

# GRADUATE SCHOOL PREPARATION



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# **GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION PROCESS AND TIMELINE**

## **AM I READY?**

The decision to attend graduate school and how soon after completing your bachelor's degree to do so will be dictated by your individual situation. For example, have you had a sufficiently enriching undergraduate experience to feel confident about choosing your graduate field of interest? Have these experiences made you feel not only competitive in the admissions process but confident about pursuing graduate study? Do you have the motivation and commitment to engage in a course of study that will involve at least two years at the Master's level or 5-6 years (or possibly more) at the Ph.D. level?

If you are unsure of the answers, you may benefit from first assessing your long-term goals and reasons for considering graduate study. You may also consider some additional coursework to bridge your interests, especially if you are choosing a course of study different from your bachelor's degree or if you are concerned about the strength of your undergraduate record. If however, you're confident of your preparation and motivation for applying to graduate school, the following will describe the application process.

## **HOW TO GET STARTED**

- Begin the graduate school application process should at least one full year in advance
- Identify the field of study you would like to pursue
- Find resources that point you to graduate school programs in your field
  - Although you may be sure you want to continue your education, you may not know how your interest is defined by the various graduate programs. A great place to start is with professors and graduate students in the field. Explain your interests and desire to apply for grad school, then ask for advice and feedback on programs you may want to look into.
- Next, you need to identify the specific programs to which you would plan to apply.
  - Websites such as [PhDs.org](http://PhDs.org) or [Petersons.com](http://Petersons.com) may give you some direction. Once you've found some schools/programs you are interested in, review the program's website
  - Look into current faculty and their research interests, the application requirements and deadline, the degree requirements
- Consult with your Academic Advisor or professors in your area of interest about programs to consider
- Graduate students are a particularly valuable source of information since they have recently gone through the application process themselves and may be able to share their experiences with you.
- Visit a prospective campus to understand the "campus culture" and set up meetings with program faculty and admissions

## WHAT GRADUATE SCHOOLS ARE LOOKING FOR

### Typically, graduate schools will evaluate you based on:

**Letters of Recommendation** Getting these letters, which are very important in the application process, seems to cause the most stress for students. Typically you will need to contact three writers. Depending upon the requirements of your program, the writers may be faculty, internship supervisors, employers or others who can confidently discuss your potential for graduate-level work. Doctoral programs often prefer letters from tenured faculty who are familiar with you and your research; Master's programs often require that one letter come from a professor, while the others may come from those who've supervised you during an internship, volunteer, or work experience related to your proposed graduate study.

**Statement of Purpose** The statement of purpose (sometimes referred to as the "essay" or "statement of professional goals") is another crucial element of your application. Think of it as your opportunity to convince the application committee that you are focused and prepared for successful graduate study. Your statement creates a narrative guide for the committee, and as such it should highlight the important skills and experiences they should note, detail your academic trajectory, and explain how and why aspects of your application that may seem to be weaknesses are in fact strengths. It should also discuss what you would like to study, how and why you're prepared to pursue such study, why you're interested in attending a specific graduate program, and how that program will prepare you to pursue your long-term goals. Be specific and detailed in your discussion—rather than state that you have "excellent critical thinking skills," describe a particular project or activity in which you applied critical thinking skills. Rather than write that you're applying to a particular program because of its "strong program," discuss the specific aspects of the program that appeal to you (curriculum, collegiate atmosphere, emphasis on mentorship, etc.). Remember to relate your knowledge and skills to your desired graduate study—when you describe instances in which you applied your critical thinking skills, for example, explain how those skills would be vital to your graduate study. Finally, be sure that your essay gets to the point early and sticks to it. The statement is typically 2-3 pages (typed, double-spaced), and thus doesn't leave much room for rambling. Bear in mind as well that the committee will be reading a lot of these essays. It may take you several drafts to hone your essay down to the most important and relevant components—and that's okay.

