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PART IV

The Application Process

The graduate school application process requires preparation, professionalism, accuracy, and attention to detail. All materials must be well written, well organized, and submitted on time. *The more that you understand the application and admission process, the greater your chances of success.*



Admission Criteria

Graduate school candidates are evaluated on a variety of criteria. The relative weight of each factor differs by program.

GPA

Most graduate school applicants have above average GPAs. In addition to your cumulative GPA, admissions committees will review your grades in relevant upper division and Honors coursework. For example, an A (or a D) in a freshman American History course won't have the same positive (or negative) impact for a Biology graduate school candidate as an A (or a D) in a 400-level Biology course.

Admission test scores

It can be difficult for an admissions committee to compare the grade point averages of students with different degrees from different colleges and universities. Because all candidates take the same admission test, no such problem exists when comparing admission test scores.

Work / Internship / Community service experience

First-hand experience in your area of interest demonstrates a commitment to and familiarity with that profession. Some graduate programs, especially those in the health and medical fields, require that students have a given number of hours of relevant volunteer, internship, “shadowing,” or work experience.

Although relevant experience is ideal, all work, internship, and volunteer experiences speak favorably to your work ethic, maturity, and time management skills. Such experiences also provide a valuable source of references.

References

Most graduate school applications require three or more letters of recommendation from individuals who can speak to your potential for academic and professional success. Your references typically address your academic abilities, work ethic, personal integrity, and your character.

“Academic references” come from college professors, instructors, advisors, or administrators. “Professional references” are from supervisors or managers in work or volunteer settings. Regardless of your year in college, now is the time to start fostering relationships with individuals (especially faculty members) who will serve as future references.

It is your responsibility to submit all graduate school application materials on time. This requires giving your references adequate time to prepare letters of recommendation - preferably several months. Many ill-prepared candidates run around at the last minute trying to cajole letters from busy faculty members.

Research and professional associations

Research experience and active involvement as a student member of a professional association demonstrates your commitment to the profession. Publications, research reports, Honors program projects, and participation at regional or national conferences are particularly impressive.



Essays / Personal statements

Nothing evokes fear and dread in candidates like the prospect of writing graduate school admissions essays. They are an important and labor intensive component of the application.

It is critical that your essays portray you in a favorable and professional manner. Essays are writing samples, so pay attention to spelling, grammar, and overall organization. Demonstrate your ability to follow directions by answering the questions and addressing the pertinent issues without exceeding the specified word count.

Essays provide an opportunity to reveal who you are, what obstacles you've overcome, what motivates you to excel in your chosen field, and why you want to attend a particular program. Have essays (and resumes) critiqued and proofread at your college's writing lab, Career Services, or by professors or professionals in the field. Several excellent books are available on the topic, including *Graduate Admission Essays* by Asher.



Visits / Interviews

Some programs require interviews, in person or by phone. If you are invited to come for an interview, you have made the first cut. This is your opportunity to impress upon the committee your commitment to the profession, interest in the program, maturity, and your winning personality. Thoroughly research the program, dress in business attire, and ask and answer questions in a thoughtful manner.

If the interview is optional, make every effort to arrange an interview. You are at a distinct advantage if you go to the trouble and expense to interview *and* you make an excellent impression.

Personal qualities

Graduate committees seek students who will succeed academically, graduate on time, and do the program proud by excelling in their subsequent professional careers. In addition to the aforementioned criteria, committees attempt to assess such qualities as integrity, maturity, cultural competence, sensitivity to diversity issues, and the ability to manage stress and overcome personal obstacles. *Everything you submit to a graduate school (every written and personal communication) represents an opportunity for you to demonstrate these qualities.*



Admission Tests

Most graduate programs require candidates to submit admission test scores. These are the graduate school equivalent of the ACT and SAT.

Which test to take

The most widely used test is the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). Other exams include:

- ▶ Miller Analogies Test (MAT)
- ▶ Law School Admissions Test (LSAT)
- ▶ Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT)
- ▶ Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT)
- ▶ Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) - generally required of international students

Visit the website of the required test for details regarding test locations, dates, cost, and the procedures for submitting scores to graduate schools.

Graduate school financial awards are often based on admission test scores. If you tend to score well on standardized tests, take the admission test and submit your scores, even if the test is optional.

Where and when to take tests

Students thinking of entering graduate school in the fall after their senior year often take their required test late in the summer after their junior year. This provides plenty of time to study during the summer. It also allows enough time to retake the exam prior to the typical early spring graduate school deadline. *Do not wait until the last minute.* You do not want to be rushed or risk missing the application deadline. It can take weeks or even months for your scores to reach graduate schools.

