

# GUIDE TO APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

**Sage**  
Career Planning

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## **Why go to Graduate School?**

Choosing whether or not to attend graduate school is a big decision. Some careers such as physical therapy require at least a master's degree or a Ph.D., but there are additional reasons to pursue your education beyond a bachelor's degree. Most students that complete graduate school begin their careers in higher positions earning higher salaries than those who do not have an additional degree. Graduate school can also be an opportunity for networking as well as developing additional valuable skills such as leadership and communication.

## **Choosing a Graduate Program**

You can choose a graduate program in much the same way that you chose an undergraduate program. Consider not only your desired degree, but also location, reputation of the program, size, and cost of the school(s). While graduate school application fees can be expensive, a wise option is to apply to one "safe" school (that you are fairly confident will accept you), at least one school that presents a real challenge, and one or more others that you are interested in. There are several graduate schools across the country that will waive their application fees for certain students through the Committee on Institutional Cooperation's FreeApp (<http://www.cic.net/home/students/FreeApp/Introduction.aspx>).

## **Application Process**

### **Graduate Standardized Exams**

Many graduate schools require that you take the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) prior to applying. The GRE is a standardized test that assesses your reasoning, math, analytical writing, and critical thinking skills. Depending on your desired degree, there may be additional exams you need to take such as the GMAT (business), LSAT (future lawyers), and MCAT (future doctors). Each of these tests has a website with more information on the exam, test dates, and fees. Some of the tests are only offered at certain times during the year, so it is important to plan ahead.

### **Letters of Recommendation**

Your grad school applications will require letters of recommendation, and may include a form for each person to fill out. Be careful when selecting who you will ask for recommendations- it should be people who have knowledge of your work as a *professional* or *student* first hand and have positive things to say about you. These references should be professional rather than personal. Consider professors, advisors, employers, co-workers, and mentors. Be respectful and ask each of them in person if he or she would write a recommendation. You may also want to provide them with a list of your accomplishments or a resume so they can refer to it during their writing.

### **Personal Statement**

Your personal statement is what will set you apart from other candidates who are applying to your school(s). The schools may differ in exactly what type of question(s) they ask, but the main point is to convince the admissions committee that you are the right choice for their program. You may want to discuss personal reasons for your interest in the area, for example, difficulties you have overcome or extracurricular achievements. You could also discuss your future educational and professional goals, specific skills that are relevant to the program, and any related research or work experience. Regardless of what you decide to include within your personal statement it is important that you have a clear direction when writing.

Have an outline. The first step in creating one is deciding upon your thesis. Your thesis should be a clear statement that declares your purpose. This thesis statement should be viewed as the framework to your personal statement and referencing it while writing will help determine if what you are including is consistent with your main point. There should be an order to your personal statement, a reason that paragraph one comes first and paragraph two follows. Having a clear outline of the thesis and main points and how those main points fit together will help you make sure that you are getting your point across. Use that outline to check whether the most important point is first, whether all points are equally important, and which points you might sacrifice in the interest of space.

When you complete a draft, put it away for a day or two, then reread it and make changes. Now send your statement to professors, friends, or anyone who will be a quality editor. After you receive all the feedback, use what you feel is suitable, and write your final version of the statement.

## **Timetable for Applications**

### **Summer before you wish to attend graduate school**

- Explore graduate programs and request information from schools.
- Look into any tests that you will be required to take to apply to your graduate school(s). You may want to consider taking a prep course for these tests.
- To take a free practice test, go to [www.princetonreview.com](http://www.princetonreview.com), click on your intended graduate degree under the “Test Prep” tab, and then choose the “Free Practice Tests, Events & Seminars” tab.

### **September**

- Register for the GRE and any other necessary exams.
- Create a draft of your personal statement of academic and professional goals and give it to the Office of Career Planning or Writing Center to review.
- Narrow down your graduate program choices.

### **October**

- Take the GRE and ask for letters of recommendation.
- Order your official transcripts from the Registrar’s office to be sent to your chosen school(s).

### **November/December**

- Complete a draft of your grad school applications; review and edit.
- Submit the completed applications.

### **January**

- Follow up with the graduate schools to make sure all the documents were received.

### **February/March/April**

- Visit prospective schools, if possible.
- You should receive admission letters as early as February and as late as April.
- Once you have been accepted, the institution that you have been accepted by will provide you with information about when you must accept or decline their offer by. Submit a FAFSA.

## **Graduate School Funding**

Graduate school is a major financial investment. There are a variety of financial resources available to graduate students including scholarships, grants, assistantships, fellowships, and loans.