**Experience** Admissions committees are interested in knowing how much and what types of experience you have had in your field. The place to discuss your experience is in the statement of purpose. Doctoral programs are particularly interested in your academically-related experience, while Master's programs may be interested in academic as well as non-academic experiences, such as internships, independent study research experiences, applicable employment, related volunteer experience, laboratory assignments, etc. Such opportunities demonstrate that you have the preparation and commitment necessary to successfully pursue your professional goals.

**GPA** The GPA is a standard estimate of your aptitude to be academically successful in graduate school. GPAs are calculated in a number of ways: cumulative, last 90 units earned, or by major.

You will need to check with individual institutions to see how they handle GPA calculation and if they require you to have taken particular courses while in undergrad.

**Standardized Exam** The GRE is required by most universities in the United States. It is used not only for purposes of admission, but sometimes also (in conjunction with other criteria) to award fellowships, teaching assistantships, and research assistantships. The General GRE exam tests you in three areas: VERBAL (analogies, antonyms, sentence completion, reading comprehension), QUANTITATIVE (arithmetic, algebra, geometry, data analysis, quantitative comparison, problem solving) and ANALYTICAL WRITING.

The GRE Subject Test is required by some graduate programs, but certainly not all. Check with the programs to which you're applying to see if it is required. The Subject Test is paper-based and offered three times a year (November, December and April).

- Free downloadable preparation materials and a sample exam are available at [http://www.ets.org/gre/revised\\_general/prepare/powerprep2](http://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/prepare/powerprep2) but study guides are also available at local bookstores.

The GMAT is required for all business schools. The GMAT consistent of four main sections---- Analytical Writing, Assessment, Integrated Reasoning, Quantitative and Verbal. GMAT study resources can be found at <http://www.mba.com/us/the-gmat-exam.aspx>

**Application** Late summer or early fall is the time to complete applications to the graduate programs of your choice. Most graduate applications are available online. Be sure to find out whether a departmental application is required in addition to the university application. Read each program's website carefully to make sure that you have all the information you need. Also, get organized! Determine a schedule of due dates and turn in your application and supporting materials with the earliest deadlines first. Ideally, by the end of fall semester you will have turned in all of your applications. Many institutions have priority deadlines in December and January, so it's best to have all materials turned in by the end of December (or earlier in some cases). Being familiar with the deadline dates is crucial to the process, so don't let this detail slip your mind.

## FINANCIAL AID

**Institutional:** Based upon merit. The application process is can be included as part of the admissions application or through a supplemental application. The deadline to apply for these awards is often much earlier than program deadlines. Examples include: research and teaching assistantships, tuition fee waivers, and fellowships.

**Federal and State:** Applying for this assistance is a separate process in addition to applying for admission. At some schools, applying for federal aid and institutional support are combined. In all instances, you will be required to complete a FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) form. You only need to complete one FAFSA and have it sent to multiple institutions. The application deadline is usually in early March. Visit [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov) to apply.

**External:** This encompasses local, national and international organizations, foundations, and corporations who offer funds to support graduate education in a number of ways. Fellowships

primarily provide for living expenses and, in some instances, payment of tuition and fees. Recipients are usually free to use them at the University of their Choice. Application deadlines vary, so start your research early.

## **Writing the Personal Statement: Before You Write**

**The following are a list of questions that Purdue Owl recommends to think about before you begin to write your personal statement.**

- What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?
- How have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
- What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, and/or persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

## Writing the Personal Statement: An Outline for Ideas

Many students applying for graduate school are very anxious about what to write in the personal statement. The following suggestions may be helpful for finding a direction.

