

Graduate School Guide



CAREER DEVELOPMENT
...embrace your calling

Table of Contents

Checklist	3
Should you go to graduate school?	4
How to choose a graduate school	5
When and how do you apply?	6
Personal Statement	7
Entrance exams	8
GRE	8
GMAT	9
LSAT	10
MCAT	11
Recommendations and References	12
Acronyms	13
Additional Resources	14

Graduate School Checklist

Junior Year

- Begin to investigate programs that you are interested in and request brochures from these schools.
- Speak to your faculty about graduate school
- Look into deadlines for entrance exams
- Give consideration to which faculty members to ask for letters of recommendation.

Summer After Junior Year

- Get the applications from the schools you are interested in. Be sure to check their websites. Make copies and compose a rough draft on the copies in case you make a mistake.
- Contact the programs/departments directly for more information on their specific requirements. At some schools, admission into graduate school and a specific program may be a separate process.
- Begin drafting your personal statement
- Look into visiting the institutions you are interested in.

Fall of Senior Year

- Take entrance exams if you have not done so previously.
- Speak with faculty about your letters of recommendation
- Send in your applications (make sure you keep a copy)
- Fill out forms with Registrar to have transcripts sent to institutions after Fall grades are in.
- If necessary, schedule interview with prospective programs.
- Research financial aid resources
- If you do not receive anything from the school that states that they received your application, be sure to follow-up.

Winter of Senior Year

- Most of the deadlines take place during this time, usually in January. **MAKE SURE EVERYTHING IS SUBMITTED BY THE DEADLINE!!!!**
- Call the schools to check on your application materials as often as necessary. If the school uses a web-based notification system, be sure to check it first.
- In February, fill out the FAFSA if applicable.

Spring of Senior Year

- Continue to check on your application file status.
- Follow-up/send thank you notes to the faculty who wrote your letters of recommendation.
- Notify the program you are choosing of your acceptance, and notify the other programs that you are declining acceptance.
- If applicable, look into and apply for fellowships/assistantships associated with your program.

Should You Go to Graduate School?

- **Do your research.**
 - Undergraduate education, especially at a liberal arts institution, is the time to explore different majors and career options.
 - When it comes to graduate school, you need to **know what you want to study** and feel passionate about it.
- “You don’t go to explore different career options or even a wide variety of subjects, really. That’s what college – and real life – are for. If you are still casting about for your life’s goals, don’t hide on campus. Take a stab at a career or two. And then go to graduate school if and when inspiration hits” (Shea, 2006).
 - Depending on the field, graduate or professional school can be **up to a decade or more** of additional schooling.
 - There is some good news, too. Individuals with a master’s degree earn \$234,000 more in their lifetime than those with only their bachelor’s and those with doctoral degrees earn \$503,000 more.



How to pick a school

- This is not a process to begin the spring semester of your senior year.
 - If you are serious about continuing your education, and especially if you are looking into competitive institutions, you need to **begin the process during your junior year**.
- A good place to start is to **begin to get information** from the schools you are interested in.
 - Search the schools' websites and call or e-mail the graduate admissions office to ask for descriptions of the programs, application materials, and financial aid information. You may also contact the specific program directly to receive additional detailed information.
- Factors **to consider** in your decision (*differing priorities for each person/field*) :
 - **Specialization** - Is this a growing/stable/receding job market (*i.e. will you be able to find a job after you graduate?*)
 - **Ranking of the program** - It may indicate the quality of program, but be sure to understand the qualities that determined the ranking (*they may not be the most important to you*)
 - **Location** of the university
 - **People**- You will be spending a lot of time with advisor and fellow students
 - **Cost**-There will be more assistance available as you pursue upper level (PhD) degrees
 - **Quality of life** - especially if you have spouse/family: child care, employment opportunities for spouse, health insurance, cost of living, weather, culture, recreation
 - **Quality and reputation** of school/department/faculty
 - **Type of program**
 - **Outcomes** (What do you want to get out of it?/Do they offer job placement to graduates?)
- **Talk to the experts:**
 - This may include current professors who you admire or alumni of the school/program. Research publications in the field and read the author's notes. It often mentions what school the person graduated from or the university they are currently teaching at.
- Schools that have recently received research grants may be interested in accepting larger groups of students to help them with their research projects. You may have a better chance of acceptance into these programs.
- If you are a little older or have worked between your undergraduate education and applying to graduate school, make sure your application highlights what you have done since graduation.

