

# APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL IN TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

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## SUMMARY

- Provides guidance on applying to Master's and PhD programs
- Provides tables listing current graduate programs in technical communication, organized by state

If you are considering applying to graduate school in technical communication, for a Master's or PhD, I have written this article for you. After reading graduate applications for the last three years as part of Texas Tech University's Technical Communication and Rhetoric faculty, I thought that applicants—especially practitioners who don't have a faculty member readily available—might benefit from mentoring during the rhetorically complex application process. This article provides the same advice I give my own students who are applying, and I have supplemented it with advice from technical communication faculty members from other programs.

This article explains the entire process of applying for both Master's and PhD programs and provides strategies for strengthening your application. It also includes lists of graduate technical communication program names, degrees, and due dates, organized by location of the program, plus distance programs, so you can locate potential programs. In short, I've tried to provide every piece of information you will need to begin writing your graduate school application.

## WHY DOES OUR FIELD NEED ITS OWN ARTICLE ON GRAD SCHOOL APPLICATIONS?

The literature currently available on graduate applications falls into several categories. There is an enormous number of short how-to articles online and in print about applying to graduate school. These articles generally focus on writing the personal statement, and are sometimes helpful as a final checklist, but rarely provide enough information to offer substantive guidance for writing. Two good short handouts are from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Writing Center (2006) and Purdue's Online Writing Lab (2006), a handout which summarizes a much longer book about applications by Stelzer (1997). The second category of literature on the topic consists of books that discuss succeeding in graduate school broadly (of which applying is a chapter or two), which can be helpful if the applicant isn't intimidated by the sheer volume of information. The final main category are books that provide advice for medical school, law school, MBA programs, and humanities applications together, often blurring their distinctions and providing advice that doesn't fit each field equally.

It's common for these different publications to provide overly general, incomplete, or incorrect advice. About.com incorrectly advises applicants to "mention any hobbies," without pointing out that the hobbies should relate to your graduate study, and offers overly general advice like "be yourself" (2006). Another recommends that applicants should "do a bit of research if necessary to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs" (Stelzer 1997, 12)

when thorough research is necessary. A third declares that the personal statement has two main purposes, instead of the four provided here (Barnes 2000, 123).

Finally, some publications provide spectacularly awful advice, such as a recent article on Essayedge.com: “Create Mystery or Intrigue in your Introduction. It is not necessary or recommended that your first sentence give away the subject matter. Raise questions in the minds of the admissions officers to force them to read on. Appeal to their emotions to make them relate to your subject matter” (2006).

Even when an applicant can sort through the contradictory, incomplete, and improper advice, what remains doesn't always apply to the field of technical communication. For example, a book that I found useful in my own graduate studies is *Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a Master's or Ph.D* (Peters 1997). The chapters which urge thinking about the entire process are very useful, but all of the information doesn't fit technical communication, such as “apply to approximately ten schools” (Peters 1997, 66).

Much of the advice about applying to graduate school is for the fields of law or business, for people trying to distinguish themselves from enormous applicant pools. *Real Essays for College & Grad School* suggests the application needs to “differentiate you from the dozens or hundreds of other competent, high-achieving individuals” (McKinney 2000, 23). One such book of advice, *How to Write a Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School*, warns applicants not to write what application committees have “read a thousand times before” (Stelzer 1997, 8).

In contrast, technical communication admissions committees haven't read anything a thousand times before. STC had at its largest only 21,789 members (Society for Technical Communication 2006). The academic technical communication community is even smaller; the current membership of the Association of the Teachers of Technical Writing is 466 (Karis 2006). As a result of our field's smaller size, some of the techniques advised in applying to other disciplines—telling personal anecdotes that provide a punchline at the end of the statement, or showing drama in a life story (Stelzer 1997, 7)—seem disingenuous or naive when writing a technical communication graduate application. With a smaller application pool, application review committees have more time to read the application thoroughly, and therefore drawing attention with gimmicks isn't necessary.

As a result of reviewing the literature available on writing graduate applications, it became apparent that a comprehensive, field specific, easily accessible, article-length guide to writing graduate applications could be of help to our field; I attempt to provide it here. In addition, members of the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, responding to my request to our listserv, have offered their input on the application process. This advice is incorporated throughout the article.

When seeking advice beyond this article, by all means read other literature published on the application process, but determine if the advice is appropriate for our field. It might also be helpful to envision applications as speeches, and note the differences in techniques that might make a speech stand out in a group of 30 versus a group of 3000.

## **APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL**

Overall, applying for a graduate degree is very little like applying for an undergraduate degree. Graduate degree applications are much more rhetorically complex, demanding previous

knowledge of the field, either through coursework or through experience. In order to write a strong application, applicants must understand the purpose of the degree they are applying for.

### **Purpose of a Master's**

A Master's degree is primarily a content, skills, and theory degree. Master's degrees are generally about 30 credits, and take approximately 2 years to complete on a full-time basis.

The Master's degree in Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication of Iowa State "features a wide range of courses in the history, theory, and pedagogy of rhetoric and writing; in communication theory and professional document analysis, design, and production and on a variety of special topics. An internship in professional communication is also available. Study in this specialization prepares students to teach business and technical writing, teach composition at the community college level, write proposals and grants, produce manuals and in-house publications, and edit various kinds of documents" (Iowa State 2006).

At North Carolina State University, the Master's of Science in Technical Communication "strives to prepare professional communicators for a variety of careers that involve the relationships between people and technical systems. Such careers include those in web design and development, software and hardware documentation, industrial training and development, medical communication, environmental and agricultural communication, technology transfer, organizational information management, and human-computer interface design. In many areas, a Master of Science degree in Technical Communication helps qualify professionals to move into management positions" (North Carolina State University 2006).

As these two examples demonstrate, Master's degree programs concentrate on enabling degree holders to begin teaching at the community college level or advance in the duties of a technical writer, becoming managers of technical communication processes. While research is introduced in the Master's degree, it is not generally a primary focus. Strong applications need to show an understanding of what a Master's degree will enable the applicant to learn and accomplish. The overall goal of the Master's application is to demonstrate a readiness to advance in knowledge of the field, often with a specific sub-interest such as usability testing, editing, or single-sourcing documents.

### **Purpose of a PhD**

Many people misunderstand the purpose of a PhD. They know that professors often have one; they know there's a dissertation; and they know it's the terminal degree. However, many applicants don't realize just how much emphasis is placed on acquiring research methods and producing research studies in the PhD. The PhD is primarily a research degree, which enables graduates not just to use research in their own practice, but also to produce it.

The PhD prepares people for advanced managerial or research positions in industry or tenure-line academic positions, which usually mandate that 40% of the position is to produce original research, a key component to earning tenure (hence the adage, "Publish or perish"). In addition to research training, PhD students receive training and gain experience in teaching, often receiving tuition for teaching what are called *service courses*, which are introductory courses taken by students from majors across the university.

This emphasis on research can be seen in descriptions of PhD programs in technical communication. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's PhD in Communication and Rhetoric defines

its mission as “to enable students to make a contribution with rigor, depth, and creativity on issues related to communication in technologically-mediated contexts” (2006).

Texas Tech’s description of its PhD in Technical Communication and Rhetoric states, “the PhD qualifies people to conduct independent research by various methods and thus to contribute to knowledge. The PhD is usually a qualification for a professorial position in a university. The aims of study are broad knowledge of the literature on technical communication and rhetoric, specialized knowledge of some aspect of technical communication or rhetoric as reflected in the dissertation research, and ability to conduct ongoing independent research using one or more methods” (2006).

The PhD program is also essentially an apprenticeship program. It consists of approximately 2 full-time years of course work, six months to one year of studying for comprehensive exams, and then the writing of a dissertation under the guidance of a committee, led by a committee chair. The process generally takes a minimum of 4 years, and students finishing in five, six, or seven years is not unusual. When the PhD is obtained, the student is then ready to become a faculty member and begin supervising the entire process for others.

The overall goal of the PhD application is to demonstrate that the applicant is ready to become a scholar, a producer of research. This involves showing a mastery of knowledge about technical communication, an understanding of the nature of the degree, an ability to do graduate-level study, and a research interest.

## **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE MASTER’S AND PHD APPLICATION**

When I explain the main difference between the Master’s degree and the PhD to my students, I say that the Master’s prepares them to consume research, and the PhD prepares them to produce it. It’s quite a difference in perspective.

When asked about the differences between the two applications, Jerry Alred, a Professor at the University of Milwaukee-Wisconsin and Graduate Coordinator of their Professional Writing Program, wrote: “Many of the same elements are required for the MA and PhD. However, for the PhD, factors such as the ‘statement of purpose,’ the recommendation letters, the GRE, and the transcripts become more significant. We have many applicants to the MA program that plan to be professional writers, so their applications are often reviewed with that goal in mind. The writing samples in those cases may be functional documents. Most PhD students plan to teach and pursue research, so more scholarly writing samples are appropriate” (2006).

