

Is graduate school the next step for you?

What do you want to do?
Why do you want to do this?
Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
How do you think you'll get there?
Is this a realistic plan?

Graduate and undergraduate school admissions are similar in many ways; they are both competitive and receive many more applications than available spaces. In both cases, applicants provide biographical information, objective credentials and subjective credentials. The objective credentials include grades, work experience and standardized tests scores. The subjective credentials include the personal statement (essay), letters of recommendation and sometimes an interview (telephone or in-person).

Graduate and undergraduate education are quite different. Undergraduate education provides a broad and solid foundation upon which you will build your graduate education. Graduate education is “specialized” and provides the specific training that you need to succeed in your career. It is up to you to research the schools and programs to identify those that will provide that training.

Many strong candidates are not offered positions in programs of their choice. Sometimes this is due to the competition and sometimes this is due to the applicants not presenting themselves in the best light. The goal of this booklet is to provide information that can help you plan and organize so that you can present a competitive admissions file to the most appropriate program for you.

How to Prepare For Graduate School:

Applying to graduate school is time-consuming and demanding. You have to plan ahead, be diligent, be organized, and be prepared to spend the time it takes to prepare an excellent admissions file for the school of your choice. You should begin to plan once you know that you want to attend graduate school. In general, you should start looking at graduate schools during the junior year (although the sophomore year is not too early). The students with the appropriate information can prepare themselves to meet the requirements of the school/s of interest.

Prepare a 4-year calendar, indicating each semester and each summer with goals for each. These goals should be reviewed once every three months to monitor if you are indeed on track.

- *Have you taken the appropriate courses?*
- *Have you successfully applied to summer internship programs?*
- *Do you need to take a prep course for the required standardized test?*

It is important to include some courses outside your major. This will make you a well-rounded individual who can “survive” in any setting. Of course, you should include some extra-curricular activities, as long as they do not jeopardize your academic record.

Freshman Year

- The usual introductory level courses
 - Basic science courses
 - English
 - Reading
 - Writing
 - Research techniques
- Develop a vitae (resume)

Sophomore Year

- Advanced science courses
- Advanced research techniques
- Some “life-enriching” courses
 - Arts
 - Humanities
- Seriously think about graduate schools

Junior Year

- Some advanced courses
- Independent research
- A prep course in the Fall semester (campus-based or commercial) for the required standardized test
- Start collecting information on graduate schools and funding agencies – Internet, faculty advisors, national science meetings, and peers
- Include some courses in other fields, such as business
- Take the required standardized test(s) in the Spring semester

Senior Year

- Review/request/download informational/application materials in the early Fall for schools and funding
- Retake standardized tests in the fall semester if necessary
- Meet faculty members to ask for GOOD letters of recommendation
- Write the personal statement (this should have been started in the summer)
- Order transcripts
- Complete the requirements for graduate school, including advanced courses
- Include some “life-enriching” courses

Summers

- Participate in Fellowships/Internships which provide practical experience
- Identify and apply to summer programs (this will give you a preview of the application process for graduate school)
- Talk to senior students and faculty advisors
- Search the web
- Complete and submit the application materials during the prior winter

How to Find Information about Graduate School

Utilize your support network and contacts to find helpful information during your process. Consider these helpful sources:

- Faculty advisors/mentors and their contacts and collaborators
- Internet searches
- The schools website
- Network contacts
- Summer internships/fellowships

Once you have gathered information and prepared a list of schools, the application materials should be reviewed/requested/downloaded at the end of the junior year/summer after junior year. This gives enough time to develop a thoughtful personal statement and make the choice of ideal recommenders.

Selecting Schools for Application and One for Matriculation

You should apply to no fewer than five and no more than ten schools. These should include one “safety” school and one “reach” school. The schools should be selected based on real information, i.e., a realistic look at your qualifications vs. the requirements for admission and the curriculum of the program.

- Do they offer what you are looking for?
- Is this the best program for you?
- Are you academically qualified for that school/program?
- Is there an emphasis on your particular area of interest, i.e., are there enough faculty members in your area of interests?
- What are the opportunities/resources outside the school, in the geographic area?
- What is the reputation/ranking of the school (you should look at the quality of the research and publications, not just the name/national rankings)?
- Are their laboratories state-of-the-art, not only conducting cutting edge research, but well equipped?
- List your criteria for looking at those schools in order of priority
 - Academic
 - Geographic location
 - Academic advisement
 - Environment/atmosphere
 - Amenities
 - Teaching opportunities

Curriculum and Faculty

- What is the structure/organization of the program?
- What happens if you want to switch departments/programs?
- Is there a supportive academic advisement in place?
- Is interdisciplinary cooperation among the students and faculty encouraged or discouraged?
- What is the student/faculty ratio/relationship (program size)?
- Are there enough professors in your area of interest to choose from?

