



Career Development

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Preparing for Graduate Studies

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Attending a graduate school is a big step, and the process of application is different from applying to pursue a bachelor's degree. It is a huge commitment – in both time and money – so you need to determine if it is the right choice for you.

Reasons to go to graduate school:

- You know what type of career you want and it requires an advanced degree
- You have a strong interest in a particular field of study and you enjoy working in an academic environment
- You want to change careers into a different field than your undergraduate degree

Reasons not to go to graduate school:

- You want to avoid a full-time job search
- You don't know what type of careers interest you
- Someone else told you to do it (family, friends, professors)

If you do decide to pursue an advanced degree, you'll want to be sure to have all the information you need to successfully get connected to a program.

Research institutions which interest you

- Refer to US News & World Report (rankings edition) and the Peterson's Guides. Speak to professors about their graduate school experience.
- Attend open houses offered by the schools which interest you (if possible).
- If you are following the work of a certain faculty member, either on campus or elsewhere, try to locate him or her and meet for an informational interview of sorts. If faculty member is not local, call or e-mail him or her.
- Use websites such as www.petersons.com and www.gradschools.com to learn about graduate programs.

Take the required Graduate School Admissions Test

- Find out what entrance examinations the schools you are interested in require as part of their admissions requirements and contact Educational Testing Service (609-921-900) or American College Testing (319-337-1000) for the dates and registration deadlines you need.
- Participate in the practice entrance exams offered on-campus twice a year.
- Enough time must be allowed so that the exam can be taken again if you are disappointed with the score received.
- Some examinations such as the GRE can be taken by computer at any time, with certain time restrictions between examinations.
- The key is to plan ahead relative to application deadlines to both the institution and to the department to which you desire acceptance.

Request applications

- Once you have narrowed your choices to a manageable number, contact these schools by mail, phone or internet.
- Look over their materials, find out what is required, and decide what personal criteria of yours must be met. Come to firm conclusions about size, location, reputation, requirements of the program, etc., and whenever possible, visit your top choices. Try to obtain an on-campus interview. "Fit" is as important as ever, and you need to feel certain that this school meets your requirements.

- Check deadlines - there may be as many as three. You may be required to apply to the school, for financial aid, and to the department you are interested in as well. Typically, deadlines occur between mid-January through mid-May.
- Tally the application fees you must pay.
- Choose between seven to ten graduate schools; apply to dream schools, to middle of the road schools, and to schools to which you are absolutely sure you can gain acceptance. Give yourself some alternatives from which to choose, should acceptance to your #1 choice not occur.

Letters of Recommendation

- Identify professors who can write excellent recommendations – don't wait until the last minute. Give professors two months notice, minimum.
- Set up meetings with them to clear up any questions they might have. Provide them with a copy of your resume, it will help them remember your accomplishments and achievements.

Personal Statement

The personal statement is extremely important because it is an opportunity to distinguish yourself from other applicants. In this statement you need to demonstrate why you are uniquely qualified to be accepted into the program you've chosen.

- Be concise, coherent and specific.
- Identify your goals, along with stating why you chose the program and the school.
- Give a brief but complete summary of your qualifications, rounded out by summarizing your background in relationship to research experience, awards, publications, extracurricular involvement, etc.
- Some applications will offer a required or suggested page length, but if no directions are given, write a statement of no longer than two pages maximum, single-spaced.
- This statement is important enough to make the difference between being accepted or not, so make it the absolute best it can be.
- Be honest.

Financial Aid

- Most graduate programs expect that their students are usually not able to pay, so opportunities are offered in the form of research or teaching assistantships, fellowships, school-based scholarships, merit-based scholarships or minority/under-represented student scholarships.
- Check into what each institution offers, as well as searching out what is offered on a national basis. This can be done electronically as well as in print.
- After receiving your tax information in January, you may begin the process of applying for Federal Financial Aid by going to www.fafsa.ed.gov.

Final Tips

- Do not expect to succeed in graduate school on your own. Take care of yourself and create support networks which you can rely on when things get tough.
- Form study groups with classmates, and if possible, find a faculty mentor and learn from him or her.
- If you have not done so in college, learn effective techniques to manage your stress and your time.
- Be as open as you can to a new situation, be protective of self and time and be yourself.