Dorothy Winsor, Chair of the Admissions Committee for Iowa State’s Programs in Rhetoric and Professional Communication, answered, “An MA is often a practical degree. Students intend to finish the degree and then go to work. They simply need to show they’re interested in doing that . . . A PhD is a research degree. Students have to demonstrate they can manage the theoretical and research aspects of the program” (2006).

To my students, I generally give the same advice for writing both types of applications, and it is geared toward the more complicated PhD application—such as discussing a research interest. I think that if a Master’s application can achieve the sophistication of a PhD application, it becomes more competitive. However, in response to the perceptions reported above and the direct urgings of another colleague, I differentiated my advice between Master’s and PhD applications in this article. Personally, I’d advise you to write the most sophisticated Master’s application you can, especially if you plan to continue to pursue a PhD.

Not all advice on graduate applications agrees. In this article, I have been careful to delineate what is my advice versus the advice of my respondents. If you ask other faculty members for their opinions on the application process, it's likely we'll overlap but still have points of disagreement (for example, one respondent declared that it's not possible to give advice on applying to Master's programs because they differ across the country). There isn't one absolute answer, so follow the advice that makes sense to you.

## **CHOOSING PROGRAMS TO APPLY TO**

Choosing programs to apply to is a very personal decision. This article contains two tables listing PhD and Master's programs in technical communication (see Tables 1 and 2). They were compiled by obtaining info from every program in the STC database, adding programs found through web searches, comparing the list against another by another researcher, and finally by submitting the list to the Association for the Teachers of Technical Writing listserv to ask technical communication academics to verify their information.

These tables are organized by state; programs with distance offerings are marked with an asterisk. New programs are starting every year, so for the most updated list, look at the academic programs database linked from the main STC webpage ([www.stc.org](http://www.stc.org)).

When choosing a program, Dorothy Winsor recommends that you “look for a program that matches your needs. In my opinion, the most important thing is the faculty. Different schools can have classes with the same name, but they're not the same program” (2006).

Generally, applicants apply to more than one program. There is no rule about how many programs you should apply to. Do look at each program's website before you begin applying and contact the school to ask about resources for the application process—some provide extensive resources. At the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Jerry Alred notes, “Our department has a packet of information that our English graduate office sends and I suggest they contact some specific advisors in our Graduate School. I suggest they visit our program and faculty Web sites. I also like to connect applicants with students currently in our program, especially our ‘graduate student representative’ who is able to give them solid, practical advice. Beyond that, I ask about their interests and give them more specific contacts related to those interests” (2006). Old Dominion even arranges a gathering each year for all applicants considering applying for the PhD to mentor them (Romberger 2006).

How many programs should you apply to? I advise for a Master's degree, choose six programs to read about and three to apply to. For a PhD, when your future career depends much more upon the quality of the program, and funding becomes more important for many students, I'd recommend researching ten schools and applying to five.

## **THE APPLICATION REVIEW PROCESS**

It can be helpful when writing an application to have a mental model of the review process. These processes vary, but generally graduate applications are submitted by applicants either to the graduate school of the university or directly to the department. If submitted to the graduate school, the graduate school coordinates the filing of all the parts of the application and then sends the completed application to the department for review. If applications are submitted directly to the department, often a departmental administrative assistant will compile the files along with the director of graduate studies, who shepherds the files through the review process.

From here, the procedure varies further by department. The applications may be reviewed by all the faculty members or a specific admissions committee. Generally, the applications are classified into accept and decline groups, and the accepted applications are limited—by how many new students the program can take, or by how many promising candidates apply. Finally, the accepted applications are often ranked for funding opportunities both within the department and the university.

## **YOUR AUDIENCE**

The admissions committee has a more complex job, however, than just accepting the applicants with the strongest applications. The prestige of a department and its programs comes from two sources: its research and its graduates. Graduate instruction, especially supervising the dissertation phase for PhDs, is very effort-intensive. The faculty reviewers of applications—your audience—are always thinking about the following questions when evaluating potential students.

### **Is this applicant prepared for graduate study?**

Admissions reviewers are concerned about applicants' abilities to perform graduate work and, more importantly, complete the degree. Only a certain number of positions are available in any given year, and usually only a percentage of those come with funding. The program's goal is to graduate students who can make a contribution to the field, to increase the program's reputation and prestige of the field by producing useful, productive Master's and PhD holders. Students who do not graduate use up a portion of the department's limited funding and effort.

You can show your readiness for graduate study by demonstrating throughout the application that you have technical communication experience to build on and that you will flourish in an academic environment.

### **Does the applicant fit this program?**

Reviewers also need to determine if the applicant's needs can be answered by the program. If an applicant states an interest in a topic the department doesn't specialize in, he or she is likely to be turned down, even if the qualifications are strong—which is why someone can be a top pick of one program and on the rejection list at another. This possibility will be eliminated by performing research on the program and connecting your needs with the program's features in the personal statement.

### **Does the incoming class have balance?**

The committee also needs to make sure that no single faculty member becomes overburdened by supervising too many dissertations. The incoming group of students needs to be balanced across faculty members and overall topics of interest. From the applicant's standpoint, there isn't much to do to counter this. Realize, however, that another year the same topic might be more open in the department you applied to.

## **WHEN TO APPLY?**

If you look at Tables 1 and 2, you'll notice that programs have from one to five application dates including international application deadlines. If you need financial aid, submit by the deadline specified for aid. If there is no special date, try to apply for the fall admission, when most programs have the most funds available (because they're offered in year-long packages).

If your employer is paying for your degree, I still recommend you apply for fall admission. Incoming students often form friendships while taking the same introductory classes. These

relationships are one of the most significant benefits of graduate school, for professional networking and social connection. If you begin in spring, naturally, you can still form bonds with your classmates, but because it's less likely that you will have all the same classes, it might take a bit more effort.

## **WRITING THE APPLICATION**

Applying to graduate school is an involved process. With enough time, it can be relatively enjoyable: thinking about what you'd like to learn, reading descriptions of courses you might take, and envisioning job opportunities the degrees open up. On an abbreviated schedule, applying to graduate school can be extremely stressful. It takes a minimum of two months, and four to six months is better; one guide recommends a year and a half (Peters 1997, 68). Tricky applications would take longer than four to six months. Starting early is always beneficial—schools will simply keep your information filed until the next review session. As Dorothy Winsor noted, “My primary advice is to start early gathering and sending all materials. Everything takes longer than you think it will” (2006).

## **PARTS OF A GRADUATE APPLICATION**

Graduate applications usually consist of a few forms, transcripts, graduate record exam (GRE<sup>®</sup>) scores, a personal statement, a writing sample, and recommendation letters. This section describes each portion of the application and recommends strategies for creating a strong application. Start working on your pieces early and make sure your last name appears in all electronic file names and in a header or footer, even if the document is one page.

### **Transcripts**

Transcripts will be the easiest portion of the application—simply order them from your previous school or schools. However, request them early. It sometimes takes a few weeks for them to be sent out (most schools do offer a rush service for an extra fee), and follow up with the school to which you are applying to ensure that they arrived.

### **Graduate Record Exam (GRE<sup>®</sup>) scores**

The graduate record exam, commonly called the GRE<sup>®</sup>, is a test created by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) (2006). It is divided into three sections: verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and analytical writing. It's offered electronically at testing centers located across the country, which can be located on the ETS website. It's costly (\$130 at the time of this writing) and takes three hours.

The GRE tests “skills that have been acquired over a long period of time and that are not related to any specific field of study” (Educational Testing Service 2006). The important part of that description is “not related to any specific field of study”—meaning that items on the GRE must be applicable to all applicants to graduate school. It doesn't test on any skills beyond what each student can reasonably be expected to have completed as an undergraduate or even in high school. For example, the math in the quantitative section tests “basic concepts of arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and data analysis” (Educational Testing Service 2006). If it tested calculus, then undergraduate math majors would be at an advantage. ETS, the company that distributes the GRE, solved this problem by offering subject-specific tests for certain majors and the general test for all graduate school applicants. Technical communication has no subject-specific GRE, so you only need to prepare for the general test.

However, since the GRE tests high school or undergraduate skills, it's likely that it has been a while since you have seen them last. And even if your geometry or algebra skills are up to date,

you probably haven't used them in a test situation recently, much less answered a formal logic question in a timed situation. The most important piece of advice here is—study for it. Yes, study for it. Stephanie Turner, Director of the Professional Writing and Technical Communication Master's Program at University of Houston-Downtown, for this article, responded with the same advice: "Study for the GRE, yes, really, I mean it—take a few practice tests" (2006).

