

The Grad School Decision: Basic Considerations (<http://www.petersons.com/common/article.asp?id=506&path=gr.gs.advice&sponsor=1>) 2/29/09

To go or not to go, that is the question. Grad school sounds like a great option for...what exactly? A chance to learn more, get a better job, and earn a bigger salary...or are you looking to gain bragging rights, or perhaps borrow a little more time before you have to hit the real world? Whatever your reason, there's a lot to think about if you're going to commit to another few years of school.

Grad school isn't for casual learners — it entails hard work; long hours; lots of reading, research and writing; and most likely, financial debt. As much as the idea of extra letters in your title might sound endearing, if you really want to go for an advanced degree, there are a few things you need to consider.

Why you want to go

First and foremost, grad school isn't a cakewalk. Even if you were cream of the crop as an undergrad, this is a whole other ball game. Students entering grad school should be serious about their studies, so maturity and dedication are necessary. Your decision to attend should be made with a goal in mind — entering a certain profession or enhancing your career, for example. Don't go after an advanced degree if it's just a way to kill time or stave off a midlife crisis. If that's what you're looking for, take up golf!

What to study, where to go

When you apply, know *what* you want to study, because unlike college, this isn't the time to be feeling out what you want to do with your life. This is serious stuff, so give serious thought to what you want to study and why you think it will benefit you.

If you're sure of your aspirations, then it's time to consider *where* you want to study. Most programs are competitive and many schools have fewer grad programs to choose from than they do undergraduate programs. Many schools build reputations as excellent places for certain fields of study, and that's where they may put all their energy, finances, and academic resources. Depending on what you want to study and how concerned you are with the name of your alma mater, this may limit your options in terms of location, size, student body, etc.

Depending on your life circumstances, choosing a school may be complicated by the fact that perhaps you have a good job (or your spouse has a good job) — and maybe a mortgage and kids, too. It's possible that there are no options for graduate study within driving distance, let alone within the field you want to pursue. Ask yourself if you're willing to tear up roots to get that degree.

The peer factor

In grad school, classes are smaller and more interactive. Professors tend to treat you more like, well, adults...adults with skills, knowledge, and a keen interest in their chosen studies. Your fellow students may be a bit more diverse, including people from various stages of life. Many classes consist almost entirely of students in their thirties or forties who have returned to school to enhance their education and their careers. These are not folks who will be impressed with discussions of the keg parties last weekend. Come to

class prepared. Do your homework and expect to involve yourself in discussions, make presentations, and speak to the subject as an expert (or at least as someone who wants to become one).

The benefits

The benefits of a graduate degree are an essential consideration. While it may be a nice added feature to your resume, spending the time and money may not be necessary. There are a few degrees that are obviously necessary to get into certain fields, such as law or medicine, but many fields don't demand that you have a master's to get started. Take a look at available jobs — even the higher end job postings in your chosen field are likely to state something like, "Master's degree preferred, but will substitute for experience and other qualifications." If you're already working and have built a sturdy career, another degree may not be required to climb higher up that ladder.

How far to take it

Given that you need to weigh the necessity and benefits of pursuing an advanced degree, you should also consider how much of a degree you need. A doctorate in just about anything is great if you plan to become a professor or researcher, but in most fields, it's not necessary. While it may sound nice to refer to yourself as Dr. So-and-So, it's not necessarily going to impress potential employers or change their salary offers.

Competitiveness

We've already mentioned that grad students tend to be serious about their studies, and subsequently, there is a certain level of competitiveness, at least at the admission end of things. Grad schools have far smaller programs than most colleges, so you may be competing against some very smart people for a limited number of openings. Admission officers want students who will be able to contribute to their research programs and reputation, so ask yourself if you're up to the challenge.

Workload and lifestyle

If you start grad school, expect whatever social life you have to diminish substantially. (If you didn't already have one, don't expect to gain one!) After-hours get togethers will probably consist of library outings and study groups, and that's as good as it's likely to get. You may have *some* fun here or there (as you should), but the bottom line is there's a lot of work to be done and it's not the kind of work that you can cram in the night before. Say goodbye to squeaking by on the next day's test. It just doesn't work that way. Also make sure the prescription on your eyeglasses is current; you're likely to be doing a lot of reading...late at night...when everyone else is asleep.

Costs

Last but not least, look at how much that degree is going to cost you and whether you'll be able to get any free aid to obtain it. Free financial aid for grad school is harder to come by, so unless you're independently wealthy, it's likely you'll have to take on at least some debt. When all is said and done, will it be worth it?

