



Graduate School Guide

Graduate school is an **advanced program of study centered on a specific academic discipline or profession**. Although graduate programs vary significantly, in general, they prioritize studies in a specific discipline, involve smaller classes and greater expectations for students' work, and include scholarly research and/or hands-on work experience in the form of a practicum, internship or teaching.

Graduate School Application Process

This guide will walk you through the following 9 steps in the graduate school application process:

1. **Decide if Grad School is the Right Choice for You**
2. **Research Graduate Programs**
3. **Give yourself Plenty of Time to Apply**
4. **Take the Necessary Graduate Admission Tests**
5. **Apply for Financial Aid**
6. **Request Letters of Recommendation**
7. **Write Your Personal Statements**
8. **Assemble Remaining Materials**
9. **Prepare for Graduate School Interviews**

3 Different Levels

MASTER'S DEGREES are available in a wide variety of academic disciplines. Some can lead to a doctoral degree, but others are the "terminal" degree in the field (Master of Fine Arts (MFA), Master of Business Administration (MBA), Master of Social Work (MSW), and Master of Library Science (MLS)). Master's degrees usually take two years to complete if enrolled full time.

SPECIALIST DEGREES are typically earned beyond a master's degree and involve additional coursework, training or internships. These degrees usually lead to professional certification (i.e. Ed.S. for a Specialist of Education, or a Psy.S. for a Specialist in Psychology).

DOCTORAL DEGREES are the highest degree level and usually involve the creation of new knowledge through independent research. Typically these degrees require five to seven years to complete, including the time to write and defend a dissertation.

Some graduate programs are academic in nature, with a focus on creating original research. Others are more professional, with a focus on developing knowledge and skills for a specific field. Some are a combination.



1. Decide if Grad School is the Right Choice for You

As you weigh this decision, consider these questions:

- **How certain are you about the career or field you want to enter?** If you are absolutely convinced of the degree you want to pursue, then consider starting a graduate degree in that discipline. However, if you are not 100% confident, then spend some time working, interning or volunteering in the field (or conducting informational interviews with people who have pursued a specific degree or career in the field). Doing so could give you insight—without the investment of time and money in a graduate program. Do not go to graduate school unless you are convinced it is the right fit.
- **Can you pursue your desired career without a graduate degree?** If so, then taking some time to work or volunteer in the field before pursuing a graduate degree could give you greater insight into the need for graduate study. Also, time away from an academic environment can be valuable; graduate school admissions committees often look favorably on applicants who made a conscious decision to gain experience and then return to school. If you cannot pursue your desired career without a graduate degree (i.e. you want to be a medical doctor, a lawyer or a college professor), then going straight from undergraduate studies to graduate school is probably a smart choice.
- **Do you have the qualifications necessary for a specific graduate program?** Choose a graduate program most appropriate to your academic level and experience. Before applying to a program, assess your qualifications in light of the requirements outlined by the department.
- **Is now the best time for graduate school?** Even if you know that graduate school is in your future, it is important to consider the timing. If you work for a while in the field and find an employer who offers educational incentives, could you get their financial support to pursue graduate school? Will you be better able to focus on graduate school after you have paid off your college debt?
- **More specifically, could a gap year (or longer) be a wise choice?** There can be merit in taking a gap year or more to gain professional experience before attending graduate school. In fact, many professors claim that students with real-world experience make better graduate students because they understand their field better, they know the roles they hope to assume in their field, they ask better questions, and they are more invested in their education overall. Consider a gap year (or longer) if:
 - o You were not able to log the observation hours, volunteer hours, or job shadowing experiences as an undergraduate that are recommended by some graduate programs.
 - o You need rich experiences that you can write about in your personal statements and talk about in your graduate interviews. Application committee members usually want their candidates to have concrete work experience in the field so they know what they are getting into.
 - o Your GPA and test scores are not as strong as you would like, and a recommendation from a supervisor who knows your work in the field could strengthen your application.
 - o You are looking for some cross-cultural or global experience. Some people take advantage of the year after undergraduate studies to travel or volunteer abroad. This can be especially advantageous for people who wish to pursue a graduate degree with an international, cross-cultural or language focus.
- **How will you pay for this graduate degree?** Will you work full or part time while you pursue your graduate degree? Could you be eligible for continuing education funds from your employer? Would you go to graduate school full time and be eligible for a fellowship, assistantship, scholarship or grant? If you go into debt for this degree, would you be able to start paying it back (in addition to any undergraduate debt) immediately upon graduation?

