Applying to Graduate School

THE PROCESS

While you might think that the graduate school application process begins when you request application materials from the graduate institutions of your choice, it really begins months before you ever request those documents, albeit only informally. The process starts when you begin to consciously seek out and nurture relationships with your undergraduate professors and advisors as well as professors or researchers at your target graduate institutions. It continues when you begin your preparation for, and then take, the GRE (if it is a required application element for the schools you are considering).

Most graduate schools have a single application form for all their graduate programs and a set of basic application requirements to which individual departments may add. At some schools, individual departments have their own applications. At these schools, you will have to request the application from an individual department rather than from a central office.

Once you’ve requested and received admissions materials, it’s time to buckle down and complete the applications to your target schools. Before you dig in, take some time to consider all the application pieces (we discuss these below) and set a schedule with self-imposed deadlines that are possible to meet.

The applications themselves typically involve writing a personal statement, filling out general information forms, soliciting recommendations, requesting transcripts, and having GRE scores sent. Some programs may have additional requirements, such as an interview or portfolio.

Whether your completed application is sent to a central graduate admissions office initially, rest assured it will quickly end up in the hands of departmental admissions committee. The departmental admissions committee is the place where the decisions are made. The committees typically sort applications into three piles: definitely yes, maybe, and definitely no. The first pile is generally the smallest, and the second the largest. Once an application hits the yes pile, it doesn’t generally come out again, and there are that many fewer vacancies for the applicants who follow. This should clue you into an important truth: Getting your application in early is important.

Eventually, the department issues offers of admission, notices of rejection, and, in some cases, a few notices that applicants have been wait-listed. As a general rule, the larger the enrollment of a program, the more likely there will be a waitlist. Usually, a committee will extend offers of admission to a few more people than a department actually has room for; the assumption is that some students who’ve been accepted will prefer other schools and enroll elsewhere. If a large number of accepted students choose other schools, offers will be extended to wait-listed applicants.

THE PLAYERS

As you enter the treacherous waters of the applicant pool, it’s wise to know exactly who you’re swimming with. Here’s a quick overview of the power players in the admissions process.
**THE ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE**

These, of course, are the big fish. Each department has its own admissions committee, which is principally responsible for the decision to admit or reject any given applicant. As we mentioned above, even when you submit your application to a central office of graduate admissions, it will wind up in the hands of the department that administers the program to which you're applying. An admissions committee generally consists of three to five faculty members. Some of these faculty volunteer to serve on the committee, and others are assigned to the job unwillingly. Some are grumpy; others are cheerful; and all inevitably bring their own quirks of prejudice and personality to the table. In some departments, doctoral students may even sit actively on the admissions committee.

**THE DEPARTMENTAL SECRETARY**

Every academic department has a single, central administrator who knows where everything is. The job title may vary, graduate secretary and graduate administrator are some possibilities, but the job is the same. And the job is more powerful than you might think. The typical graduate secretary has been with the department for many years and will probably keep the position for many years to come. She (or he) knows where everything is, how everything works, and what's happening in the department. She has a good general understanding of the major fields within the discipline and knows what research each professor and graduate student is doing. To a large extent, she is personally responsible for keeping the department running. Do not underestimate her importance.

If you do the application process right, you'll talk to the departmental secretary a number of times: to request information and materials, to find professors and graduate students working in your field, and to verify the receipt of application documents. The secretary is a wellspring of information that can provide invaluable assistance with your admissions strategy. She is also an esteemed member of the department, whose opinions are respected by the faculty. Always remember to be polite and respectful.

**THE PIECES: YOUR APPLICATION**

When you send away to your target schools for application materials, you'll get a sheaf of very different forms from different schools. They vary widely in appearance, from grainy, expensive-looking booklets with stately print to flimsy, perforated sheets of onionskin with disco-era lettering. Some schools offer online applications that let you fill out information online and either submit your application electronically or print a hard copy to mail in.

