Graduate School Preparation Handbook

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Introduction

Are you considering going to graduate school? Are you aware of all your options, and what a graduate program involves -- financially, mentally, and emotionally? This guide has been prepared to help you maneuver through the process.

Entering a graduate program is an important decision that will affect your life for 2-3 years and should not be taken lightly. Understand the pros and cons, how you'll pay for tuition fees, whether you have the stamina and discipline to get through, whether you have the emotional and financial support, and what your prospects are post-graduation, when tuition loan interest is mounting.

Should You Go To Graduate School?
By Saundra Washington

The decision to attend graduate school and the choice of an institution and degree program requires serious consideration. The time, money, and energy you will expend doing graduate work are significant, and you will want to analyze your options carefully. Before you begin filing applications, you should evaluate your interests and goals, know what programs are available, and be clear about your reasons for pursuing a particular degree.

There are two excellent reasons for attending graduate school, and if your decision is based on one of these, you probably have made the right choice. There are careers such as medicine, law, and college and university teaching that require specialized training and, therefore, necessitate advanced education. Another motivation is to specialize in a subject that you have decided is of great importance, either for career goals or for personal satisfaction.

They say to get a good job you need a good education. One way to get that good education is to get a graduate degree. If you are talented and ambitious, you have probably given some thought to going to graduate school. But how do you decide if grad school is the right choice?

To be honest, graduate school is not for everyone. It is very different from undergraduate school and requires different interests and skills. Before you launch a graduate school career, it is good to consider what your grad school experiences may be and whether a graduate degree will help you get where you want to go.

Why Graduate School?

Start by asking yourself why you want to go to graduate school. Is it because you have not decided what kind of career you want to pursue? Will you be doing it simply to put off looking for a job? Are you considering advanced study mostly because everyone else you know is doing it?

If your honest answer to these questions is yes, then maybe you had better think twice. Graduate school will require diligence and dedication. You will put in more study hours than you did as an undergraduate. You are likely to be in smaller, more competitive classes, and your instructors will be more demanding. All of your classes will center around one subject - hopefully a subject you enjoy. You will be successful in that kind of environment only if you are there for some well thought out reasons.

Some careers require graduate study. It's not possible to be a clinical psychologist, for example, without an advanced degree. The same is true if you plan to enter college teaching, biomedical research, and any of hundreds of other fields. For these careers, it's not a matter of whether you should continue your studies but when.

For other careers, a graduate degree may not be a requirement but may be looked upon favorably by employers. People who do graduate work in these areas do so with the hope of securing a better job or earning a higher salary. These are certainly good reasons for entering graduate school, but be sure the field is one that appeals to you. A graduate degree can take you only so far
before your own knowledge and ability in the area are put to the test.

Some people enter graduate school out of a desire to do something special for their community. This is certainly an excellent reason to want to continue school, but the same cautions apply. Those who can make the most difference in their communities are those who are really ready to devote themselves one hundred percent to their studies.

Finally, some people enter graduate school out of a strong interest in the subject. For these people, class assignments regularly inspire them to find out more about the topic. They read books and articles in the field over and above class requirements. They enjoy talking to their professors and classmates about topics covered in class. If this sounds like you, then your plans for graduate study may be right on target.

The Right Program Can Make a Difference
Once you are certain that grad school fits into your plans, you need to find out as much as possible about the program you have in mind. Entering graduate school for the right reasons will not be enough if you end up in the wrong program.

Use the resources around your campus to identify and choose between programs. Your very best resources will be your instructors. Anyone who is a college professor has probably earned at least one graduate degree and is likely to have been associated with several universities as either an instructor or a graduate student. College professors---especially those who teach in the field you plan to pursue---can steer you in the direction of good programs and give you a fairly good idea of what to expect as a graduate student.

If at all possible, visit one or two campuses that have the program you want. Talk to the program director or department chair to find out about the focus of the program and whether it will suit your needs. To get a balanced view, be sure to talk to students in the program too.

Find out how long it will take to get your degree and whether you will have to write a thesis or do a major research project. Find out what courses you will have to take and if there are any other requirements to earn the degree (for example, an internship or field work placement). Ask if the program offers any fellowship or scholarships, and what you must do to apply for them. You might even want to ask a program director how his/her program differs from a similar program at another institution.

You Can Always Go Later
One of the best things about graduate school is you do not have to do it now. If after asking yourself the right questions and doing a little research, you are still not sure, maybe you should wait.

The advantage of going to graduate school right after college is that you have become accustomed to being a student. You have developed study habits and a certain amount of discipline, which you can carry with you to the new academic environment. The advantage of waiting is that your graduate school experience will be infinitely more worthwhile to you if you go because you are ready, not just because it seemed like a good thing to do.

Graduate school training can open a great many doors for you, but only if you are ready. If you have a genuine interest in your field and a sense of purpose, you are certain to be successful in graduate school and in your career.

Reasons to Go and Not to Go

- 20 Reasons Why You Should Go

In some disciplines, having a graduate degree is a necessity for getting a "career" job. That does not mean you should dive right in, immediately after completing your undergrad degree. Just make sure you have a good reason for going.
Some of the reasons below are more valid than others, but they are reasons for which people attend grad schools.

- **Greater earning power.** This is a common reason why people go to grad school. However, it should not be the only reason, since getting a grad degree is a very serious commitment.
- **Advance your career.** A grad degree can open up a wider array of career opportunities: psychology, social work, healthcare.
- **Career change.** Many people are finding their current careers unrewarding. An advanced degree can help transition to another career -- whether out of desire or necessity.
- **Enhance your education.** Graduate schools can provide opportunities to explore theories you may have about a topic.
- **Get community recognition.** If you explore your theories and discover something new, you will get recognition for it.
- **Get international recognition.** Carry that recognition further. If your discovery is truly groundbreaking, you may receive international recognition, not to mention awards. Who knows -- maybe you have a Nobel Prize within you.
- **Get research opportunities.** Even if you do not get to explore your own theories, there are other opportunities to participate in funded research.
- **Upgrade your education.** Your knowledge of your field is outdated and you find it difficult to keep up with advancements without following up and getting an advanced degree.
- **Enjoy travel opportunities.** Some programs, such as archaeology, require studying abroad for research purposes. For those who like to travel, this is a bonus.
- **Find teaching opportunities.** Not everyone is suited to teaching, but for those who are, getting a PhD can lead to a tenured position at a university or college, with a nice salary, a teaching or research assistant to help with workload, consulting opportunities (partly shared with your department), and a nice pension upon retirement.

