

## **Admission guide.**

Ok, given that you found this page and especially this article I assume you are interested in getting a Phd in Economics. Now the question, why this guide, aren't there enough there? Yep I guess there are, but most of them are written by Americans (of the US-kind) for Americans. Given that I am European, this guide will focus more on the details relevant for Europeans. (however forgive me if I make certain statements which might not be true for your special case, my experience is limited to a Dutch university and a lot of second-hand information about German schools).

What I am doing is something you will see a lot within research publications, not coming with something new or great but taking the successful ideas of others and developing them further, filling holes and adding things. Now this is not what you should working for, but hey at least it may get you published....

Already in the beginning I realize how outdated some things might be, since the Netherlands introduced the BA/Ma implying that the timetable I worked on is not really relevant anymore. Nevertheless first piece of information, Grad School in the US always starts in September, implying that there is only one round of admission per year. This also implies that you have to start getting serious about this at least one year in advance. So coming out of your summer holiday, you realize you will be finished by the summer next year and want to go to Grad School, don't wait, get started. If you will graduate before that, maybe think about getting a Research position at a University, Research institute or Central Bank (Companies might pay more, but it will most likely not be helpful with your application) or simply take a long vacation (you might need it and you very likely don't have the time during Grad School).

Most of the deadlines are Mid-December to New Year for admission in the following September, so better get going early, it really helps a lot and reduces stress (which you will have regardless how good your timetable planning is....)

A little warning, the whole application process will cost you quite a bit. Calculate something like 70-90 \$ for an application (get a credit card, is the easiest, cheapest way to pay for this). Additionally 200-300\$ for Standard tests (more about that later), and other smaller costs, like for transcripts, stamps, etc.

My total ended up to be just short of 1000\$ for the whole thing (but it paid off...;-))

## **Selecting schools**

Selecting the right school might be a little bit more complicated than choosing your undergrad institution, since the US has a large number of schools offering Phd programs in Economics, spreading from the worlds top schools to schools you should completely

forget. Other factors are large differences in environment (think New York City and deep deep Midwest) and the cost for the whole process.

The first question is how competitive are you with your background? Are you lone top of your class, years of research assistance, Studienstiftler (for Germans...), publications, a lot of math courses, then hey shoot for the top 5, otherwise be a little bit more cautious. Ok if your grades are pretty good, you have a nice Masters thesis, good standing with senior faculty, but especially a good quantitative background, you can look lets say somewhere within the 20 or 30 highest ranked schools (always include some top-schools, since there is a certain degree of randomness in the admissions procedure involved) .

There are various sources for these places, <http://home.comcast.net/~chrissilvey/> gives a good overview about the various rankings. [www.econphd.net](http://www.econphd.net) also has some.

So get, lets say the top thirty schools, cancel those, where you would never go due to environment conditions, like too hot in South California or too much snow in Minnesota. Then consider whether you have a strong research interest like say, Trade theory or Labor economics, check which schools have faculty working on that. Usually the higher the schools are in the rankings, the more likely they will cover all fields.

But one word of warning, most students arrive with a certain idea about specializing but will change that during their first two years, and honestly, after they admitted you, nobody will care what you claimed in your personal statement.

For the rest start with their website, see what kind of feeling you have about the place, talk with professors at your home institution whether they have recommendations (especially with those who studied or worked in the US), scout other websites and internet forums, if you have questions, e-mail departments or current grad students (like me ;-). Surely some of them won't respond, but I guess most will answer your questions (as long as you don't have five pages of them and they actually can answer them). Also money plays role, most schools give a certain degree of Financial aid, usually the higher ranked the school is, the more money you get. Financial aid is usually merit-based and not need-based, so you might get offers without a stipend. Have some thoughts whether you still want to go in that case and how you finance it. Again current students, departments and their websites are sources for this kind of information.

At the end you should have a list with say 7to 15 Schools, about which you feel confident that you would accept an admission. (otherwise what's the reason for applying...)

A lot of admission guides mention safety schools. This indicates a school, where you are quite sure of getting accepted. If you are really determined about getting a PhD, then you should include at least one, better two.

