



Graduate School:

THE INSIDER'S GUIDE

TO GETTING ACCEPTED

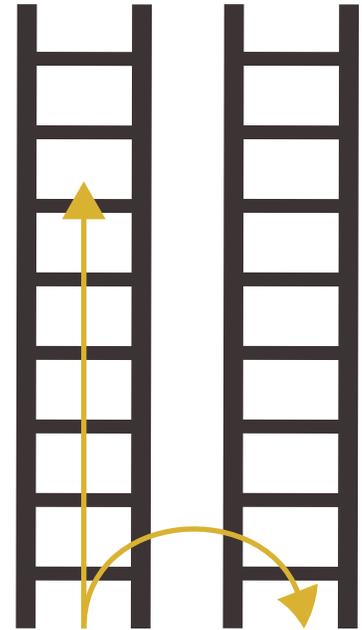
Table of Contents

1. [GRAD SCHOOL DECISIONS](#)
2. [GRADUATE SCHOOL SELECTION](#)
3. [FINANCING GRAD SCHOOL](#)
4. [ENTRANCE EXAMS](#)
5. [APPLICATION PACKAGE](#)
6. [GRADUATE SCHOOL/LIFE BALANCE](#)

1. Grad School Decisions

There's nothing quite like the feeling of accepting a diploma. Perhaps it's something you've imagined from time to time—seeing the look of pride on your family members' faces at your graduation ceremony, hanging a newly framed diploma in your office, and updating your résumé to include your new degree. But is graduate school right for you? It's a considerable investment in time and tuition dollars, and frankly, not everyone will derive concrete benefits from an advanced degree.

The people who do benefit from grad school generally fall into one of two categories: **Corporate ladder climbers** and **career switchers**. Of course, there are always exceptions. Lifelong learners genuinely enjoy learning for learning's sake alone, and for these individuals, grad school is more like an expensive, yet worthwhile hobby.



Grad school is a marathon, not a sprint, and your decision-making process should be equally exhaustive. Have an interview with yourself to clarify your thoughts. **Ask yourself these questions:**

- What do I need from grad school to make it worthwhile?
- Is there a promised promotion attached to an advanced degree?
- Will I have to reduce my hours at work?
- Can I afford to take a temporary pay cut?
- Will my family support me?
- Do I truly need advanced credentials to advance myself?
- How long would it take me to earn my degree?
- Would the benefits of a certification program compare to those of a master's degree?
- Will a graduate degree support my personal growth objectives?
- Will my expected salary increase be greater than the expense?



Out of all of these questions, the one that is arguably the most relevant is the last one. It's tricky to develop a reasonably accurate estimate of your anticipated increase in wages, but you can check the latest numbers from the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) to get a general idea of what you might earn. Then, ask yourself whether the salary bump will be worth it.

2. Graduate School Selection

Once you're ready to take the plunge and investigate your options, you'll notice that earning a graduate degree can be far more flexible than your undergrad career was. Regarding learning options, there are three primary categories:



1. 100% on-campus programs.



2. 100% long-distance learning.



3. Combination of long-distance learning and on-campus programs.

All types can offer high-quality education, so it really comes down to your personal preferences and the availability of the program you want. Here's a rundown of the pros and cons:

Campus-based learning: Pros

Develop meaningful connections with professors and other students.

Experience professional networking opportunities.

Enjoy access to campus services, such as tutoring, the library, and career counseling.



Campus-based learning: Cons

Experience less flexible course scheduling.

Deal with a new commuting schedule each semester.

Get no opportunity to retake a missed class.



Long-distance learning: Pros

Lectures and supporting materials can often be viewed any time.

Real-time collaboration is still possible.

Classes are usually comparable in quality to campus classes.



Long-distance learning: Cons

Not necessarily less expensive than campus-based programs.

Some schools use adjunct teaching staff for online programs.

Students with poor self-discipline can fall behind.

If you live near a campus that offers a combined online/campus-based approach, this may be your most tempting choice. It offers the best of both worlds: Structured support and progress monitoring on campus, with the flexibility and self-pacing of online programs.

