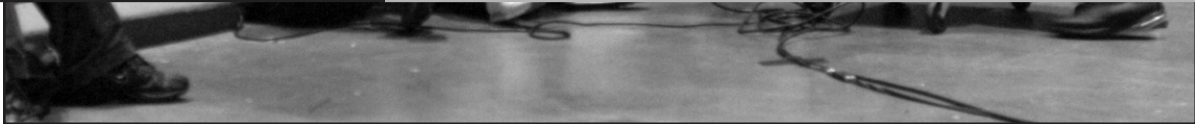




**OCS**

**APPLYING TO  
GRADUATE SCHOOL**



***Undergraduate Resource Series***

Office of Career Services | 54 Dunster Street  
Harvard University | Faculty of Arts and Sciences | 617.495.2595  
[www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu](http://www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu)

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## GETTING STARTED

**The fundamental step in considering graduate study is to understand WHY you want to pursue a graduate degree. To set the stage for careful decision making, it is important to clarify your reasons for pursuing a graduate degree, your goals for study and research, and the realities of your intended career path. As you begin to think about this, consider the following questions:**

### What are your MOTIVATIONS?

- How have you come to the decision to attend graduate school? What factors are motivating you?
- Do you have an intellectual passion for a particular field of study?
- Has a professor or mentor encouraged you to pursue a graduate degree?
- Do you feel ready for graduate school, or are you responding to expectations from family, friends, or peers?

### What are your GOALS?

- Have you identified some personal and professional goals? How will a graduate degree move you toward them?
- Is a graduate degree a prerequisite to enter your field of interest, or will it help you to transition into a new field?

### What are your EXPECTATIONS?

- Have you researched the academic responsibilities, lifestyle, and financial and personal obligations of graduate school?
- Are you aware of the marketability of your degree and the job prospects following completion? Have you spoken to people in your field of interest to ensure your perceptions are accurate?

## TIMING OF APPLICATION AND ENROLLMENT

Enrollment in graduate school should be your decision, based on an academic interest, the need for specialized training and education for professional advancement, and/or a desire for personal enrichment. Timing depends on a number of factors:

- Do you need real world experience before starting graduate school in your area of interest, or does your field encourage enrollment directly after completing a bachelor's degree?
- Do you need to prepare first for your proposed studies, for example, by taking introductory courses, sitting for standardized tests, or "testing" your interest in the field through an internship or entry-level work in order to create a stronger application?
- What financial, personal, academic, and/or employment obligations must be fulfilled before embarking on graduate studies?

- Do you want to consider taking a “gap year” or two? You might use this time to gain experience to strengthen your candidacy, to clarify your goals and interests, and/or to do something very different before committing to graduate training. If you do take a gap year, inquire with some programs about their deferment policies. Some programs routinely offer deferrals whereas others discourage them. Either way, prepare as much of your applications as possible, and request letters of recommendation before you leave Harvard.
- Some degree programs offer both full-time and part-time enrollment, some enroll students only in the fall while others allow students to begin in any semester. Which is right for you?
- Graduate programs in some fields allow students who are admitted to defer their enrollment for a year, but others do not and advise individuals to “apply when you’re ready to come.” Are you ready?

## CONSIDERING DIFFERENT DEGREE OPTIONS

**The degree you choose – master’s, professional degree, or doctorate – corresponds to your personal and career needs, interests, resources, and goals.**

### MASTER’S DEGREE (e.g. MA, MS, MPP, MPH, MFA, EdM)

- Generally a master’s degree takes one to three years to complete.
- Master’s degrees tend to focus on the practical application of knowledge and skills.
- Master’s programs may or may not offer direct career preparation or advancement.
- Students usually end their studies after the master’s degree, but some programs prepare students to apply for continued studies or doctorate.
- Master’s degrees are not usually funded – you would most likely be responsible for tuition and fees, possibly taking out student loans to supplement your own resources.
- You may be able to pursue a program full or part time.
- Because these programs are relatively short, it is important to investigate the level of career services you will be eligible for at the institution of interest, and whether these services apply to alumni.

