



Advice to Applicants

University of Arizona – Steward Observatory

This document was compiled by current Steward grad students. It has not been reviewed by the Admissions Committee, nor is it guaranteed to be fully comprehensive. Nevertheless, we hope to offer useful guidance on making each part of your application as strong as possible.

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Link to the Application Portal: [GradAppPortal](#)

To start your application, follow this link and create an account. If you already have a UA NetID, sign in with this. If you don't have one (or don't know what this is), make a GradApp account under Method 2. You will need to provide some personal information and select your desired program of study and start term: Astronomy and Astrophysics (PHD) Fall 2022.

After that, follow the instructions in the application. [Here](#) is a checklist for you to keep track of the required application materials, and below you will find our instructions and advice for completing each part. Good luck!

Transcripts

You will need to submit an unofficial transcript from each institution you attended from which you earned credit towards your degree(s). This means including transcripts from any institution(s) that you have transfer credit from. Once you are admitted to our graduate program, you will need to submit an official transcript with your degree(s) listed before the start of your first semester at UA. The Admissions Committee will not view negatively any coursework graded as Pass/Fail during the Spring 2020 semester.

International applicants, please include a letter from your school indicating your class rank if it is possible to do so. This allows the admissions committee to more easily evaluate your academic achievements if your GPA or grading system is different from the 4-point scale commonly used in the U.S.

The Statement of Purpose

Your statement of purpose is the part of your application that lets the admissions committee see who you are as a person and sets you apart from other applicants. It allows you to demonstrate your motivations, aspirations, and qualifications for graduate study. You can also include anything that you think the admissions committee should know about you that has not been conveyed through the other parts of your application. **You need not include everything listed here: these suggestions are just to give you ideas of what you can write about.**

Who are you?

Tell the admissions committee a bit about who you are, and why you are motivated to pursue a graduate degree in astronomy. This should be done as concisely as possible. This can include topics such as the cause of your interest in astronomy, your broad research interests and what about them excites you, and/or what your career goals are.

What technical experience do you have?

Spend some time discussing any experiences you have that would prepare you for graduate study, including research, technical jobs, projects, publications, etc. This can include how or why you got involved in the work, what skills you learned or used, what challenges you overcame, and/or any products or results and how they were shared with others. Feel free to include as many activities as you have space for. It's best if each activity demonstrates something different about you, whether that's a skill, interest, drive, etc. Write technically, the admissions committee is composed of faculty and postdocs at Steward and will understand language appropriate for a journal or conference presentation. Show off what you've done!

Note: Remember to write about what YOU did. It is great if you were part of a team project, but that information isn't useful to the admissions committee unless you detail YOUR role and why it was important. Pick the most relevant activity/activities you've done and tell the story.

If it's been a few years or more since you got your undergraduate degree, it may be a good idea to detail what you've done since then and why it's motivated and prepared you for graduate study if you haven't already.

What challenges have you faced (if any)?

If you have faced educational, familial, cultural, economic, and/or social challenges on your academic journey, you can write about them here or in the separate box at the end of the application. This can be where you demonstrate achievement despite or because of these challenges, show how overcoming these challenges demonstrates that you are ready for the further challenges of graduate school, and/or explain why another area of your application may not reflect your true strengths and abilities.

What non-academic activities have you done?

Write about any other activities you have done that demonstrate you are an active member of your community, including outreach, teaching, leadership roles, and departmental activities. You can include what motivated your participation, why the activity fits in with your motivations and career goals, and especially note if you took on a leadership role within these activities and any relevant skills that you used or developed.

Why do you want to come to the University of Arizona?

Tell the admissions committee why you are applying to this program specifically. This may include that specific research is being done here that aligns with your interests, the program will help you with your career goals, and/or there is a person or group you might like to work with. It is a good idea to be specific, look at the department website, and reach out to professors or graduate students via email.

General Tips:

- Write in an active voice.
- Be clear and as concise as possible.
- Link everything together, your statement should flow from one idea to the next.
- Show, don't tell. Don't say that you are a skilled researcher, describe what you've done that demonstrates this!

- Proofread, proofread, proofread! Spelling mistakes imply that you haven't put enough effort into your statement to catch them. It's helpful to have someone else (ideally, multiple people!) read your statement and make sure it is error free, flows well, and conveys the message that you want it to convey.

Personal Statement Box

The application includes a short space at the end for you to share personal experiences that might be relevant to your application. This is the working prompt:

The Department of Astronomy strives to maintain a strong and diverse graduate program. Please discuss any educational, familial, cultural, economic, or social experiences, challenges, or opportunities relevant to your academic journey; how you might contribute to social or cultural diversity within your chosen field; and/or how you might serve educationally underrepresented segments of society with your degree.

Your CV (or Resume)

Your CV (or resume) is a quick reference for the Admissions Committee to see your experience and accomplishments listed out. Note that an academic CV (Curriculum Vitae) is distinct from a resume, which is typically used when applying for an industry position. Either format is accepted, use whichever you are most comfortable with!

