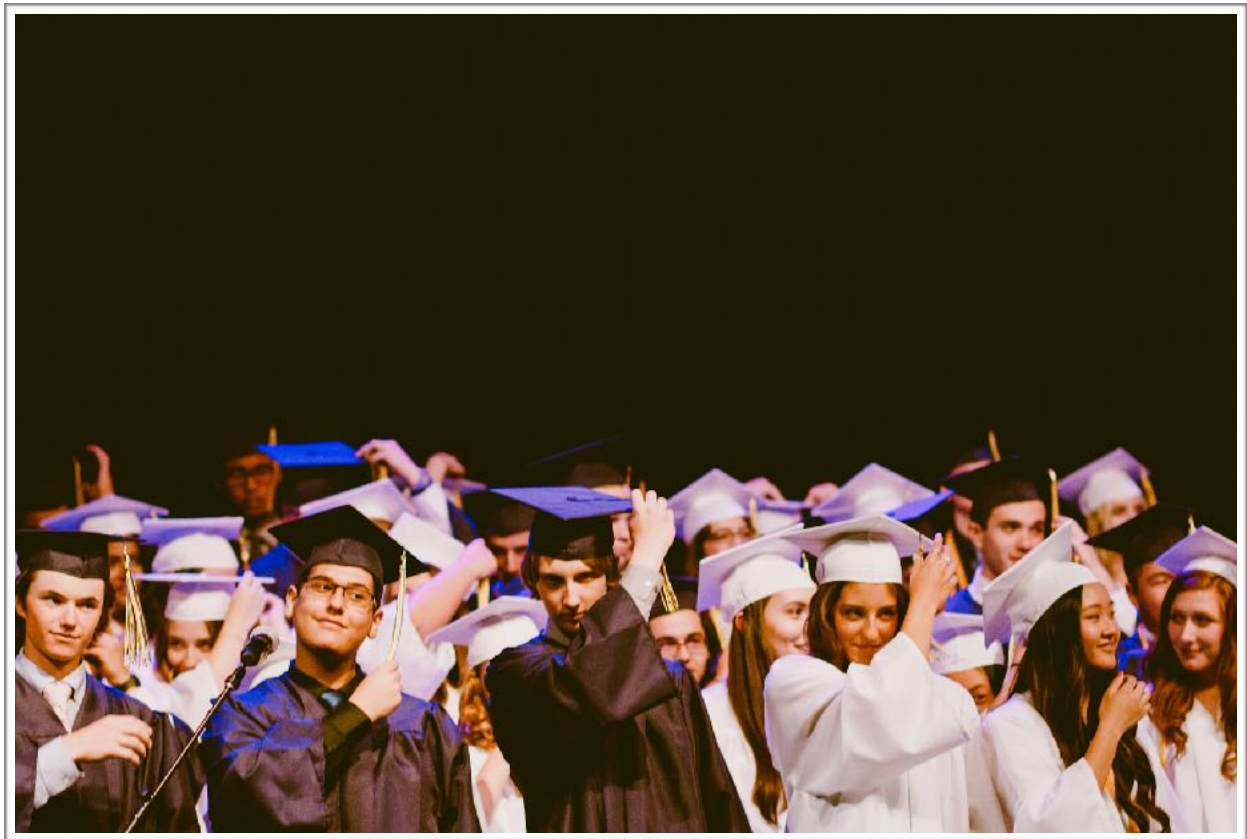


Applying to MS in USA Guide



Scholar Strategy's Guide to Getting into World's Top MS Programs

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Introduction

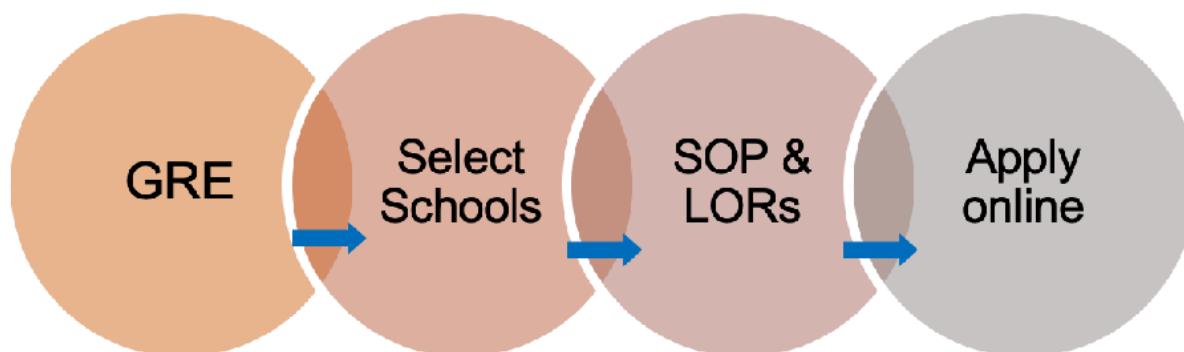
This eBook will help you understand the full process of how to go about applying to USA universities for MS/MIS/MBA programs.

The application process for universities in USA is different from the entrance procedure in India.

In India, admissions are decided solely by entrance exams. What does it mean?

It means that students need to do well in one exam to decide their future. They can cram the topics day and night and hope that they do great on the fateful day. So, all that is counted is student's performance on the day and nothing else. She can be a great student otherwise but if she has a bad day on the exam day, her future is suddenly bleary. But admissions to universities outside India happen very differently. And, they take into account your overall profile including your academic performance, some test results, your extra-curricular and professional experience and accomplishments. And, it means that you can plan and do well. We will help you understand the process better and excel at it in this e-book.

Let's take a look at the process.



In short, there are **FOUR** steps:

I GRE, TOEFL

II Shortlisting schools for your aspirations

III Preparing required documents for the application

IV Apply by the deadline

Note: Ideally, shortlisting schools should be done before giving GRE but students prefer to get the tests out of the way and be comfortable with the score before focusing all energies into shortlisting schools and actually applying to them. A candidate is able to typically apply to around 10 universities for MS and MIS programs.

First three steps are 90% of the work and we will understand each in detail. You will also find tips and advice on how to excel at these in their respective sections. People who have studied at Top USA schools and come out with flying colors created this eBook. We hope you will find it helpful. This is also covered on our blog - <https://scholarstrategy.com/ms-in-usa>

