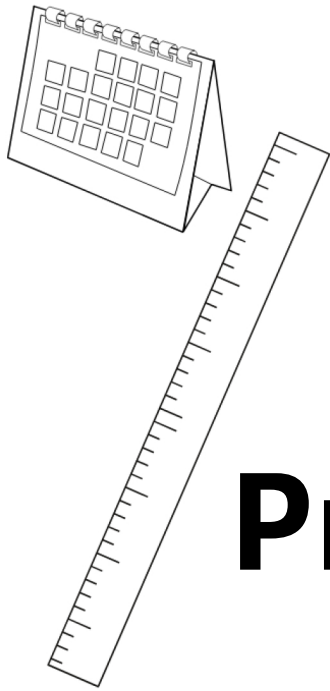


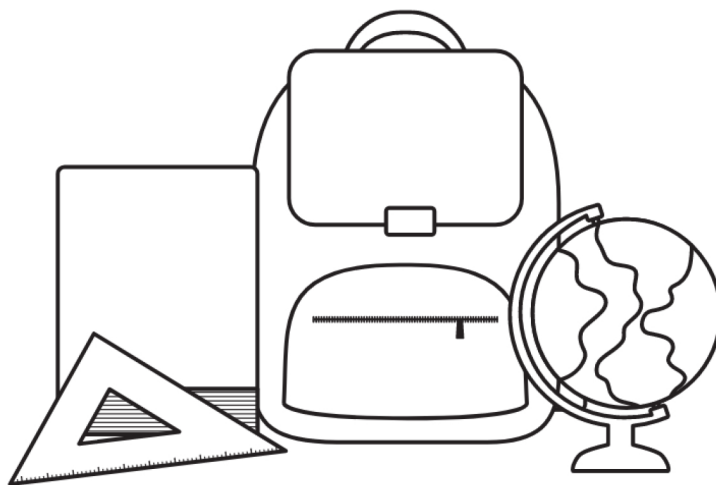
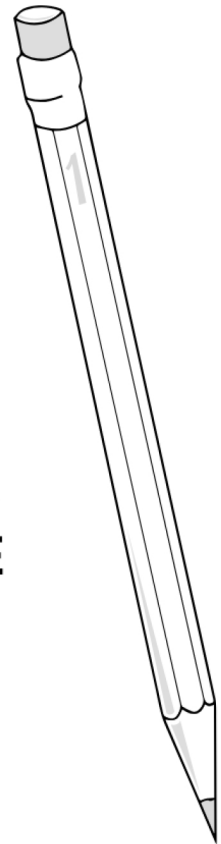
VANDERBILT  UNIVERSITY

Career Center



Pre-Graduate School Advising

**EXPLORE PROGRAMS AND
APPLY WITH CONFIDENCE**



Amanda Moore

Vanderbilt University Career Center



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Introduction

Applying to graduate school can be tough, but it's important to know what to focus on to alleviate the stress that comes along with it. The biggest piece of advice to gather from our guide is: This is **your** process. Unlike college admissions, the diversity in programs in combination with the varying student priorities in those programs the application process for graduate school is highly individualized. It's all about figuring out what **you** are specifically interested in pursuing and finding the program that best fits your needs. There is no "one size fits all" model or template to follow when it comes to applying to graduate programs.

This guide is filled with advice and tips curated from Career Coaches who developed insights over years of coaching students through the application process, expert graduate admissions professionals, and a few student (maybe personal) stories.

Main goals:

- Submitting application materials you are proud of
- Developing confidence in your application
- Picking a program that aligns with what's most important to you
- Cultivating a timeline that works for you
- Staying organized

How to Use:

This guide is for anyone curious about graduate school. Whether you're a first-year student, an upper-level student, or even an alumnus this guide provides insights into why graduate school, finding the right program for you, preparing to be a top candidate, application, and tips for being a successful graduate student.

We open this guide with the first resources we developed to help students navigate their graduate school exploration, application, selection, and success in the program. The Graduate School Application Flowchart helps you assess where you are in the process and where to focus your time. What we love about this flowchart is you can come in at any stage and go back as you need. You will find that often the best place to start is with a question. Utilize the table of contexts to see where you might want to get started.

SECTION 1: Preparation

Earning a graduate degree takes time. Traditional programs take between 2 and 7 years of concentrated study and training. Therefore, potential students should clarify their *why* early in the process.

A quote we tell students often to motivate the unpacking of *why* is from Friedrich Nietzsche, "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how."

Some common themes behind a *why*

- Seeking better career opportunities and/or higher compensation
- Developing a specialization in a specific field of study

Whatever the *why*, aspiring graduate students should consider the time commitment, cost, and potential pressures involved.



GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION PROCESS

Phase 1: Self-Reflection & Discovery

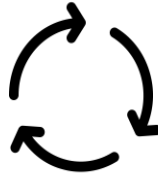
Questions to answer: *Why do I want to attend graduate school? Why am I pursuing an advanced degree in this field? How is graduate school a pathway to my goals?*

- Have conversations with people who know you well, as well as with professionals, faculty members, and current graduate students who can help you to understand the benefits or challenges of pursuing graduate study
- Meet with a Career Center coach to see how graduate school fits your professional goals
- Use these tools:
 - Wandering Map, Graduate School Diamond, and other Career Center tools/inventories

Phase 2: Develop a Plan & Research

Questions to answer: *What schools have programs that “fit” my desired professional & academic goals? What are my needs and desires for student life, financial aid, and location of study? Of these factors, what considerations are most important to me?*

- Use these tools:
 - Online graduate school listings
 - Graduate School Comparison Worksheet and Graduate School Comparison Excel Spreadsheet (Use these to document your research)
 - Speak with faculty you admire



Phase 2: Develop Connections

Questions to answer: *Have I contacted at least one person involved in the program's operation or admission for each program I am applying for? What are the experiences of people in the program?*

- Reach out via phone calls or email to professors, program directors, admissions office, and current graduate students
 - Ask if you be put in contact with a current graduate student when you reach out
 - Talk to CC about what questions to ask
- Attend in-person or online information sessions
- Take advantage of any opportunity to get on campus, where you can: observe a class, take a tour, meet with admissions, meet with a professor, have coffee with a current student, etc.

Phase 3: Design Application

Questions to answer: *Are my application components complete? Can I submit it on time? Have I submitted additional applications on time for scholarships or financial aid?*

- Reach out for recommendation letters early
- Use a Graduate School timeline to check off requirements and stay on track
- Pay close attention to deadlines for components of the application, and additional applications (i.e. scholarship, financial aid applications)
- Assemble a personal statement review team—ask your peers, mentors, professors for help
- Have personal statements reviewed by Writing Studio staff and Career Center coaches

Phase 4: Deliver Your Talents to the School that Fits You Best

Questions to answer: *Have I followed up on any outstanding application components? After receiving my admissions decisions, which option most aligns with my goals & important factors/values/needs? What did I learn about my goals, values, and abilities through this process?*

- Confirm that an official transcript will be sent to the school, if necessary
- Discuss options with a Career Coach, faculty mentor, or professional mentor
- Follow up with thank you notes or emails to all recommenders
- Dig further: find ways you'd like to get involved on campus—clubs, activities, local organizations in the city



Should I Go?

RUN TOWARD SOMETHING (NOT AWAY FROM SOMETHING ELSE):

For most students, graduate school is a hazy-maybe option that will “probably happen” at some point.

Our goal is to get them thinking of grad school as an intentional step in their professional development.

That all starts with the motivation—having a good answer to the question, “Why do you want to go to graduate school?”

Whys: A Sampling

Good Reasons to Go to Grad School

- “X degree is necessary for my field.”
- Can describe skills/knowledge the program will give them (and how they fit into your future)
- “I’m passionate about Z, and I want to develop more expertise in this area.”

And Some Bad Ones

- “Well, I’m not sure what I want to do...”
- “The economy is bad, so...”
- Parental pressure
- “I’ve always wanted to go to law school...”

ACTION STEP: Motivation, goals, and interests may help you determine your readiness and need for graduate school.

ACTIVITY: Conduct a self-inventory using the four components below.

You’re Itching to Apply: You feel excitement when reading about the application process and can’t wait to get started on your essays and studying for any entrance exams.

You Can’t Stop Thinking About Your Field of Study: The field you want to pursue occupies your mind, and you know exactly why you want to study it.

You’re Invested in Learning: You thrived as an undergraduate and look forward to the challenge of grad school classes, research, and writing your thesis or dissertation.

You’ve Figured Out the Financial Component: You’ve formulated a financial plan -- through a funded graduate program, financial assistance, and/or student loans -- and haven’t woken up in a tuition-related panic.



Timeline

One quick google search and you will find many, many example application timelines, which can heighten your sense of anxiety if you feel like you are “behind” others. We have found that the strongest applicants have invested time in program research and personal reflection. However, we would never tell a student to count themselves out or give up on graduate school just because they feel pressure. The suggested preparation process for graduate school applications typically begins at least 6 months before the application deadline. This is where the process becomes very individualized based on your program's application deadlines. For students to research programs and school, if required take (and possibly re-take) graduate entrance exams and develop/edit application materials.

