

# ***THE GRADUATE/PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL APPLICATION PROCESS***

## **BEFORE YOU START**

### Leave plenty of time

Many components of the application process take substantial time to effectively complete. Well-informed decision-making requires solid research that requires a great deal of time. Start the research process approximately 16 months before you want to begin the program.

Most general application deadlines fall between December and February; however, check exact deadline dates once you have selected the programs to which you will apply. Schools will not make exceptions to application deadlines.

Deadlines for financial assistance are sometimes different from the application deadlines. In some cases, financial assistance deadlines are earlier. Be sure to check these dates and allow sufficient time to complete appropriate forms.

You may wish to make a schedule similar to the one below to track your progress.

Research completed by: \_\_\_\_\_

Take practice test for GRE or equivalent on: \_\_\_\_\_

Take a prep/course study during: \_\_\_\_\_

Select programs by: \_\_\_\_\_

Transcripts requested by: \_\_\_\_\_

Begin work on personal statement/essays by: \_\_\_\_\_

Take drafts to professors for review & critique by: \_\_\_\_\_

Materials ready for letter writers by: \_\_\_\_\_

Approach letter writers by (provide – at minimum – one month before deadlines) \_\_\_\_\_

\*Deadline for letter writers \_\_\_\_\_

Start filling out applications by \_\_\_\_\_

Applications completed by \_\_\_\_\_

\*These deadlines should be well in advance of the actual application deadline so you have time to follow-up and make sure they have completed the letters.

### Suggested Timetables

Spring semester of your sophomore/Fall of your junior year (for a typical December-February deadline)

- Start building relationships with faculty members who may be potential reference letter writers
- Ask for advice from professors and others regarding what graduate programs you should consider
- Explore graduate programs (consider faculty interests, entrance requirements, and deadlines)

Summer before your senior year

- Begin to draft a personal statement of your academic and professional goals
- Narrow your list of graduate programs (include a few 'reach' schools and one or two 'safe' schools, but make the majority of your list schools that have good programs and that have class demographics that match your GPA, test scores, etc.)
- Contact programs and request answers to any final questions
- Review for the GRE (download free software from gre.org) or other entrance exams...consider taking your GRE in the summer, so you have time to retake in the Fall if necessary. Keep in mind that preferred locations/dates fill quickly! Subject tests are offered only 3 times a year (twice a year on campus), typically September, October, and April with deadlines approximately one month prior to test dates.

## September

- Share your personal statement with your professors
- Consult your campus writing center or Career Services office to review your statements
- Finalize your graduate program choices

## October

- Take your (final) GRE or other entrance exam (keep in mind scores may take up to 6 weeks for grad schools to receive)
- Revise your personal statements and tailor them to your chosen graduate programs
- Order official transcripts (always send them straight to the institution – scores sent ‘to student’ are not considered official)
- Ask faculty members for recommendations (include specific information about deadlines, your personal statements, unofficial transcripts, and copy of your résumé)

## November

- Download application forms (or questions) so you can complete a draft...review and edit
- Submit completed application forms
- Follow up periodically with your faculty members to ensure they’ll be able to meet deadlines

## December

- Submit your final application and follow up with the program to ensure all materials are received

## January-March

- Visit your prospective programs, if possible
- Submit a FAFSA, even if you expect to receive funding, so you have other options just in case

## April

- Accept or decline all offers of admission

## **MAKING THE DECISION**

### Know Yourself

Know your career objective. The reason for attending graduate and professional school is to prepare for a specific career. In order to be able to present a strong application, it’s important that you know what that is (even if you change your mind once you get to grad school).

Knowing your own values, skills, interests, and work characteristics are crucial to choosing which fields and programs to pursue. If you need assistance, visit Career Services.

### Research to Select a Degree and Program

Research basic information about the university, the faculty in each program, and contact information for each institution you’re considering. When you go to undergrad, it’s important to choose the university wisely. For your graduate degree, look at the department more closely than the overall university. Two websites that are very helpful are [www.phds.org](http://www.phds.org) and [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com). Another is Peterson’s Guide which can be found online at: [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com).

