



# Grad School Prep

## ADVANCED DEGREES

After you have completed your undergraduate or Bachelor Degree program, you might consider continuing your education to obtain an advanced degree. Perhaps you are considering the possibility (or feasibility) of attending *graduate* or *professional* school in an attempt to get your *Master* or *Doctoral* Degree.

A *professional* degree program helps you develop skills necessary for a career in a specific type of work: medicine, law, pharmacy, engineering, journalism, nursing, social work, counseling, business. A *graduate* degree program helps you develop skills and conduct research in a broad academic area: English, history, political science, foreign languages, the arts, math, education, and the sciences.

Among the most popular advanced degrees are: PhD (Doctor of Philosophy), MD (Doctor of Medicine), EdD (Doctor of Education), JD (Juris Doctorate), MS (Master of Science), MA (Master of Arts), MBA (Master of Business Administration), MEd (Master of Education), MN (Master of Nursing), MSW (Master of Social Work).



## GOOD QUESTIONS

Is a graduate or professional degree required in your field? Do successful people in your field typically have an advanced degree? How will a graduate or professional degree enhance your chances for success in your career? Learn as much as possible about your chances of succeeding in that field once you have the degree.

Can you do it? How well have you performed in your past academic pursuits? Do you have the academic and personal qualities to succeed? Graduate school is an enormous commitment of time, money, energy and effort. It is important to make an informed choice. Do you have the motivation and self discipline for another two to seven years of school?

## EXPLORING YOUR OPTIONS

It is important to conduct thorough research and gather good information regarding your grad school options. How do you know which programs to apply for? How do you decide where to go? Do you know what to look for in a good graduate or professional school program?

Consider these critical components: The accreditation of the institution or program, credentials and reputation of the faculty and department, quality of the students, breadth and depth of class offerings, admission and application requirements, employment success of the graduates, job prospects, access to campus resources, and availability of financial aid.

Important questions: How competitive is the program? How difficult? How challenging? How long is the program? What courses will you take? What activities are available?

Other factors might include location and geography, housing and living conditions, and cost and expenses.



## GET FOCUSED

Examine your motivations. Should you go to graduate school? Is graduate school right for you? Why do you want to go to graduate school? Is it for the right reasons?

How focused are you on your career? How genuinely interested are you in this field? Will graduate school assist you in achieving your career goals? Is a graduate degree a good investment for you?

Evaluate your situation. Determine your career and life goals. Decide what work you want to do and how you'd like to spend your life. What kind of work do you hope to do? What type of career or vocation do you want for yourself? What will you specialize in?

## APPLICATION PROCESS

Generally, most colleges require a completed application form (with processing fee) and official transcripts (confirming coursework, grades, and degree) from each institution you attended.

Components of the Application Process: Application Form, Resume or Curriculum Vitae, Statement or Essay, Portfolio or Samples of Work, Transcript of Courses and Grades, Grad Exam Scores, Letters of Recommendation.

Qualifications and Requirements: Grade Point Average, Coursework, Class Projects, Research, Publications, Extracurricular Activities, Club Membership, Employment Experience, Internship Experience, Leadership Experience, Community Service Involvement.

Entrance Exams: Graduate school applicants must present a satisfactory score on a prescribed graduate exam specified by the respective college or program. Among the most common exams are: GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT, MAT.



## FINANCIAL AID OPTIONS

Graduate Assistantships (Non-Academic)  
Teaching Assistantships (Academic)  
Research Assistantships (Academic)  
Fellowships (Grants and scholarships)  
Tuition Assistance / Reimbursement (Employer Funding)  
Direct Employment (Fulltime or Part Time Job)  
Student Loan (Bank or Credit Union)

## HELPFUL WEBSITES

Princeton Review - [www.princetonreview.com](http://www.princetonreview.com)  
Thomson Peterson's Guide - [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com)  
Council of Graduate Schools - [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com)  
Graduate School Guide - [www.graduateguide.com](http://www.graduateguide.com)  
All About Grad School - [www.allaboutgradschool.com](http://www.allaboutgradschool.com)  
Alabama Connection - [www.alabamaconnection.org](http://www.alabamaconnection.org)

## TIME LINE

Procedures and requirements for entering graduate school vary from one institution to another. For specific admissions policies, contact the university you are interested in attending or visit their website. Begin the application process early. Give yourself enough time. Know your deadlines. Typically you should begin the process about a year and a half in advance.

