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PROFESSIONAL
SURVIVAL GUIDE
FOR APPLYING TO
GRADUATE
SCHOOL



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If you plan to attend graduate school, **you must take action early**. Deadlines for admission and financial aid at many graduate institutions and for most national fellowships occur during the **fall semester of the previous year**. The following information is to help you understand the process of applying to graduate school.

TIMELINE

Junior Year

- Make an appointment with a Career Consultant to discuss your career goals and how graduate school will fit into your goals.
- Explore types of graduate degrees that would prepare you for your career goal.
- Conduct informational interviews with professionals in your field of interest. What type of graduate degrees did they pursue? Did their particular degree prepare them well?
- Research schools- take into consideration their locations, cost, required coursework and fieldwork (if any) the research interests of the faculty, and what their graduates go on to do.
- Narrow down your list of schools to 3-5 potential schools.

Summer between Junior and Senior Year

- Continue researching faculty areas of interest.
- Contact the graduate school office, the academic department, and the financial aid office to request applications and literature from each school.
- Review school materials to learn all you can about available programs.
- Study or take a prep course for admission tests.
- Begin writing application essays.
- Make a list of prospective school deadlines for admission, housing, and financial aid.
- Visit the campus. See how well you like the surroundings, services, geographic area.

Fall of Senior Year

- Request letters of recommendation from professors, supervisors, or whomever you have chosen.
- Get your application essay critiqued.
- Take standardized admission tests (GRE, MCAT, LSAT, etc.) and order scores sent to your chosen schools. Plan to retake them if you need to improve your scores.
- Send completed applications.

Spring of Senior Year

- File the FAFSA at www.fafsa.ed.gov.
- Check to make sure the schools you are applying to have all of your information and that your file is complete.
- Wait for notification from schools to see if you were accepted. Pay attention to upcoming summer dates for new student orientation and registration at the university you choose.
- Notify the schools where you decide to decline admission.

STEP 1: Research & Selection

Career + Calling

Career + Calling is a great place to start collecting information on potential graduate programs. We have a variety of resources to assist you in your search. You can also come in and make an appointment to speak directly with a counselor regarding your graduate school search.

Online Resources

Peterson's Guides	www.petersons.com
Graduate School Listings	www.gradschools.com www.graduateguide.com
The Princeton Review	www.princetonreview.com
Natl. Association of Graduate Professional Students	www.nagps.org
The Council of Graduate Schools	www.cgsnet.org
APU's chapter of the PEW Society	www.apu.edu/honors/apuhonorsocieties/

Accredited vs. Non Accredited Schools

When researching graduate schools, make sure that you learn whether or not the program is accredited. Think about the career you want to pursue after a degree- does the accreditation of the program matter? Will it affect your validity in the field? Some areas of study (i.e. psychology, medical school, architecture) necessitate going to a school that has been nationally accredited.

STEP 2: The Application Package

- Application Form
- Statement of Purpose/Entrance Essay
- Application Fees
- Transcripts
- Letters of Recommendation
- Standardized Test Scores
- Interviews

Applying to graduate school is similar to applying to a university for undergraduate study. The main difference between the two application processes is the focus on the **statement of purpose** and **letters of recommendation**. For graduate school, your statement of purpose will focus on your readiness and interest in a specific field of study. Additionally, your entrance test scores (GRE, MCAT, LSAT, etc.) and your grade point average from your undergraduate studies are important deciding factors.

Application Form

- Follow the instructions carefully and be sure to make a copy of the application for your own records.
- Have one or more people check for errors before you send the application in the mail.
- If the application is online, make sure to continually check and save your application. Some universities (including all schools within the public California state system) require you to apply to both the university and the specific “school” or program separately.
- Pay attention to the requirements, the deadlines for application (they may vary between the university as a whole and the actual program) and complete both application forms.

Application Fees

- Be sure to follow instructions for paying the application fee.
- Depending on the type of school, you may be asked to pay the fee to the general university or to the specific program.
- Most fees range from \$25 - \$150 and are usually not refundable.
- However, many schools will reduce or waive the fee based on proof of financial hardship. Be prepared to show tax statements to prove your need if you decide to apply for a fee waiver.