The ETS website has free study materials, and paid materials from many companies are available as review books, software, or even complete classes. Much more information about content and studying is available at the ETS website, [www.ets.org](http://www.ets.org). Study supplies can be found online and in nearly every bookstore.

You may ask yourself if preparing for the test is really important when you probably won't take another standardized test in your life, and the GRE doesn't relate directly to your graduate studies. Some schools are considering dropping it from their application requirements, and others don't require it at all. However, if the school requires the GRE, the applicant *must* do the best he or she can to build the strongest application possible. These applications are used not only for admission, but also to determine who are the strongest applicants, which in turn determines who is offered funding. So please study.

### **Personal statement**

A personal statement is part of nearly every graduate application. Different schools give it different names—a letter of background and goals, a letter of intent, a statement of interest. In my experience, it is by far the portion of the application that applicants can improve. It is usually 1-2 pages, often given in word counts or ranges, such as 600 words maximum or 750 words maximum, or 600-750 words. Sometimes the applications provide specific questions that must be answered, but more frequently, the prompt is broad.

James Madison University's Technical and Scientific Communication program simply requires that applicants include "a background and goals statement that explains how the Master of Arts or Master of Science program relates to the applicant's prior experience and how it fits into his or her long-range professional goals" (2006).

The University of New Mexico asks applicants to include a letter of intent, which they describe as "your opportunity to tell the program faculty about yourself. It need not be extremely detailed, but should provide information about your areas of interest, previous experience, and goals" (2006).

Other prompts are more detailed, such as this one from Miami University (2006):

This statement is a very important part of your application. You may organize the statement in any way you choose; however, it must answer these questions:

\* How do your undergraduate study, your work experience, and your professional goals qualify you to study in the MTSC program? It is helpful to make sure you understand our program before you respond to this question.

\* Why are you interested in the MTSC program and in the profession of technical and scientific communication?

\* What type of work do you want to do after graduation? (Be as specific as possible at this time in your schooling and career.)

Although the prompts are often simple, the graduate personal statement is one of the most rhetorically difficult pieces of writing most people will ever create.

The personal statement has four main purposes:

- To show that you are a serious applicant
- To show that you can write and think well
- To show why you like that *specific* program
- To explain any problems in an application (low test scores, lack of experience, poor GPA)

### **Show that you are a serious applicant**

Graduate school, as we discussed in the purposes of the M.A. and PhD degree sections above, requires more from its applicants than undergraduate degrees. Strong applicants show that they are emerging scholars and advanced practitioners, possessing knowledge of the field, capable of completing graduate work with enthusiasm and minimal supervision.

**Show an investment in the field.** Master's and PhD degrees are based on the expectation that they are *additional* degrees—obtained in addition to one you already hold. Your personal statement should mention your previous education, but be careful not to simply restate the names of your degrees and when they were obtained. Share additional information that is persuasive, such as a problem at work that prompted you to seek out an additional degree or being able to work with a certain researcher which led you to graduate school.

Also show your investment in the field outside of classwork. This is especially important for applicants who don't have academic experience in technical communication, which is common in our field. Years of professional employment, conference presentations, and professional memberships all show a dedication to your field of study.

**Show an investment in scholarship.** Showing years of experience in the technical communication field is excellent, but strong applicants—particularly for the PhD, less so for the Master's—also show their commitment to the scholarship of technical communication, by teaching a class, by having recent conference presentations, or by mentioning recent scholarly books and articles they have read.

**Show your understanding of the nature of graduate school.** To do this, applicants don't need to restate the nature of the degrees. For Master's applicants, it's as simple as explaining the coursework and perhaps research areas that are your focus, and the goals you hope to achieve with the help of additional study.

For PhD programs, it's imperative that a research interest be included, and ideally it should be narrowed down to a dissertation topic, especially for the most competitive programs. It may seem odd for a program to ask for a topic before the coursework has even begun. However, the admissions committees' job is to determine who is prepared for graduate school and whose needs can be answered by the program; they can't do that if they don't know an applicant's research interests. The dissertation topic proposed in the personal statement isn't a written contract. If you choose a different topic during your two years of coursework, that's perfectly fine. (If you change your focus later, you will know enough about the program to pick a topic that can be supported by your department).

**Show, don't tell.** I like to tell my students that persuasion happens in the details. Statements that include sentences like, "My organizational skills are very strong" aren't impressive. But a sentence like, "For the last three years, I have managed an average of 8-12 product

documentation projects per year, cooperating with 23 SMEs” is much more persuasive. If you share what you’ve accomplished, the admissions committee can pick the adjectives to describe you.

### **Show why you want to attend graduate school at that *specific* program**

Most programs prompt applicants to answer why they want to attend graduate school. Being specific about what you can gain and citing specific details about the program is the best response. Mentioning what you hope to do with your new knowledge—become a manager, for example—is also useful. Do avoid mention of higher pay. While certainly it’s a nice benefit of graduate study, it’s rarely the most persuasive reason to an academic application committee.

In addition to why you want to go to graduate school generally, it’s very important to mention why you want to attend that particular program. Graduate schools know that applicants apply to more than one school. We expect it and encourage our students to apply to more than one. However, we want to know why you actually want to come to our school as opposed to any school, because then we know you are more likely to accept our admission and succeed in the program.

To achieve these objectives, read everything you can find on the program, department, and faculty. If you’re going to spend 2 or more years of your life in this program, learning from this faculty, you need to know what they’re about. What is their emphasis? Do they have any special programs? What are the recent publications by the faculty? Have the faculty received teaching and research awards? Does it have an online program that will give you flexibility in study? How do their graduates do on the job market?

Naturally, websites are excellent sources to begin your search, from the program page to the faculty members’ homepages, which often include CVs (academic resumes which include publications). From there, branch out to reading a few of the faculty member’s publications, especially if you hope to be mentored by that person. Take notes of what impresses you so you can use it in the personal statement.

It is perfectly appropriate to mention faculty members by name in your personal statement. For example, if you can write that you would like to help Kirk St. Amant in his recent cross-cultural communication research, it immediately shows an application committee three things. First, you’ve done some research on our program. Second, you found a specific faculty member you would like to work with. And third, you have some idea of what your research area will be. Not a bad achievement for one sentence. Name-dropping might seem obsequious, but—especially in a PhD program—you are essentially apprenticing yourself to faculty members. It’s appropriate that you can mention who you would like to apprentice with and why.

After a few hours of reading, if you aren’t excited about the program, don’t apply. If what they’re doing doesn’t interest you, you won’t be happy there.

### **Show you can write and think well**

A personal statement needs to be grammatically perfect and at least slightly sophisticated in style. If it is full of grammatical errors, is unclear, or shows the applicant to be naïve, it will very likely cost the applicant admission. Multiple revisions and feedback from others—especially those who have written a graduate application or a faculty member who often reads them—will help greatly. Personal statements often take more than ten revisions.

### **Explain any problems in the application**

If there are any weaknesses in an application, the personal statement is also the place to explain them. The key to explaining all of these weaknesses is to *briefly* describe the problem and explain how the applicant has been working on fixing it.

Some weaknesses can be explained. If I'm reviewing a strong application with average or slightly low GRE scores, for example, I will likely still be willing to vote for that applicant's admission. After all, I know my students won't take another standardized test in graduate school. (Low scores, however, indicate to me that the applicant either didn't prepare for the test or doesn't have the skills it tests for, and that is a problem).

Low undergraduate GPAs due to one or even two semesters of low grades are also common and not always a major weakness. Family members or the applicants themselves can become ill, or sometimes students have trouble adjusting their freshman year. An applicant in this situation should briefly explain the situation and point out how it was an aberration or an early problem that the student overcame. And low GPAs matter even less the longer the applicant has been out of school. Overall, review committees know that life can interfere with studies. We expect effort, not perfection. However, if an applicant offers no explanation of a weakness in the application, the committee is likely to assume that the grades (or test scores, etc.) reflect the applicant's true abilities (see the Low GPA section later for more strategies).

A few tips on explaining a weakness—do not dwell. The entire explanation should be three sentences or less, and it should be embedded in the middle of the statement. The opening and closing paragraphs of the statement should have a positive, focused note.

## **ATTRIBUTES OF WEAK PERSONAL STATEMENTS**

In my questions to the Association of the Teachers of Technical Writing listserv, I asked members about the attributes of the worst and best personal statements they had ever seen (the best are reported in the next section). One respondent stated, "The worst statements are those which seemed 'canned' or completely uninformed about our program or aimed at another major area (such as literature)." Another observed, "Some of the worst personal statements that I have read go into a lengthy narration on a family member's sacrifice to give them opportunities (e.g., get an education in the US), thereby often completely neglecting the telling of how or why they want to pursue studies in a particular field."