### Opening Paragraph: 4-6 sentences

The selection committee will read many personal statements each year, and the majority of these statements start in a similar fashion. Students tend to describe themselves in terms of their academic work, high level of motivation, or desire to help others. Because these characteristics are common among applicants, they will not distinguish you as an individual. Think of the opening paragraph as an opportunity for you to paint a “mental picture” of yourself for your readers. Identify something about you or your experiences that make you unique and well-suited for graduate training—a fact that illustrates the type of person you are. Incorporate this element into the opening paragraph. Your goal is for the committee to be interested enough in the information to retain it and use it as a central point around which to organize the other details in your packet and to help them remember you. For example, you might have traveled extensively, been raised in a foster home, led a service project in your community, paid for your own college education, overcome a physical challenge, survived a great loss, or double-majored. Be thoughtful about the mental picture that you choose; you do not want to invoke pity, raise a red flag, or create a complicated self-portrait. Keep the paragraph short and focused, four to six sentences in length. The point is to help the selection committee see you as a person, not just another folder.

### TIPS

- Be concise and organized.
- Avoid stating ideas that your readers already know (I.e. “I want to get a graduate degree in psychology so that I can continue to learn about why people do the things they do”). Your application to a psychology graduate program is evidence that you enjoy the field of psychology and would like to obtain a graduate degree.
- Don’t start with a quote unless it is impossible to express the idea in a better way.
- Create a strong opening to make a positive first impression. Good writing is a process, requiring feedback and multiple drafts.
- You might choose to write this section last. Put together the rest of the paper, and then think about the overall image you would like to present to introduce yourself.

### Academic Accomplishments: 5-7 sentences

You might choose to write your second paragraph to emphasize aspects of your academic work. Many students make the mistake of repeating information that can be found elsewhere in the application. Remember, the selection committee will have your transcript, GPA, and GRE score. You do not need to repeat this information unless repeating it serves a purpose like addressing inconsistencies. For example, if you want to address why your GRE score does not represent your ability or how your grades dramatically improved after your first year, this paragraph might be the ideal place to do so. Otherwise, use this paragraph to expand on, or

supplement, the information you have already provided. As you write about the work you have done in college, link the activities to skills and qualities that you possess. Avoid simply listing activities you have done or classes you have taken. Such lists do not tell the reader much beyond the fact that you stayed busy. For example, you might reveal that you worked full-time while maintaining a high GPA to show that you have strong time management skills and the ability to multi- task. This is more effective than simply writing something like, “I am willing to work hard, am motivated to learn, and have good time management skills.”

### **TIPS**

- Share your accomplishments honestly, but maintain a humble tone. You may be competing against other applicants who have a higher GPA or stronger GRE scores than you.
- Quantify your accomplishments when possible. For example, provide your class rank (e.g., 15 out of 475; top 10%) rather than making vague statements such as “high GPA” or “top student.”
- Feel free to share activities not directly related to your field, especially if they reveal positive aspects of who you are. Be specific.
- Start concentrating on writing smooth transition sentences to start each paragraph. Show the reader how this paragraph logically follows the preceding one. Your reader should understand your overall organization as well as the main idea of each paragraph.

### **Research Experience: 5-8 sentences**

Most graduate programs include a research component and research experience as an important factor in admission decisions. Therefore, documenting your research experiences can be a critical aspect of your application. The term “research experience” can include a range of participation from entering data to publishing independent work. You need to be specific about the research skills you have acquired. “I worked in a child development lab during my senior year” needs additional details such as, “I was responsible for greeting parents, explaining informed consent, and videotaping parent-baby conversations.” Graduate programs appreciate students who understand and are prepared for research training—from the mundane to the more challenging aspects. Thus, even limited exposure to research may be useful to include in this paragraph.