Background Research on Grad Schools

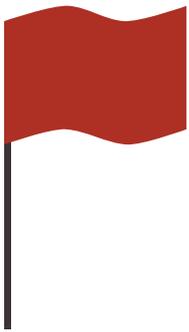
Before applying to any grad school, make sure it maintains accreditation. This protects you from subpar academic programs, and it lets employers know your credentials are valid. Regional accreditation is preferable to national accreditation. You should be able to find accreditation information listed on each school's website, but take it with a grain of salt until you can confirm the info.

Some schools lay claim to accreditation from entities that aren't reputable. Some don't even exist. Ignore buzzwords like "independent" and "internationally recognized," and instead do your own research. If the accrediting body is not listed as a recognized entity by the Department of Education or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, then you should assume its accreditation is meaningless.



Steer Clear of Diploma Mills

Contrary to popular belief, the digital era isn't solely responsible for diploma mills. They've been causing trouble in the U.S. since before 1876, which is when the U.S. Commissioner of Education, John Eaton, [denounced fraudulent educational institutions as a "disgrace."](#) However, there is no doubt that the internet has made it easier for unscrupulous "educators" to sell worthless degrees.



Watch out for these red flags:

- Lack of accreditation.
- Accreditation by a bogus entity.
- Lack of admissions requirements.
- Flat fees, rather than fees by credit hour or course.
- Promise of a diploma within weeks.
- Diplomas awarded based solely on life or work experience.

Grad Program Details

Now that you know how to ignore the bad apples, it's time to delve into the details of program selection. Don't assume that the policies of the university apply to the specific degree program you're interested in. To get the details on scheduling, credit transfers, and requirements, you may need to directly contact the program or department. Alternatively, call the admissions office.

Insider's Tip:

When calling any admissions office, emphasize that you don't want your number on their call list. Unless you enjoy receiving courtesy calls every afternoon, of course.

As you collect the data, create a chart to help you easily recall which program offers which amenity. Write the names of the schools in a vertical column, and then create a horizontal field with entries for flexible schedules, accepted credit transfers, and admission requirements. Put a check in the corresponding field when a school meets your criteria in these areas or when you meet the admission requirements.

Feel free to add additional criteria relevant to your needs. Once you've made your reference chart, add some additional notes about whether the course offerings for each program will suit your career interests, and whether the graduation requirements to earn your degree seem reasonably attainable. Always know what you're getting into before you apply.

Sample Reference Chart

	Flexibility	Credit Transfers	Admission Requirements	Notes
John Milton MFA Program	✓		✓	
Jules Verne Submariner's Academy		✓	✓	
Descartes School of Psychology	✓		✓	
Noam Chomsky Finishing School		✓		

Networking Opportunities

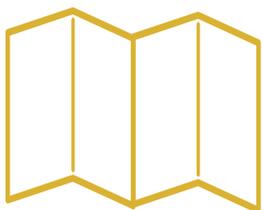
Some prospective grad students make the mistake of applying to schools before knowing what they offer in terms of career opportunities. It's common for higher education institutions to maintain an alumni network, but don't assume that your potential schools do. Confirm this ahead of time, and contact the person in charge to ask if you can get in touch with a few alums to ask some quick questions about their experiences at the school.



Similarly, consider whether the schools on your list offer structured internship programs. Internships can prove especially invaluable if you're switching careers, as you'll need to build your professional network from the ground up.

Campus Tours

A campus tour might not be worth your time if you're interested in a long-distance degree program. Otherwise, clear a full day on your calendar for each school you're considering. Don't schedule your tour during school breaks, as you'll want to speak with the faculty in what might become your department. As you walk the halls and talk with your tour guide, keep this mental checklist handy:



- Engaged and friendly student body.
- Accessibility of professors and academic advisors.
- Availability of public transit.
- Student-faculty ratio in the program.
- Dominant teaching styles (i.e. discussion-based, lectures, or project-based).
- Campus safety.
- Career advisory services.
- Campus geography (in one location or many around the city).
- Wellness programs/gym access.

Feel free to add to this checklist based on your personal needs and preferences, and definitely take notes during your tour. Arrive prepared with relevant questions. Campus tour guides have plenty of stock answers on hand, so you might get more genuine responses if you ask questions like these:



- What surprised you the most when you came here?
- Which professors have a reputation for being difficult to work with?
- Do students often get together after class?
- What would you have done differently?
- What's your favorite class?
- What don't you like about this school?
- Can you tell me about your capstone project?

