PA School Application Checklist and Timeline

Congratulations on your decision to pursue a career as a Physician Associate (PA)!

Admission to PA school can be challenging and competitive, often requiring years of education and healthcare practice just to meet candidacy requirements. Each applicant is on a unique path to PA school, whether they plan to enter PA programs directly after completing their undergraduate degree, after some time off spent strengthening their application, or after transitioning from another career.

Once you've determined that you're ready to apply to PA school, this checklist and timeline will help you navigate the application process. While our timeline serves as a general guide, it's essential to verify specific deadlines and policies for each program you're interested in applying to.

Best of luck, future PA!

AAPA

American Academy of Physician Associates



GETTING STARTED

CASPA reopens in late April each year, kicking off a new cycle for PA school enrollment.

Begin preparing to apply to PA school with these initial steps:

- Learn more about the PA school application process.
- Understand the application services, timeline, and cost.
- Create your CASPA account (and remember the password).

What is CASPA?

Most PA programs use the Centralized Application Service for Physician Assistants (CASPA) to manage their application process. While each program may have different application requirements, CASPA helps students by providing one place to enter all application information and documentation. PA school admissions continue throughout the year, and every school has different timelines and policies for notifying applicants. CASPA reopens in late April each year, kicking off a new cycle for PA school enrollment.

Create your CASPA account and familiarize yourself with its components. You may be able to get started on some sections, but be aware that most application information from past CASPA cycles will not be saved when the new cycle opens.

How long does the application process take?

Applicants need to meet minimum experience and education requirements before they can apply for PA school, so the application process will take, at a minimum, two to three years of preparation.

Once applicants are ready to apply to an upcoming cycle, they typically begin preparing a few months before the program application opens. Some applicants report that it can take a few weeks to complete tasks and enter information required on the PA school application.

After your program application is submitted, it may take a few weeks to several months to receive an interview request or notice of admission. In addition, classes may not actually begin until the following year. Reapplicants may begin preparing for the next application cycle as soon as they submit their current application.

When should I submit my application?

Each program will provide an application submission deadline, whether there is one final submission deadline for all application components, or individual deadlines for various components (ex. official submission, all components received, or CASPA verification).

We encourage applicants to apply early to reduce competition and increase chances of being accepted.

CASPA-participating programs can choose one application deadline from 10 options:

- **June 15**
- **July 15**
- **August 1**
- **September 1**
- **October 1**
- **November 1**
- **December 1**
- **January 15**
- **March 1**
- **April 1**

We encourage applicants to apply early, as it can take several weeks for CASPA to verify your application and send it to your selected programs. Some programs have rolling admissions, which means they review applications and offer interviews as they receive them, so applying early can reduce competition and increase your chances of getting accepted.

While applying early can offer an advantage, don't rush your application. Review your PA school application first for accuracy and completeness, and make sure that it reflects your best qualities and qualifications.

How much does the application process cost?

The cost of applying to PA school can vary greatly depending on how many programs you apply to and the specific costs of each application. CASPA charges a standard application fee, plus an additional fee for each additional program application. As of 2024, CASPA charges $184 for the first program you apply to and $61 for each additional program.

Ex. $184 + 5 programs @ $61 each = $489.

Supplemental applications, transcript orders, entrance exam fees, and interview expenses (including flights and hotels) are likely to add additional costs to your application. There are limited fee waivers available for the first two programs an applicant applies to through the CASPA Fee Assistance Program.

Applicants should prepare for the costs associated with applying to PA school.

RESEARCHING PA PROGRAMS:

Researching PA programs may seem overwhelming, but it is important to find programs that best fit you and your interests; research until you have a comprehensive understanding of the program and its requirements.

How do I find the right PA programs for me?

When choosing PA programs, it is important to consider the unique features of each program. This information can be found on each program's website and may include:

- Admission requirements
- Class size
- Program length
- Program delivery (virtual or in-person)
- Accreditation status (to practice as a PA, you must graduate from an institution that has ARC-PA accreditation)
- Location
- Cost

Quality is more important than quantity, and applying to too many or too few programs can have drawbacks.

