



FOLLOW YOUR

PATH:

GRADUATE

SCHOOL GUIDE

Paul Smith's College
Center for Academic and Career
Success

Key Questions

- ▶ Should I go to graduate school?
- ▶ How do I find the right graduate program for me?
- ▶ How do I apply?
- ▶ When do I apply?
- ▶ Do I need to take an exam?
- ▶ How do I prepare for an entrance exam?
- ▶ What is a personal statement? How do I write one?
- ▶ How do I ask for a letter of recommendation?
- ▶ How will I pay for graduate school?

Should I go to graduate school?

If you are uncertain about whether or not to attend graduate school, check with an academic advisor, career counselor, supervisor, or someone else knowledgeable in your profession. Generally, your chosen profession will dictate whether graduate school is an option or necessity.

Reasons to Attend Graduate School **IMMEDIATELY**:

- Have clear career goals
- Chosen profession requires more education
- Assistantships or financial assistance are available now
- It may be easier to continue while you are still in "student mode"
- Lack of career opportunities now
- Avoid interrupting your career later

Reasons to Work/Volunteer/Travel and Return to Graduate School **LATER**:

- Undecided about career goals
- Need to fulfill financial obligations and repay loans
- Establish solid experience first
- Land a good position immediately after undergrad
- Change career direction; or re-tool and update skills to advance your career
- Company provides tuition reimbursement
- Some programs, like MBAs and law school, require or prefer 5-7 years of full-time work experience before entrance

How do I find the right graduate program for me?

Consider the following:

Programs Offered
Admission Requirements
Cost
Reputation
Faculty
Career Assistance

Library Resources/Facilities
Geographic Location
Size
State Residency Requirements
Alumni Network
Financial Aid Opportunities

What do I need to apply?

- GPA Requirements
- Letters of Recommendation
- Admission Test Scores
 - GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT, MAT
- Essay/Personal Statement
- Interview
- Undergraduate Degree/Relevance
- Resume
- Related Experience

When do I apply?

Junior Year – Spring Semester

- Research areas of interest, institutions, and programs
- Visit the Center for Academic and Career Success to learn more about the graduate school application process
- Talk to advisors about application requirements
- Register and prepare for required graduate admission tests
- Investigate ways to finance graduate school
- If appropriate, begin to obtain letters of recommendation

Junior Year – Summer Session

- Take required graduate entrance exams
- Check college's Graduate Admissions website for application, deadlines, and instructions
- Begin writing your personal statement/essay/statement of purpose
- For medical, dental, law school etc., you may need to register for the national application or data assembly service most programs use
- Research and apply for fellowships or scholarships

Senior Year – Fall Semester

- Obtain letters of recommendation
- Take (if you have not already) or repeat (to increase scores) entrance exams
- Have application and essay critiqued
- Send in complete applications
- Apply for fellowships, assistantships, scholarships, financial aid, etc.

Senior Year – Winter Session

- Complete the FAFSA and financial aid profile if required
- Send in any remaining application materials

Senior Year – Spring Semester

- Follow-up with all institutions to verify receipt of application before deadline
- Visit schools and keep track of applications
- Attend any required interviews
- Finalize financial aid and send a deposit to the institution you have chosen
- Notify all institutions you applied to of your decision
- Send thank you notes to the individuals that wrote recommendations for you, informing them of your choice

Do I need to take an exam?

Just as you took the SAT or ACT for entrance into college, you may need to take another entrance exam if you want to go to graduate school. Be sure to read the requirements so you know what test your school is looking for!

- GRE: Graduate Record Exam, the most common general entrance exam for graduate school
- GMAT: Graduate Management Admission Test, used for MBA and other business programs
- LSAT: Law School Admission Test, used for admission to law schools
- MCAT: Medical School Admission Test, used for admission to medical school

- MAT: Miller Analogy Test, an entrance exam used for admission to some graduate schools

How do I prepare for the entrance exam?

There are many FREE resources that can be used to study for exams!

- GMAT www.gmat.com
- GRE www.gre.org
- LSAT (Law School Admissions Test) www.lsac.org
- MAT (Miller Analogies Test) www.milleranalogies.com
- MCAT (Medical College Admissions Test) www.aamc.org/students/applying/mcat/
- Kaplan Test Prep www.kaptest.com
- Peterson's Test <https://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools/graduate-school-test.aspx>
- Test Magic (GRE, GMAT) www.testmagic.com
- FREE GRE Question of the Day <http://kaplanquizzes.com/gre/>
- FREE GRE Practice Test <https://www.kaptest.com/gre/gre-practice/free-gre-practice-test>

What is a personal statement? How do I write one?