STEP 1 — Define your goals. Research grad school programs. Gather literature and visit websites. Create your short list of schools.

STEP 2 — Research financial aid options. Research housing and living options. Determine test requirements. Register for and take the necessary tests. Request letters of recommendation.

STEP 3 — Begin writing your statement or essay. Submit application packets. Attend grad school expos and forums.

STEP 4 — Visit campuses of grad schools. Attend interviews. Compare and discuss options. Finalize your plans.

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

As part of the overall application packet, many institutions require a *Statement of Purpose* or *Statement of Professional Goals & Objectives*. This personal statement or letter of intent or essay is a written narrative through which the candidate provides a brief overview of his/her knowledge, experience, skills and credentials and promotes his/her qualifications and potential for success in the program.

The content of the essay may include: Reasons and Motivations, Career Goals and Objectives, Professional Background and Experience, Level of Preparedness, Education and Academics, Coursework, Identification of Interests, Skills and Values, Achievements, Awards, Accomplishments, Distinctions, Projects, Research, Publications, Extracurricular Activities, Memberships, Leadership, Community Involvement, Strengths, Personal Traits, Prospective Contributions to the Field

## ON-LINE ARTICLES

About Grad School: What Do Graduate Schools Want?  
<http://gradschool.about.com/cs/miscellaneous/a/want.htm>

Advice for Undergraduates Considering Grad School:  
<http://dlis.gseis.ucla.edu/people/pagre/grad-school.pdf>

Grad Schools: Articles: Get Informed: <http://www.gradschools.com/article-category/get-informed-1>

Grad School Tips: Types of Grad School Essays: <http://www.gradschooltips.com/typesofessays.htm>



## GRADE POINT AVERAGE

Grades are important not as a sign of intelligence, but instead grades are a long term indicator of how well you perform your job as student. They reflect your motivation and your ability to do consistently good or bad work. Not all grades are the same, though. Admissions committees understand that applicants' grade point averages often cannot be compared meaningfully. Grades can differ among universities. An A at one university may be a B+ at another. Also grades differ among professors in the same university. Admissions committees try to take these things into account when examining applicants' GPAs. They also look at the courses taken: a B in Advanced Statistics may be worth more than an A in Introduction to Social Problems. In other words, they consider the context of the GPA: where was it obtained and of what courses is it comprised? In many cases, it's better to have a lower GPA composed of solid challenging courses than a high GPA based on easy courses like "Basket Weaving for Beginners" and the like.

## GRAD ENTRANCE EXAM SCORES

Clearly, applicants' grade point averages are difficult to compare. This is where the graduate entrance exam (GRE, MCAT, LSAT, GMAT) scores come in. Whereas grade point averages are not standardized (there are enormous differences in how professors within a department, university, or country grade student work), the standard entrance exam is. Your exam scores provide information about how you rank among your peers (that's why it's important to do your best!). Although exam scores are standardized, departments don't weigh them in a standardized way. How a department or admissions committee evaluates exam scores varies. Some use them as cutoffs to eliminate applicants, some use them as criteria for research assistantships and other forms of funding, some look to exam scores to offset weak GPAs, and some admissions committees will overlook poor exam scores if applicants demonstrate significant strengths in other areas.

## RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

Usually admissions committees begin the evaluation process by considering GPA and your standard entrance exam score. These quantitative measures only tell a small part of an applicant's story. Letters of recommendation provide context within which to consider an applicant's numerical scores. Therefore it's important that the faculty who write your letters of recommendation know you well so that they can discuss the person behind the GPA and exam scores. Generally speaking, letters written by professors known to committee members tend to carry more weight than those written by "unknowns." Letters written by well-known people in the field, if they signify that they know you well and think highly of you, can be very helpful in moving your application towards the top of the list.