- **Work on advanced projects.** The computer scientists who delved early into computer graphics set the standards for much of the CGI technology used in movies today.
- **Access to advanced equipment and tools.** In a similar vein, entering a grad program could mean having access to advanced equipment on campus -- such as the astronomy lab, supercomputers, rare books, and even great minds.
- **Higher potential for future promotion.** While obtaining a graduate degree does not necessarily always lead to a high-paying job right away, it can open up opportunities for future promotions.
- **Not being stuck behind a desk.** If you have the necessary education to qualify for a high-ranking position in your chosen industry, it means that you often have the option of not sitting behind a desk all day. You might go meet colleagues or clients, travel, or even play golf in the afternoon on a nice day.
- **Employer incentives.** Some large corporations have funds set aside that will pay partial or full fees for qualified employees.
- **Be part of a chain of knowledge.** This doesn't tickle everyone's fancy, but just imagine that the knowledge handed to you by your professor came from another professor who learned it from someone who learned it from a famous scientist or philosopher. You become part of a chain of knowledge.
- **Because you want to.** To learn, to think critically, to accept the academic challenge.
- **To stand out.** By attending grad school and completing a degree, you join an elite segment of the population.
- **Free tuition.** In some cases, grad schools might not only waive your tuition but also give you a stipend for living expenses, in return for taking on the work of a teaching assistant or research assistant.
- **Realization of interest.** Not everyone realizes during undergraduate studies that they are suited for grad studies. Some of your professors might recommend it to you, and offer to supervise, with tuition waived and a research assistant position to cover expenses.
- **15 Reasons Why You Should Not Go**

Now for the flipside. Completing a grad degree has many rewards, as indicated above. However, there are also many reasons not to go.

- **Highly competitive.** Graduate programs always have fewer spots than undergraduate programs. There's competition for seats, research positions, grant money, and often as a result, departmental politics.
- **Enables the "professional student" mindset.** Some students just don't want to leave school. One of the reasons for this is said to be a fear of going out into the workforce.
- **Requires ability to set priorities.** Successfully completing a grad degree requires a great deal of discipline and priority setting. This can be a strain on family and personal relationships, not to mention yourself.
- **Relationship strains.** If you're married, housing might be an issue. You might be offered a grad/research assistant position and free tuition, but no accommodations for your spouse in campus housing.
- **Stressful.** Emotionally exhausting. Completing a graduate degree, especially a PhD, requires emotional maturity.
- **Writing a thesis.** Some grad programs require writing a thesis on a topic that your degree supervisor picks out for you. Writing an original thesis is not easy, compared to course work, and is often the reason grad students take a lot longer than program duration. Each semester you delay might mean a "penalty" fee in the form of extra tuition that has to be paid.
- **Requires support.** You might need a strong support network to get through emotionally, when your thesis research is going nowhere.
- **Might take 2–7 years of your life.** Not everyone finds they can complete a grad degree in the typical one or two years. Personal obligations often intrude, or lack of finances makes it difficult. Or your supervisor doesn't like your research. This doesn't even factor in the costs and how long it might take to pay back loans.
- **Extra cost of education.** Graduate schools can be very expensive. If you are not going to work during your studies, or will not receive an assistant job and waived tuition fees, the cost of your education is going to mount.
- **Graduating with a large debt.** This state of financial affairs might push you into accepting any job after graduation, out of necessity.
- **No guarantee of higher salary.** Getting a grad degree does not necessarily mean you'll get offered a job with a much higher salary than you are getting now.
- **Return on investment might be slow.** Even with a higher salary, how quickly will that offset tuition loans and the zero or negative cash flow due to not earning while studying?
- **Limited job opportunities.** If the degree you get is in an academic field, finding work outside of teaching or research may be difficult, and thus not necessarily worth it to you.
- **Undesirable job locales.** Teaching positions offered after graduation could be in areas you simply don't want to live in.
- **Too qualified.** During an economic downturn, should you find yourself looking for employment, having an advanced degree can be a liability. You might hear, "sorry, you're overqualified."

If you are determined to go to grad school, consider spending a few years getting relevant work experience first. You could take the time to save the money for tuition and expenses, which would allow you to devote dedicated time to a degree. Or if you've built up trust in your employer, they might foot part of the tuition and give you time off each day to attend to studies. All this allows you some peace of mind, which might be what you need to succeed in grad school.

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**Types of Graduate Programs**

Traditionally, graduate education has involved acquiring and communicating knowledge gained through original research in a particular academic field. The highest earned academic degree, which requires the pursuit of original research, is the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.). In
contrast, professional training stresses the practical application of knowledge and skills, for example, in the fields of business, law, and medicine. At the doctoral level, degrees in these areas include the Doctor of Business Administration (D.B.A.), the Doctor of Jurisprudence (J.D.), and the Doctor of Medicine (M.D.).

Master's degrees are offered in most fields and may also be academic or professional in orientation. In many fields, the master's degree may be the only professional degree needed for employment. This is the case, for example, in fine arts (M.F.A.), library science (M.L.S.), and social work (M.S.W.).

Some people decide to earn a master's degree at one institution and then select a different university or a somewhat different program of study for doctoral work. This can be a way of acquiring a broad background: you can choose a master's program with one emphasis or orientation and a doctoral program with another. The total period of graduate study may be somewhat lengthened by proceeding this way, but probably not by much.

In recent years, the distinctions between traditional academic programs and professional programs have become blurred. The course of graduate education has changed direction in the last thirty years and many programs have redefined their shape and focus. There are centers and institutes for research, many graduate programs are now interdepartmental and interdisciplinary, off campus graduate programs have multiplied, and part-time graduate programs have increased. Colleges and universities have also established combined degree programs, in many cases in order to enable students to combine academic and professional studies. As a result of such changes, you now have considerable freedom in determining the program best suited to your current needs as well as your long-term goals.

Are you aware of the options you have in terms of graduate programs? From an academic sense, most disciplines have a master's and a doctoral (Ph.D.) degree. Depending on your discipline, a master's degree might consist of:
1. Only coursework.
2. Coursework and a special full-term project.
3. Coursework and the writing and presentation of a thesis.

Graduate programs that are designed to put you into the work force tend to lean towards options #1 or #2. If a specific discipline's grad degree is course work only, there'll be a heavier course load than for other programs. Projects are usually done alone, which means that you're not at the mercy of an under-contributing partner. Programs that prepare you for teaching typically lean towards option #3, and there's no guarantee that your thesis presentation will succeed the first time. (Which is why it's always worth trying to get your thesis done as soon as possible, leaving time for revisions and presenting again)

Doctoral programs nearly always come under option #3.

Getting Your Master's Degree

A master's degree comes in only two options: a professional ("terminal" master's degree), or an academic master's degree. Obviously, your field of study can vary wildly, but degrees are distinguished by whether they are professional or academic.

A terminal degree is a means to an end; it will prepare you for entrance into a specific type or group of jobs. A terminal degree implies there is no need for any further education, thus the word "terminal." Degrees from professional master's programs are usually marked by specific initials that denote their area of specialty, such as a degree in Master of Business Administration (M.B.A) or Master of Library Science (M.L.S.).

Conversely, an academic degree centers on research and scholarly studies in a specific area. These degrees are more likely to lead to
continued education at the doctorate level where you can specialize in a very specific area of that field — Pre-Revolutionary Russian Literature, for instance. Academic degrees are denoted as M.A. (Master of Arts) or M.S. (Master of Sciences), usually in a broad area such as Master of Arts in English or Master of Science in Zoology.

