

Applying to Graduate School: Practical Advice from a Student Who's Been There

Table of Contents

- 1. 12 Things I wish I Knew Before I Applied to Graduate School**
- 2. How to Prioritize and Research Graduate School**
- 3. How to Prepare for the GRE, MCAT, LSAT & GMAT**
- 4. How to get Good Letters of Recommendation**
- 5. How to Write an Effective Personal Statement**
- 6. How to Find Funding for Graduate School**
- 7. How to Interview for Graduate School**
- 8. Searching for Graduate Schools Checklist**
- 9. Applying to Graduate Schools Checklist**
- 10. The Cost of Applying to Graduate School**



This packet was created as part of an internship project at the NIU Career Services Resource Center for PYSC 485 credit during my senior year at NIU. The information used in these handouts is a product of my own research from when I was applying to graduate school and is derived from my personal experiences. All of the handouts are written from a student's perspective, and will hopefully speak to those who are trying to navigate the challenging process of applying to graduate school.

12 Things I Wish I Knew Before I Applied to Graduate School...

1. **RESEARCH!** This is the most important step of the process. You should spend a few months researching different programs and comparing your options. If you are even considering graduate school as an option get started ASAP!
2. **Practice for the GRE!** This is one test that you should not “wing.” It is very expensive, and each time you take it the scores become a permanent part of your GRE record. Prepare so that your first test will be your only test!
3. **Give your recommendation writers plenty of time to write!** Give your writers at least 6 weeks! If you hurry your writers, you are not going to get a good letter... you might not get a letter at all! Remember that you are asking someone to do YOU a big favor by writing a recommendation and you are trusting them to represent you well in your application.
4. **Have at least 5 people read your personal statement!** Your parents and best friends are **NOT** good people to critique your statement. They will think everything you write is great! Take your statement to an objective third party that will provide honest, critical feedback!
5. **Apply early!** It is impossible to know what complications will occur at the last minute or what you will need to correct. Avoid surprises. In fact, some programs have rolling admissions or early application opportunities that could work to your benefit!
6. **Stay organized!** Keeping all the deadlines, paperwork and applications straight can be a challenge, but sending a statement for Michigan State to Illinois State would be a **huge mistake!** You will be sifted out of the application pool immediately! Also, keep copies of **everything** you submit.
7. **Research funding opportunities and apply for graduate assistantships!** Graduate school is expensive! Look for fellowships, assistantships, scholarships and grants early to have a better chance of having school (at least partially) paid for!
8. **Follow all of the directions for the application!** If you cannot follow the directions when applying to the program, they will assume that you just cannot follow directions. Do not send that message! If you have questions about the process, contact someone on their end!
9. **Pay attention to where you send things!** Some materials will need to go to the Graduate School and others will need to go to the Department to which you are applying. Sending things to the wrong office might not only delay the process of your application, but it might not be processed at all.
10. **Check on your application once you submit it!** Things may get lost in the mail or under someone's desk! If you do not care enough to verify the status of your application, who else will? Write a polite and professional e-mail or call the program, but remember to be patient while waiting for a response. All correspondence with the faculty and staff is part of your first impression.
11. **INTERVIEWS!** Some programs expect you to interview before you can be offered admission. Be prepared to buy or borrow a suit! Remember to review any information sent to the school prior to your interview.
12. **Stay calm and confident!** You can do this! Graduate schools make the application process complex to make sure that the students who apply are serious about their programs and are represented fairly.

1. How to Prioritize and Research Graduate Schools

First, determine what is most important to you by creating a priority list. Consider the following factors:

1. Why do you want to go to graduate school?
2. Is graduate school necessary for your field?
3. If so, which degree do you need to have to work in your field?
4. How long will it take to earn that degree? Are you willing to be in school for that long?
5. Can you go to school part time or do you need to be a full time student?

Visit the following websites to begin a general search of schools with your degree and program:

petersons.com	princetonreview.com/graduate-school.aspx
gradschools.com	grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/grad
graduate-school.phds.org	findtherightschool.com
gradview.com	collegesurfing.com
gradschooltips.com	gradschool.about.com

After learning some of the basics...

Make a list of the top programs for you. Be sure to consider:

1. Necessary accreditations to work in your field
2. Quality of the program
3. Location and cost of living in the area
4. Financial assistance available
5. A good match with your own interests

Then, rank the schools. It is best to apply to a range of schools:

- 1-2 that are a long shot for you
- 3-5 schools pretty well matched with your abilities
- 1-2 “safety” or back-up schools that you are sure you will be accepted to

Finally, get organized:

1. Create a file for each school and keep the information separate
2. Print applications or requirements from each website
3. Make a list of all the application deadlines and requirements for each school

2. How to Prepare for the GRE, MCAT, LSAT & GMAT

The GRE, MCAT, LSAT and GMAT can be very intimidating! That is exactly why you want to be as familiar with the test as possible before you take it! Here are some tips to get the best score possible:

- Determine if any of these tests are necessary for entrance to your programs
- Determine which test you need to take and how soon the scores are due—
 - Some programs require that you take the general GRE AND subject tests
 - It is a good idea to take the test a few months before your applications are due, just in case you need to retake it
- **Determine if you are eligible for a GRE fee waiver!** These waivers will cover half of the cost of the GRE. However, you must apply for this well in advance to finish all the paperwork involved.
 - <http://www.fa.niu.edu/gre.shtml>
- Register for a testing place, date and time well in advance
 - Once you register, some of the tests (like the GRE and GMAT) will provide free practice materials
 - Having a date set will provide time to practice!
- Visit these websites for specific test information before registering:
 - GRE: <http://www.ets.org>
 - MCAT: <http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/transitionfaq.htm>
 - LSAT: <http://lsac.org/LSAT/TheLSAT-menu.asp>
 - GMAT: <http://mba.com/mba/gmat>
- Take a practice test before you start studying to determine which areas you will need to focus on the most.
 - Practice tests are often offered on campus or nearby through Kaplan
 - <http://www.kaplan.com/TestPreparation/Graduate/>
 - Buy a practice test book with a CD-ROM for you to practice!
 - The websites for each test have preparation suggestions as well
 - **<http://www.testprepreview.com/> is a GREAT PRACTICE WEBSITE!**
- If you feel like you need it, there are several prep courses offered on campus that will help you prepare for graduate school exams:
 - <http://www.niu.edu/clasep/testprep/index.shtml>
- Each person learns differently, so determine your level of readiness and study accordingly! It is a good idea to treat your graduate exam like a separate class, so make room in your schedule to study for it each week!

3. How to get Good Letters of Recommendation

Most graduate programs require at least three letters of recommendation to support your application. It is a good idea to let potential recommendation-writers know of your decision to apply to graduate school. That way, when you ask them for a recommendation, they are not caught off guard.

Good people to ask for recommendations:

- Professors, faculty members, or advisors who are familiar with your work
- Work or internship supervisors, if the position is relevant
- Organization leaders who are faculty members

How to ask for a recommendation:

- It is best to ask in person, although asking through e-mail is appropriate if you do not see the person on a regular basis.
- Ask politely if they feel like they know you and your work well enough to be comfortable writing you a letter of recommendation.
- If they are uncomfortable or say they do not think they are not familiar enough with your work, do not press the issue. You are better off with no recommendation than a bad recommendation.
- Be sure to ask at least two months before the due date, so your writers have time to reflect on what to say

What to give your recommendation-writers:

- A list of the programs you are applying to and the degree you are pursuing
- The deadlines for each school—it is helpful to give writers only ONE due date for all of the recommendations. It would be beneficial for you to make that deadline 2 weeks earlier than you actually need them.
- If the school has a form to be completed with the recommendation, fill out all of the information you can. That way, you are not leaving the burden of filling out minor details to the person writing the recommendation.
- Provide an updated resume, personal statement and any other information that you think will be helpful to complement your application.
- Some programs will want to receive your recommendations in a packet that you submit all at once; others will only accept recommendations received directly from the writers; and some have recommendations as part of an online application. If they are to be part of a packet, arrange to pick up recommendations from the writers or have them mailed to you in a larger envelope. If they are to go directly to the school, be sure to provide postage. If the recommendation needs to be submitted online, be sure to give your writers a heads-up.

Finally, FOLLOW UP! Don't be afraid to send a friendly reminder a week or two before the due date. Your writers will appreciate it!

More resources:

- <http://www.cs.washington.edu/homes/mernst/advice/request-recommendation.html>
- <http://jobsearch.about.com/od/referencesrecommendations/a/recommendation.htm>
- <http://www.psywww.com/careers/lettrec.htm>
- <http://www.socialpsychology.org/rectips.htm>

4. How to Write an Effective Personal Statement

Writing a personal statement is probably the most intimidating step of applying to graduate school. It is also one of the most important pieces of your application and usually carries a lot of weight in the eyes of admission coordinators. It is your one opportunity to introduce yourself to the program and make a first impression. Therefore, you should put a tremendous amount of thought and energy into perfecting this document.

1. Follow ALL of the requirements stated by the program!
 - EVERY SCHOOL IS DIFFERENT! Therefore, you need to tailor your statement for each school. You may even have to write one statement for the graduate school and a separate statement for your program.
 - Make sure you answer every question or talk about every required topic
 - Stay within the page or word limits (i.e. one page or 750 words)
2. Use SPECIFIC examples to support claims that you make
 - If you say that you are a dedicated student, back it up with a specific example of a time you demonstrated dedication!
 - Examples will help you stand out from other applicants
3. Tell them why YOU are different!
 - What can you bring to the program that no one else can?
 - What makes you unique?
4. Why are you PERFECT for that program?
 - Do you have the same goals?
 - Are you interested in working with a specific faculty member? If so, mention that in your essay!