Transcripts

Many schools require more than one copy of an official transcript from every college you attended. For official transcripts, have the college send copies directly to the university you are applying to. Some programs will allow you to send “unofficial” copies, which means you can print them yourself or send photocopies. Transcripts are used to verify if you have completed all the required prerequisites and to verify GPA. Your GPA is often a deciding factor in your admission, however, you won’t necessarily be ruled out if you have other valuable life or leadership experience, great recommendations, or high test scores. Graduate committees may consider your cumulative GPA, your GPA of the last two years or only your GPA in courses relevant to the field.

STEP 2: The Application Package

Statement of Purpose/Entrance Essay

Your essay serves several purposes. It provides a writing sample, shows your interest and personal objectives in a career field, describes who you are and why you are ready to pursue further study, and states why you are interested in attending a particular school or program. Be sure to speak to each expectation placed forth and stay within the page limitations. *See further tips on writing your Statement of Purpose at the end of this guide.*

Writing your Statement of Purpose

(adapted from owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/)

Answer the questions that are asked

- If you are applying to several schools, you may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar.
- Don't be tempted to use the same statement for all applications. It is important to answer each question being asked, and if slightly different answers are needed, you should write separate statements. In every case, be sure your answer fits the question being asked.

Tell a story

- Think in terms of showing or demonstrating thorough concrete experience. One of the worst things you can do is to bore the admissions committee. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you'll be putting yourself ahead of the pack. If you distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable.

Be specific

- Don't, for example, state that you would make an excellent doctor unless you can back it up with specific reasons. Your desire to become a lawyer, engineer, or whatever should be logical, the result of specific experience that is described in your statement. Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.

Find an angle

- If you're like most people, your life story lacks drama, so figuring out a way to make it interesting becomes the big challenge. Finding an angle or a "hook" is vital.

Concentrate on your opening paragraph

- The lead or opening paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you grab the reader's attention or lose it. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement.

Tell what you know

- Detail your interest and experience in your particular field, as well as some of your knowledge of the field. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the field and use the language professionals use in conveying this information. Refer to experiences (work, research, etc.), classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended, or any other source of specific information about the career you want and why you're suited to it. Since you will have to select what you include in your statement, the choices you make are often an indication of your judgment.

Don't include some subjects

- There are certain things best left out of personal statements. For example, references to experiences or accomplishments in high school or earlier are generally not good ideas. Don't mention potentially controversial subjects (for example, controversial religious or political issues).

Do your research

- If a school wants to know why you're applying to it rather than another school, do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs. If the school setting would provide an important geographical or cultural change for you, this might be a factor to mention.

Write well and correctly

- Be meticulous. Type and proofread your essay very carefully. Many admissions officers say that good written skills and command of correct use of language are important to them as they read these statements. Express yourself clearly and concisely. Adhere to stated word limits.

Avoid clichés

- A medical school applicant who writes that he is good at science and wants to help other people is not exactly expressing an original thought. Stay away from often-repeated or tired statements.

STEP 2: The Application Package

Writing the Personal Statement: Top 10 Rules

1. **Strive for depth rather than breadth.** Narrow focus to one or two key themes, ideas or experiences in your life
2. Try to tell the reader something that no other applicant will be able to say
3. Provide the reader with insight into what **drives you to succeed**
4. **Be yourself**, not the 'ideal' applicant
5. **Get creative and imaginative** in the opening remarks, but make sure it's something that no one else could write
6. Address the **school's unique features** that interest you
7. Focus on the affirmative in the personal statement; consider an addendum to explain deficiencies or blemishes (for example, a poor grade in a course related to your field of interest)
8. **Evaluate experiences**, rather than describe them
9. **PROOFREAD** carefully for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage and style
10. Use readable fonts, typeface, and conventional spacing and margins

