
Timetable for Applying to Graduate School

Applying to graduate school is very similar to the process you used in applying to an undergraduate college at the University of New Orleans: there are basic requirements and deadlines to meet.

JUNIOR YEAR	
Spring	<input type="checkbox"/> Become familiar with graduate school admissions criteria and degrees offered <input type="checkbox"/> Research area(s) of interest, institutions, and programs <input type="checkbox"/> Register and prepare for appropriate graduate admission test(s)
Summer	<input type="checkbox"/> Take required graduate admission test <input type="checkbox"/> Write for application materials <input type="checkbox"/> Visit schools of interest if possible <input type="checkbox"/> Work on application essay <input type="checkbox"/> Begin applying for fellowships and scholarships <input type="checkbox"/> Check on application deadlines
SENIOR YEAR	
Fall	<input type="checkbox"/> Obtain letters of recommendation from professors and other reference people <input type="checkbox"/> Have application essays critiqued (optional) <input type="checkbox"/> Take graduate admission test(s) if you did not earlier
Dec./Jan.	<input type="checkbox"/> Send in completed graduate school applications
January	<input type="checkbox"/> Send in completed financial aid applications and appropriate standardized forms <input type="checkbox"/> Check with all schools before the deadlines to make sure your file is complete
Spring	<input type="checkbox"/> Keep track of acceptances, wait lists, and rejections <input type="checkbox"/> Visit schools that accept you
April/May	<input type="checkbox"/> You can usually wait until the middle of April (or later if the school has not finalized your financial aid package) before making a firm commitment to the school <input type="checkbox"/> Be sure to notify other schools that accepted you of your decision so they can admit students on their wait lists <input type="checkbox"/> Send thank you notes to reference people

This timetable is based on the ideal, and many applicants will not be able to follow it if they decide to attend graduate school at the last minute, or if their programs' deadlines are different than those suggested. Overall, keep in mind the various requirements for applying and be sure to meet all deadlines.

Admissions Criteria

The usual criteria are GPA, letters of recommendation, admission test scores, application essay, an appropriate undergraduate degree, and evidence of creative talent (e.g., samples of evidence of previous work related to the discipline). Usually the total student record is examined closely, and weight assigned to specific criteria may fluctuate from student to student. Few, if any, institutions base their decisions purely on numbers (test scores and GPAs).

The actual process graduate schools follow in making decisions also varies. Generally, schools employ clerical personnel whose job it is to make sure files are complete. Usually files are then sent directly to the academic departments. Here a faculty committee (or the department chairperson) will make recommendations to the chief graduate school officer (usually a graduate dean or vice president), who is responsible for the final admission decision.

There are several common barriers to graduate and professional school admission about which you should be aware:

- Deadlines not met
- Unrealistic assessment of admissions criteria and unreasonable expectations of admissibility
- Inappropriate application essay

- Inappropriate undergraduate curriculum
 - Weak or ineffective recommendation letters
 - Incomplete application and inadequate follow-up checks (often transcripts and recommendation letters not received)
 - Weak academic record (poor grades) and/or low admission test scores
 - Lack of research activity, extracurriculars, etc.
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Graduate degrees

Graduate study has become increasingly important to society. More college graduates than ever are going on for graduate and professional degrees because of their value in the marketplace and because fields are becoming so specialized that graduate study is essential. A primary purpose of graduate education is to add to existing knowledge through intellectual creativity and research. Graduate education serves society's needs in technical and professional ways, and provides a major source of intellectual leaders of society.

When considering graduate study, it is important to understand that graduate education generally falls into two areas: traditional graduate education, which emphasizes original research and has as its highest earned degree the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.); and professional school in such areas as medicine, business, engineering, and law, in which knowledge and skills are applied to meeting requirements for professional practice. Degrees in these areas include the Doctor of Medicine (M.D.), the Doctor of Jurisprudence (J.D.), and the Doctor of Business Administration (D.B.A.).