One respondent noted, "The worst are the ones are from applicants who are sending a generic statement that has nothing to do with our program, that shows no interest graduate study in technical and scientific communication and that say outright things such as—I don't like my job/career/major and thought I'd try technical writing. I hear there are jobs available here."

Another recalled this statement: "The absolute worst personal statement I ever read was written by a philosophy major (though I have nothing against philosophy majors!) whose passion for the life of the mind was seriously thwarted by his apparently total lack of knowledge of technical communication and inability to write clearly and concisely. It was the most enthusiastic fluff I've ever read."

## **ATTRIBUTES OF STRONG PERSONAL STATEMENTS**

Strong personal statements, on the other hand, "are a good writing sample" and "show the person is a good match for the program" (Winsor 2006). These statements "reflect smart thinking, good writing, and a sense of having reviewed our program and what it offers" (Alfred

2006).

Stephanie Turner, Director of the Professional Writing and Technical Communication Master's Program at University of Houston-Downtown, wrote that strong personal statements provide this information: "What kinds of writing and problem-solving you do best and enjoy the most; what appeals to you about our program; how your undergraduate degree in X can be useful to you in a master's program in technical communication; what work experiences you value the most and why; what you see yourself doing after finishing a master's degree here" (2006).

Linn Bekins, Associate Professor and Director of the Advanced Certificate Program in Technical and Scientific Writing at San Diego State University, remarked, "The best personal statements that I have read *reflect* on their relevant experience(s). That is to say that they clearly articulate what they have *learned* from specific experience(s). . . Personal statements need to be tailored to clearly articulate the applicant's motivations for entering a field and to highlight that individual's potential contributions to a field" (2006).

Strong personal statements provide the applicant's chance to explain his or her thought processes, and it's the best place to be persuasive, especially when making the change from one field to another. One respondent remembered, "A strong [personal statement] I recall was from an applicant who was transforming himself from a poet/literary scholar to a workplace writer because of a job he had that was opening his mind to the ways he could apply his considerable writing skills to practical problem solving in the workplace. This was not an easy transformation for him to make, but his commitment and ability to follow through on it were obvious in his personal statement!" (Turner 2006).

### **Writing the personal statement**

Achieving these four purposes of a personal statement is very difficult. Even excellent writers can become nervous and turn out weak first drafts; this is very common and reflects in no way upon the applicant's writing skills. Most graduate applications take more than 10 drafts before they're good enough to submit. That's why having a good amount of time available to write one is essential; they're stressful enough to write without writing them under a short deadline.

It's also common for the writer not to be able to determine where revision needs to occur. Sometimes someone else needs to smash it apart (as I say in class), before it can be put back together. This is where former faculty members, ones who can also write your recommendation letters, can be helpful. Colleagues with graduate degrees are also helpful. Help from any good writer is better than writing it with no feedback.

To help you along in this difficult process, here is very specific advice about writing the personal statement.

**Be careful with personal anecdotes, clichés, and quotations.** Many pieces of online advice urge applicants to use a personal anecdote in a graduate personal statement. Here's an example from Accepted.com, "In answering the essay questions, use anecdotes when possible. These short stories illustrate points, reveal desirable qualities, engage the reader, distinguish you from your competition, and make your writing come alive. I like to call the application essay or personal statement a human interest story about you. Human interest stories, which fill the popular media, are full of anecdotes and personal elements. They are hold [sic] the readers [sic] attention and persuade. That's exactly what you want your essay to do" (2006).

Another example comes from an article featured on [essayedge.com](http://essayedge.com), entitled “Tips for Writing Your Graduate School Essay,” “**Be Original**. Even seemingly boring essay topics can sound interesting if creatively approached. If writing about a gymnastics competition you trained for, do not start your essay: “I worked long hours for many weeks to train for XXX competition.” Consider an opening like, “Every morning I awoke at 5:00 to sweat, tears, and blood as I trained on the uneven bars hoping to bring the state gymnastics trophy to my hometown.”

That advice is sophomoric for a graduate application. My advice is to avoid anecdotes—they quickly turn saccharine and are extremely difficult to write without using clichés. However, when I mention “anecdotes” I’m not referring to thoughtful explanations of professional or academic experience that relate to future studies (which absolutely can and should be included)—I’m referring to the types of anecdotes mentioned in the quoted advice above, cutesy stories that would be only barely passable in an undergraduate application. There is some research to support my advice: one recent study looked at the effectiveness of writing techniques in medical school applications. The application evaluator noted that he finds opening hooks “often manipulative . . . and therefore usually not effective” (Bekins, et al. 2004). If you are determined to use an anecdote, however, please make sure it has to do with your area of study, reason for attending graduate school, or a positive, desirable trait.

In addition to anecdotes, clichés should also be avoided. Most practitioner applicants avoid clichés well, but there are common ones I have seen frequently that appear in early drafts:

- “My grandmother/grandfather/former teacher/dad once told me . . .”
- “I’ve never been satisfied with what I already know.”
- “I’m really motivated to achieve my dreams.”
- “I really want to help people . . .”
- “I’ve always loved technical communication . . .”

Clichés are a problem because they don’t help prove an applicant’s writing skill or sophistication. Many clichés point out attributes that we expect all graduate applicants to have—motivation, desire for knowledge, love of the field. In a discussion of literature graduate applications focusing ineffectively on the applicant’s love of literature, two researchers observed: “It is not that love of literature is no longer considered a good thing, but that in a graduate application this love is taken for granted and therefore doesn’t score any points: it’s a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for entrance into graduate school” (Graff and Hoberek, 1999, p. 244).

Quotations are also difficult to use well. It’s quite easy for a quotation to take up a large paragraph of the personal statement, which makes it difficult for the committee to evaluate the applicant’s writing abilities because the words are not the applicant’s own. I recommend avoiding them. However, for those applicants who are determined to use them, quotations from members of the field would be more useful than those of political leaders.

Indulging in anecdotes, clichés, and quotations can make a writer seem naïve rather than an advanced member of our field. Naïveté in personal statements was recently mentioned in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, which reflected on one person’s experience as a graduate admissions director: “It wasn’t that difficult to deny the many applications of perfectly bright students whose personal statements began with high-flown rhetoric concerning their love for the discipline and their success in school from an early age. That kind of personal statement tends to correlate with half-baked examples of scholarly work, barely revised from undergraduate classes. Those students write well and think clearly, but don’t really understand the nature of graduate study” (Midler, p. C2).

**Don't share too much demographic information.** Perhaps inspired by online advice that tells applicants that personal statements are a chance to “get to know you,” or in an effort to convince reviewers that they are serious about graduate school, some applicants have shared inappropriate demographic information.

For example, one application explained how the applicant's partner had terminal cancer and the surviving applicant could not support the family without advancing to a job that required a graduate degree. Naturally, we reviewers were sympathetic, but we were also *really* uncomfortable. Because the entire personal statement was dedicated to personal information, we couldn't evaluate the applicant's potential as a scholar.

Reviewers actually don't need to know anything about applicants personally—not marital status, sexual orientation, family size, personal situation, etc. (professional and academic experience is not what I mean by personal information, and should be highlighted). Most of the forms that request the limited personal information that we do ask for (for my university, it's gender and ethnicity) are from the graduate schools themselves so they can keep track of diversity statistics. Other than that, we actually prefer not to know so we can be as objective as possible.

The only time to share personal information is when it relates to your scholarly interests. If you are bilingual or lived and worked in another country, for example, and that skill has led you to want to research cross-cultural communication, by all means mention it.

**Create a positive tone.** Since the application is all that the reviewing committee usually knows about the applicant, strive to create a positive tone. Never complain. If an applicant complained in a professional application, when restraint should be at its utmost, what is he or she like in person? One study of undergraduate applications found empirical support for positive traits demonstrated in a personal statement correlating with a higher chance of admission (Hatch et al., 1993). Create a positive tone that represents you as a scholar.

**Make your language match your motivation.** Strong personal statements talk about why the applicants want a degree in the context of what they can learn from it and what it will enable them to do—research, teach, manage more difficult projects.

Weak personal statements describe what they hope to learn from a graduate degree, but it doesn't match the scope of the degree. For example, I've read an application from someone who was applying to learn how to make brochures. While this is certainly a result of a Master's degree, it's a small goal that could be fulfilled by taking a few courses instead of two years' worth.

Weaker personal statements state that a degree is desired because a topic “interests them.” Similarly, undertaking a graduate degree because “I feel it's time” is not persuasive. Being interested or feeling it's time is not likely to keep an applicant pursuing graduate study for the years Master's and PhD programs take. While applicants ought to be interested and feel it's time to pursue a degree, those shouldn't be the only—or strongest—reasons they do. To strengthen your application, use reasons and verbs that match your motivation.