There are also other considerations, such as:

- What is the program's mission, beliefs, and values?
- What is the program's culture?
- How will your performance be evaluated?
- How are students supported when they are struggling financially or emotionally?
- Are clinical electives flexible?
- Can you adjust or add electives to gain more experience in a specific topic or specialty?
- Are there additional opportunities for hands-on clinical practice?
- Does the program allow international rotations?
- How are students supported when preparing for board examinations?
- Does the program offer any scholarships?

AAPA's Applying to PA School: How to Choose the Right Program provides some helpful tips on choosing the right PA program for you.

How many PA programs should I apply to?

There is no definitive answer. Depending on your qualifications, preferences, and goals, some experts recommend applying to seven to 12 schools to maximize your chances of acceptance. Others suggest applying to five or six schools for a focused, realistic, and budget-sensitive approach. On average, most students apply to at least six PA programs during an application cycle.

Consider your strengths and weaknesses when choosing a program, including your academic standing, clinical experience, and references. If you feel that you are a strong or above-average applicant, you may have a higher chance of getting into PA school and can apply to fewer programs. If you feel that part of your application is weak or below average, you may want to apply to more programs or target less competitive ones.

Also, if you have certain preferences, such as geographic location or program cost, this may limit the number of programs that meet your criteria. Apply to programs that align with your goals, values, and interests, and that you are genuinely interested in attending.

Where can I find program information?

Thorough research of PA programs can help narrow your application list, ensure that you meet minimum requirements, and save you money on your total application cost.

- PAEA's Program Directory is a great place to begin your program search. This free resource includes essential program information, application requirements, deadlines, and matriculant data.
- myPAbox is another great resource for comprehensive program information. It identifies programs that you have the best chances to get into based on your applicant information, potentially saving you money AAPA members receive a 25% discount on this product.

PREPARING YOUR APPLICATION:

Follow these next steps as you prepare to apply for PA school:

- ✓ Write your personal statement.
- ✓ Order your transcripts.
- ✓ Ask for recommendation letters from your professors, faculty members, and supervising PAs.
- ✓ Complete additional or supplemental applications.
- ✓ Meet prerequisite coursework, experience, and entrance exam requirements for each program.

As you prepare your application, review each program's unique application components. In addition to prerequisites and experience, applications will likely have additional requirements, such as recommendation letters, a personal statement, transcripts, and supplemental applications. Here are some important details you should know:

Personal Statements:

Personal statements are a critical piece of your application and should be written carefully. Begin preparing your personal statement well in advance of CASPA opening so that you have time for proper reflection and review. While each school has their own guidelines for the personal essay, CASPA typically provides a single prompt: "Please explain why you are interested in being a PA." Some programs provide at least one additional (usually optional) essay prompt.

Here are some things to include:

- Tell a meaningful and descriptive story of your PA experience and interest.
- Explain why, how, and when you learned about the PA profession.
- Explain your interest in the PA profession over another healthcare career.
- If you are transitioning to PA from a different career, explain the timing and reasons for your decision.
- Describe your dedication to the PA profession.
- Cover any deficiencies in your application and what steps you have taken to ensure you'll be a great PA candidate.
- Use a spelling/grammar checking service or share your essay with an English professor before submitting.

Here are some things to avoid:

- Avoid reciting what is on your resume.
- Avoid grammatical errors.
- Avoid discussing the PA career as a "back-up" option.
- Avoid writing over CASPA's 5000-character limit (including spaces).

Transcripts:

Official transcripts are produced by your school's registrar's office and are typically delivered electronically. Ask your school to send the transcript directly to CASPA. If there are any holds on your account at a school, resolve them now to avoid delays in sending transcripts. If you still have coursework to complete, consult each program for final transcript deadlines.

Recommendation Letters:

Sometimes called evaluations or reference letters, recommendation letters help program directors understand you from a different perspective. A strong letter will:

- Speak to your abilities, attitudes, and accomplishments in an academic or work setting.
- Be clear and concise.
- Include examples of your projects or meaningful interactions.
- Be no longer than one page.

