



**Palm Beach
Atlantic**
UNIVERSITY
Career Development

HOW TO GUIDE

*Applying to
Graduate Programs*

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION TIMELINE

Freshman & Sophomore Years

As you are beginning to think about applying to graduate programs this is the time to also begin thinking about the following:

- ❑ Get involved on campus – e.g., research, student clubs and organizations, student leadership positions, intentional volunteerism/community service, jobs and internships connected to your area of study or career path.
- ❑ Connect with your faculty advisor and professors. These are the individuals who will likely be writing your recommendations for graduate school. Developing these relationships is crucial for when you make the ask.

Junior Year

- ❑ Begin researching programs. Think about what your career goal is and discover which degrees/programs will help you attain your goal.
- ❑ Utilize your resources! Come into the Career Development office to discuss your career goals and how graduate school fits into them. Talk to your professors and find out their recommendations.
- ❑ Talk to professors/professionals in your field of interest. Ask them about their career journey. What degree(s) did they get? Would they recommend getting the same degree? What were the steps they recommend taking to reach where you want to be?
- ❑ Research schools. Begin looking for graduate schools with programs that will help you achieve your goal. Make sure you consider all the different factors (cost, location, fieldwork, etc.). The “Researching Graduate Schools” chart in the Appendix can help you brainstorm all the factors you should consider and then it helps you weigh all the pros and cons!
- ❑ Narrow down your list to a manageable size. This part can be tough but try to get it down to 3-5 potential schools. This will not only make the application process easier by reducing the number of applications you have to complete, but it will also enable you to research and know more about the programs that your background and desired future fits with the best.
- ❑ Figure out which entrance exam(s), if any, you will need to take. Check registration dates and register if needed.
- ❑ Begin studying for exams and completing practice tests for the specific exam you will be taking.
- ❑ Start thinking about whom you will ask for letters of recommendation.

Summer Between Junior and Senior Year

- ❑ Contact the schools that you are interested in. Information is power, so reach out to the graduate school office, the academic department, and the financial aid office to collect all the necessary information (applications, academic calendar, current faculty lists, etc.).
- ❑ Take any necessary entrance exams (GRE, LSAT, MCAT, etc.).
- ❑ Begin writing application essays and/or your personal statement.
- ❑ Begin updating/revising your resume.
- ❑ Make a list of deadlines (admission, housing, financial aid). You can make a spreadsheet. Add it to your calendar. Set notifications on your phone. Whatever it takes to get it in on time!
- ❑ Visit the campus. See how you like the school culture, the campus facilities, the surrounding area, etc.

Fall of Senior Year

- Request letters of recommendation *early*. Pro tip: Send an email along with your resume and a due date. We recommend you state the date prior to when you need to submit your application. Build in buffer time.
- Re-write and finalize your application essay/personal statement. Take your essay to AWE (writing center), the Career Development Office, and/or your faculty advisor to get feedback and ideas for improvements, while also ensuring it is error-free.
- Re-take standardized application tests if needed. Order the scores to be sent to your chosen schools.
- Order official transcript (if needed).
- File the FAFSA for graduate school financial aid.
- Complete and send applications!

Spring of Senior Year

- Double-check that the schools you applied to have received all the required information.
- Attend any necessary interviews or auditions.
- Send thank-you notes to anyone who wrote you a recommendation letter.
- Wait patiently for schools to notify you regarding your acceptance.
- Once you choose your graduate school, notify the schools that you will not be attending.
- Take note of any upcoming summer dates for new student orientation and registration.
- Arrange a campus visit. Talk with faculty and current students. If possible, arrange to sit in on classes.
- Start researching and applying to available scholarships and grants.
- Secure housing plans.
- Share your good news with advisors, professors and faculty that have been involved in the process!

DECIDING IF GRADUATE SCHOOL IS THE NEXT STEP FOR YOU

Is graduate school your next step? There is no doubt that a graduate degree can immensely benefit your career, or even be required for it. But, before you begin the process of writing personal statements and taking your GRE's, take a step back and ask yourself if this is the right step for you right now.

Statistics support the idea that graduate school will boost your salary and your chances of employment, but it's important to look beyond these potential benefits to really figure out if graduate school is a worthwhile investment for your career. A graduate degree takes a lot of time, energy, and money! Depending on the degree you are seeking, graduate school can take from two to seven years. When you decide to go to grad school, it is basically going to be your 20's [the entire decade where your friends are making money and buying homes]. Are you okay with that? If you have a clear end goal in mind, this sacrifice will likely be worth it to you. But it's a good idea to ask yourself *why* you want to go to graduate school and how this degree will help you before making a commitment.

Pro Tip from Dr. Stice

Should you go to graduate school? "It depends. If you love your subject and can't imagine not spending the next few years following your curiosity and going deep into the field, it may be right for you. If you need a master's degree to get the job you want or to be promoted, it probably makes sense. But if you are considering a PhD, you need to remember that there is no guarantee of a job at the other end. That's right, many people get PhDs in the humanities and then end up working in radically different fields, and you may just end up starting a regular entry level position many years later than your friends. Wanting to be a professor or not being sure what to do next are not sufficient reasons for going to graduate school.

WHEN TO GO

There is no absolute guideline about when to go to graduate school. Speak with your faculty, advisor, and with people currently pursuing programs of interest to you. Individuals will share their best advice, and it is just that—advice; ultimately, the decision belongs to you.

There are pros and cons to both immediate and delayed entry. Some advise going immediately after earning your bachelor's degree because faculty are more likely to remember your achievements for recommendations. You are also in the habit of researching, writing academic papers, and studying. Some lose the ambition and drive to pursue further education if they delay applying.