Due to the differences in departmental requirements, it is difficult to make generalizations about applications. There is no common application process for graduate students, such as the American Association of Medical Schools (AMCAS) application, which is used by almost all US medical schools. But despite this variety, most share several features in common:

**DEADLINES**

First things first: Meeting your schools’ deadlines is one of the most important details of the application process. You don't want to be rejected from a school for which you might otherwise have qualified simply because you were late in filing your application. Check with each individual department to which you are applying to find out their specific deadlines. Also be aware that there may be separate (usually earlier) deadlines for those students seeking financial aid. Get your applications in as early as possible.

**TRANSCRIPTS**

A transcript is a certified, official copy of a student's permanent academic record. All graduate schools require official transcripts of your grades from any colleges you attended.
Most schools ask that transcripts be sent directly to them, but some ask that you collect the information and send in a complete application package. Contact the registrar’s office (at every undergraduate institution you have attended) to request that your transcript be sent either to you or directly to the school to which you are applying. If your school used a bizarre grading scale, you will often need to translate your transcript into the requested format.

**APPLICATION FEE**

Application processing fees range from low (around $30-45) to expensive (over $75). These high fees are no accident -- they are designed to discourage less-serious applicants from bombarding busy admissions committees. Fee waivers are occasionally offered by a school for applicants who can prove financial need. A good rule of thumb to follow is this: If you failed to qualify for a fee waiver for the GRE, you are unlikely to qualify for a fee waiver from an institution. Check with the graduate admissions office of the schools to which you are applying to find out if you qualify for a fee waiver.

**TEST SCORES**

Almost all graduate schools ask applicants for applicable standardized test scores, such as the GRE General Test, a GRE Subject Test, or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Here again, you must check with individual departments to ensure you meet their specific requirements. Although there are a few programs that don't require the GRE General Test, most do. Only a few require the GRE Subject Tests. All foreign students from countries where English is not the native language are required to take the TOEFL. See our sections on the GRE and TOEFL.

**LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION**

These letters are one of the most influential aspects of your application to a graduate program. Committee members use them to get a more personal perspective on an applicant. Keep this in mind when choosing your recommenders. They are (hopefully) what set you apart from the other applicants. A borderline student is often pushed into the acceptance pile because of excellent recommendations.

Some application packets include recommendation forms that ask a recommender to rate your abilities in various categories as well as provide blank spaces for open-ended comments on an applicants personality and potential. Others simply ask recommenders to write their own letters.

Most schools require two or three letters. Try to get three, or even more, in case one is lost or submitted late. Some programs require more recommendations for Ph.D. applicants than they do for Master's degree applicants. Others require additional recommendations for students applying for funding. Be sure you know the specific procedure for the department to which you are applying. If there's any doubt in your mind, call the dean's office or the admissions contact for that department.

**PERSONAL STATEMENT**

While applicants to medical, law, and business schools are asked to submit fairly lengthy essays about their motivations, goals, greatest achievements, character flaws, and/or even to propose solutions to hypothetical problems, applicants to graduate programs are usually asked to submit a personal statement only. The personal statement may be called anything from an Autobiographical Statement to a Letter of Intent. Whatever its name, if you are required to write one, do it well.

No matter what type of graduate program you are applying to, admissions committee members will evaluate the following: how clearly you think; how well you have conceptualized your plans for graduate school, and how well your interests and strengths mesh with their programs.
THE INTERVIEW

Interviews, of major importance for admission to some graduate programs, are not required for entrance to others. However, many schools encourage you to visit the campus and set up appointments to speak with admissions officers and individual faculty. It's a good idea for you to check out the places at which you're thinking about spending several years. You'll get insight into the school and the programs that you just can't get on paper. And if an interview is optional, take advantage of the opportunity to make a personal impressions. We have some specific interview advice for you.

THOSE LITTLE POSTCARDS

The final part of your application process is to fill out that pile of little postcards addressed to each department, which will eventually be used to notify you of the receipt of your application documents. Don't forget these, they'll save you some stress.