Each program may have specific guidelines for recommendation letters, including evaluator roles or relationships. Recommendation letters should come from professional or academic sources. Unless a PA school explicitly requests one, avoid personal sources such as relatives or public officials. Evaluators should have some seniority within their institution. Here are some options for professional or academic evaluators:

- Professors/teachers
- Advisors
- Supervisors/colleagues
- PAs/healthcare workers
- Mentors

The CASPA application service requires a minimum of three recommendation letters, but allows up to five recommendation letter requests.

Once you have entered the appropriate contact information in CASPA, evaluators will be asked to submit their recommendation letter directly. Make sure to check periodically whether the letters have been submitted, and send a polite reminder email to the evaluator if needed.

Supplemental Applications:

Supplemental applications are typically essays that are required in addition to the standard personal statement essay. Some applicants consider these essays to be early interview questions that help the program get to know them better. Not all programs require a supplemental application, but many do. If required, each supplemental application will include an additional fee. Some programs allow you to request a fee waiver for the supplemental application. Each essay can range from 250-2500 words in length. Essay prompts and deadlines will vary by program, so consult the specific program requirements for details.

Here are some examples of supplemental essay prompts:

- What unique qualities or experiences will you bring to our PA program?
- Discuss a challenging patient encounter and what you learned from it.
- Describe your commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in healthcare.
- Discuss a significant healthcare issue and propose a solution.
- Explain any academic or professional gaps in your application.
- Discuss your long-term career goals as a PA.

Additional resources on preparing your application:

- AAPA Do's and Don'ts for Writing a Strong CASPA Personal Statement
- CASPA Quick Start Guide and FAQs

COMPLETING PREREQUISITES:

Applicants are encouraged to check PA program website and admissions offices for specific requirements, but all PA programs require some prerequisite coursework. The most common courses required include:

- Anatomy & Physiology
- Biochemistry
- Biology (general)
- Biology (microbiology)
- Chemistry (general)
- Chemistry (organic)
- English Composition/Writing
- Genetics
- Medical Terminology
- Psychology (general)
- Statistics

Each program has specific guidelines for the types of coursework that is accepted, the minimum acceptable grade, and the time allowed since the coursework was completed. For many programs, courses taken more than five to seven years ago will not be accepted. Different programs also have different policies for classes that may be in progress. Some programs may accept you contingent upon completion. In this case, you should update schools as you complete these requirements. If you have questions about course prerequisites for a specific program, email the program directly, ideally before the CASPA cycle opens.

Additional resources on prerequisites:

PAEA's CASPA Common Prerequisites (2022)

GAINING EXPERIENCE:

While every experience presents an opportunity to demonstrate your relevant background, PA programs regularly place a minimum on experience hours earned across Healthcare Experience, Patient Care Experience, and Shadowing.

CASPA has nine different categories outlined within the Experiences portion of the application, including:

- Healthcare Experience
- Patient Care Experience
- Shadowing
- Non-healthcare employment
- Leadership
- Teaching
- Volunteering
- Research
- Extracurricular activities

Most PA programs require at least 1000 hours of HCE/PCE. (2000 = about one year's worth of full-time work.)

Healthcare Experience (HCE) and Patient Care Experience (PCE):

CASPA defines HCE as, "Both paid and unpaid work in a health-related field where you are not directly responsible for a patient's care but may still have patient interaction; for example, filling prescriptions, performing clerical work, delivering patient food, cleaning patients and/or their rooms, administering food or medication, taking vitals or other record keeping information, working as a scribe, CNA, medical assistant, etc."

PCE is defined as, "Experiences in which you are directly responsible for a patient's care; for example: prescribing medication, performing procedures, directing a course of treatment, designing a treatment regimen, actively working on patients as a nurse, paramedic, EMT, phlebotomist, physical therapist, dental hygienist, etc." PCE may also include experience working as a physical therapy aide, pharmacy technician, or patient care technician.

Most PA programs require at least 1000 hours of HCE/PCE. (Two thousand hours is about one year's worth of full-time work.) Many applicants have about 5000 hours of experience. Consult directly with your program about their minimum requirements for a competitive applicant.

While these are CASPA's guidelines, many programs will count things like CNA and medical assistant as PCE and overrule CASPA's determination. You'll need to check with specific programs you're applying to for clarification. This information should be readily available on their website(s). It is the applicant's responsibility to use their best judgement when determining where their experience best fits.