**Follow directions.** Most application packets provide instructions about how long personal statements should be and if they should answer specific questions. Applicants should not go over the recommended length; it shows the admissions committee that they can't follow directions. Similarly, applicants shouldn't go drastically under the length (such as more than

20% shorter). Admissions committees provide applicants with a length guide to help them determine how much information to include. Provide what they've requested.

**Get help.** If you have relationships with faculty members, have more than one go over it. They've read application materials and can tell you where you can strengthen it. Colleagues, friends, and family members with graduate application experience are also helpful. In a pinch, any strong writer can also be helpful if you tell him or her what you are trying to accomplish in terms of content and tone.

That applicants receive feedback on their statements is expected by admissions committees. It's not unusual: one study found that 62% of participants reported receiving help on their statements (Powers and Fowles 1997). If you're worried about how much help is too much, I tell my students that others can give advice, but the applicant ought to be the only one typing in the text.

**Writing sample.** Many applications also ask for a writing sample. For Master's applications, include a recent piece that demonstrates your abilities. For applicants who have recently taken classes, a revised final paper from a class is a good choice. A document created at work can be useful, but applicants need to be careful to optimize it. A chapter from a software manual by itself isn't always impressive, because review committees don't know anything about the context. Is this just a revision of an earlier manual? Was there more than one author? How much of this is the applicant's work? That same chapter with a cover memo explaining the applicant's role and the challenges of creating it—limited budget, extensive usability tests, a distributed world-wide authoring group, challenging localization—can strengthen it immensely, especially if those challenges are linked to the applicant's interests in graduate school.

Writing samples for PhD applications (and, I'd advise, Master's applicants who want to become PhD students) should be at least somewhat scholarly. Revised final papers from recent courses are usually strong pieces. Conference papers, if long enough, can also serve as a good representation of your work.

If you're applying to a PhD program and you don't have a writing sample that has a scholarly aspect to it, go ahead and write one. There's no requirement that the writing is for any purpose other than the application. Writing a scholarly piece is usually easiest as part of a class, because you'll have guidance and feedback for revision from the instructor (see *Tricky Applications*). However, if a class isn't possible for you, an excellent start would be a submission to any technical communication conference, including the STC's Annual Conference. Their request for proposals (RFP), posted on the STC website, will provide ideas for possible papers.

To strengthen the sample, consider submitting it to a journal or conference. Journal articles and conference proposals are usually reviewed by 2-3 members of the field, who then provide invaluable feedback on the piece. And naturally, if the piece is accepted, it strengthens your application considerably.

## **Recommendation letters**

Most schools ask for two to four recommendation letters. Choose your recommenders carefully. Many of the industrial applications we receive have three letters, one from a boss and two from co-workers. All three letters usually testify to the applicant's promptness, ability to work under deadlines, and niceness, and close with an assurance that the applicant will perform *extraordinarily* well in our M.A. or PhD program. From our previous lengthy discussion of the

importance of showing the applicant's overall abilities, you might notice that these typical letters—while pleasant—won't add much to a graduate application.

These letters miss an opportunity for really strengthening an applicant's proposal. First of all, each letter says the same thing. Smart applicants choose their letter writers based on what new information each provides in the context of an application.

Additionally, the letters often stress attributes about the applicant the author likes—promptness, niceness, deadline conscientiousness—but miss crucial information about the applicants' experience, the complexity of their work, or their thinking abilities.

And finally, missing from these types of letters is the applicant's ability to do graduate work, especially scholarly work. Being able to work well in industry is no guarantee of being a strong student, just as being a strong student isn't a guarantee of being a strong practitioner.

Letters should help support your overall purpose in the application. For PhD applications, they should show you to be a prepared, serious graduate study candidate with an interest in an area of research. For Master's applications, they should show you as an experienced, dedicated member of the field who is ready to advance to the next stage of knowledge.

Note that application instructions will often ask the recommender to send the letter directly to the school or seal the envelope and sign across the flap, to assure that the applicant doesn't get to read the letter. You will be asked, somewhere on a form, to give up your right to read the letters, so that your recommenders can be completely honest in their evaluation. It is recommended that you sign this. Some people will send you a copy of the letter so you can read what they wrote, and some will not.

So choose your letter writers carefully. As for how recent your association needs to be, I wouldn't be surprised to receive a request for a letter from any student in the past five years. Past five years, I doubt my letter would be among the best three or four that a candidate could choose because he or she has probably become more skilled since that class.

Faculty letters are generally more important for PhD applicants than for MA candidates. One respondent noted, "I would think most applicants for the PhD would have some letters that suggest academic promise, even if they are relatively 'old.' For MA candidates who seek professional writing positions, academic recommendations may not be as important as articulate letters from managers, clients, and colleagues" (Alred 2006).

Jean Lutz, Director of the master's and bachelor's programs in technical and scientific communication at Miami University, remarked, "In our experience even letters from teachers from long ago can have some value—if the teacher has stayed in touch with the student and if the teacher has some concrete knowledge that the student has the same desirable qualities now as then. Beyond this advice, I'd suggest letters from employers who can speak to the qualities we value in graduate school: innate intelligence coupled with intellectual curiosity; independence of mind; ability to work both independently and collaboratively; and the responsibility to meet deadlines and do quality work" (2006).

If you don't have a faculty member who has had you in class recently, you might choose a supervisor or someone who has worked with you extensively, such as on a long-term project that required research and exceptional communication skills and can mention these specifically.

Think about what you are trying to say about yourself in the application and who can provide enthusiastic detail and support.

### **Tips on asking for a recommendation letter**

First of all, ask as far ahead as possible. Many faculty members expect more time than industry recommenders. We expect to be asked at least a month ahead, and anything less than a week (or even two) is not advised.

*When possible, ask in person.* Matching your time for the recommender's time generally shows thoughtfulness (unless the meeting is an inconvenience). Share (briefly) your excitement about applying to graduate school, and ask if he or she would be able to write you a *strong* recommendation letter. Don't ask if he or she could write a letter, because anyone can. The real test is whether the letter he or she is comfortable writing will strengthen your application, and the only way to find out is to ask.

For people who took undergraduate courses with me, I generally don't write a letter unless he or she earned at least a B in my course, and I emphasize that I can only reflect the performance I observed. I did once turn down a graduate student, not because I thought badly of his abilities, but because I really did not know him—I hadn't had him in class and he hadn't done research with me. The unfamiliarity would have been apparent in the letter, and vague letters are nearly as bad as truly negative ones. It's fairly rare to be turned down, but no admissions committee sees a verbal no; they do see negative or generic letters. It's worth asking.

*Be prepared.* Have with you information on the school, the due date of the letter, any forms the recommender needs to fill out, your resume, a draft of your personal statement, and any other information you want the recommender to reference. Having a copy of the personal statement really helps the recommender be specific about why you want to attend graduate school. Recommenders can only be as specific as the information they have at their fingertips. If you are asking a faculty member, remember that faculty teach 30-100 students per semester, so help their memories by providing the course title, semester, and final project. For industry recommenders, you can provide copies of yearly evaluations, notes they wrote you about the success of a project, anything (not confidential) you would like them to be able to draw from.

Do tell the recommender that you need the letter earlier than you actually do; if he or she is late, it won't jeopardize your application. If the recommender notices from the literature about the school that you're asking for it early, tell him or her you're trying to get the application in early. Include an addressed, stamped envelope; perhaps put the information in a brightly colored envelope that won't get lost on a desk—do whatever you can think of to make it as easy as possible to write a letter for you.

*Be specific.* It's perfectly acceptable to ask a letter writer to speak specifically to some topic—to ask a manager to discuss a project involving collaboration and or the report you wrote researching a new system, for example. While it's acceptable, it is a delicate task, because some people don't like being told what to write. You might try, "I've got Anwar Sadat writing about my performance in his class, and Joe Smith writing about my technical skills. I was hoping that you might be able to speak about the single-sourcing project you discussed in my annual report last year." The recommender can choose not to, but if she or he has said yes to writing a letter, clearly his or her intent is to help you, and will likely fulfill your request.

And as long as you're asking questions, you might ask if they would like to receive a reminder email a week before the letter is due.

The best letters usually come from existing relationships between faculty members and students, because faculty members write them frequently and are aware of what they should contain. If you don't know any faculty members personally, or it has been years since you have spoken with them, consider deliberately nurturing a relationship with a faculty member by taking a course *before* applying (for this and other strategies, see the Tricky Applications section).

