

Graduate School Applications: Understanding the Parts and Pieces

Overall Application Tips

- Read and *follow instructions carefully*.
- Pay attention to all specific *deadlines* (application, financial aid, additional funding positions, etc).
- Be *open and honest* about the information you provide.
- Have at least 2 other people *proofread* your documents prior to submitting.

Application Form

Unlike many undergraduate programs, graduate programs do not utilize a common application; each and every institution has their own application that tends to vary based on the program for which you are applying. Some graduate schools only ask candidates to submit one application to the graduate school, while others ask candidates to submit a smaller supplemental application to their department, school or college of interest as well. To get a better sense of the application process for the programs you are considering, visit each program's website for details and review thoroughly. Contact the head of the program or the graduate school admissions team if you are unable to find the specific information you need to apply.

Personal Essay/Statement of Purpose

The personal essay, statement of purpose, or letter of intent provides you with space to express your **passion, motivation, creativity, maturity, and unique perspective**. Admission committees use the statement to assess your qualifications and determine if your interests and goals align with the program. Often times the guidelines for statements of purpose differ a great deal between each of the graduate programs and colleges and universities you are considering so be sure to **thoroughly read instructions and follow carefully**. Some programs will provide you with specific prompts to address within a set number of words or pages; others will simply prompt you to write a letter of intent that highlights how the program aligns with your interests and goals.

It is important to remember that admission counselors have access to your entire application packet; they will be able to review your resume and do not need you to highlight each and every activity you have been involved in and every position you have held. The statement of purpose should:

- **Expand on your resume**, do not just repeat it.
- **Dig in deeper** to relevant experiences that have helped shape you and your interest in the field of study.
- **Showcase your ability to write**, build an argument, and think critically when given prompts (especially if the content is left up to your discretion).

To ensure that your essay reaches your audience effectively, have it reviewed by faculty within your field of study and/or staff in the Writing Center and Career Services. Remember to use examples to back up claims you make and write professionally *without jargon or slang*.

Depending on the program, you may be expected to be fairly specific about what you plan to study during your graduate career and which faculty you hope to work with. It is often helpful to explore the webpages of the department and the associated faculty to get a sense of the focus of their research and the kinds of graduate students they are most interested in attracting. Faculty webpages are excellent places to find their past publications and research interests. You should tailor your statement to highlight those areas where your interests and those of the department coincide. Overall, **what are they looking for?**

- *Sincerity* – Your audience will be able to tell if you are writing what you think they want to hear. Be “real.”
- *Motivation and commitment* – This is where you show your passion!

- *Writing ability* – This skill is vital for success in a graduate program and any work environment.
- *Personal qualities* – The admission committee wants to know your personal traits and qualities. Use clear examples to back up all statements you make.

Finally, here are some **common mistakes** to avoid:

- *Careless errors* – Grammar and spelling mistakes can be detrimental to your success because it shows you do not care about the process. Be sure to have at least a few people review your essay before submitting.
- *Vagueness* – Writing generic statements without backing them up with examples will leave your audience feeling like you are all talk. Examples will solidify your arguments.
- *Lack of flow* – Be organized with smooth transitions so you do not distract your reader with abrupt changes.
- *Too much information* – Your essay should be concise and to the point because irrelevant information will leave your audience feeling like you wasted their time.

Transcripts

Graduate programs normally request official transcripts from all of the colleges and universities where you have attended classes. Transcripts help the selection committee get a better sense of the coursework you have completed, your grade point average (GPA) for that coursework, and the course loads you have been able to balance and manage. Be sure you:

- have completed the necessary prerequisite coursework before applying for a graduate program.
- finish your bachelor's degree strong because most programs place increased emphasis on the last 60 hours of upper division coursework you have completed.

Graduate programs typically do not accept unofficial transcripts, so it is important to **work with the campus registrar** to ensure your official transcripts are sent directly to the graduate school admissions office. If you have not yet completed all of your undergraduate coursework, you will need to remember to **send a final transcript** after your last grades post and your degree has been confirmed.