Some of these questions seem personal, but there's a good reason for that. If you ask a general question about the program or the campus, you'll get a general response. Ask the tour guide directly about his or her experiences, and you'll get a more genuine peek at what goes on behind the scenes.

Set aside some time after your tour to reflect on your thoughts and write down any additional notes. With each subsequent tour, you can start to rank the schools based on their desirability, which will allow you to narrow down your list of options more easily.

3. Financing Grad School

Unless you've recently won a lotto jackpot, you're probably stressing out about how to pay for that coveted master's or doctorate degree. It won't be easy, but it's definitely doable; if you truly want to advance your career, you'll have all the motivation you need to get through this lengthy process. First, take a look at government programs.



Federal Financial Aid

Remember the FAFSA you filled out as an undergrad? It's time to break out your financial documents and do it all over again. These days, you can [complete and submit the FAFSA online](#) at the website of the U.S. Department of Education. Check out the feature that shows the federal deadline for the school year, as well as your state and university deadlines.

Insider's Tip:

Mark a calendar with fake deadlines, several weeks before the real ones. This extra wiggle room can be a lifesaver if you're a procrastinator.

One more note on the FAFSA: You might be selected for verification. If this sounds a bit like a tax audit, that's because it is. Just like the IRS, the U.S. Department of Education can do the digital equivalent of selecting names from a hat to verify that the submitted financial information is accurate. This doesn't necessarily mean you've done something wrong, but you may have to jump through some extra hoops and submit additional documentation.

State Financial Aid

Check your state's Department of Education, Adult Education Agency, or Higher Education Agency for additional financial aid. The federal Department of Education maintains [resource lists and links organized by state](#). For instance, if you click on Florida, you'll be directed to the Florida Department of Education. Go through all of the available resources for your state and apply for each that you're eligible for.

University Financial Aid

Next, contact the college's office of financial aid or bursar's office. "What can you tell me about financial aid?" is a question these folks hear every day. You'll likely be directed to fill out a university-specific financial aid application for merit-based funding, such as fellowship grants. Alternatively, your school might use the College Scholarship Service PROFILE (CSS/Financial Aid PROFILE), which hundreds of colleges rely on to assess aid eligibility.

Insider's Tip:

Avoid aggressive negotiations. Thank the school for any aid offer, then ask if it's possible to re-evaluate it. Offer any additional financial information that may be helpful.

Then, contact the secretary for your department to ask about program-specific financial aid. You might be eligible for scholarships or assistantships through your department.

Scholarships

Private scholarships aren't just for undergrads. There are some great online databases you can put to work for you—[fastweb!](#) is one example. You can search for opportunities based on merit, veteran status, ethnicity, and “unique situations” like bilingualism. Many scholarships are career-specific, such as those intended to assist law or medical students.

The competition for these scholarships is fierce, so now is not the time to skimp on the essays. Give yourself more time to write the essays than you think you'll need, and ask a friend to give you feedback on them.

Insider's Tip:

Before writing an essay, get into the mindset of a salesman. Know your audience and what they're looking for, and be passionate and perhaps a little quirky.

Employer Reimbursement

Employers love employees who take the initiative to pursue professional development and continuing education opportunities. It's worth your time to visit HR and ask about tuition assistance programs. Expect your company to require that your advanced degree will be directly related to your work.

Insider's Tip:

If your employer doesn't offer tuition dollars, ask for a raise instead. Discuss all the wonderful ways your advanced degree will benefit the company.

Employer reimbursement might come with a catch. Before accepting financial assistance, ask HR these questions:

Q

- Are there any stipulations or requirements?
- If I leave the company, must I repay the money?
- Is my reimbursement dependent upon my GPA?
- Must I remain with the company for a set period of time after earning my degree?
- Do I have to report the money as a “windfall” on my taxes?

Loans

If grad school tuition was embodied by a pro wrestling match, Private “Low Rate” Lender would be on one side of the ring and Federal “Ol’ Reliable” Loan would be on the other. The debate rages on regarding which is the better option, but savvy grad students tend to recommend federal loans.

