

Applying to Graduate School

Questions to Ask Yourself:

- Do you have a clear idea of the career you want to pursue? Is a graduate degree a requirement for your career? Will it make employment easier? Or could it make your search more difficult because you are “overqualified” for the field?
- Who wants you to go to graduate school? Is it your own interests or motivation pushing for the advanced degree? Are you responding to others in your life such as friends, parents and teachers?
- What can you do with your undergraduate degree? There are lots of choices for all levels of education, so keep your options open.
- Will the time and money you spend on graduate school repay you for the money and experience you will earn if you take a job beginning immediately after graduation?
- Is there another avenue for continued learning? For instance, could you gain marketable skills through professional seminars and workshops or a training certificate?

Evaluating Graduate Schools:

- Specific characteristics of each program (i.e., graduate placement, faculty-student ratio)
- Accreditation
- Faculty that specialize in your area of interest
- Cost of program and availability of financial aid
- Reputation of the program
- Geographic area and surrounding community
- “Fit” with your career interests and goals

Finding the best program for YOU:

- Do your research: read research articles, review school websites, talk to people and professors in your field, refer to annual reports such as Peterson’s guides and U.S. News.
- Attend graduate school fairs and speak with admissions representatives.
- Talk with current or former students, alumni, and faculty (ask for their evaluation of strengths/weaknesses of the program).
- Examine if the academic strengths of the department fit your career goals.
- If possible, visit schools of interest—this will give you the best chance to get a feel for the program, the requirements, and the faculty and students. If you cannot visit, try to talk with current students or professors for insider information.

Factors Considered for Admission to Graduate School:

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|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| • Academic major and GPA | • Writing sample |
| • Honors and awards | • Publications/affiliations |
| • Test scores (GRE, GMAT, etc.) | • Internships |
| • Leadership/volunteer activities | • Racial/ethnic background |
| • Personal statement | • Work experience |
| • Quality of undergraduate education | • Personal interview (if conducted) |

Admissions Tests

Graduate Record Exam (GRE):

General

- The GRE is a “general” graduate admissions test and is required for most programs.
- The General Test will examine your verbal, quantitative, and analytical abilities in attempt to measure your potential success in graduate school.
- The GRE Revised General Test is section-level adaptive in that the difficulty level for the second section of each measure is based on your performance in the first section. Test-takers are allowed to skip and return to questions within a section.
- The GRE is offered at many testing facilities and, unlike the other exams, is offered most days
- Scores on the GRE General Test are valid for up to five years.

Subject

- The GRE Subject Test will examine your knowledge of a particular academic subject including:
- Biochemistry, Biology, Chemistry, Literature in English, Mathematics, Physics, and Psychology.
- These tests are administered on paper three times per year: April, September, and October.
- For more information and to register go to: www.gre.org.

Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT):

- The GMAT is a standardized test used by most business schools to assess the qualifications
- Scores are used to predict your academic performance during the first year.
- The four sections of the GMAT contain an analytical writing assessment and questions on integrated reasoning, quantitative, and verbal skills.
- The test is offered most weekdays and some Saturdays, but cannot be taken more than once
- For more information and to register go to: www.mba.com.

Law School Admission Test (LSAT):

- All U.S. law schools registered with the Law School Admission Council (LSAC) require applicants to take the LSAT examination prior to applying.
- The test is a multiple-choice format containing reading comprehension, analytical reasoning,
- The LSAT is only offered four times per year so be sure to plan accordingly.
- For more information and to register go to: www.lsac.org.

Medical College Admission Test (MCAT):

- Almost all medical colleges require the MCAT examination as a way to compare applicants and to predict first year success in medical school.
- The MCAT is a standardized, multiple choice test designed to assess problem solving, critical thinking, and writing skills in addition to the examinee's knowledge of science concepts and principles prerequisite to the study of medicine.
- Scores are given in verbal reasoning, physical sciences, writing, and biological sciences.
- MCAT scores are valid for approximately three years.
- For more information and to register go to: www.aamc.org.

Suggested* Timeline for Applying to Graduate School

*If you plan to attend graduate school right after graduation, this process should begin during spring of your Junior year.

