

Graduate School Application Process ::

When Should I Apply?

Application deadlines will vary by school, and can also depend on the individual program within the school. Schools with a rolling admission policy make admissions decision as applications are received. You should submit your application early, allowing yourself time to respond to incomplete information. An early application can also give the admissions committee a chance to consider your application before they are inundated with other applications.

The Application

Your goal in applying to graduate school is to demonstrate what you will contribute to the program and what you hope to gain. Here are some considerations to get you started:

- Send an email or neatly typed letter requesting an application, catalog, and information about the department or program.
- Graduate schools generally require a non-refundable application fee, typically between \$35 and \$75. This fee may be waived if you meet certain financial criteria. Contact the schools directly to see if you qualify.
- Familiarize yourself with what is required to send as a part of your application packet (personal statement, letters of recommendation, transcript, writing sample, etc.) Your application should look as professional as possible, so don't wait until the last minute to complete your application.
- Seek out the assistance of a faculty advisor in preparing your application. If you are Pre-Health professions, see the Pre-Health advisor.

The Personal Statement

Most schools will ask for a personal statement describing your interests and future plans. This is unlike any other paper or essay you have written, so you should seek advice on it. Donald Asher's *Graduate Admissions Essays: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why* is a great resource. Be sure to ask faculty advisors, the Writing Center or Career Services staff to review your essays and personal statement.

The personal statement should not be taken lightly. It is usually the first (and sometimes only) introduction the admissions committee has to you. It indicates your writing ability and expresses your desire to become a professional in the field to which you are applying. Some programs only want a short statement, others may request several separate essays about a variety of topics.

Other hints for writing your personal statement:

- If you feel your academic record has some "bumps" in it, use the personal statement to address these, explaining not just why you faltered, but what you have done to improve your grades since then.
- Tailor your essay to each particular school's philosophy and requirements.
- Be specific about your accomplishments and goals.
- Most importantly, it should be individual and sincere without being full of clichés.
- Don't attempt to write your personal statement during one sitting. Plan on revising and adjusting regularly. It should be a "work in progress" that takes a few weeks or an entire summer to prepare.

Letters of Recommendation

Most graduate schools require two or three recommendations. Choose references you know well, can speak to your academic preparation and future goals, can be a positive recommendation for you, and are familiar with the field or institutions to which you are applying. Some graduate programs will also seek non-academic recommendations, usually from professionals in the field.

Use three well-written and meaningful recommendations rather than a handful of brief "testimonials" from people who don't know you well. Having a family "connection" may be helpful for setting up an informational interview, but may not be helpful as a recommendation.

Make sure you request letters of recommendation plenty of time before the deadline, preferable early fall semester of your senior year. Provide the recommendation form, a stamped envelope, a reminder about the deadline, and other pertinent information such as your personal statement and resume. Follow-up is your responsibility, since most graduate schools will not notify you if a piece of your application is missing.

Transcripts and Supplementary Materials

Request your transcripts from the Registrar well in advance of deadlines. For medical and law schools you will need to submit your transcript to an application service (AMCAS, LSDAS) which will coordinate and forward copies of all your application materials to your schools. Supplementary materials should be included only if they support your candidacy. Some schools may require a writing sample, research paper, music tape, or art portfolio. Be sure to take time and prepare these materials so they present your best strengths.

As mentioned above, follow-up with the schools is your responsibility. Err on the side of caution to ensure all of your materials arrive.

Graduate Admission Tests

Most graduate programs require a specific admissions test. The registration deadlines for these tests are well in advance of the actual test dates, and some are only given a few times a year. The exceptions to this are the GMAT and general GRE exams, which are only offered in a computer adaptive version that can be taken at almost any time. Note there is usually a limit to how many times you can take the test during a given period of time.

There are many options available when preparing for these standardized tests. Test preparation courses, manuals and computer disks produced by various publishers are all available. Preparing adequately is crucial, since it is often inadvisable to take the tests more than once.

You need to decide what method of preparation will be best suited to your individual habits. If you feel your time management and self-motivation are strong, you may decide a test preparation course is not the most effective way to prepare. If you aren't sure you will be able to set aside the time each week to prepare, or you want additional guidance in some testing areas, then you might want to consider a test preparation course. Student Educational Services, located in the Academic Resource Center, can provide additional information on the tests and review courses offered. The Pre-Law and Preprofessional Health advisors can also provide information and advice.

GRE (Graduate School Admissions; <http://www.gre.org>)

Format: Similar to the SAT, includes verbal, math and analytical sections. Some programs also require a subject test (i.e. chemistry, psychology). A writing assessment was added in October 1999. The general test is computerized, and offered regularly.