Insider's Tip:

Some schools list “preferred lenders.” Don't automatically assume these have the best offers. Do your homework.

A private lender might offer a lower rate than a federal loan, but always read the fine print. In most cases, you'll start paying back a private loan right away, whereas you can defer federal loans and, in some cases, get them forgiven entirely. In short, federal loans like Stafford loans have the knockout punch.

Take a closer look at these comparisons.

Federal Loans

- Interest is tax deductible
- Forbearance available for financial hardships
- Loan forgiveness (public service sector)
- Repayment plan flexibility
- Usually no credit check

Private Loans

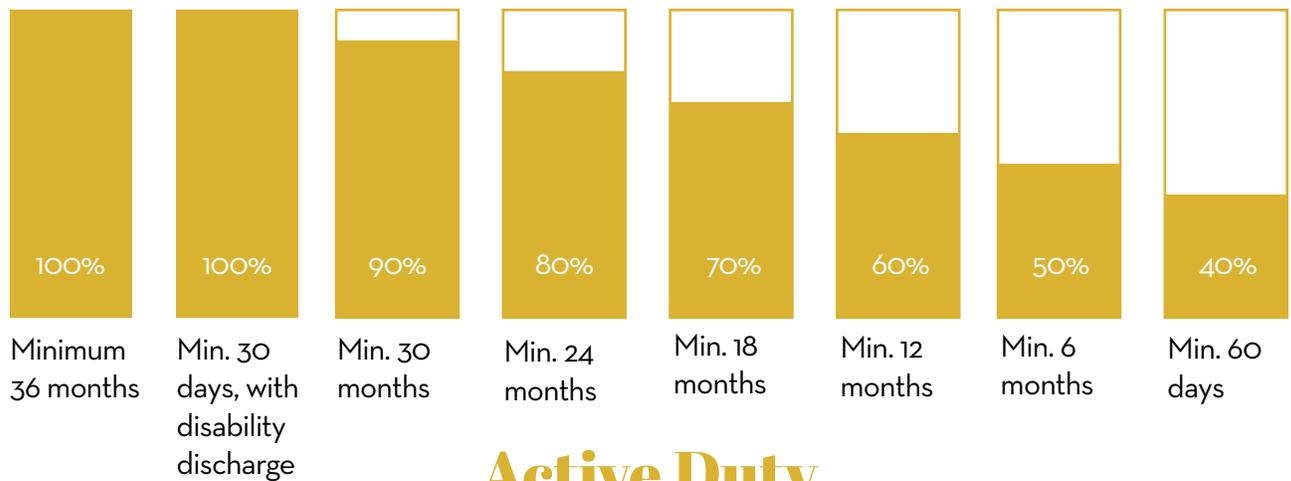
- Interest is likely not tax deductible
- No forbearance likely
- No loan forgiveness likely
- Questionable flexibility/based on lender
- Almost certainly requires a credit check

Military Servicemember Aid

Putting your life on the line for your country is a noble act. One way the U.S. thanks you for your service is by improving your access to higher education. The Post-9/11 GI Bill offers aid to prospective undergrad and graduate students who served in active duty after September 10, 2001. Your eligibility will continue for up to 15 years from the last date of your service.

Your total tuition benefit, which is paid directly to the school, is calculated based on your time in active duty.

Max ▶
Benefit



Active Duty

Scholarship opportunities are also available for veterans.



- U.S. Army F. Edward Hebert Armed Forces Health Professions Scholarship Program
- Capt. Sean P. Grimes Physician Assistant Educational Scholarship Awards
- Military MBA
- Colonel Loren J. and Mrs. Lawona R. Spencer Scholarship
- Army Nurse Corps Association Scholarship Program
- Army Aviation Association of America's AAAA Scholarship Foundation
- Mujica Graduate Student Veteran Stipend (Georgetown University)

Financial Aid After Enrollment

Grad students who plan to work full-time or part-time while enrolled will likely need a few years to complete their degree. Each year you're enrolled, you need to fill out a new FAFSA, ask for aid from your school, and apply to scholarship opportunities.

Insider's Tip:

The secret to getting more financial aid is to visit the financial aid office a few weeks prior to finals. Offer to provide more financial documents if needed.

