

Applying to Graduate School

A Guide for Individuals Planning To Attend Graduate School



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Is Graduate School the next step for you?

What do you want to do?

Why do you want to do this?

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

How do you think you will get there?

Is this a realistic plan?

Introduction

The goal of this Guide is to provide information to help you plan and organize your graduate application process so that you can present a competitive admissions file to the most appropriate programs for you.

Graduate and undergraduate school admissions are similar in many ways; they are both competitive and the Schools receive many more applications than available positions. In both cases, applicants provide biographical information, objective credentials and subjective credentials. The objective credentials include grades, work experience and standardized test scores. The subjective

credentials include the personal statement/ statement of purpose (essay), letters of recommendation and an interview (Skype, telephone or in-person). But graduate and undergraduate education are quite different. Undergraduate education provides a broad and solid foundation upon which you will build your graduate education. Graduate education is “specialized” and provides the specific training that you need to succeed in your chosen career. It is up to you to research the schools and programs to identify those that will provide the necessary training for you to reach your career goals.



Many strong candidates are not offered positions in programs of their choice. Sometimes this is due to the competition and sometimes this is due to the applicants not presenting themselves in the best light. Or, it is more likely due to a combination of these factors.

The following information is designed to help potential graduate school applicants plan, organize and prepare competitive application files for their schools/programs of interest.

How To Prepare For Graduate School

Applying to graduate school really starts the moment you begin to think you may want to attend graduate school. It is time-consuming and demanding. You have to be

- Diligent
- Well-organized

And you have to be prepared to spend the time it takes to prepare an excellent admissions file for the schools of your choice. As soon as you know or think that you want to attend graduate school, you should begin to plan. As soon as you have a good idea about what you want to do, you should begin looking for schools/programs to apply to.

In general, you should start looking at graduate schools during the junior year (although it is best to begin even earlier). The student armed with information early in the process can best meet the requirements of the school/s they are interested in.

Prepare a 4-year calendar, indicating each semester and each summer. Goals should be set for each semester and each summer. These goals should be reviewed about once every three months to monitor if you are indeed on track.

- Have you taken the appropriate courses
- Have you successfully applied to summer internship programs
- Do you need to take a prep course for the required standardized test

It is important that you include some courses outside your major during the undergraduate years. This will make you a well-rounded individual who can “survive” in any setting. You should include some extra-curricular activities as long as they do not jeopardize your academic record.



Freshman Year

- The usual introductory level courses
 - Basic sciences courses
 - English
 - Reading
 - Writing
 - Research techniques
- Develop a vitae (resume)
- Participate in a summer research program

Sophomore Year

- Advanced science courses
- Advanced research techniques
- Some “life-enriching” courses
 - Arts
 - Humanities
- Seriously think about graduate schools
- Participate in a summer research program

Junior Year

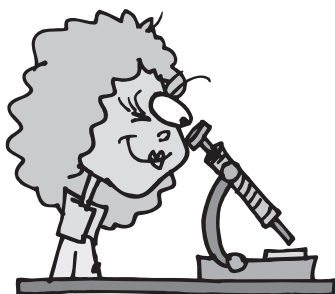
- Advanced science courses
- Independent research
- A prep course (campus-based or commercial) for the Graduate Record Examination (GRE)
- Start collecting information on graduate schools and funding agencies from
 - Internet
 - Faculty advisors
 - National science meetings
 - Peers
- Include some courses in other fields, such as business
- Take the GRE in the Spring semester
- Participate in a summer research program

Senior Year

- Review/request/download informational/application materials in the early Fall for schools and funding
- Retake GRE in the Fall semester if necessary [pay attention to application deadlines]
- Meet with/contact advisors/mentors to request **STRONG** letters of recommendation
- Write the personal statement (this should have been started in the summer)
- Order transcripts
- Complete the requirements for graduate school, including advanced courses
- Include some “life-enriching” courses if there is room in your schedule

Summer Programs

- Participate in research summer programs throughout the undergraduate years (essential for a competitive application)
- Identify and apply to several summer programs for each summer
 - this will give you a preview of the application process for graduate school
 - apply to schools that you may be interested in for graduate school
- Complete and submit the application materials during the prior winter
- Become fully-immersed in the research projects that you work on
- Talk with senior students and faculty advisors about programs and experiences



How to Find Information About Graduate Schools

- Network contacts
- Faculty advisors and their contacts and collaborators
- Internet
- The schools
- Summer programs

Once you have gathered information and prepared a long list of schools, you should review the list and narrow it down to a manageable six or seven. The application materials should be reviewed by the end of the junior year but no later than the summer after junior year. This will allow you enough time to develop a thoughtful personal statement and to make the optimal choice of recommenders.