In addition, master's degrees can be earned in almost any field and may also be academic or professional. Those who intend to pursue doctorates may even elect to earn a master's degree first. This has the advantage of allowing a person to select a different university or a somewhat different program of study for his/her doctoral work. The total period of graduate study needed to obtain a doctorate could be somewhat lengthened by proceeding via the master's degree route, but probably not by much. In many fields, such as fine arts, library science, education, and social work, the master's may be the only professional degree needed for employment. For a complete listing of graduate degrees and corresponding abbreviations, you may want to refer to *Peterson's Annual Guides to Graduate Study*.

It is important to note that the distinctions between traditional graduate study and professional programs are less well-defined than they traditionally have been. It is possible to combine the pursuit of a graduate degree, with its emphasis on research, with professional studies; for example, one might pursue a master's degree in history simultaneously with a law degree.

Steps for Choosing a Graduate Program

Choose a Specialization and Research Schools

Talk with professors, advisors, and graduate students knowledgeable about your area of interest. Heed their advice on emerging trends in the field, reputation of schools, the degree of competitiveness in admissions, and career opportunities.

The Office of Career Development has graduate school directories from which you can compile a list of schools (and their addresses) offering the type of graduate study you seek. They briefly outline, for each field of study, the academic programs, research facilities, current faculty, financial aid resources, cost of study, cost of living, student body, geographic area, and application requirements. Two of the best general guides to graduate study are:

- *Peterson's Annual Guides to Graduate Study*. Published annually. Office of Career Development, UC 268)
- *Directory of Graduate Programs*. Vol. A-D. Graduate Record Examinations Board and the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States. Published annually. (PA/B4)

Also consult the internet. Sites abound.

In addition to these resources, the Office of Career Development has a variety of graduate school directories which are discipline specific. They include guides for graduate programs in psychology, public administration, chemistry, urban and regional planning, linguistics, sociology, political science, to name a few

Other Office of Career Development resources which will aid you in your graduate school research include general graduate catalogs along with descriptive literature from a number of individual programs (i.e., law, management, psychology, international

and public affairs, education, etc.). The latter are arranged alphabetically and by discipline and provide more in-depth information on each program than do the graduate directories in their synopses. To choose an appropriate school you will want to be aware of the publications being written on current research in the discipline. Your decision about a field of study may have developed out of your exposure to the literature during a substantial undergraduate program. Use Mann or Olin Library to find related professional journals and research the specializations that appeal to you. Also, note the schools represented on editorial boards located on the inside cover of these periodicals; such recognition usually reflects a department's strength in the discipline. Being aware of who the top people are and where they are is important for several reasons. (1) A graduate department's reputation rests heavily on members of the faculty, and, in some disciplines, it is more important to study under someone with a noted reputation than to study at a school with a prestigious name. (2) Certain types of graduate funds are tied to specific research projects and, as a result, to working with particular people. (3) Most Ph.D. (and nonprofessional master's degree) candidates must pick faculty chairpersons and one or more committee members; this is often done during the first semester. These committees are frequently your major source of direction and are responsible for evaluating your work. These are crucial reasons for learning as much as possible about a school's faculty members.

The Office of Career Development has graduate program ratings and updates these rankings as the results of new surveys are published. Ratings of professional schools, including law, medicine, business, and engineering, are available as well as selected graduate programs.

Most rankings of graduate programs are done by "peer rating," that is, by asking respected scholars in the academic disciplines to rate the graduate departments in their fields. Many academicians feel that these rankings are too heavily based on traditional concepts of what constitutes quality and perpetuate the idea of a research-oriented department as the only model of excellence in graduate education. Therefore, more than one ranking should be consulted and rankings should be supplemented by other resources.

The following items can be useful in judging the educational quality of graduate programs.