4. Entrance Exams

The alphabet soup of entrance exam acronyms can be confusing. Should you take the GRE or the GMAT? If you take the LSAT, do you need the GRE, too? The exam you need to take is dependent upon the degree you want and the schools you're applying to.

Let's take a closer look by breaking down the acronyms and figuring out which exams you can ignore and which you should take. Here's a quick reference guide so you can skip right to the section for the exam that's relevant to you.

- GRE: Accepted by most grad degree programs
- [GMAT: Business school](#)
- [MCAT: Medical school](#)
- [LSAT: Law school](#)

Graduate Record Exam (GRE)

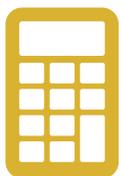
The GRE is what most aspiring grad students take. There are two categories: The General Test and the Subject Tests.

GRE General Test: Assesses analytical writing ability, critical thinking, and verbal and quantitative reasoning skills. The GRE General Test is not specific to a particular field of study. Take this exam if your school doesn't specify a different, preferred exam.

The General Test has three main sections: Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, and Analytical Writing.



In **Verbal Reasoning**, you'll find questions pertaining to reading comprehension, text completion, and sentence equivalence. The questions include multiple choice and select-in-passage questions.



In **Quantitative Reasoning**, you'll be asked numeric entry and quantitative comparison questions. Multiple choice questions dominate this mathematical section, with some exceptions.



In **Analytical Writing**, you'll be asked to provide clearly reasoned and effectively communicated responses to writing prompts. Here, the testing company wants to know how well you can use English, analyze claims, make arguments with supporting evidence, and present your ideas in a coherent fashion. There are two separate, timed writing tasks. One is to write about an issue, while the other involves an argument.

Scores: Each section is scored separately.
Analytical Writing: 0-6 (half-point increments)
Quantitative Reasoning: 130-170 (1 point increments)
Verbal Reasoning: 130-170 (1 point increments)

Insider's Tip:

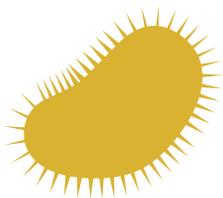
Use the ScoreSelect® option from ETS to send schools only your best scores.

GRE Subject Tests

These tests are an opportunity to show your command of your field of study. Typically, applicants who take a Subject Test also take the General Test. Subject Tests are available in these areas:

- Biology
- Chemistry
- Literature in English
- Mathematics
- Physics
- Psychology

The formats for the Subject Tests vary. Here's a look at the sections in each.



Biology

1. Cellular and Molecular Biology
2. Organismal Biology
3. Ecology and Evolution



Chemistry

1. Analytical Chemistry
2. Inorganic Chemistry
3. Organic Chemistry
4. Physical Chemistry



Literature In English

1. Literary Analysis
2. Identification (recognition of literary works/styles)
3. Cultural and Historical Contexts
4. History and Theory Of Literary Criticism



Mathematics

1. Calculus
2. Algebra
3. Additional Topics (miscellaneous, including discrete mathematics)



Physics

1. Classical Mechanics
2. Electromagnetism
3. Optics and Wave Phenomena
4. Thermodynamics and Statistical Mechanics
5. Quantum Mechanics
6. Atomic Physics
7. Special Relativity
8. Laboratory Methods
9. Specialized Topics (miscellaneous, including nuclear and particle physics)



Psychology

1. Biological
2. Cognitive
3. Social
4. Developmental
5. Clinical
6. Measurement/Methodology/Other

Scores:

Each Subject Test is graded on a 200 to 990 scale. Grades are assessed in 10-point increments. The Subject Tests for biology and psychology also have sub-scores, which are expressed on a scale from 20-99.

Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT)

The GMAT is for aspiring business school students who want to earn a Master of Business Administration (MBA). You'll have 3.5 hours to demonstrate your smarts in this test's four sections.



1. Analytical Writing Assessment:

Assesses your critical thinking skills and communication abilities.

2. Integrated Reasoning:

Assesses your analysis of information from various sources in multiple formats.

3. Quantitative:

Involves mathematics, including numerical problems and interpretations of graphical data.

