

# HANDBOOK FOR APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

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# INTRODUCTION

The admission processes for graduate school are more competitive today than ever before.

This handbook can provide you basic information about graduate school and the application process, along with some tools to help you stay on track with your application timeline. Best wishes in your educational endeavors!

Before applying to graduate school, it is important to have a clear understanding of what you want to do. If you are still in the exploration process, instead of filling out graduate school applications, focus on self-assessment and career planning as your first step.

# IS GRADUATE SCHOOL RIGHT FOR YOU?

- There are many questions to consider before jumping into a graduate program. Explore what receiving a graduate degree will do for you. There are several ways you can do this:

Ask yourself: will receiving an advanced degree help me to attain my career goals?

Examine yourself: are you ready for the commitment it will take to persist to graduation day? Financially? Mentally? Emotionally?

Research how receiving an advanced degree will impact your salary.

Talk to professionals in your field. Is an advanced degree a requirement for your profession or are there other ways to obtain your desired position?

Weigh the pros and cons: consider the above questions and fill-out the pros and cons worksheet.



# WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN

Decide what the most important factors are and rank them 1-12

\_\_\_\_\_ **Accreditation:** Be sure to determine the proper accreditation your field requires, if any. You could encounter some serious problems if the program does not have the necessary accreditation. For instance, if you attend an unaccredited law school, you may not be allowed to sit for the state bar exam - a requirement to be a practicing lawyer!

\_\_\_\_\_ **Admission Standards:** Most schools publish information about their admission standards, including undergraduate GPA and standardized test scores. Some also publish the number of applicants compared to the number of students admitted.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Research/Academic Focus:** Some graduate programs possess a specific strength or focus in one or two areas within a discipline. It's a good idea to explore faculty interests and research areas of each program.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Cost/Financial Aid:** Be sure you examine all associated costs (e.g., tuition, books, fees, housing). Explore whether any financial assistance may be available to you for each program, including grants, loans, and assistantships.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Culture:** Find schools with cultures that fit your style; by doing so, you'll increase your chances to excel. Talk with department chairs or faculty members to ascertain the degree of fit with the approach, the academic program, and the culture of the department.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Faculty:** One very basic and commonly-used measure in this area is the percentage of classes taught by full-time faculty. However, also explore the reputation of the faculty. Consider, for example, faculty acclaim, professional experiences, and/or number of scholarly publications. For doctoral programs, identify faculty with whom you share mutual research interests and with whom you may want to work.<sup>1</sup>

# DECIDING WHERE TO APPLY

**\_\_\_\_\_School Location/Surrounding Community:** Sometimes the value of a graduate degree is greatest in the area where the school is located. Also, consider the type of area the school is in - do you want an urban, rural, or suburban setting?

**\_\_\_\_\_Physical Facilities:** Make certain that the school has the types of facilities you need. Say, for example, your specialization is market research. You'll want to find out about the program's computer facilities as well as their behavioral labs for activities such as focus groups.

**\_\_\_\_\_Reputation/Ranking:** There are several organizations that rank graduate programs, such as U.S. News & World Report and Business Week. Rankings can be a good indicator of quality, but you need to proceed with caution - make sure you investigate the source of the rankings and have a clear understanding of what the ranking is really telling you. For example, a particular school may have a high overall ranking while the program you are considering may be weak.

**\_\_\_\_\_Career Assistance:** It's likely that one of your main goals for earning a graduate degree is career advancement or career change. As such, you'll want to explore the career development and placement assistance each program provides to graduates. Even though this assistance should account for only a small part of your overall job search upon degree completion, it's still an important factor to consider

**\_\_\_\_\_Resources:** As you assess a school's resources, don't just stop at learning about its library holdings. Think of "resources" as all those things that support your graduate program, such as endowments and foundations that help fund student research and publications.

**\_\_\_\_\_Size:** Certainly, you want to consider the size of the university, which can be important in terms of the resources available and the kind of environment you are seeking. But don't forget to look at the size of the graduate program as well. After all, that's where you'll spend most of your time. Find out about faculty/student ratios in the program.<sup>1</sup>

# APPLICATION TIMELINE

## Time Table

Most application deadlines fall between December and February of the preceding year (professional programs such as medical and law school have earlier dates). Be sure to leave plenty of time to research programs and gather application materials (16 months is recommended). The following is a guideline:

**June:** Begin researching potential schools. Determine if your program requires an entrance exam (GRE, MCAT, LSAT etc.) . Register for the entrance exam.