SPECIAL APPLICATION MATERIALS

Up to this point, we have discussed application materials that are relevant to all graduate-school applicants. Some prospective graduate students, however, have other application requirements to fulfill as well, such as:

STATE RESIDENCY FORMS

Anyone applying to a state-supported school as a resident of that state is usually entitled to a lower tuition-sometimes dramatically lower. Consequently, many people will try to qualify for state residency to save money. State governments, on the other hand, try to put limits on residency in order to keep money flowing into the state. If you're applying to a public university as an in-state student, you're likely to be responsible for a form relating to proof of your residency.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

A variety of additional requirements can crop up for prospective grad students from other countries. The most universal of these is the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). It's an exam written and administered by ETS (surprise) to test basic English language skills. Most graduate programs set minimum scores that applicants must achieve in order to qualify for enrollment. In addition, when submitting your academic transcript, you will need a certified English translation. You will also need to submit proof of immunization, along with various other health certificates.

Schools will also ask international students for documented evidence that they will be financially self-sufficient for their first nine or twelve months in the country. Once international students have been accepted to a school, they must follow certain governmental regulations. The school will send you a Form I-20 or Form IAP-66, Certificate of Eligibility for Non-Immigrant Status. You must then obtain an international student visa (F-1 with the Form I-20 or J-1 with the Form IAP-66) by presenting your acceptance documents, your passport, and your evidence of financial support to a US embassy or consulate. Be sure to check with your own government to find out if there are any other requirements you must meet to study in the US. Read our Guide for International Applicants.

JOINT- OR DUAL-DEGREE STUDENTS

Applicants intending to work toward two degrees simultaneously are often required to fill out a special form about their degree plans. A single form is usually used by students working toward two degrees within a graduate school (dual-degree students) and those working toward degrees to two different schools within a university (joint-degree students).
RETURNING AND PART-TIME STUDENTS

Many graduate programs accept students who have been out in the workforce and are returning to school to get advanced degrees, as well as those who are still working full-time and want to earn their degree simultaneously. Admissions requirements may be different for both returning and part-time students, so be sure to check with the admissions office and department.

YOUR UNWRITTEN APPLICATION

As we've said several times now, you have to realize that the application process begins long before you ever receive materials in the mail. A large part of your application is never put down on paper. It consists of the contacts you've made with faculty, your conversations with them, and the impressions you've made.

With all the piles of paper involved in applying to graduate schools, it's easy to conclude that paperwork is what it's all about. You spend weeks poring through faculty listings, course offerings, and graduate bulletins to choose your schools, and then you start filling out application forms, requesting transcripts, and writing essays. Of course, all of these documents are important. But in the graduate admissions game, you have a big advantage if you talk to people.

Unlike undergraduate schools, a typical graduate program receives only hundreds -- not tens of thousands -- of applications each year. Out of these hundreds, a program might extend offers of admission to a few dozen, expecting some of those admitted to choose other schools. It's a group of applicants small enough that the admissions committee can reasonably expect to meet, or at least talk to, a fair number of them. Some graduate programs receive fewer than 100 applications annually, which makes applicants' chances of making personal contact better still. By the same token, some popular graduate programs do receive several thousand applications each year, and the admissions committees in charge of these programs won't necessarily have time to chat. In general, however, there's a lot of room in the graduate admissions process to talk with professors and other members of the department.

To put together the strongest possible application, you've got to be a go-getter-or at least act like one. That means talking to professors in a way that makes your research interests or career intentions clear to them. If you yourself have a clear idea of your research interests and career plans, your questions to professors will communicate that. If you've done some thinking about what you want from a graduate program, professors will sense your clarity and direction and get a better feel for you as a prospective student. That's what the actions of a successful go-getter accomplish.

There are two steps to developing personal contacts within a department: First, knowing what program you hope to enter and what field you want to work in, and what you want to learn from your conversations with faculty; and second, picking up the phone and making some calls—even if it makes you nervous.