The best advice I was given on writing statements:

1. Start early. Procrastinating will only make your anxiety of writing stronger!
2. Just WRITE! Don't worry about having an interesting "hook" when you start out... just START and good ideas will come.
3. Have SEVERAL people read your statement! Each person will catch something different or will be able to make suggestions! People to ask:
 - The University Writing Center (815-753-6636)
 - Appointments and walk-ins are available
 - <http://uwc.niu.edu/>
 - Career Counselors (815-753-1641)
 - Available by appointment only
 - <http://www.niu.edu/careerservices/>
 - Career Service Interns (815-753-7238)
 - Walk-ins only! No appointment necessary
 - <http://www.niu.edu/careerservices/>
 - Professors and advisors in your field
 - Teaching assistants, graduate assistants, friends, English majors

More resources:

- <http://education.yahoo.com/college/essentials/articles/grad/gradessaysecrets.html>
- <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/http://jobsearch.about.com/od/referencesrecommendations/a/recommendation.htm>
- <http://www.accepted.com/grad/personalstatement.aspx>

5. How to Find Funding for Graduate School

Graduate school can be expensive, especially if you venture out of state! Do not let the cost of a particular program deter you from applying, but seriously consider the amount of money you will need for academic and living expenses while enrolled in the program. Look at the department's website to see if there is financial assistance for graduate students. Also, it is a good idea to look at the university's website as well, to see if you qualify for any financial assistance or awards. Finally, feel free to contact the school to ask about the following types of funding:

Assistantships: Generally includes a tuition waiver of some sort and requires you to work 10-20 hours a week as a Teaching Assistant, Research Assistant or Graduate Assistant, for which you are paid a stipend.

Fellowships: These are much rarer and more competitive than assistantships. Generally, a fellowship includes a complete tuition waiver as well as a stipend--- but you don't have to work as a TA, RA or GA!

Scholarships: Very similar to undergraduate scholarships! These can be through the school or private organizations, but they are FREE MONEY!

Research Grants: Sometimes private companies or organizations will hire graduate students to do some sort of research for them.

PLEASE NOTE: Many programs require you to apply for assistantships, fellowships and scholarships at the same time that you submit your application. Others will have deadlines separate from the application process that can be before or after the application deadline. DO NOT OVERLOOK THESE DEADLINES. Some programs will automatically consider you for these awards (maybe you have to check a box on the application), while others will have you submit an entirely different application. Be sure to follow all of the requirements for these applications, as well!

Loans:

Finally, there are always loans! Read up on the different types of loans available to graduate students and be sure to file for FAFSA by the priority filing date!

More Resources

<http://www.fafsa.ed.edu>

<http://www.petersons.com/finaid/file.asp?id=1001&sponsor=1&path=gr.pfs.overview>

<http://www.finaid.org/>

<http://www.gradview.com/financialaid/>

<http://www.scholarships.com/scholarships-for-graduate-students.aspx>

<http://www.studentscholarshipsearch.com/graduate-school-scholarships/>

6. How to Interview for Graduate School

Graduate schools will often interview the top applicants before making a final decision. So, if you are invited to interview, **CONGRATULATIONS!** It means they think you have what it takes to succeed in the program and they want to make sure that you are a good fit. To succeed at an interview, however, you need to do your homework first!

PREPPING FOR A SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEW:

1. Review all of the application materials you sent to the program. Bring extra copies of resumes and statements in a portfolio.
2. Re-research the program and familiarize yourself with each faculty member's research. Read their most recent publications or abstracts.
3. Be prepared to talk about why you are applying for the program, why you fit with the program, your goals for graduate school as well as your professional goals. Also, be prepared to talk about specific experiences to support what you say.
4. Review lists of commonly asked interviews questions. Make an appointment to do Perfect Interview with Career Services, or schedule a mock interview! If you are unable to do so, practice interviewing with a friend, so you are comfortable saying your responses out loud. It is okay to jot down notes for responses to review before you go in to an interview.
5. Prepare some thoughtful questions to ask the faculty and graduate students.
6. Buy or borrow a suit that fits you and looks professional.

AT THE INTERVIEW:

1. Be nice to **EVERYONE YOU MEET**; you never know who they are or what input they might have on your acceptance. With that said, be especially nice to graduate students in the program and ask them questions!
2. Remember that you are **ALWAYS** being interviewed—during breakfast, lunch, dinner, group discussions, and down time between interviews. Carry yourself in a professional and confident manner all day.
3. **TURN YOUR CELL PHONE OFF OR ON SILENT.**
4. Introduce yourself to other candidates and be friendly. They might be your competition at the moment, but they could be your future classmates.
5. When asked a difficult question, take some time to think about a good response. Don't feel pressured to blurt something out immediately.
6. **RELAX**—everyone wants you to do well!

AFTER AN INTERVIEW:

1. Write down what you talked about with each person who interviewed you.
2. Send a follow up e-mail to thank them for inviting you to interview and take the opportunity to tell them anything you forgot to say in the interview.
3. **BREATHE!**

More resources:

<http://gradschool.about.com/cs/interviews/a/tory.htm>

<http://www.wartburg.edu/pathways/gradprep/interview.html>

http://gradschool.about.com/od/interviews/Graduate_Admissions_Interviews.htm