4. Verbal:

Tests reading comprehension, critical reasoning, and command of English.

Scores:

Each section is scored separately, with a total range of 200 to 800. The majority of people score between 400 and 600.

Law School Admission Test (LSAT)

Take the LSAT if you're ready to pursue a law degree. In the past, nearly all aspiring lawyers could expect to take the LSAT. But times are changing, and a few select schools, like Harvard Law School, now accept GRE scores in lieu of the LSAT. It's likely that other schools will eventually follow suit, but always check before you register for one exam or the other.

The LSAT features five sections. Each of the following sections consists of multiple choice questions, with a time limit of 35 minutes.



- 1. Reading Comprehension**
- 2. Analytical Reasoning**
- 3. Logical Reasoning (two sections)**

The last section is what makes the LSAT unique among standardized tests. It's not scored. It's a writing sample, which you'll have 35 minutes to complete. Although it doesn't contribute toward your score, it will be sent to each of your selected law schools.

Scores:

Your score is expressed on a range from 120 to 180. The average test taker earns a score of around 150.

Insider's Tip:

The LSAT doesn't penalize you for incorrect answers, and questions are all weighted the same. So go ahead and guess if you need to.

Medical College Admission Test (MCAT)

According to the [Association of American Medical Colleges](#) (AAMC), just about every medical school in the U.S.—and quite a few in Canada—require MCAT scores upon application.

There are four sections.



- 1. Chemical and Physical Foundations of Biological Systems**
- 2. Critical Analysis and Reasoning Skills**
- 3. Biological and Biochemical Foundations of Living Systems**
- 4. Psychological, Social, and Biological Foundations of Behavior**

Insider's Tip:

The AAMC publishes a yearly, downloadable guide for the current MCAT. This guide will become your best friend.

Each of the first three sections tests 10 “big ideas,” or foundational concepts. These draw upon the introductory content that you’re expected to have learned as an undergrad in the fields of biology, chemistry, and physics. The entire test requires more than seven hours of “seated” time, with a few optional breaks.

Score:

Each section is scored separately, so you’ll get four section scores, along with a fifth total score. The total score range is from 472 to 528.

Study Tips

People who score well on entrance exams have a few things in common. They start studying well in advance, they create a study plan, and they study a little every day. Start preparing as soon as you know which exam you’ll take. It isn’t necessary to spend hundreds of dollars on pricy prep courses or private tutoring, but do consider purchasing the official study guide.

You should also brush up on basic academic skills. It’s been a while since you learned basic concepts in high school, and you might be surprised at how rusty you’ve gotten with your quadratic equations and literary elements.

Enlist help from your family and friends, but look beyond the traditional flashcard quiz method. Instead, teach them the concepts you’re learning. Teaching others is one of the most effective ways to reinforce your own knowledge.

Before diving into studying, take a practice test. That way, you’ll see where you stand on the various sections. Take additional practice exams in the weeks leading up to the real exam.

Test-Taking Strategies

The strategies you can use to score well depend on the specific exam you’re taking and how you’re taking it. Read all available information about the test from the testing company. You’ll need to know, for instance, if you can go back to review previous answers if you’re taking a computerized test.

If the exam does not penalize incorrect answers, then you should make an educated guess. Do use the elimination method if you have to guess. Cross off answers that you know are incorrect first, and then select the most likely answer.

Lastly, don’t skim or skip the directions. Doing so might save you some time, but it isn’t worth it if you miss a vital piece of information necessary to correctly answer a question.

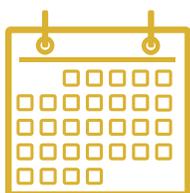
Insider’s Tip:

Look for academic channels on YouTube, like Khan Academy, to relearn basic concepts. Free, online, on-demand classes are available on various digital platforms.

5. Application Package

Now that you've spent long hours researching schools, preparing for entrance exams, and agonizing over the decision of where to study, putting together an application package might seem nearly anti-climactic. You already know where you want to go. Now it's just a matter of getting there.

Although the end of the application process is nearly in sight, you need to resist the temptation to speed through the rest of it. Give yourself plenty of time to review and edit your materials before sending them off.



