What to do and When to do it

Applying to graduate programs can seem like a daunting task.

This info will:

- help you decide whether or not you should apply to graduate school.
- show you how to choose a program that suits your needs.
- offer advice on what your admissions essay should and should not include.
- let you know when you should be doing all of these things.

Should I go to graduate school?

Before you apply to a graduate program, ask yourself why you want to go. Postgraduate education is not an alternative to getting a job, nor can you be certain that your advanced degree will increase your earning power. It’s much easier to write a resume and get a job than you might think; in fact, if you fear that the real world is going to be difficult and terrifying, the best thing you can do for yourself is jump right in and get an internship or some other kind of work experience. There are a number of publications and online resources within the Career Center’s Resource Library and website detailing work opportunities; if you need assistance, ask a Career Counselor for help. If you do not need a graduate or professional education to reach your eventual career goal, why spend the time and money required to earn it when you’d be better served by obtaining hands-on work experience?

Graduate schools will want to know that you are focused and serious about the field. Delaying graduate school for a year or two while you gain related experience is a great way to demonstrate your commitment. Let your passion for learning more about a subject drive your decision to apply.

On the other hand, if your career goal requires you to study a particular field in greater depth than an undergraduate education allows, or you need an advanced degree to reach your eventual career goal, then a graduate program it is. Also, if you are driven to attain an advanced degree simply for the joy of learning, go for it!

Where can I go for information?

Peterson’s Guides - Can be found in the Career Resource Library and Trexler Library with specific information on Master’s and PhD programs. There is a guide for each general category of academic study, including humanities, medicine, social sciences, and business. The guides list programs alphabetically by field and offers statistics such as acceptance rates, price per credit, application deadlines, faculty research, and the size of the departments. The most recent edition can be found in the Trexler Library or online at www.petersons.com.
Educational Rankings Annual - Can be a good resource to narrow down the possibilities and evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses of various programs. This publication rates graduate programs in most academic fields according to overall strength and value for money. Ask faculty in your department for other resource recommendations. Note: While rankings can be helpful, they may not be the complete story since the criteria used by each source may or may not be criteria that are most important to you. Rankings should not be used as your sole decision-making tool.

Websites listed in this guide can be a good starting point for gathering information. Individual university and program websites are essential to visit as part of your research process.

Don’t forget to consult faculty members in your intended field of study. Not only will they have advice for you, they can also connect you with their colleagues. Your professors and their contacts at other institutions can provide you with a wealth of knowledge concerning various graduate programs.

In graduate school, the activity of the individual professor or department in which you are studying may be more important than the prestige of the overall institution. Do not underestimate the benefit of keeping current with what is happening in your chosen discipline. Become familiar with the journals and publications in that field. Follow your area of specialization and know who is publishing and from what institutions. Also note those who are on the editorial boards of those publications. You can research this using Google Scholar.

There are several basic questions to keep in mind as you examine institutions. First, look at their academic training, and secondly at their research activities. In addition, how do they approach teaching and the area of student development? Additional information to consider includes the make-up of the graduate student body, the library and research facilities, as well as students and faculty, and what kind of financial assistance is possible? Other important questions include what kinds of experiential opportunities exist, such as assistantships and internships, what types of advisement and career services do they provide, and where do program graduates find employment?

It is also a good idea to visit the institutions in which you are interested. Some criteria to focus on include faculty reputation, career opportunities, the size of the department, the quality of their facilities, the availability of financial aid, teaching and research opportunities, as well as any other factors you determine to be high on your priority list.

A good rule of thumb is to apply to 6-9 Masters or PhD programs, 10 medical schools, or 6-9 law schools. See “Tips for Evaluating Graduate Schools” for more information.
How do I get in?

Typically, the criteria for admission into a graduate program are as follows:

1. Satisfactory undergraduate GPA and success in relevant courses (varies)
2. High admission test scores (varies)
3. Detailed letters of recommendation
4. A well-written admissions essay
5. A strong personal interview (required by some programs)

As the particulars of each institution's entrance requirements vary, be certain that you examine each university's literature/website carefully.

Though you do not necessarily need a bachelor's degree in the field you wish to study in graduate school, there may be a preference toward candidates with relevant courses and/or observation or work experience in the discipline or field. Many programs have prerequisite requirements; if you can't meet them immediately, don't panic. At some universities you can complete these courses as a part-time, non-degree seeking student before you actually apply to the program.

Graduate Admission Test

Most institutions will require you to submit your scores on a graduate admission test. These include:

- GRE (Graduate Record Examination; general and subject tests)
- MCAT (Medical College Admission Test)
- LSAT (Law School Admission Test)
- GMAT (Graduate Management Assessment Test)
- MAT (Miller Analogies Test)
- DAT (Dental Admission Test)
- OAT (Optometry Admission Test)
- PCAT (Pharmacy)

*these entrance exams are also used for veterinary school.

In this guide, there is more information on these tests. Check the requirements of the program to which you are applying so you know which admissions tests are necessary.

Letters of Recommendation

Be sure to obtain letters of recommendation from your professors; some programs will require more than others, so make sure you review the admission requirements for each institution you intend to apply to very carefully. Check with the institution of your choice regarding their policy on letters. They may require the recommendations be from faculty members, however, some schools may specify a mix of faculty members and others who know you well. When choosing a recommender, you should look for someone who has a high opinion of you, knows you in and out of class, is familiar with your goals, and has worked with or
taught a large number of students. This person should be someone whose opinion will be held in high regard.