There are numerous positions in which you can obtain HCE/PCE without a prior certification/degree. If you earn additional certifications after you've submitted to CASPA, be sure to update schools along with additional hours/experiences you've obtained.

Shadowing:

Shadowing is defined as time spent officially following and observing a healthcare professional at work (PA shadowing experience is preferred). Though not all schools require a specific number of shadowing hours, observing PAs in various medical settings can strengthen your application and show the admission committee you understand the unique role PAs play in healthcare. Confirm with the PA program directly about their shadowing requirement. Remember to track your shadowing hours, specialty area, and name of provider for reference in your application.

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Finding a PA to shadow can be challenging, as not all medical facilities permit shadowing. Here are some tips on how to find shadowing experience:

- Use your personal connections. If you know a PA, or have a friend or family member who knows a PA, ask them if they would be willing to let you shadow them, or if they can refer you to other PAs who are open to shadowing.
- Contact your local, regional, or state PA chapter. AAPA Constituent Organizations is a good place to start. Ask them for guidance and insight on finding shadowing opportunities, and if possible attend one of their meetings and network with PAs.
- Contact the admissions advisor at your local PA program to see if there is a list of contacts who are open to allowing prospective students to shadow.
- Visit or call local clinics, urgent care centers, or hospitals. Search online for medical facilities in your area that employ PAs, and check if they have a formal shadowing program or policy. If they do, follow their instructions and apply for a shadowing position. If they don't, try to visit or call them and ask to speak to a PA or a supervisor. Explain your interest in shadowing a PA, and be polite and professional.
- Find a clinical job or volunteer opportunity where PAs work. If you can find a job or a volunteer position that involves working with PAs, such as a medical assistant, a scribe, an EMT, or a phlebotomist, you may have a better chance of getting a shadowing opportunity, as you will build a positive relationship with the PAs over time.
- Expand your search to other healthcare professionals. If you are having trouble finding a PA to shadow, you can also try to shadow other healthcare providers, such as physicians, nurse practitioners, physical therapists, or pharmacists. While this may not count as PA shadowing for some programs, it can still give you valuable clinical experience and exposure to different aspects of healthcare.

Additional resources on experience:

- AAPA's Accrue Healthcare Experience and Patient Care Experience Before Applying to PA School
- AAPA's How to Find PA Shadowing in the Era of COVID-19
- AAPA's Become a PA: Pre-PA Workshop (Live event)

COMPLETING ENTRANCE EXAMS:

While some schools are no longer requiring a standardized entrance exam, most programs still require applicants to take one. Required entrance exams may include the GRE, PA-CAT, TOEFL, MCAT, ACT, and SAT. Confirm the specific requirements with the PA programs to which you plan to apply.

If your program does not require an entrance exam, taking an exam voluntarily can be a good way to distinguish yourself from a large pool of applicants, most of whom do not take an exam unless required. For programs that require an entrance exam, you will be part of a small pool eligible to apply.

Standardized tests should be taken three to six months before you plan on applying.

GRE:

The Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) is a standardized test that measures applicants verbal and quantitative reasoning, analytical writing, and critical thinking skills. The cost is $220 and there are multiple resources to utilize for study prep, including workbooks and online courses. You must also factor in the cost of $27 to send scores to each program that you are applying for that require a GRE score. Some applicants may qualify for a program to help alleviate the cost. Learn more about the GRE here.

PA-CAT:

The PA-CAT was introduced in 2020 and was developed specifically for the typical prerequisite requirements of most PA schools. The topics covered include anatomy, physiology, general biology, general and organic chemistry, biochemistry, microbiology, behavioral sciences, genetics, and statistics. Taking PA-CAT currently costs $228. Learn more about the PA-CAT here.

TOEFL:

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a standardized test to measure the English language ability of non-native speakers wishing to enroll in English-speaking universities. PA programs that accept international students may require TOEFL for entrance. Learn more about the TOEFL exam here.

MCAT:

Although PA programs no longer require the MCAT for admittance, some programs will accept an MCAT score in replacement of a GRE score. Consult the program website for details. Learn more about the MCAT here.