About Scholar Strategy

<https://scholarstrategy.com> is a community network of Indian students studying abroad and those students who are planning to study abroad. It is the first ONLINE student mentoring service in India specializing in application guidance for MS/MIS and MBA services.

Scholar Strategy was founded by grads from UIUC, and NYU due to the lack of sensible advice for Indian students who want to study abroad.

Why Scholar Strategy works?

- **Expertise**

- We know what it takes. We did it ourselves by graduating from:
 - UIUC (world's 4th best CS pgm)
 - NYU (world's 10th best MBA)

- **Global Network**

- By joining us, you can access:
 - Our global network of mentors hailing from Columbia, Booth, Purdue, CMU...
 - Our global network of alumni hailing from Duke, Cornell, UIUC, CMU, TAMU...

- **Saving time and money**

- We are an online service, saving money on physical space. Hence,
 - We are more cost effective than local counselors
- No commute time wasted, reach us online!
- No appointments, talk to us at your convenience

Why our students love us?

These are some of the testimonials we received:

“I was pretty sure that I stand no chance of getting into a good university when I walked out of the GRE centre with a low score. But Nistha has proved me wrong!! Nistha’s guidance has been more than valuable in writing SOP, LORs and listing Universities. She takes great care in reviewing documents and provides a candid evaluation. Her tailored counseling is what makes her successful. Thanks to Nistha, I find myself preparing to attend UIUC this Fall”

Surya Sumukh, Cornell MEng CS

“Nistha's valuable advice has helped me explore different dimensions of my “Statement of Purpose” and “Resume” and she personally reviews and re-reviews the same to perfection. It is unbelievable that Nistha is able to deliver quality service and what I exactly want, though we are miles away from each other. She is very prompt to any queries I have had regarding application procedures and gives the right amount of push and constantly keeps me on my toes as to what I must deliver and by when...”