On the other hand, for some, delaying applying and attending is in their best interest. Allowing for additional time to study for entrance exams and earning higher scores is of importance. For others, gaining some valuable life and work experience gives them more knowledge on which to base their graduate studies. Below are some questions you can ask yourself to help determine the best timing for you. One piece of advice we offer is not to allow fear to drive your decision making.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE DECIDING ON GRADUATE SCHOOL

- **Why** do I want to go to grad school?
- What do I want to do in my lifetime? (List out specific short- and long-term professional goals)
- Is graduate school necessary to achieve those goals?
- If graduate school is not a requirement for my specific goals, what are the long-term benefits it will grant me? (Higher salary? More opportunities? Make me more competitive? etc.)
- How probable is it that I will change course after spending some years working?

- Do I want to specialize in an area of study?
- Is there a particular faculty member I want to study under at a particular institution? (Balance this with the fact that faculty may not always be there.)
- Do I have the interest and ability to be successful in graduate school?
- Am I willing to invest more time and more money in another academic program?
- Am I willing to potentially go into debt to get this degree?
- Will I get a positive return on my investment (ROI)? (Weigh all the costs of graduate school and estimate how likely/how long it will take to receive a return on your investment financially.)
- Am I simply delaying career decision-making? (This is not a good enough reason!)

WHERE SHOULD YOU APPLY? OR WHICH SCHOOLS SHOULD YOU APPLY TO?

Once you have determined that graduate school is the right next step for you, it is time to think about which schools you might apply to. A useful site to help you sort through the various programs you could apply to is <https://www.gradschools.com/>. The site allows users to search by subject matter and/or location.

Pro Tip, Dr. Carl Miller

Generally, institutions tend to hire faculty who align with a given philosophy or did their academic studies/research under particular leadership. Keeping the end in mind, if you know where you would want to teach, consider earning your Ph.D. at the schools where they hire most frequently from.

If your goal is to publish and present, then you must be able to do it as a graduate school student. What kind of support is there for students for travel, research, summer stipends, etc.?

Getting in touch with the graduate program ahead of time and connecting with faculty is important. This can be tricky. Having a relationship with someone in the program can help you know how to avoid landmines and receive tips on the best applications.

Pro Tip, Dr. Elizabeth Stice

Graduate school is very different from undergraduate. When you came to PBA, you looked at schools overall and thought about things like cost, reputation, and what it felt like when you visited. When you apply to graduate school, the main (almost only) thing to consider is the program you are applying to within that school. There's no point in going to a big name [university] if they don't have a solid program in whatever it is you want to study (history, literature, philosophy, politics, etc.). You are also picking programs based on who the faculty are. Working with the right people is very important.

Deciding which schools/programs to apply to.

Research, research, research! In addition to the two professors' tips above, knowing about the faculty in charge of a program can help you figure out what the program emphasizes (look at their research/publications) and will show you if their interests align with your desired specialty.

It may feel like you are wasting time, but you will end up wasting more time (and money) if you don't take the time to investigate if a program is a good fit prior to sending out an application. Most schools have websites for the graduate side of their departments and a lot of times they have dedicated graduate coordinators to help answer your basic questions. If you need help narrowing down your list, flip to the appendix in this guide and fill out the "Researching Graduate Schools" chart. Taking all these aspects into consideration, are there any programs that you can rule out? Once you've looked at all the different aspects of the schools you're

considering, use the “Which Graduate School is More Me” exercise which will allow you to evaluate graduate programs both logically/objectively and values/emotionally/subjectively.

Things To Consider:

Accredited vs. Non-Accredited Schools - When researching graduate schools, make sure you learn whether the program is accredited. Think about the career you want to pursue after a degree

- Does the accreditation of the program matter?
- Will it affect your validity in the field? Some areas of study (i.e., psychology, medical school, architecture) necessitate going to a school that has been nationally accredited.

The school - What is the school’s and program’s reputation? Does their name carry weight in the field you want to pursue? Are there advising relationships available to you?

The program - Does it have the program you want? How long does it usually take to complete the degree you are pursuing? What percentage of students finish their degree? What is the average class size? What are the program’s objectives and values? How does the program teach (lecture-style or hands-on learning)? Are online classes available? What is the culture of the program? Will you write a thesis?

School Location - Where do you want to live (city, suburbs, rural)? What size school do you want to attend? How far do you want to be from your support system (family, friends, etc.)? Does the weather/climate where the school is located matter to you? Do you prefer public or private schools? Do you want to go to a faith-based school? If you need any educational accommodations, does the program make those accommodations? What is the culture on campus? What are your housing options? Is there a social scene?

Faculty - How accessible are professors? What are their research interests, and do they match yours? What have they specialized in? How could they assist you in reaching my career goals? How many students are there per faculty member?

Research - Is it a research-focused program? What kind of research opportunities are there? What kind of facilities/equipment does the school have available to you? What kind of research have past students done? What research/publications have faculty made? Is there any research funding available?

Requirements - When is the admissions deadline? What are the program requirements to apply (standardized test scores, essay, interview, audition, etc.)? What score do you need on any test you have to take? What is the program’s acceptance rate?

Finances/Funding - What is the cost? What types of scholarships/financial aid is offered? Are there any assistantships available? What is the average cost of living in the area? What job opportunities are there in the area?

Alumni - What jobs do alumni have after receiving their degrees? Are there any networking opportunities with alumni? If you get the opportunity to talk to an alumnus, do they suggest the program? What are the advantages it gave them in their field?