When and How Do You Apply to Graduate School?

- It is best to begin the process **at least a year in advance**.
 - If that deadline has already passed for you, **don't panic!** Now is a better time to start than never!
- **Plan ahead**
 - Volunteer in on and off campus organizations related to your discipline.
 - It will give you the added benefit of having something to talk about later.
- An **informational interview** of a faculty member in one or more of the programs you are considering is definitely a good idea
 - If you have requested the interview, make sure you have questions prepared.
- **Request applications** well ahead of the deadline so that you can see and have enough time to meet the requirements.
- Try to **give yourself options** by applying to multiple programs.
 - Consider including a safe school and a challenge school in your application process.
- Application documents and procedures:
 - Typical application will include your transcript, GRE or other standardized test scores, letters of recommendation, and a personal statement/admission essay.
- If interested in a fellowship or assistantship inquire about this as you apply.
 - These positions are more likely to be open the earlier you apply. You likely will have to interview. Prepare.
- The graduate admissions office of the university will hold your application until they have received all the pieces. Make sure everything has been submitted by the end of January for the earliest admission.



Writing a Personal Statement

- Don't use the same personal statement/essay for all the applications. Each program can tell if you are not specifically answering their question.
- Organization
 - The statement will likely need to cover the past, present and future.
 - This may include your preparation, motivation, plans for the future, and events and experiences that have shaped you.
 - Stay within space limits. Follow all directions. Type it in a standard font and make sure there are no errors.
 - Have a structure or plan for your statement. Organize it around a story or an angle. Example - Describe an event that shaped you or show how a series of events have led you to where you are today.
 - The opening paragraph is the most important. No clichés - 'I want to be a (fill in the blank) because I want to help people'. So does everyone else!!!
- Avoid
 - Controversial topics or high school accomplishments.
 - This is not a resume. It should tell a story not list all your accomplishments.
 - Addressing your shortcomings. A better place to explain shortcomings is in faculty letters of recommendation. A faculty member explaining that you are a bright student but a poor test taker is more reliable than you making a similar statement. It will look less like you are making excuses. Be sure to share your thoughts with your faculty if this is a concern.
- Make sure your statement emphasizes what the program emphasizes.
 - Know why you want to attend that particular program and make sure you include that.

Graduate School Entrance Exams

- Test fees are expensive so plan ahead and make sure you know what the schools you are applying to require. You don't want to spend the time or money preparing for a test you really don't need to take.

Graduate Record Examinations (GRE):

- Free POWERPREP software available at www.ets.org/gre/general/prepare (not Mac compatible)
- General Test - computer based
 - Analytical Writing: two sections - 1) present your perspective on an issue 2) analyze an argument
 - Verbal Reasoning
 - Quantitative Reasoning
- Subject specific tests
 - biochemistry, cellular and molecular biology, biology, chemistry, computer science, literature in English, mathematics, physics, and psychology
- Registration:
 - Register online, by phone, or mail
 - Can retake the general exam once per calendar month and no more than 5 times per 12 month period
 - \$160 for General Test; \$140 for Subject Tests
 - Fee includes scores sent to as many as four institutions (additional schools \$23 per score).
- Test format:
 - Computer adaptive test – score is based on the number of questions you answer correctly, difficulty of questions you answer, and number of questions completed. The type/difficulty of question changes based on previously correct/incorrect answers – begins with medium level question.
 - Scoring:
 - Verbal Reasoning scores will be reported on a new 130 – 170 score scale, in 1-point increments (versus 200 – 800 in 10-point increments - prior to August 2011).
 - Quantitative Reasoning scores will be reported on a new 130 – 170 score scale, in 1-point increments (versus 200 – 800 in 10-point increments - prior to August 2011).
 - Analytical Writing scores reported on a 0 – 6 score level, in half-point increments.
- Website: <http://www.gre.org>

Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT):