Below is the Vanderbilt Career Center's *Suggested Timeline for Applying to Graduate School*. We intentionally titled it “suggested” because it was created for applicants who are planning on applying directly after their undergraduate program. We often suggest students to use it as a template or checklist to create their own timeline.

I encourage any student who feels anxious about the application process to connect with their Career Coach to discuss their post-graduation options, develop a timeline, and evaluate the next steps.

Vanderbilt Suggested Timeline for Applying to Graduate School

Junior Year:

Fall and Spring

- *Research multiple programs*
- *Ask for alumni and faculty insight*
- *Review the application process*
- *Become aware of financial aid submission requirements (FASFA)*
- *Track deadlines of your top colleges and universities*
- *Prep for appropriate tests and know the scores needed to obtain admission at your top colleges and universities*

Summer

- *Complete the required graduate admissions test. While we don't offer test prep for the GRE, LSAT, MCAT, or GMAT, we can help you find appropriate testing centers in the Nashville area. Scores from these admissions tests are generally good for five years*
- *Start online applications. Many portals let you save drafts for up-to a year*
- *Start speaking with admissions staff and faculty at your target schools*
- *Begin brainstorming what story you want to tell in your personal statement*



- *Look into financial aid, scholarships, fellowships, and teaching or research assistantships*
- *Make a list of those you might ask to write recommendation letters for your application*

Senior Year:

Fall

- *Obtain your recommendation letters; schools often require 3-5*
- *Complete online submission of a full application*
- *Schedule campus visits if you are having a hard time deciding on locations*

Spring

- *Follow up to check on the status of your application with each school*
- *Choose and share your decision with the college or university*
- *Send thank-you notes! Include those who wrote recommendation letters and inform them of your plans.*

Now Or Later?

Once you decide pursuing a graduate degree is essential for your professional goals the next question typically is **when** should I go? There are many layers to unpacking when the right time is. Again, this is best evaluated by self. The right time is when you will be most successful as a student. Yes, some programs do encourage or show preference to those who have professional experience, but more programs are diversifying what that professional experience is like in their candidates. The best way I encourage students to measure aptitude for future success in a program is to talk to current students and identify common characteristics, skills, etc. accepted students demonstrate and share in networking interactions. Some common examples are time management, initiative, effective planners, strong professional writing skills, and emotional maturity.



GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION BASICS

RECOMMENDATIONS

Most graduate programs require 2-3 recommendations. Have you thought of who and how to ask for yours?

ESSAYS

There are specific requirements and elements review committees look for in your personal essays. How are you building these documents?

TEST SCORES

Do you know which, if any, entrance exam you need to take for your intended program? How will you prepare? Did you know some programs will waive entrance exams based on a strong GPA or other qualifications?

TRANSCRIPTS

You will be required to submit transcripts from each academic institution you have attended. Do you know how to request those?

ACADEMIC COURSES

Do you meet all the academic requirements for your program of choice? This can range from GPA requirements to specific courses.

EXPERIENCE

How will you market your experience to make yourself a stronger candidate? Some programs prefer concentration on research while others give weight to volunteering and student leadership. Do you know how to speak to your key accomplishments?

For assistance in your graduate school planning and application, check out additional resources on the Career Center website and schedule an appointment today with your career coach.



How To Stand Out as a Top Candidate

It's never too early to start preparing! There are some common characteristics of top candidates some you might already be doing.

Good grades: are a key qualifier for getting into the graduate school of your dreams. Graduate schools weigh GPAs heavily when deciding whether a student best fits the program. Many will have a minimum GPA for admittance.

Tip: Keep your aim high. Minimum is what qualifies but to potentially be in the running for competitive scholarships, graduate assistantships, etc. you want to have a stronger GPA.

Professional Experience: Gaining career-related experience(s) address: how you started, what your job experiences consisted of and, most importantly, what you learned. I tell students to think about experience as related to your program in three ways people, place, and purpose. Meaning talk about the population you've served and/or want to serve, the environment as directly connected to future career goals, and skill/expertise developed and demonstrated that has helped to build a connection to why you're applying for the program and/or tied to your success in pursuing the specialization.

Examples: Internships, research projects, presentations, and publications can showcase a vested interest and involvement within your field of study. Getting involved with the "real-world" aspect of a major or industry of interest is crucial to success.

Involvement: Enhance your application by staying involved within your community. While extracurricular activities are not nearly as important for graduate schools as they are for undergraduate schools, having a presence in the community — through volunteering, participating in clubs, or committing to a sports team — can set you apart from other applications.

Tip: This is where you can speak to connection to specialization beyond academic success. The more than a number story to your application.

