

Tips for Submitting a Competitive REU Application

If you've decided to apply to an REU or other summer program, there are a few practical steps you can take in order to make your application as competitive as possible.

- 1. Read and follow the directions.** The application form will ask for specific information from you. Make sure to provide exactly what is requested. If you have questions about any part of the application, contact the program director and ask for clarification.
- 2. Demonstrate specific knowledge and interest in the program to which you are applying.** Don't just say that you're interested in doing an REU. Tell the reader exactly why you are interested in the specific REU to which you are applying. Do your research before you complete your application. Browse the program's web site, and use this knowledge to highlight specific aspects of the program that are particularly appealing to you. Don't use the same application essay for every program you apply to. Show the reader that you spent some time researching and applying specifically to their REU.
- 3. Carefully proofread your application.** An application with spelling or grammatical errors leaves a bad first impression. Read your application carefully before you submit it, and ask someone else to give you some feedback as well. You want to submit an application that is well-written, polished, and professional.
- 4. Choose good references.** What your references write about you can make a big difference in distinguishing your application from others. Choose references who know you well and who will take the time to write a thorough and detailed letter of recommendation. It's okay to ask a reference, "Do you think that you will be able to write a strong and detailed letter for me?" Also, make sure your references understand what is expected of them. Some REUs provide detailed instructions for references; if such instructions are available, make sure that your references have a copy of them. Also give your references a copy of your application essay and any other information that would help them to write a strong letter for you.
- 5. Say what makes you different from other applicants.** Summer programs such as REUs are highly competitive. It is not unusual for a program with 8-10 participants to receive 100-200 applications. If you have unique experiences that set you apart from other applicants, make sure to mention these. What you write needs to convince the reader that you have unique traits and abilities that will contribute to your success in an REU. Of course, your academic preparation is important, but it is also important to demonstrate that you have the social and emotional maturity to function well in an intense research environment, working with people from all different backgrounds. Extracurricular and co-curricular activities often speak well to these characteristics.
- 6. Be genuine. Don't oversell yourself.** Provide an honest account of your background and experiences, but don't be boastful or arrogant. Don't namedrop or use obscure mathematical terms to try to impress the readers.
- 7. Apply to multiple programs.** It's important to remember that REUs are extremely competitive, and even the very best students do not get accepted by every program to which they apply. Do some research, and choose a variety of programs (perhaps 5-10) that suit your interests and abilities.