The Statement of Purpose is an important part of your application that will tell the admissions committee who you are, what has influenced your career path so far, your professional interests, and where you plan to go from here. This statement is about YOU as a person!

ITEMS TO INCLUDE:

- Personal uniqueness and your personal journey
- Major areas of interest
- Immediate and long-term goals
- Research & related work/internship experience
- Educational background
- Why you want to attend THEIR institution
- Answers to the specific questions that are posed
- Follow guidelines provided by the institution as to length and content. Be clear and concise and ALWAYS have your statement reviewed by a few sources to check for **readability, grammar, and spelling!**

Pro Tips for a Personal Statement

1.) Be personal

Students are often encouraged to write about family, friends, education, talents, and passions in their personal statements. The people who read these applications often want to hear about a significant place, person, or event in your life. They want to know about the books you've read or classes that you've taken that have shaped your outlook and educational experience. They want to hear more about a person you've met or an experience you've had that has shaped the person you have become and the future you are pursuing. Don't be afraid to tell a personal anecdote about yourself to give the readers a better sense of who you are outside of your resume, transcripts, and test scores.

2.) Gear toward a specific school and program

Many students make the mistake of writing one personal statement to send to multiple schools. Faculty members and admissions representatives who will be reading your personal statement want to be sure that you've done your research on their school. What is it about their specific school and program that compels you to apply? Is there a specific professor you hope to serve as your mentor? Do you like the internship opportunities the program offers? Do you hope to connect with a strong alumni network? Be sure to specifically reference aspects of the program, place, or professors that you are drawn to.

3.) Tell a story

While students are often tempted to copy and paste elements of their resume and college transcripts into their personal statement, this is not necessarily the best time to rattle off facts about your accomplishments. The personal statement is the time to dig deeper to tell YOUR story and fill in some of those blank spaces that your resume and transcripts can't cover. Start with an engaging hook to get the readers' attention without being cliché or unoriginal. Tell a brief story that shows why you are passionate about this field and how you became interested. Use vivid language to tell your story while being dynamic.

4.) Mention your future plans

While your personal statement is largely about what experiences compelled you to pursue graduate school at a particular institution, you also should mention your plans for the future. It is crucial to explain in your personal statement how you see your pursuit of an advanced degree fitting in with your future goals. Where do you see yourself in 5 to 10 years? How will you apply what you've learned in graduate school? How do you see your degree as a step in your professional journey?

5.) Proofread. Proofread. Proofread.

The biggest rule when it comes to writing a stellar personal statement is to avoid all spelling and grammatical errors. You will write a lot in graduate school so don't lose sight of the fact that showing how well you write is just as important as the content of your story. Sometimes it can be difficult to catch errors on your own after looking at the same page for hours on end. While working on your own to proofread, try reading your statement aloud to yourself, or read from the bottom of the page to the top to catch errors more easily. Additionally, be sure to have at least three other people, such as professors, supervisors, mentors, and counselors in the Academic Success Center, Writing Center, or Career Center look over your statement to catch anything you may have missed. Also, avoid use of all slang terms or "text speak." You want to sound relatable while still maintaining a professional image.

When it comes down to it, your personal statement is really just that, a time for you to get personal and tell your own unique story of your professional journey! Best of luck and happy writing!

Personal Statement Outline

The first paragraph of your personal statement should be brief. Briefly discuss your objective (e.g., acceptance to the particular graduate program). Also, briefly discuss your background, academic interests, and future goals in order to justify your admission into the graduate program to which you are applying. The first paragraph is also where you want to "hook" your readers. You can do this in many ways, but here it is ok to get a bit more personal to tell a story unique to you and how it relates to this field or program.

The second section describes your background. It should establish your academic and other preparation (e.g., work experience, research experience, teaching experience, internship) for the program to which you are applying.

The third section should describe your career goals. This section may be switched in order with the second section depending on your preference. This paragraph assures graduate programs that applicants are serious, and that they have a purpose for seeking a graduate degree. Discuss your future goals and how your pursuit of this academic program fits with those goals.