**Master's program workload**
Getting your master's degree requires two to three years of full-time coursework. Plan on taking some required courses, but later on you'll be able to focus on an area of interest within your subject area.

You may find you have less flexibility in choosing your specialty if you're in the sciences. This is due to the fact that you'll very likely be completing lab research or field work under the supervision of faculty members. Subsequently, your choices may be limited to the research interests of the faculty.

In professional programs, you may also need to complete internships and practicums that introduce you to working in your field.

**Master's programs may require final exam or project**
To top off your master's program, expect to participate in some sort of final exam process, complete a final project, or perhaps do both! Final exams are usually cumulative and serve to demonstrate your mastery of the field. These could be oral or written, or a combination of the two.

Final projects may be a required master's thesis. Similar to a Ph.D. thesis, they require original research and subsequent conclusion. However, you may just need to prepare a long research paper on a specific topic.

**Combined master's degree**
Many universities now offer combined master's degree programs where you can study in professional and academic areas at the same time. This reflects a trend towards enabling academic students to be more marketable, in part due to the difficulty they may encounter in obtaining tenured professor positions as a Ph.D. candidate later. At some schools, you can actually design your own degree program, so if you're interested in combining your M.L.S with an M.A. in Pan-Asian Studies, go for it!

**Choosing a Specialization / Researching a Program**
There are several sources of information you should make use of in choosing a specialization and a program. A good way to begin is to consult the appropriate Peterson guide (www.petersons.com), which will tell you what programs exist in the field or fields you are interested in and, for each one, will give you information on degrees, research facilities, the faculty, financial aid resources, tuition and other costs, application requirements, and so on.

Talk with your college adviser and professors about your areas of interest and ask for their advice about the best programs to research. Besides being very well informed themselves, these faculty members may have colleagues at institutions you are investigating, and they can give you inside information about individual programs and the kind of background they seek in candidates for admission.

The valuable perspective of educators should not be overlooked. If the faculty members you know through your courses are not involved in your field of interest, do not hesitate to contact other appropriate professors at your institution or neighboring institutions. Ask for advice on programs that might suit your goals. In addition, talk to graduate students studying in your field of interest; their advice is valuable also.

Your decision about a field of study may be determined by your research interests or, if you choose to enter a professional school, by the appeal of a particular career. In either case, as you attempt to limit the number of institutions you will apply to, you will want to familiarize yourself with publications describing current research in your discipline. Read related professional journals and make note who is
publishing in the areas of specialization that interest you, as well as where they are teaching. Take note of the institutions represented on the publications' editorial boards (they are usually listed on the inside cover); such representation usually reflects strength in the discipline.

Being aware of who the top people are and where they are will pay off in a number of ways. A graduate department's reputation rests heavily on the reputation of its faculty, and in some disciplines it is more important to study under someone of note than it is to study at a college or university with a prestigious name. In addition, in certain fields graduate funds are often tied to a particular research project and, as a result, to the faculty member directing that project. Finally, most Ph.D. candidates (and nonprofessional master's degree candidates) must pick an advisor and one or more other faculty members who form a committee that directs and approves their work.

Many times this choice must be made during the first semester, so it is important to learn as much as you can about faculty members before you begin your studies. As you research the faculties of various departments, keep in mind the following questions: What is their academic training? What are their research activities? What kind of concern do they have for teaching and student development?

There are other important factors to consider in judging the educational quality of a program. First, what kinds of students enroll in the program? What are their academic abilities, achievements, skills, geographic representation, and level of professional success upon completion of the program? Second, what are the program's resources? What kind of financial support does it have? How complete is the library? What laboratory equipment and computer facilities are available? And third, what does the program have to offer in terms of both curriculum and services? What are its purposes, its course offerings, and its job placement and student advisement services? What is the student - faculty ratio, and what kind of interaction is there between students and professors? What internships, assistantships, and other experiential education opportunities are available?

When evaluating a particular institution's reputation in a given field, you may also want to look at published graduate program ratings. There is no single rating that is universally accepted, so you would be well advised to read several and not place too much importance on any one. Most consist of what are known as "peer ratings"; that is, they are the results of polls of respected scholars who are asked to rate graduate departments in their field of expertise. Many academicians feel that these ratings are too heavily based upon traditional concepts of what constitutes quality - such as the publications of the faculty - and that they perpetuate the notion of a research-oriented department as the only model of excellence in graduate education. Depending on whether your own goals are research-oriented, you may want to attribute more or less importance to this type of rating.

If possible, visit the institutions that interest you and talk with faculty members and currently enrolled students. Be sure, however, to write or call the admissions office a week in advance to give the person in charge a chance to set up appointments for you with faculty members and students.
The Real Cost of Graduate Study

Depending on the specific area of study that you choose, getting a grad degree does not guarantee that you'll financially recover shortly after graduation. This is best explained with an example. (The following are not necessarily real numbers, and are in fact concocted to illustrate a principle. Kiplinger.com has a more accurate payback calculator, which might show you that it could take years to pay off grad school.)

1. **Salary before entering grad program:** $30,000.

2. **Duration of grad program:** officially two years, but you find you need an extra year (which might cost you a "penalty" amount, depending on the number of extra semesters you need).

3. **Cost of tuition:** $50,000 total for two years, plus any penalties for extra semesters.

4. **Cost of education:** Well, assuming you're not working during your studies, you've lost any earnings from work, aside from what you might receive if you manage to get paid in a grad/research assistant position. For the sake of argument, say that you don't, or don't have the time to accept.

5. **Cost of living:** For the sake of argument, say that rent, food, gas, car payment, insurance, etc., is costing you at least $1,500/month, depending on your specific situation. That might or might not be covered with the earnings from an assistant's position. Let's say it's not. Then the cost is 3 years x 12 months/year x $1500 = $54,000.

6. **Salary after graduation:** $60,000 -- double what you previously made.

So what has this cost you? You've either paid out $50,000 in tuition (maybe more), or owe it in loans plus interest. And you've lost 3 x $30,000 in earnings = $90,000. Plus you've spent $54,000 in living expenses. In essence, that's a cost of $194,000 plus interest. How long will it take you to recover that $194K at your new $60,000/year salary? Keep in mind that that $60,000 will incur income taxes, and it has to pay for your living expenses post-graduation. Is it worth it to you?

