



Graduate School Planning Tips

Successfully applying to graduate school programs requires planning. Use this short guide to consider if graduate school is a requirement for your future career path, as well as gain helpful tips that will get you started on your graduate school plan.

Is graduate school for me?

Graduate school is not for everyone and it is not a requirement for all career fields. If you are unsure of your next step, consider the reasons to apply to a graduate or professional school listed below.

- Completed a [self-assessment](#) of interests and researched the educational requirements of career options related to my interests.
- Strong interest in a particular subject matter and through [informational interviews](#) found that further education is favored within the field.
- Chosen career position requires a [license or certification](#) that stipulates the completion of an advanced degree.
- Knowledgeable of the financial obligations and other aspects related to applying to a graduate program and found it to be an [investment for my future career position](#).

Degree Types

Academic or professional doctoral	Traditional masters	Professional masters	Traditional professional
PhD	MS, MA	MS, MA, MPH, MHA	MD, DDS, JD, MSW, Pharm.D., DMV
Research-based	Research-based	Practice-based cross-disciplinary	Practice-based
4 to 7 years	2 to 3 years	1 to 3 years	3 to 5 years
Major research project with dissertation	Research with thesis or capstone	Research project or capstone	Clinical practitioner training

When is the right time to go to graduate school?

- It is never too late to apply and attend graduate school. In fact the average age of graduate students is 33 years old. Many students take a “gap year” to complete a volunteer project or work in the field to test it out and gain skills.
- Start the planning process one year before your ideal start date and make sure to stay in touch with those professionals who will serve as recommenders to support your graduate school application.



Is Graduate School Right for You? _____

At some point in your college career, you must decide what you want to do after graduation—and that includes whether or not to attend graduate school. Here are some pointers to help you make an enlightened decision.

1. SHOULD I CONSIDER GOING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL?

Going might be a good idea if you...

- want to be a professor, lawyer, doctor, investment banker or work in any profession that requires a post-secondary education.
- wish to develop additional expertise in a particular subject or maximize future earning potential and career advancement.
- are deeply interested in a particular subject and wish to study it in-depth—AND have the time and financial resources to devote to further education.

Going might not be a good idea if you...

- are trying to delay your entry into the "real world" with real responsibilities and real bills.
- are clueless about your career goals.
- aren't able to devote time and hard work needed to succeed.
- want to stay in school longer to avoid a poor job market.

2. IS IT BETTER TO WORK FIRST OR ATTEND GRADUATE SCHOOL IMMEDIATELY AFTER I COMPLETE MY UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE?

Work first if...

- you want some real-world work experience before investing thousands of dollars in a graduate degree.
- the graduate school of your choice prefers work experience (most MBA and some Ph.D. programs require this).
- you can't afford graduate school now, and haven't applied for any scholarships, grants, fellowships or assistantships, which could pay for a great deal of your education.

Go now if...

- you are absolutely sure you want to be a college professor, doctor, lawyer, etc., and need a graduate degree to pursue your dream job.
- you have been awarded grants, fellowships, scholarships or assistantships that will help pay for your education.
- you're concerned that once you start earning real money, you won't be able to return to the lifestyle of a "poor" student.
- you worry whether you'll have the discipline (or motivation) to write papers and study for exams in a few years.

3. I'M BROKE. HOW WILL I PAY FOR TUITION, BOOKS AND LIVING EXPENSES?

- **Family:** You've likely borrowed from them in the past; maybe you're lucky enough for it to still be a viable option.
- **Student Loans:** Even if you've taken out loans in the past,

another \$50,000 - \$75,000 may be a sound "investment" in your future.

- **Fellowships/Scholarships:** A free education is always the best option. The catch is you need a high GPA, good GRE/GMAT/LSAT/MCAT scores and the commitment to search out every possible source of funding.
- **Teaching/Research Assistantships:** Many assistantships include tuition waivers plus a monthly stipend. It's a great way to get paid for earning an education.
- **Employer Sponsorship:** Did you know that some companies pay for you to continue your education? The catch is they usually expect you to continue working for them after you complete your degree to recoup their investment.

4. WHAT ARE THE PROS AND CONS OF GOING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL FULL-TIME VS. PART-TIME?

Benefits of attending graduate school full-time:

- you're able to complete your degree sooner.
- you can totally commit your intellectual, physical and emotional energy to your education.
- ideal if you want to make a dramatic career change.

Benefits of attending graduate school part-time:

- work income helps pay for your education.
- you can take a very manageable course load.
- you can juggle family responsibilities while completing your degree.
- allows you to work in the function/industry/career of your choice while continuing your education.
- employers may pay for part (or all) of your degree.

5. ASSUMING I WANT TO GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL IN THE NEAR FUTURE, WHAT SHOULD I DO NOW?

- Identify your true strengths, interests and values to discover what is right for YOU—not friends or parents.
- Keep your grades up and sign up (and prepare) to take the required standardized tests.
- Talk to faculty, friends and family who have gone to graduate school to get their perspective about the differences between undergraduate and graduate life.
- Talk to faculty, friends and family who are in your targeted profession to get a realistic sense of the career path and the challenges associated with the work they do.
- Investigate creative ways to finance your education—by planning ahead you may reduce your debt.
- Research graduate schools to help you find a good match.
- Investigate the admissions process and the current student body profile of your targeted schools to evaluate your probability for admission.
- Have faith and APPLY! You can't get in unless you apply.

