Getting into Grad School:
A Guide with Exercises for Prospective Graduate Students

If you're considering grad school for your future, you are probably asking yourself many questions: *Is grad school the best option for me now? What are the benefits and challenges? Which grad programs should I apply for? What's involved in an application to grad school? What are admissions committees looking for? Who can help me? What resources are available? What are alternatives to grad school?*

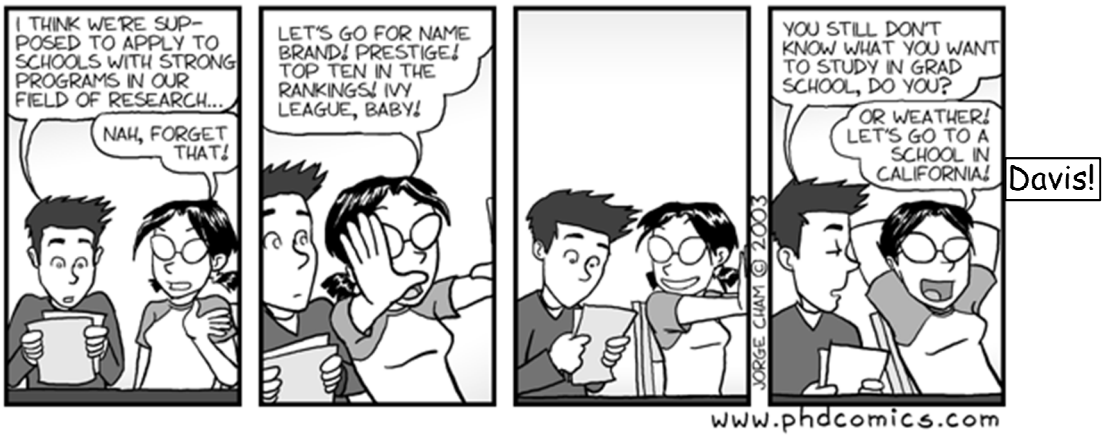
These are all important questions to consider, and should be considered carefully. This guide focuses on the main aspects of the decision-making process and the application:

A. **Deciding which grad programs to apply into**
B. **Writing your personal statements**
C. **Asking for recommendation letters**
D. **Interviewing and talking with prospective faculty**
E. **Making your final decision**

Because these decisions and your application for graduate school is complex and time-consuming, this guide was prepared to provide critical information and advice. Additionally, this guide contains questions and exercises to help you to prepare your application for graduate programs. Be as honest as possible with yourself, and talk about your answers with close friends. You may need to adjust the wording of your answers for your application, but it's important to begin with an honest assessment of yourself as you prepare your application. Faculty in admissions committees have read many applications, and if you are not genuine in your answers, you will hinder your chances for being admitted.

Using this guide and working on these exercises can help you get started in the right direction, but remember to seek additional help from other people (faculty, grad students, postdocs, peers, career counselors, etc) and resources (online information, recruiting fairs and conferences, self-assessment tools, etc). Additional suggestions and resources are incorporated within this guide.

As you approach multiple decisions, this can be a stressful time period. But it may help to realize that you are not alone, and that many people have approached these decisions and successfully passed into new adventures. So, remember to find and use friends to encourage you in this process. Best wishes!



A. Deciding on which grad programs to apply into

As you consider grad school, you may need to begin by asking whether grad school is your best option. Working on these preliminary exercises below will help to confirm or correct your decisions, help you to better understand your motivations and qualifications, and can help prepare you for your next steps.

As you work on these exercises and answer these questions, try not to "force" your responses into what you think other people want to hear. Instead, it's important to start by focusing on simply being honest with yourself, so that you develop an accurate self-assessment. You can adjust your responses into a positive light for your specific applications later.