Kanchana Karthikeyan, Duke MEM

GRE, TOEFL – First step is to take GRE and TOEFL tests

Graduate Record Examination General Test is a standardized computer based test conducted by Educational Testing Service (ETS). You can find details [here](#) but we will summarize the important points for you-

Taking a GRE General Test [costs \\$205](#) and sending your scores can cost \$25 for each school. You need to create or have a My GRE Account to [register online](#) for the computer based GRE General Test, check more details [here](#).

GRE General Test consists of six sections. The first section is always the analytical writing section involving separately timed issue and argument tasks. The next five sections consist of two [verbal reasoning](#) sections, two [quantitative reasoning](#) sections, and either an experimental or research section. These five sections may occur in any order. The experimental section does not count towards the final score but is not distinguished from the scored sections. You can skip back and forth within sections. The entire test lasts about 3 hours 45 minutes.

Structure of the Computer-based Test

Measure	Number of Questions	Allotted Time
Analytical Writing (One section with two separately timed tasks)	One "Analyze an Issue" task and one "Analyze an Argument" task	30 minutes per task
Verbal Reasoning (Two sections)	20 questions per section	30 minutes per section
Quantitative Reasoning (Two sections)	20 questions per section	35 minutes per section
Unscored¹	Varies	Varies
Research²	Varies	Varies

GRE scores remain valid for five years, so it makes sense to give it early and have enough time to focus on applications.

Tip: Do not leave GRE to be taken in last 2 months of the application deadline.

One, it increases stress and might affect your ability to score higher. Two, in case you are not happy with your score, you will have to take GRE again but you can only take GRE once a month.

Therefore, we recommend that you **take GRE at least THREE months before your application submission timelines**. For e.g. for Fall applications, try to give GRE by August of preceding year.

Latest GRE tests are being scored out of 340. Anything above 320 is considered a good score. Remember that just taking the GRE does not mean that your scores are available everywhere. When you actually apply to specific schools later, you will explicitly need to send your score report to that school. Bad news is that it costs \$25 (INR 1400) to send your score to each school. Great news is that you can send upto 4 reports free on the day you take the GRE test.

Tip: So, it makes sense to know at least 4 schools you are most likely to apply and send your scores to those when you take the test. (That is a saving of \$100 right away!)

TOEFL - The TOEFL iBT test measures your ability to use and understand English at the university level and is required for Indian students to apply to US or European schools. The test costs \$180 in India. You can register online. The scores are out of 120 and anything above 105 is considered good. If you sincerely prepare for GRE verbal section and have been going to an English medium school, you

should not need to worry too much about TOEFL. Again, its more of a formality and its score, unless too low, will never impact your application results.

What really matters?

We have seen students fretting for months on GRE. It is one thing to prepare well and it is another thing to stress about a test. Particularly, we Indians, tend to take tests too seriously. But remember that GRE is not your regular entrance exam!

“You do not pass or fail GRE or GMAT, you just show that your aptitude is above a certain level”

These tests are only a small part of the overall application process – so acing one doesn’t mean you’ll get into Harvard and bombing it doesn’t mean that you won’t get into a good school either. You simply want to score more than a baseline that is used as a filter by schools to weed out low aptitude students.

Want to know a secret? – Even if your score is low but overall profile is awesome, you can explain why you did poorly on the exam and if reason is sound enough (for e.g. You had some personal family problem, illness etc), a school will most likely not reject you on basis of low score alone.

FAQs

1. What is GRE subject test?

The GRE Subject Test is a special requirement mostly for Ph.D or for students who want to change their Undergraduate stream. It is usually optional if you are applying for MS in your field. Some say that taking it still helps improve your profile but I recommend spending the time you would on a subject test on the application contents instead.

2. Can I give GRE again if my score is low?

Yes, so give the exam without being stressed. Taking it multiple times does not put you at a disadvantage.

3. What is the best time to give GRE?

Please give it at least three months before you plan on submitting your applications.