In addition, seek advice from your professors, as well as faculty, students, and alumni of the graduate programs you are considering. Contact people who work in your field of interest who are not affiliated with the programs to find out what universities they respect or which their employers recruit from. Set up informational interviews and ask these people questions that will assist you in making an informed decision! These questions vary by field.

- Ask people who are in your field of interest what kind of training they recommend you receive and which programs they recommend.
- Find out if you are comfortable with the culture/locale of the programs and schools you are considering.
- Determine how you will be matched with an advisor, and, if you will be working closely with her or him, try to meet before you make a final decision on admission.
- Find out how faculty/departments support their students (financially and otherwise...what services are available?).

- Ask what percentage of the students in the past five years have graduated from the program and what the average length of time to complete the degree was.
- Inquire about jobs secured by graduates from the program in the past several years.
- If possible, visit the campuses; visit with faculty who specialize in your area of interest, meet with student services staff, and find out more about the program/research/requirements.

## **THE APPLICATION PROCESS**

### Clustering

Apply in clusters. Apply to programs where the average test score/GPA for the most recent entering class is lower than yours is. Apply to programs where the average score/GPA is on par with yours. Apply to programs where the average score/GPA is above yours. Do not rule yourself out of a program you really want--you do not know how the admissions committee will weigh the different components of your application.

### Statements of Purpose/Personal Statements

Most graduate/professional schools will have specific questions they wish you to address. Be sure to respond directly to those questions. Commonly asked questions include:

- What are your immediate and long-term career goals?
- How will graduate/professional school help you obtain these goals?
- What unique skills or aspects will you bring to our program?
- What experiences, research, demonstrated skills and accomplishments have made you decide on and prepare you for this program?
- How will this specific program assist you in reaching your goals (you may mention specific faculty, research, program emphases, courses, etc.)?
- Discuss your background only by directly tying it in with the above

Allow sufficient time to write the statement and have revisions of it reviewed by many people. Customize each statement to each program. Follow the "show, don't tell" rule-- describe experiences you have had that demonstrate your abilities instead of just listing them. Do not include your entire life story, unless specifically requested to do so. Do not make your essay any longer than it absolutely needs to be, but be sure to include why you're interested in that particular program/institution, what your long-term goals are (and how that program fits in with those), as well as what you would bring to the institution.

### Graduate Admissions Exams/Tests

Yes, they ARE very important! Test scores are often a key factor when a program is doing its initial screening. You want your scores to be good enough that the committee considers looking at the rest of your application.

**TAKE NO RISKS!** Take a practice test, study extensively, or take a prep course! Unlike the SAT's, programs will see the scores of any graduate test you have taken within the last 5 years (unless you choose *ScoreSelect*). Do not comfort yourself by thinking that if you score low the first time, you can take it again. Although you can take it again, it may very well work against you, as the schools will know your first score. Treat these exams as though you only have one opportunity for testing.

*Institutions that require GRE:* While most programs require the General GRE Test, some programs also will require the Subject Test in the discipline. It is recommended that the tests be taken on separate days. Few students can complete six hours of intensive examination and score well.

There are varying opinions on when you should take exams. Some students do better on exams if they take them while they are still students, when course material is fresh (this is especially true for medical programs). However, other students perform better when they have had some time away from school and have a clear

objective for attending a graduate or professional program. Although your GRE scores are held for five years, some programs will only accept scores completed within the past three years. Take the test when you will be best prepared, but no less than 8-12 months before you plan to enter graduate/professional school.

### Letters of Recommendation

Most graduate/professional programs require three letters of recommendation. The following are commonly asked questions regarding letters of reference.

#### *1. Who should write my letters?*

You should have letters from people who can comment on your experience and abilities relevant to graduate study in your chosen field and relevant to the professional work you will ultimately be doing. Generally, it is best to have some letters from professors in your academic major. Professional schools often look for letters from employers as well as from faculty. Research-based programs prefer letters from professors who can attest to the applicant's academic potential or research abilities. The strongest letters of reference grow out of an established relationship. Start early! Visit your professors so they know you early, rather than from 1-2 meetings the semester you're applying.

