

ADMISSIONS STRATEGY

# Who Actually Reads Your Application? Why General Admissions Rules Don't Always Apply to Top Majors



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A student applying to computer science at one university may be evaluated through a direct-to-major admissions process. At another, the student may apply to the university first and compete for a place in the major later. At a third, the intended major may influence the application without triggering a separate departmental review.

These distinctions matter. Yet many families approach college applications as though every university uses the same admissions structure—and every application lands on the desk of the same kind of reader.

The reality is more complicated. Some universities admit students directly to competitive majors; others separate university admission from major admission; still others admit students to a broader college before they declare a field. The people and procedures involved can differ accordingly.

For families applying to competitive programs in computer science, engineering, business, or other specialized fields, the right question is not simply, “Who reads my application?” It is “How does this university actually make admission decisions for the program I want to study?”

Understanding that process can improve an application. Assuming that departmental experts are evaluating every sentence can lead students in exactly the wrong direction.

## MYTH NO. 1: A COMPUTER SCIENCE PROFESSOR WILL READ YOUR COMPUTER SCIENCE APPLICATION

It is an appealing theory. If a student applies to computer science, surely a computer science professor will evaluate the application, recognize sophisticated technical terminology, and reward evidence of specialized knowledge.

Sometimes academic departments participate in admissions processes. But there is no universal rule that undergraduate applications to specialized majors are read by faculty members or industry experts.

Consider three real examples.

At the University of Washington, students can apply directly to the Paul G. Allen School of Computer Science & Engineering through its Direct to Major pathway. The school explains that decisions use criteria developed in partnership with the Allen School, while the university's admissions process evaluates academic preparation and personal characteristics. Importantly, the Allen School explicitly says applicants do not need to craft a computing-focused application.<sup>1</sup>

At the University of Maryland, the process distinguishes university admission from admission to the computer science major. The university's computer science department describes a two-stage process in which the university considers applicants for admission and the College of Computer, Mathematical, and Natural Sciences

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makes the decision about placement into the major.<sup>2</sup>

At UC Berkeley, first-year admission involves holistic review, with the intended major and college structure affecting how students enter particular programs.

Berkeley's undergraduate computer science pathways have specific direct-admission and major-declaration rules.<sup>34</sup>

These examples demonstrate why applicants should research each university separately. They do not establish that all specialized programs use departmental faculty as application readers.

The practical consequence is straightforward: do not write an essay for an imagined professor-reader. Write for the actual application process, following the university's published instructions and demonstrating the preparation, interests, and qualities the institution says it values.

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## MYTH NO. 2: SPECIALIZED MAJORS REQUIRE SPECIALIZED VOCABULARY

A student interested in artificial intelligence might write about transformer architectures, gradient descent, vector embeddings, and reinforcement learning. An aspiring engineer might reference finite-element analysis, computational fluid dynamics, or advanced materials science.

Technical vocabulary can be appropriate when it helps explain real work. It becomes a liability when it substitutes for demonstrating understanding.

Imagine two applicants describing a machine-learning project.

The first writes:

*"I explored transformer-based architectures, optimizing model performance through iterative hyperparameter tuning and advanced embedding strategies."*

The second writes:

*"I built a model to classify medical reports, then found that it missed statements expressing uncertainty. I revised the approach to account for language that indicated a diagnosis was only suspected, not confirmed."*

The first description contains recognizable technical terms. The second explains a problem, a limitation, and a decision the student made.

If the student genuinely performed the work, the second description gives the reader a clearer way to understand the student's contribution. It also leaves room for technical details where they are relevant.

The same principle applies outside computing. A student interested in economics does not need to insert terms such as "econometric identification" or "intertemporal optimization" into a personal essay unless those concepts genuinely help explain the student's thinking.

The goal is not to sound less sophisticated. It is to make sophistication visible through accurate explanation.

Technical language should clarify the work, not advertise the vocabulary.

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## WHAT SPECIALIZED ADMISSIONS CAN CHANGE

Although a student should not assume a faculty member will read an application, applying to a specialized major can change the admissions requirements and the evidence that matters.

Three differences deserve attention.

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### 1. THE INTENDED MAJOR MAY DETERMINE THE ADMISSIONS PATHWAY

At some universities, applying to a particular major is a formal decision with consequences for admission. The University of Washington, for example, identifies computer science, computer engineering, and business among the programs with direct-admission pathways for first-year students. Applicants must follow the relevant first-choice-major instructions to be considered through those pathways.<sup>5</sup>

At other institutions, students enter a broader undergraduate college and declare their major later. Some programs have separate application requirements, prerequisite courses, or capacity limits.

A student should therefore determine whether the university admits applicants to the institution, the college, the major, or some combination of these.

Do not assume that applying under a different major is an easier route into a program. Admission to the university may not guarantee later access to a highly competitive major.

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## 2. ACADEMIC PREPARATION MAY BE PARTICULARLY RELEVANT

An engineering program may emphasize preparation in mathematics and science. A computer science program may examine the student's academic record alongside evidence of problem-solving and initiative. A business program may have its own application structure and selection criteria.