Reflect on Your Interests/Find Out What Really Interests You

Finding the *right* graduate school is about finding a good match based on your goals, interest, and priorities. This is very individual. Even before you start looking, you must know what you would be passionate about studying for the next couple of years. The Career Center encourages intentional reflection to find clarity when it comes to fit and gaining confidence in your next steps. After time reflecting on your interest and priorities...



Identify your dream program

ACTION STEP: Networking

Now that you know what you are interested in and have prepared yourself for success, it's time to find a professional who matches your interests and professional goals.

Ask for advice. Reach out to the people you've identified and ask about their educational pathway.

Are there specializations you haven't thought about or additional programs that you're excited to explore?

Once you have a few networking conversations take that expert advice and use it to inform your program search but don't stop with just one professional's opinion! Utilize your entire network. Bring what you've learned as your potential pathways to your dream career and unpack it with your faculty members and career coach. These people are essential supports to take what you've learned and help you develop a program search plan.

SECTION 2: Exploration

Types Of Programs

Masters' vs Doctoral Programs

Typically, you can finish a master's degree in about two years. Completing a doctorate requires four years or longer in most cases. Doctorates also come with more challenging requirements, like researching, writing, and presenting a dissertation. some careers require a doctorate, such as:

- Research scientist
- Professor
- Doctor
- Lawyer
- University president
- Healthcare administrator
- Psychologist (most types)

The most common programs are the Master of Arts, Master of Science, and Master of Business Administration.



Master of Arts (MA)

The Master of Arts degree typically falls within the industries of education, communication, social sciences, and music.

Similarly, you can pursue a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in areas like photography, painting, and creative writing.

Master of Science (MS)

Master of Science degrees are generally in science, health, technology, and mathematics. Schools sometimes offer an MS for social science professions. These degree programs emphasize research more heavily than MA programs, which focus more on course content.

Some programs offer both an MS and an MA in a single subject. In this case, the MS tends to have additional academic requirements. It will also require more research than the MA option.

Students with a background in the field are typically required to choose the MS, while students who are new to the field may prefer the MA.

Master of Business Administration (MBA)

The Master of Business Administration is steadily gaining in popularity. MBA students receive broad training in all aspects of business, including operations, management, accounting, marketing, human resources, and more.

Students who already have a specialty in mind may choose a concentration. If concentrations aren't available, students can typically select electives based on their interests and goals.

Emerging areas and trends for MBA options:

Deferred MBA admissions/2+2 Programs

A 2+2 program is comprised of at least two years of professional work experience followed by two years in a traditional MBA Program. Typically, after being admitted through a 2+2 program, students spend a minimum of two years (maximum of four years) working in a professional position in the public, private, or nonprofit sector before enrolling in their MBA program.

Check out more here [Deferred MBA Programs: Ultimate Guide to The Top 7 B-Schools](#)

Types of Doctoral Degree Programs:

Doctoral degrees are terminal degrees. This means you've achieved the highest degree possible in your field.

The two main types of doctoral degrees are the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) and professional doctoral degrees.



Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

The Doctor of Philosophy prepares students to do academic work in their discipline, such as research and teaching at the university level. Students build knowledge in a highly specialized area and develop their academic inquiry and research skills.

Ph.D. programs generally begin with core coursework, followed by an exam. Students must pass the exam to continue with the program.

Next, students begin conducting research and ultimately work on their dissertation. Along the way, students may be required to submit papers to academic publications, give oral presentations at conferences, and otherwise prepare to be a leading scholar in their field.

These programs can take anywhere from 3-8 years to complete. On average, you should expect to spend 4-6 years in a Ph.D. program.

Professional Doctoral Degrees

Professional doctoral degrees focus on building career skills. Students learn to apply research to practical problems within their field.

Many professional doctorates are intended for working professionals who want to advance their knowledge and skills. These students plan to advance their careers and pursue more influential positions.

However, most professional doctoral programs require some research as well. Typically, students identify a real-world problem in their field and research potential solutions.

Professional doctoral degrees include:

- Doctor of Business Administration (DBA)
- Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD)
- Doctor of Medicine (MD)
- Doctor of Education (EdD)
- Doctor of Public Health (DPH)
- Juris Doctor (JD)
- Doctor of Healthcare Administration (DHA)
- Doctor of Information Technology (DIT)
- Doctor of Psychology (PsyD)
- Doctor of Social Work (DSW)

These degrees take about the same amount of time to complete as a Ph.D. The key difference is that they're designed for students interested in professional rather than academic careers.

What's Important to you?