Writing the Personal Statement: Top 10 Pitfalls

1. Do not submit an expository resume; avoid repeating information found elsewhere on the application
2. Do not complain or whine about the "system" or circumstances in your life
3. Do not preach to your reader. You can express opinions, but do not come across as fanatical or extreme
4. Do not talk about money as a motivator
5. Do not discuss your minority status or disadvantaged background unless you have a compelling and unique story that relates to it
6. Do not remind the school of its rankings or tell them how good they are
7. Do not use boring clichéd intros or conclusions
 - "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is..."
 - "This question asks me to discuss..."
 - "I would like to thank the admissions committee for considering my application."
 - "It is my sincere hope that you will grant me the opportunity to attend your fine school."
 - "In sum, there are three reasons why you should admit me..."
8. Do not use unconventional and gimmicky formats and packages
9. Do not submit supplemental materials unless they are requested
10. Do not get the name of the school wrong

STEP 2: The Application Package

Letters of Recommendation

These are an important part of your application to graduate school. Most universities require three letters; two should be from faculty in your undergraduate field of study. You may also ask employers from jobs or internships you've previously held. The person should focus his or her recommendation in areas that he or she has directly observed. Also be sure to allow the recommender at least four weeks to write the letter. If possible, have him or her address a copy directly to each program you are applying to. It's also usually best to get the letter (sealed and signed, to ensure that you did not tamper with it) from your recommenders and send them together with your application package. Finally, remember to send a thank you note to your recommenders.

Recommendation Letter Guidelines

Provide the following information to the recommender:

- Information on the program and why you are applying
- The name, title and contact information of the person to whom you are writing the letter (usually the head of the department)
- Specific skills and qualifications (academic, work or volunteer) you would like the recommender to address
- Self-addressed stamped envelope
- The date you need the letter, or the deadline for him/her to send it directly to the university

Standardized Test Scores

Be sure to plan ahead so that you have time to retake the required entrance exam more than once, in case you wish to improve your scores. The most common test for graduate schools is the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). Aside from law and medical schools, many graduate schools are moving away from requiring a specific score for entrance into their programs. Some no longer require you to take a standardized test at all. Regardless, if you must submit low scores, a good GPA, great recommendations or related experience can sometimes offset them. **To learn more about standardized tests, go to:**

GRE www.gre.org

GMAT www.gmat.com

LSAT www.lsats.org

MCAT www.aamc.org/students

MAT www.milleranalogies.com

TOEFL www.toefl.org

GRE Tests: General & Subject: for more information, visit www.gre.org

The General Test has three sections: Analytical Writing, Verbal Reasoning and Quantitative Reasoning. It does not focus on any specific discipline or subject matter. *Unless specified, most programs will require you to take only the GRE General test.*

The Subject Test measures mastery and comprehension basic to graduate study in these major fields:

-Biochemistry

-Literature in English

-Cell & Molecular Biology

-Computer Science

-Physics

-Psychology

-Math

-Chemistry



STEP 2: The Application Package

Interview

Some graduate schools include an individual or group interview as part of the admissions process, usually as the second phase in the process. If your potential school requests an interview, treat it as you would a job interview: dress appropriately, be prepared to answer questions about the school and the program to which you are applying, highlight your past academic/work experience and your future goals, and sell yourself! *For more help with preparing for an interview, see our Survival Guide for Interviewing.*

STEP 3: Additional Information

Ideas for Financial Aid

- **FAFSA:** In order to get loans for graduate school, you must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. The simplest way to fill it out is online at www.fafsa.ed.gov. You will want to work with your institution's graduate financial aid office to support you through the loan application process if you apply for any other types of loans.
- **Fellowships:** These range in amounts from one hundred to several thousand dollars and are given to enable a student to study without performing any work or services beyond excellence in his/her study.
- **Assistantships/Graduate Internships:** This form of assistance requires the student to work on-campus in return for compensation. Frequently these assistantships are available in areas in student life or administrative departments on campus, classroom teaching, or participating in a research project with faculty.
- **Grants-in-Aid:** Grants are generally awarded on the basis of financial need and do not require work. These are especially available for minorities and women in underrepresented areas, including the sciences and engineering.