Ultimately, you have to decide on the reasons why you want to pursue a graduate degree, and whether it will be worthwhile financially. If doing so opens up greater opportunities in a few years, then it might just be worth it. If you plan to enter a career where a grad degree is a necessity, then it's also worth it, long term. Simply put, you cannot assess the value of getting a grad degree on a short-term basis.
## Financial Guide Worksheet

**Directions:** Complete for each year of graduate / professional studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>EXPENSES</strong> (per year estimate)</th>
<th><strong>INCOME / REVENUE</strong> (per year estimate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tuition</td>
<td>Your contribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fees</td>
<td>Spouse contribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Room</td>
<td>Parent Contribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>Summer employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>Scholarships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>Grants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>Loans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bills/Loans</td>
<td>Gifts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child support</td>
<td>School year employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total Estimated Expenses: __________

Total Estimated Income/Revenue __________

Programs and/or institutions you are considering: ____________________________________________

(Source: Peterson’s Guides to Graduate School)
10 Sources for Funding Graduate Study

Depending on the program and school you choose, getting a grad degree can be costly. If you’re applying for financial aid, give yourself extra time to assemble all of the financial information you’ll need to support your request for assistance. You may have to submit your entire application earlier than students who are not applying for financial aid, so make sure you check the deadlines and are clear on which one applies to your situation.

1. **Scholarships and grants.** Look into scholarships and grants that the government, corporations or private organizations set aside for various types of qualifications (war vet, single parent, cultural member, etc.).

2. **Grad assistant positions.** Many universities receive a certain amount from the government for each grad student they accept. As such, they will often waive the tuition fee and sometimes offer living expenses via a part-time grad assistant position.

3. **Research grants/positions.** In a similar vein, your thesis advisor might have research grant funds coming and might offer that to you in return for your participation as a research assistant. (Note that this might force you into research work that does not interest you, but when you choose a thesis advisor, you often do so because of their previous research topics or academic interests.)

4. **Employer education programs.** Some large corporations set aside funds to pay partial or full tuitions in the pursuit of advanced education by qualified employees.

5. **Employer salary advance.** Companies that cannot afford to foot the bill might offer an interest-free advance on salary, with certain conditions in place.

6. **Family loans.** Have wealthy parents or other family members? Maybe they can lend you tuition and expenses in return for completing certain milestones in your grad endeavors.

7. **Insurance scholarships.** Some insurance companies offer a policy that can only be applied towards college/university tuition. Unfortunately, you or your parents need to have the foresight to sign up years before you need it. The drawback is that there are often multiple conditions to meet, and if you don't, you could lose the payout.

8. **Credit cards.** Zero percent APR credit cards are still being offered by financial institutions. If you're careful and clever, it is possible to juggle the balance from one card to another, when their offer periods run out. However, this is a dangerous and potentially stressful approach. Credit card debt is already fairly high, on average. If you get tempted to spend the money on other purchases and/or miss payments, the financial repercussions can be huge.

9. **Personal line of credit.** While getting a 0% APR credit card does require good credit, having really good credit can get you a personal line of credit from your bank at reasonable interest rates. Lines of credit rarely have time limits on them, unlike 0% APR credit cards.

10. **Savings from work.** Considering all the reasons not to go to grad school, you might consider spending a few years working after getting an undergraduate degree and entering a grad program. You can put the savings into safer investments such as a CD (Certificate of Deposit) or an online savings account. (What's more, having some work experience on your resume when you do complete your grad degree makes you more marketable than the person who jumped right into a grad program after college.)
Web-Based Graduate Programs

Web-based grad programs, where most of your coursework can be done remotely via the Internet, do exist. Make sure that you choose an accredited program. An online degree often has as much credibility to an employer as many bricks-and-mortar degrees -- often without the huge cost, time commitment, and stress. Most of these require a short-term residency on campus (or nearby), during which time you either write exams in person or present your thesis (Masters or Doctoral).

Naturally, online grad programs cannot be offered for all disciplines, but if you are an adult student with many demands on your time, a web-based degree might be worth considering. Many of these offer more time leeway for completing the program. This simply means that you don't have to quit work nor ignore family and friends as much as you might have to otherwise.

Graduate Admission Guidelines

The graduate admission process is complicated and time-consuming, but you can get through it. The most important part of the graduate school application process is probably the amount of introspection and research you have to put into it. Identify your goals and what you hope to achieve by going to graduate school, and then find the school that you think can help you achieve those goals -- and that you think you can get into.

Once you’ve done that, start applying by taking an organized approach to the process; this should help ease you through it with a little less stress.

Time Table

It is important to start gathering information early to be able to complete your applications on time. Most people should start the process a full year and a half before their anticipated date of matriculation. There are, however, some exceptions to this rule. The time frame will be different if you are applying for national scholarships or if your undergraduate institution has an evaluation committee through which you are applying, for example, to a health-care program. In such a situation, you may have to begin the process two years before your date of matriculation in order to take your graduate admission test and arrange for letters of recommendation early enough to meet deadlines.

Application deadlines may range from August (a year prior to matriculation) for early decision programs at medical schools using the American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS) to late spring or summer (when beginning graduate school in the fall) for a few programs with rolling admissions. Most deadlines for entry in the fall are between January and March. You should in all cases plan to meet formal deadlines; beyond this, you should be aware of the fact that many schools with rolling admissions encourage and act upon early applications.

Applying early to a school with rolling admissions is usually advantageous, as it shows your enthusiasm for the program and gives admissions committees more time to evaluate the subjective components of your application, rather than just the "numbers." Applicants are not rejected early unless they are clearly below an institution's standards.

The timetable that appears below represents the ideal for most applicants.

Six months prior to applying:
- Research areas of interest, institutions, and programs.
- Talk to advisers about application requirements.
- Register and prepare for appropriate graduate admission tests.
- Investigate national scholarships.
- If appropriate, obtain letters of recommendation.

Three months prior to applying
- Take required graduate admission tests.
- Write for application materials.
- Write your application essay.
- Check on application deadlines and rolling admissions policies.
- For medical, dental, osteopathy, podiatry, or law school, you may need to register for the national application or data assembly service most programs use.

**Fall, a year before matriculating:**
- Obtain letters of recommendation.
- Take graduate admission tests if you haven't already.
- Send in completed applications. Winter, before matriculating in the fall
- Complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Financial Aid PROFILE, if required.

**Spring, before matriculating in the fall:**
- Check with all institutions before their deadlines to make sure your file is complete. Visit institutions that accept you.
- Send a deposit to your institution of choice. Notify other colleges and universities that accepted you of your decision so that they can admit students on their waiting list.
- Send thank-you notes to people who wrote recommendation letters, informing them of your success.

You may not be able to adhere to this timetable if your application deadlines are very early, as is the case with medical schools, or if you decide to attend graduate school at the last minute. In any case, keep in mind the various application requirements and be sure to meet all deadlines. If deadlines are impossible to meet, call the institution to see if a late application will be considered.

**Deciding where to apply**
The decision to go to grad school is an important one and you should realistically define where it makes sense to apply. Take the same approach that’s recommended for applying to college by choosing one or two “safety” schools, a few in the middle range, and a couple of “if you’re lucky” schools.

Being realistic about your qualifications doesn’t mean you need to immediately dismiss programs you think you can’t get into -- you can never be too sure of who they may accept from year to year...it could be you. So fulfill the graduate school requirements, and take a shot!

**Completing the graduate school application**
If you know where you want to apply, start getting ready at least a year and a half before enrolling -- two years if you’re applying for national fellowships or going after a professional degree in law or med school. Wherever you’re applying to graduate school, you’ll need time to meet all the deadlines.

