and Planning

- Create a timeline from October to January (or longer if applying across multiple countries).
- Register and prepare for GRE and TOEFL exams early.
- Set target test dates no later than early November.

Selecting Programmes

- List 15 programmes (US, EU, UK) based on fit, geography, funding, and competitiveness.
- Track deadlines, portal systems, and specific requirements in a spreadsheet.

Materials Preparation

- **Statement of Purpose:** Write a general 1000-word version, then tailor for each school.
- **Diversity Statement:** Draft a 500-word personal reflection (if applicable).
- **Curriculum Vitae:** Update and tailor to highlight research experience and technical skills.
- **Writing Sample:** Prepare 30-page, 10-page, and 2-page versions.
- **Coursework Sheet:** Prepare a summary with courses, grades, textbooks, and topics.
- **Research Proposal:** Write if required (Europe/UK), especially for funded applications.

Letters of Recommendation

- Secure 3 letter writers (ideally 1 academic, 1 research, 1 balanced).
- Share your CV, transcripts, SOP, and school list with deadlines.
- Add writers to portals at least 2 weeks before deadlines.

Application Portals

- Open portals early and review specific questions or upload fields.
- Prepare tailored answers for school-specific questions (motivation, research, fit).
- Upload clean PDFs and check for version control before submission.
- Track which SOP/CV/version was submitted where.

Additional Tasks

- Apply for external scholarships (EU/UK), where needed.
- Practice for interviews, especially for business schools or European PhDs.
- If required, prepare a research presentation or video introduction.
- Organise all materials into folders (Dropbox/Drive) for backup and easy access.

After Submitting

- Relax and take time to disconnect, waiting is part of the process.
- Prepare for possible interviews (know your writing sample, proposal, and SOP).
- Plan visit days if you receive multiple offers.
- Reflect on personal fit, not just prestige, when making your final decision.

Remember: About 40% of this process is within your control. The rest involves timing, fit, and luck. Be kind to yourself, and trust that the right match will find you.

Appendix B: Tools and Platforms

A curated list of digital tools and platforms that can support your application journey, from writing and editing, to tracking deadlines and preparing for standardised tests.

Writing and Collaboration

- **Overleaf** – `https://www.overleaf.com`
  Collaborative LaTeX editor for SOPs, proposals, and academic CVs.
- **Grammarly** – `https://www.grammarly.com`
  Grammar, clarity, and tone checker to refine documents.
- **Google Docs** – `https://docs.google.com`
  Easy for sharing drafts with peers, professors, or mentors.

Reference Management

- **Zotero** – `https://www.zotero.org`
  Organise citations, build bibliographies, and manage PDFs.
- **Mendeley** – `https://www.mendeley.com`
  Reference manager with PDF annotation tools.

GRE/TOEFL Preparation

- **ETS Official Prep** – `https://www.ets.org/gre/test-takers/general-test/prepare.html`
- **Magoosh** – `https://magoosh.com`
- **Manhattan Prep** – `https://www.manhattanprep.com/gre`

Application Tracking

- **Google Sheets or Excel** – For tracking school lists, deadlines, SOP versions.
- **Notion** – `https://www.notion.so`
  Centralise notes, application logs, timelines, and checklists.

Job & Predoc Listings

- **Predoc.org** – `https://www.predoc.org`

LaTeX & Formatting Help

- **LaTeX Templates** – `https://www.latextemplates.com`
- **CTAN** – `https://ctan.org`
  Central hub for LaTeX packages and documentation.