

# Preparing for Graduate School

## USC CAREER CENTER

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### Is graduate school for me?

*Take this brief survey to assess your motivation to continue your education*

### Types of graduate programs

*Learn the differences between academic and professional programs*

### Factors to consider

*These nine criteria will help you find your best program match*

### Writing a winning essay

*How to set yourself apart with a unique personal statement*

### The graduate school application process

*A step by step guide to meeting admission requirements on time*

**Like your bachelors degree,  
graduate education is  
one of the best investments  
you can make.**

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UNIVERSITY OF  
SOUTH CAROLINA

## IS GRADUATE SCHOOL FOR ME?:

Label each statement below as True, False, or Unknown:

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. If I do not go to graduate school now, I may never go.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. I can get a job in my field without a graduate degree, but not in my specialized area of interest.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. I am unsure of my career goals and graduate school will help me clarify my interests.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. I am actively exploring both graduate school and direct entry into the market place.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. My professors are encouraging me to attend graduate/professional school.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. I cannot work in my field of interest without a graduate degree.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. The job market is crowded and a graduate degree will make me more competitive.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. A graduate degree will significantly increase my entry level salary.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I like school; I am not ready to leave the academic environment.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. I have career-related experience as part of my background.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. I have always known that I would go directly from undergraduate school into graduate study.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. Most students enter my field of graduate study directly from undergraduate school.

My primary reason for considering graduate school now is:

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The academic programs of study I am considering are:

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## TYPES OF GRADUATE STUDY:

### ***Professional Schools***

- Professional Schools emphasize the practical application of knowledge and skills. They include dental, medical, veterinarian, law, paralegal, and business schools.
- Many professional schools do not require applicants to have a specific undergraduate degree; however, specific (related or rigorous) undergraduate courses may be an important factor. Typically, professional schools are interested in how academically challenging your previous coursework was.
- Professional schools often evaluate applicants heavily according to responses to application essay questions and/or a personal statement. They are concerned with responses to ethical/philosophical and scenario questions.
- Professional schools are interested in an applicant's background in terms of community service, leadership, campus and association involvement, work experience, and the result of tests such as the LSAT and MCAT.
- More students go directly into professional schools (immediately following undergraduate education) than those who go directly on to graduate school.

### ***Graduate Schools***

- There are many specialized paths to consider when applying to graduate schools. For example, a student interested in counseling could earn an M.Ed. (Master of Education) in Counselor Education, an M.A. (Master of Arts) in Counseling Psychology or a M.S.W. (Master of Social Work). Each program may have an entirely different philosophical approach and may better prepare students for working in different areas of the market. For example, some programs prepare students for careers as professors or researchers, and others prepare students for careers in varying areas of industry such as business or government. It is important to have a solid grasp of the specialty area you want to pursue and the industry area in which you wish to work when choosing a graduate program.
- Graduate schools are interested in an applicant's background in terms of community service, leadership, campus and association involvement, work experience and the results of standardized tests. (Some programs require both general and subject area exams and have minimum standards for admittance.)
- Some graduate programs may require you to obtain a credential file (typically education and pharmacy programs).
- Graduate degrees may or may not increase salaries depending on the academic area. (Investigate.)
- Many students take time off between undergraduate and graduate studies in order to acquire valuable work experience and further confirm their specialty area of choice. (Some industries and graduate schools prefer this.)

## **FACTORS TO CONSIDER:**

### **Geographical Area**

Consider whether you can afford in-state vs. out-of-state tuition, how much you can spend on travel expenses, how far you want to be from loved ones and how far-reaching the reputation of the program is.

### **Finances**

Consider how much you can pay toward tuition, books, housing, living expenses, etc. Are you interested in fellowships, scholarships, tuition waivers or graduate assistant stipends, and are they available?

### **Experiential Learning**

Does the school offer graduate assistantships? If so, are they related to your studies and will they afford you related practical or professional experience, or only teaching experience?

### **Reputation**

Are the programs accredited by the appropriate accreditation boards?

### **Quality**

Consider the quality of the academic courses, the library, the equipment or labs, advising, etc.

### **Demographics and Culture**

Consider these factors for both the student body and the faculty. What is your impression of faculty/student interaction? How is morale of the department? Do you "fit" with the environment?

### **Publications and Faculty Research**

How well known are professors in the academic marketplace? Do you wish to study or conduct research under a particular "expert" in the field who teaches at a particular institution?

### **Requirements**

How many credit hours (or years) is the program? Does the program require students to take comprehensive finals (final exams which cover the entire curriculum), or research and write a thesis?

### **Preparation/Placement Record**

What types of positions have previous graduates of the program gone on to hold?

## WRITING A WINNING ESSAY:

Writing an essay or personal statement is often the most difficult part of the application, as well as the most distinguishing. It is the one portion of the application that allows you to really set yourself apart and tell the admissions committee what you have to offer that is unique from other applicants. It should be something that only you could write and does not resemble what all other applicants are likely writing. It should be well thought out, a clear, succinct statement showing that you have a definite sense of your goals, and be grammatically perfect.