### **Graduate Assistantships**

Graduate assistantships are provided by the schools themselves and are similar to work-study programs. In exchange for working part-time within a department at the school, you will receive a partial tuition credit as well as the possibility of a small paycheck. Assistantships can be very beneficial as they provide both financial assistance as well as valuable work experience to put on your resume. You may even be able to receive an assistantship within your major’s department. Contact the schools directly to find potential assistantship opportunities. The time commitment for a graduate assistantship vary from institution to institution. As well, some graduate schools allow you to have more than one graduate assistantship, while others do not allow this.

### **Graduate Fellowships**

Graduate fellowships are provided by the schools as well as professional organizations and are similar to scholarships. Check with organizations that promote research or advanced study in your specific field. Use the internet to search for fellowship opportunities, particularly the websites of the grad schools you are interested in. You may also contact the schools directly to inquire about fellowships.

### **Loans**

Complete a FAFSA as soon after January 1<sup>st</sup> as you can in order to qualify for federal student loans. At the graduate level, most student loans are federal and include Perkins, Stafford (both Subsidized and Unsubsidized) and Grad PLUS loans. Interest rates differ and you should thoroughly research loan types before accepting your FAFSA award letter.

## **Graduate School Funding (Continued)**

### **Full Time versus Part Time**

It is important to determine if you want to be a full-time or part-time student when getting your graduate or professional degree. Here are some questions that you can ask yourself to determine the best option for acquiring your grad degree:

- Do I need this degree immediately or am I flexible with when I finish my program?
- Do the class times fit into my work schedule?
- Can I work during this program and manage my academic course requirements?
- Is there an internship component that would inhibit me from working at a traditional full-time job?

### **If You Are Not Accepted**

If you are not admitted to any of the graduate school you applied to, it is important to view this as a setback rather than a defeat. The fact that you were not admitted does not mean you are unsuitable for graduate level work. There are several things you can do now:

- **Improve test scores and essays:** Most people's test scores improve when taking the tests again because they already know the format and challenges and therefore know how to prepare properly. Similarly, if you have already written application essays, you are familiar with the basic procedure and can hone your skills and your essay. You can also have your essays edited by someone else who can help you.
- **Improve references:** Improving references can be slightly trickier since it doesn't depend solely on you. However, if you didn't take advantage of providing professors with a clear resume and helpful information, doing so can improve the recommendations they provide. You can also look for different people to provide you with recommendations.
- **Apply to a Master's program instead of a PhD program:** The requirements are usually less stringent to be accepted into a Master's program and this can provide you with the opportunity to adjust to graduate study and see if it's what you want to do.
- **Apply as a non-degree student:** This will generally enable you to take classes with the other degree candidates, allowing both you and your professors to see if you can handle the work. Students who choose this path often have the opportunity to make an extremely positive impression on the professors guiding the acceptance process and when their application comes up the following year, they can have references included from the department to which they are applying.
- **Apply to different schools or reapply to the same schools next year:** Your first approach would be to apply to the same schools as this year. This can be good if you have spent time working with professors from that school or changed your application significantly in some way. However, some committees will be less likely to admit applicants they have previously rejected, so it may be better to find new schools to apply to.
- **Work in a related field:** Gain experience in a field that is related to your graduate program. This will stand out because it shows you have a sincere interest in the field and are determined to work in that area.

### **Recommended Resources**

#### **Peterson's Guide**

Peterson's is a great resource for anyone that is considering obtaining a graduate or professional degree. This website helps you find graduate schools that are a good fit for you based off of information such as geographical preference, graduate degree type, and what field you want to study. This website also has a list of all United States institutions for graduate degrees, as well as some programs that are based outside of the United States. This website also has information about the deadlines for application, required materials, and more. Please visit the website for more information: [www.petersons.com/graduate-schools](http://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools)

#### **Princeton Review**

Princeton Review can help with the grad school search as well. This website is similar to Peterson's, but provides more information about the tuition and costs associated with most graduate schools. As well, this website provides more details on the demographics and makeup of the student body, what programs are offered at the institution, if there are graduate assistantships, and so much more. Please visit this website for more information at:

<http://www.princetonreview.com/grad-school>

#### **Other Resources**

- List of Graduate School Fellowships (<http://www.gradschools.com/article-detail/a-1676>)

- BrainTrack ([www.braintrack.com/us-college-by-state](http://www.braintrack.com/us-college-by-state)): This website lists all U.S. universities organized by state.