### PROFESSIONAL DEGREE (e.g. JD, MBA, MD)

- Generally, professional degrees take two to four years (but can be slightly longer if a professional practicum/internship is required) and provide focused training leading to specific career paths.
- Professional degrees are generally “terminal” degrees that do not lead to doctoral programs.
- Professional degrees are not usually funded – you would most likely be responsible for tuition and fees, possibly taking out student loans to supplement your own resources and any grants you might receive.
- In some, but not all, fields, you may be able to pursue your program full or part time.

### DOCTORAL DEGREE (e.g. PhD, EdD)

- A doctoral degree can take four to seven years (or more) and allows a student to pursue original research and scholarship in a specific area.
- Doctoral degrees are designed as preparation for a career in university teaching, research, or advanced positions in certain professional fields.

- A doctoral program is very different from the undergraduate experience in that it is often a narrowly focused, much more independent experience.
- Conducting research and writing a dissertation are rigorous undertakings that can be intellectually, exciting but also may be isolating and challenging.
- Doctoral programs in competitive departments are often (but not always) funded with a combination of grants, fellowships, and teaching or research assistantships.
- Doctoral programs are almost always full time, but some may allow part-time enrollment.

## RESEARCHING GRADUATE SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMS

**Gather as much information as you can! Keeping in mind your academic interests and goals...**

- Talk to professors, mentors, and professionals with expertise in your field of interest. Ask them for suggestions of particularly strong programs and (for the doctoral degree) specific faculty whose research interests complement your own.
- Examine resources online such as *Peterson's Graduate and Professional Programs* and field-specific references to review programs of study, tuition and related costs, financial aid resources, and application requirements.
- Review professional journals to learn where professors are doing work that interests you.

### Then...

- Consider the strength(s) of each program, the courses offered, and the work being done by its faculty, in light of your own interests. Also consider asking where alumni have gone to work after graduation.
- Speak with (or email) faculty, current students and, if possible, graduates of the program. Make every effort to visit the school(s) to get a first-hand perspective on the campus, department, facilities, and people. Inquire whether there is a dedicated recruiting event for prospective or admitted candidates, or whether you could arrange your visit individually.
- Explore questions of faculty accessibility and how often they meet with their advisees. What are typical class sizes?
- Check out the graduate student facilities and organizations (e.g. housing, office space, computer facilities, libraries, labs, lounges, extracurriculars, support services – including career services specifically designed for graduate students).
- Find out what types of funding are available, including how, when, and for what purposes they are allocated. Are internship opportunities available? Will the financial support continue for the duration of the program?
- Check out eligibility for research assistantships, teaching assistantships, work on campus, fellowships, or grants (internal or external).
- Understand requirements for the degree such as classes, qualifying exams, final projects, etc.
- Find out what percentage of students are offered employment by graduation and the types of jobs and employers they attract.
- Ask about connections to alumni and networking events available to current students and alumni.

## THE APPLICATION PROCESS

**As a result of your research, you will want to create a “short list” of schools that meet your interests and goals and then begin the application process.**

- Make careful note of all application requirements and deadlines (these can vary).
- Try to compile your documents and submit each complete package in a timely manner – ahead of the deadline – to avoid a last minute rush.
- Solicit letters of recommendation from those who know you and your interests and abilities well, and who will provide the strongest support for your candidacy. They may be professors or employers, or a combination of both, depending on the type of graduate program you want to pursue. Be sure to give recommenders advanced notice to ensure you can meet the application deadline.
- If standardized test scores are part of the admission process, determine exactly which exams are required (e.g. GRE General, GRE Subject, LSAT, MCAT). Register for and take the tests well before the application deadline, ideally with sufficient time to retake the test(s) if necessary.