Attrition rate: Do all of their students graduate? If students leave, how many do and why?

I want to be a college professor - Look at the schools you would like to teach at; what institutions did their younger faculty earn their degrees at? Look for the pattern. If your goal is publishing and presenting, then you must be able to do it as a graduate school student. What kind of support is there for students for travel, research, summer stipends, etc.?

Pro Tip, Dr. Carl Miller

Get in touch with the graduate program ahead of time and start connecting with faculty. This can be tricky but having a relationship with someone in the program can help you know how to avoid landmines. They may also give you some insider tips that will help you submit the best application possible.

Pro Tip, Nicole Frieree, PBA Alumna

Think of this as a 40-year career decision. Make sure you go to a program you want to be at and meets your career goals. That may mean you take a year off if you do not get into the schools which would be best for your career. It might seem difficult to take a year off, but a year is just a small blip in time.

As Nicole suggests, delaying graduate school may seem like forever, when taken in the full context of a career that will last 40+ years, one year may not be that big a deal. And if in that you make the most of your time, you are setting yourself up for greater success. Here are some suggested activities you could do in that year-long sabbatical:

- Take some additional classes/course to get your GPA up
- Invest time in studying for standardized entrance exams
- Get a job or internship in a field related to your area of study – it will boost your resume content
- Conduct some of your own research
- Volunteer in an area connected to your intended area of study

Now that you have determined graduate school is your next step, let's move on to the actual application process.

Helpful Resources:

- Gradschools.com -- Schools by subject and type
- USNews.com/education -- Rankings of schools
- Topuniversities.com -- Worldwide graduate programs
- Cur.org -- Registry for undergraduate researchers

HOW MANY SCHOOLS SHOULD I APPLY TO?

This is a great question to ask your faculty advisor. We recommend you apply to several schools and select by the following categories: “reach,” “middle of the pack,” and “safety” schools. You will also want to take into consideration the cost of applying to each school, which includes the application fee, standardized tests, along with sending test score reports. While the ideal number of schools varies for each individual, a manageable range is between five to 10 schools. One exception to this is medical school applications. It is not uncommon for applicants to apply to upwards of 20 schools.

THE GRAD SCHOOL APPLICATION PROCESS

Below in bulleted form are the steps in the application process. Each step will be explained in full on the following pages.

- Application Form
- Application Fees
- Entrance Exams & Test Scores
- Transcripts
- Letters of Recommendation
- Statement of Purpose / Entrance Essay
- Resume / CV
- Interviews / Auditions

This process will likely be similar to the process of applying to PBA, but it should not be taken lightly. The main difference between applying to an undergraduate program and graduate school is the focus on the purpose statement and letters of recommendation. Dr. Craig Hanson, director of PBA's Master of Global Development program, advises that **there is not any one "litmus test" item that will guarantee admission** (not the GRE, GPA, writing sample, statement of purpose, etc.). All the elements of your application are important, but none of them are going to make the decision for the admissions committee; however, **the statement of purpose and the letters of recommendation are often a key part of your application**. For graduate school, your statement of purpose will focus on your readiness and interest in a specific field of study.

If you are applying to competitive programs where the number of applicants far exceeds the spots available, test scores and GPA may be more important. Many of these competitive programs have a de facto policy of refusing admission of an applicant whose GRE scores (or GPA) are below a certain threshold.

While this section will give you a basic overview of the graduate school application process, the actual process for programs in different fields may vary. The admissions practices in the humanities, the sciences, and professional programs (business/medical/industrial) are all quite different. The humanities and sciences tend to have a fall application and a spring decision timeline. While professional programs often do not. Use this guide as a starting point, then continue to research what your own specific application process will look like. The good news is that our professors have noted how PBA successfully gets our students into graduate at a much higher rate than the typical university. For example, the national average for acceptance into graduate programs in philosophy is 2%, but PBA's philosophy department has a 100% acceptance-with-money rate. Your professors, your advisors, and the office of Career Development are all rooting for your success, so make sure you use them as resources throughout this process.

APPLICATION FORM

- Read the instructions! Follow the instructions carefully and give them all the information they are asking for. Also, pay attention to all the application requirements and make sure you fulfil them all.
- Ask for help—have one or more people check your application for errors before you send it in the mail/submit it online.
- If it is an online application, make sure to continually save it so you do not accidentally lose any progress.
- Some universities (including all schools within the public California state system) will require two separate applications, an application to the university and to the specific "school" or program within the university.

- Note all deadlines and make sure you get everything submitted on time (deadlines may vary between the university as a whole and the actual program).
- Be sure to save evidence of submission of your application for your own records.

APPLICATION FEES

Application fees can range from \$25-\$150 and they are usually non-refundable. Be sure to follow instructions for paying the fee; depending on the type of school, you may be asked to pay the fee to the general university or to the specific program. However, if you have proof of financial hardship, many schools will reduce or waive the fee. If you decide to ask for a fee waiver, be prepared to show tax statements to prove your need.

ENTRANCE EXAMS & TEST SCORES

GRE. LSAT. MCAT. PCAT. Don't let those scary-sounding acronyms get the best of you! Planning in advance and studying hard will help you conquer the dreaded standardized test(s). Contact the programs you are applying to and find out what test(s) are required. When you contact them, also find out the required score for the program and the average scores of accepted students so you will have an idea of what score range you are aiming for. Once you know what tests you must take, research when the test is offered and figure out when you should plan to take it. Aim to take it earlier rather than later. You should give yourself enough time before the test to properly study, but also leave yourself enough time afterwards to retake the test more than once in case you want to improve your scores.