- General Information:
 - Used for business school admissions
 - Sections include: verbal, quantitative, and analytical (analysis of argument and responding to an issue).
 - Very similar in structure to GRE.
- Registration:
- Administered year-round and on demand at test centers around the world.
- The cost to take the GMAT exam is \$250.
- Test format:
 - Computer Adaptive Test:
 - Score is based on the number of questions you answer correctly, difficulty of questions you answer, and number of questions completed. The type/difficulty of question changes based on previously correct/incorrect answers – begins with medium level question.
 - Because the computer scores each question before selecting the next one, you may not skip, return to, or change your responses to previous questions
 - Scoring
 - The GMAT exam yields four scores: Verbal, Quantitative, Total, and Analytical Writing Assessment.
 - Your score report includes all GMAT scores from tests taken in the last five (5) years.
 - Scores range from 200-800. Two-thirds of test takers score between 400 and 600.
 - For each of your scores on the GMAT test (Verbal, Quantitative, Total, and Analytical Writing Assessment) you will receive a percentile rank for the most recent three-year period. Your percentile rank may change from year to year. Your scaled score never changes.
 - Analytical Writing Assessment: The 2 essays for the analytical section are each graded on a scale from 0-6 by computer and person in half-point intervals. This gives you four scores - averaged for your overall score. Writing scores are computed separately from the multiple-choice scores and have no effect on the Verbal, Quantitative, or Total scores.
- Website: <http://www.mba.com/the-gmat.aspx>

Law School Admission Test (LSAT):

- General Information:
 - Required for schools belonging to the American Bar Association – usually the most reputable law schools.
 - Most law schools place great significance on scores from this test
- Registration:
 - Offered four times a year (usually October, December, February, June)
 - Will need to be taken by December for admission for the following fall, but taking the test earlier is advised
 - Basic Fee: \$139
- Test format:
 - Five 35-minute sections of multiple-choice questions.
 - Four of the five sections contribute to the test taker's score. The unscored section, commonly referred to as the variable section, typically is used to pretest new test questions or to preequate new test forms.
 - A 35-minute writing sample is administered at the end of the test. LSAC does not score the writing sample, but copies of the writing sample are sent to all law schools to which you apply.
 - Scoring:
 - Scores range from 120-180
 - Score is based on the number of questions answered correctly (the raw score). There is no deduction for incorrect answers, nor are individual questions on the various test sections weighted differently.
- Website: <http://www.lsac.org>



Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT):

- General Information:
 - Used for medical school admissions
 - Almost all U.S. medical schools require applicants to submit MCAT exam scores.
- Registration:
 - Register on the Association of American Medical Colleges website
 - Administered multiple times from late January through early September at hundreds of locations
 - Basic Registration: \$235
- Test format:
 - Four sections [physical sciences (*general chemistry and physics*), verbal reasoning, writing sample, and biological sciences (*biology and organic chemistry*)]
 - *Physical Sciences and Biological Sciences*: fundamental principles and concepts in biology, general chemistry, organic chemistry, and physics presented in basic science courses
 - *Verbal Reasoning*: read a series of passages that will contain all the information you need to answer the accompanying questions. Become familiar with the types of critical thinking and reasoning skills used in humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.
 - *Writing Sample*: address the given topic, respond to the specific writing tasks, and fully develop your ideas into a complete, unified essay.
 - Scoring
 - Four separate scores - one for each section and the total score (*excluding the writing sample*). Based on the number of questions you answer correctly. A wrong answer will be scored the same as an unanswered question.
 - The raw score you receive on each section is converted to a score on a 15-point scale.
 - Ex. a raw score on one of the sections is between 40 and 43, a converted score might be 11. Scores ranging from 44 to 46 might have a converted score of 12.
 - The conversion of raw scores to scaled scores compensates for small variations in difficulty between sets of questions. The exact conversion of raw to scaled scores is not constant; because different sets of questions are used on different exams.
 - Writing section converted to letter score. The letter scores range from a low J to high T.
 - Scores are valid for three years
- Website: <http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/about/start.htm>

How to ask for Recommendations and References

- Make sure you have built relationships with your professors before you ask them for a recommendation
 - see if you can be a TA/professor's assistant
 - talk to them about your interest in graduate school so asking them for a recommendation is not a surprise
- You are not their #1 priority so give them plenty of time – AT LEAST a few weeks' notice is appropriate
- Give them the information they need:
 - copy of your resume, a list of classes you may have had with them/grades received, letter about why you are considering grad school/long term goals.
 - May want to send a letter/call to see if they are willing first. If you sense mixed feelings, move on. One way to get out of this situation is to tell them you will give them the information later and then call in the next day or so and say you don't need the recommendation. If the professor asks for a draft of a letter, do it. They may use it directly so it is a great chance to sell yourself.
- Make sure you include a self-addressed stamped envelope (SASE) if needed so application can be sent quickly.