Selecting Schools for Application and One for Matriculation

The School

You should apply to no fewer than five and no more than ten schools, five to seven is optimal. These should include at least one “safety” school and one “reach” school. The schools should be selected based on real information, i.e., a realistic look at your qualifications vs. the requirements for admission and the curriculum of the school.

- Do they offer what you are looking for
- Is this the best program for you
- Are you academically qualified for that school/program
- Is there an emphasis on your particular area of interest, i.e., are there enough faculty members in your area of interest so you will have a choice of laboratories
- What are the opportunities/resources outside the school, in the geographic area
- What is the reputation/ranking of the school (you should look at the quality of the research and publications, not just the name/national rankings)



- Are the laboratories state-of-the-art, not only conducting cutting-edge research, but also well-equipped
- List your criteria for looking at those schools in order of your personal priorities
 - academic
 - geographic location
 - academic advisement
 - environment/atmosphere
 - amenities
 - teaching opportunities

Curriculum and Faculty

- What is the structure/organization of the program
- What happens if you want to switch departments/programs
- Is there a supportive academic and non-academic advisement system in place
- Is interdisciplinary cooperation among the students and faculty encouraged
- What is the student/faculty ratio/relationship (program size)
- Are there enough faculty in your area of interest to choose from

The Facilities

- Where is the campus located
- Housing
 - cost
 - location
- Accessibility of special facilities (such as core facilities) to students
- Are there special amenities/services for students at the institution
- What is there to do in the community/outside the school
 - are there cultural/sports events (theaters and arenas) in the area
- Is it easy to get from place to place



Alumni

- Is there career advisement
- Where are the alumni
- Are there alumni in the types of careers you are contemplating

The Application Process

Prepare a spreadsheet with the names of the schools you are interested in and populate with the information discussed above. This will help you organize and plan the application process. Include the names of the schools, the application deadline, the requirements, etc. Add information such as strengths and weaknesses for each school. Use this spreadsheet to keep track of your schedule of submission of the application documents and contacts with the school. You will use this spreadsheet during the interview process to add notes about your experiences and impressions of the schools where you interviewed.

What

Application Form

- Read the application instructions
- Complete the entire application form, i.e., answer all questions
- Do not reference information in another section of the application even if the question seems duplicated

Transcript

- Have transcripts sent early
- Verify grades with the registrar's offices before transcripts are sent

Standardized test scores (GRE)

- Consider taking the GRE at the end of your junior year/during the summer between your junior and senior years
- If needed, take it again in the fall of the senior year [pay attention to the application deadlines]
- Prepare for the GRE, the scores count in the admissions file
- Practice, Practice, Practice, and practice some more
- Visit the ETS website for tips and test strategies
- Take a GRE prep course if you can

Personal Statement

- Write like a paper
- Outline, fill-in, rewrite (see section below on Personal Statement)

Recommendations

- Submit the number of recommendations that is requested
- Select academic/professional references, not personal/social ones
 - research advisors
 - summer program mentor
 - undergraduate academic advisors
- Ask the recommenders if they can write you a **STRONG** letter of recommendation
- Ask recommenders to meet with you if that is possible
- Give a copy of your personal statement and CV to recommenders so that they know what your plans are
- Give them as much time as possible to write a substantive letter
- Follow-up with the school and the recommenders, before the deadline, to make sure that the letters were submitted

Interview

Based on the above application materials, you may be called for an interview. You can contact the school and ask questions about the interview process.

- Who are the interviewers
 - faculty
 - students
 - administrators of the school
- How many are there
- What is the school looking for in its students

Prepare for the interview.

- Practice with faculty members
- Re-read your personal statement
- Review your research experiences so that you can discuss the research
- Dress appropriately and comfortably

Pay attention to the environment while you are there.

- Are students and faculty readily available to meet with you when you visit
- Do they seem happy to be in the program/school
- Is the atmosphere and culture what you want/need

Be aware that you are at the interview the entire time you are on the campus, not just the one-on-one interviews.

When

When is the deadline for

- The application form
- All other supporting documents
 - send in all materials as early as possible before the deadline
 - check with the school, well before the deadline, that all materials have been received

How much

- How much is the application fee
- Can it be waived

Where

- Where can you follow-up with questions
 - central office
 - department/program office
 - a specific person



Personal Statement

What is the personal statement?

It is an honest introduction of you, and what makes you qualified to do what you say you want to do. It is also an evaluation of your writing skills and your ability to present your ideas in a coherent and concise manner. The essay should impress the readers enough that they look forward to meeting you. You should be able to show the readers that you are unique and that your goals match those of the institution to which you are applying.

Why are you unique and why would the school spend its resources to meet you?