#### *2. What materials should I give my letter writers to help them write a well-informed recommendation?*

The materials you give your letter writers should help them write letters that are personalized as well as customized to the field and programs you have chosen. Include a copy of your personal statement (give them a rough draft if that's all you have), unofficial transcripts, papers you have written for them (with their comments), your résumé, and any other product or description of relevant accomplishments. Even provide a brief outline of what points you would like the letter to include.

You can request that letter writers address certain skills or achievements about which they have first-hand knowledge and/or use letters of recommendation to compensate for a weaker part of your application. For instance, if you do poorly on standardized tests so you have received a low verbal score on the GRE's, but you have an instructor who has consistently praised your verbal abilities, ask him/her to mention that (or even acknowledge your trouble with standardized tests). It is wise to put any request like this in writing so the letter writer will not forget. (Note that you cannot benefit from this if you did not take the GRE's early enough to have the results already!)

#### *3. Is it better to have a high prestige/status instructor write the letter even if they do not know me as well, or is it better to have a lower-ranked instructor write it if they know my abilities better?*

Remember, these letters should be as personalized as possible. It is better to have a strong letter from a junior faculty member or a graduate student Teaching Assistant (TA) who knows you well than a mediocre letter from a senior person who does not really know you or your work and abilities or who does not take the time to write a thoughtful letter. A TA may ask the professor to co-sign the letter and this may be helpful. Or, the TA may be asked for comments that will be included in the professor's letter.

#### *4. Is it better for me to waive my legal right to see the letters of reference that are written about me?*

There are varying opinions on this issue. You should discuss your decision with your letter writers. While some people who serve on graduate admissions committees prefer waived letters, feeling they have more credibility, others give equal credibility to all letters. In summary, there are advantages to waiving your legal right to review your letters and there are different advantages to maintaining that right.

##### Waiving your legal right to review your letters

- Some admissions committee members may give more credibility to the letters.
- Some letter writers will only write letters that the student will not see.

### Not waiving your right to review your letters

- You can hold on to your own copies for your own purposes.
- You can acquire a pool of letters and can select different letters for different graduate programs.
- You know with certainty the contents of all your letters.

Of course, some of your letter writers may give you a copy of the letter even if you've waived your right to see it.

#### 5. *If a letter mentions a weakness of mine, will the letter work against me?*

Particularly if you waive your right to review the letter, ask the letter writer if s/he can write you a positive letter. If an overall glowing letter mentions one or two areas for improvement, the letter may be taken even more seriously than one that makes you sound perfect. The admissions committee is being assured that your letter writer sees you realistically and is willing to be honest. However, if the overall tone of the letter is negative, this WILL likely count against you. If you want to see a letter because you are concerned that it may not be positive, consider asking someone else to write the reference letter!

#### 6. *If I do not apply to graduate school my senior year but I am planning to later, when should I get my letters of reference?*

There are advantages to getting the letters in order before you leave school, but there are different advantages to waiting. Many students worry that their instructors will not remember them. It has been argued, however, that reference letters are professional not personal in nature, and that instructors do not need to remember you to write them. All the materials that you give the instructor (see question #2) should be enough to remind them of your merits as a student and the professional qualities you possess.

#### Getting letters in order before you leave school

- You know where to find the instructor.
- The instructor remembers you.

#### Getting letters in order at the time of application

- You will have had time to clarify the specific field you wish to study.
- The information you give your letter writers will be different from that which you would have given senior year.
- The letters will be more customized to the specific field and programs you have chosen.

If you do not waive your right to see the letter, you may ask a letter writer if they will write a letter now and then refine it later if you save it electronically and give it to them when you know more specifically to which programs you will apply.

### Interviews

Doctoral programs in the sciences may interview prospective candidates. Prepare for interviews by researching the school and being clear about your goals. Be prepared to ask well-informed questions whose answers could not be easily found elsewhere.

### Follow Up

Even if schools say they will send postcards/emails to let you know what pieces of your application are missing, it is still your responsibility to make sure all your materials have arrived. Check early enough that if something is missing, you have time to get it in by the deadline!