### **Employment/Volunteer Work/Clinical Experience: 5-8 sentences**

Graduate programs invest a great deal of time and money in their students; therefore, selection committees want to choose students who are knowledgeable about and prepared for training. Each program might place its training emphasis in a slightly different area. You need to think about each program to which you are applying and identify the qualities that are desired by that program. For example, if you are applying to an industrial/organizational program, the school is likely to be interested in any statistical skills, legal training, or management experience you have. If you are applying to a clinical program, the school will want applicants who understand issues such as confidentiality and professional boundaries. Being able to identify these qualities demonstrates to the program that you are knowledgeable about the training they provide. After you have identified the qualities desired by your program,

carefully consider how your work, either paid or volunteer, has helped you develop these skills and an awareness of the issues related to your field of interest. You may not have direct experience in your field of interest, so think broadly about how the work you have done translates to graduate training. Perhaps you held a position which required you to do public speaking; those speeches may have helped you develop an awareness of your audience, an ability to communicate complex ideas in an accessible fashion, develop rapport with a diverse group of people, project a professional demeanor, or showcase technological expertise. Write about the aspects that are most relevant to the degree you are seeking. When possible, clarify to the selection committee how your capabilities will benefit you and your program during graduate training. Graduate committees recognize that the skills you can acquire as an undergraduate are limited, so don't exaggerate what you have done. The committee is looking for students who have a good foundation on which to build during graduate school. They are not seeking applicants who believe they have already mastered the necessary skills. Instead of phrasing an idea as "Because of my exceptional people skills, I was asked to do intake interviews for new clients," you might want to use, "Handling the intake interviews for new clients challenged me to build rapport with a variety of personalities and strengthened my time management skills." Show humility and a willingness to learn.

### **TIPS**

Avoid using local abbreviations or jargon that will be unfamiliar to your committee. Use the full name of places where you have worked or positions you have held. Look for overall strengths as well as specific skills. If you are involved in a wide range of activities, emphasize the breadth of your experiences. If you have devoted yourself to a particular cause, emphasize depth and commitment.

### **Future Plans/Goodness-of-Fit: 6-9 sentences**

Typically, graduate programs will ask you to state your future plans. This paragraph allows you to describe your goals and explain how you are a good fit for a particular graduate program. In order to explain fit, you need to investigate each program to which you are applying. If you have done your research, then you will have picked each program because it has characteristics that appeal to you. Show the selection committee that you are familiar with these characteristics, and that these characteristics are a good match with your career goals. Selection committees will not be impressed with over-the-top flattery that praises features that apply to most graduate programs (e.g., "I would love to learn from your very accomplished faculty"). Instead, consider unique elements that attracted you to that specific program. Perhaps the location of the program will afford you a professional experience that you would not get otherwise. Perhaps the program's heavy focus on practical experience matches your future goals. Perhaps your interests match the program's specialization. Reveal your familiarity with the program and explain how the program meets your training needs along with how you are a good fit for the structure of the specific program.

Some schools will ask you to mention specific faculty members whose expertise matches your current interests. If asked, a good rule of thumb is to mention two or three faculty members with similar research programs. Demonstrate that you are familiar with their expertise while avoiding



excessive name-dropping or flattery. “My current interests match most closely with Dr. Susan Doe’s work with fetal alcohol exposure in rats” is preferable to “I am impressed with Dr. Susan Doe’s many publications in prestigious journals dealing with rats and alcohol.” Mentioning more than one faculty member is useful, as individual faculty members may retire, move, go on sabbatical, or have full labs. Although you may have very defined interests, be careful about seeming narrow or close-minded. Just as you may have changed majors in college, it is possible that your research/training focus may shift slightly in graduate school.

### **TIPS**

- Avoid writing a generic paragraph and using it for every program to which you apply. The selection committee easily will identify this strategy.
- Have plans for your future with defined interests.
- Have realistic plans for your future. You do not want the selection committee to perceive you as naïve and/or unprepared.
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### **Concluding Paragraph: 4-5 sentences**

If you have done your job, the selection committee should have a clear idea of who you are and what you would bring to their program by this point in the paper. Thus, your goal for the last paragraph is to close the paper on a strong note. One option is to return to the original picture that you painted in the opening paragraph. Reference the idea again as a bookend, connecting the imagery at the end of the paper to the imagery that opened the paper. This reminder helps package all of the information in the body of the paper around a central idea of who you are. This paragraph also affords you the opportunity to express your willingness to meet with the selection committee and/or provide them with additional information. Show enthusiasm about the possibility of being accepted to the program, but don’t write as though your acceptance is guaranteed. “I would welcome the opportunity to express my interest in your program in person” is better than “I look forward to being a graduate student in your program”. This paragraph is your last chance to make a lasting impression.