Graduate School Admissions Tests

These are the main four graduate school admission tests:

1. Graduate Record Examination (GRE); www.ets.org/gre

Graduate Record Examination (GRE)—The GRE is the “general” graduate admissions test and is required for admission to many university graduate programs. It includes a seven-part “general test” that tests verbal, quantitative, and analytical abilities as they measure the applicant’s potential success on a graduate level, and a 14-part “subject test” that is designed to measure knowledge of subject matter related to a specific field.

A writing assessment, designed to measure thinking and writing skills was added to the lineup because writing and thinking are deemed essential for success in many graduate programs. In general, this test is given year round in computer based test centers. You may take the GRE General Test (computer-based and/or paper-based) no more than once in any calendar month. If you take the GRE multiple times, some graduate schools may average your scores. You should call the schools to which you are applying to find out their policy and then plan your strategy accordingly. GRE score reporting is cumulative.

- Current GRE Board policy states that your scores are retained for the five testing years following the testing year in which you tested.
- All scores earned during this time will be reported to each institution you designate.
- You may choose to send only General Test scores, only Subject Test scores, only stand-alone Analytical Writing or Writing Assessment scores, or any combination of the above, but you may not choose to have only those scores from a specific test date reported.
- Your score report will indicate your designated recipients and your cumulative record reported at that time. However, your designated recipients will not receive information concerning the other score recipients you have chosen

For complete information, please visit the GRE website. *GRE test scores are valid for five years.*

2. Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) www.mba.com/us

The GMAT is a standardized test used by 1,500 graduate management programs around the world to assess the qualifications of applicants. Scores are used to predict academic performance in the first year of graduate management school. There are nine timed sections and two 30-minute essays to write. The GMAT assesses analytical writing, integrated reasoning, quantitative and verbal skills. 800 is a perfect score. The GMAT is given year round. Information about test center locations is provided when the applicant begins the registration process. *GMAT test scores are valid for five years.*

- You may take the GMAT only once every 16 days and no more than five times within any 12-month period.
- The retest policy applies even if you cancel your score or quit a test within that time period.
- Official GMAT score results are kept on file for 10 years.
- All of your scores and cancellations within the last five years will be reported to the institutions you designate as score recipients.

3. Law School Admission Test (LSAT); www.lsac.org

Law School Admission Test (LSAT)—The American Bar Association requires a half-day standardized test for admission to any of the 200+ law schools that are members of the Law School Admission Council (LSAC or Law Services). The test measures reading and verbal reasoning skills. Many law schools require that the LSAT be taken by December, nine months before law school begins. The Law School Admissions Council recommends taking the test earlier—15 months to a year before law school begins. The LSAT is offered four times per year in June, October, December, & February. *LSAT test scores are valid for five years.*

- Normally, you may not take the LSAT more than three times in any two-year period.
- This policy applies even if you cancel your score or it is not otherwise reported.
- LSAC (Law School Admission Council) reserves the right to cancel your registration, rescind your admission ticket, or take any other steps necessary to enforce this policy.
- However, you may retake the LSAT if a law school to which you are applying requires a more recent score than any you have on record, or approves your retaking the test, and the school provides LSAC with written proof of its requirement no later than the last day of registration for the test.

4. Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) www.aamc.org

The MCAT tests a wide range of skills, including problem solving, critical thinking, and writing. It also tests the aspiring student's knowledge of science concepts and principles that are prerequisites to the study of medicine. Scores are given in verbal reasoning, physical sciences, a writing sample, and biological sciences. Almost all U.S. medical schools require an MCAT before admission. For 2010, the exam is offered 28 times per year on 26 different testing dates. For complete details and updated information, please visit the above website. In general, MCAT scores are valid for 3 years. However, this time frame varies from school to school. You may wish to contact the school(s) of your choice to find out their policies concerning MCAT scores.

- You may take the MCAT exam a maximum of three times per year, but can only register for one testing session at a time. Documentation is no longer required if you have already taken the exam three or more times.
- There is no defined waiting period between tests. However, you may only register for one testing session at a time, and you must wait until the second day following your exam administration to register for your next exam.

WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION

These statements are extremely important! Be sure you take complete advantage of this opportunity to tell the admissions committee why they should accept you. Start early, allow plenty of time, and proofread carefully. Expect these essays to be tough to write—but remember, the potential rewards are worth it!

Types of Personal Statements:

- **General Statements** – you write about yourself – the topic is relatively open.
- **Specific Essays** – the topic is assigned to you. *Examples:* describe an ethical dilemma you once faced; what are the strengths and weaknesses of the degree you want to earn; what other alternative career have you considered; assess your oral and written communication skills; delineate your learning goals; write your own question & answer it—take a risk.

Purposes of Personal Statements

- Not just a writing sample (but make sure you write well)
- Fill in the blanks of your résumé (don't repeat what they already know)
- Give a sense of you as a person
- Show that you understand the field you want to enter
- Show that you can think reflectively, critically, and systematically
- Show that the degree will build on previous experiences
- Explain any blemishes on your record (don't whine, just explain)

Questions to Ask Yourself *Before Writing*

- What is unique about my background? Have I overcome hardships? How did this experience change me?
- When did I become interested in this field? What specific experiences (including work/volunteer experience) have furthered this interest?
- What are my career goals?
- Are there any snags in my record that I should explain?
- Which personal characteristics, skills, etc. will enhance my prospects for success in graduate school and in the professional world?
- What makes me stand out from the pack? What are the most compelling reasons for this school to be interested in me? Why should they accept me and what will I add to the school? (Give them reasons to accept you!)

DOs & DON'Ts

- **DO** find a "hook," a controlling idea that ties your essay together. This can be a brief story or an unusual quality you have.
- **DON'T** just tell a story. If you use a story, be sure to analyze it and explain why it is important, what you learned from it, etc.
- **DO** take your drafts to Learning Resources to be reviewed. Ask if the essay makes sense, if your main point is clear, if your ideas flow smoothly from one sentence to the next, if you sound like a real person (preferably an interesting real person), if you have enough – but not too much – detail.

- **DON'T** dwell on something from the distant past. High school happened too long ago to make an impact – surely you've done something interesting since then. The exception would be if you have been engaged in a lifelong struggle with a disability or economic disadvantage.
- **DO** be positive and upbeat in tone.
- **DON'T** assume that names of places give enough information. Describe your school; describe your company and how it fits into the marketplace (unless you work for a high profile firm like IBM).
- **DO** be as selective as possible. Your application already includes a résumé of your experiences. This is your chance to fill in the blanks of your résumé, showing what you are like as a person in a way that your résumé never could. Try to avoid merely listing your activities. Also, avoid giving too much detail (e.g. what concentration of acid you used in that experiment).
- **DON'T** write what you think they want to hear.
- **DO** ask your friends and family to help you remember all of the details from which you can select when you write your essay. It's easier than you would think to forget things you have done in the past.
- **DO** show that you know something more about the field than you have seen on TV or in movies.
- **DON'T** use clichés or generalities (Shakespeare's quote about killing all the lawyers is a typical clichéd opening).
- **DO** take the opportunity to explain your weaknesses (you were sick on the day you took the LSAT, your mother died while you were a sophomore, etc.) You don't need to be dramatic or to go on and on about it, but if you can work in a meaningful explanation, do so.
- **DON'T** try to be creative (e.g. writing a poem instead of an essay) or controversial, unless the question specifically requires it. You never know who will read your application.
- **DO** be specific. Don't say, "I am well-known as a warm and caring person." Instead, say, "My manager recognized me as employee of the month because of my excellent customer service."
- **DO** fit your essay into the big picture of your application. If you say you have always wanted to be a product manager, but have no evidence to show that you have ever been exposed to that career, your statement will not carry much weight.
- **DON'T** make proofreading errors. While Learning Resources can't proofread your essay for you, they can show you different strategies for proofreading effectively.
- **DO** show your final draft to friends. Don't ask them, "Isn't this a fabulous essay?" Instead, ask them, "Does this sound like me?" If it doesn't sound like the "you" they know and love, you'll want to revise.
- **DO** sell the school on the school. They want to know that you are choosing them as much as they are choosing you. Show that you know about the program, faculty, school's mission, and school's reputation.