Completing your application will typically require:
- admission test scores,
- undergraduate transcripts,
- letters of recommendation,
- application form, and
- personal statement

These are the basic graduate school requirements. If you’re going straight through from college, spend time rubbing elbows with your professors and leaving them with a positive impression -- it may help you get accepted.

**Meeting deadlines**
Graduate application deadlines for fall admission may range from August -- one full year prior to your planned enrollment -- to late spring or summer for programs with rolling admissions. Some schools may even accept applications up to the time that school starts, particularly if not enough students applied or were accepted.

If you’re under the gun or missed the printed deadline altogether, contact the particular school you’re interested in (as in College of Engineering, College of Public Affairs, etc.) to find out if they make exceptions to what they have in print.

However, most programs will probably require you to submit your application between January
and March of the year you wish to enroll. Check your deadlines carefully. Different aspects of your application or different programs within the same school may have different deadlines.

Admission Tests

Early on in the graduate admission process, determine if you need to take any standardized exams (such as the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) as part of your application. Completing these a year before entering graduate school and getting your scores back will help you rule out -- or in -- any schools you may have on your academic wish list.

Graduate schools are more competitive than undergraduate college when it comes to admission, so it’s good to know early on what your test scores are so you can weigh them along with all your other qualifications. If your scores are higher than the average student accepted at the school, then your chances are good, so long as the rest of your graduate application is in line.

If you're applying to graduate, law, medical, or business school you'll be required to take a standard examination. Few students relish the idea of standardized tests, but they help admissions officials determine who is capable of withstanding the rigors of graduate school.

Why?

Standardized tests permit students from a variety of universities and colleges with differing grading standards to be compared. For example, consider two applicants with GPAs of 4.0, but from different universities. Is the 4.0 from the state university similar to the 4.0 from the Ivy League college? A standardized exam permits these two applicants' abilities to be compared fairly. Standardized tests are also the basis for awarding fellowships and other forms of financial assistance.

Applicants to graduate school complete the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), which tests verbal, quantitative, and analytical abilities.

The Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) is taken by prospective business school also measures verbal, quantitative, and analytical reasoning but it is tailored to the needs of business schools. Prospective law students take the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), which measures reading, writing, and logical reasoning. Finally, students who hope to attend medical school take the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT).

Most standardized, graduate-school tests are designed to identify potential success or capacities for success, rather than measure specific knowledge or achievement. While some subject knowledge is essential (the Medical College Admission Test, for instance, evaluates fluency in the sciences), most standardized tests seek to judge a candidate's thinking skills.

Exceptional standardized test scores can open up new educational opportunities, especially for students with weak applications because of low GPAs, for example. However, note that although performance on standardized tests is a strong factor in the admissions process, it is only one element in the admission process; the undergraduate transcripts, recommendation letters and personal statements are other elements taken into consideration.

GRE Scores

Once you've completed the official on-line test, you'll have one last question to answer. The computer will ask, "Do you wish to see your score?" If you click on "yes" (twice to be exact) you'll see your Quantitative, Verbal and Combine scores. Your results go into the ETS databank, where they will stay for five years. Each time you send a score report to a graduate school, all results during the past five years will appear on your report. There's no way to hide a poor test result!

If you don't reach your target score, you can take another GRE as of the next calendar month. Keep in mind that most of the top programs will consider the higher of two GRE scores. Some
will even consider a third set of results. But none of the top programs will take seriously a strong score that shows on a report next to three, four or more weak scores.

If you decide you don't wish to see your score, click on "no" and the computer will cancel your results and your performance will not be logged in the ETS databank. Your record will show you took the test, but no school will ever know how you did. Neither will you - it is impossible to cancel the exam once you've seen your scores. Because the exam is expensive and you'll be (hopefully) well prepared when you take it, you probably shouldn't cancel your score unless your exam becomes a clear disaster.

**What is an Acceptable GRE score?**

What is a good GRE score? There is no official minimum. In theory, any score above 550 for Verbal and 700 for Quantitative can be considered acceptable. In the event you get a lower score, but the rest of your application offers very competitive features (professional career so far, secondary studies, etc.), there's no use wasting time working on your GRE. Bear in mind that putting together an application takes time and that you should manage your time as best as you can. No point in retaking GRE to go from 550 to 570 (verbal); concentrate instead on your personal statement and your references. In short, retake GRE only if you've made a significant mistake or experienced trauma the day before testing, which resulted in your score being significantly lower than the one you did during your preparation.

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**Letters of Recommendation / References**

Nearly every graduate program requires applicants to submit recommendation letters. Don't underestimate the importance of these letters. While your transcript, standardized test scores, and personal statement or admissions essay are vital components to your graduate school application, an excellent recommendation letter can make up for weaknesses in any of these areas.

A well written recommendation letter provides admissions committees with information that isn't found elsewhere in the application. A recommendation letter is a detailed discussion, from a faculty member, of the personal qualities, accomplishments, and experiences that make you unique and perfect for the programs to which you've applied.

**Who to Ask?**

Most graduate programs require two or more recommendation letters. Most students find choosing professionals to approach for letters difficult. Consider faculty members, administrators, internship/co-operative education supervisors, and employers.

The persons you ask to write your recommendation letters should:

- know you well
- know you long enough to write with authority
- know your work
- describe your work positively
- have a high opinion of you
- know where you are applying
- know your educational and career goals
- be able to favorably compare you with peers
- be well known
- be able to write a good letter

Keep in mind that no one person will satisfy all of these criteria. Aim for a set of recommendation letters that cover the range of...
your skills. Ideally, letters should cover your academic and scholastic skills, research abilities and experiences, and applied experiences (e.g., co-operative education, internships, related work experience).

**Approaching Referees**
When you approach potential referees, be prepared to make an appropriate and effective request. Also be aware of common mistakes students make when requesting recommendation letters. Ask if they know you well enough to write a meaningful recommendation letter. Pay attention to their demeanor. If you sense reluctance, thank them and ask someone else. Remember that it is best to ask early in the semester. As the end of the semester approaches, faculty may hesitate because of time restraints.

**Provide Information**
The best thing that you can do to ensure that your recommendation letters cover all the bases is to provide your referees with all the necessary information. Don't assume that they will remember anything about you.

Make an appointment to speak with your letter writers. Give your letter writers plenty of time (three to four weeks at minimum).

Provide a file with all of your background information:
- transcript
- resume or vita
- admissions essays
- courses you've taken with them
- research experiences
- internship and other applied experiences
- honor societies to which you belong
- awards you've won
- work experience
- professional goals
- due date for the application
- copy of the application recommendation forms (if provided by the institution to which you're applying)

**Confidentiality**
Recommendation forms supplied by graduate programs may require you to decide whether to waive or retain your rights to see your recommendation letters. As you decide whether to retain your rights, remember that confidential recommendation letters tend to carry more weight with admissions committees. In addition, many faculty members will not write a recommendation letter unless it is confidential. Other faculty may provide you with a copy of each letter, even if it is confidential. If you are unsure of what to decide, discuss it with your referee.