**July:** Request information from schools that interest you.

**August:** Take the entrance exam. If you're not happy with your scores, sign up to take it again. Begin writing your personal statement.

**September:** Finalize your list of prospective schools. Contact your recommenders.

**October:** Request official transcripts from your undergraduate institution. Arrange a campus visit if you can.

**November:** Have someone in the field and a few smart (and honest) friends read over your personal statement.

**December:** Complete and submit all applications, keeping two copies of every section for your records. Verify that your recommendations have been sent.

**January:** Focus on financial aid—fill out the FAFSA online and look into private loans, grants, assistantships and fellowships.

**February & March:** Time to relax and wait.

**April:** Celebrate your admittance!₂



# SCHEDULE TRACKER

■ **Begin Researching Schools and Programs by:**

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■ **Take the Practice Entrance Exam by:**

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■ **Register for the Entrance Exam by:**

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■ **Request School and Program Information by:**

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■ **Begin Writing your Personal Statement by:**

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■ **Approach Letter Writers by:**  
\*Deadline for Letter Writers:

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■ **Request Official Transcripts by:**

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■ **Arrange a Campus Visit by:**

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■ **Fill Out and Complete Application by:**

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■ **Request Financial Aid Information by:**

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# PERSONAL STATEMENT

- The main task in writing your statement is to convey **passion, excitement, and individuality!**

## What are they *really* looking for?

- More than anything else, admissions committees are looking for some insight into your *persona*; they are hoping to get a glimpse of the human being behind the data in your file. <sup>3</sup>

- Reflect and write it out

Write 2 unique characteristics about yourself



Name 2 people that have had an impact on you professionally



Name the turning point for you when you decided to apply to graduate school



Name 2 reasons you want to attend graduate school

# 5 STEPS TO WRITING AN EFFECTIVE PERSONAL STATEMENT

- **Step one: Reflect** on past experiences that have influenced your decision to apply to graduate school.

Use these sample questions and the worksheet on the previous page to reflect upon before writing:

- ❑ **What** is something unique about you? Think about your life as a whole (family, volunteer experience, travel, interests).
  - ❑ **Who** or what has influenced or inspired you to pursue your particular field?
  - ❑ **What** was the turning point for you when you decided to apply to graduate school?
  - ❑ **Why** do you really want to attend graduate school and your specific program?
- **Step two: Read the directions carefully.** Some programs ask specific questions. Be sure to answer any and all of the questions. Other programs might simply ask you to write a personal statement. But be sure to use all the words they allow but do not go over the word limit. There is a reason they put a word limit in their requirements: admissions readers read twenty, thirty, sometimes one hundred essays for one program.
  - **Step three: Create an outline.** The outline will serve as a focus when writing. You can create an outline unique to the questions you are answering or you can use the sample provided to guide your writing.
  - **Step four: Write.** There is no one right way of writing, everyone has their unique style. Start writing early allowing yourself time to craft the best statement possible. Don't expect your first draft to be perfect. It is called a personal statement for a reason, be sure to use specific examples that showcase your personal qualities.
  - **Step five: PROOFREAD.** By the end of writing and proofreading you will probably have your statement memorized. Have others read your statement looking for different things. For example, have a friend read to see if they think it is interesting. Have a professor read to see if he/she thinks it is appropriate. Have someone from the Writing Center read to ensure you've used correct grammar. Have someone from the Career Development Center read to make sure you've answered all the questions and that it makes sense. Lastly, read it out loud to yourself, you will be able to hear how it flows.