## TIPS & ADVICE

What do graduate schools want? What do graduate admissions committees look for in graduate applicants? Understanding what graduate schools want in applicants is the first step in tailoring your experiences and application to make yourself irresistible to the graduate programs of your dreams. Their goal is to identify applicants who will become important researchers and leaders in their field. In other words, admissions committees try to select the most promising students. What's a promising student? One who has the ability to become an excellent graduate student and professional.

## IDEAL GRADUATE STUDENT

The ideal graduate student is gifted, eager to learn, and highly motivated. He or she can work independently and take direction, supervision, and constructive criticism without becoming upset or overly sensitive. Faculty look for students who are hard workers, want to work closely with faculty, are responsible and easy to work with, and who are a good fit to the program. The best graduate students complete the program on time, with distinction, and excel in the professional world to make graduate faculty proud. Of course, these are ideals. Most graduate students have some of these characteristics, but nearly no one will have all, so don't fear.

## CRITICAL CRITERIA

What is the criteria weighed by admissions committees? How do faculty weigh the various criteria for admission? Unfortunately there is no simple answer; each graduate admissions committee is a bit different, but generally speaking, the following criteria are important to most admissions committees:

- Undergraduate GPA (especially the last two years of college)
- Graduate entrance exam scores
- Recommendation letters
- Personal statement



## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

What do you consider to be your major strengths?  
What weakness or area for improvement have you identified?  
Name one of your greatest accomplishments?  
What relevant experience or activities have you been involved in?  
What have you learned from your extracurricular activities and how have they prepared you for your career pursuits?  
Which courses have you enjoyed most? Which courses have been the most challenging for you?  
Why did you choose this profession as your career goal?  
What inspired you or attracted you to this field?  
What do you think it takes to be successful in this field?  
What challenges do you anticipate?  
What are your plans for the future? What are your goals and aspirations?  
What contributions do you hope to make to your field?  
Are you an active learner? Are you enthusiastic about learning?  
Do you enjoy reading and researching and believe that you're good at it?  
Do you see yourself as a good test-taker? Do you organize your time and use it efficiently?  
Can you adapt easily to new situations? Do you set priorities and deal with competing academic demands?  
Are you able to integrate new information with your existing knowledge?  
If you received low grades, were there extenuating circumstances?  
How have you done overall in your school's required courses in your subject area?  
If your transcript includes withdrawals, incompletes or course repeats, what were the circumstances?  
Can you provide evidence of resourcefulness in the face of adversity during a difficult course?

## ADMISSIONS ESSAY

The personal statement, also known as the admissions essay, statement of purpose, and personal goal statement, is your chance to introduce yourself, speak directly to the admissions committee, and provide information that doesn't appear elsewhere in your application. Faculty read personal statements very closely because they reveal lots of information about applicants. Your essay is an indicator of your writing ability, motivation, ability to express yourself, maturity, passion for the field, and judgment. Admissions committees read essays with the intent to learn more about applicants, to determine if they have the qualities and attitudes needed for success, and to weed out applicants who don't fit the program.



## GRADUATE SCHOOL ESSAY

As part of the overall application packet, many institutions require a *Statement of Purpose* or *Statement of Professional Goals & Objectives*. This personal statement or letter of intent or essay is a written narrative through which the candidate provides a brief overview of his/her knowledge, experience, skills and credentials and promotes his/her qualifications and potential for success in the program.

The content of the essay may include: Reasons and Motivations, Career Goals and Objectives, Professional Background and Experience, Level of Preparedness, Education and Academics, Coursework, Identification of Interests, Skills and Values, Achievements, Awards, Accomplishments, Distinctions, Projects, Research, Publications, Extracurricular Activities, Memberships, Leadership, Community Involvement, Strengths, Personal Traits, Prospective Contributions to the Field

## PURPOSE OF THE ESSAY

Your graduate school application provides the admissions committee with a great deal of information about you that cannot be found elsewhere in your graduate application. The other parts of your graduate school application tell the admissions committee about your grades (i.e., transcript), your academic promise (i.e., GRE scores), and what your professors think of you (i.e., recommendation letters). Despite all of this information, the admissions committee does not learn much about you as an individual. What are your goals? Why are you applying to graduate school?