Written by Roslyn J. Bradford.



Applying to graduate school timeline



The most important thing to remember when applying to a graduate school program is to start early, research well, and follow-up on everything. Use the information below to initiate and organize your graduate school search and application process AFTER you have determined that graduate school is for you.

JUNIOR YEAR:

- Keep your grades up. Graduate programs sometimes place a heavy emphasis on GPA.
- Understand standardized tests. Most graduate programs require applying students to complete an assessment like the [GRE](#), [LSAT](#), [MCAT](#), etc. Identify when and where the tests are being administered and plan accordingly.
- Generate a list of possible graduate school options.
- Research graduate programs with the following questions in mind: “What do you want out of a program?”, “Are there faculty conducting the kind of research that you are interested in?” or “Will the program offer significant opportunities?”. Also consider the following aspects of each program you investigate:
 - Geographical location
 - Faculty in specialty area
 - Costs
 - Financial aid available
 - Practical experience
 - Where the graduates are working
 - Housing opportunities
 - Diversity within the program
 - Resources available
 - Facilities (labs, research centers, etc.)
 - Reputation
- Reinforce current relationships with professors to secure future recommendations letters. Current professors can also be a great source of information since they have completed an advanced degree.

JUNIOR YEAR: Summer

- Study and take the respective standardized test or schedule a date for the fall.
- Narrow your school choice. Decide on one or two favorites, as well as one or two backups. The [Peterson's guide](#) and [GradSchools.com](#) include a list of programs that can be filtered by location, size, degree type, etc.
- Arrange a visit to your schools of interest to connect with current students and become familiar with the schools' environment, if possible.
- Request application materials from graduate schools or ask questions about the online application system. Check other application requirements and ensure that you know the due date for everything.
- Does your online image need a clean up? If an admission counselor were to find you on Facebook, would it hurt your candidacy?
- Update your resume and have it reviewed by the University Career Center.

SENIOR YEAR: September/October

- Depending on your area of study, consider researching the faculty within your desired program to examine their research interest. If you locate a professor of interest, you may contact him/her to express interest and ask questions. Professors are very busy, so be sure to have a reason for sending an email/leaving a message, and be careful with the time you are requesting.
- Request letters of recommendation from faculty. Give your recommenders the following information:
 - An overview of your experiences and/or a copy of your resume.
 - Deadline date. List a date that is a week or two before the actual date.
 - Name of the school and program to which you are applying.



- Instructions on how to submit the recommendations (via email, a database system or a letter).
- Draft your [statement of purpose](#). Consult the instructions for each graduate program regarding the statement of purpose, as directions may vary. Make an appointment with the UMD Writing Center to have it reviewed. Additional tips for getting started are listed below.
- Take any required standardized test!
- Attend area [graduate school fairs](#) to network with admission counselors and gain inside information.
- Research scholarships and potential sources of financial aid available through each program you apply to.

SENIOR YEAR: November/December

- Follow-up with professors to ensure recommendations have been sent and send thank you notes/emails.
- Have official transcripts sent.
- Polish off your statement of purpose.
- Complete application forms adhering to stated deadlines.

SENIOR YEAR: January/February

- Submit applications adhering to stated deadlines. Ensure you have a record of all of the documentation you submit. Submit your application early to avoid last minute rushes and complicated situations.
- Fill out FAFSA after January 1st to apply for financial aid. Remember, you will eventually have to include a copy of your federal income tax return.
- Check with the graduate program to ensure that all required application materials have arrived.
- Prepare for a phone and/or an on campus admission interview (optional in some cases; required in others).

SENIOR YEAR: March/April

- Make a decision. After you have heard from all of the schools, send your acceptance and declination letters promptly.
- Finally, the process is over! Do not forget to send thank you letters to all the people that helped you, such as recommenders, friends, etc. Stay in contact with your recommenders because you never know when you may need them again.

Exploration Resources

- UMD Career related [links for graduate and professional schools](#)
- [What Can I do with a graduate degree in...?](#)
- About.com, [Applying to Graduate School](#): Parts of the Grad School Application
- What you need to know about [medical school](#)
- [Law school](#) information

Advising Options

- The [Pre-Law Professions Advising Office](#) serves all current and former students at the University of Maryland interested in law school and legal careers.
- The [Reed-Yorke Health Professionals Advising Office](#) is available to advise students on health related graduate school admission.
- The [University Career Center @ BSOS](#) meets with students individually to discuss strategies for choosing, applying to, and evaluating graduate school offers.
- The [UMD Writing Center](#) offers feedback on personal statements in individual appointments and through workshops each fall and spring semester.