Do Your Research

- You might be able to find similar majors that interest you at more than one university undergraduate program, graduate programs are somewhat



more unique and more directly tailored to a specific career path. Whether it's law school, medical school, or any other type of program, it is important to research all your potential schools early on.

- Every school is going to be different regarding what they look for in candidates, so it's important to start your research early. Seek out those programs that interest you, sign up for their mailing lists to receive more information, and even reach out to the contact provided with any questions. Figuring out where you're interested in attending is just the first step, but with all the materials offered by graduate programs, it can be the easiest one.

Connecting With Programs

Identifying Contacts: Who and how to ask for help

Learning the language – not every program will have someone on staff identified as an admissions representative. Often the best contacts for prospective students will have dual roles and/or other titles.

Some to keep in mind:

- Student Services Coordinator
- Admissions Representative
- Student Support Manager
- Program Coordinator
- And More!

If you need help identifying the best people to connect with, ask your Career Coach for support.

Information Session:

Attending information sessions can be a great way to identify your connection and fit with programs of interest. These opportunities are organized by the university and are often available in multiple ways (recorded, virtual, in-person, etc.) Many grad schools will run events for prospective students in major cities, which are a great way to potentially meet the people who'll be assessing your application. Speak to a program representative about your goals and find out whether you would be a good match for the school.

Additional key points of contact: Current students and faculty to find out what the program and courses are ACTUALLY like.

A slightly round-about way of researching a postgraduate course – but a great one – is through current students. Start with those contact provided by the school but feel empowered to utilize all your networking tools like LinkedIn to identify and connect with a current student – even alumni of your programs of interest.



Current Student Outreach Example:

“Hi [First name], I'm thinking of applying to [enter name]. I'd love to hear about your experiences over coffee. Thanks, [Your name]”

VU Career Center: Questions to ask Grad School Admissions

Once you connect with a program representative, current student, or faculty member, don't be afraid to ask questions about the department or course. Any information they give you will be much more honest than what you'll find in a prospectus.

Build an awareness of the university's values

Every university has its own set of values and mission, and application review committee members will be looking out for signs that your personality and values are a good fit with their program. There are many ways to do this of course – looking into the program's website, through word of mouth, reviewing the university's published research, and even speaking to admissions advisers during your program research stage.

Ask for help!

Are you striking the right note in your admissions essay? Does your Resume/CV look professional? If you're unsure, enlist the help of a good support system. Key people to consider would be a faculty member, Career Coach, Writing Studio, academic advisor, and/or mentor to examine your application. Unlike friends and family, an academic professional is often able to offer a level of support that goes beyond just spotting typos. Instead, they'll help ensure your application is the strongest it could be and something you are confident in.

Prospective students often ask how to stand out in the application process. Rather than standing out just for the sake of being different, we highly recommend a three-pronged approach to the application 1) be yourself and 2) demonstrate your strengths 3) clearly define your goals and how a higher degree is essential to your long-term success. It is important to be yourself, and to be honest about your expectations. This is the best way to have mutual success. Don't try to use the application to create a persona you think the program is looking for; rather, be honest about who you are, your motivation for the degree, your skills and the experiences that make you suited for the degree, and the program, and understanding for how this degree will elevate your ability to achieve your goals. Applicants who can describe in specific detail why they are a good fit for a program are the most successful. The strongest applications take this further to demonstrate their motivation and strengths rather than merely listing them. Your honest approach and strong writing skills will make you memorable in a good way.



QUESTIONS TO ASK GRADUATE SCHOOL ADMISSIONS

PROGRAM DETAILS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How much emphasis is put on research, teaching, or professional experience?• Are assistantships available in the department or on-campus? What is the best way to find those?• With what professionally related activities are students involved?• What facilities are available for grad students (maybe more thinking about what support is out there for grad students—can they use the career center? Health services? Mental health? Rec center?)
ADMISSIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What % of students are accepted? Waitlisted?• Can I defer admission? Under what circumstances?
ACADEMICS / FACULTY	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How available are faculty to the students?• How long does it typically take to graduate?• Why do students leave the program?• What's available to help students do research or participate in internships, etc.• What's the student-to-faculty ratio for my program?• What is the academic advising process?• How large are the classes? Are courses offered regularly?• What kind of flexibility is there in scheduling?• What is the workload associated with departmental assistantships?• What is the students' impression of the faculty's commitment to mentoring students?