4. Where can I give GRE in India?

Ahmedabad, Allahabad, Bangalore, Calcutta, Chennai, Gurgaon, Hyderabad, Mumbai, New Delhi and Trivandrum.

Preparation Material

The best available software to practice for GRE is POWERPREP® II software and the best part is that it is FREE. It consists of two full-length, simulated practice tests for the computer-based GRE revised General Test.

The strategy we recommend is to take the first test when you are beginning to prepare for GRE to understand where you stand. Use your scores to understand where you need to put more efforts, for e.g. do you need more work on verbal (if so, which section) or quantitative.

Next step is to prepare thoroughly, take other available tests from Barron's, Kaplan, Princeton etc. When you have taken all other tests and have taken a test date, you take the PowerPrep second test again. Note that this is the closest simulation to actual tests, so the scores that you get on PowerPrep are the best estimation of how much you are likely to score in real test. Also, even after taking the two tests, keep giving it multiple times as you get some new questions each time.

Here is our detailed strategy on [how to score 330+ in GRE](#).

Key Takeaways:

Ok, if you had to just remember 4 things from this post, remember this-

1. You need to take GRE General Test to apply for MS.
2. You should take it **THREE** months before you intend to submit the applications. For Fall applications, give GRE by July.
3. User PowerPrep software wisely to prepare for GRE. We recommend taking it once at beginning of your preparation and once just before appearing for the real test. Do sufficient research to shortlist 4 schools that you intend to apply before appearing for GRE so that you can send 4 **FREE** score reports.
4. Don't obsess over GRE scores, as long as its not too low, it doesn't matter. The only factor to consider here is the cost factor. It is expensive to take these tests, so give after ample preparation.

Shortlisting Schools For Your Applications

We are going to discuss the most important topic of your applications i.e. which schools should you be applying to. It is a very strategic decision that can determine:

- Whether you get admitted or not
- Even if you get admitted, whether you get **scholarship** or not
- What will be your **job prospects** upon graduating

As you can see, all of these are critical factors for your future.

Job hunt is a bigger topic that won't fit here but the bottomline is that there are two ways you are going to land a job interview when studying in US – on campus recruitment or applying on your own. There are some companies that will come on campus and you can apply through your school's career office. Obviously, this is easier than hunting companies and applying on their websites because an employer is going to devote more attention to students in person. So, higher the number of employers that come on campus in a school, better the job prospects will be for you.

Therefore, one of your criteria should be to find schools that have more employers coming for placements on campus. And you also don't want to end up in huge debt while studying. So you want schools that are more likely to offer at least some kind of scholarship.

In our counseling, we deeply understand an applicant's profile before helping in shortlisting schools that maximizes your career prospects later on.

Of course, if you are looking to start your own company instead of joining a job, you should take that into account instead of maximizing job prospects. If you want to learn more about how we do it, check out our [counseling packages](#) and [contact us](#).

Additionally, you might have some other personal factors while considering schools (for e.g. I have to study in Tristate area (NY, NJ, CT) because my aunt lives there). We advise not to restrict yourself and try to get into the best school you can because studying abroad is big investment both of money and time. So, you should try to get the maximum return and not restrain yourself. It's fine if your brother lives in Iowa, studying from San Francisco is still going to be better for you.

Caveats

Often local counselors make you apply to 2-3 safe schools where you are most likely to get admitted. It is fine as long as the schools are legit and will not compromise on your career prospects but sometimes, they have tie ups with not so legit schools. Most of the times, your visa will be rejected for such schools. But at times, some unfortunate students end up going to these schools only to discover later that there are zero job prospects or worse, the degree itself is not recognized. This is terrible and the only option left at that point is to come back to India with a hefty education loan and a not so worthy degree. A student should be smart enough to not fall into these traps and make sure that you are taking counseling with someone who knows about this domain and is providing genuine guidance. A good counselor will tell you where NOT to go.

Secondly, most counselors have set universities that they make all students apply to irrespective of their profiles. Have a say in school selection process and try to use your own due diligence to determine if it is worth applying to a school or not. Sometimes, its better to take a job in India and wait another year before applying instead of going to a worthless school.