Types of Required Standardized Entrance Exams

- Graduate Record Examination (GRE) - <https://www.ets.org/gre>
- GRE Subject Tests - <https://www.ets.org/gre/subject/about>
- Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) - <https://www.mba.com/exams/gmat>
- Law School Admission Test (LSAT) - <https://www.lsac.org/lSAT>
- Medicinal College Admission Test (MCAT) - <https://students-residents.aamc.org/taking-mcat-exam/taking-mcat-exam>
- Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) - <https://www.ets.org/toefl/test-takers/ibt/why>
- Fundamentals of Engineering (FE) - <https://ncees.org/engineering/fe/>
- Dental Aptitude Test (DAT) - <https://www.ada.org/education/testing/exams/dental-admission-test-dat>
- Veterinary Aptitude Test (VAT)
- Optometry Admission Test (OAT) <https://oat.ada.org/en/apply-to-take-the-oat>
- Pharmacy College Admission Test (PCAT) - <https://www.pearsonassessments.com/graduate-admissions/pcat/about.html>

Prometric.com is an online tool to find where you can take the entrance exam you need for your application.

Test Preparation

Since standardized test scores, along with your GPA (to a degree), are the only quantitative factors that admission boards can look at to evaluate your potential success, they are often a key part of your application. Test scores (especially if you are applying to competitive programs) can make a significant difference in what schools you are admitted to and what financial packages you will be offered (if any). Even if you are typically a good test taker, don't underestimate these tests. Standardized entrance tests are not like the hundreds of other tests you've taken throughout college; an impressive score on a graduate school entrance exam is difficult without significant preparation.

These tests tend to be expensive, so you want to do as well as possible the first time around. Understanding the structure of the test you are taking and studying the concepts and skills sets it will evaluate are essential to doing well on any standardized test, so you should do some sort of test prep. You could purchase test prep books (Princeton Review, Kaplan Review, etc.), use online resources, hire a tutor, and/or join a study group.

Free/Low-Cost Test Prep for the GRE

- **ETS:** <https://www.ets.org/gre/revise/general/prepare>
- **Manhattan Prep:** <https://www.manhattanprep.com/gre/> - Free GRE Starter Kit (full length practice test, GRE flashcards, Study plan guides), offer free online prep events + helpful paid resources
- **Mygretutor.com** - *free detailed study guides, free practice questions with real time feedback* – <https://www.Mygretutor.com>

Paid Test Prep

For some individuals an investment of not only time but finances in a study course have improved scores. Talk to others who have taken the same entrance exam, talk to your faculty, and do your due diligence in researching the test prep businesses. You know yourself and what will be most helpful to you in order to get your best scores possible. Below are some links to popular paid test prep courses.

- **Kaplan** - <https://www.kaptest.com/gre>
- **Magoosh** - <https://www.gree.magoosh.com>
- **Princeton Review** - <https://www.princetonreview.com/grad/gre-test-prep>
- **Peterson** - affordable paid study resource for a range of different entrance exams - <https://www.petersons.com/testprep/product-category/grad-school-test-prep/#>

Prep for Specific Exam Sites

- **MCAT (Medical College Admission Test)** - <https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/taking-mcat-exam/prepare-mcat-exam/>
- **GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test)**
 - **Official GMAT site** - <https://www.mba.com/exams/gmat>
 - **Online MBA Review** - overview of the GMAT - <https://onlinembareview.org/resources/online-mba-gmat-guide/>
- **Official LSAT (Law School Admission Test) site** - <https://www.lsac.org/>

What if My Scores Aren't Great?

If your first test does not go the way you hoped, you can retake it; it will not hurt your application. In fact, it is more likely to show the university that you are working hard to improve. Taking a test more than three times, however, will often do more harm than good, as it can make you look unprepared to an admissions board. If you don't get the score you were hoping for and must submit low scores, it's not necessarily going to crush your chances of getting accepted. Admissions boards understand that not everyone is good at standardized test-taking, so a good GPA and great recommendations can often offset this weakness in your application.

Some Tips for Approaching Standardized Entrance Tests

1. Start Early! Create a study timeline and stick to it so you are fully prepared when the test date comes.
2. Find out what knowledge the test assumes you have. Make sure you are familiar with those concepts and don't be afraid to go back to the basics (even if that means you must go back and review the basics of high school math).
1. Look at how the test is structured. Make a game plan for how you will approach it within the time limit. Know how the test will be scored.
2. The best way to do well will be by taking practice tests and analyzing your performance on them. So, figure out your target score, then take a practice test to measure your strengths and weaknesses. Then create your study plan.
3. The next step is to create a study timeline and stick to it. The key here is making a timeline that is realistic for your abilities and the time you need to invest in studying.
4. Ask around. Chances are you know someone that has taken the test you are studying for, so ask for their best test-taking tips and learn how they prepared for test day.
5. Study hard! Most professionals recommend spending 8-12 weeks (about 3 months) pouring over practice books before testing.

Preparing for the GRE (Graduate Record Examination)

The GRE is the most used entrance exam. If you are not going into a highly specialized area (like Law or Medicine) this is likely the test you will need to take. It has three sections: verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and analytical writing. Unlike the standardized tests you took in high school, the GRE is taken on the computer. Additionally, the verbal and quantitative reasoning sections are a computer-adapted test. This means that if you are doing well on the test, the questions will get harder, making adaptability a key skill to doing well.

Unless specified, most programs will require you to take the GRE General test. GRE also offers subject tests which measure mastery and basic comprehension to graduate studies in these major fields: Biochemistry, Literature in English, Cell and Molecular Biology, Computer Science, Physics, Psychology, Math, Chemistry.