Now here you have to ask yourself another question, does it have to be the US? If you can imagine staying in Europe, you can find a certain number of Departments with Grad schools which are competitive with schools say starting around rank 15 to 30 in the US.

Names are LSE, UCL, Toulouse, Tinbergen (Amsterdam & Rotterdam), Tilburg, Barcelona, etc... (check out the rankings at Econphd.net, you can find the good schools in Europe, especially in the subfield rankings).

They also work fine as safety schools, since most of their deadlines are after you get notice from the US. (this is not a guarantee, some schools may actually have earlier deadlines....).

### **Letter of recommendation**

All schools will ask you to provide at least two, or more likely three recommendation letters. Letters from non-academic persons don't help, so all have to be written by Professors. Now the question is whom to ask and how to do that. Some ideas, try to pick profs who either studied or worked for some time in the US. There might be a higher chance that admission committees know them, which is always helpful. Otherwise definitely try to get some senior faculty, again the reputation of the author helps. But one word of caution, they should be able to make an informed statement about you. A lukewarm letter from a renowned professor, who doesn't know you, is surely not preferable to a glowing, well-informed, letter from junior faculty.

Another problem could be that the professor has no experience with writing such letters, so he might actually ask you to write some draft for him. I did not have to do this, so I don't have experience with it. But as always, the internet has the answer for it, as for almost everything else, there are websites out there (only be sure that you pick one which actually discusses letters relevant for grad school, Business schools and other programs might ask for slightly different things)

It might be useful to ask a prof whether he has any advice about getting a Phd, which schools he can recommend, whether he has experience with the admissions process, etc, before you ask him for a letter. This way you can show that you are really interested in his opinion and not just a letter from him. Also provide them with the relevant forms (can be found on school websites, some schools start with electronic forms), but also have other information ready, like your c.v or a list of your courses with grades.

Be sure to ask them with enough time to spare, you don't want to pressure them in the end. But take care that they are actually writing it, maybe through little reminder (for example through a question whether they need any additional information).

Also be sure that he actually has only nice things to say about you.....

### **Statement of purpose**

This is the part which usually requires the most time and effort. It is also the part differing the most from applicant to applicant. So here are some of my thoughts on it, other people may disagree

You can either write a very general SOP or a very specialized one. The second category requires that you know what you want to do, can convincingly make a case for it, show evidence from your previous education and have a reason why the school is exactly the right one to do this. If you write one of these, make sure it is compelling and convincing and that you picked the right schools...

Since I didn't know precisely what I want to do, I kept my SOP very general, writing more about my general interest in economics, my fascination with mathematical tools and my reasons for getting a Phd. I included how my previous education prepared me for grad school, what experiences I had with research and how that sparked my interest in doing more.

I closed the letter with a paragraph about fields which I am interested in and stating that this school is exactly the right one for this.

One discussion is whether you should mention individual professors. My opinion is that it might only be helpful if you write a specialized SOP to show that you investigated the department thoroughly.

However since nobody knows whether faculty might actually leave the school, it actually may be counterproductive if you decided to write a more general SOP.

Some general tips:

teaching can be great, but warrants only a short comment, it's all about research, research, research

be enthusiastic, the comment I got on my first draft, was something like "you make a good case, but you don't sound enthusiastic enough". So forget European understatement and adapt some American enthusiasm (stopping short of boosting)

don't overstress your successes, yes you might have been top of your class, best here and there, overachiever there, but hey they have your transcripts, so they can see how good you are from there, no need to bore them with rankings and statistics.

Past research is good to mention, but don't get lost in technical details. Try to state that you learned from it, how much you got to love doing research and argue that this is exactly what you want to do.

After they admitted you nobody cares what research interests you wrote in your SOP so only make sure the school actually has someone working in that field.

Have other people read it. Probably under two different aspects, the first regarding the content (like your professors) and the second regarding language (maybe your school has people helping with writing essays and papers)

Keep it short, however the word limits are not exact, so twenty words too much is no big deal, but definitely respect limits.

## **Technical details**

Now there are some annoying details you have to fulfill, including standardized tests (Americans love them for admissions, don't know why, but I guess makes life a little bit easier for admissions committees)

First the GRE.