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1. Decide if Grad School is the Right Choice for You (cont.)

- **Are you motivated to engage in the following activities?** You want to make sure that you have the determination to succeed in a graduate program, so weigh your aptitude for continued work in:
 - **Reading** – If you enjoy reading professional journals or publications in your field of study, then chances are good you will enjoy delving into the specifics of this discipline. Know that graduate study requires copious amounts of independent reading.
 - **Writing** – You will likely write as much, if not more, than you did in college (depending on your major). Often your capstone project is a written thesis or a similarly extensive presentation of your research findings.
 - **Research** – Research is a vital part of any graduate program, so be prepared for engaging in significant research even if you are not doing a thesis or dissertation. If you secure a research assistantship, you will complete research for your professor in addition to your own.
 - **Statistics** – Most graduate programs require a statistics course. You may want to take an undergraduate or summer course in preparation, especially if you have not taken a mathematics course recently.
 - **Giving presentations** – As a graduate student, you will deliver many presentations in class and/or as part of your research findings. You may even teach undergraduate classes as a teaching assistant or ultimately defend your research to a dissertation or thesis committee. Strong public speaking skills will help you communicate effectively.
 - **Organization & time management** – Graduate school will require that you juggle multiple assignments and activities, especially if you are working as a teaching or research assistant. The stronger your organizational skills, the easier it will be to manage your time and responsibilities.

2. Research Graduate Programs

Once you decide to pursue graduate school, the next step is to research programs that best fit your needs and interests.

Sample websites focused on graduate study:

GradSchools.com

Peterson's Graduate Schools

US News – Best Graduate Schools

The Princeton Review – Grad Programs

- After searching broadly for potential programs, visit each program's website to learn more. Note that the program's website is the best place to find specific information about the application process and to request more information from an admissions counselor.
- Conduct informational interviews with current students or alumni of the graduate programs you are considering. They can offer valuable firsthand knowledge.
- Tell your professors that you are researching graduate programs and that you welcome their input on which schools to consider. They have likely been through this decision process themselves. Furthermore, they may know colleagues or past students who have attended the programs you are considering.
- Attend fairs and virtual events hosted by graduate schools. Many programs host fairs and online information sessions where you can learn about professors, classes, application requirements and costs. You can also find events like this on Handshake.
- Prioritize the factors that matter most to you:
 - Location
 - Academic quality and reputation
 - School or program size
 - Faculty expertise and mentorship possibilities
 - Internship or practicum possibilities
 - Frequency and applicability of course offerings
 - Timeframe for completion
 - Admissions requirements, including test scores, GPA, recommendations and entrance exams
 - Faith component
 - Costs, including tuition and fees, the cost of living, transportation/parking, and financial aid
 - Campus culture, community and student life
 - Campus facilities and services (if in person) or accessibility to resources (if online)
 - Employment outcomes, professional networking connections and career assistance



3. Give Yourself Plenty of Time to Apply

While most graduate school application deadlines fall between November and February, they can vary significantly. (For instance, medical school application deadlines can be very different because most U.S. medical schools use the American Medical College Application Service as the primary application method.) Consult the websites of the graduate programs in which you are interested to determine their application deadlines. Note that there are likely different deadlines for applying to graduate programs and applying for financial aid. Pay special attention to these details, and consider the following timeline when managing your applications:

JUNIOR YEAR

- If possible, begin researching graduate programs during your junior year. Visit programs' websites, request promotional material, and talk to current students, alumni or faculty from the program.
- Start looking into financial aid resources.
- Register for any required standardized tests, and take at least one practice test.
- Identify the faculty members or professionals you would like to ask to write letters of recommendation for you.
- Review your unofficial transcript, as well as the procedures for how to request an official one.
- Take any required standardized tests.