1. *Begin by asking yourself some preliminary questions.* Why do you want to go to grad school, as opposed to seeking a job or a professional degree (e.g. MD, JD, MBA, etc)? What are some alternatives that you're considering, and their pro's and con's? Make sure that you're motivated and committed to persisting through your decision. Superficial motivations (e.g. my significant other/friends are doing the same; I don't like the alternatives) probably won't sustain you when challenges arise.
2. *Assess your strengths and weaknesses.* Various self-assessment tools may help you discover your strengths, so that you can address them meaningfully in your conversations and applications. Completing an Individual Development Plan (e.g. using the myIDP website for those in the STEM disciplines) can help you assess your skills, values, and interests. Also, writing down your Seven Success Stories can help you determine past patterns of success and achievements. This exercise involves writing seven stories of when you thrived, and reflecting on patterns of behavior and circumstances that helped you to succeed--which helps to name your strengths and give examples.
3. *Conduct informational interviews*. Find grad students, postdocs, faculty, and professionals who seem to be doing what interests you, and ask them to chat with you briefly. Ask them about their work: general responsibilities, challenges, and benefits; what a typical day looks like; strengths and skills that have helped them to succeed; their career path and their motivations at critical decision points. See if you can envision yourself in a similar role and career path.
4. *Seek counsel from others.* Talk with faculty who know you, to help you determine whether you have the essential qualifications to succeed in grad school (this will also help you when you need recommendation letters). Faculty can also suggest specific grad programs and universities to consider. Furthermore, your university probably has academic advisors and career counselors who may be able to provide career tests, mock interviews, and other resources.
5. *Seek research experiences and internships.* Whether or not you attend grad school, these research experiences are vital in preparing you for a wide range of options, and can also help you decide between grad or professional programs, MS or PhD programs, applying to grad school immediately or delaying for some time, etc. Academic and preparatory programs (e.g. McNair, UC LEADS, CAMP, etc) can also help provide research experiences and valuable professional development activities.
6. *Search online for specific universities and programs,* if the previous steps seem to confirm that you have the essential qualifications and sufficient motivation for grad school. Try to identify those programs which your peers (with similar interests and academic credentials) were admitted into and have succeeded. Rankings of grad programs with your discipline can also help. Organize their application requirements, deadlines, and specific faculty with whom you're interested in working.

7. *If you're in the biosciences and trying to decide between PhD, MD, and PhD-MD programs*, it might help to learn about a research study that interviewed and followed undergrads as they selected and pursued these different programs: McGee and Keller "Identifying Future Scientists: Predicting Persistence into Research Training", *CBE–Life Sciences Education*, **2007**, *Vol 6*, pp 316-331.

B. Writing your personal statements

The overall application for most graduate programs generally includes the following:

1) GPA and transcripts
2) GRE scores (check if the general and subject GRE is required or optional for your programs)
3) Personal statements
4) Letters of recommendation
5) Biographical information from your essays or résumé/curriculum vitae that describe your academic, research, and professional experiences
6) Interview (for some graduate programs, often in the biosciences)

In general, faculty and admissions committees use these components to determine if you are a suitable candidate for graduate school. In particular, they are trying to determine if you are a suitable candidate for their specific program.

Beginning with your personal statement, you must demonstrate to the admissions committee that you have considered graduate school seriously and their program in particular. It's your opportunity to summarize your academic and research experiences. You must also communicate how your experiences are relevant to preparing you for the graduate degree that you will be pursuing.

The personal statement is where you highlight your strengths. Make your strengths absolutely clear to the reviewers, because they will often be reading many other statements. Your self-assessments and honest conversations with peers and advisors (from Part A above) should have also revealed your strengths. But you must also address (not blame others for) weaknesses or unusual aspects of your application or academic background.

Your personal statement should focus on the two main aspects of your qualifications and motivations:

1. Identify your strengths in terms of qualifications for succeeding in the grad program and provide examples to support your claims. Start your statement by describing your strengths immediately. Because faculty will be reading many statements, it's important to start off with your strengths. Consider traits of successful graduate students from your informational interviews, and identify which of these traits you have.
    a. Consult your responses from the exercises in Part A above, and summaries from your self-assessments and conversations. What are traits of successful graduate students in your discipline? Which of these traits do you have? You may wish to consult your notes from your informational interviews and your Seven Success Stories. Write short summaries that demonstrate your strengths, e.g. how your strengths helped you to achieve certain goals or overcome obstacles.
    b. Summarize your research experience(s). What were the main project goals and the "big picture" questions? What was your role in this project? What did you accomplish? What did you learn, and how did you grow as a result of the experience(s)?

2. Explain your motivations for why you are applying to this graduate program at this university. Be as specific as possible. Identify several faculty members with whom you're interested in working, and explain why their research interests you.
    a. Explain why you are applying to graduate school, as opposed to seeking a professional degree or a job. Discuss your interest and motivation for grad school, along with your future career aspirations.
3. Identify and briefly address weaknesses or unusual aspects in your application--e.g. a significant drop in your GPA during an academic term; weak GRE scores; breaks in your education path; changes in your academic trajectory, etc. Don't ignore them, because ignoring them might indicate that they are blind spots for you. Explain how you'll improve and strengthen those areas, or find accommodations around your weakness. Determine how you will address them in a positive light, e.g. by discussing how you overcame obstacles due to your persistence, what you learned from challenges, and how you grew from failures. This blog on weaknesses may also help.

C. Asking for recommendation letters

As you progressed through the decision-making process in Part A above, you should have had several conversations with faculty. These conversations will help you immensely as you seek several faculty to write recommendation letters on your behalf. Those conversation will help the faculty write meaningfully about your strengths, and avoid superficial letters where the faculty simply report your letter grade from a course.