As the application deadline approaches, check back with your referees to ensure that the recommendation letters were sent on time (but don't nag!). Contacting the graduate programs to inquire whether your materials were received is also appropriate. Regardless of the outcome of your application, be sure to send a thank you note once you have determined that faculty members have submitted their letters.

**Application Form**
To obtain the materials you need, an application, a bulletin, financial aid and/or other information you may need, make your request from the website of the graduate school you are interested in attending. However, you may want to request an application by writing a formal letter directly to the department chair in which you briefly describe your training, experience, and specialized research interests.

If you want to write to a particular faculty member about your background and interests in order to explore the possibility of an assistantship, you should also feel free to do so. However, do not ask this faculty member for an application, as this may cause a significant delay.

**National Application Services**
In a few professional fields, there are national services that provide assistance with some part of the application process. These services are the Law School Data Assembly Service (LSDAS), American Medical College Application Service...
(AMCAS), American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine Application Service (AACOMAS), American Association of Colleges of Podiatric Medicine Application Service (AAPMAS), and American Association of Dental Schools Application Service (AADSAS). Many programs require applicants to use these services because they simplify the application process for both the professional programs' admissions committees and the applicant. The role these services play varies from one field to another. The LSDAS for example, analyzes your transcript(s) and submits the analysis to the law schools to which you are applying, while the other services provide a more complete application service. More information and applications for these services may be available from your undergraduate institution.

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**Essay / Personal Statement**

Students often wonder how to approach writing the graduate admissions essay, also known as a personal statement. What do you include? What don't you mention? Read these answers to common questions.

**How do I choose a theme for my admissions essay?**

It may be helpful to make a list of all of your experiences and interests at first and then try to find an overlapping theme or connection between the different items on the list. However, your underlying theme should be why you should be accepted into graduate school or specifically accepted into the program to which you are applying. Your job is to sell yourself and distinguish yourself from other applicants through examples.

**What type of tone (attitude towards the subject) should I incorporate in my essay?**

The tone of the essay should be balanced or moderate. Don't sound too cheerful or too morose but keep a serious and ambitious tone. When discussing positive or negative experiences, sound open-minded and use a neutral tone. Remember not to hit the extremes (too high or too low) and remain in balance. Additionally, do not sound too casual or too formal. Portray confidence and use an active voice.

**Should I write in the first person?**

Although you were taught to avoid using I, we, my, etc., you are encouraged to speak in the first person on your personal statement. Your goal is to make your essay sound personal and active. However, avoid overusing “I” and, instead, alter between I and other first person terms, such as “my” and “me” and transition words, such as "however" and "therefore."

**How should I discuss my research interests in my personal statement?**

First, it is not necessary to state a specific and concise dissertation topic in your personal statement. You are only to state, in broad terms, your research interests within your field. The reason you are asked to discuss your research interests is because the program would like to compare the degree of similarity in research interests between you and the faculty member you wish to work with. Admissions committees are aware that your interests will likely change over time and, therefore, they do not expect you to provide them with a detailed description of your research interests but would like for you to describe your academic goals. However, your research interests should be relevant to the proposed field of study. Additionally, your aim is to show your readers that you have knowledge in your proposed field of study.

**What if I don't have any unique experiences or qualities?**

Everyone has qualities that can distinguish themselves from other individuals. Make a list of all your qualities and think of how you utilized them in the past. Discuss the ones that will make you stand out but will still have some connection to your field of interest. If you do not have many experiences within your field, then try to make your other experiences relate to your interests. For example, if you are interested in applying to a psychology program but only have experience working at a supermarket, then find a connection...
between psychology and your experiences at the supermarket that can show your interest in and knowledge of the field and portrays your ability to become a psychologist. By providing these connections, your experiences and you will be depicted as unique.

**Should I mention which faculty members I would like to work with?**
Yes. It makes it easier for the admission committee to determine if your interests match with the faculty members you’re interested in working with. However, if possible, it is recommended that you mention more than one professor you wish to work with because it is a possibility that the professor you are interested in working with is not accepting new students for that year. By mentioning only one professor, you are limiting yourself, which can decrease your chances of being accepted. Additionally, if you only wish to work with a specific professor, then you are more likely to be rejected by the admissions committee if that professor is not accepting new students. Alternatively, it may be helpful to contact professors and find out if they are accepting new students before applying. This reduces the chances of being rejected.

**Should I discuss all volunteer and job experiences?**
You should only mention volunteer and employment experiences that are relevant to your field of study or have helped you develop or acquire a skill that is necessary for your field of interest. However, if there is a volunteer or job experience that is not related to your field of interest yet has helped influence your career and academic goals, discuss it in your personal statement as well.

**Should I discuss flaws in my application? If yes, how?**
If you think it may be helpful, then you should discuss low grades, low GRE scores, etc., providing an explanation. However, do not whine, blame others, or try to explain away three years of poor performance. When you discuss flaws, make sure you aren’t giving unreasonable excuses, such as “I failed my test because I went out drinking the night before.” Provide explanations that are reasonably excusable and comprehensive to the academic committee, such as an unexpected death in the family.

**Can I use humor in my personal statement?**
It depends. Humor may keep the reader entertained but at the same time it may hurt you if it is not taken in a light manner. If you do plan on using humor, do so cautiously, keep it limited, and make sure it is appropriate. The last thing you want to do is offend the admissions committee. Instead, aim to leave a smile on the readers face.

**Is there a limit in the length of the personal statement?**
Yes there is limit but it varies depending on the school and the program. Usually, personal statements are between 500-1000 words long. Do not exceed the limit. More importantly, remember to answer all the questions being asked.

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**The Interview**

Interviews are generally not part of the graduate school application process, though they are often associated with the graduate school requirements for medical and business schools. Even if an interview is not required, though, it can be a perfect opportunity to "sell" yourself to the school, and stand out from the pack.

Much like the undergraduate application process, there probably won’t be any interview requirements for graduate school admission (though interviews are required by most medical schools and some business schools). However, this doesn’t mean you can’t schedule an interview if you really want the opportunity to sell yourself.

If you think an interview will sway the graduate admission team of the school you’re longing to attend, by all means call the school and request one! There’s a good chance your request will be granted.
Take the professional approach to interviews

Required or not, an interview for graduate school admissions resembles a professional interview for a job. If you know how to look the look, walk the walk, and talk the talk, you’ll be that much more appealing to the graduate admission committee.

Make the most of the interview opportunity and leave a great impression by following some simple advice:

- Prior to interviewing, get to know the professors at the school you’re considering. If the school is far away, find out who the big players are, make some phone calls, and get your name out there.
- Do your homework on the program you’re interviewing for so you can respond to and ask questions intelligently.
- Write your personal statement before your interview -- it will help you respond to issues that may come up.
- Prepare like you would for a job interview and be ready to discuss your professional goals, areas of interest, and motivation for graduate study.
- Be prepared to answer questions in a way that demonstrates how you solve problems and articulate your ideas.
- Keep in mind that interviewers are probably more interested in your character than how much you know.
- Ask questions that matter to you and give the interviewer insight into your personality and priorities. Don’t ask questions that can be answered in the school’s literature.
- Be sure you are dressed properly. That means dressing as if you are going to a professional interview.
- Present yourself as positively as possible. Talk about your strengths, not your weaknesses.