### **Types of essays**

Some programs request only 1 or 2 paragraphs about why you want to pursue graduate study. Others require 5 or 6 separate essays in which you are expected to write at length about your motivation for graduate study, your strengths and weaknesses, your values and philosophies on a given topic, your greatest achievements, an influential life event and solutions to hypothetical problems. Business schools are notorious for requiring several time consuming essays.

### **Content**

A graduate school essay should be essentially a statement of your ideas or goals. Usually it includes a certain amount of personal history, but you do not have to supply autobiographical information unless required by the school. In deciding whether or not to include personal history consider its influence on your future plans and ability to distinguish you further from other applicants. Keep your essay positive and upbeat. It is better not to mention low grades or test scores unless specifically asked to. If negative circumstances must be addressed, they should: 1) be in the past; 2) be currently resolved; and 3) be unlikely to recur. Avoid long, tedious excuses. You may also wish to ask one of your references to address these issues in the recommendation letter.

The admissions committee may be trying to evaluate some, or all, of the following things from your essay

- A clear reflection of your writing abilities (both grammatical and creative).
- The clarity, focus and depth of your thinking.
- Level of maturity.
- Reasons for deciding to pursue graduate education in a *particular field* and at a *particular institution*.
- *Motivation, commitment* and *enthusiasm* to pursue a particular field of study.
- Major area of special interest.
- Expectations you have with regard to the program of study and career opportunities.
- Immediate and long-term goals and how previous research, education, and work experience relate to your future plans.

### **Approaches/Tips**

- Jot down the most unique things about you. List your goals, accomplishments, and influences.
- Concentrate on the opening paragraph. Avoid "I have always wanted to be a \_\_\_\_." Consider opening with an epiphany – the moment you realized your passion.
- Have an angle or a "hook" that emphasizes a distinguishing characteristic about you or a life event.
- Tell a story. Even if it includes autobiographical information, it does not have to be written chronologically.
- Demonstrate that you have researched the program(s) and know why you are choosing to apply.
- Consider the reader's point of view. Avoid any statements that could be interpreted as dishonest.
- Less is more. Illustrate the salient points in depth and refer to supporting materials for more detail.
- Open or end with a quote that has particular relevance to you, your philosophies or the field.

**Source:** Asher, D. (2008). *Graduate admissions essays: Write your way into the graduate school of your choice*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press.

## THE APPLICATION PROCESS:

### ***Junior Year: Fall and Spring***

- Attend the Graduate & Professional School Fair sponsored by the Career Center, or similar programs offered by academic colleges.
- Determine your area of interest and whether you prefer an academic or professional based program.
- Determine your financial resources. Consider how this may affect your choice of programs in-state versus out-of-state (tuition differences), how many programs you will apply to (application fees) and whether or not you will need to obtain a paid assistantship or other paid work while in school.
- Research related institutions and programs (*Peterson's Guides* and professors are both good resources).
- Talk to advisors/professors about the application process.
- Register for appropriate graduate admissions tests (i.e. GRE, GMAT, MCAT, LSAT). Take practice exams if desired.
- Write a resume and have it critiqued at the Career Center. You may wish to include this in your application.
- Ask supervisors/professors for letters of recommendation. Provide a copy of your resume to assist them.

### ***Junior Year: Summer***

- Investigate national scholarships.
- Take required graduate admission tests.
- Write schools of choice for application materials (both for programs of study and assistantships).
- Visit institutions of interest, if possible. If not, call to discuss programs with appropriate program coordinators.
- Write your application essay. Have it critiqued by the Career Center and/or a writing professor.
- Check on application deadlines vs. rolling admissions policies (both for programs of study and assistantships).
- For medical, dental, osteopathy, podiatry, or law school, you may need to register for the national application or data assembly service most programs use.

## THE APPLICATION PROCESS (CON'T.):

### **Senior Year: Fall**

- Obtain letters of recommendation.
- Request copies of transcript from the Registrar's office and send separately, or with application, as requested.
- Take graduate admission tests if you have not already done so.
- Apply for financial aid or student loans, as well as scholarships, if desired or necessary.
- Send completed applications in advance of the deadlines.

### **Senior Year: Spring**

- Check with institutions before deadlines to make sure files are complete.
- Interview at institutions that require and interview for either program admittance or assistantships.
- Visit institutions that accept you, investigate housing options, and make final decision.
- Talk to students currently enrolled in the program.
- Send deposit to institution of choice.
- Make housing arrangements (such as completing application for graduate housing or an off campus apartment).
- Notify others institutions that accepted you so that they may admit students on their waiting lists.
- Send thank you notes to people who wrote your recommendation letters, and inform them of your success.

**Note:** You may not be able to adhere to this timetable if your application deadlines are very early, as is the case with medical schools, or if you decide to attend graduate school at the last minute. In any case, keep in mind the various application requirements, and be sure to meet all deadlines. If deadlines are impossible to meet, call the institution to see if a late application will be considered.

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