**Shepherd your application(s) with care and attention to deadlines and details!**

## APPLICATION ESSAY(S) OR STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

**The essay or statement of purpose is the core of your application. It describes...**

- Your intellectual interests and academic preparation in the field.
- Why you are interested in this particular graduate program, including your career goals.
- Possible areas for in-depth study and research.
- A sense of “who you are” as an individual, as well as your potential as a student and, ultimately, as a professional in the field.

**Some tips for composing your application essay/statement:**

- Demonstrate motivation, enthusiasm, maturity and personal uniqueness, while articulating clearly why the program is a good match for your interests.
- Explain your passion for the field and note any connections to the department or program.
- Articulate long-term goals, why you want to go to graduate school, why you’ve chosen this particular institution and department, and, if applicable, any specific faculty member(s) with whom you hope to work.
- Cite any previous work you’ve done in the field and/or discuss past research projects completed or papers published.
- For research-intensive degrees, propose specific questions that intrigue you, how you might approach them, and why pursuing this line of inquiry would contribute new knowledge to the field. You will likely not pursue this particular project for your thesis, but this mini-proposal illustrates your ability to think independently

and creatively and allows you to demonstrate how your research interests fit with the department.

- Your essay is viewed as a writing sample - make sure it demonstrates excellent communication skills.
- If there are any deficiencies in your academic background, explain them in the personal statement, or ask a recommender to do so in his/her letter of recommendation.
- Keep your statement(s) succinct.
- Do not overstate or understate your qualifications.\*
- Ask yourself if the statement is interesting and provides a compelling argument to the committee for your admission into the program.
- Proofread the statement carefully and ask professors, mentors, friends, and other advisers to critique it. Check for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors.

\*Be straightforward in describing your relevant accomplishments and support these with examples. Allow your recommenders to provide the superlatives. On the other hand, do not apologize or point out deficiencies or present yourself in a self-deprecating way.

## ADVICE FOR REQUESTING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Letters of recommendation are often the deciding factor in whether you are accepted to a graduate program. Along with your statement of purpose, an effective letter of recommendation provides a portrait of who you are, beyond your college grades or entrance exam scores. Admission committees rely on letters of recommendation not only to validate what you have written in your application, but also to gather information about your personality, character, and motivation for your chosen field.

### Points to Consider Before Asking for a Letter:

Before approaching faculty or employers for letters of recommendation, take some time to reflect on how these letters can best be used to strengthen your application.

- **Get a sense of the qualities the graduate school is looking for in a candidate**, by looking at successful graduates of the program. What qualities do they have?
- **Who do you know who can positively comment on these relevant personal qualities?** Ideally, your letter writer should be someone who knows you well, is involved with the career you are considering, can compare you to other applicants, and is *very enthusiastic* about supporting your application.
- If you need to provide several letters of recommendation, consider how each letter can fill different needs. **Request letters from individuals who know you in different contexts and can comment on different strengths.**
- **What would you like someone to include in the letter that may be missing in the rest of your application?** Who can comment on your professional behavior? Your maturity? Did you take a particularly challenging sequence of courses that is not necessarily obvious from your transcript? Are there extenuating circumstances that might account for atypical grades?

- Decide whether you want to **waive your right** to see the letter of recommendation. For most graduate programs, confidential letters have greater credibility and they are assigned greater weight in the application process. Interestingly, many letter writers are less inhibited in praising an applicant when the letter is confidential.
- **Allow plenty of "turnaround time."** You want to be sure the letter writer has the opportunity to write a thoughtful, complete letter without worrying about an unrealistic deadline. Providing a few months is often much appreciated. Then, follow up periodically to ensure the letters are submitted on time.

### **Points to Consider When Contacting the Letter Writer:**

After deciding which individuals can provide the most positive and most complete picture of your relevant skills, experiences, and character traits, speak with each of the potential recommenders.