### **TIPS**

- Stay short and focused. The last paragraph is not the place to insert important, new information.
- Seek feedback from professors once your paper is written. Your paper ultimately needs to reflect you; however, you should consider the input from multiple reviewers.
- Revise, revise, and revise. Good writing is a process that takes time. Many students submit the first or second draft of their personal statement; revising beyond that might just give you a competitive edge.

## Grad School Interview Tips

Graduate school interviews can take various forms: one-on-one meeting, group interview, campus/faculty visits, panel interviews, or, recently the most common, on-the-spot phone interviews. Keep in mind that the goal in any interview is to communicate to the interviewer that you are prepared and excited about their graduate program. The interview component is one that you have control over. The following are some general guidelines that can help you prepare:

### Before the Interview

- **Do your homework:** Know the school, the program, and the faculty, especially those with whom you want to work (use the internet and your networking skills). Contact graduate students to get the real scoop on the department and faculty. There was a reason why you applied to this school and chose this field—remember to convey that during the interview.
- **Know your goals:** Consider whether your goal is to teach, to do research, to go into industry, etc. Give thought to what area you would like to specialize in and on what topic you might pursue for your dissertation/thesis.
- **Review your transcript:** Be aware of “glitches” in your transcripts and be prepared to explain them (just as you may have done in your statement of purpose). In addition, remind yourself of commitments outside of academia that may have contributed to making you a strong candidate to succeed in graduate school (i.e. employment, volunteer experience or extra-curricular).
- **Dress to impress.** First impressions are meaningful; make sure you look neat and professional. In addition, you need to convey your sense of composure and self-confidence.
- **Be early.**
- **Bring a copy** of your resume/CV, abstract, and a mini-version of your most recent presentation.
- **Know your audience.** Address them with respect and use their title; don’t talk to them like a friend.
- **Follow the cues** from the interviewer—follow suit in both your tone and in the timing of introductions and conclusions. Never try to cut off or extend the interview.

- **Anticipate questions** related to your research and your field along with facing challenges and persevering in graduate school.
- **Convey your passion** for your research. That’s why you’re pursuing graduate school, and this is your opportunity to relate that to the committee.
- **Ask for a clarification** or a repeat of the question if you are unsure of what’s being asked or if you need some extra time to process and respond. Never interrupt or cut short the question.
- **Have questions prepared** for the end of the interview. Most likely you will be given a chance to ask your own questions. Ask meaningful questions that demonstrate you have researched the department and field carefully, as well as ones that show you have been listening to the interviewer. It is also appropriate to ask when you can expect to hear from the admissions committee.
- **Be yourself!** Act naturally, but also, be professional and courteous.

**After the Interview** If you do not receive an offer at the end of your interview or visit, follow-up. Thank any networking contacts who may have helped you set up the interview. If you received contact information from the interviewer(s), send a letter or e-mail thanking him/her for the visit and interview. Call the admissions office if you do not hear by the date originally given to you.

*Adapted from: University of California, Davis Advising Services. (2011). Graduate School Application Process and Timeline: An Overview in Pursuit of Master’s and Ph.D. Programs. Retrieved from [http://advisingservices.ucdavis.edu/advising/grad/handouts/grad\\_school\\_application\\_process\\_and\\_timelin](http://advisingservices.ucdavis.edu/advising/grad/handouts/grad_school_application_process_and_timelin)*

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