Hello future applicant,

As a disclaimer, I did not get into every program I applied to. I had my fair share of rejections, and there were moments the process felt overwhelming. But I did get admitted to programs that were an excellent fit for me, including my top choice, and along the way I learned a lot that I wish I had known at the beginning. This guide is me passing those lessons on in case they help you too.

There's already plenty of general advice online. Instead of repeating the basics, I've focused on the smaller, sometimes overlooked steps that made a real difference for me. Think of this as a notebook of insights I collected while applying — practical, personal, and hopefully reassuring.

Step 1 — Figuring Out What You Actually Want to Study

The hardest part at the start wasn't the essays or the deadlines. It was handling the pressure of deciding what I truly wanted to spend the next five or more years researching.

What helped was asking myself: what are the questions I can't stop thinking about? For me, those questions circled around **working memory and attention**. How do we maintain multiple items in mind when our environment constantly competes for our focus? How do we allocate limited resources when some items are more important or more uncertain than others? How are decisions guided when we're not confident in what we're holding in memory? And how do these processes connect to longer-term memory and conscious experience?

Once I had that compass, it became easier to filter programs. I didn't apply to labs where these kinds of questions couldn't realistically be asked. That focus helped me avoid chasing interesting but ultimately unfitting projects, and it made my applications more coherent. For me, my interests were centered in a few different veins of cognitive research, so I reached out to attention, mind-wandering, and neuroimaging researchers (though most focused on different aspects of memory). Following those threads pointed me to the right labs.

If you're not sure where your compass points, look at your past research and the papers you kept wanting to read even outside of assignments. Then, share these interests with your current PI(s), labmates, or anyone (me, especially if you share my passions) who will hear you out and see if they have any names to add to your list.

Step 2 — Reaching Out to Potential Advisors (Aug. – Oct.)

Once I had my list of core questions and potential labs, I started emailing professors in the summer and fall. The main purpose was to confirm whether they were taking students and to get on their radar.

My emails were short and direct. I introduced myself, briefly described my research background, mentioned why their work excited me, and asked if they were admitting students. I always attached my CV. Here's word-for-word what I sent to Dr. Awh and Dr. Vogel back in August of 2024:

> **Subject: Prospective PhD Applicant (Fall 2025)**
>
> Dear Dr. Awh and Dr. Vogel,
>
> My name is Brecken and I'm a research assistant in Dr. Tommy Sprague's lab at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where I support an fMRI/eye-tracking study on uncertainty during a visual working memory task. I am also assisting Dr. Barry Giesbrecht and Dr. Jonathan Schooler in running experiments on value-driven attentional capture and phenomenology of thought during long-term memory encoding.
>
> I plan on applying to PhD programs this fall and I'm interested in your recent work, especially your various approaches to investigating resource allocation in visual working memory. Your paper on a complementary sequential encoding paradigm to the classic simultaneous paradigm is quite intriguing, as I currently supervise a drawing, free-recall study that uses the simultaneous paradigm as a WM measure. Also, I am curious about your characterization of working memory as ongoing neural activity and would appreciate the opportunity to further discuss connections between WM and LTM.
>
> Will either (or both) of you be taking on graduate students in Fall 2025? My research interests primarily include visual working memory, sustained attention, goal-driven behavior, and similar neural mechanisms underpinning consciousness. I have also attached my CV to this email and would love to (virtually) chat if you're interested!
>
> Kind regards,
> Brecken Marome

Responses varied. Some were warm and encouraging, others short, and a few never came. What I learned is that you can't over-interpret these replies. Busy faculty may not have time to send a long note, and sometimes an enthusiastic email doesn't translate into an eventual offer. The important thing is to make contact and be genuine about your interest.

Tip: Start a spreadsheet with all PIs you email, their universities, what they research, whether they reply, and if they're taking students. It helps keep you organized when things get busy.

Step 3 — Preparing for Conversations

Sometimes a professor wanted to meet for a brief Zoom chat before applications were due. These “pre-interviews” were informal, but I recommend treating them seriously. Professors are busy, and if they make time for you, use the opportunity well.

I read their recent work, came up with questions, and sometimes even drafted a simple experiment idea. Not every conversation was the same. Some were structured and technical, others were casual and wide-ranging. The best preparation is knowing your own interests well and being ready to talk about how they connect to theirs.

You don’t need a polished experiment proposal, but you should be able to explain how your background overlaps with their research. Preparation builds confidence, and that confidence carries into interviews later, especially if you end up interviewing with someone you’ve already met.

Tip: Keep a running doc of the questions you plan to ask. Let the professor know if you’d like to take notes during the meeting — it helps later when details blur together.

Step 4 — The Application Itself (Nov. – Dec.)

When I wrote my statements, I focused on making the research fit clear. Instead of just saying “I’m interested in memory,” I connected my background to the lab’s specific approaches — whether it was sequential vs. simultaneous encoding paradigms, resource allocation models, or uncertainty measures in working memory tasks.

This helped my statements stand out. Faculty want to see that you know their work and can imagine extending it.

I also had several mentors and peers read my drafts. Each round of feedback sharpened them. If you don’t have access to examples, ask around. Many students and postdocs are willing to share if you reach out politely.

I applied to around ten programs. That gave me options without stretching myself too thin. I also applied to the NSF GRFP. I was named honorable mention, but writing the proposal helped sharpen my thinking and gave me a strong supplemental piece for applications.

Start early. If you need an extra SoP reader or would like to read mine, I’d be happy to help.

Step 5 — Interviews (Dec. – Mar.)

Interview season was stressful, but preparation helped. Once I received my schedule, I researched everyone I’d be meeting. For each person, I wrote down one or two specific

questions, often about a recent paper or method. Even if I didn't ask them, having them prepared made me feel more confident.

I also had a few general questions ready: What do you enjoy about this department? How do graduate students typically collaborate across labs?

The hidden gem here is that interviews are not just about impressing faculty. They are also about you evaluating the program. Pay attention to how people interact, how graduate students describe their experience, and whether you can see yourself thriving there.

Step 6 — Making a Decision (Mar. – Apr.)

Coming into the application process, all I wanted was someone to give me a chance. "Just one interview," I remember telling friends and family. I ended up with multiple offers from labs I deeply admired, and choosing between them was harder than I expected.

If you find yourself in this position, use every resource you can: talk to your PI, consult friends and family, and make structured comparisons like point systems or pros/cons lists. Most schools will bring you out for a visit, but if you're still unsure, try to visit again. This is a big decision, and it's normal to feel pressure.

In the end, one school will start to stand out. For me, that was Chicago. For you, it may be somewhere else entirely, and that's more than okay.

Closing Thoughts

Applying to PhD programs is stressful, time-consuming, and full of self-doubt. But it is also a rare chance to sharpen your sense of what kind of scientist you want to become.

If you take nothing else from this guide, remember this: follow the questions that keep you curious, don't over-analyze every faculty email, and prepare in ways that make you feel confident. For me, questions about working memory and attention kept me grounded through the rejections, deadlines, and stress. For you, the compass may point somewhere different — trust it.

I wish you the best of luck in your own journey.

—Brecken