- The letter of recommendation will be especially effective if the writers include **specific examples and instances**. So, provide each letter writer with information relevant to your experience and application. This could be a resume, a personal statement, a reminder of particular incidents or discussions, etc. You might create a few bullet points discussing how this information relates to your application. Let the writer know what would be helpful to include in the letter. Consider whether the writer can comment on any of the following topics:
  - *Intellectual ability; rank as compared with Harvard and non-Harvard students*
  - *Follow through on assignments, rigor of academic program*
  - *Depth of involvement and achievement in work, lab, volunteer, extracurricular activities*
  - *Ability to communicate both in person and in writing*
  - *Maturity, emotional stability, concern for people, problem-solving skills, tenacity in reaching goals, curiosity, creativity, leadership, self-discipline, integrity, teamwork*
  - *Response to criticism, ability to relate to others, capacity for collaborative and independent work, attitudes toward supervision*
  - *Motivation and potential for success in the graduate program and beyond*
- Provide your recommenders with information about each graduate program you've chosen and point out the academic and personal strengths you are asking them to highlight.
- Don't forget to **thank the person writing your letter** by sending a thank you note or small gift. Share the outcome of your application. Not only could the letter make the difference in whether or not you are accepted, you most likely will want to ask for letters again in the future.

### **SO YOU'VE BEEN ADMITTED – CONGRATULATIONS!**

The work you've done to select programs that match your interests and goals has prepared you well to decide 1) if you will enroll in graduate studies, and 2) if you received more than one offer of admission, where you will ultimately pursue your degree. As you consider these questions, review the information you gathered about the faculty, courses, graduate student support and resources, location and environment, social life, and financial requirements (including aid packages, if available) at each school. Consider the pros and cons of each option. Your decision should feel right to you!



## RESOURCES FOR APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

**Peterson's Graduate and Professional Programs**, Peterson's, annual.

[www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com)

This comprehensive guide gives thumbnail descriptions of graduate and professional programs in the U.S., including application requirements and dates, contact information, and program descriptions.

**PhDs.org**

[www.phds.org/graduate-school](http://www.phds.org/graduate-school)

A comprehensive resource for grad students of all levels...from prospective to PhD and beyond. Search for Master's and PhD programs, view interviews of grad students giving advice, and browse many resources on getting into and succeeding in grad school.

**GRE-Graduate Record Exam:**

[www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org)

Explore this site to learn about the GRE, order practice materials, register for the exams, and answer all your GRE questions.

**GraduateGuide**

[www.graduateguide.com](http://www.graduateguide.com)

A directory of graduate schools in the US and Canada, plus advice and resources.

**Fastweb.com** and **Finaid.org**

[www.fastweb.com](http://www.fastweb.com) [www.finaid.org](http://www.finaid.org)

Search for scholarships and learn how to craft a winning application.

**Graduate School Resource Center - Idealist**

[www.idealists.org/info/GradEducation](http://www.idealists.org/info/GradEducation)

This resource center helps you connect your educational options with your future social change career. The articles offer advice and insights on how to explore educational options, whether graduate school is right for you, how to finance your education, etc.

**Graduate Admissions Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice**

[id.lib.harvard.edu/aleph/012102606/catalog](http://id.lib.harvard.edu/aleph/012102606/catalog)

Advice on and examples of essays for grad school applications.

**Graduate School Resource Center - Idealist**

[books.google.com/books/about/Is\\_a\\_PhD\\_for\\_Me.html?id=b09aPgAACAAJ&hl=en](http://books.google.com/books/about/Is_a_PhD_for_Me.html?id=b09aPgAACAAJ&hl=en)

Includes chapters on preliminary doctoral program requirements, the dissertation, financing graduate education, applying to & surviving the Ph.D. program, postdocs, employment, higher education, & life as an academic; includes statistics & resource lists.

**Chronicle of Higher Education**

[www.chronicle.com](http://www.chronicle.com)

Get the most current advice about making the most of graduate school. The Chronicle of Higher Education is the go-to resource for all things academe.

**Come to the Office of Career Services and meet with an adviser  
to discuss your graduate school questions.**

*Drop-in hours every day, 1:00-4:00pm*