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

Whatever you apply for, you are likely to need:
1. **Transcript** official or unofficial. Check out the relevant university website(s) to find out how far in advance you have to order these.

2. **Letters of recommendation.** Who are *your* best letter writers? They know you well, you got a good grade in their classes. When applying for an academic program, your letter writers should be your professors, not pastors, friends, co-workers, because professors can speak about your skills in writing and analysis. (But non-academics might be good references for different types of positions). Coordinate and communicate with your letter writers. Approach them early so they have time to write a good letter. Be sure they know what it is you are applying for, and let them know what you will emphasize in each particular application.

3. **Personal statement.** This really means “professional statement”; do NOT make it too personal! It should mostly be about your current interests (research interests, for research programs) and about your future professional aspirations. You can shift your emphasis for each application, according to what each particular selection committee will be looking for. Each scholarship/fellowship web page will describe the program aims, and will list (or at least imply) their criteria for evaluation. For instance, in some cases, they care most about demonstrated community engagement. In other cases, they care about applicants’ past research experience. You can get a sense of what they are looking for if the web page includes profiles of past students – what is highlighted? Your personal statement can help the evaluation committee to understand how you fit with areas THEY want to support.

4. **C.V.** This also should be tailored to application. That doesn’t mean making things up. It does mean: think about which items belong at the top of page 1. This will vary, depending on whether you are applying for a scholarship, an internship, a research institute, etc. A C.V. for a job should look different than a C.V. for law school, and that should look different for one for grad school.

5. **Start working on all of these early.** That means *weeks* early, not hours ahead of the deadline. Write multiple drafts, put them aside, and come back a few days later with fresh eyes.

6. **Get help.** Ask professors, fellow students, other people who have jobs/positions/fellowships that are like the ones you want to get.

7. **Things that summer research scholarships or graduate school committees look for:**
   1. **Academic preparation** (good grades; appropriate courses showing a clear interest in the subject area; research preparation -- have you taken research classes or done research?)
   2. Is there a good *fit* between your aspirations and their program?
   3. **Background** that demonstrates your long-term interest in the area for which you are applying, such as activities or courses that fit with your stated aspirations.
   4. **Enthusiastic and detailed recommendation letters**, ideally from professors who are themselves active researchers. Your best letters will come from professors after you have already *completed* at least one course with them (so that they know how you did), so think ahead.