What you need to apply to Caltech Astro
(and most other astro grad programs) in approximate order of importance:

- Online application form (Caltech can waive the application fee)
- 3 letters of recommendation
- CV/résumé
- Transcript(s) (unofficial transcripts are fine for Caltech)
- Personal statement
- General GRE
- Physics GRE (“strongly recommended” but not strictly required for Caltech, and many agree that it’s the least important part of your application)

IMPORTANT NOTE:
Although this list is in what we grad students think is roughly the order of most to least importance, remember that your application will be judged as a whole. Excellent parts of your application can help make up for other parts.

Application timeline: what to do and when to do it

This timeline is just a rough guideline, and you don’t need to follow it exactly. Also, this process is stressful, so don’t forget to take care of yourself!

Now: Start getting materials together

- Think about where to apply.
  - You might want to organize your thoughts in a spreadsheet that lists things like “Course requirements,” “People to work with,” etc.
  - Feel free to reach out to people!
    - You can contact faculty you’re interested in working with. Ask about their research, see if they’re taking students, etc.
    - You can also ask current grad students what it’s like working with Prof. [insert name], what the culture of a department is like, etc.

- Start working on your CV.
  - Find templates online (we recommend making yours in LaTeX)
  - Caltech’s grad office has a nice list of things that should go in a CV
Now: Start getting materials together (continued)

- Figure out what tests you need to take:
  - You will need to take the **regular GRE** at some point. This test is computerized and offered at lots of **locations and times**.
  - The **physics GRE (PGRE) subject test** is **NOT** formally required for Caltech Astro, but a good score can help your application.
    - Some schools do still require PGRE scores. If you decide to take the PGRE, **register** early for the September and/or the October test.
    - Study tips: Take the **official practice tests**, especially the most recent ones! Some of us also found the book *Conquering the Physics GRE* to be useful.
  - If your first or native language is not English and you don’t have a degree from a US institution, you may need to demonstrate English proficiency with the **TOEFL**. Dates and locations vary by country.

September-ish: Letters of recommendation

- Ask for **letters of recommendation**.
  - Who to ask?
    - **Best**: past research supervisors
    - **Good**: academic advisors or professors who know you well
    - **Not ideal**: professors who don’t know you well (even if you got an A in a class they taught)
  - How to ask?
    - Ask early! They might be able to suggest places to apply
    - Explicitly ask if they can write you a “strong” letter
    - Once you’ve decided where to apply, **send your letter writers info**:
      - A list of places and deadlines to send letters (update regularly!)
      - Your CV/résumé and a copy of your transcript, along with whatever extra information they ask for
  - If you have the opportunity, consider attending the American Astronomical Society (AAS) **winter meeting** in early January.
    - This is **NOT** required, but it can be a very good chance to network. Some schools may use this as an opportunity to get to know you.
    - You can talk to your research advisor about presenting your work at the meeting. **October 3** is the abstract deadline for AAS.
    - If your advisor doesn't fund you to attend AAS, you can apply for **travel grants** and **other sources of funding**.
October-ish: Fellowships and essays

• Check out the Astrobetter list of fellowships and see if any might be right for you.
  • Don’t think you’ll get a fellowship? Apply anyway, if you can. It never hurts, and it’s really useful when writing other applications.
  • For US citizens, the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program (NSF GRFP) is a great opportunity. The application is due October 30 for physics and astronomy.
  • For more tips on applying for the NSF GRFP, check out Alex Hunter Lang’s website. Even if you don’t apply, you might want to check out the great example essays hosted here.

• Work on your essays / statements of purpose.
  • DO:
    • Express your career goals & research interests
    • Briefly describe past research, emphasizing your contributions
    • Explain why a particular program is a good fit for you
      • Name drop professors who you might want to work with
    • Ask people to look over your statement!
      • Especially ask grad students, postdocs, and/or professors
      • Get a friend to check for clarity and grammar
    • Send them to your letter writers once you have drafts
  • DON’T:
    • Be overly flowery—it’s not an undergraduate application essay!
    • Use clichés (especially the “I fell in love with astronomy as a child” one)

November-ish: Work on applications

• Send your transcripts.
  • Fellowship and grad school applications both typically require transcripts. Depending on your university, it can take a long time to get official transcripts sent; get it done early and avoid rush charges.
  • Note that Caltech Astro will accept unofficial transcripts!

• Make sure your letter writers get recommendations in!
  • Caltech’s online form will send you a notification when a letter has been submitted on your behalf. If they are not in yet, gently remind your letter writers; they’re busy and might have forgotten.
December: Send in your applications
Application deadlines are usually in December-January (note that for some schools, deadlines for international students may be earlier than for US students). Caltech Astro’s deadline is December 21.

After submitting applications: try not to stress!

January-March: Wait to hear back
• For some schools, you may be interviewed over video chat if you make it to the short list.
  • At Caltech, committee members will ask you about your research experience. They will ask you to explain various aspects of your research and ask how you think joining the program at Caltech will be mutually beneficial to you and to our department.
• Decisions for astronomy graduate programs usually start coming in late January. Caltech will post all final decisions by April 1.

March-April: School visits
• If you are accepted, someone from the university will be in touch about visiting the department (all expenses will be paid for you).
• Astrobetter has a list of good resources for visiting and choosing schools, including Dra. Cabrera Salazar’s list of questions to ask.

For US schools, April 15 is the deadline to decide on a grad school.
Before April 15, take your time to make a decision! But if you’re sure that you want to reject an admission offer, please let the school know as quickly as possible. This lets them admit students off the waitlist and gives these students more time to consider their options.

FINALLY:
Remember that grad school admissions are often driven by factors you have no control over (funding, which professors are looking for students, etc.). You are not defined by the schools you do or don’t get into, and plenty of astronomers (including some of us) didn’t go to grad school right away. You can be successful no matter what you decide to do.