BE HONEST

The personal statement (or statement of purpose) is your introduction of yourself to someone who has to be impressed enough to want to meet you. This individual is reading hundreds of these documents (and probably has read thousands in the past) and yours must stand out. This brief document (generally one to two pages) has to communicate your abilities, accomplishments and goals. It must also show your writing skills; your ability to present yourself and your ideas concisely. This is your chance to shine, to stand out from among the hundreds of statements that the reviewer is reading. It should show your commitment to and motivation for graduate school based on your history. It should have a positive tone, be honest and professional. It is crucial that you get some honest critique on your statement before you submit it to the school. However, the voice of the statement should be yours. Remember, if you are invited for an interview, the school will expect to meet the person who wrote the statement. Although you should not have to rewrite your entire essay for each school/program you are applying to, it should be tailored for each program.

Content

- Answer all specific questions asked (read the application instructions)
- Who are you and why do you want to pursue graduate education
 - show your competence, knowledge in your field, and expectations
- What makes you qualified to follow this path
- Why are you unique
 - how would your presence enhance the School/Program's environment and add to the diversity of the student body



- Present relevant positive and negative life experiences
 - accent the positive; briefly explain those events which negatively impacted your academics
- Do not make excuses
 - explain how those negative events positively affected you in your growth; show your perseverance to continue despite the roadblocks
- Why do you want to do what you say you want to do
 - show your potential and long-term goal
- Why are you applying to that particular program/school
 - how will that program help you reach your goals

General Sequence

- Your goals
 - degree, field, specialty (if known at this time)
- Why are you pursuing an advanced degree
 - what event(s) brought you to this point and what are your qualifications (your research experiences)
- Why are you applying to this particular school
 - what are its strengths and how will these help you achieve your goals
- Conclusion
 - a few sentences to wrap up, showing how graduate school will help you reach your career goals

Length

- Follow the application instructions
- Not too long, not too short

Style

- Clear & simple (no need for big words)
- Concise (present only necessary detail to get your information across)
- No repetition
- Make sure it flows
- Check spelling, grammar and word usage



How do you write the personal statement?

Preparation of your personal statement should be done deliberately and thoughtfully. You should begin writing long before the application deadlines.

- Make a list of **everything** you think you should tell the school.
- Rearrange them in a logical sequence.
- Review your list and remove items that are irrelevant to your history, plans and goals.
- Prepare an outline and then fill in some details.
- Write a draft of the essay.
- Based on the application instructions, cut the “fat” to bring the essay to an acceptable length.
- Prepare a final draft.
- Get feedback from at least one person who is familiar with your background, interests and goals.
- Get feedback from at least one person who can critique the essay for writing skills.

NOTE: You should get feedback on your personal statement but it should be written by you. The voice of the personal statement should be yours.

Conclusion

The personal statement should be clear, simple and concise. You should only present those details that are necessary to get your information across. If there are no instructions, the personal statement should be about two pages (using a standard 11-point font). Your story should flow smoothly from one paragraph to the next. There should be no spelling or grammar errors. These kinds of errors convey the message that you are not committed to your education and that you do not think that this document is important enough for you to take the time to proofread it.

Remember, your personal statement is a representation of you. It should be an honest reflection of your strengths, your qualifications, your goals and your thoughts on how you will get from here to there. It is crucial that you present yourself honestly.

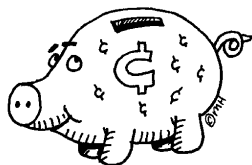
Financial Aid

All top graduate schools in the biomedical sciences will provide a comprehensive fellowship package to their students. This may include a stipend, tuition, health insurance, travel awards, etc. So why should you bother to apply for an extramural individual Predoctoral fellowship if you do not have to, particularly, prior to matriculation? You should check with the school to see if there is help for students who are preparing extramural grant applications.

- The prestige of winning a competitive grant
- Shows initiative
- Shows that you are a go-getter who knows what to do
- Alleviates the financial burden to the program
- Increases your competitiveness

There are some questions that you should ask about the fellowship package, regardless of the source.

- What and how much funds are available and for how long
- How is the fellowship awarded
- Are there payback/teaching obligations
- Are fellowships full/partial for the duration of study
- How are fellowships renewed each year
- Is the fellowship enough to live on in that particular location
- Are there opportunities to supplement the financial aid packet



Conclusion

You have submitted an exceptional application file, had great interviews and have now received offers of acceptance from the schools. You should review your spreadsheet with the information you have been adding to help you select the best school/program for you. The accepted deadline for decisions about offers by the student is April 15. The school can withdraw the offer if they have not heard from you by then. Although you have until April 15 to make your final decision, you should inform the school as soon as you have made your final decision so that you and they can plan accordingly.

After you receive the offer of acceptance you should discuss any pressing issues with the schools so that you can make a well-informed decision about where to matriculate. This is the time to discuss particular circumstances such as family-oriented issues that will impact where you matriculate.

AND NOW YOU ARE OFF TO GRADUATE SCHOOL TO DO.....



Notes

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