Faculty

- Academic training
- Research activity
- Research productivity
- Teaching effectiveness
- Concern for student development
- Involvement in program affairs
- Group morale or "esprit de corps"

Resources

- Library
- Financial support
- Laboratory equipment and facilities
- Computer facilities

Students

- Academic ability at entrance
- Achievements, knowledge, skills at time of degree completion
- Professional accomplishments of graduates
- Judgments on program quality
- Satisfaction with various aspects of program
- Group morale or "esprit de corps"

Operations

- Purposes of the program
- Course and program offerings
- Admission policies
- Faculty welfare
- Evaluation of student progress
- Program leadership and decision-making
- Job placement of graduates
- Advisement of students
- Student-faculty interaction
- Internships, assistantships, and other opportunities for relevant student experiences
- Degree requirements
- Relationships with other graduate programs

Once you have narrowed your list of schools, if possible, visit the schools and talk with current students. Write or call a week in advance of your visit to give those in charge of admissions a chance to set up appointments with faculty members and students. You may want to talk to the schools' alumni also, who may be found by writing to the departments for names of alumni in your geographic area. Often alumni may be found among UNO's faculty members.

Graduate Admissions Tests

There are several examinations used in graduate/professional school admissions. The most common are the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT), and the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT). **GRE**

For academic graduate study, the examination required is usually the GRE. The GRE consists of a General Test and Subject Tests in specific disciplines. The GRE General test can only be taken in the Computer-Based Testing (CBT) version. (The last GRE General test administration was April 1999.) The General Test is composed of three sections: verbal (30 minutes), quantitative (45 minutes), and analytical (60 minutes). Each section produces a score. There may be an unidentified experimental section that does not count towards your score. The scores are based on the number of correct answers without penalty for wrong answers. Some graduate programs will require the Subject Test in a specific discipline in addition to the general GRE, if prior knowledge of the field is essential to graduate study. The Subject Test covers basic terminology and concepts, and it uses a traditional, paper-and-pencil administration; currently there are no computerized Subject tests.

Writing for Application Materials

Generally, a postcard requesting an application, financial aid forms, and a graduate school bulletin is sufficient. Refer to directories of graduate and professional schools for information about whom you should contact for these materials. If you have a number of specific questions, however, you should put them in a separate letter. All such requests should be addressed to either the admissions director or department chairperson, and it is a good idea to write a coherent, grammatically correct letter since your initial correspondence may be kept in your application file.

Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are requested for almost every application to graduate school. If they are not required, it is still helpful to add them. In letters of recommendation, admissions committees look for information not provided elsewhere in the application. A good letter will describe you in ways that are impossible to measure by grades on tests. Letter writers will measure you in comparison to your peers and will distinguish you from other applicants.

Who should write letters for you?

Choosing reference people can be difficult, and most graduate schools require two or three letters. Identify a few faculty members, administrators, or employers with whom you have become acquainted through classes, extracurricular activities, or jobs. Recommendation letters from professors are highly valued, especially if you have helped them with research.

Ultimately, the ideal letter writer is someone who can describe you and the work you have done positively and in some detail. The rank or title of the writer is not nearly as important as what he/she says. If a teaching assistant knows you much better than a chaired professor, ask the TA, not the professor. A good person to ask for a reference will meet several of the following criteria:

- Knows your work in the field well and can comment on it in detail
- Has a high opinion of you
- Knows you well in more than one area of your life
- Knows about the particular places to which you are applying as well as the type of study you are pursuing
- Can make a favorable comparison of you with your peers based on having taught or worked with a large number of students
- Is known by the admissions committee and is valued as someone whose judgment should be given weight
- Writes a good letter of recommendation

No one person is likely to satisfy all these criteria, so choose those persons who meet as many of the criteria as possible.

Once you have decided whom to ask, you may wonder how to ask. Probably the best approach is to ask your recommenders if they think they know you well enough to be able to write a meaningful letter. If you sense reluctance, you can politely say "thank you" and find someone else. Be aware that the later in the semester you ask, the more likely faculty are to hesitate because of time

constraints. If possible, ask early in the fall semester of your senior year if you plan to attend graduate school immediately following graduation.

As you line up two or three suitably enthusiastic recommenders, make appointments to talk with them. Go to appointments with the recommendation forms in hand; be sure to include addressed, stamped envelopes for the writers' convenience. Provide them with supporting information along with the recommendation forms. Include a draft of your application essay (if possible), a resume or curriculum vitae, and a transcript. Be sure to outline on a separate piece of paper the contact you have had with them, including course number(s), course title(s), research papers, etc. Also, make sure that the writers know when your application deadlines fall.

