

Applying for graduate school

Shigeto Kawahara
Rutgers University
kawahara@rci.rutgers.edu

1 Introduction

Many of you are interested in pursuing graduate career in linguistics or speech pathology. The following is a summary of my advice based on my own experience, both as a student and as a teacher. Since it is based on my own experience, it is more about applying for linguistics programs than for speech therapy programs. However, in the past few years, I have sent a number of students to speech pathology schools, so I have some advice about this case as well (see another handout of mine on this). The phonetics lab has a facebook group for Rutgers students who are interested in speech pathology careers.

Working at a lab is probably the closest and surest path to your graduate career. There are several reasons: (i) having research experience strengthens your application in general; (ii) you will probably get a good recommendation letter; (iii) if you get to do your own research, you will have a good writing sample; (iv) your professor will probably help you write your personal statement; (v) your lab alumni may be able to give you good advice; (vi) in case you need to have an interview, they may be able to do a practice interview for you; (vii) they may be able to get you some funding, etc, etc.

Oftentimes, professors (well, I) do not like to take senior students, because they like you to stay in their lab longer than a year. So PLAN AHEAD. Don't wait until your senior year.

Now here's a list of things you need to include in your application package:

- (1) What you need for graduate school applications
 - a. Coverletter (a general guide to your application packet)
 - b. Personal statement.
 - c. Recommendation letters.
 - d. Sample work. (Not every school requires this)
 - e. GRE scores.
 - f. (good) GPA.
 - g. Curriculum Vitae (a.k.a. resume)

2 Personal statement

- (2) Personal statement

- a. It should maximally be 2-page long (shouldn't be too short or too long).¹
- b. Aim for a good balance between what you've done and what you want to do. Show that you've done something substantial and also have some promising future plans.
- c. You should create a general statement which you can use for all schools.
- d. But tailor it for each school you're applying. Mention specific professors' names that you want to work with.
- e. Study their website and show them that you're genuinely interested in their program.
- f. Say, as concretely as possible, why the school you're applying for is good for you. "I would like to further pursue my interests on X with Professor Y who works on Z (where X and Z are related)".
- g. Try to have a narrow focus with general interests. Don't say "I want to study the accentual system of Japanese deverbal nouns in my graduate career" or "I am interested in linguistics in general".
- h. Ideally you should be able to say something like "I have worked on accentual properties of Japanese focusing on deverbal nouns, which bears on general issues on the theories of accents. I am also interested in syntax, especially wh-movement, etc, etc".
- i. If possible, ask your advisors/friends to read your statement for feedback.
- j. You can get sample statements from your lab mates.

3 Recommendation Letters

- (3) Recommendation letters
 - a. You need 2 or 3 letters.
 - b. Interact with your letter-writers as much as possible. Take more than one class if possible. Go to their office hours. Let them know well in advance that you're interested in going to grad school.
 - c. As mentioned above, seek for an opportunity to work at a lab. Your lab director will probably write you the best letter (assuming that you work hard).
 - d. GIVE THEM ENOUGH TIME to write your letters, at least a week, but preferably longer (they write better letters if they have more time; plus you don't want them to imply in their letters that you are a last-minute person). Have a meeting with them, and give them the hardcopies of the rest of your application packet.
 - e. If possible, get letters from both P-side (phonetics, phonology) people and S-side (syntax, semantics) people.
 - f. Don't wait until December or late November. Professors tend to be very busy around that time, plus, they won't be impressed if you waited until last minute.
- (4) My personal rules: to get a letter from me
 - a. Work with me as a research assistant or through an independent study OR
 - b. Take two (or more) classes with me and do well OR

¹Good graduate programs can get up to 100 (or possibly more than) applications, so there's necessarily a psychological limit on how long the personal statement can be.

- c. Take one course and do really well while interacting with me beyond class hours.
- d. I am not trying to be mean; these are necessary conditions for writing a good letter.

4 Sample work

- (5) Sample work
 - a. Do an independent study or honors thesis.
 - b. A good term paper is usually not good enough to get you in to a good grad school.
 - c. Have your advisor read your paper before you submit it.
 - d. If you have more than one good sample work, that'd be excellent.
 - e. Try to present that project somewhere (ideally at a referred public conference or undergraduate students).²
 - f. Some undergraduate conferences in linguistics: Cornell, Harvard, etc.

5 GRE and GPA

- (6) GRE and GPA
 - a. These are not as important as what's been discussed above (in my opinion).
 - b. But don't undermine the value of these—there can be a university-level requirement.
 - c. Make sure to keep your GPA high for your major at least.
 - d. Don't worry about the Verbal section if you're non-native.

6 Resume (Curriculum Vitae)

- (7) CV
 - a. CV is a list of your academic (and other achievements)
 - b. You may not have a lot, but you should have some to list.
 - c. Contact info
 - d. Overall GPA, your major GPA, your major(s) (and minor(s))
 - e. Work experience
 - f. Academic presentation
 - g. Extracurricular activities

7 Other advice

- (8) Other advice

²Of course if you present at professional conferences (for graduate students and professors), that would even be better, but it is certainly not necessary.

- a. If you are applying for speech pathology schools, Rutgers most likely does not offer all the prerequisite courses. Don't sweat. No students of mine got rejected for this reason. You can take (online) summer courses.
- b. In general, start early.
- c. Discuss with your advisor about where to apply.
- d. Try to present at public undergraduate conferences, if possible. Meet people there. Don't shy away from socializing with people.
- e. Take advantage of programs that help you build your career (the McNair program; the Aresty program at Rutgers).
- f. Try to get a fellowship. Departments love to admit somebody who bring in their own money, plus it makes your application look good.
- g. Ask your graduate student friends or advisors for a successful sample application packet.
- h. If you are a non-native speaker of English, have your application packet proofread by a native speaker—this handout certainly isn't.

8 Once you get an offer

- (9) After you get accepted
 - a. Make a campus visit.
 - b. They will probably treat you well (it's a bad sign if they don't).
 - c. Interact with graduate students there. Try to get a feel of how it is likely to be a graduate student in that department.
 - d. If you are turning down an offer, do it as soon as possible. That helps them make an offer to somebody else.