FUNDING/COSTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What's the department's history with funding its students throughout their studies?• Is funding available year-round?• What are the hidden costs (insurance, conferences, etc.)?• Is there support for graduate students to attend conferences?• What is the cost of living?• Are there any application fee waivers? If so, how do I apply for them?
FINANCIAL AID	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What's the average financial aid package?• What is the typical loan/grant breakdown?• What percentage of students receive scholarships?
STUDENT LIFE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is there residential Grad school housing? If not, does the university assist students with finding housing or roommate matching?• How do new grad students form their social groups? What are some of the most popular extracurriculars?• How accessible and helpful are health services?• What facilities/resources are available for grad students? Career Center, Rec Center, etc.
CAREER OUTCOMES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Where are past students employed?• How easy is it to find summer jobs/other kinds of work?• How engaged/impactful is the school's alumni association? Are there structured networking opportunities?• What percentage of graduates gain employment in their field immediately upon graduation? Within 3-6 months? Which organizations hire graduates? Where are the employers located?



SECTION 3: Selection

Picking program

Choosing the RIGHT program: You want to go to graduate school and now you need to choose a program. When faced with a daunting array of choices, certain factors can help narrow your decision, including the school or program's location, specific degree programs available, cost, time commitment, faculty, accreditation, online learning options, and on-campus resources.

Priorities Checklist

ACTION STEP: Build your own checklist based on these common themes

- **Location:** Consider location if you want proximity to the ocean to research marine mammals in the wild or need access to certain museums or facilities -- or if the climate does not work for you, e.g., allergies or seasonal affective disorder become debilitating.
- **Degree Programs:** The more specifically you can narrow your field of study, the better. Graduate programs tend to focus on specialties and concentrations that align with educational and research goals.
- **Cost:** Check a program's offerings of loans, scholarships, teaching or research assistantships, and work-study opportunities. Consider the cost -- especially for professional programs like law and medicine, which come with high price tags.
- **Time:** Once you determine the time you can devote to graduate work, find programs tailored to your needs. For example, you can consider part-time study, evening classes, or online options. Also, think about the number of years required to complete your target degree.
- **Faculty:** A renowned authority in your area of research interest may sound great, but this advantage might disappear if they travel frequently. Reach out to professors and students in the program and ask questions.
- **Accreditation:** Most employers only hire graduates of accredited programs -- regional accreditation is particularly important and signals more rigorous academic assessment standards than national accreditation.
- **Online Learning Components:** Taking location and travel time/money out of the equation can expand your educational options -- especially if your responsibilities include a job or family commitments. You might also pay lower tuition rates.
- **Availability of On-campus Resources:** Carefully consider the resources you may need, such as an extensive library, laboratory space, or advising and counseling, and ask around about their availability and quality.



There are other factors to consider, like fit, faculty, student composition, location, and cost, but start with:

- Defining your motivation for the degree
- Finding a program that aligns with your learning style so you can excel
- Evaluating the program's track record for employment

How many programs should I apply to?

The golden rule of 5:

- 1 if lightning strikes = dream school *always apply to your dream school
- 2 top selection schools that you are a strong candidate for
- 2 "safety schools" = schools you "know" or are certain you'll get into

SECTION 4: Application

Gather your application materials early

Once you decide where it is you're interested in attending, look at what each program requires for its application. Typically, programs will ask for a resumé, a personal statement, test scores, and letters of recommendation, though that varies by school. Don't just wing your application and submit it the day that it's due without a second thought. Write your essays in advance and reach out to those professors or employers for letters of recommendation early on.

Regarding personal or professional statements, it is a good idea to write them, read them aloud, and revise them once or twice before creating a final product. Take advantage of student support resources like your Career Center and Writing Center to get an expert reviewer. This will help you not only develop a strong essay by gain confidence in your application. You can also ask a friend, mentor, and/or faculty member that you trust to give honest feedback. As is the case with all writing, it is helpful to get a second set of eyes on your work because while something might make sense during the writing process, it may not translate quite the way that you had hoped once on paper.

Statement of Purpose vs. Personal Statement

A large component of the graduate school application is the supplemental essay(s) required. As you are learning graduate programs offer endless specializations and variations which is also true for what they might ask from a candidate in their required essays.

The most common request is for Statements of Purpose or Personal Statements. Both statements essentially serve the same overarching purpose: to make the admissions committee think you are a good fit and will be successful in the program to which you're applying.



Main Differences:

Statement of Purpose

Academic and professional background, skills, and accomplishments; research interests; academic/career goals; why this program is a good fit for you

Personal Statement

Personal motivation for applying; how you developed your research interests; any relevant experiences, challenges, or accomplishments

Keep in Mind:

- **Statement of Purpose**

Think of the statement of purpose as a cover letter. You might start with something autobiographical or anecdotal, but most of the essay should be about your relevant training and technical career goals.