The GRE General Test and GMAT can be scheduled on most weekdays and some Saturdays. The MCAT is offered 28 times a year, whereas the LSAT is only offered four times a year. Tests are given at professional testing centers located in larger cities and college towns. (Some universities have their own test centers.) Accommodations can be made for students with disabilities.

Test preparation

The three most common test prep options are self-study, test prep courses, and individual tutoring. To determine which approach will be most effective for you, consider cost, convenience, your schedule, and your personal learning style.

- ▶ **Self-study** is a good option if you are self-disciplined and learn well independently. It is also the most affordable alternative.
- ▶ **Test prep courses** are advisable if you benefit from the structure of a classroom and learn best by listening and discussing. A test prep course takes a significant commitment of time, effort, and money, so select your course carefully. Speak to former students, attend orientation sessions, and/or sit in on a sample class.
- ▶ **Individual tutoring** is preferable if you benefit from one-on-one instruction and feel there are only specific portions of the exam that require special attention. In the GRE, for example, students often devote the majority of their preparation to the Quantitative Reasoning (i.e., Math) portion of the exam. You may be able to find a tutor to help you with a specific subject area through a test prep company or through your university.

Some students take their test with minimal preparation in order to determine if further study is necessary. This is not a good idea. Tests are expensive and graduate programs will receive all your test results. Diagnose your strengths and weaknesses through practice exams available from test prep companies and test publishers.

Practice exams

Take as many practice exams as possible. Many unsuccessful test takers report that their problems stemmed from having insufficient time on one or more sections. You should, therefore, make sure that you don't exceed the allotted time when taking practice exams.

Test scores

Some programs have strict score cut-offs. That is, you will not be considered for admission if your score falls below a designated point. In most cases, however, the scores are factored in combination with other admission criteria. A particularly strong admission test score, therefore, may compensate for a subpar GPA.

Since most programs provide the average test scores of previously admitted candidates, you can usually determine how your scores stack up.

The key to doing well on admission tests, as with all aspects of graduate school preparation, is early, unrushed, and thorough preparation.





The Application

Many professional programs, including schools of Law, Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Medicine, Optometry, Pharmacy, Physical Therapy, and Public Health have “centralized application services” that allow candidates to apply to multiple programs with a single application. This is a significant time and labor saver for candidates. For most other graduate programs, you need to apply to each program separately.

Most universities have a “Graduate School” department that oversees the operation of their various graduate programs. Once an applicant’s file is complete, this department forwards the file directly to the academic department. A faculty committee or the department chairperson then makes a recommendation to the chief graduate school officer (usually a graduate dean or vice president), and the chief graduate school officer makes the final admission decision.

While most programs have a set application deadline, programs with rolling admissions review applications as they arrive. Application deadlines for the Fall semester are typically in January or February, and notification generally occurs about a month or two later in March or April. Many candidates are placed on wait lists while the programs await responses from their accepted candidates.

Graduate school applicants typically submit the following:

- ▶ **Application form**
- ▶ **Application fee** - Fees average about \$70. If you have financial need or participate in one of your college’s TRIO programs, you may be eligible for an application fee waiver.
- ▶ **Undergraduate transcript(s)** - You need to notify the registrar’s office at each college you have attended to have your transcripts sent. Graduate schools typically require “official” transcripts; photocopies may not be accepted.
- ▶ **Resume** - Some programs require resumes; others have you enter your experiences in a separate application.

- ▶ **Admission test scores** (if required)
- ▶ **Essays / Personal statements** (if required)
- ▶ **Letters of recommendation** - Some programs will instruct you to have your reference letters (typically three) mailed directly to the department under separate cover. Others will have you collect the letters in separate sealed envelopes and mail them yourself. You may be asked to sign a waiver which releases your right to view the letters of recommendation.
- ▶ **Affirmative Action/Equal Employment Opportunity form** - This information is requested by the Graduate School for statistical purposes. It will not be seen by the admissions committee, nor will it impact your application in any way.
- ▶ **Scholarship applications** - Always complete any optional scholarship application materials that may be included in your application packet.

The keys to success in the application process:

- ▶ Follow directions. If you can't follow directions in the application process, the admissions committee will lose confidence in your ability to succeed in graduate school. Do not submit more material than is requested.
- ▶ Ensure that all submissions are neat, well written, organized, and submitted prior to the deadline.
- ▶ Apply to as many programs as possible, especially in the more competitive disciplines.
- ▶ If a program uses rolling admissions, submit your application as early as possible. Financial assistance may run out for late applicants.

Create a record of all the programs to which you've applied and a checklist of submitted materials. You should receive a letter or email from each program indicating that your application is complete, or that there are missing materials. If in doubt, contact the program.