Choose your recommenders wisely and thoughtfully. As you ask for a reference letter, specifically ask if they will write a strong letter on your behalf. Although it might be an awkward question to ask directly, it's much better to find out in advance, before they submit a letter. It is not uncommon for admissions committees to receive negative or lukewarm reference letters, which will significantly hurt your chances for getting admitted. Moreover, if they mention any concerns or weaknesses, this will help prepare you to address them in your personal statements and/or interviews.

The letters of recommendation should support your claim that you have considered graduate school seriously. The letters must identify your strengths that will exemplify how you will become a successful graduate student. Letters that simply confirm grades received in courses are of little value to an admissions committee, since they will have your transcripts. Your letters of support should add new dimensions rather than be redundant.

Who should write your letters? Ideally, you should select research mentors and faculty, who can speak to your abilities to be a successful graduate student. Some ideal options are:

a. faculty research mentors (most important reference)
b. employer or supervisor during an internship or job in a field related to your discipline (it's better if the employer has a graduate degree)
c. postdoctoral research mentor (if he/she has worked closely with you in your research)
d. faculty instructor (who can comment on more than simply your grade)
e. academic advisor

Letters from these individuals would be less than ideal for your graduate application:

- family or friends

- religious advisors
- graduate students
- employer or supervisor in an un-related field or discipline
- faculty member in an unrelated academic discipline who can only report your final grade

Identify at least 5 faculty members whom you might ask to write a recommendation letter for you. Many programs require 3 references, but you'll probably need to identify more references and use them for different programs and universities depending on the faculty members' experiences and backgrounds. Admissions committees appreciate receiving reference letters from faculty who are very familiar with their university or graduate program.

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For each request for a recommendation letter, make it as easy as possible for the faculty to complete. If you make it difficult, you may annoy them and cause them to be less than excited to write a strong letter on your behalf. Remember that you may be asking them to submit multiple letters for different programs, so this will consume significant time and energy from them. For each request, provide:

1. The name of the university and type of program to which you're applying, along with clear instructions on how to submit the letter (online or mailing paper letters), deadline (remember to give them extra time if this is your first request to them), and if you'll be asking for additional letters in the near future. You may want to check their calendar if they'll be unavailable for a significant time period before the deadlines, which often occur near the end of the fall term.
2. Provide a short summary of your CV and personal statement, to refresh their memory of your background, strengths, and motivations for that particular program

D. Interviewing and talking with prospective faculty

The graduate application process varies broadly and depends on your specific academic program. The range may include:

- Admission decision based only upon submitted electronic application
- Admission decision based on application + interviewing with faculty
    - In these cases where you are admitted to work with a specific faculty member, you should contact faculty directly
- Admission decision based on application + interview by phone and/or campus visit

Because of the range of possible application processes, it's critical to learn about each programs' requirements. For some graduate programs, you will need to directly contact faculty because a specific professor will decide whether to admit you as their own graduate student. In these circumstances, make sure to contact faculty directly. (It may be surprising, but some students don't contact faculty and so severely hinder their chances of being admitted.) It will be important in your decision-making process to determine if you envision working closely with that faculty member and if you have matching working and communication styles. The faculty member will also want to assess your experiences and how you work

by communicating with you. Thus you will want to sharpen your interview skills as you communicate with faculty.

Furthermore, some graduate programs will invite you to conduct a phone interview or invite you to the university for a campus visit. The interview is your opportunity to more thoroughly demonstrate that you have what it takes to be in the graduate program. You will want to show your understanding and enthusiasm for the research that you have done, by honing your interview skills. Many grad programs in the biosciences often use a campus visit and interviews, so make sure that you learn what's involved in each application process.

1. BEFORE the interview:
    a. For campus visits, it's OK to ask what is expected of you and how to prepare (e.g. if you will be covered for your traveling expenses, how to dress, if you should bring your CV, etc).
    b. Learn about the faculty and people you will be meeting or communicating with. Read about the research interests of the faculty, including abstracts or papers. Prepare at least 1-2 specific research questions for each interview.
    c. Review the research that you did. If it is published, reread the paper, abstract, or poster. Prepare a brief (1-2 minutes) oral summary of your past work. What was the research question? How did you address it? What did you specifically complete and achieve? What are some possible questions that faculty might ask?
    d. Prepare detailed questions you have of the program you are considering. Generic questions (e.g. tell me about your program) indicate that you didn't read the basics on their website, and so won't leave a positive impression. Determine what's important for you (specific research facilities, professional development activities, student groups, opportunities for collaborations, etc) and research about them online.
    e. Determine and list the questions you have about the program, university, and location of where you are visiting. What are you hoping to see and learn?
    f. If you generally get nervous before interviews, Amy Cuddy's research and PopTech talk on power poses may help: http://poptech.org/popcasts/amy_cuddy_power_poses
    g. Conduct a mock interview with a friend or your career center.
        i. Ask a peer or friend (e.g. a current grad student or postdoc, who is familiar with grad school interviews) to help you sharpen your interview skills.
        ii. Come prepared to the mock interview in professional attire, and with your materials (CV, papers, etc).
        iii. If possible, video record your mock interview. Although many cringe at watching themselves, the video can be incredibly helpful in revealing blind spots.
        iv. After the mock interview, ask your peer for honest and critical feedback. Listen actively and allow them to speak openly without trying to be defensive.
2. DURING the interview:
    a. For campus visits, dress appropriately (usually business or business casual, but be comfortable); be on time; organize your papers (e.g., résumés / CVs, reprints, questions). Even for phone/Skype interviews, dressing professionally will help you to mentally prepare for the interview.