ACT / SAT

The ACT and SAT are standardized exams typically used for college admissions. Masters-level PA programs are not likely to require the ACT and SAT exam for program admission, but some programs (typically combined BS/MS programs) may allow an ACT or SAT exam score to be entered. Consult the program website for details and requirements.

When should I take my exams?

Generally, you want to take your standardized tests three to six months before you plan on applying to leave yourself enough time to retake the exam should you receive a less-than-ideal score.

SUBMITTING YOUR APPLICATION

After preparing your PA school application, complete these final steps:

Review your application for errors and omissions.
Submit your application and any supplemental applications.

Your application should be complete and should demonstrate your unique qualifications for PA school. If you are applying to multiple PA programs, ensure that you have met each program's specific requirements.

CASPA may take several weeks to review and verify your application, so submit well in advance of your program's deadline.

When you are ready to submit, follow these steps:

- Select all of the programs you want your application to be sent to. You can add but not remove programs once you submit.
- Review your application for errors and omissions. Changes cannot be made once you submit your application.
- Submit your application as soon as it is complete to begin the verification process. CASPA will continue to receive your materials (transcripts, recommendation letters, etc.) after submission.
- Pay the applicable fees. Save the receipt.

Programs only accept verified applications, and CASPA may take several weeks to review and verify your application. Some programs will begin the interview process promptly after the application deadline, so make sure to submit well in advance of your program's deadline.

TIP: Some applicants choose to wait for CASPA to confirm that you meet the minimum requirements (ex. GPA) before they submit supplemental applications.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

You submitted your application. Congrats! What should you do now?

- ✓ Check your application status often.
- ✓ Complete any remaining prerequisites or experience.
- ✓ Prepare for PA school interviews.
- ✓ Celebrate your acceptance and get ready for your PA journey.
- ✓ Reapplicants: Don't give up!

After submitting your application, you can check your application status at any time. It may take up to four weeks after all documents have been received for CASPA to verify your application. Continue to complete remaining prerequisites and experience hours. If you are still enrolled in an undergraduate program, complete your degree. Update your applications as you complete these requirements.

Stay strong!

Following submission, you may be asked to interview with a PA program. It may several weeks to months before you hear further news from a PA program, and many applicants feel anxious during this time. Stay strong!

PA SCHOOL INTERVIEWS:

Being invited to interview with a PA program means that they are seriously considering you for a spot in their program. While you may receive an interview invite within weeks of submitting your application, you may not be invited until several months after submission, if at all. It may also take weeks to months to hear from a program after interviewing. Keep in mind that not all programs require an interview prior to admission. Check the program's specific timeline for interview dates and requirements.

PA school interviews provide a chance to share more about yourself, your motivations, and your skills. Interviews also provide a chance for you to ask questions about the program to see if it is a good fit for you. Depending on the structure, interviews may last just 15 minutes or up to a full day.

Here are some tips for interviewing:

- Dress and behave professionally.
- Review potential interview questions ahead of time. Practice your responses in a mock interview.
- Your delivery is as important as your response. Programs want to know how you communicate and respond to a situation.
- Stand out with thorough research, knowledge of current challenges to PAs and patients, and your vision of yourself as a PA.
- Ask thoughtful questions to help you learn about the program.
- Prepare a statement summarizing your goals and reasons for applying.
- Although it will not affect your chances of acceptance, always follow up with a thank-you note.

PA school interviews provide a chance to share more about yourself and to determine whether the program is a good fit for you.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- What Every Pre-PA Needs to Know about PA School Interviews
- PA School Interviews 101 Webinar

ACCEPTANCE OR REAPPLICATION:

If you've been accepted to PA school, congratulations! You may still have some final steps to complete before starting your PA program, such as paying admission fees, purchasing textbooks, and brushing up on terminology. Check with your program for specific details. See this article on what to expect during the first phase of PA school. Sign up for AAPA Student Membership.

If you have not been accepted into a program, don't give up! PA school is highly competitive, and many applicants apply for at least two cycles. Take the necessary steps to strengthen your application, including expanding your experience, completing missing coursework, perfecting your personal statement, etc. Request feedback from admissions advisors of the programs where you interviewed. Hear from others to stay inspired. Find support from a mentor.