However, the precise expectations vary. The University of Washington's Allen School states that previous computing experience is not required for direct-to-major consideration, even though applicants with access to computing opportunities are encouraged to pursue them.<sup>6</sup>

That distinction matters. A student should not assume that an advanced technical project is mandatory merely because the intended major is technical.

Instead, investigate the program's stated requirements and consider how the student's actual preparation demonstrates readiness for the work ahead.

## 3. THE APPLICATION STILL NEEDS TO REVEAL THE PERSON BEHIND THE INTENDED MAJOR

A specialized major does not make every other dimension of the application irrelevant.

Universities can consider academic performance, personal qualities, activities, responsibilities, achievements, and context. UC Berkeley, for example, describes first-year admission as a holistic review of academic and nonacademic information, with achievements considered in the context of the opportunities available to the applicant.<sup>7</sup>

A student applying to engineering should not feel compelled to turn every experience into evidence of engineering aptitude. A part-time job may demonstrate reliability. Music may reveal creative discipline. Tutoring may show the ability to communicate difficult ideas. Family responsibilities may explain how the student manages time and contributes to others.

These experiences do not become irrelevant simply because the intended major is specialized.

## HOW TO RESEARCH WHO ACTUALLY EVALUATES YOUR APPLICATION

Students can replace speculation with a short, practical research process.

Step 1: Identify the admissions unit. Is the application handled by a central undergraduate admissions office, a particular school or college, or a combination of offices?

Step 2: Verify the admission pathway. Determine whether students apply directly to the major, enter a broader college, or apply for the major after enrolling.

Step 3: Read the official criteria. Look for required preparation, additional essays, portfolios, interviews, auditions, prerequisites, or program-specific review procedures. Do not infer requirements from student forums or admissions anecdotes.

Step 4: Match evidence to the stated expectations. If the program emphasizes quantitative preparation, show that preparation through actual coursework and relevant work. If it asks about intellectual interests, explain the questions that motivate the student. If a portfolio is required, follow its submission rules carefully.

Step 5: Explain specialized work in plain, precise language. Identify the problem, the student's contribution, the decisions made, and the lessons learned. Include technical terminology when it improves accuracy, not simply because it sounds advanced.

This process is more reliable than trying to guess whether an application will be read by a generalist or an expert.

## THE REAL MISTAKE: WRITING FOR AN IMAGINARY AUDIENCE

Students sometimes imagine an admissions reader as a professor who will reward every technical detail. Others imagine a generalist who will not understand specialized work. Both assumptions can distort an essay.

The stronger approach is to explain the work so that an informed reader can follow the student's reasoning without needing to be an expert in the precise subfield.

For example, an applicant who developed a tool to translate medical reports should not merely announce that the project uses natural-language processing. The student can explain the communication problem, why the first approach fell short, what changed during development,

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and why the result matters to the people who might use it.

That explanation can communicate technical engagement, judgment, and purpose at once.

The same method works for a student who studies robotics, economics, neuroscience, architecture, or business. Specificity comes from the student's actual decisions and questions—not from the density of specialized vocabulary.

And if a university publishes clear instructions about the audience, format, or content of an application component, those instructions take priority over generic advice.

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## HOW SCHOLAR COACH HELPS STUDENTS RESEARCH MAJOR-SPECIFIC ADMISSIONS

Scholar Coach helps students build applications around verified program requirements and authentic evidence of academic interest.

**Map each university's admissions structure.** We distinguish university admission, direct-to-major admission, school-specific pathways, and post-enrollment major selection using official sources.

**Verify program requirements.** We review prerequisites, supplemental questions, portfolios, deadlines, and published selection guidance rather than relying on rumors about what admissions officers supposedly prefer.

**Identify relevant academic evidence.** We examine coursework, independent projects, research, work experience, and other commitments to determine which experiences genuinely demonstrate preparation or intellectual engagement.

**Make specialized work understandable.** We help students explain complex projects through the questions they investigated, the decisions they made, the obstacles they

encountered, and the results they can substantiate.

**Keep the application authentic.** We connect the student's real interests to the intended program without inserting jargon, inventing expertise, or forcing every activity into a major-specific narrative.

The objective is not to predict the identity of an unseen reader. It is to prepare an application that responds accurately to the university's actual process and gives the reader meaningful evidence to evaluate.

Before trying to impress a computer scientist, engineer, economist, or business professor, find out whether the program uses departmental review at all. Then focus on what the application can demonstrate: the student's preparation, judgment, curiosity, and capacity to contribute.

You do not need to guess who is reading your application. You need to make your work clear enough—and your evidence strong enough—that the reader can understand what you have actually done.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> University of Washington: Direct to Major Admissions
- <sup>2</sup> University of Maryland: First-Year Computer Science Applicants
- <sup>3</sup> UC Berkeley: First-Year Applicants
- <sup>4</sup> Berkeley EECS: Computer Science BA
- <sup>5</sup> University of Washington: Admission to Majors
- <sup>6</sup> Allen School: Direct to Major Admissions
- <sup>7</sup> UC Berkeley: Application Resources

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## SOURCES

University of Washington: Direct to Major Admissions  
University of Maryland: First-Year Computer Science Applicants  
UC Berkeley: First-Year Applicants  
UC Berkeley: Application Resources  
University of Washington: Admission to Majors

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