

General Questions

1. How many uni's did you apply to? also did you apply to uni's outside of the US (Canada, Europe)?
2. Any specific criteria in selecting the uni's ? (the general stuff I'm aware of is using CSrankings, talking to students/profs during conferences)
3. Where all did you get your LoRs from and how many? In the sense that were they all from MSR or also some from your undergrad college?
4. Any resources you used during SoP writing?
5. any general advice you would have from your experience of the application cycle.

Notations:

MSR -> Microsoft Research Lab, India

RF -> Research Fellow (enrolled as part of MSRI's Pre-doctoral Research Fellow Program)

RF1: now a Phd student at CMU

1. you can find all the colleges and the results and stuff here - <redacted_for_confidentiality>. I mostly applied to universities in US, the only one outside of US was UToronto.
2. I only applied for PhD. I selected them based on whether I had potential advisors who worked in fields I was interested in. I mostly used CSrankings but I also looked at conferences (to see who was actively publishing in the area), and I got some input from senior RFs/ my letter writers etc
3. I got all my letters from MSR. I had 5 in total but I submit different combinations of the letters based on the university/area (I applied to a bunch of colleges for ML and ML for SE so I chose the letter writers based on who was a better fit. I also had two versions of SoPs and stuff)
4. I just spoke to senior RFs and after I had my first draft I read some of their SoPs and then made changes. I also had few senior RFs and my mentors review it.
5. Start early! time flies and it's always better to start as soon as you can. Making the list of profs is what took me the longest. Also, when filling up the application, I recommend having some sheet with all your details so you can copy paste the info. I also recommend filling out as much as possible (like bio data etc) as soon as possible so then before the deadline you can just tweak your essays and submit them instead of trying to fill out the whole application then. It is quite long as time consuming. I also recommend taking to senior RFs, they were super helpful and it really helped me a lot.

I **strongly recommend** you having a first draft of your essays ready before you read others. Different people structure it differently and it's very easy to get confused/get conflicting feedback

RF2 now a Phd student at UMich

1. How many uni's did you apply to? also did you apply to uni's outside of the US (Canada, Europe)?
I applied to 12, 10 in US for PhD 2 in Canada for MSc (U Toronto and UBC), Canada rejected me 😊
2. Any specific criteria in selecting the uni's ? (the general stuff I'm aware of is using CSrankings, talking to students/profs during conferences)
Yeah so for like 4-5 months before dec I used to spend time looking at different profs work presented at conferences I follow. So from that I had a list of about 20-30 profs. Then after that it was down to selecting a subset based on the degree to which I like their work, lab openings etc. I also tried to pick universities/depts which had more number profs that I liked just to increase chances. For example say UT austin had only one prof that I liked, so I dropped it in favour of UCLA which had two. In some

cases I also had to search for profs specifically for a University, for example Dartmouth had one prof I really liked but then I went through their entire faculty list to find other profs who were also working in spaces of my interest, just so that I can mention their work in my SoP and probably increase my chances. I think it was a bit easier for me as the conferences in my area are smaller (20-60 papers every year)

3. Where all did you get your LoRs from and how many? In the sense that were they all from MSR or also some from your undergrad college?
2 from MSR: <redacted_for_confidentiality> and <redacted_for_confidentiality>, one from my undergrad college (not a well-known prof)
4. Any resources you used during SoP writing?
I referred to <redacted_for_confidentiality> SoP and to research statements of profs. in my area. Although profs have a TON to talk about in their research statement compared to us (atleast compared to me 😊), their statements gave me a fair idea of how to structure my SoP. <redacted_for_confidentiality>, <redacted_for_confidentiality> and <redacted_for_confidentiality> also reviewed it and gave feedback. I would say hardest part was writing one page SoPs as compared to 2 page. My first draft was 3 pages long, then worked on condensing it. Pretty much like how paper writing goes. Multiple passes and you end up with a good enough final version.
5. any general advice you would have from your experience of the application cycle.
Start with shortlisting profs and then once you have a big enough list, work on selecting universities and departments. Ideally you should have 2 profs that you're interested in from each department. If you talk with people even before applying you'll get to know if they have vacancy and if they're looking for people with your type of profile. You can also ask <redacted_for_confidentiality> if he can send introductory emails to folks he knows. Make your SoP as modular as possible so that you can swap out pieces based on whom you're applying to. Although if you start early you don't have to worry about the modular SoP part as you have enough time for each application.