Studying for the GRE

1. Go back to the skills you learned in high school (especially in math). Many of the mathematical questions on the GRE are related to the algebra and geometry you learned years ago.
2. Read! Reading frequently can go a long way in making sure your comprehension and vocabulary are up to par.
3. The GRE was redesigned in 2011 so if you are buying any used study guides, make sure they were printed after the test was revised.
4. Give yourself plenty of time to refresh your skill sets and review materials.
5. Pretend you're taking the test and see how you do under exam conditions. The GRE is 4 hours long with a few short breaks so make sure you have the endurance to perform under these conditions.
6. There are tons of free practice tests out there, so take a lot of them!
7. Use ETS practice tests as bookends. ETS is the company that creates the GRE, and they offer two practice tests online. Take one before you begin studying to measure where you are, then take the other one just before the GRE to see how far you've come.

8. Be confident on test day, even if you must fake it till you make it! Arrive early, remember all the training you've done, stay calm and then crush it!
9. Did you finish the test, and you know you didn't do as well as you hoped? You can cancel your scores before they're sent out to schools. The GRE can be retaken each month, up to 5 times per year.
10. Need to improve your scores? Analyze what mistakes you made the first time around and come up with strategies to keep that from happening. If you struggled with math, make a list of the concepts and equations you struggled with. If you struggled with vocabulary, come up with a list of words you've seen on GRE exams/practice test and memorize them.

TRANSCRIPTS

All transcripts must be official; that is, sent directly to the admissions office and directly from the registrar's office. Many schools require more than one copy of an official transcript from every college you have attended. Some programs will allow you to send "unofficial" copies, which means you can print them yourself or download them from my.PBA. Transcripts are used to verify if you have completed all the required prerequisites and to verify GPA. Official transcripts bear the University seal and the Registrar's signature. They are typically produced on either security paper and presented in a sealed envelope or they are secure, digitally signed in a PDF.

To request your official transcripts from PBA go to the [National Student Clearinghouse](#) (NSC) to order them via the internet. Be sure to allow yourself enough time for your transcripts to be sent to your schools of choice.

Transcripts are not processed if the student has outstanding obligations to the university. PBA students may walk-in and request official transcripts from the office of the Registrar and are processed for a fee of \$15 per transcript.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

An excellent recommendation letter can set you apart from other applicants. These can be especially powerful and helpful if you have a lower GPA or standardized test score. Asking for a recommendation can feel awkward but asking in the right way can lead to a powerful letter.

Before the Ask – Read the Directions

While most schools ask for 2 to 3 letters of recommendation, each school has their own requirements when it comes to what and how they want them. Some will ask for academic recommendations, others for supervisor recommendations. Some will require a letter typed on institutional letterhead, others provide an online form with evaluation scales and text boxes for typed answers. Follow their instructions precisely.

Who to Ask

Choose a recommender who knows you well and can confidently be an advocate of your character and your work. This is a good reminder for those who are first-year students, sophomores, or juniors to maintain your relationship with faculty whom you may one day want to ask a recommendation from.

When to Ask

Ask for your letters at least one month in advance of when you need to recommendation. Be sure to follow up with those you asked a minimum of two weeks prior to their due date. This is necessary to ensure that all of your application materials reach the admissions committee on time.

How to Ask

- If you are within 50 miles of your recommender, always ask them in person and explain to them why you think they are a good person to write it for you.
- If you don't know the recommender well, or it has been a few years since your last contact with them, remind him/her of your connection to them. Which classes did you take with this professor? When? Was there any student work you're especially proud of? Do any of your extracurricular activities especially relate to what you're applying for?
- Let the individual know if there is anything you think (or know) they should mention in their letter. This should be brief, but it's immensely helpful. Depending on what you're applying for, it may be relevant to share details from your application (as you do with the Fulbright) or why you want to pursue the opportunity you're applying for (graduate school, a job). If the recommender understands your passion for the opportunity and the reasons you think you're a great fit, they'll be able to craft a much more detailed and persuasive letter for you.

Information to Provide Your Recommender

Provide the following information to the person you are requesting the recommendation from.

- ✓ Information on the program and why you are applying
- ✓ The name, title, and contact information of the person the letter will be addressed to
- ✓ Specific skills and qualifications (academic, work or volunteer) you would like the recommender to address in their recommendation
- ✓ Your Resume/CV
- ✓ URL to the recommendation site, email of where to send it to, or a Self-addressed stamped envelope (which you fill out and provide)
- ✓ The deadline or date by which you need the letter or online recommendation to be submitted by
- ✓ The exact format the recommendation needs to be in

After the Ask

Send a thank you note to your recommenders! This is a courtesy they are doing for you, and a thank you is a courtesy you can offer back.

But what do you do if the application is due in three days and your letter of recommendation has not been submitted yet by the individual you asked? Come up with a non-confrontational way to remind them about your needed recommendation. For example, you could email them: "Dear X, I am finishing up my application for Y. I wanted to check in and make sure there is nothing else you need from me to help with the recommendation letter." Remember that the recommender is doing you a favor.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE/PERSONAL STATEMENT/ENTRANCE ESSAY

Your essay serves several purposes:

- Provides a writing sample
- Demonstrates your interest and personal objectives/future goals in a career field
- Describes who you are and why you are ready to pursue further study
- States why you are interested in attending a particular school or program

Be sure to thoroughly read the writing prompt and answer each part of what the personal statement is asking for, while also staying within the page and word count limitations.