PA school is highly competitive, and many applicants apply for at least two cycles.

FULL CHECKLIST

- ✓ Learn more about the PA school application process.
- ✓ Create your CASPA account (and remember the password).
- ✓ Research PA programs until you have a comprehensive understanding of the program and its requirements.
- ✓ Order your transcripts.
- ✓ Ask for recommendation letters from your professors, faculty members, and supervising PAs.
- ✓ Write your personal statement.
- ✓ Complete additional or supplemental applications.
- ✓ Meet prerequisite coursework, experience, and entrance exam requirements for each program.
- ✓ Review your application for errors and omissions.
- ✓ Submit your application and any supplemental applications.
- ✓ Check your application status often.
- ✓ Complete any remaining prerequisites or experience.
- ✓ Prepare for PA school interviews.
- ✓ Celebrate your acceptance and get ready for your PA journey.
- ✓ Reapplicants: Don't give up!



TIMELINE

This timeline is highly generalized. Application deadlines vary, and may range from June to April.

1-5 YEARS BEFORE APPLYING

- Learn more about the PA profession.
- Research PA programs and their application requirements.
- Gain experience (shadowing, volunteering, healthcare/patient care).
- Enroll in necessary prerequisites.

5 MONTHS BEFORE APPLYING

- Create a free CASPA account. (Remember that CASPA does not save application details from previous cycles.)
- Review your official transcripts and place your official transcript order.
- If you plan to take an entrance exam (ex. GRE, PA-CAT), doing so early will give you an opportunity to retake the exam should you want a better score.

4 MONTHS BEFORE APPLYING

- Attend PA program information sessions for programs that interest you.
- Begin looking at fee waiver eligibility.
- Start preparing your potential recommendation letter authors (teachers, faculty members, supervising PAs, etc.).
- Start brainstorming ideas for your personal statement.
- Create or download a spreadsheet, like AAPA's Pre-PA Record Keeper, to keep track of your HCE/PCE, shadowing hours, volunteering hours, etc.

3 MONTHS BEFORE APPLYING

- Construct a rough draft of your personal statement.
- Ask friends/family/coworkers to proofread your personal statement and provide feedback.
- Continue to gather information you'll need to enter within CASPA.
- When completing your CASPA application, refer to PAEA's Applicant Guide that shares specific CASPA details.

2 MONTHS BEFORE APPLYING

- Connect with PAs and learn more about the profession.
- Attend AAPA's annual conference (pre-PAs receive a registration discount) and network at the Become a PA: Pre-PA Workshop in May.
- If you are completing a degree, send updated transcripts, hours, or other records to the programs to which you are applying.

SUBMISSION

- Apply once you are sure your application is ready and error free.
- Check in with references writing letters of recommendation. References listed in your application will receive a link from CASPA to submit their letter and evaluation.
- Fill out supplemental applications, if applicable.

1-2 MONTHS AFTER APPLYING

- Prepare for and attend PA school interviews, then follow-up with a thank you note.
- Finalize any remaining prerequisites or HCE/PCE hours.
- Continue to monitor your status to ensure your application is verified without issue.

2-5 MONTHS AFTER APPLYING

- Prepare for and attend PA school interviews, then follow up with a thank you note.
- Wait for acceptance letters and decide on your preferred school.

5-8 MONTHS AFTER APPLYING

- Continue to wait for acceptance letters, participate in interviews, and make decisions about where to attend.
- Assess your application and plan for reapplication, if necessary.
- If reapplying, consider your application's strengths and weaknesses, including whether you need to retake prerequisites, gain more patient care or health care experience, retake entrance exams, or improve your personal statement. Don't give up!
- Hear from others to stay inspired and find support from a mentor.

AFTER PROGRAM ACCEPTANCE

- Prepare for PA school by reviewing your medical terminology, building a support system, and completing final program requirements such as assigned readings.
- See this article on preparing for the first phase of PA school.
- Confirm requirements with the program you have accepted before you attend.
- Celebrate your acceptance and get ready for your PA journey with AAPA Student membership.