Standardized Test Scores

Many graduate schools require standardized test scores be on file for the admission committee to consider as a part of your application packet. For example:

- Graduate Record Examination (GRE®) is often considered the general graduate school entrance exam.
- GRE Advanced tests for specific disciplines such as French, mathematics, philosophy, engineering, etc.
- Law School Admission Test (LSAT®) is typically required for entrance into law school.
- Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT®) is required for MBA and other business-related degrees.
- Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT®) is required for entrance into medical school.

Research your field to determine which test is required. Some programs do not mind receiving multiple scores from the same exam and are willing to consider your highest scores when reviewing your application; that being said, other graduate programs frown upon applicants having to take entrance exams numerous times, especially if scores have dropped or remained the same. Make sure to **review the admissions requirements** for the programs you are considering and check with a graduate admissions counselor if you are unsure of whether or not the program needs to have a test score on file in order to consider your application.

Resume/Curriculum Vitae

Most graduate programs will ask you to submit a copy of your resume or curriculum vitae (CV) as a part of your application. It is important to make sure the resume or CV you submit provides the selection committee with a solid sense of your background, skills and experience; make sure to incorporate internship and work experience, significant research or research projects, volunteer work, community service and extracurricular activities. Structure your CV so that the information of most relevance or interest to a specific graduate program is prominent (one way to do so is to place it near the beginning of your document). It is also important to make sure that the resume or CV you submit is well-written, polished and professional. To learn more about how to develop an effective resume or CV, consider reviewing the [Resume Writing Guide](#) and sample resumes on the Career Services [Resume Tips page](#) or schedule an appointment to meet with a Career Services staff member for a resume or CV review.

Letters of Recommendation

Admissions counselors and selection committees want to hear from others who have worked with you and have first-hand knowledge of your skills, personality, and potential for success within a rigorous academic program. It is not uncommon for programs to request at least three letters of recommendation and indicate that at least two of the three letters should come from faculty members who can speak to your ability to succeed within a graduate program. It is important to ensure that you have a strong connection with the people you ask to write letters on your behalf, as these letters provide selection committees with insight about you that cannot easily be gleaned from your grades and test scores. Letters of Recommendation should support everything already mentioned and add depth to your application. When **asking for letters of recommendation**:

- Schedule a meeting in person, if possible
- Ask for a “positive recommendation”
- Share information about why you want to pursue this type of graduate program and any other information that may be helpful to the person writing this letter
- Follow up appropriately – send an email reiterating the information you shared in your face to face meeting, provide any documents they may have requested (resume, cover letter, etc), and outline specific due dates for each institution so they can plan their time

Writing Sample

While the statement of purpose or letter of intent helps the admissions counselors and selection committee get a better sense of your writing skills, some programs will also ask you to submit a writing sample. When requesting a writing sample, many programs do not dictate the type of course or subject area where the sample must be from so take your time and thoroughly review all the papers and projects you have created to find a sample that best demonstrates your ability to write a high-quality paper.

Interview

When considered a top candidate for a program, you might be asked to visit campus to complete an interview or conduct one over the phone or through a video chat program. Interviews allow selection committees and program faculty to get to know you personally and ask questions that will help them better determine your fit within the program and the incoming cohort. It is important to showcase your qualities, passion, and professionalism. It is also important to demonstrate to the selection committee that you are knowledgeable and passionate about the field of study and the program. To prepare, consider creating a portfolio of your work and doing a mock interview with a Career Services staff member.

Resources

WSU Vancouver Career Services

- vancouver.wsu.edu/career

Graduate School Directory

- gradschools.com

The Peterson Guide

- petersons.com

The Princeton Review

- princetonreview.com

Personal Statements

- General
 - http://wts.indiana.edu/pamphlets/personal_statements.shtml
- Law School
 - <http://www.accepted.com/law/personal-statements>
- Medical School
 - <http://www.accepted.com/medical/sampleessays>
- Mistakes to Avoid
 - www.winningpersonstatement.com/mistakes.htm