How to Get Into Graduate School

Y. Evie Garcia, PhD

A. What are admissions committees *really* looking for????

1. Academic Aptitude for Graduate Study

GPA – undergrad mainly but some schools will also look at grad work
GRE. MAT LSAT, MCAT, etc. – be sure to sign up to take it well in advance of the deadline

2. Relevant Life Experience

Short-term and Long-term goals
Self Awareness
Aspects of Life that Relate to Experience

3. Work-Related Experience

Paid
Volunteer

4. Potential to Contribute to the Profession and to the Program

a. Professional Activities

Association memberships
Offices held
Papers presented
Publications
Honors received
Certificates
Licenses

b. Letters of recommendations

At least two from professors, if possible
Strong recommendations

5. Goodness of Fit for the Program

6. Writing ability

B. What if I am not strong in all areas?

Do all you can to enhance other areas:

Join professional associations
Get a volunteer position
Get help with writing
Take a class or pay for a tutor on the GRE
Get on someone's research team

Have someone proof your writing

Ask for STRONG recommendation letters and if the recommender is not willing, look for a different recommender

Take some graduate courses—get recommendations, possible research team, bring up GPA

Research college, department, and professors and make sure your interests align with programs to which you are applying

C. Common Mistakes that Applicants Make

- a. Missing the deadline
- b. Not reading the questions
- c. Not asking for *strong* recommendations
- d. Not ensuring that recommendation forms were sent to the university
- e. Failing to have a professor or experienced writer proof essays
- f. Revealing information that is TOO personal
- g. Not having at least 2 professors write the recommendations
- h. Writing such short essay responses that faculty evaluating the essay can't score it
- i. Failing to answer the questions—e.g. writing an answer that does not address the question
- j. Failure to read the mission statement for the department and the college in which it is housed
- k. Failure to look at the Program of Study and give thought to what classes cover and the kinds of training applicant needs most
- l. Botching the following question: “What kind of skills do you think you need to improve upon?” or “Describe your limitations” or “Describe what you would like to get out of Graduate School.”
 1. Listing a number of personal or character faults
 2. Listing common personal faults and trying to make them sound like an asset
 - a. I try too hard
 - b. I'm a perfectionist
 - c. I'm a workaholic
 3. Describing lofty ideals you want from graduate study
 - a. Make the world a better place
 - b. Become a better, more informed human being
 - c. Make a difference in people's lives
- m. Appearing unsophisticated about graduate school culture by referring to a professor as Mr., Ms., or first name.

D. What to do

- a. Meet deadlines.
- b. Read and answer questions accurately.

- c. Ask for **STRONG** recommendations and if recommender can't give one, get another recommender
- d. Start with recommendations as soon as you've chosen the programs to which you want to apply. You cannot control this aspect!
- e. Make sure recommenders know the deadlines.
 - i. Make sure they know whether it's a form or if they have to draft a letter.
 - ii. Estimate for them the time it should take to complete.
 - iii. Provide helpful information such as the semester and year that you began your acquaintance with the recommender, bulleted points about you, perhaps your transcripts, your resume or vitae, copies of papers you did in the professor's class that include her/his comments, etc.
 - iv. Ask for notification of when forms or letters were sent by recommenders and provide your e-mail address. Better yet—make a 15-minute appointment with someone who has agreed to recommend you strongly and ask her or him to fill out the form or write the letter, put it in an envelope, sign across the seal, and give it to you so you can send it in with the rest of your application packet (make sure that's allowed by the program to which you are applying)
 - v. Many programs have on-line application processes now where recommenders send letters and you can log in and track the completeness of your application file.
- f. No matter how good a writer you think you are, have a professor or friend who is an excellent writer edit your essays and statement.
- g. Do not list current personal problems and only refer indirectly to past personal problems if relevant to the application (e.g. application to psychology or counseling programs)
- h. Find at least two professors to write recommendations—preferably three.
- i. If it says write an essay up to a page, write a page or only 1-2 lines shorter.
- j. Read about the program in which you are interested and the college in which it resides.
 - i. Try to understand what the departmental and college goals are and use your essay to show how your goals are a good fit with the department and college.
 - ii. Look through professors' vitae and see who is doing current research that you are interested in. Best if more than one professor does work in that area.
- k. Look at the Program of Study and look up the classes in the on-line graduate catalog so you can describe what kinds of knowledge and skills you are expecting to obtain in the program.
- l. Use "j" above to answer the "What kinds of skills do you think you need to improve upon" or "What are your weaknesses?" questions.
- m. If your instructor holds a doctorate, refer to her/him as Dr. (not Mr. or Ms., or by first name) unless indicated otherwise by the professor.

SO, YOU WANT TO GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL?

TIPS FOR WRITING AN EFFECTIVE PERSONAL STATEMENT

"Admission to our department is very competitive, and essays make a big difference. After two days of deliberation we'll be trying to cut the top ninety students down to fifteen. They all have straight-A averages, high GREs, and all the recommendations say, 'This is the best student I've had in twenty-five years.' All we've got left to go on is the statement of purpose and papers they've written. That's why the statement of purpose is so important—it's where the student has a chance to establish a personal voice, to appear unique in a situation where everyone looks the same." From *Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a Master's or Ph.D.*, by Robert L. Peters, Ph.D.