Graduate School Acronyms and Jargon

They're words you've probably heard time and time again, but do you really know what they mean?

A.B.D.: An acronym for "All But Dissertation." These will be the initials behind your name if you've completed all your Ph.D. coursework in graduate school, but not your thesis.

Assistantship: Can be teaching or research centered. In exchange for work or research for the program, you're offered free or reduced tuition or other benefits, such as health insurance and a monthly stipend.

Defense: Generally an oral presentation to a committee of people where you provide a summary of your thesis and the research results you obtained. An Examining Committee then presents you with questions and you must respond and defend your work. There's usually a time limit.

Dissertation: The D word is a fancy synonym for "thesis." (*See below*).

Fellowship: Scholarships or grants awarded to doctoral students in grad schools. Could cover the cost of everything, including tuition, housing, and food. Sometimes there are strings attached, like working on a very specific type of research, or publishing a set amount of articles in a specific field.

GMAT: Graduate Management Admission Test, for admission to a graduate business school.

GRE: Acronym for Graduate Record Examination, a general exam for graduate school admission.

Internship: Work experience as part of a field of study, which usually takes place over several months. It may be full-time, may require you to move, and you may be paid.

LSAT: Law School Admission Test, a standardized test required for admission to law school.

MCAT: Acronym for Medical College Admissions Test, for admission to medical school.

Oral Exams: Common for doctoral degrees and sometimes required for master's-level programs. These comprehensive exams are presented verbally and usually graded by a small committee of professors. Demonstrates your mastery of the concepts you've covered in your studies.

Ph.D. (*Doctor of Philosophy*): This is an advanced degree, beyond the master's level, which requires further courses as well as several years of original research culminating in a dissertation.

Practicum: A work experience or hands-on portion of a class in graduate schools. Smaller in scope than an internship and usually only lasts as long as the length of the course which requires it.

Terminal master's degree: These are also referred to as professional master's degrees and include degrees with descriptive titles, such as Master of Business Administration (M.B.A.), Master of Social Work (M.S.W.), Master of Education (M.Ed.), or Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.). These are degrees that prepare you for a particular profession. Any further education at the Ph.D. level isn't considered necessary to enter your career field.

Thesis: A thesis is almost always required if you're pursuing a Ph.D., but some master's programs require them as well. Your thesis is typically an original and significant contribution to research in your field.

Information taken from Peterson's Graduate School Guide: <http://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools/graduate-school-glossary.aspx>

Additional Resources

Online Resources:

- General Information:
 - <http://www.gradschools.com>.
 - <http://gradschool.about.com>
 - <http://www.petersons.com/GradChannel>
 - <http://www.gradloans.com>
- GRE prep:
 - <http://www.gre.org> (free test materials available on this site)
 - <http://www.petersons.com/testprep>
 - <http://www.kaptest.com>
- LSAT prep:
 - <http://www.LSAC.org>
 - <http://www.kaptest.com>
 - <http://www.review.com>
- MCAT prep:
 - <http://www.aamc.org>
 - <http://www.aacom.org>
 - <http://www.review.com>
 - <http://www.kaptest.com>



Printed Resources:

- **Peterson's Graduate Schools in the U.S.** (2011). Peterson's Guides (ISBN: 0768928617)
- **Get Into Graduate School: A Strategic Approach.** Kaplan. (ISBN: 0743240952)
- Asher, D. (2008). **Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice** (3rd Edition). Ten Speed Press. (ISBN: 1580088724)
- Jerrard, R. (1998). **The Grad School Handbook.** Perigee Trade. (ISBN: 0399524169)
- Peters, R. (1997). **Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning an M.A. or a Ph.D** (Revised edition). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (ISBN: 0374524777)
- Stewart, M.A. (2009). **How to Write the Perfect Personal Statement: Write powerful essays for law, business, medical, or graduate school application (Peterson's Perfect Personal Statements)**(4th edition). Peterson's Guides. (ISBN: 0768928168)
- Mumby, D.G. (2004). **Graduate School: Winning Strategies for Getting in With or Without Excellent Grades.** Proto Press Publications (ISBN: 0968217346)
- **Paying for Graduate School Without Going Broke** (2005 Edition). Princeton Review. (ISBN: 0375764224)