# SAMPLE PERSONAL STATEMENT OUTLINE

- **Why this field?**
  - When did you decide that you wanted to go into this field?
  - What influenced your decision?
- **What are your career goals?**
  - Mention both long-term and short-term.
  - Make your career goals sound firm, like you've thought about them.
  - Be sure your career goals align with the school you're applying to.
- **Why this school? How will this school specifically help you achieve your career goals?**
  - Mention research that is being conducted there.
  - Specific professors you are interested in working with.
  - Mention anything you know about campus culture or reputation.
  - Specifics of the program (student to faculty ratio, practicum opportunities, mentor programs, placement rates, etc.).
  - Don't use personal reasons such as convenient, quick drive, know friends there.
- **What can you bring to the table?**
  - What makes you stand out as an applicant?
  - How have your experiences shaped you and will help you succeed in grad school?
  - Prove how you will be able to succeed in grad school and in particular, their program.
- **Wrap up**
  - Don't need to sign your statement.
  - Conclusion paragraph, reiterate what you just told them.
  - Don't necessarily need to thank them (end of cover letter isn't necessary).
- **Final Tips**
  - If you feel inadequate in any area, be sure to address that (low GRE scores, low GPA for a semester, lack of involvement in co-curricular activities, etc.)
  - Use transitional statements and ensure the document flows
  - Ensure you've changed out all the specific school information such as school names, etc. 4

# LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

What others have to say about you could possibly influence whether you are admitted to graduate school or not. Be careful to select 3 people who:

1. Know you well enough to write a detailed letter
2. Will say wonderful things about you
3. Are reliable enough to turn your letter in on time

## Quick Tips

Ask your letter writers 3-6 weeks in advance.

Provide your resume, transcript, statement of purpose as a lens to write their letter through.

Let your letter writers know if you would like them to speak about something specific.

Be sure to send a thank you letter.

# VISITING CAMPUS

- Visiting the campus of your prospective school(s) can be really helpful in your search for the right campus and program. It can also give the admissions committee a stronger sense of who you are as a person, beyond what they will glean from your application.

Your campus visit can include some or all of these ideas:

**Attend a Colloquium**

**Campus Tour**

**The Admissions Interview**

**Informational Interviews**

**Financial Aid Office Visit**

**Exploring the City**

# RESUME

Your graduate school resume may include different categories than your classmates because your experiences will be different. The sections you choose to include and the order in which you choose to list them should be strategic. What do you want the admissions committee to pay the most attention to?

- **Layout**--The layout and order of your resume should be organized with the most important and related experiences at the top and should be determined by what you would like to emphasize to the admissions committee.
  
- Some of the most commonly included categories are:
  - Objective
  - Education
  - Academic Experience/Highlights
  - Research
  - Employment
  - Volunteer, Community, and/or Extra-Curricular Involvement
  - Certifications/Professional Development

# RESUME

- **Objective** : A short sentence identifying the school and the program to which you are applying.
- **Education** : Be sure to include the name of your undergraduate college / university, degree, graduation date, major, minor, and GPA.
- **Academic Experience and Highlights**: Select the most outstanding academic accomplishments to highlight for the admissions committee.  
Areas that may be included are:  
Internships, Research, Scholarships, Independent Study, International Study, Honors, Conferences, Presentations, or Special Projects.  
(These may be subtopics under Education or they may be their own categories.)
- **Employment**: List the most relevant and recent job positions. Be sure to include bullet points that highlight the skills that will best support your application for graduate school and your major area of study.
- **Volunteer, Community, and/or Extra-Curricular Involvement**: If you participated in campus or community activities that developed your leadership, time management, or other skills important to your success in graduate school, include these activities and provide a bulleted list that shows your participation.
- **Observation**: Most graduate schools prefer applicants with a combination of academic and experiential background such as observation or internship experiences.
- **Certifications**: Include any related certifications (CPR, First Aid, etc.)
- **Additional Categories**:- Additional categories you might choose to include are:
  - Memberships
  - Leadership Experience
  - Foreign Languages
  - Computer Skills



# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- There are hundreds of websites to utilize as resources when making decisions about graduate school. Below are trusted sites to make use of.

## Finding a Graduate School

- <http://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools.aspx>
- <http://www.gradview.com/index.jsp>
- <http://www.gradschools.com/>

## Test Prep

- <http://www.kaptest.com/>
- <http://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools/graduate-school-test.aspx>
- <http://www.princetonreview.com/>

**1. Career Vision**

[http://www.careervision.org/about/Graduate\\_School\\_Right\\_For\\_Me.htm](http://www.careervision.org/about/Graduate_School_Right_For_Me.htm)

**2. The Princeton Review**

<http://www.princetonreview.com/grad/application-timeline.aspx>

**3. Stewart, M.A. (2009). *How to write the perfect personal statement 4<sup>th</sup> edition*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Peterson's,**

**4. Minnesota State University, Mankato Career Development Center**

<http://www.mnsu.edu/cdc/students/grad/>