Before You Start Writing: Some Things to Consider

- ✓ What is it they're asking for? Whether you're asked to provide a Goal Statement, a Statement of Purpose, or a more specific form of an autobiographical essay, insure that you have a clear understanding of what the institution wants from your essay.
- ✓ What length of essay is required? Some want essays no longer than 300 words; others want at least 500 words. Anything over three pages is too long. If no precise length is specified, one or two typed pages is a good length/
- ✓ What is most important for the admissions committee to know about you? The admissions committee wants to find out whether you are prepared for graduate study, able to do it well, and are focused. They want to know you're committed to this subject, how you got interested in it and what you hope to get out of graduate school.
- ✓ What do you regard as your most unusual, distinctive, unique, and/or impressive quality?
- ✓ What events or experiences in your background might be of particular interest to the admissions committee?
- ✓ What special qualities or skills do you possess that make you think you'll be successful in graduate school and/or the profession to which you aspire?

After You've Written a First Draft

- ✓ Did you give it time to cool before you've looked at it again?
- ✓ Does your opening paragraph capture attention?
- ✓ As a whole, is your statement interesting?
- ✓ Is it well written?
- ✓ Is it positive and upbeat?
- ✓ Does it sound like you?
- ✓ Is it an honest and forthright presentation of who you are?
- ✓ Did you answer the questions asked?
- ✓ Did you inadvertently omit relevant information?

Before You Submit Your Letter

- ✓ Revise.
- ✓ Show your essay to someone else for comment, preferably your academic adviser.
- ✓ Revise again.
- ✓ Eliminate all grammar and spelling errors.
- ✓ Print on top quality paper.

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A TRACK TO RUN ON

In your junior year:

- Meet with your faculty adviser, mentor, or with staff at the Graduate College do discuss and define your graduate study plans in relation to your long-range career goals.
- Solicit from your adviser and other faculty members suggestions of potential graduate programs. Contact these programs and request information about requirements and deadlines. (Not that application to some professional schools, such as schools of dentistry or medicine, are considered in the summer between your junior and senior years.)
- Narrow your field of potential programs to five or six. Visit their web sites. In particular, you're looking for information about the research interests of the faculty. Contact those faculty members who are doing research in your field of interest. Tell them of your plans and ask them questions about their research. The point here is to establish a relationship with the faculty member so that when applications are reviewed the faculty member can support your application.
- Create a time line for applying to the appropriate programs based on the requirements and deadlines for each. Provide yourself with a cushion to accommodate unexpected delays. Many programs review applications received by a specific deadline—miss the deadline and you will have to wait another year to be considered for admission.

In your senior year:

- Register for required tests such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) or the Miller Analogies Test (MAT). Do this at least a month prior to the test date.
- Take required tests and when you receive the results, decide whether to re-take them.
- Seek out and prepare financial information for grants, fellowships, scholarships, loans, and graduate assistantships.
- Request official transcripts of your undergraduate career be sent to the institutions to which you are applying.
- If letters of recommendation are required, ask faculty members to write them for you. If the program requires that letters be submitted on forms, provide the forms to the faculty member. Allow ample time for faculty members to write their recommendations and submit them by the required deadline. Four to six weeks is reasonable. A thank you note is always appropriate.
- Prepare your statement of purpose or goals for your application. Revise it and ask your faculty adviser to review it. NAU's Career Services is available to provide assistance with writing these statements for students currently enrolled at NAU.
- Complete your application. Insure that all relevant information is provided. Most graduate programs have a two-track application process. You must apply for admission into the Graduate College and you must also apply for admission into the specific program. Make certain you understand the requirements of both tracks. More and more programs are using an online application process. Take the time to understand how the online application works.
- Approximately one month after you have applied, contact the institution to confirm whether all application materials have been received. If anything is missing, send the requested material immediately.

When you get there:

- Visit the Graduate College; make friends with the department secretary; remember that your graduate education is your responsibility—pay attention to details and ask questions.

SOME WEB SITES YOU SHOULD VISIT

Gradview.com

Petersons.com

GRE.org

Gradschools.com

Help With Curriculum Vita

<http://www.cestagi.com/about.php>

NAU Testing

<http://testing.nau.edu/exams/admissions.html>

SOME BOOKS YOU MIGHT WANT TO READ

- Asher, D. (2008). *Graduate admissions essays: Write your way into the graduate school of your choice (graduate admissions essays)*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.
- Barnes, C. (2002). *Kaplan/Newsweek graduate school admissions adviser, (4th ed.)*. New York: Kaplan. 2002.
- Frank, F. & Stein, K. (2004). *Playing the game: The streetsmart guide to graduate school*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.
- Get into graduate school: A strategic approach for master's and doctoral candidates*. (2008). New York, NY: Kaplan Publishing.
- Getting money for graduate school*. (2002). Princeton NJ: Peterson's Guides.
- Graduate schools in the U.S. 2008* (2007). Lawrenceville, NJ: Peterson's.
- Mumby, D. (2008). *Graduate school: Winning strategies for getting in with or without excellent grades*. Quebec, Canada: Proto Press Publications.
- Peters, R. (1997). *Getting what you came for: The smart student's guide to earning a master's or Ph.D.* New York: Noonday Press.
- Stelzer, R. (1997). *How to write a winning personal statement for graduate and professional school*. Princeton NJ: Peterson's Guides.