If You Don't Get In

- Get a job in your targeted field or try to volunteer or intern in your targeted field.
- Apply to a wider range of schools. Talk to admissions officers to find out what they look for in applicants.
- Retake the GRE to improve your scores.
- Work with a Career Consultant to improve your resume and statement of purpose.
- Apply again! The candidate pool is different every year, so you may have a better chance if try again later.

In Print Resources

Asher, Donald. (2000). *Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice* (Graduate Admissions Essays) Ten Speed Press.

Stelzer, Richard J. (1997). *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School*. Petersons Guides.

Peters, Robert. (1997). *Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning an M.A. or a Ph.D.* Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

FAQ

How many schools should I apply to?

There is no right or wrong number of schools. Generally, after you fully research different programs, you should be able to narrow down your list to about three to five possibilities.

Should I take a break before pursuing advanced study?

Possibly. If you are at all doubtful about your commitment to two to four more years of schoolwork, do not apply now. You also have a better chance at gaining entrance into programs if you bring work, volunteer, or internship experience that is related to your field, or proves that you have valuable life experience and know what you are getting yourself into by beginning a graduate program. If you do take time off, be sure to keep in touch with faculty so they can write a letter of recommendation for you when you decide to apply. It is also a good idea to take the GRE or other required entrance exams now, while your studies are fresh in your mind. Your scores will be good for five years.

Does my intended graduate field of study have to match my undergraduate field of study?

Not necessarily. Remember to check the admissions requirements for the program that you are interested in. Some graduate programs require you to have taken a certain number of classes (prerequisites) in that area of study to be accepted in the program, while other programs require you to have an undergraduate degree in the same field of study. Different schools may also require a different number of prerequisite courses than others. Some programs do not require a degree or classes in the same field of study at all.

I am a junior transfer student and do not know the faculty well enough to request letters. What do I do?

Contact faculty at your previous institution, or consider taking an independent study or conducting research with a faculty member so he/she can get to know your academic abilities. Approach new faculty members at the beginning of the semester and let them know you will be applying to programs later on. Ask them to start evaluating your work from the beginning and be willing to get feedback that will improve your writing, research, and classroom participation.

Should I apply for a masters or a doctoral program and what is the difference?

For practical training in your field of interest, or to teach at the community college level, a master's degree is sufficient. A master's degree can also be helpful to earn alongside a credential if you wish to teach in grades K-12. If you want to pursue a career in academia and teach at the college level or do research, apply directly to a doctoral program. It is also advisable to apply directly to a doctoral program if your goal is to eventually obtain a doctoral degree, though it's much more difficult to gain entrance into a doctoral program without a master's degree in the same field. Some programs require you to first have a master's degree, or allow you to earn both at the same time.

GRADUATE SCHOOLS WITH INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS

This list does not detail every international program available- use it to get you started if you are hoping to attend a program with a global emphasis in international studies or opportunities for studying abroad

American University: www.american.edu/sis/

Columbia: www.sipa.columbia.edu/academics/degree_programs/mia/index.html

Georgetown University: sfs.georgetown.edu/learning/graduate/

George Washington: elliott.gwu.edu/

Harvard: www.hks.harvard.edu/degrees/masters/mpa-id

John Hopkins: www.sais-jhu.edu/academics/degrees/ma/index.htm

Monterey Institute of International Studies: <http://www.miis.edu/>

Princeton University: www.princeton.edu/grad/

Stanford: internationalrelations.stanford.edu/

Syracuse: www.maxwell.syr.edu/

Tufts University: fletcher.tufts.edu/academic/default.shtml

UC Berkeley: gspp.berkeley.edu/

UC San Diego: irps.ucsd.edu/index.htm

University of Chicago: cir.uchicago.edu/

University of Denver: www.du.edu/korbel/

University of Maryland: www.gradschool.umd.edu/catalog/programs/gvpt.htm

University of Pittsburgh: www.gspia.pitt.edu/

USC: www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/ir/

Yale: jackson.yale.edu/ma-degree