Key Takeaways

Remember that school selection is the **MOST** critical part of your application and if done carelessly, can ruin all other efforts you put in GRE and application documents. Schools can largely determine your job and scholarship prospects, so it makes sense to spend enough time researching on which schools suit your financial and career needs.

Key Documents For Your Applications

Once you have shortlisted which schools and programs you will be applying to, you need to go ahead and actually fill out the applications for each of them. Most of the schools now accept online applications; all you need is good Internet access, valid email account and a credit card to pay the application fee in dollars.

Each application will ask you to fill out personal details.

This can get repetitive, so it is advised that you create a text file and store your basic information from which you can copy and paste it into each application.

You will be required to upload some specific documents as well. This includes-

- A. Writing the SOP
- B. Submitting the LOR
- C. Submitting the Resume
- D. Transcripts

Writing the Statement of Purpose (SOP)

This is one of the most important components of your application because this is the only document that is totally under your control. This is the place where you can tell your story and differentiate yourself from other candidates. Usually, you'll cover these topics in your SOP-

Background and Aspirations

In a typical SOP, you will begin with a brief background/description of yourself and what you hope to achieve through studying MS at this university.

Caveat: Don't quote cliches here as everyone is doing it! Also, avoid getting too poetic. Remember you are applying for MS.

Academic and Professional relevance

Every school wants great students who will carry its name and reputation higher. For that, you need to show your academic and professional brilliance. So, talk about the academic (or professional if you have work experience) projects that can tell them about your subject expertise.

Tip: Give more space to what you contributed and learned from that project instead of just describing it.

How many and what kind of projects you want to highlight is up to you. But we recommend expanding on at least one and show your involvement. MS is about a lot of course projects and some research. You have to demonstrate that you can not only handle it but excel at it. Similarly, talk about any papers you might have published. Research papers and project become more important for PhD and MS programs those require a thesis to be completed.

Personal Story

Admission Committee consists of people who are reading your applications. Since they handle a large volume of applications every day, it is important to make your SOP stand out or be memorable. You can stand out by being academically brilliant too but if your experience is not that distinguished, try to put forth a strong story that connects your background and aspirations and aligns it with your passion to do MS at that school.

For e.g. even if you have not published big papers or done great research projects, you could have still started a startup with couple of friends and done some relevant work through it. The startup could be as simple as a website that offers building surveys for companies who want to do some marketing research.

You could be highlighting some personal angle here such as how you came up with the concept and what were some of your lessons. Here, you can also talk about extra-curriculars especially if you excel at something such as playing in a band, professional photography (something that is more than just a hobby), blogging (may be how you applied your php programming lessons to customize wordpress) etc.

Tip: Remember, anything that helps the admission committee personnel see a face behind your application is good, as it will help him in remembering you.

Caveat: But, don't spend too much space talking personal story that is not directly relevant to the course as that alone can't get you admitted. Personal stories are good to supplement your academic/professional experience section.

Talk about how you have applied your learnings

Be it professional or personal section, remember to talk how you have applied your education or lessons into real world. This is a GREAT way to show that you'll be able to translate your classroom lessons to your professional life. A naive example but you'll get the point-

“Having learned how xyz and abc help improving the signal strength of the wireless networks in my CCNA certification course, I was excited to help the system admin at my current company do so and so”

One more-

“My brother’s company wanted to get customer feedback on one of their new products and I offered to get the surveys designed, filled and collected for them. Initially, I was doing it manually with my friends but then I realized that we can automate and package the service in a very easy-to-use way and put it online. To our surprise, we got contacted by lot of local companies in first month itself. Slowly, we iterated and developed pro packages that charged a premium for nicer result analysis. By integrating our services with right social media platforms and offline distribution channels, we had built a fully functional survey building service in six months. This gave me an inspiration to test new ideas online”

If you want more samples like this, check our [Sample SOPs for Engineers](#).

The above concludes the topics that should feature in all your SOPs (irrespective of the school). Next, you should be talking specific points about each school-

Why are you applying to this school?