The Interview will permit you to:

- project as favorable an image as possible, and thus overcoming any deficiencies your record might show;
- familiarize yourself with the campus, its facilities, and with the members of its student body;
- obtain first hand answers to questions about the school that may not yet have been answered.

Significance of the interview

The receipt of the letter requesting that you come for an interview clearly indicates that the graduate school is seriously interested in you. The large volume of applications has meant that admissions officers have to be highly selective in granting interviews. Admissions officers have at their disposal only a limited number of interviewers, usually faculty members and whose time is obviously very valuable.

Obtaining an invitation to come for an interview means either that they wish to confirm a tentative decision that you are acceptable or they think that you deserve a chance to prove that you merit admission in spite of some possible weakness. The interviewer will endeavor to appraise such personal qualifications as responsiveness, warmth of personality, poise, ability to communicate ideas clearly and concisely, and soundness of motivation.

What the Interviewer Is Trying to Discover

The following criteria will usually be touched upon in the interviewer's written evaluation of the interview:

2. Personality: Friendliness, ability to establish rapport and charm, sense of humor.
3. Communication skills: Ability to express ideas clearly, fluently, and intelligently.
5. Maturity: Ability to undertake responsibility that the career entails.
6. **Interests:** What educational, social, and cultural interests do you have?
7. **Level of concern:** Do you have a genuine interest in people, their problems, and helping them?
8. **Emotional stability:** Composure while under pressure.
9. **Intellectual potential:** Have you truly demonstrated superior intellectual abilities?
10. Overall subjective reaction of the interviewer to the applicant.

Evaluate yourself in terms of items 1 to 9 as honestly as possible and work to improve your weaknesses. By subjecting yourself to mock interviews by your peers, you can determine where your weaknesses are, and how well you are doing to overcome them. Allow your mock interviewers to be honest and candid.

**Sample Interview Questions Often Asked During a Graduate School Admission Interview**

1. Why did you attend ____ for your undergraduate degree?
2. What are your extracurricular activities?
3. Why do you want to become a ____?
4. What books and newspapers do you read?
5. What do you do during the summer?
6. How will you finance your education?
7. What other schools have you applied to?
8. What do you plan to specialize in?
9. Why did you get a poor grade in _____?
10. Do you have any questions?
11. Which school is your first choice?
12. What kind of social life do you have?
13. Describe your schedule at OSU-Marion.
14. What were your favorite courses taken?
15. Did you participate in any special projects in high school or college?
16. Will your religious convictions interfere with your studies or practice?
17. How did you arrive at your decision to become a ____?
18. Describe a typical day in your life.
19. Do you feel you should have gone to a different college?
20. What do you do in your spare time?
21. Tell me about yourself and your family.
22. What do you think are the most pressing social problem?
23. Describe your study habits.
24. What experiences led you to your career choice?
25. What are your plans for marriage and a family?
26. Why isn't (name of school) your first choice?
27. Why do you think you are better suited for admission than your classmates?
28. What is the status of (job title) in modern society?
29. What has been your most significant accomplishment to date?
30. If you had great willpower, how would you change yourself?
31. What are the characteristics of a mature person?
32. What can be determined about an applicant at an interview?
33. What television programs and movies have you seen recently?
34. Describe any research project you've worked on at The Ohio State University at Marion.
35. What is your opinion on _______ (major current event issues)?
36. What newspaper do you read and what columnist do you like the best?
37. How do you cope with frustrating situations?
38. What will you do if you are not accepted?
39. How do you rank among other students in your major at your school?
40. Have you ever worked with people, and if so in what capacity?
41. Who has the greatest influence on your life?
42. What made you apply to our school?
43. What are your weaknesses?
44. Describe your exposure to (subject) at The Ohio State University at Marion.
45. If you are accepted to more than one school, how will you decide which to attend?
46. How do you see yourself ten years from now?
47. Why did your grades go down?
48. What is your favorite piece of music?
50. Where is your favorite place to study?
51. What would you do to improve the quality of life in large cities?
52. What topics of conversation do you most enjoy?
53. If you were to have a year off, what would you do it?
54. What is your favorite form of entertainment?
55. What is your opinion of the government's health care plan?
56. How do your parents feel about your career goals?
57. What are the characteristics of aromatic compounds?
58. What do you think and how did you prepare for the entrance exam?
59. Explain why your admission test scores went up (down) when you took the test a second time?
60. Would you be willing to serve in an area where there is a shortage?
61. What message would you like me to convey to the admission committee in your behalf?
62. What were your most favorite and least favorite courses in college?
63. Have you been interviewed or accepted at any other school?

Questions You May Want to Ask at a Graduate School Admission Interview

Ask The Graduate Department...

1. What are the academic regulations/requirements for graduating?
2. a) What percentage of the students pass the qualifying exams the first time?
   b) How many chances are there?
3. Are a large percentage of the students graduating with a terminal master's degree?
4. What is the average time to obtain a Ph.D.?
5. How many students will be in my entering class?
6. a) When (and how) do you choose your advisor?
   b) How difficult is it to switch advisors after, say, a year?
7. Who selects the thesis/dissertation committee?
8. Is the support offered in the form of a teaching or research assistantship? How much is the stipend?
9. How many working hours per week is expected for a teaching or research assistant?
10. Are you guaranteed support for the entire time, or is it on a year-by-year basis?
11. If it were year by year, what would disqualify a student?
12. Is there a teaching requirement? How are teaching assignments made (lottery or choice)?
13. What sort of computer facilities do they have? Do they have easy access to electronic mail?
14. What are the provisions for housing, day care, health insurance, etc.?
15. What is the actual time commitment for a TA / R.A.? Is the stipend enough to live on in that area?

Ask Current Graduate Students...

1. Do the students have enough time for a social life? Is the type of social life you have acceptable?
2. What are the neighborhoods like? Do you like them?
3. What is the academic social environment like, for example, do students work together?
4. How well does the faculty treat graduate students?
5. Do graduate students have access to athletic and other university facilities?
6. Are the provisions for housing, health insurance, etc., adequate?
7. Is the atmosphere highly competitive?
8. Do most of the students like working with their research advisor?

Before Choosing a Graduate School Advisor...

1. Your advisor should be willing to help you get through in a timely manner, i.e., assist you with meeting the deadlines for preliminary exams, proposal preparation, and dissertation.
2. Choose an advisor whose research area is something that interests you.
3. Choose an advisor with whom you get along!
4. Does your advisor give you a thesis problem or do you find your own?
5. Find out what is the average time for a student to finish a degree with the advisor you are considering.
6. How much monetary support is there for research?
7. How independent is the research of the students?
8. How frequently is the advisor available?
9. Do students present their work at national conferences and who pays?
10. Does the advisor take an active role in placing her/his students? Do students go into industry or academia?