## **OTHER COMPONENTS**

Some schools request other components they find useful in evaluating applicants, such as a portfolio: "For me, the portfolio has been the key to our being able to determine whether we have a good applicant. It shows a commitment on the part of the applicant to come to graduate school. Also, the portfolio helps students overcome low GPAs or GREs. It is especially important, I think, to our nontraditional aged students whose biggest fear is often the GRE—it may have been 25 years since they were in college" (Allison 2006). No matter what component you are creating, keep in mind your overall goals for the application.

## **FINISHING THE APPLICATION**

After submitting the application, watch for responses from the program. Most programs will send confirmations that pieces of the application have arrived. Keep a list, perhaps conveniently in a spreadsheet, and note what's missing. Follow up with an email if you have any questions or worry that something hasn't arrived.

After your application is confirmed to be complete, try to be patient. It takes time for the applications to be gathered and reviewed.

Acceptances and rejections can be sent by email, regular mail, or phone. Usually, especially with PhD programs, acceptances come first. Later, in a separate communication, funding offers arrive. If the school needs additional information for funding consideration, it will contact you.

## **STRATEGIES FOR TRICKY APPLICATIONS**

Often applicants find themselves in a special situation with their applications—perhaps their GPA from their undergraduate degree is low, they've been out of school for quite a while and don't know any faculty members to ask for letters, they have no academic experience in technical communication, or they're not sure they're ready for graduate study. In this section, I provide advice on writing the strongest application possible in these situations.

Do remember that one weak piece in an application doesn't necessarily mean a rejection. Faculty members ask for many pieces in an application so we can look at the entire picture. At the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Jerry Alred noted, "We tell students that in the case of the other items (GREs, letters, transcripts), the faculty tend to consider the mosaic created by the student's file. For example, we do not become fixated over GRE scores, although they tend to have more or less value for specific faculty members" (2006).

### **Low GPA**

Ability to flourish in the academic environment is an important characteristic. How important a low GPA is to an application depends on whether it is a MA or PhD application, and how recent the GPA is. First, check if the school you are applying to has a minimum requirement.

For low undergraduate GPAs that are older, an applicant only needs to show how she or he is ready for graduate work now, such as by talking about work responsibilities. Applicants with recent low undergraduate GPAs might want to take a course as a non-matriculated student. *Non-matriculated* means that the student doesn't belong to the program—he or she is taking the course essentially a la carte. If the student is later accepted to a program, the non-matriculated course is usually applied to the degree requirements.

Graduate programs like non-matriculation experience because it is a no-risk way for students who are promising members to prove themselves without the program giving an admissions spot to someone who might leave the program later.

Low Master's GPAs for PhD applicants are much more problematic, especially if they're recent, because MA work is more comparable to PhD work than undergraduate work. If it's an older MA, especially if it's in another field, the argument could be made for growth since then. If it's a recent low Master's GPA, non-matriculated study is likely the applicant's best option.

### **No recent coursework or no faculty relationships**

Recent coursework or relationships with faculty members aren't required for a successful graduate application. However, they are helpful, especially when demonstrating knowledge of the field and obtaining recommendation letters, and especially for PhD applicants. To see if others shared my view, I asked ATTW listserv members "What should applicants do if they don't have recent academic experience, in terms of asking for recommendation letters, proving academic capability, etc.?"

A faculty person at Old Dominion responded, "For MA students a long absence from academia is not a problem. When students are applying to the Professional Writing MA, we look for professional writing samples and letters of recommendation from employers or clients as much as we look for a reference from a prof. For the PhD, a long space between the MA and the PhD may be a bit of a draw back, but not much. There are a number of students in the PhD program, who have been teaching at community colleges for a while, and are returning for their PhDs. That makes perfect sense to our admissions committee."

Dorothy Winsor noted, "students without recent academic experience have a little tougher time, although most of our doctoral students have spent time in the workplace. MA students can probably get by with recommendations from employers and documents they've created for work. We'll look at their other application materials (GREs, GPAs, etc.). PhD students might be well advised to take an academic paper they wrote and revise it for one of their writing samples. They can ask employers to address their ability to manage complicated ideas, conduct research etc, in their recommendation letters. And again, we have their other materials to look at" (2006).

While recent academic experience isn't required, it is important to show ongoing intellectual curiosity. Stephanie Turner noted, "If an applicant doesn't show *some* sort of evidence of ongoing academic interest and/or engagement with writing since the last degree way back when, even if it's 'only' something like involvement in a reading group or helping write a church or club newsletter, then I see that as a red flag" (2006).

If you don't have recent coursework or relationships with faculty members, there are a number of strategies you can use. The best strategy is to take one or more courses as a non-matriculated student (see Low GPA section, above). It's an excellent way to show ability to

perform at a graduate level while simultaneously forming a connection with a faculty member who can then write a recommendation letter.

You might also try introducing yourself at a conference or via email and asking to become involved in his or her research. Naturally, the success of this strategy depends on the receptiveness of the individual faculty member. However, not every faculty member has a research assistant, and many institutions are encouraging more research conducted with industry. Some faculty members would welcome the help, and the only way to find out is to ask. Other faculty members are involved in STC and you might form a relationship by doing committee work with them.

Especially for PhDs, you can also counter no recent coursework by reading in your subject of study and then incorporating that knowledge into your personal statement. This is especially effective when you tie the theories and studies you have been reading about with what you would like to do research in.

### **No academic experience in technical communication**

A lack of academic experience in technical communication isn't necessarily a problem, but it does take thoughtful explanation to make the argument for an advanced degree when the applicant doesn't hold the initial degree. Fortunately, for our field, it's not unusual for practitioners to have no technical communication coursework (instead having a degree in another field entirely) but quite a bit of professional experience. If this is your situation, the best strategy will vary depending on whether you're applying for a Master's degree or a PhD.

For Master's applicants, it's imperative that you discuss your professional experience. Your professional experience doesn't have to be in the field of technical communication, but ideally it should relate in some way. For applicants with no academic experience and no professional experience, a certificate program might be a better option. To strengthen the MA application, applicants might read up on the field to incorporate research and theories. More involved methods would include taking a community college class or earning a certificate. Finally, non-matriculated study is a good option, too.

For PhD applicants, certainly discuss your professional experience. If you hold a Master's degree in a field other than Technical Communication, you might indicate how that graduate work has helped prepare you for graduate study in technical communication.

### **Not sure you're ready for graduate work**

There are options for determining if you're ready for graduate work. The least committed method is to visit faculty members' webpages and review their syllabi and course schedules. Many of us post these publicly. You can review the readings, assignments, and pace of the course without any commitment. You could even read along for a week or two and see if you like it. If you're ready for a bit more commitment, you can take a course as a non-matriculated student (see Low GPA section, above). Also, especially if you have a specific question, you can ask the Graduate Director of the program or ask to speak to a student.

### **WHAT HAPPENS IF AN APPLICANT GETS REJECTED?**

First of all, the applicant should remain calm. There are three kinds of "no"s: no—not with this application; no—until more experience; and no—never.

*No—not with this application* is the easiest to fix. If asked, graduate directors may provide specific feedback and urge the applicant to resubmit the section of the application that was weak in time for the next round of reviews. Fixing the flaw in the application might be reworking the personal statement, retaking the GRE, or asking for different recommendation letters. Often this type of weakness can be remedied in time for the next period of application reviews.

*No—until more experience* is more difficult to fix but can certainly be done. Usually, this type of rejection is remedied with a conference presentation or two or taking a graduate class as a non-matriculated student.

*No—never* is a bit unusual, because more experience nearly always makes an applicant more appealing.

The first step after receiving a rejection letter is for the applicant to send an email (preferably) or make a phone call to the graduate director of the program and ask if there is anything that he or she could improve upon in the application to make it more desirable for the next set of reviews; doing this will let the applicant know which type of rejection it is and address it accordingly. It also shows dedication to the field. Then, the applicant should begin strengthening his or her application appropriately.

## **WHAT TO DO AFTER YOU'RE ACCEPTED**

After you're accepted, simply enjoy your success. Most schools send out information on your next tasks, either in the acceptance letter or soon after, so keep an eye out for them. And finally, don't forget to call or write your recommenders and share your good news.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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**TABLE 1. MASTER'S PROGRAMS IN TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION**

*Listed alphabetically by state. All programs in the U.S. unless specified otherwise.*

\*Indicates a distance education program.