This will typically discuss specific coursework, professors and research that you are interested in. This should tie up with your experience and background sections as well as your aspirations. You should have selected universities based on these anyways, so you should just be tying it all together at this point. If you are not finding good stuff to write here, you should rethink why you are applying to this school in the first place?

Caveat: Whenever you are mentioning specific professors, avoid talking about very famous ones as everyone will be talking about them. If the schools feels that your education will be hampered unless you are able to work for that professor only and if that professor is over subscribed, it might actually get you rejected even if your profile was great otherwise. So, exercise some caution when selecting professors

with whom you want to work. A good strategy is to mention a couple of them and don't make your plans look too contingent on the availability of one professor.

Why should this school admit you?

As I said, it's all about the 'fit'. Talk about why you will excel at their program and afterwards professionally. The more you can convince them on this, better your chances are.

Caveat: Don't use Templates

Please refrain from using templates given by counselors or websites. The whole point is to make your application stand out and by using a template (especially the ones where you just change your specific information), you are looking similar to thousand other applicants. In fact, try to write the first SOP yourself without seeing any sample SOPs. After writing the first draft, check out some good SOPs and tweak accordingly.

Do you know what are some common SOP mistakes? [See this](#)

Letter of Recommendation (LOR)

LOR is the **ONLY** place where a third person can help strengthen your application and you can use it to your advantage. Sometimes, a LOR alone from a highly regarded Professor can get you admitted even if rest of the application was average because LOR is that unbiased external perspective on your candidacy that the school can use to evaluate your profile and if it comes from a credible source, then the schools can place high weight on it. As such, LORs can be more important for PhD applicants in vouching for their ability to research.

Lets come to the basic points. All universities usually ask for 3 LORs – and you can choose who to get them from.

What constitutes a good LOR?

A good LOR is one that validates your candidacy by sounding genuine, vouching for your ability to excel at your target program and coming from someone who is credible.

Who should you get your LOR from?

This is very important factor and since you have a choice here, make sure you understand the difference it can make. Ideally, you would want to choose an internationally known Prof whom the schools can trust and who is ready to vouch for you! But it's easier said than done and in 95% cases, it's hard to find such a perfect recommender.

So, next, you can look for someone who is better regarded (HOD vs an Associate Prof for example) and with whom you have worked closely. If you can find someone like this, then just go for him. Understand that people at higher positions are expected to connect with more number of students and therefore their evaluation can be trustworthier as they will judge you against a broader pool. As such, their evaluating in 'top 5% people I have interacted with' holds more weightage than a lower ranked person's 'top 2% people I have worked with'.

Now, if you need to find another recommender and don't have much choice left, go for people who know you better and will sound genuine. The mistakes that students make sometimes is that they take LORs from HODs or Deans even if they haven't really worked with them. Now although the person has more credibility in general, he cannot be trusted to know the student personally and as such, any recommendation from him will lack the substance. As opposed to it, it may be **better to get LOR from someone who knows your work better and regards it highly even if he doesn't have a fancy title.**

If you are presently working, you could get one LOR from your project manager/lead depending upon whether you think he can add value to your application. The longer you have worked, better it is to ask your manager as they are more up to date on your skills and accomplishments. Sometimes, people still choose to get LOR from college Professors if they have been working less than 2 years as they don't feel comfortable disclosing their MS plans to their employer – this is fine as MS do not require professional LORs per se anyways.

Other factors to consider may be the ability of person to express since his views need to be conveyed properly to make an impact. Even if he thinks highly of you but can't convey it nicely, it may jeopardize your chances.

In case you are applying for PhD, getting a LOR from someone in your desired area of research is more important. You should get at least one LOR that evaluates your research skills. So, choose your recommenders accordingly.

Writing the actual LOR

Professors who are used to writing LORs can do the job on their own upon your request but you can still give them inputs on things that might matter for you. For e.g. you can provide them details on what you have been working on and what is your proposed area of study so that they can talk about that in the LOR.

Remember that these people are busy, so you will need to follow up and help them help you.

Sometimes recommender might ask the student to draft a letter that they can then modify. This is perfectly acceptable but students should take care that the letter gives the perspective from the recommender and not feed praises for the sake of it.

