

First, although any publications are better than no publications, it is best to publish in the forums that are most recognized by the subfield that you want to work in.

Second, there is no substitute for personal contacts. Most good graduate programs get hundreds of applications and there has to be something that makes them immediately stand out from the pile. Coming from MIT, having a perfect SAT score (for those institutions that still use it), etc. can do the trick but, barring that, you need to have a faculty member be able to point to an application and say, I know about this person, I've spoken to them, and I am interested. The best way to make personal contacts is meeting people at conferences, but another way that I often suggest to my students is to email relevant people. **SUCH EMAILS SHOULD NEVER BE ABOUT WORKING WITH THEM OR GETTING ACCEPTED TO THEIR UNIVERSITY**, at least not initially. Rather, they should involve asking a question about their research, e.g., about one of their papers that the student has read. Most academics love talking about their own work. Once a rapport has been established, then the student can casually mention that they are looking for graduate programs and does the faculty member have any suggestions. If they are interested, then they can suggest applying to their own program, but if they are not, this gives them an easy out and the other programs they suggest can be useful avenues for exploration.

Finally, no graduate application should be written in a general form. For each application, the student should research the department, identify the types of work and faculty members that best fit, and then write their application to target the interests of those specific people.