RF3 now a Phd student at CMU, also got Phd UMD, UIUC

1. I applied to 11 places, 10 in US. I also applied to MILA, but wasn't particularly enthused by them, and they by me.
2. I selected uni if it had (a) large number of profs working on things I like (b) had prior IIT students in the university (c) had profs who knew my LOR writers.
3. I got 3 LORs. One from <redacted_for_confidentiality> at IIT. One each from <redacted_for_confidentiality> and <redacted_for_confidentiality> at MSR.
4. IIT has a folder of prior SOPs, I used that to see Sindhu's proposal. And dutifully followed the advice from Prof Matt Might's CS blog.
5. Don't apply to schools which have prior history of preferring IIT guys (as you are not one). (Cornell, Princeton IMO) Also, for vision, don't apply to the absolute super stars, look for new guys, growing groups, and people in interdisciplinary areas, much better shots.

RF4 now a Phd student at CMU

1. I applied to around 10 universities. I did not apply to universities outside the US.
2. I applied mostly based on general rankings and my mentors' suggestions. I don't really have a niche, so I went with general rankings. If you feel like you have a specific field of interest, you may consider applying to colleges that have a good program/professors related to your field. Talk to your mentors.
3. I got 2 from MSR, 2 from undergrad college. But people say it isn't necessary to get any from undergrad college. People with all 3 LORs from MSR haven't been at a disadvantage because of that.

4. <http://cwfletcher.net/Pages/SoP.php> - Examples of good SoPs with very good explanation
<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~pavlo/blog/2015/10/how-to-write-a-bad-statement-for-a-computer-science-phd-admissions-application.html> - What not to write (in turn telling you what to focus on)
 These two should be good enough and cover pretty much all you need to know. I'll send across more if I remember.
5. Just apply to all places you want to go to. Don't set a bar on yourself. Because admissions are sort of random and there's luck factor involved, so it can go either way.

RF5 now a Phd student at UW

1. I applied to 15 universities. I would recommend to apply broadly (~20 schools) if you can afford it, because there are a lot of unpredictable and unknown factors which you can't really control like profs funding, whether they are taking students this year, their current research interests (2 admits for me were this - I didn't expect it), what each faculty looks for in a candidate and so on. In general, PhD admissions are very subjective and just because a school looks ambitious, you shouldn't shy away from applying to it.
 - a. I was considering applying to some schools outside of the country (Edinburgh, Ox-bridge), but was discouraged because they had shorter PhD programs and many of them required or strongly preferred an MS especially since my undergrad was not in CS. Also, funding structure afaik was much more complicated. In that regard, US schools (and visas) are very streamlined and also flexible (coming from non-CS low-GPA background). Also, the unis I was interested in (from an NLP standpoint) did not have any HCI people there. Only Oxford had Max van Kleek, but there was no one in NLP who could complement him.
2. I applied to NLP + HCI, so I just looked at the number of people working in these fields. UW, CMU and UMD are probably the only ones which have top depts for both, but other schools had a great dept for one of them (HCI @ GATech, UMich, UCSD). CSRankings is a decent proxy for what I just said. Just make sure you are not missing anyone who you really want to work with but the dept. isn't that big (like I missed applying to Chris Callison Burch at UPenn, because NLP group there is small and HCI was non-existent).
3. I didn't get any LoR from my undergrad because at BITS you write your own LoRs + the research isn't good, so profs aren't well-known. I got LoRs from <redacted_for_confidentiality> and <redacted_for_confidentiality> but only used them alternatively for each application depending on the school. I got other LoRs from the places I interned (CMU, UCL, Spotify).
4. There are many good ones, but Philip Guo's and Noah Smith's advice influenced me the most.
<https://pg.ucsd.edu/PhD-application-tips.htm...> and
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1IT-bsIP0GKfh815sQnM2hCzzR9prt-QLx16rimUOdIM/edit?usp=sharing...> You can find some others here
<https://martiansideofthemoon.github.io/2018/05/29/grad-resources.html>
5. I barely contacted anyone. Around Jan I had panicked and reached out to some profs who I thought I had a good chance with, but they didn't respond or gave a canned response, so I stopped doing it. I don't see a point unless you have met the prof before. Even with that, I would say the prof would have likely forgot about you unless you made a lasting impression and the prof themselves told you to apply in which case you definitely should reach out. A better thing would be for your LoR writer to reach out to your potential advisors. <redacted_for_confidentiality> was very gracious to send a couple of emails to people who I had applied to and whom he knew personally :)
6. If you are applying to competitive fields like ML/NLP/Vision, strategize such that your profile stands out. There will be many people with top undergrad school, 4/4 grades, and top LoRs with whom you will be competing especially if it is a popular/well-known sub-area such as Interpretability/Explainability. Find a niche area which is relatively unexplored, but one where you see a lot of potential in future. A + B (or interdisciplinary) is the best way to make this happen, but it can be within the area too (ML has completely overcast NLP, but there are still people who are very

interested in reviving the old-school/classical methods as they are more robust). Its easier said than done - in my case it worked out to be NLP + HCI based on my work and my research interests - there is a lot of work here, but as a field, it is quite nascent. I see the potential because there have been so many recent advances in NLP that they will soon find their way into human-facing applications.