When asking professors for letters of recommendation, it is important to set up an appointment to discuss it; don’t just show up at their door and ask them to do it. Be sure to take along a copy of your resume and a list of courses you took with that professor. Discuss your long-term goals with the faculty member, and make certain that s/he can write you a positive recommendation. Remind her/him of specific papers/projects/characteristics you hope s/he can mention that will be relevant to your application. Give her/him an addressed and stamped envelope if it needs to be mailed or complete directions if it should be submitted online. It is recommended that you give your recommenders a minimum of four weeks’ notice on letters. Send a nice thank-you letter when it’s done.

Confidentiality

Institutions will generally give you a choice of making your recommendation confidential or non-confidential. Discuss this option with your recommender. If you make it confidential, you will give up your right to review that recommendation. Typically, institutions will give additional credibility to a confidential recommendation; therefore, it is advisable to waive your right to see the recommendation. If it is non-confidential, you will have the right to see the recommendation. Some of your references may provide you with a copy of the letter voluntarily. The decision to have your recommendations confidential or non-confidential is up to you, but this decision must be made before you have your references write their letters.

See “How to Ask for Letters of Recommendation” on other pages in this guide.

Auditions and Portfolios

Graduate programs in music, theatre, and dance will frequently require auditions; programs in art, architecture, journalism, and other visual fields will often ask for portfolios. The purpose of both the audition and portfolio is to showcase your background and preparation in your chosen field. The admissions committee will also attempt to assess your potential from these sources. Check with your schools of choice for their policies. In your portfolio, be sure to label each piece individually. The level of proficiency in an audition will vary according to whether your program is in performance or in an area such as education. Again, check the policies of your preferred graduate schools so that you can prepare well in advance. Also, talk with faculty and review your materials before you submit anything!

Admissions Essay

Perhaps the single most important part of your application will be your admissions essay; this is also the part of the process that you have the most control over. The essay provides an excellent opportunity for you to sell yourself to a graduate program. This is your chance to display your critical thinking and writing skills; the people on the receiving end use
it to gauge your level of interest, commitment, and maturity. It should include, first and foremost, an answer to the question posed on the application. No matter how well you express yourself verbally, if you dodge the question your commitment will be in doubt. Assess your reasons for pursuing this field of study, relate your goals, and show that you are ready to undertake this demanding course of study. You can not afford to write a superficial essay. Expect to write and revise this document several times before you submit it with your application materials.

Since the essay is such an integral component of a graduate school application, don’t leave anything to chance. Show it to faculty members, the career counselors in The Career Center, and/or a tutor at the Writing Center to assess its strengths and weaknesses and to check for proper grammatical usage.

In this guide, see “Tips for Writing Graduate School Essays” and “Law School Application Essays/Personal Statements” for more information.

**Personal Interview**

Not all graduate programs require a personal interview for admission; if yours does, you need to be prepared. Candidates who are offered an interview have met the basic requirements with regard to grades and test scores. The interview is the graduate school’s way of selecting the best candidates from among the group of qualified applicants. Therefore, it is important that you prepare and practice before going to the interview. Medical schools generally require interviews, as do many business schools. Law schools, generally do not interview for admission.

Be ready to discuss what makes you uniquely qualified for this program, your career and academic goals, and why this program is the best match for you. You may be asked for your thoughts on a controversial topic or may be asked to put yourself in a situation. In either case, they are not looking so much for you to have a ‘correct’ answer, as they are interested in observing your thought processes and decision making skills.

Attend the “Gearing Up for Graduate School” events and our “Interview with Confidence” workshop to learn more about researching and interviewing. Schedule a mock interview in The Career Center to practice your approach before the actual interview.

**How do I pay for this?**

Begin researching scholarships, grants, loans, and other sources of financial aid as early as possible – ideally, you should begin this process in the fall of your junior year. The Career Center has a number of publications in the Career Resource Library that can help you find the means to finance your education.

Attend the “Researching & Funding Grad School Programs” workshop in October.
Another option that may exist for you is a graduate assistantship. These typically come in two specific types: research and teaching assistantships. In most cases, these will involve 10 to 20 hours a week of undergraduate instruction and/or faculty research. You may receive tuition remission and/or a stipend to cover living expenses. Not only do these programs provide an inexpensive means of financing your education, they also provide valuable experience in your chosen field. If this sounds like an option you would like to explore, apply directly to the program in which you are seeking admission. Some deadlines for funding are earlier than the application deadlines, so make sure to request the proper information from the program and read it carefully to keep all the dates straight.

In this guide, see “Tips for Keeping Graduate School Costs in Check” for more information.

GEARING UP FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL?

Don't miss the Career Center's Fall programming!
Designed specifically for sophomores and juniors
(Seniors are also welcome.)

See the Career Center's website for the details on these programs offered in October:

Kaplan Practice Tests
(take a free practice GRE, LSAT, MCAT, DAT, GMAT or OAT)
Applying to Law School
Writing a Winning Graduate School Essay
Researching & Funding Grad School Programs
Law School Fair
Departmental Sessions (in various majors)