On the recommendation forms you will be asked to signify your choice of either waiving or retaining the right to see the recommendation. Before you decide, discuss the confidentiality of the letter with your writers. Many faculty members will not write a letter unless it is confidential. This does not necessarily mean it is a negative letter, but rather that they believe it will carry more weight as part of your application if it is confidential. You must make the decision whether or not to waive your right even if it means finding another recommender. Waiving the right to see a letter does usually increase the perception of its validity. After discussing the confidentiality of the letter, talk to the writer about your goals and why you are applying to certain schools. This will help him/her slant the letter in your favor.

Verify that your recommendation letters have been received by the graduate schools before the deadlines. You may send along with your application materials stamped postcards asking the schools to acknowledge when your files are complete, or you can call schools and inquire about the status of your applications. If your files remain incomplete because letters of recommendation are missing, don't be shy; you will need to contact the writer (or his/her secretary), who may need a tactful reminder of the deadlines.

Credential file

If you are planning to wait a year or more before applying to graduate school, or you want to make sure all letters are written and compiled in one place before applying, you may want to establish a credential file (a repository for letters of recommendation and other documents). However, generalized letters of recommendation, such as those sometimes written for credential files, are not as effective as those composed by a writer with a specific field of study in mind. For more information, visit the Office of Career Development.

Writing Essays for Applications

Any essay or personal statement for an application must, of course, be your own work. If you are applying for a research degree, you will probably be asked to write a "statement of purpose." Admissions committees will be interested in how focused your research interests and ultimate career goals are, and how your undergraduate studies, work experience, and other background relate to the proposed graduate field of concentration.

If you are asked to write a "personal statement," in applying to law school for example, you have almost unlimited possibilities open to you. You might choose to write about some work you have done or someone you have known and relate that to what you plan to do over the next few years. Whether or not you write something autobiographical, remember that there is no set form and if you do write an autobiographical piece, it does not have to be arranged chronologically. Before writing anything, stop and consider what your readers might be looking for; the application or general directions may convey this.

Your essay will serve as an indicator of your writing abilities, but keep in mind that in most cases clarity and development of your ideas are the main considerations. If highly imaginative or eloquent writing does not come easily for you--and there are few people for whom it does--don't worry. Try to stick to a style you are comfortable with and don't try to sound like someone else. Your main aim will be to write a clear, succinct statement showing your self-determination and enthusiasm for the field of study.

How to organize your essay

There are two main approaches to organizing an essay. One is to make an outline of the points you want to cover and then to expand upon them. If you are comfortable with this method, it will probably yield a well-organized essay. The other approach is to put your ideas down on paper as they come to you and then to go over them, possibly eliminating a great many sentences and pushing others around ruthlessly until you have achieved a clear, logical sequence. This approach is difficult, but may produce a more inspired piece of writing than the outline method.

After you have gotten your first draft down on paper, go over it for style. One of the most common pitfalls applicants encounter is the habit of making "I" the subject and first word of nearly every sentence. Many people also use the simple declarative sentence almost exclusively, which tends to result in monotonous reading and often to obscure the development of ideas. For instance, cause and effect relationships are often lost in a series of simple sentences. Look carefully through what you have written for ideas or statements that have a cause and effect relationship.

Another weak point of many essays is the tendency to oversell through the use of adjectives and adverbs. If, when reading over your essay, you find yourself saying that certain experiences or ideas are "interesting," "educational," or "rewarding," or if you find the words "very" and "extremely" appearing frequently, you need to do some editing. Ask yourself not how interesting your summer job was, but what was interesting about it and what you learned from it. Rather than using vague adjectives, either be specific or simply let your experience and qualifications stand on their own merit.

1 Gale H. Varma and Robert H. Stowers, "Financial Assistance for Graduate and Professional Education," *Peterson's Annual Guides to Graduate Study*, vol. 1. 1994.