The following section, “Writing a Good Personal Statement” is from Dr. Lisa Marzano, English professor at Belmont Abbey, and former director of PBA’s Center for Writing Excellence. Dr. Marzano is a skilled writer and has provided valuable edits and support to students writing personal statements for graduate admissions.

Writing a Good Personal Statement

The first step to writing a good personal statement is knowing what admission committees use the personal statement for. The purpose of the personal statement is exactly what it sounds like; it is to show who you are as a person. The rest of the application will communicate your accomplishments and the quantifiable reasons you would make a great graduate student; on the other hand, the personal statement gives an admission committee the opportunity to know the more personal side of your reasons for applying to graduate school. Your GPA or your GRE score might show you are a good student, but they don’t indicate why you chose this field of study or what will keep you motivated throughout the difficult parts of furthered education.

Additionally, the program will be investing in you, not only as a scholar, but also as a person. Upon your acceptance, they would spend the next few years working alongside you, so it’s important to them for you to be a good person, just as much as it’s important that you are a good student. They’ve seen your accomplishments, **so use the personal statement to show them your values, your strengths, and if appropriate, address any weaknesses in your application** (i.e., low GPA, low GRE score, a disconnect between your undergraduate studies and their graduate program, etc.)

Below are steps to follow when writing your personal statement.

Step 1: This is the easy part—follow directions. Answer every question they ask in the word-count/word-limit that they give.

Step 2: If you are applying to multiple programs, the application essay prompts may feel similar. However, each application essay you write should be unique. Just like your resume should highlight different experiences/skill sets for each job you apply to; the personal statement should reflect the values and emphasis of the specific program you are applying to. Why do you want to go to that school? Who do you want to work with? What skills does the program emphasize? Show the admission committee that you’ve done your research. Show them how you are familiar and invested in their specific program, then use this knowledge to tell them specifically what work you want to do in (and after) graduate school.

Step 3: Write in active voice, not passive. Write in a tone that is formal, not conversational. And above all, write it not only as a narrative, but as a persuasive piece. Your job is to show the reader how you are a great fit for the values of their program.

Step 4: Start with something catchy and avoid cliches. E.g., “Ever since I was a child, I wanted to ...”, “I’ve always loved helping people.” Yawn! Show them you are an original, creative scholar that they’d be lucky to have.

Step 5: Emphasize your strengths—don’t be too shy (but don’t wander into arrogance either).

Step 6: Be true to yourself. Your personal statement should focus on who you are and what is important to you. Don’t write something that is not representative of you just to get into a particular program. Falsely appearing to be a perfect fit will help no one in the long run.

Step 7: Keep it short. An efficient essay that communicates your point will be better than a scrawling script. Meet the word requirement, of course, but explain why you’re a great fit with the efficiency and the focus you would have in a 30-second elevator pitch.

Step 8: Every paragraph should work together to tell the same story. They can have a different emphasis, but they should all point to what motivates you.

Step 9: Keep the language simple; you don't have to go out of your way to use big words.

Step 10: Show, don't tell! Quantify your accomplishments as much as possible. Use numbers, identify results, and give them specific details to understand what you've accomplished.

Step 11: Make use of the resources available to you. Ask for writing advice from your professors and advisors, as well as from other people who were recently accepted into graduate school. Take your essay to Academic Writing Excellence or the Career Development office. Get your friends and family to read over your statement(s). Just one grammatical or spelling error can give the admissions committee the wrong idea of your communication abilities and your investment in their program, so proofread extremely carefully and get as many eyes on your work as possible to ensure no mistakes slip through.

<https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-best-way-to-start-your-statement-of-purpose> infographic

RESUME / CV

Not every school requires you to submit a resume or a CV, but if they do, know that resumes and academic CVs are not interchangeable. An academic CV showcases your academic achievements, including many of the following:

- Degrees earned (not including your high school diploma)

Certifications, licenses, advanced training

- Thesis, research, projects
- Professional organization memberships
- Publications, presentations
- Academic conference attendance
- Volunteer experiences
- Work experience
- Activities, interest, leadership involvement

CV's also differ from resumes in that they may be longer than one-page and should showcase all of your academic experiences.

This guide will give you some tips on crafting a resume to get you into the grad school of your dreams, but don't be shy—come into the Career Development office (located on the first floor of the Lassiter Student Center) to get help, ask questions, or just get a second pair of eyes to make sure your resume/CV is application ready. Below are some general tips.

Highlight: Make sure you highlight any requirements of the program. For example, if the program requires a certain GPA and a specific major, the fact that you meet these requirements should be emphasized by being made obvious in your document. Bring it to the top of your resume, make it **bold**, *italicize*, or do whatever looks best that also ensures they are unable to glance over it.

Be concise: you might be able to fill 2 pages if you've had a lot of applicable experience. However, if you're just giving them extraneous information, keep it to one page.

Format of Education Section: As a student, your Education section should be near the top of your resume, right under your name and contact information. Unlike a work resume—where you may only devote a line or two to your education—a resume for graduate school may include more information. You could include: your GPA, the title of your undergraduate thesis (if you completed one), research you’ve completed, international study, conferences, publications, awards or honors you received, relevant classes you’ve taken, or anything else you feel may be important to the program you are applying for.

Relevant Coursework: This is not required by any means, but you have the option to include an Academic Experience or Course Highlights section. This may be a good idea if there are two or three upper-level courses that are particularly relevant to the program you’re applying for. Format it in the same way you did your Work Experience section, providing the title of the courses and describing the hands-on experiences or in-depth study you engaged in during those courses.