Junior Year

MAY

- **Begin your online research** of graduate programs that match your interests, values, and career goals.
- **Take the practice GRE test.** The Princeton Review offers a free version:
 - <https://www.princetonreview.com/grad/free-gre-practice-test.aspx>
- Sign up for a prep course, or at the very least, start studying on your own with a study guide,
- such as ETS’s “The Office Guide to the GRE Revised General Test” or Princeton Review’s “Cracking the GRE”.

JUNE – JULY

- If you are not already sure, research and decide on your specific area of concentration within your field of interest.
- Continue your GRE prep and register for the GRE if required for your schools.

AUGUST

- **Take the GRE General Test.** If you are not happy with your scores, this gives you plenty of time to retake the test(s) by mid October.
- Begin writing your **personal statement** (also called statement of purpose or essay).
 - This will also help you define your grad school goals and allow you time to get feedback from your professors/advisor.
- **Contact prospective graduate programs** and request additional information, including course catalogs and financial aid information.
- Create a “Schools of Interest” spreadsheet to organize your research.

School	Program	Degree	Area	Professor(s)	Deadline	Materials Needed

- **Contact your mentors and professors.** They are great sources of career advice and can probably recommend some good programs--and maybe even help you make some connections with other professionals in the field.
 - It’s also a smart way to refresh their memory of who you are and what you are interested in, which will come in handy when it’s time to ask them for letters of recommendation.
- **Start talking to professionals in your prospective field** to learn more about what it’s really like to do this type of work and the long-term opportunities that are available.

Senior Year

SEPTEMBER

- **Register for the October GRE Subject Test** (if necessary).
 - The Subject Tests are still administered on paper and are only given three times a year: April, September, October.
- Once you've isolated the most appealing schools, **pick a professor or two** from each program whose interests match up with yours and start to familiarize yourself with their work.
 - Learn about their current research and read their most recent publications.
 - Many students also attempt to establish contact with the department chair and faculty members at prospective graduate programs.
 - Establishing contact can help you to get a feel for the professor and the program and also to see whether they'll be accepting students for the coming year.
 - If you feel uncomfortable contacting a professor, try to contact a current graduate student—they are also great resources and have been in the same situation.
- **Choose** two or three professors (or two professors and one supervisor) to serve as your **recommenders**. Some schools have specific requirements so pay attention to instructions!
 - First, send a friendly note or phone call telling them your plans and asking if they'd be willing to write you a recommendation.
 - If they agree to be a reference for you, many people suggest giving them a deadline two weeks earlier than you plan to have your application in—this helps to give leeway for a busy schedule.
- Look into merit-based **grants and fellowships** as possible ways to help finance your education.
 - Add any financial assistance application deadlines to your schedule.
- **Keep polishing your statement of purpose**.
 - Ask a professor or career counselor to review your statement. Consider gathering feedback on it from other people who know you well, including family and friends.

OCTOBER

- **Finalize your list** of potential schools.
- Continue to **prepare for the GRE Subject Test** if you are taking one.
- **Take the GRE Subject Test**, if necessary. Arrange to have scores sent directly to the schools.
- It is best to complete your applications online--it's faster and easier.
 - If you are doing any applications on paper, be sure to get the hard copies now.
- **Request official transcripts**, paying careful attention to where they should go.
 - **To request a transcript stop by ONESTOP or go online to:**
<http://www.pepperdine.edu/registrar/transcripts/>
- Send your recommenders the appropriate forms:
 - The latest version of your personal statement, your CV or resume, and stamped-and-addressed envelopes to school sites (carefully note where each should be sent).
- If you are visiting your prospective schools (a good idea), **set up informational interview sessions** with professors, current students, program advisors, and financial aid officers.

NOVEMBER

- **Refine your personal statement**, tailoring it to each school as necessary.
- **Tie up any other loose ends**.
 - Do you know where your recommendation letters are? Have you made sure that all your test scores have been sent to schools? Are you aware of financial aid and scholarship deadlines?

Senior Year (Continued)

DECEMBER

- **Complete and submit all applications.** Keep a copy of each part for your records.
- **Verify** that your recommendations have been sent.
- Research deadlines for funding opportunities in your program(s), including graduate and teaching assistantships

JANUARY

- **Start focusing on financial aid**
 - Fill out the FAFSA online--to qualify for financial aid, you need to complete the FAFSA as soon after January 1 as possible. Look into private loans and any alternate sources of funding available.

FEBRUARY UNTIL...