With so many applicants and so few slots it's critical that graduate admissions committees learn as much as possible about applicants so as to ensure that they choose students who best fit their program and are most likely to succeed and complete a graduate degree. Your admissions essay explains who you are, your goals, and the ways in which you match the graduate program to which you are applying.

## CONTENT OF ESSAY

Graduate applications often ask that applicants write in response to specific statements and prompts. Most prompts ask applicants to comment on how their backgrounds have shaped their goals, describe an influential person or experience, or discuss their ultimate career goals. Some graduate programs request that applicants write a more generic autobiographical statement, most often referred to as a personal statement.

## PERSONAL STATEMENT

A personal statement is a general statement of your background, preparation, and goals. Many applicants find it challenging to write a personal statement because there is no clear prompt to guide their writing. An effective personal statement conveys how your background and experiences have shaped your career goals, how you are well matched to your chosen career, and provides insight about your character and maturity. No easy feat. If you are asked to write a generic personal statement, pretend that the prompt instead requires you to discuss how your experiences, interests, and abilities have led you to your chosen career.

## TARGET YOUR AUDIENCE

Writing an effective graduate admissions essay requires knowing your audience. Consider the graduate program at hand. What specific training does it offer? What is its philosophy? How well do your interests and goals match the program? Discuss the ways in which your background and competencies overlap with the graduate program's requirements and training opportunities. If you're applying to a doctoral program, take a close look at the faculty. What are their research interests? Which labs are most productive? Pay attention to whether faculty take on students or appear to have openings in their labs.

## WRITING THE ESSAY

Your admissions essay is similar to any other essay you have written for a typical class assignment. It has an introduction, body, and conclusion. Your admissions essay presents an argument, just as any other essay does. Granted, the argument concerns your capacities for graduate study and the outcome can determine the fate of your application. Regardless, an essay is an essay.

Beginning is the hardest part of writing. If you search for the perfect opening and delay writing until you find just the right angle, phrasing, or metaphor you may never write your essay. Writer's block is common among applicants writing admissions essays. The best way to avoid writer's block is to write something, anything. The trick to beginning your essay is to not start at the beginning. Write the parts that feel natural, such as how your experiences have driven your career choices. You will heavily edit whatever you write so don't worry about how you phrase your ideas. Simply get the ideas out. It is easier to edit than write so your goal as you begin your admissions essay is to simply write as much as you can.

## THOROUGH EDITING

Your essay will require editing and proofreading. Once you have a rough draft of your admissions essay, keep in mind that it is a rough draft. Your task is to craft the argument, support your points, and construct an introduction and conclusion that guides readers. Perhaps the best piece of advice is to solicit feedback from many sources, especially faculty. You may feel that you have made a good case and that your writing is clear, but if a reader cannot follow it, your writing isn't clear. As you write your final draft, check for common errors. Perfect your essay as best you can and once it's submitted congratulate yourself for completing one of the most challenging tasks entailed in applying to graduate school.

## COMMON ERRORS

Be careful with your spelling and your grammar. In addition to spelling errors and grammatical errors, here are other mistakes you need to avoid:

**Misuse of Words** - Confusing words like *your* and *you're*, for example, will not impress the admissions committee. Learn more about commonly confused words to ensure that your essay does not include silly mistakes. Other often confused words include: *loose/lose*, *affect/effect*, *lead/led*, *to/too*, *they're/there/their*.

**Informality** - Essays containing slang may turn off some readers. Others may dislike the use of contractions. Err on the side of formality to ensure that you don't offend the graduate admissions committee.

**Sharing too Much** - Perhaps the most important error that graduate school applicants can make in preparing their admissions essays is becoming too personal. The essay is not the place to unload frustrations or provide a detailed overview of your childhood, for example.

**Making Excuses** - The admissions essay is a place where you can add a personal touch to your application. It is where you can provide context for your accomplishments. Some students use the essay as a place to explain poor grades. Take care in your decision to discuss your grades. Appropriate excuses to offer include serious illness, deaths, and major life stressors. If you choose to provide an excuse for poor grades keep your explanation succinct. Don't make your admissions essay an explanation. Admissions committees have heard it all. They may empathize with your situation, but ultimately their concern is locating applicants who will excel in their programs. Focus on your strengths rather than explaining your weaknesses.



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