Funding Sources

Different types of financial aid exist for graduate school. Opportunities may be based within the university, federal government, or private organizations and will vary based on your area of interest and type of degree sought.

Based in graduate program or university

- **Fellowships & Grants:** generally requires an application and when granted, the recipients receive a “stipend” or awarded money. The recipients may be obligated to conduct research or particular duties outlined by the fellowship or grant.
- **Research Assistantships:** money awarded in exchange for the recipients’ research assistance, usually within their graduate studies area.
- **Teaching Assistantships:** money awarded in exchange for the recipients’ teaching of college courses, usually within their graduate studies area.
- **Administrative Assistantships:** position that contains a stipend for the completion of administrative task in an academic or student affairs university office. Graduate students in programs like Student Personnel or Counseling usually apply for this type of financial aid.

Federal government/volunteer

- **GI Bill:** Affords Veterans money to finance undergraduate or graduate studies.
- **Military:** Can often get support for graduate and professional education in exchange for a commitment of future military service.
- **Volunteering:** AmeriCorps offers a one-time educational stipend to accepted volunteers who complete a 9-month service commitment. Peace Corps and other similar programs offer combined graduate school and service opportunities.
- **Public Service and Student Debt:** [Analysis of Existing Benefits and Options for Public Service Organizations](#)
- **Loans:** Parents or students may borrow money under the federal loan program upon meeting certain qualifications. The loans tend to have lower interest rates than private sector loans and require repayment. [Read more.](#)

Private sector

- **Banks/Credit Unions:** Parents or students may qualify for a private sector educational loan. Loans must be repaid with interest.
- **Employer Sponsorship:** Some organizations fund additional education. The catch is they usually expect you to continue working for them after you complete your degree to recoup their investment.

Additional resources

- [Financial aid: Loan Analyzer](#)
- [Fellowship options](#)
- [Loan forgiveness programs](#)



Personal Statement Guidelines

STEP 1: BRAINSTORMING

Actions:

- Devote time to reflect on the following questions.
- Discuss them with friends or family members.
- Jot down notes. In some cases write sentences.
- Think about the flip side of each question. For example, why are you really committed to the field of biology despite pressure from your parents to become a lawyer or to get a job?

Your answers to some of these questions will form the heart of your personal statement.

1. How did your pre-college education influence your decision to pursue graduate study in your field?
Think about: High school courses, teachers, special programs, student organizations, and community or volunteer work.
2. How has your college experience influenced your decision?
Think about: College courses, professors, academic interests, research, special programs, student organizations, and the decision-making process you went through to choose your major.
3. How has your work experience influenced your decision?
Think about: Internships, externships, part-time jobs, summer jobs, and volunteer or community work.
4. Who has had the most influence on your decision to pursue graduate study? In what ways?
Think about: Parents, relatives, teachers, professors, clergy, friends of the family, college friends, parents of friends, local merchants, supervisors, coaches, doctors, dentists, lawyers, etc.
5. What situation has had the most influence on your decision?
Think about: Family, academic, work or athletic situations. Think about happy, sad, traumatic, moving, or memorable situations.
6. What personally motivates you to pursue graduate study in this field?
Think about: Your personal skills, interests, and values.

STEP 2: WRITING YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

Actions:

Incorporate your responses to the above questions. Begin writing your first draft:

1. Develop an outline of your statement prior to writing. It doesn't have to be detailed. It can be three or four main points in the order you want to make them.

2. Accentuate your strengths and what makes you unique.
3. Explain your weaknesses in positive ways. For example, refer to them not as weaknesses but as areas for improvement or growth.
4. Paint pictures and tell stories about what makes you special. In this way the admissions readers will remember you. The story can be happy or sad. The more feeling you can inject into your statement, the more you will stand out.
5. Find out the specific orientation and philosophy of the graduate program. Adapt and refine your statement to fit. This will make you stand out from other applicants who recycle the same personal statement with each application.

Suggested Outline

Your personal statement will likely range from 250-1200 words or 1-6 pages. The typical personal statement should be 2-3 double-spaced pages or 500-700 words. Here is a suggested outline. You should adjust the main point of each paragraph and number of paragraphs depending on the desired length of your personal statement and the areas in your background that you choose to emphasize.

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| Paragraph 1 | A personal human-interest story |
| Paragraph 2 | Your academic interests and achievements |
| Paragraph 3 | Your relevant work and/or research experiences |
| Paragraph 4 | Your career interests |
| Paragraph 5 | Why you are interested in this particular school |
| Paragraph 6 | The qualities you will bring to this school |

REFERENCES

Write for Success: Preparing a Successful Professional School Application, Third Edition, October 2005 by Evelyn W. Jackson, PhD and Harold R. Bardo, PhD. NAAHP, National Association of Advisors for the Health Professions, Inc.

"Perfect Personal Statements" by Mark Alan Stewart. Peterson's Guide 2004

PERSONAL STATEMENT CRITIQUES

Contact your campus career office and make an appointment with a career counselor to have your personal statement critiqued. Ask a professor if they would review it as well. Having feedback from professionals with different points of view can only make for a stronger personal statement overall.

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