<b>Location of School</b>	<b>Name of University</b>	<b>Master's Programs</b>	<b>Deadline Dates for application</b>
Auburn, Alabama	Auburn University	Master of Technical and Professional Communication (MTPC)	Accepted anytime; for funding, 1/15.
Huntsville, Alabama	Alabama, University of (Huntsville)	Graduate Certificate in Technical Communication (MA)	No published deadline--submit approx. 3 months before desired entrance date
Flagstaff, Arizona	Northern Arizona University	Rhetoric, Composition, and Technical Writing (MA) (distance or campus) or Certificate in Professional & Technical Writing (distance or campus)	applications reviewed year round
Little Rock, Arkansas	University of Arkansas at Little Rock	Professional and Technical Writing (MA)	3/15 for fall; 10/15 for spring
Los Angeles, California	University of Southern California	Professional Writing (MA)	rolling admissions basis--accept students in the fall, spring, and summer
San Diego, California	San Diego State University	Rhetoric and Writing Studies with a specialization in Technical and Professional Communication (MA)	4/1 for fall; 11/1 for spring
San Luis Obispo, California	California Polytechnic State University	Technical Communication Certificate Program (MA)	
Denver, Colorado	University of Colorado at Denver & Health Sciences Center	Master of Science in Technical Communication Dual Master degree in Technical Communication and Public Administration Dual Master degree in Technical Communication and Instructional Design	Applications are accepted any time
Denver, Colorado	University of Denver	BSCPE Engineering Communication Specialization (MS)	Fall - All programs Deadline 1: 1/15 Early Action; Deadline 2: 3/15 Priority Scholarship Consideration; Deadline 3: 5/15; Final deadline: to avoid space-only consideration  (Spring - All programs) Deadline 1: 9/15 Early Action; Deadline 2: 11/15 Priority Scholarship Consideration; Deadline 3: 12/15 Final deadline to avoid space-only consideration
Fort Collins (or Denver), Colorado	Colorado State University	Technical Communication (MS)	4/1
Melbourne, Florida	Florida Institute of Technology	Technical and Professional Communication (MS)	4/1 for fall; 9/1 for spring; 2/1 for summer
Orlando, Florida	University of Central Florida	Technical Writing Track (MA) or Graduate Certificate in Professional Writing	Domestic Applicants-1/15 for fall priority; 3/30 for fall; 11/1 for spring. International

			Applicants-1/15 for fall priority; 1/15 for fall; 7/1 for spring
Atlanta, Georgia	Georgia Institute of Technology	Information Design and Technology (MS) Human-Computer Interaction (MS)	2/1
*Macon, Georgia	Mercer University	Technical Communication Management (MS)	Rolling admission; apply approximately two months before start of term.
Marietta, Georgia	Southern Polytechnic State University	Graduate Certificate in Technical Communication (distance)	7/1 for fall; 11/1 for spring
Boise, Idaho	Boise State University	Technical Communication (MA)	12/06 Graduation=7/5 5/07 Graduation=10/2, 8/07 Graduation=2/27
Chicago, Illinois	Illinois Institute of Technology	Technical Communication and Information Design (MS) Information Architecture (MS)	4/1 for fall; 11/1 for spring
DeKalb, Illinois	Northern Illinois University	English with a specialization in Rhetoric and Professional Writing	6/1 for fall; 11/1 for spring; 4/1 for summer
Normal, Illinois	Illinois State University	Masters in Writing (Professional Writing sequence, Technical Writing emphasis) (MA)	1/15 for fall; 10/15 for spring
West Lafayette, Indiana	Purdue University	English with a concentration in Rhetoric and Composition	2/1 for fall; 10/1 for spring
Ames, Iowa	Iowa State University	Rhetoric, Composition, and Professional Communication (MA)	1/15
Pittsburg, Kansas	Pittsburg State University	Professional Writing and Rhetoric Emphasis (MA)	3/31
Hammond, Louisiana	Southeastern Louisiana University	English with Professional Writing Concentration (MA)	5/1 for summer; 7/15 for fall; 12/1 for spring
Lafayette, Louisiana	University of Louisiana Lafayette	Professional Writing (MA) Rhetoric	Must submit at least 30 days before the beginning of the semester in which admission is sought
*Ruston, Louisiana	Louisiana Tech University	Track in Technical Writing (MA) or Electronic Graduate Certificate Program Technical Writing and Communication (distance)	6/1 for fall; 9/1 for winter; 12/1 for spring; 3/1 for summer
Baltimore, Maryland	University of Baltimore	Interaction Design and Information Architecture	
Towson, Maryland	Towson University	Professional Writing (MS)	3/1 for fall; 10/1 for spring
Amherst, Massachusetts	University of Massachusetts	Professional Writing and Technical Communication (MA)	1/15
Boston, Massachusetts	Northeastern University	Master of Information Design, Editing, and Management (MA)	
Boston, Massachusetts	Simmons College	Communications Management (MS)	Rolling, apply early. 5/1 for summer; 8/1 fall; 12/15 spring.
North Dartmouth, Massachusetts	University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth	Professional Writing (MA)	4/1 for fall; 11/1 for spring
Worcester, Massachusetts	Clark University	Professional Communications (MS)	Rolling
East Lansing, Michigan	Michigan State University	MA in Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing	12/15 for funding; otherwise rolling.
Houghton, Michigan	Michigan Technological University	Rhetoric and Technical Communication (MS)	1/10

Southfield, Michigan	Lawrence Technological University	Technical and Professional Communication (MS) or Certificate in Technical and Professional Communication	
Ypsilanti, Michigan	Eastern Michigan University	Written Communication with concentrations in Technical Writing and Professional Writing or Graduate Certificate in Technical Writing	Domestic Students-5/15 for fall; 10/15 for winter; 3/15 for spring; 4/17 for summer. Non-Degree Students-8/1 for fall; 12/1 for winter; 3/15 for spring; 6/1 for summer
Mankato, Minnesota	Minnesota State University, Mankato	English: Technical Communication (MA)	Domestic Applicants-7/1 for fall; 11/1 for spring; 2/3 for graduate assistantship. International Applicants-5/1 for fall; 10/1 for spring; 2/3 for graduate assistantship
Minneapolis, Minnesota	Metropolitan State University	Technical Communication (MS)	3/1 for summer and fall; 10/1 for spring
St Paul, Minnesota	University of Minnesota	Rhetoric and Scientific and Technical Communication (MA) Scientific and Technical Communication (MS)	For MA, 1/15 only. For MS, 6/15 for fall, 10/15 for spring.
Springfield, Missouri	Missouri State University	Technical Writing (MA)	
Springfield, Missouri	Southwest Missouri State University	Technical Writing (MA)	7/20 for fall; 12/20 for spring; 5/20 for summer
Rolla, Missouri	Missouri-Rolla, University of	Technical Communication (MS)	
Butte, Montana	Montana Tech	Technical Communication (MS)	1/30
*Newark, New Jersey	New Jersey Institute of Technology	Professional and Technical Communication (MS) (campus, distance with some campus courses)	1/15 for fin. aid; 6/5 for Domestic applicants; 4/1 for International applicants
Albuquerque, New Mexico	University of New Mexico	Rhetoric and Writing (MA)	2/1 for fall
Las Cruces, New Mexico	New Mexico State University	English with an Emphasis in Rhetoric and Professional Communication (MA)	2/15 for fall; 10/15 for spring
Brooklyn, New York	Polytechnic University	Technical and Professional Communication (MS) or Graduate Certificate in Technical Communications	For Fall=4/1 for International applicants and those applying for assistantships; 7/15 for Domestic applicants
Rochester, New York	Rochester Institute of Technology	Communication and Media Technologies (MS)	Rolling
Troy, New York	Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute	Technical Communication (MS) Human-Computer Interaction (MS) Communication and Rhetoric (MS)	1/1 for fall; 8/15 for spring; 1/1 for summer
Utica, New York	SUNY Institute of Technology	Information Design and Technology (MS)	6/1 for fall; 12/1 spring
Charlotte, North Carolina	University of North Carolina	Technical/Professional Writing (MA)	5/1 for fall; 10/1 for spring; 4/1 for summer
*Greenville, North Carolina	East Carolina University	English, concentration in Technical and Professional Communication (MA) (distance or campus)	6/1 for fall; 10/15 for spring; 3/15 & 5/1 for summer
Raleigh, North Carolina	North Carolina State University	Technical Communication (MS)	6/15 for fall; 11/1 for spring
Bowling Green, Ohio	Bowling Green State	Scientific and Technical	