A CV is a list of any experience or accomplishments which demonstrate your readiness for graduate study in astronomy. CVs are typically longer and more inclusive than resumes. Examples of information that can be included on a CV include any of the following:

- Education, including your undergraduate institution, degree, and GPA.
- Employment history
- Research experience
- Publications
- Talks & presentations
- Teaching experience
- Service & outreach
- Awards, grants, scholarships, and fellowships
- Relevant skills
- Anything else that you think highlights your qualifications for graduate study in astronomy

A resume is typically a more condensed version of a CV that lists the most relevant information from the list above, while also including a short description of each point that you list.

UA Astronomy and Physics's TIMESTEP program offers templates for CVs [here](#)

GRE Scores

GRE scores are **not accepted** as part of Steward Observatory's graduate application. We recommend that students do not request or pay for the sending of official score reports from either the General or Physics GRE to the University of Arizona as part of their application for admission to our graduate program.

Letters of Recommendation

You will need to ask three people for letters of recommendation. A strong letter writer is someone who knows you and your abilities and achievements well. Typically, this includes research mentors and colleagues, supervisors (from a technical job or REU, for example), and professors who know you well, though that is certainly not an exhaustive list. The most important thing is that each letter writer is able to articulate who you are as a person and why you are going to succeed in graduate school.

It is best to give letter writers plenty of time to write, they are likely very busy too! Asking for letters *at least* four or five weeks before the application deadline is recommended, and the earlier the better. When asking for a letter, ask the person if they would be able to write you a strong letter of recommendation. They will have your best interests in mind, and if for whatever reason this person does not think they are able to write you a strong letter, they will tell you, and you can ask someone else. Don't feel bad if someone says they can't write you a strong letter, this is not a poor reflection on you or your qualifications for graduate school! Usually, this means they think they will be too busy or think they don't know you quite well enough to write a compelling letter. This is another reason why asking for letters early is important! You need to leave yourself enough time to ask someone else if you need to.

Once you know who your letter writers are, list their contact information in the relevant section of the application. Once you have done so, click the 'email' button next to their name. This will send an email to the letter writer with instructions for writing and submitting their letter. You must send each writer this email individually, otherwise they will not be able to submit their letter. After the emails are sent, you can check your application status to see who has submitted their letter. Don't feel bad about sending reminders to your letter writers as the deadline approaches, many letter writers will be writing multiple letters for multiple people, and it can be hard to keep track of all of the deadlines. Once a letter is submitted, be sure to send a thank you to the person that wrote it!

UA Astronomy and Physics's TIMESTEP program offers a sample spreadsheet for keeping track of letter deadlines [here](#)

General Tips

- It's essential to keep track of all of the schools you are applying to, their required materials, and their deadlines so that you don't miss anything. TIMESTEP also provides a template for a spreadsheet that you can use for this purpose [here](#)
- Look at departments' faculty pages and see what areas of research the faculty are engaged in. If you notice that a faculty member's work aligns with your interests, make a note of their name and what they work on. It's a good idea to have a sense of who you might like to work with at each school when applying.

It can also be helpful to get in touch with potential advisors as you go through the application process. Send potential advisors an email, let them know you are interested in their work, and ask if they are looking for students during the next application cycle. At a minimum, this can put your name on people's radar and demonstrate that you've "done your homework" on a program. At best, it can lead to forming a relationship with a potential advisor before you even start your graduate career.

- Take a look at any fellowships that might be available to you. Securing your own funding is hugely beneficial, as it frees you up to work on whatever research projects you want to, without being tied to an advisor's (or department's) funding situation.

Application Timeline

This is a sample timeline for an applicant that intends to submit their application during the last Fall of their undergraduate degree. This timeline assumes a typical application deadline in late November to early January.

Junior Year: Start thinking about a list of schools you might like to attend. Your professors, academic advisors, and research mentors are great resources! Ask if they have recommendations for you based on your research interests.

Summer before your Senior Year:

- Finalize your list of schools. Organize the application requirements of each school, paying special attention to their deadlines.
- If one or more of your schools requires GRE scores, (some also require the Physics subject test!) register for and start studying for the GRE. **Please note that Steward Observatory does NOT accept GRE scores as part of our application.**
- Research available graduate fellowships and make a plan to apply to these as well.
- Start thinking about your personal statement.
- **International Applicants:** Make plans to take your English Proficiency exam. Information on this can be found [here](#)

August/September of your Senior Year:

- Ask for letters of recommendation.
- Write your personal statement.
- Take the GRE(s), if one or more of your schools requires these. **Please note that Steward Observatory does NOT accept GRE scores as part of our application.**
- Get in touch with potential advisors at each school.

October/November of your Senior Year:

- Keep editing and re-drafting your personal statement until you think it's perfect.
- Take the GRE(s) if you haven't yet (you should be done with these by mid-October to ensure your scores will be available before application deadlines). **Please note that Steward Observatory does NOT accept GRE scores as part of our application.**
- **International Applicants** should also have taken their English Proficiency exam by mid-October.
- Fill out each application.

December/January of your Senior Year:

- Complete and submit each application before the deadline!
- Keep in touch with your letter writers to make sure they submit their letters on time. Send them thank you's once they've submitted their letters!

February – March of your Senior Year:

- You'll get admissions decisions over the Spring months!
- Visit schools you've been accepted to and start narrowing down your choices.

April 15 is the standard deadline for successful applicants to announce their decision on which school they will attend. CONGRATULATIONS – you're a grad student!