The fourth section should start to wrap things up and primarily focus on what you intend to study in graduate school and why you have chosen this particular school/program. Your interests, background, and professional goals should now be clear, so you should make the case that the best way to reach your professional goals given your interests and background is to study at the graduate program to which you are applying. Be specific. Discuss specific faculty members (if you know about them from the program's website, for example) and how your interests are similar to theirs. The point here is to show how you are a good match for the program

How do I ask for a letter of recommendation?

Most departments will request between 3 and 5 letters of recommendation. One or two of your letters should come from faculty members in your major field. You may also consider asking a professor from a different field to show the breadth of your academic interest. Other options include an internship supervisor, coach, or a current employer if you are working in a field related to the degree you will be pursuing. Many graduate schools will now just request the names and contact information of references that you will provide for the online application. They will then be contacted directly. However, you can still follow these same tips for online applications.

TIPS FOR REQUESTING LETTERS:

- Begin developing a relationship with the people that you plan to request recommendations from several semesters before you need the letters. An effective letter can only be written when they know you well! Pass along a copy of your updated resume to any recommenders so they can be refreshed on your achievements and involvements.
- Discuss the letter with the potential writer. Ask: Do you believe you know me well enough to write a recommendation? Do you feel you can write a positive letter? Do you have time to you complete it by the date it is needed?
- Give the person writing the letter **AT LEAST** four weeks to write your letter. Plan to have the recommendations completed at least four weeks before the actual application deadline, by December 1 for a January deadline, for example.
- Provide the writer with everything they will need: your updated resume, the due date (4 weeks before the final deadline), and any special instructions from the graduate admissions office.
- Letters of recommendation can be confidential or non-confidential and can be submitted online or in paper form. Be sure to read and follow the application instructions very carefully for each school you are applying to so you submit the materials in the format that is required.

How will I pay for graduate school?

- Apply as early as possible for financial aid
- Investigate a variety of types of financial aid including grants, scholarships, fellowships, loans, and assistantships
- Inquire about funding from the graduate admissions office, the financial aid office, and the specific department at each potential university
- Check with college, government, and private sources (foundations, professional associations, etc.)
- Be sure to complete the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid)

Types of Financial Aid:

Grants: Grants are gifts that you do not need to repay. There are many types of grants available to students. Students may receive grants from the government, college, or through private sources of funding. The amount being offered varies for each individual based on specific criteria of the organization.

Scholarships: Scholarships are awards given to graduate students based on a variety of factors such as academic merit, field of study, or financial need. Like a grant, students do not need to pay back the money awarded in a scholarship. Scholarships can be awarded through the university or through private sources.

Fellowships: Fellowships are like scholarships and, similarly, do not require repayment. Fellowships are awarded by private organizations, institutions, or through the government to graduate students. Fellowships vary in the amount being awarded and can be used either towards research or education. Students can be given a 1- to 4-year stipend with or without a tuition waiver.

Assistantships: Assistantships are similar to internships or work-study programs awarded during your undergraduate years. However, assistantships usually require students to work as teacher assistants, research assistants, assistants to professors, office assistants, or perform other duties on campus. The amount awarded through assistantships varies based on faculty/institution grants or state or federal aid. The research and teaching positions acquired are in your field of study or department

Loans: Loans are borrowed money that must be paid back to the government or private lender, often with interest, over a specified amount of time. Interest rates, repayment plans, and conditions vary depending on the type of loan and lender. Below are two types of loans graduate students are eligible for.

- Federal Direct Unsubsidized Student Loans – These are non-need based loans, and are available regardless of financial need. Interest begins to accrue immediately. Students may choose to pay the interest that accumulates or have it capitalized, meaning the interest will be added to the principal amount of your loan and additional interest will be based upon the higher amount. Paying the interest as it accumulates will reduce the amount of interest that must be repaid. Repayment begins six months after graduation.
- Private Alternative Loans – We encourage you to compare lender discounts and other borrower benefits when applying for an alternative education loan. You have the right to select any lender you wish to use for an alternative loan. It is the responsibility of the student to thoroughly evaluate each lender before choosing the one that is right for you. Private alternative loans can be found through www.elmselect.com.

IF IT'S BOTH
TERRIFYING

— AND —

amazing

THEN YOU SHOULD
DEFINITELY
PURSUE IT