Issues for Women...
1. Is your prospective advisor sensitive to women's issues?
2. It has been said: "do not attend a graduate school where there are no female faculty." Talk to female graduate students in the department.
3. Do they have women's support groups? What do they do? Do they have one specific to your field?

Helpful Hints...
1. Attend research seminars offered at your university and annual meetings of professional organizations.
2. Participate in drafting grant proposals so you will know how to write successful ones.
3. Make an effort to present your work at departmental and professional meetings.

(Adapted from "Graduate School in Science and Engineering: Tips for Students and Faculty," by Marsha Lake Matyas)

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Portfolio

Some graduate schools may require or encourage you to submit a portfolio as part of your application materials. As you create your portfolio, think about the undergraduate work you have accomplished both academically and beyond. Also, think about what graduate schools look for in candidates including leadership, initiative, teamwork, communication skills, involvement in campus activities, excellence in academic work and more.

What to include:
- Overview of your accomplishments during your undergraduate years
- Your personal statement
- Class projects
- Resume
- Letters of recommendation from faculty, staff, employers, supervisors
- Include certifications, awards and other achievements
- Unofficial transcripts
- Student Activities Transcript
- Writing examples
- Items demonstrating teamwork and leadership skills
- Statement of teaching/research experience/interest if you are applying for assistantships
- Standardized test scores

Tips
- Take your portfolio with you when you interview and use it where appropriate during the campus visit.
- Consider making a copy to leave with the school after you leave the interview.
- Use a three (3) ring binder with a nice leather look cover with pockets to store additional papers.
- Create categories and use section headings to separate materials into an organized fashion
- Make your portfolio easy to read, attractive to look at and creative (but, not too cute or overdone).
- Have a table of contents to lead the reader to the right sections easily and to keep yourself organized.
- Strongly consider creating an electronic version of your portfolio for the web or on a CD.
Audition

Like a portfolio, the audition is a demonstration of your skills and talent, and programs in music, theater, and dance often require it. Although all programs require a reasonable level of proficiency, standards vary according to the field of study. In a nonperformance area like music education, you need only show that you have attained the level of proficiency normally acquired through an undergraduate program in that field.

For a performance major, however, the audition is the most important element of the graduate application. Programs set specific requirements as to what material is appropriate, how long the performance should be, whether it should be memorized, and so on. The audition may be live or taped, but a live performance is usually preferred. In the case of performance students, a committee of professional musicians will view the audition and evaluate it according to prescribed standards.

The DOs and DON'Ts Reminders

The graduate school admissions process is not just completing a graduate school application and sending it in. Applying can be complicated and time-consuming. From filling out stacks and stacks of forms to trying to make a good impression on the graduate school admission committee, there's a whole lot to do. This reminder list will help you get the job done well and on time!

The DOs for the graduate admission process

- **DO** start your graduate school application one to one-and-a-half years before you plan to enroll.
- **DO** make sure you double-check all your deadlines -- they may be different than undergraduate deadlines.
- **DO** make every element of your application the best it can possibly be.
- **DO** get your financial aid application in as early as possible. Financial aid for grad school is limited.
- **DO** fill out your financial aid application online, if possible.
- **DO** read applications and directions carefully.
- **DO** make sure that everything that is supposed to be included is enclosed.
- **DO** start asking for letters of recommendation at least six months before your application deadline.
- **DO** fill out your own applications. Type the information yourself to avoid crucial mistakes.
- **DO** make copies of all applications, and practice filling one out before you complete the original.
- **DO** type or neatly print your answers, and then proofread the applications and essays several times for accuracy.
- **DO** ask someone else to proofread them for you as well.
- **DO** demonstrate that you are professional, focused, and interested in the field you’ve chosen to study.
- **DO** be truthful, and do not exaggerate your accomplishments.
- **DO** keep a copy of all the forms you submit.
- **DO** be thorough and turn things in on time.

The DON'Ts for the graduate admission process

- **DON'T** use correction fluid. If you type your application, use a correctable typewriter or liftoff strips to correct mistakes. Better yet, fill out your application online.
- **DON'T** write in script. If you don’t have access to a computer or typewriter, print neatly.
- **DON'T** leave blank spaces. Missing information may cause your application to be sent back or delayed.
• DON'T be unclear. If the question calls for a specific answer, don’t try to dodge it by being vague.
• DON'T approach people about letters of recommendation at the last minute!
• DON'T go overboard on your personal essay. Treat it as a professional application, not a creative project.
• DON'T assume that the admission office has everything they need. Wait two or three weeks and then follow up to make sure.
• DON'T put things off.

Your fulfillment of the graduate school requirements is how the school sees you. Following this list of DOs and DON'Ts will help you make a good impression on the admission committee.

Balancing Work, Family, Studies

Graduate programs can be incredibly demanding, but if you find the right one and attend for the right reasons, as described above, they will be rewarding. If you have a family and a full- or part-time job, you'll have a lot of demands on your time. Here are some tips for balancing your grad life.

1. Hoard your contacts. Don't burn bridges with undergrad professors. Ask your favorites for recommendations, if they have not already offered, and provided that you honestly believe they'll agree to it. Such contacts might later provide some moral support during difficult academic times.

2. Determine your workload. Ask professors and current grad students how much time per week they expect you'll need to devote. Then add 20–30% as a safety factor.

3. Have reliable transportation. Having your own vehicle reduces the amount of time you'll spend in transit -- which is more valuable in this case than what it's costing you for gasoline, insurance, parking, etc. Alternately, is city transit reliable enough, and monthly passes affordable or even covered with your tuition?

4. Live on or near campus. If you cannot or do not want a vehicle, consider living as close to campus as possible. Apartments for married students might also be available for rent, if you qualify.

5. Determine a long term budget. It's not enough to ensure you'll have funds for the first semester of your program. Will you have enough for the entire run? Will a source of funds be available later, once your current savings run out? If you are not working full-time, do you have an offer for a grad assistant/ research job from your degree supervisor?

6. Work first, play later. Grad students do not have to give up all forms of entertainment. However, only you know what your priorities really are and what they mean to you.

7. Garner emotional support. If you have a family and do not have their emotional support, it will be very difficult getting through a grad program. This includes but is not limited to them respecting your study time.

8. Define time boundaries. Ask family and friends to respect a schedule that you post — say on the kitchen fridge. These are times when you are not to be disturbed, unless there's an absolute emergency. Make sure to define, especially to children, what an emergency entails. If you have a significant other, they must help enforce these time boundaries.

9. Exercise. Regular physical activity not only keeps you in shape and gives you the stamina you will need, but adrenaline pumping through your body perks you up. It's hard to stay in a funk if you exercise regularly.

10. Meditate or pray. When all else fails and you're stressed out, consider prayer and/or meditation. Both calm you down and relieve stress.