Scores: The GRE can be taken more than once; however, you should check with the programs to which you are applying to see what they do with multiple scores. Score reporting is cumulative (all scores during the last 5 years are reported when you request scores to be sent to a school). Scores are good for 5 years.

When: It is advisable that you take the GRE while you are still an undergraduate, even if you are not planning on going immediately to graduate school, while your knowledge is still fresh. The general test is offered regularly, so leave yourself enough time to possibly retake the test if needed. Subject tests are offered in September, November and April.

LSAT (Law School Admissions; <http://www.lsat.org>)

Format: The three question types are reading comprehension, analytical reasoning, and logical reasoning.

Scores: Score reporting is cumulative. The majority of law schools will average your scores rather than taking the higher score, so it is generally not advisable to take the LSAT more than once. You may consider doing so if you believe extenuating circumstances, such as illness, caused you to not do as well the first time. Scores are good for 3 years.

When: It is ideal to take the LSAT by July or October of your senior year, which will put you at an advantage with law schools that begin reviewing applicants in October and mailing acceptance letters by November. Waiting until December of senior year could put you at a disadvantage, as schools may be more lenient in the initial phase of applications, resulting in fewer spaces for those applying later.

MCAT (Medical School Admissions; www.aamc.org/stuapps/admiss/mcat)

Format: You are tested on the areas of verbal reasoning, physical sciences, biological sciences, and a writing sample.

Scores: Score reporting is cumulative. Different schools use multiple scores in different ways; it is generally not advisable to take the MCAT more than once. You may consider doing so if you believe extenuating circumstances, such as illness, caused you to not do as well the first time. Scores are good for 3 years.

When: The MCAT is offered in April and August of each year. It is strongly recommended that you take the MCAT in April of your junior year for admission the fall after you graduate. Waiting until August to take the test can put you at a disadvantage, given the high number of applicants and rolling admission policies.

GMAT (Graduate Schools of Management; www.gmac.com)

Format: You are tested in the areas of analytical writing, quantitative, and verbal.

Scores: Score reporting is cumulative. It is generally not advisable to take the GMAT more than once; some schools will average the scores or adjust the second score. You may consider doing so if you believe extenuating circumstances, such as illness, caused you to not do as well the first time. Scores are good for 5 years.

When: Many of the top business schools will require 2-5 years of full-time work experience before applying to their programs. Some people choose to take the test their senior year of college (while they are in academic mode), and some people choose to wait

a few years, so the decision is an individual one. The test is computerized and offered regularly, and scores are good for 5 years, so there is a great deal of flexibility.

Interviews and Campus Visits

On-campus visits provide insight into programs, the campus and the community. Getting a first-hand look is crucial for your top choices, and recommended for your second and third tier schools. Make arrangements to talk with faculty and other students when you are there, and ask to sit in on the classes. Explore the campus and surrounding area to get a feeling for what life would be like there as a graduate student.

Whether or not an interview is required will vary, as will the purpose and the format of the interview itself. Medical schools, for example, will usually put applicants through several interviews with faculty, and may use the interviews as a way to narrow down their pool of applicants. Law schools less often require interviews, and in fact, may not allow them. For graduate programs, it will vary.

Ask the admissions office what part an interview plays in the admissions process. If they say that it does not affect admission, then the interview is solely for your benefit. If the school doesn't require an interview, then request one. If they do not allow interviews (some will interview by invitation only), arrange for a campus visit to speak with faculty and current students. A good interview can only strengthen your application. You can use this time to demonstrate that your interests, goals and skills are compatible with and will enhance the program.

Preparing for a graduate school interview is much like preparing for a job interview. You need to research as much about the school, the program and its graduates as possible. You should dress professionally, and come prepared with questions of your own for your interviewers. The interview is an excellent opportunity for you to "sell" yourself to the program, particularly if you are a borderline candidate. You will be asked questions about your professional aspirations, your strengths and weaknesses, what you would contribute to the program, and various other topics. Participate in a mock interview with a Career Services staff member or your faculty advisor to give yourself some practice answering interview questions.

Other interview tips:

Interview early. Send a brief letter to the director and each professor you would like to meet, giving a range of dates you will be in the area. Indicate you will call to finalize plans, giving the faculty at least a week to receive and read your letter.

Prepare. Research the program and the faculty, reading articles they have published. This will also help you decide if you would enjoy studying with this faculty. Develop a list of questions. Be ready to discuss your goals and interests, how the program fits into your plans, and what you can contribute to the program.

Meet with students. If you can't, ask for names and phone numbers so you can talk with several students.

Follow up on your interview with a thank you letter. This should be sent immediately after your interview.