

Identify whether or not graduate/professional school is the right decision for you and the steps involved in the application process.

CONSIDER THESE QUESTIONS

- Do you have a clear idea of the career you want to pursue?
- Is a graduate degree a requirement for your career?
- Who wants you to go to graduate school? Is it your motivation pushing for the advanced degree?
- Will the time and money you spend on graduate school repay you in the long term?
- Is there another avenue for continued learning?
- If you put off graduate school for three years, are there things you will gain?

CHOOSING THE RIGHT PROGRAM OF STUDY

Some graduate degrees are academic and others are professional in orientation. Academic degrees focus on original research, whereas professional degrees stress the practical application of knowledge and skills required for practicing in the profession. Master's degrees may take 1 to 3 years to earn, and doctorates generally take 4 or more years to complete.

For many fields, the master's may be the only professional degree needed for employment; examples are the Master of Business Administration (M.B.A.), Juris Doctor (J.D.), Master of Education (M.Ed.) and the Master of Social Work (M.S.W.). For other careers, the doctorate is pursued; such degrees are the Doctor of Medicine (M.D.), the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), and the Educational Doctorate (Ed.D.).

EVALUATE SCHOOL OPTIONS

Once you've decided to pursue graduate study, begin to explore schools offering the type of program you want. You'll find directories that briefly outline the academic programs, financial aid resources, cost of study, application requirements, and other information. Peterson's (www.petersons.com) is one online resource you can use.

As you evaluate each program consider the following:

- Quality of the faculty and their research interests
- Special concentrations and courses related to your interests
- Prestige of the institution
- Overall cost of attendance
- Accreditation
- Alumni career opportunities during and after graduation
- Housing options, geographic location, and the surrounding community
- Factors of personal importance to you

Graduate programs are rated but the criteria vary, so read the introduction of each rating carefully to see how judgments were made. You can view the U.S. News and World Report website for college ratings

<http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/grad>

APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS

Application requirements differ substantially among institutions and programs, so read each school's material carefully to make sure you file a complete and timely application. Application deadlines vary by type of program and school requirement.

Schools generally require:

- Graduate admission test (GRE, LSAT, GMAT, MCAT)
- Official transcripts of your undergraduate work
- Two or three letters of recommendation from professors and/or employers
- Essay or statement on your background and interests in the field
- Completed FAFSA financial aid form

PLANNING IS IMPORTANT

Graduate school can be personally rewarding, yet also demanding. Consider your motivations, and talk with your advisor early about the application process. Read all application materials carefully in order to meet all requirements and deadlines. If you plan well, success in graduate school can be accomplished!

WRITING A PERSONAL STATEMENT

The process of admissions for graduate programs is highly competitive. In addition to the quantitative data and other materials that you will be asked to submit to a school's admissions committee, a piece of writing called a *statement of purpose*, *personal essay*, or *statement of background* will be required. The written expression of your qualities as an applicant is an important way for committee members to get to know why you are a good candidate.

WRITE ABOUT YOU

The piece of writing that each school requests may be very different from that of others. Some programs may even ask for more than one essay. Before you begin to write, study very carefully the essay directions on the application materials. Make sure that you have a good idea of what you are being asked to write.

Some applications may ask you to give a personal history, telling about experiences that you have undergone which have led to your decision to pursue graduate education in a certain field of study. The information that could be included in a personal-type statement is limited only by your own imagination and life history, but you should be highly selective about what you include. Generally, keep in mind that the points about your life that you highlight should be somehow relevant to both your own interest in the field of study, as well as to the concerns of the admissions committee.

Whatever the particular form of the essay asked of you, there are a number of basic areas that committees are interested in when evaluating your application. Each reader will ultimately have this question in mind: "What makes you a successful candidate for our school?" In order to answer this question, try to do the following:

- Clearly state your short and long term goals; tell how university "X" can help you meet them
- Give specific reasons why you are interested in a particular field, as well as why you have chosen to apply to this particular school
- Refer to past experiences, both academic and professional that are relevant to graduate study
- Articulate what is particularly valuable about the perspective that you will bring to the prospective field of study and the specific department
- Demonstrate your ability to think and express ideas clearly and effectively
- Show motivation and capacity to succeed in graduate education
- Write concisely and try to keep your readers interested. Remember that they are reading many application essays and therefore, you need to be considerate of their needs
- Offer other information that demonstrates your need and desire to be accepted by the program
- Describe your areas of research and professional interest. You might indicate how your proposed studies are located within a broad field. For example, someone applying to an engineering program might say:

My particular interests are in optical communications, networks, and signal processing. As an undergraduate research assistant, I studied the principles of wavelet transforms, one of the most recent signal processing techniques, and I developed software models using Matlab to simulate the transform process. Currently I am investigating new applications of wavelet transforms. University X's program in Electrical Engineering provides the direction and environment in which I can pursue my work in optimal communications networks and signal processing.

WRITE ABOUT THE SCHOOL

Once you have developed a sense of the faculty's interests and the department's special features, you can make it clear in your application exactly why you want to attend that particular school. What is it about the department's curriculum structure or general approach to the field that makes you interested in being a student there? For example, state that you *want to be a member of the XYZ Group for Blank Studies because . . .*, but don't tell them how great, well respected, and world-renowned this part of the school is.

WRITE ABOUT ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

If you have additional, relevant information about yourself that does not easily fit into the essay, or into any other section of the university's application, you may want to include a curriculum vitae with your application package. This is especially applicable to those who have worked professionally since having graduated from school. Relevant items here might include work experience, publications, and presentations, as well as language and computer skills.