A strong statement of purpose should:

- Focus on your specific interests within your chosen field
- Detail how your academic and professional experiences have developed those interests and prepared you to pursue them at a higher academic level
- Explain how your interests can be pursued at this specific institution in this particular program

- **Personal Statement**

Think of the personal statement, by contrast, as more of a narrative/story of your process. You still want to mention your research interests and the specific program you're applying to, but you also have an opportunity to flesh out your personal history.

A strong personal statement should:

- Focus on the intersection of your personal, academic, and professional lives
- Detail various life experiences that have developed your character, work ethic, and perspective
- Explain how your background particularly suits you for this program and/or will allow you to contribute a unique perspective to the community

SUMMARY: A statement of purpose is about what you want to do, while a personal statement is about who you are.



Entrance Exams: Just one of many components (Don't stress yourself out!)

While the GRE and other entrance exams are important and should be studied for and taken seriously, for some schools, it is **not** the most important part of the application. Unlike the SAT and ACT, which were weighted heavily among most of the undergraduate programs I applied for, entrance exams are just another opportunity for a student to demonstrate his or her potential for success within the program.

Some graduate programs have done away with and/or made entrance exams optional. However, GRE and other test scores work on a school-by-school basis, so be sure to check into each program's requirements before taking the test. Regardless of whether the GRE is required upon submitting your application, be sure to take the exam well in advance. That way, you have the scores ready if a program asks or have time to take the test again before submitting your scores.

Even though some schools may not require test scores upon applying, or at all, it is important that those taking the GRE do not take it cold. Studying for the test is something that a person can do either as a part of a course or on his or her own. Find a study plan that works for you and stick to it, but do not take the test cold because the only person you'd be hurting with that is yourself.

With the new trend of optional entrance exam scoring, many students are asking when it is helpful to take and submit an optional score. General advice is if it adds to candidacy academically. Meaning do you have a lower GPA than you were hoping for and want to strengthen your assessment from an aptitude lens. That would be a good justification for optional testing. Additionally, taking the GRE or other exams (doing well) on top of a strong GPA could make you a stronger candidate for scholarship or assistantship funding.

Recommendations

Who to ask: get meaningful letters of recommendation

Letters of recommendation are not always something that is required of an applicant for undergraduate programs, so this can be completely out of some people's comfort zones.

When choosing professors or past supervisors to write these letters, be sure to give them some time rather than just springing it on them last second. You want to make it as easy as possible to advocate for you. Ask someone who can speak on your behalf from past course experiences and how you perform as a student. It is important to have some sort of relationship with the professor prior to asking for a letter of recommendation, making sure that they are someone who has seen you grow as a student and progress during your time as their



student. In addition, when asking a professor for a letter of recommendation, be sure to make it personal. Don't just send a generic email; go into the professor's office hours and have a genuine conversation before asking for a letter of recommendation.

Common mistakes to avoid (recommendations)

Professors take the writing of recommendation letters very seriously, and they expect students to do the same. Recommendations reflect not just the quality of the student, but also the integrity of the professor and ultimately the university.

- Never assume that the professor will be willing to write a letter. Always ask first, even if the professor has written a letter for you in the past.
- You should also ask for permission to list a professor's name as a reference on an application, even if a letter is not required.
- Do not simply drop off forms and information with the office assistant or send them as an email attachment. Request to meet with the professor in person.
- If a professor denies your request, he or she simply may have inadequate experience with you to write an effective letter, or they may have insufficient knowledge about the position.
- Don't harass professors about whether they have sent the letter yet unless they ask you to send a reminder. You may request that the professor send you an email to confirm that the letter is sent.

All-Star Candidate Traits

- A strong background and experiences in an area relevant to what they want to study
- Clear insights about their core motivations
- An overarching vision that connects the dots from their academic and work history to grad school to future career plans
- Understanding of program with its various strengths and weaknesses relative to their interests and goals
- Comprehension of the program's specializations and unique offerings as it relates to career opportunities
- An ability to articulate how well his/her interests align with what the program offers and what he/she can uniquely bring to the program

Are you a memorable candidate?

- What is it that you (and only you) can bring to the program?
- What about your background (educational or professional experience) has prepared you for an advanced degree in this field?
- Why are you interested in pursuing further education in this field?
- What do you intend to get out of graduate school and how does that relate to your future career aspirations? How does this specific program fit into that vision?



- Why are you specifically interested in this program out of all of those in the same field? Which of the program's strengths lend themselves well to your goals? Which professors or courses particularly interested you?
- Why is now the right time for you to pursue a graduate degree?

Show, don't just tell them

Showing the admissions committee who you are and why you would be a good fit for their program means making sure that you send in materials to back up what it says on your resume.