	University	Communication (MA)	
Cincinnati, Ohio	University of Cincinnati	Professional Writing and Editing Track (MA)	7/30 for fall
Dayton, Ohio	Wright State University	Certificate in Professional and Technical Writing English with concentration in Composition and Rhetoric (MA)	at least 4 weeks before registration for the quarter in which the student wishes to begin graduate study
Oxford, Ohio	Miami University	Technical and Scientific Communication	2/1 for funding, rolling otherwise
Stillwater, Oklahoma	Oklahoma State University	Technical Writing (MA option or MA emphasis)	
Portland, Oregon	Portland State University	Writing (MA or MS)	2/1 for fall (typically appl. accepted for fall quarter admission); International students apply 6 months before intended enrollment term
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	Drexel University	Master of Science in Communication (MA)	U.S. Students: Fall: 9/1; Winter: 11/23; Spring: 2/22; Summer: 5/24; International Students: Fall: 6/13; Winter: 10/17; Spring: 12/19; Summer: 3/24
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	Carnegie Mellon University	Design in Communication Planning and Information Design (MDes) Rhetoric (MA) Professional Writing (MA)	MA, MDes 2/1 MAPW 2/15
Clemson, South Carolina	Clemson University	Professional Communication (MA)	2/1
Rock Hill, South Carolina	Winthrop University	English (MA)	2/1 for summer and fall; 9/1 for spring
Chattanooga, Tennessee	University of Tennessee at Chattanooga	Rhetoric and Writing (MA)	
Memphis, Tennessee	Memphis, University of	English with concentrations in Professional Writing or Composition Studies (MA)	7/1 for fall; 12/1 for spring; 5/1 for summer
Memphis, Tennessee	University of Memphis	Professional Writing (MA)	Domestic applicants: 7/1 for fall, 12/1 for spring, 5/1 for summer. International applicants: 5/1 for fall, 9/15 for spring, 2/1 for summer.
Denton, Texas	University of North Texas	Technical Writing (MA)	No appl deadline--students may begin in fall, spring, or summer semesters
Houston, Texas	University of Houston-Downtown	Professional Writing and Technical Communication (MS)	3/31 for fall; 11/30 for spring
*Lubbock, Texas	Texas Tech University	Technical Communication (MA) (campus or distance)	On-campus-1/15 Online-4/1 for summer or fall; 10/1 for spring
San Marcos, Texas	Texas State University	(major in) Technical Communication (MA)	6/15 for fall; Instructor and Teaching Assistantships, 1/15 for fall. 11/1 for spring.
*Logan, Utah	Utah State University	Technical Writing (MS) (distance)	3/1 for summer or fall; 11/1 for spring
Provo, Utah	Brigham Young University	Technical and Professional Writing (MA)	1/15/07 for fall 07

Salt Lake City, Utah	Westminster College	Professional Communication (MA)	2 months before semester recommended
Fairfax, Virginia	George Mason University	Professional Writing and Editing (MA Certificate)	3/15 for fall; 10/15 for spring
Harrisonburg, Virginia	James Madison University	Technical and Scientific Communication (MA or MS depending on undergrad background)	5/31 for fall; 8/31 for spring
Norfolk, Virginia	Old Dominion University	Professional Writing (MA)	6/1 for fall; 11/1 for spring; 2/15 for fin. aid
Radford, Virginia	Radford University	English (MA or MS)	
Cheney, Washington	Eastern Washington University	Rhetoric/Composition and Technical Communication (MA)	Quarterly admission
Seattle, Washington	University of Washington	Technical Communication (MS)	Day Masters Program--2/1 is deadline for autumn quarter, 9/15 winter. Evening Masters Program-- autumn-rolling admission 6/1 to 7/1; 11/1 for winter
Morgantown, West Virginia	West Virginia University	Professional Writing and Editing (MA)	2/1 for fall (only semester you can get in)
Eau Claire, Wisconsin	University of Wisconsin--Eau Claire	Technical Writing (MA)	7/1 for fall; 12/1 for spring; 5/1 for summer
Milwaukee, Wisconsin	University of Wisconsin--Milwaukee	English with a concentration in Professional Writing (MA)	1/1 for fall; 9/1 for spring
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada	Royal Roads University	Professional Communication with a specialization in Intercultural and International Communication	11/13
Dortmund, Germany	Danube University Krems	Technical Communication (MS)	4/3
Giessen, Germany	Fachhochschule Giessen-Freidberg	Fachjournalistik und multimediale Dokumentation	
Enschede, The Netherlands	University of Twente	New Media Research and Design (MA)	8/1
Coventry, United Kingdom	Coventry University	Information Design (MA)	
Sheffield, United Kingdom	Sheffield Hallam University	Technical Communication (MA) or Programme in Professional Communication (MA) (distance)	Accept appl. all year, but begin interviews in July for fall and November for spring

## TABLE 2. PHD PROGRAMS IN TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

PhD Degree Programs in Technical Communication

Listed alphabetically by state. All programs in the U.S. unless specified otherwise.

\*Indicates a distance education program.

Location of School	Name of University	PhD Programs	Deadline Dates for Application
Orlando, Florida	University of Central Florida	Texts and Technology	1/15 for fall
Chicago, Illinois	Illinois Institute of Technology	Technical Communication	4/1 fall; 11/1 spring.
DeKalb, Illinois	Northern Illinois University	English with a specialization in Rhetoric and Professional Writing	6/1 for fall; 11/1 for spring; 4/1 for summer
Normal, Illinois	Illinois State University	English Studies (emphasis in Technical Writing)	1/15
West Lafayette, Indiana	Purdue University	English with a concentration in Rhetoric and Composition	2/14 for fall, 10/1 for spring
Ames, Iowa	Iowa State University	Rhetoric and Professional Communication	1/15
Louisville, Kentucky	University of Louisville	Rhetoric and Composition	1/15
Lafayette, Louisiana	University of Louisiana Lafayette	English with a concentration in Rhetoric	Must submit at least 30 days before the beginning of the semester in which admission is sought
East Lansing, Michigan	Michigan State University	PhD in Rhetoric and Writing, concentration in Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing	12/15 for funding; rolling otherwise
Houghton, Michigan	Michigan Technological University	Rhetoric and Technical Communication	1/10
St. Paul, Minnesota	University of Minnesota	Rhetoric and Scientific and Technical Communication	1/15 for fall
Albuquerque, New Mexico	University of New Mexico	English with a Rhetoric and Writing focus	2/1 for fall
Las Cruces, New Mexico	New Mexico State University	Rhetoric and Professional Communication	2/15 for fall (only admit in fall)
Syracuse, New York	Syracuse University	Composition and Cultural Rhetoric	1/8
Troy, New York	Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute	Communication and Rhetoric	1/1 for fall; 8/15 for spring; 1/1 for summer
Greenville, North Carolina	East Carolina University	Technical and Professional Discourse	6/1 for fall; 10/15 for spring; 3/15 & 5/1 for summer
Raleigh, North Carolina	North Carolina State University	Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media	2/1 for fall
Fargo, North Dakota	North Dakota State University	Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture (Program is pending)	4/15 for fall
Stillwater, Oklahoma	Oklahoma State University	English with a specialization in Rhetoric and Professional Writing	
Oxford, Ohio	Miami University	Composition and Rhetoric with a specialization in Technical Communication	2/1/06 for fall 06
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	Carnegie Mellon University	Rhetoric	1/15
University Park, Pennsylvania	Penn State University	English studies with an emphasis in Technical Writing	1/15

Clemson, South Carolina	Clemson University	Rhetorics, Communication, and Information Design	11/1 for fall preferred for funding. Rolling admissions until Apr. 15.
Memphis, Tennessee	University of Memphis	English with concentrations in Professional Writing or Composition Studies	7/1 for fall; 12/1 for spring; 5/1 for summer
Memphis, Tennessee	University of Memphis	Professional Writing	Domestic applicants: 7/1 for fall, 12/1 for spring, 5/1 for summer. International applicants: 5/1 for fall, 9/15 for spring, 2/1 for summer.
Denton, Texas	University of North Texas	English with a specialization in Technical Writing	1/15 for fall; 10/15 for spring
*Lubbock, Texas	Texas Tech University	Technical Communication and Rhetoric (campus or distance)	On-Campus-1/15 Online-3/1 for fall; 9/1 for spring
Logan, Utah	Utah State University	Theory & Practice of Professional Communication	2/13
Blacksburg, Virginia	Virginia Tech	Rhetoric and Writing	2/1
*Norfolk, Virginia	Old Dominion University	Professional Writing and New Media Rhetoric and Textual Studies	2/15
Seattle, Washington	University of Washington	Technical Communication	2/1
Milwaukee, Wisconsin	University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee	English with a concentration in Professional Writing	1/1 for fall; 9/1 for spring
Enschede, The Netherlands	University of Twente	New Media Design and Research	8/1

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### **Biosketch**

Angela Eaton is an Assistant Professor of Technical Communication and Rhetoric at Texas Tech University. She obtained her PhD in Communication and Rhetoric from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. She's a senior member of the STC and also belongs to the Association of the Teachers of Technical Writing, and was the recipient of the 2005-2006 STC \$10,000 Research Award. She studies professional and technical communication practice, pedagogy, and professionalization. She teaches courses in editing, grant and proposal writing, and research methods. She can be reached at ([angela.eaton@ttu.edu](mailto:angela.eaton@ttu.edu)) or 806-742-2500 x229.