Experience Section: This section should be ordered reverse-chronologically with your most recent position at the top. If there are applicable experiences you want to highlight, you may consider organizing your experiences by category (e.g., Research Experience, Teaching Experience, etc.) to bring the most relevant experiences to the top of your resume. For example, if you did an internship in your desired field one year ago but your most recent job was as a secretary, you may separate your experience into Internship Experience and Work Experience.

Make sure each experience lists the following information:

EMPLOYER/ORGANIZATION NAME, City, ST of employer/organization

Position/Title, Dates of employment/involvement

- Bulleted lists of accomplishments
- Use action verb to start each bullet and have a minimum of two bullets per experience

For a graduate school resume especially, you may want to indicate the amount of time (per week or per month) that you’ve committed to various experiences. Showing that you took a full course load and worked 15 hours a week demonstrates to the admissions committee that you are good at time/priority management, and you can juggle multiple tasks without getting burnt out.

Tips for Creating Powerful Accomplishment-based Bullets for Your Experience Section

- Write accomplishment statements as opposed to mere job descriptions
- Begin with past tense verbs (e.g., managed, administered, created)
- Do not use first person phrases such as “My responsibilities included,” or “My duties were. . . .”
- Highlight your contributions (e.g., Volunteered as interim pastor, served congregation of 300 with 3 services a week)
- For jobs where most people know what the job entails (e.g., server, cashier, etc.) How was your role different from others?
- Quantify wherever you can: how many (#), how much (\$), or by what percent (%). This helps add context.
- Ask yourself what you are most proud of accomplishing or doing in that experience; remember that it isn’t as much what you did, rather it is how you did it – your unique contribution and style.
- Show don’t tell. Provide details.

Examples of Powerful Bullets

- Poor: Waited Tables
- Better: Served over 30 patrons in a three-hour shift, earning an average of 25% in tips per table.

- Poor: Provided research assistance to professor.
- Better: Collaborated with five students to formulate a topic, conducted 40 literature reviews (personally reviewed 20), and developed a comprehensive survey of 73 questions with a goal of collecting 250 responses, and presented at the APA National Convention 2022. (Cambria Davis, PBA 2022)

Activities/Interest Section (Optional Section): In this section you may list clubs, organizations, volunteer work, or activities in which you participated. These are activities that you find important but don't require a dedicated set of lines. You can summarize them in just one line.

Examples:

- Psychology Club, member, 2011-2014
- Conference Attendee, American Enterprise Institute Summer Values and Capitalism, 2019
- Interests: running, traveling, design and the History Channel

Additional Tips & Sections:

- Remove objective statements. Consider instead adding a profile statement below your name and contact information. This is a short paragraph written in third person describing your skills, characteristics, values, and qualifications.
- Remove references (or "references upon request") on your resume. Instead, you may have a separate references page.
- Additional sections you might consider adding - could be publications, presentations, certifications & licenses, research.

INTERVIEWS & AUDITIONS

Congratulations! If you've been asked to complete an interview, it's because you've made it on the short-list of applicants. The admissions committee already thinks that you are awesome on-paper, so the interview is for them to get a sense of who you are as a person. The interview will evaluate your interpersonal skills, interest, drive, and will test your ability to think on your feet. They want to make sure you have what it takes to succeed in their program and in the profession, so they may test your maturity, communication skills, motivation, ability to manage stress, creative thinking skills etc.

These interviews typically serve four purposes:

1. They act as a public-relations mechanism.
2. They provide an opportunity for the school to answer candidates' questions.
3. They are an opportunity to recruit the student.
4. They allow for data-gathering.

Notice that three out of four purposes are for you, the student—this is *your* interview too! The schools know that you are likely looking at a different programs, so an interview gives them the opportunity to familiarize you with their campus culture, program, and faculty, which hopefully increases the chances of you picking their program.

Preparing for the Interview

Be informed. Not only will this give you talking points and strengthen your answers, but it will also make you more confident going in. Know about the university. Know about the program. Know about the faculty. Know

about your interviewer(s), if possible. Know your interviewer's area of expertise and their research, even if they aren't in your desired field.

Some facts you may want to research about the school and their program prior to the interview might include:

- the school's/program's 5 most recent publications
- size of the class/cohort for your program
- percentage of minority students/women
- age range of entering students
- academic mission of program
- style of the curriculum (problem-based, research-based, etc.)
- quarter or semester program?
- research opportunities available
- grading system
- academic support services
- student to professor ratio

If you know that you have to decide between schools, consider rating the school during your interview process. Take notes and have a system for comparing your experiences on different campuses. At the end of this guide are documents that will help you rate each program.

Practice your answers to common interview questions. Seriously. Practice these basic questions a lot. Do it in front of the mirror, practice with a friend, come in for a mock interview at the Career Development office. Having answers to the more basic questions refined before going into the interview will make you more confident and comfortable when the time comes. You should have an idea of where you want to go with your answer, but don't make it sound like you are reading from a script. No one likes talking to a robot.

During the Interview

Take a moment: If a question comes up that surprise you, don't be afraid to ask for a minute to think it over, or to buy yourself time to answer say something like, "that is a very thoughtful question; I haven't been asked that before." If anything, your interviewers will respect you more for taking a moment to compose the best answer, opposed to blurting out whatever first comes to your mind.

Always stay engaged: Interview day might be a long, mentally exhausting day. You'll likely become tired of talking about yourself and your research, and you'll just want to retreat to a corner and check out. Don't do this. Take a walk. Take a break. Go into the bathroom and close your eyes for a minute. If a prospective student is seen sitting alone, playing on their phone, it can paint a picture of disinterest. If you cannot keep up with the interview weekend, how are you going to last 5-6 years of graduate school?