The Facilities

- Where is the campus located?
- Housing – cost and location?
- Are there special amenities/services for students?
- Accessibility of special facilities/departments for students?
- What is there to do – are there cultural/sports events (theatres and arenas) in the area?
- Is it easy to get from place to place?

Alumni

- What are the career opportunities?
- Is there a career resource center?
- Where are the alumni?

The Application Process

Prepare a spreadsheet to facilitate the application process for you. Include the names of the schools, the application deadline, the requirements, etc. Use this to keep track of your schedule of submission of the application documents and contacts with the school.

What

Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Complete entire application form, i.e., answer all questions• Do not reference information in another part of the application
The application fee	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How much?• Can it be waived/deferred?
Scores and GPA	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have transcripts and test scores sent early (verify grades with the registrar's office before transcripts are sent)?
Personal Statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write like a paper – outline, fill in, rewrite (see below)
Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Submit the number that is asked for• Select academic references, not personal/social ones• Ask for a good letter of recommendation• Ask recommender to interview you• Give a copy of your personal statement and resume to recommenders• Give them as much time as possible, but follow-up
Interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who are the interviewers – students/faculty?• How many are there?• What are they looking for?• Are students and faculty readily available when you visit?• Is the atmosphere what you want/need?

When	
Deadlines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send in all materials as early as possible, before the deadline • Check, before the deadline, that all materials have been received
Where	
Follow up information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Central office vs. department/program?

Personal Statement

Why are you unique and why should the school expend its resources to meet you?

The personal statement is your introduction of yourself to someone who has to be impressed enough to want to meet you. This individual is reading hundreds of these essays (and probably has read thousands in the past) and yours must stand out. This brief essay (generally one to two pages) has to communicate your abilities, accomplishments, and goals, as well as show your ability to write concisely. This is your chance to stand out from hundreds of essays the reader is reviewing. The essay should show your commitment to and motivation for graduate school based on your history. The essay should have a positive tone, be honest, and professional. It is crucial that you get some honest critique on your essay before you submit it to the school. Although you should not have to rewrite your entire essay for each program you are applying to, it should be tailored to for each program.

Content

- Answer all specific questions asked (read the application instructions)
- Who are you and why do you want to pursue graduate education – show your competence, knowledge in your field, and expectations
- Why are you unique – what would you contribute to that school
- Present relevant positive and negative life experiences – accent the positive; briefly explain those events which negatively impacted your academics
- Do not make excuses – explain how those negative events positively affected you in your growth; show your perseverance to continue
- Why do you want to do what you say you want to do
- What makes you qualified to follow this path – show your potential and long-term goal
- Why are you applying to that particular program/school

General Sequence

- Your goals – degree, field, specialty (if known at this time)
- Why are you pursuing an advanced degree – what event(s) brought you to this point and what are your qualifications
- Why are you applying to this particular school – what are its strengths and how will this help you achieve your goals
- Conclusion – a few sentences to wrap up, showing how graduate school will help you reach your career goals

Length

- Follow the application instructions

- Not too long, not too short

Style

- Clear and simple (no need for big words)
- Concise (present only necessary detail to get your information across)
- No repetition
- Make sure it flows
- Check spelling, grammar and word usage, for example:

“Eye halve a spell checker, It came with my pea sea,
It plainly marques four my revue, Miss steaks eye kin knot sea.

Eye strike a key and type a word, And weight four it two say
Weather eye am wrong oar write, It shows me strait a weigh.

As soon as a mist ache is maid, It nose bee fore two long
And eye can put the air or rite, Its rare lea ever wrong.

Eye have run this poem threw it, I am shore your pleased two no its
letter perfect awl the weigh, My checker tolled me sew.”

Financial Aid

Why should you bother to apply for an extramural individual predoctoral fellowship if you do not have to, particularly, prior to matriculation?

- The prestige of winning a competitive grant
- Shows initiative
- Shows that you are a go-getter who knows what to do
- Alleviates the financial burden to the program
- Increases your competitiveness

There are some questions that you should ask about a fellowship package, not only from the school, but also for any individual fellowship from other funding agencies.

- Extramural vs. Intramural
- Is there help in preparing a grant proposal?
- What is available and how is it awarded?
- Are there payback/teaching obligations?
- Are all fellowships full/partial?
- How are fellowship renewed each year?
- Is the fellowship enough to live on?
- Are there opportunities to supplement the financial aid packet?
- Are there opportunities and help to apply or special individual competitive fellowships?
- What are the extramural funding sources in your field of interest?

Borrowed From:

Bosch, G. C. Gestner Sloan-Kettering Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences. *Getting in to graduate school: a guide for the undergraduate students.* gradstudies@sloankettering.edu