Whether in a Personal Statement or Statement of Purpose, use stories with a clear connection to the people you have or want to work with, the environments you have built skills, and a theme connected to your overall purpose for higher education. All these examples will help a review committee see your *why* demonstrated in action.

Applying to graduate school can be far different from any other application a person has filled out in their life. Just because it is new and unfamiliar territory doesn't mean that it must be something difficult that you navigate alone. Visit your Career Center, mentors, and academic advisors about which programs might suit you best. While this might be an overwhelming experience at the beginning, there are many resources to help ease the pain that comes with crafting the perfect graduate school application.

Interviewing:

A big part of what we have talked about is building and telling your story. This is important throughout the entire application process. Not every program will require an interview but if it does there are a few key ways to prepare.

- Review the research you've done on the university/college and the program
- Prepare and prioritize a list of open-ended questions to ask
- Practice mock interviewing with the Career Coach, family, or friends
 - DoreWays Mock Interview Modules
- Confirm your appointment
- Be sure you know what the interviewer(s) will expect
- Follow any/all directions they offer
- Dress for success



Questions to Prepare to Answer:

- Tell me about yourself
- Why do you want to study at our school?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- If accepted, what will be your biggest challenge here?
- How has your professional experience (or education) prepared you to succeed in this program?
- What are your career goals? How will studying here help you achieve those goals?
- Describe your greatest accomplishment.
- What do you do in your spare time?
- What unique qualities do you think you have to offer this program?
- What appeals to you most about our program?
- How do you motivate yourself? How do you deal with stress?
- What is your plan B? If you were not accepted to the program, what are your plans?
- Define teamwork? Success? Leadership? Fairness?

Questions to Consider Asking:

- General questions about the degree program
- Preparations for the program - do they prefer professional experience?
- Interviewee's educational path
- Culture/environment of the school
- What financial assistance is offered? Are there scholarships/fellowships to apply for?
- What kind of experiential learning opportunities are there? Teaching assistantships? Adjunct positions? Internships? Research opportunities?
- What factors are most important in admitting students?
- Where have alumni of the program gone? Where do they work?
- Do students usually publish or present papers?

Funding:

Strategies to pay for grad school:

- Get an employer to pay
- Secure a graduate school scholarship
- Work for graduate school
- Borrow smart
- Use available credit



Assistantships

What are they?

A salaried student employment opportunity for graduate students. Graduate assistants work a set number of hours per week and in return receive a tuition waiver and, often, a monthly living stipend

Where to find them?

- Departmental pages
- University job boards (Human Resources)
- Ask around (Admissions, Currents, and Faculty)

How to get them?

- Separate application process
- Contingent on acceptance to the graduate program

SECTION 5: Success as a Grad Student

After Acceptance: 6 Steps for Preparing for Grad School

Starting grad school may feel intimidating and cause anxiety. You can alleviate much of the worry and nervousness by ensuring that you've submitted all required paperwork, that you understand your academic path, that you know what will happen in class, and that you've familiarized yourself with your classmates and professors.

1. Get Organized

If you need to fill out and file forms -- for financial aid, scholarships, loans, or tuition payment accounts -- compile a checklist to ensure their completion.

2. Get Involved

Research for community groups to get connected with your incoming cohort. Some examples ...

3. Get Advised

Meeting with your academic advisor before the start of the term can help you understand program expectations, culture, and procedures. You can also learn about required and elective course options.

4. Get Acquainted

Find out about your classmates by accessing data on the departmental website, which may even post bios of current and incoming students. If you can obtain their contact information in advance, ask a couple of them to coffee.



5. Get Informed

If you can access textbooks or materials and syllabi, do so before the first day of class to become familiar with your course content. You can even get some of the reading done in advance.

6. Get the Scoop

Virtually all programs feature online faculty biographies, detailing their education, past teaching posts, research, publications, and sometimes hobbies. You can also lookup student evaluations of professors and classes.



SECTION 6: Resources

Timeline:

[Princeton Review Graduate School Application Timeline](#)

When to go:

[Should You Go to Grad School Right After Undergrad?](#)

Personal Statement:

[MIT Communications Lab](#)

[Purdue Writing Owl: Writing Personal Statements](#)

Essay Examples:

Book: Graduate Admissions Essays, Fourth Edition: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice (Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way Into the) Donald Asher

Recommendations/ Research Statement:

[Purdue Writing Owl: Graduate School Applications](#)

Interviewing:

Picture Your Career Visual Thinking Activities (pg. 112&114)

[ThoughtCo. How to Ace the Graduate School Admissions Interviews](#)

Funding:

[Graduate Scholarships](#)

Plan B:

[What to Do if You're Rejected from Grad School](#)

[Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#)

[Campus and Community Resources](#)