After the Interview

Send a handwritten thank you to each person who interviewed you. At the very least, send an email thank you. This means you will want to write down the first and last name of each person you spoke with. Recall something unique to each of your conversations and reference that. These individuals may have interviewed several candidates, so you want to make sure they remember who you are.

AFTER THE ACCEPTANCES - HOW DO YOU CHOOSE?

Congratulations, you've been accepted to multiple programs! Now, where should you go? If you are lucky enough to have this problem, you can return to the value exercise from the appendix ("Which Grad School is More Me"). This exercise helps you quantify the differences between the programs you've been accepted while focusing on the aspects you find most important. Here are a few tips about other things you should consider:

Ranking of the program

Ranking does matter, especially in competitive fields. Going to the highest ranked program you can make you competitive when you are graduated and searching for a job. This is not about the ranking of the school or the university's name recognition, but the actual ranking of the program you've been accepted into. However, even if you got into the most prestigious program in your field, that does not necessarily mean that it is the best program for you; there can be valid reasons to choose a lower-ranked (but still well-ranked) program.

Financial Aid Package

Prestigious programs are frequently accompanied by high tuition; however, they often offer competitive funding. Competitive funding means that after the first few years, some students will be cut. This can create a challenging, cut-throat environment. Different programs may offer varying amounts of secured funding—perhaps one school offers five years of guaranteed funding but less annually than another school which only offers three years of guaranteed funding. You need to know yourself to know what is the best fit.

Who You Will Be Working/Researching With?

The scholar you most want to work with may not be at the most prestigious program. If this is the case, working with that scholar may be worth more than a top-ranking program with a less-than-ideal fit for an advisor. Additionally, sometimes the scholars at the best-ranked schools have less time to spend with graduate students. Reach out to current graduate students to inquire about the level of attention and help they receive from their advisors.

Job Placement & Outcomes

Ask schools about their success in helping graduates transition into the workforce. Where do graduates from their programs tend to get hired by and how quickly? Find out what the average graduation time is and how many people make it to graduation.

WHAT IF I DON'T GET IN?

This is disappointing, but that doesn't mean you have to give up hope. Consider this a gap year and an opportunity to gain some practical experience or set some personal goals. Gap years can include obtaining certifications, travelling, volunteering, researching, interning, or working in an area of professional or personal interest. Additionally, here are a few practical steps that you can take to get where you want to be.

- Apply to a wider range of schools. Talk to admissions representatives to find out what they look for in applicants.
- Study for entrance exams and seek to improve your scores.
- Get a job, internship, and/or volunteer position in your targeted field.
- Make an appointment with the Career Development office to work on improving your resume and statement of purpose.
- Apply again! The candidate pool is different every year, so you may have a better chance if you try again later.

FINANCES – HOW DO I PAY FOR GRAD SCHOOL?

“Graduate school is not your first job, so you're not exactly negotiating your financial package. In most cases, the tuition you are offered is what you can have. For an MA, it is not unusual to pay, but the top students (and the most prestigious programs) will have tuition waived and sometimes have opportunities to become graduate assistants or work in the writing center, etc.

For a PhD, a well-ranked humanities program will not charge you for the pleasure and will provide you some kind of stipend (which will often require working as a teaching assistant, etc.). How do you get a TA gig or tuition waiver? Ask about that process when you apply. But typically applying earlier increases your chances. There may also be some special scholarships at your school, but again, you have to inquire to know. You want as much guaranteed, non-competitive funding as possible. But at the end of the day, you will not be negotiating your offer as much as choosing to accept it or not.” - Dr. Stice

Types of Financial Aid Available

- **Fellowships:** These range in amount and are given to enable a student to study without performing any work or services beyond excellence in his/her study. Research online or ask the Financial Aid office of your graduate school. The US Government offers several competitive fellowship opportunities.
- **Research Assistant/Graduate Assistant/Teaching Assistant:** Many institutions offer RA, GA, and TA opportunities for graduate students. This form of assistance requires the student to work on-campus in return for compensation. Frequently these assistantships are available in areas in student affairs (e.g., residence life, Greek Life), administrative departments on campus, or under academics (classroom teaching, or participating in a research project with faculty). Some may include campus housing and meal plans, others a monthly stipend.
- **Grants-in-Aid:** Grants are generally awarded on the basis of financial need and do not require work. These are especially available for minorities and women in underrepresented areas, including the sciences and engineering.
- **Financial Aid:** Just like when you were an undergrad, you will continue filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). But a few things do change. Firstly, you are now considered “Independent.” As an Independent, your parents’ financial information is no longer needed (except in a few cases with medical school students). This, however, means that subsidized student loans will no longer be available to you. You will have access to unsubsidized federal loans that you can use to pay for graduate school. Unsubsidized loans have a higher interest rate and do not grant any interest rate perks. Federal student loans may not have the lowest interest rank available to you, so shop around and consider private loan options as well. The FAFSA must be submitted after January 1, preceding enrollment in the fall. It must be completed each year for the following year. This is government funding.

FAFSA: www.fafsa.ed.gov

Fin Aid: www.finaid.org

Directory of Graduate Schools Financial Aid: <https://graduateguide.com/resource-category/graduate-financial-aid/>

Another Creative Way to Curb Tuition Fees – Negotiate!

Schools may be competing for you! It does not hurt to negotiate with schools to see who will offer you the most competitive tuition packages. Students have successfully been able to receive higher scholarship amounts and lower tuition by simply indicating that another school is offering a more competitive and affordable package to you. We do not under any circumstances suggest that you lie or embellish the truth, but simply make that ask. Demonstrate why you are worth that investment!