SENIOR YEAR (SUMMER & FALL SEMESTER)

- Write the first draft of your statement of purpose, and make an appointment in Handshake for a Compass Center staff person to review it.
- Request your letters of recommendation from faculty/professionals.
- Visit the campuses, if possible, and talk to people who can answer your questions.
- Write the final draft of your statement of purpose.
- Submit your applications.
- Apply for any financial aid, i.e. assistantships, scholarships or fellowships.

SENIOR YEAR (SPRING SEMESTER)

- Submit federal and state financial aid applications.
- If you have not already, try to visit the campuses.
- Talk to people who can help you make your final decision.
- Follow up with graduate programs to make sure your application is complete.
- After receiving acceptance from the school of your choice, submit the deposit and politely decline the acceptances to other schools.
- Write thank you notes to the people who helped you through this process.

4. Take the Necessary Graduate Admission Tests

Most graduate schools require test scores for admission. These tests include the following:

- **The GRE (Graduate Record Examinations) General and Subject Tests** are required by most master's and doctoral-level graduate programs. The GRE General Test consists of three parts: Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, and Analytical Writing. The GRE Subject Tests are available for six disciplines: Biology, Chemistry, Literature in English, Mathematics, Physics, and Psychology.
- **The MAT (Miller Analogies Test)** assesses one's analytical thinking and can sometimes be an alternative to the GRE.
- **The GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test)** is usually required by MBA programs.
- **The LSAT (Law School Admission Test)** is necessary for entry to law school.
- **The MCAT (Medical College Admission Test)** is for medical school admission.
- **The TOEFL English proficiency test** is a required entrance exam for many international students.
- Other career fields like dentistry and optometry have their own admission tests, so carefully research your field of interest.

Be sure to study for the test and take at least one practice test. Also, register early for the test so you are able to take it on your desired date. Most computer-based tests like the GRE General Test and the GMAT do not have registration deadlines, but they are offered on a first-come, first-served basis. Other tests, like the GRE Subject Test, require registration up to six weeks in advance of the exam date. Check with each testing organization for its specific policies. You will want to receive your final test scores well before any application deadlines. This is especially true if you decide to take the test more than once to improve your score.

GoGrad's Graduate Examination Guides (gograd.org) are helpful resources for learning more about the GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT, and TOEFL. **Chegg** (chegg.com) and **Mometrix Academy** (mometrix.com) offer study tips and guides for the GRE, GMAT, LSAT, and more. **Kaplan** (kaptest.com) offers test prep courses.



5. Apply for Financial Aid

Start by filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). This typically opens in October for the following academic year.

Explore whether you can apply for any of these financial aid options for graduate study:

- **Assistantships** are typically campus work assignments (i.e. graduate teaching assistant or research associate) that cover tuition costs and provide a small stipend.
- **Fellowships** usually cover graduate students' living expenses while they conduct research or work on a project. They are typically awarded by merit as measured by grades, GRE scores, letters of recommendation or publications.

- **Scholarships** are usually awarded based on financial need, merit, discipline of study, career goals, or membership in a minority group. Some of the most coveted scholarships in America are the Rhodes Scholarship, Marshall Scholarship, Harry S. Truman Scholarship, and Churchill Scholarship.

- **Grants** are usually awarded to cover expenses associated with research or other projects and are typically allotted for travel, computers or materials. A coveted grant for students, scholars, teachers, artists and scientists is the Fulbright Scholar Program grant.

- **Loans** are available from the government or private sources.