- Try to relax while you wait it out. This may be the most relaxing time you will have for the next several years, so take advantage of it while you can!

APRIL

- **Assess your financial aid package** and use financial aid comparison calculators online to compare packages that schools give you.
- Investigate **applying for alternative loans** if the financial aid package offered doesn't meet your needs.
- Write thank you letters to those who helped you during the application process.

Keep in Mind

While this isn't the only workable application schedule, it's a good place to start. The important thing is to draw up a schedule at the beginning of the application process, make sure you account for all foreseeable factors, and most importantly **stick to it**.

One final note: Almost every graduate school applicant will receive at least one rejection during the quest for a graduate degree. While that won't be fun, it's not quite the final word on the matter. Contact the specific department and politely express your regret at not being admitted. Don't expect them to be able to give you a lot of their time, but do take advantage of the opportunity for some useful research. Ask them if they can give you some suggestions on how you might strengthen your candidacy in the future, or if they can highlight the weaknesses in your application that resulted in your rejection.

Components of the Application

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:

- This section allows you the chance to “speak” to the admissions committee—use this part of the application to fully explain who you are and what your interests are in terms of research and career goals
- Many people recommend writing this as if you were writing directly to the professor of interest.
- Be sure to follow page restrictions and answer the questions (if any) requested of you.
- A good format to follow:
 - Discuss the program you are applying to, personal and academic background, research and professional interests, research and teaching experience, ways in which this program will fit those needs, and which professor(s) you wish to work with and how their research matches your research interests.
- Be sure to have your advisor or professor read over your statement—the more eyes the better.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION:

- **Choose your references carefully**—your letters serve as a strong support of who you are as a student and what you can potentially offer to a graduate program or department.
- When you decide to apply to graduate school, start by re-establishing connections with professors who know you well but who you may not have been in contact with recently.
- Ask each professor whether they will be able to write you a “strong” letter of reference. Almost any professor can create a standard form to write a recommendation but this will become obvious to the admissions committee—you want to strive for a personal and well-written
- Once you have selected your recommenders, be sure to give them enough time.
 - At least 6 weeks is appropriate—many advisors recommend giving the professor a deadline 2 weeks earlier than necessary to ensure the deadline is met.
- Create a Reference Packet:
 - Include: your statement of purpose, CV/resume, reference forms for each school or information on submitting the recommendation online, a list of schools you are applying to and professors/research focus at each school, deadlines, and a stamped (and addressed) envelope for each letter.
 - It is also helpful to write a letter to the recommender reminding them of how long they have known you, in what capacity, any of accomplishments or goals you achieved as their student or while working with them, and any specific areas you would like them to emphasize in their letter.

CURRICULUM VITAE (CV):

- The CV is used to exhibit and summarize academic achievements, including the following:
- degree(s)/school(s), advanced training/certifications, thesis/projects, teaching and research experience, professional organization memberships, publications, presentations and attendance at conferences, and relevant coursework.
- Unlike the resume, the CV does not have a one-page limit and should showcase all of your academic experiences.

IMPORTANT TIPS:

- Prepare your application materials and apply early to avoid last minute mistakes and stress.
- Apply to several schools, including “reach,” “middle-of-the-pack” and “safety” schools, but also keep in mind the cost of applying to each school (application fees, GRE score reports, etc.).
- Make sure you meet all the undergraduate prerequisites for the program.
- The faculty is concerned about accepting students who will fit into their graduate environment and will progress and complete the degree at a reasonable rate.

Online Resources

Use the following sites to help gain more information on applications, timelines, testing, admission requirements, financial aid, research, rankings and other helpful information.

Council of Graduate Schools: www.cgsnet.org

Graduate Schools: www.gradschools.com

Princeton Review: <http://www.princetonreview.com>

Kaplan Online: www.kaplan.com

Peterson's Education Center: www.petersons.com

Directory of Graduate Schools: www.graduateguide.com

National Association of Graduate-Professional Students: <http://nagps.org>

U.S. News and World Report- Top Graduate Programs:
<http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools>

National Association of Colleges and Employers: <http://www.naceweb.org>

Financial Aid: www.finaid.org

For advising on the graduate school application process, schedule an individual appointment:

(310) 506-4184

Seaver College Career Center

Tyler Campus Center, Suite 210

<http://seaver.pepperdine.edu/careercenter/>