It's possible to take it all over Europe (doesn't matter in which country you take it, so you may look abroad to find a closer location, check out [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org), explains the whole process). But beware, they usually have quite a waiting time till you get a slot. Try to take it as early as possible, this may allow you to take it again and the company also needs quite a bit of time to come up with your final score.

The test has three parts, a quantitative, verbal and a analytical part.

The verbal part is mostly irrelevant, nevertheless try to do it as good as possible, otherwise you might raise eyebrows with regard to your english knowledge. (So a low score should not be a reason to repeat it)

The analytical part are now two essays, one a regular one in which you have to argue a given statement. For the second essay the test will give you a statement, and your task is it to argue about the logical and argumentative quality of the statement. If you are used to write in English, you should be fine, otherwise do a certain amount of training for it. This is not the most important part of the test, but a too low result again is not really helpful. (I only got a 4.5, however some people posted in an internet forum, that UC's (Californian Public Universities like Berkeley, San Diego) and other public schools may have a minimum requirement of 5.5)

The absolutely most important part is the quantitative section. Consisting of short math question, it can be solved with high-school math knowledge. However definitely do some prep tests before to get used to the type of questions they asked. Try the exercise tests ETS has on their website, but beware I found them much easier than the real test.

You have to score at least high in the mid-700 hundreds to have a shoot a decent place and for a top-school you should have at least 780, more likely even 800. I guess some of the top-schools have limits ranging from 730 to 760 which are a must and they don't even read your application if you don't have that.

If you are not satisfied with your results, you always can repeat the test. Costs a lot and may cause deadline problems, so better be prepared for the first one.

Second the TOEFL.

This is absolutely the most annoying part of the whole process. Unless you studied in the US or UK (but even then it is not guaranteed), schools will ask you to provide the TOEFL to guarantee your English knowledge. This test is just plain stupid, but still you

should have a look at it before you do it, otherwise you actually may not score high enough (ok, I did that thing once in high school and got enough, so it is definitely not very hard, ). The organizational procedures (see [www.toefl.org](http://www.toefl.org)) are the same as for the GRE (as are the costs), so act accordingly.

Third, transcripts

Now the main problem here is to get an English translation. This I guess depends very heavily on customs at your home university (mine issued them for me), so I can't give you much of an advice here. Check websites at schools for exact requirements, maybe find current grad students from your country and ask how they did it.

One thing which you might want to include is a description of grade scales at your school, especially if you are studying in a smaller country. Most schools will have experience with European grades, but this is not a guarantee. It also can help if your grades do not always look as if they were good (at my school, a 10 out of 10 basically never happened, a 9 was extremely rare, and 8 still excellent, now compare that with US-GPA's of 4.0 out of 4.0).

If you include such a description, always try to get an official at your school to sign and stamp it, maybe even directly include it with transcripts.

### **Some general advice about the whole process**

Another point, schools' websites are great sources of information, they also give all the little details about the application process, so make sure you check them thoroughly. They may also have a grad student directory, including links to their websites.

The whole thing resembles some kind of lottery, so don't despair if you get a rejection from one place, you may get into another.

Depending on when you finish, have some ideas what to do if it doesn't work out (and maybe even have started on them). And if you don't make the cut this year, you can always reapply in the following years.

Get people involved, get advice and help, but in the end you have to write the letters and you have to make the decision where to go.

Give yourself enough time to do the whole thing, there will always be some unforeseen complications, and the December will be stressful.

Administrators and Admissions officials are only people, so don't worry too much if some online site doesn't change your status right at the deadline.

Keep watching and after some time try to contact the departments.

In other fields a very common recommendation for applicants is to contact potential advisor. Unless you are really interested in somebody's work and want to contact him

based on that, might it not be helpful in application decisions. For example at Yale every application is read by three profs and then a committee of nine makes the final decision. So you need to be very lucky to contact the right guy, and even then it can backfire. An exception might be if someone else refers you to someone (something like “Professor XY recommended that I should get in contact with you and therefore I would like to ask whether you could answer me some questions”)

Campus visits might be helpful in the decision where to apply, and it should be not too hard to arrange for a visit to a lecture and a conversation with a professor, however again this will very likely not influence their admissions decision.