Try to provide only partial drafts and have them write the meat of it so that the letter has a unique voice. If you end up writing full drafts for every recommender, they could sound all same.

So, as a student, you can do the following to help your recommenders-

- Remind them of your accomplishments (try to split it between them based on relevance of the field and subjects)
- Brief them on your work and what/where you are applying to
- Provide them with written descriptions of projects that they can use in their letters directly
- Follow up politely so that the process gets done on time

Tip: Always, remember to keep recommenders updated on the schedule, as you don't want to miss the deadlines if they end up going on vacation in the last minute!

Resume

Resumes are often taken for granted. While applicants are busy tinkering their SOPs to perfection, everyone thinks resume is a one-night job. Well, may be not.

1. Reflect

Before you begin, gather your thoughts and decide the areas/skills in your profile that your resume should be highlighting. As an applicant, you want your resume to be coherent with rest of your application. So, while your experiences, education and background are factual information, what to highlight is a matter of judgment.

For e.g. if you are showing interest in research/applying for PhD etc, your highlight should be on your research projects and publications. Similarly, if you are applying for a MCS kind of program (geared towards landing corporate jobs upon graduation), your focus should be on professional skills, industry experience etc.

2. Put only the relevant content:

- A. **DO NOT INCLUDE** an objective section or a references section. And, you should **NOT** mention your gender or marital status.
- B. Full Name and Contact Information – address, phone number and email
- C. Education – List in reverse chronological order your college and high school information (no certification or non-school education should be listed here).
- D. Related Experience or Work Experience/Research Experience/Internships – Any full-time/part-time work should be mentioned under one/two of these categories.
- E. Publications – especially important for PhD applicants.
- F. Academic Projects/Coursework/Special Skills – This should list projects, skills and coursework relevant to your application including final year projects (if not mentioned under internships etc). Skills can include any computer/software skill or something relevant to your field.

- G. Honors – List any academic or extra curricular certifications, awards, scholarships etc.
- H. Extra-curricular – List your non-trivial hobbies/interests/activities/leadership positions. Try to mention only uncommon and interesting things.

3. Use the appropriate language.

Use phrases instead of full sentences and write in first person. Never use passive voice. Resume is all about mentioning your accomplishments and what you are capable of. Keeping this in mind, every accomplishment (under projects, work experience, education or extra curricular) should be listed as a bullet point. Each bullet point should be an action phrase and likely begin with a verb. It is important to quantify your achievements wherever possible. Thus, your phrases might look like-

- implemented a new algorithm that reduced the market lag by 65%
- helped increase affiliate revenue by 75% in 2 months
- led a team of 3 students to revamp the annual magazine of our college and improved the circulation by 40%

4. Use good formatting

Intelligent formatting can make the resume more readable without running too long.

- A. Don't use dense blocks of text anywhere as they are difficult to read. Use bullet points.
- B. Keep balanced amount of white spaces. Too much and you are wasting space, too less and you make it unreadable.
- C. Use standard fonts. We recommend Book Antiqua/Palatino 10 pt mostly. Do print your final version and see how it looks on paper.

Resume length should NOT exceed 1.5 pages

Want a perfect resume template? [Download the one we designed](#)

Apply By The Deadline

This is it! You have taken all the tests and prepared all the documents by now. It is just a matter of submitting the applications.

Double and triple check your information before hitting the final SUBMIT button. Keep track of the LORs and official GRE scores that should reach the school on time.

After that, sit back and relax. The results will start pouring in March and we are sure you will make it!

Get into your Dream Schools with Scholar Strategy

Nistha Tripathi started Scholar Strategy in 2013. The org has worked with 500+ applicants and helped them into their top program choices such as Harvard, Stanford, MIT, UIUC, Cornell, CMU, Berkeley and so on. She is always available on **nistha@scholarstrategy.com**

Join our [Facebook group](#) for help with scholarship and internship hunt in Grad Schools

Subscribe to our [YouTube channel](#) for stories of how our clients got into Facebook, Tesla and so on