6. Request Letters of Recommendation

Many graduate school applications require three letters of recommendation, so think ahead about who you would like to approach about writing a letter of recommendation on your behalf. Ask professors who can speak to your academic ability and motivation, as well as previous supervisors who can address specific projects you have completed, your work ethic, or your experience in the field. Only ask people whom you know will give a glowing recommendation. If you question whether they will submit a strong letter, ask them if they feel they know you and your work well enough to write a good letter. If they express reluctance, it may be wise to ask someone else.

Before asking your recommenders to write a letter for you, schedule a time to sit down with them and explain your plans. In order to offer a good recommendation, they should be clear on where you are applying, what degree you are pursuing, and your professional goals. Follow up in writing with your recommenders, detailing to whom they address the letter, its due date, and the method for submission (paper, electronic, etc.). Go the extra mile and provide your recommenders with a summary of your top

qualifications for graduate school, including courses you took (especially the courses you took from them and the grades you earned), the topics of any research studies you conducted or major papers you wrote, any internships or projects you completed in your field, and leadership or extracurricular involvement. You cannot expect professors or supervisors to remember details about your education and work, but you want them to include specific information in their recommendation letters; do them a favor and remind them of these details. Additionally, be willing to share any supplemental materials with them, like your resume/CV, writing samples, unofficial transcript, and the personal statement for your application.

Finally, be considerate of your recommenders and their busy schedules. Approach them about writing a letter on your behalf **at least six weeks before the deadline, although eight to 10 weeks is ideal**. Follow up politely if they need a reminder. A few weeks before the application deadline, confirm that your recommenders have submitted their letters and double check that they are showing up as a completed part of your application.

7. Write Your Personal Statement

A personal statement is an essay you submit as part of your graduate school application. For detailed information about writing a personal statement, please see the [Compass Center's Personal Statement Guide](#).

8. Assemble Remaining Materials

A completed application typically includes graduate admission test scores, letters of recommendation, and a personal statement. However, it may also include the following:

- A completed online application form
- An application fee
- A resume or curriculum vitae. Let a staff member in the Compass Center assist you with polishing your resume before you upload it to your application.
- Official transcripts from all of the higher education institutions you have attended. To request an official transcript, contact the registrar's office at your current and previous universities.
- A writing sample. Some graduate programs will request a portion of your thesis, an analytical paper, a newspaper article, a work of fiction, a poem, or a screenplay. Submit your best work and adhere to their requirements (i.e. if they want a five-page writing sample and your paper is 10 pages, only submit five pages).

9. Prepare for Graduate School Interviews

Many graduate schools require an interview as part of the application process. Review the [Compass Center's Interview Guide](#) for more information on how best to prepare, and **schedule at least one mock interview with someone from our team.**

SCHEDULE

After You Submit Your Applications...

- 1 Confirm receipt of all required materials.**

If you have not already received confirmation that your complete application was correctly submitted, call the graduate program office at least a week prior to the application deadline to ensure that they have everything they need from you.
- 2 Send a thank you notes to your recommenders.**

Send a handwritten thank you note to individuals who wrote recommendation letters for you. By showing your gratitude, you are paving the way for asking for more letters or assistance in the future. Also, follow up with your recommenders after hearing from the schools to which you applied; they will want to know the outcome of your applications.
- 3 Follow-up on rejection letters.**

If you receive a rejection letter, make an effort to understand why you were not accepted. A polite telephone call or email in which you inquire as to what you could do to improve your application is perfectly acceptable. Express your willingness to learn and adjust. If you choose to apply again, only submit improved materials.
- 4 Surround yourself with support in graduate school.**

After you enroll in a graduate program, you will need a community of support. Investing in a local church or joining a parachurch organization can make a huge difference in helping you navigate the highs and lows of your program. Consider connecting with one of the following organizations:

 - o Christian Grads Fellowship: www.christiangrads.org
 - o InterVarsity: www.intervarsity.org
 - o Cru: www.cru.org

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