b. Speak enthusiastically about your work. Highlight your research accomplishments and/or professional growth. If asked to speak about a weakness, phrase your answer in a forward looking manner to demonstrate learning and growth.
c. You'll want to sound positive and enthusiastic. But avoid excessive enthusiasm, which could be interpreted as naiveté or desperation. This is a tough balance to achieve, so practice with others.
d. Listen actively to your faculty interviewer talk about his/her research. Ask questions, using your prepared lists. Take notes to remember comments and suggestions.

3. AFTER the interview
   a. Summarize your perceptions of the program, university, and environment. Make a table listing the pros and cons. List the people whom you met on your visit, and write a brief comment for each person to help you remember your interactions. Is it a good fit for you?
   b. Email your interviewers, and thank them for their time. Follow-up if you promised to provide any materials. Even if you determine that you don't wish to work with that faculty member, this isn't the time to burn bridges.
   c. Reflect on your interview performance and make adjustments to strengthen your next interview.

E. Making your final decision

At the initial stages of your application process, it may seem difficult to plan ahead and consider how you will make your final decision of which graduate program to attend. But thinking about your decision-making process will help you throughout the whole application process, because you will be more committed and focused. This commitment and focus will help sharpen your questions and priorities, and faculty will often admire applicants who have clear directions in their lives.

1. Go back to the original exercises and questions in Part A above, and reflect on your answers and responses. Have any of your answers or decisions changed? Have you learned anything new about yourself and about grad school? Have there been any surprises?
2. For those programs that have admitted you, prepare a table of characteristics, pros and cons, and your list of priorities. Determine what is important for you.
   a. If you get admitted, you may wish to consider deferring your start date for a year if you need to address other priorities in your life (e.g. taking care of family, marriage, children, other professional opportunities, etc).
3. If you did not get admitted into your desired or favorite programs, consider your options. Can you find further research, professional, or academic experiences that can help strengthen your application for next year? Can you obtain other training or education (certificate, master's degree, post-baccalaureate program, internship, etc)? (Those in bioscience have PREP and Bridge to Doctorate programs.) Consider your alternatives for other career directions.
4. During your whole application process, you probably increased and deepened your network. Reach out to some of your new network to seek their counsel and advice. Reaching out to them can build your network, and even prepare you for next steps. Identify specific people whom you want to contact.

5. Even if you are admitted into your favorite programs, it will help to go back and consider some of your basic questions. Attending grad school is often challenging for most students, and most graduate programs will be more challenging than undergraduate programs. This isn't a light decision to make quickly, and strengthening your commitment will help equip you with persistence when you face obstacles.
    a. What are some potential pitfalls as you consider starting grad school? How will you address them? Who might help you? What are some possible resources?
    b. What are some possible challenges for each graduate program that you're considering? How will you address them? Who might help you?
    c. What are you looking forward to? Remembering the positive aspects often help through depressing periods.
6. Remember to go back and personally thank your many friends, mentors, and contacts who helped you through the process. This important exercise will help to increase your gratitude and strengthen your network for future opportunities.

Source: This guide is adapted from original resources created by Minnetta Gardinier (Associate Dean for Recruitment & Professional Development; Associate Professor of Pharmacology; University of Iowa) and Sacha Patera (Associate Director of the Interdisciplinary Biological Sciences Program; Northwestern University). This has been adapted by Steve Lee (stnlee@ucdavis.edu; Graduate Diversity Officer for the STEM Disciplines at UC Davis).

Additional Resources

- The University of California provides the "What's Next" pdf and website:
    - http://www.ucop.edu/graduate-studies/_files/whats-next.pdf
    - http://graduate.universityofcalifornia.edu/admissions/preparing/index.html
- The CIC (Committee on Institutional Cooperation for the Big Ten universities) provides "Applying to Graduate School: Tips, Timeline, and Tools of the Trade" at http://www.cic.net/docs/default-source/diversity/gradschoolguide.pdf