Here's a look at a typical application timeline:



Spring/Summer: Take and retake entrance exams

August: Request letters of recommendation
Provide supplemental materials to recommenders
Begin drafting personal statements

September: Request official undergrad transcripts
Polish personal statements and ask for constructive criticism



October: Begin filling out applications
Follow up regarding letters of recommendation if not yet received
Follow up on official transcripts
Finalize personal statements



November: Compile all materials and application fees
Complete applications
Submit application packages

January: Schedule requested interviews

Of course, you should always defer to the deadlines established by individual grad schools, and adjust your own personal timeline as needed. In the next few sections, you'll get the details and insider's tips for the application package.

The Application

Unlike undergrad schools, graduate programs do not tend to use a common application. You'll have to fill out one for each school, but you can almost certainly do all of them online. You'll be asked for basic information, including the following:



- Vital statistics (name, birthdate, etc.).
- Citizenship status.
- Demographic information.
- Permanent address/contact information.
- Program selection/academic interests.
- Educational history.

Insider's Tip:

Do not start and submit your application in one day. Let it sit for a few days, then go back and review for careless errors like improper spelling.

Once you've filled in the blanks, you'll be asked to upload your materials, including your resume or CV, personal statement/writing samples, and letters of recommendation. There may be an option to upload additional materials, such as awards and professional recognitions.

Official Transcripts

Submitting your official transcripts is one of those things that seems like it should be quick and easy, but may not be. For starters, it may take your undergrad school several weeks to process your request. This is why you should submit your request in September, even if your application isn't due until early December.

Insider's Tip:

Request a transcript copy for yourself. It's always smart to know what the admissions personnel are seeing.

First, contact the admissions offices for each grad school you're applying to. Ask if the school requires specific forms to be sent with each official transcript. Some schools do, while others don't. If yours do, send the forms to your undergrad institution and provide any necessary instructions.

Next, give your undergrad school instructions for submitting your official transcripts directly to the admissions offices of your grad schools. If you act as an intermediary to pass on official transcripts, you may invalidate them and have to start the process again. However, you may still be asked to submit your unofficial transcript to the grad school yourself via the application package.

Your transcript might have a problem. It might show a failing grade, several withdrawn courses, or a few no-credit courses. These are obviously red flags for admissions personnel, but there's a workaround. Include an addendum, which can be about one to two paragraphs. In it, explain the reason for the problem. Emphasize that you take full responsibility for your shortcomings, and explain the concrete steps you've taken to prevent a recurrence.

Addendums can be tricky to write—you need to explain the situation, but not sound as if you’re groveling or aiming for an acceptance based on pity. Use these tips:

- Never blame the problem on someone else.
- Don’t tell the reviewing committee how to do its job.
- Avoid dramatic language.
- Just stick to the facts.

After you’ve written the addendum, set it aside for a day or two. Then, review it and delete unnecessary sentences and words. Ask a friend to read it and tell you his or her gut reaction to the language, and then revise as needed.

Statement of Purpose

This is easily one of the most dreaded aspects of the grad school application. It can make or break your acceptance. Because the personal essay is so important, it’s easy to get caught staring at a blank screen, paralyzed by indecision. Avoid procrastination by trying a silly writing exercise. Pretend you’re writing a letter to a long lost friend or perhaps an ancestor who died 200 years ago. Tell this person who you are and what you want to get out of your career.

The goal of this writing exercise is not to get any usable sentences for your essay. Rather, it’s to break the paralysis that grips many prospective grad students as they try to figure out how to start writing. Effective writing requires the right mindset. As an example, your writing exercise might go something like this:



*Dear Slocum Clark,
I understand you became a smuggler after President Thomas Jefferson passed the Embargo Act of 1807. I sympathize. I’m also in the field of imports and exports, except that I do it legally. As a matter of fact, I’m applying to business school to earn my MBA so I can get better at my job without having to resort to your own tactics of sailing a ship up Lake Champlain to sell potash to the Canadians.*

As you write your nonsense letter describing why you want to earn your degree, you might experience an “Aha!” moment when you identify the hook you’ll use for your actual essay. This is the micro-story you’ll use to “hook” the attention of the admissions personnel and make your application stand out. Your hook must be personal and unique.

If it just so happens that you do work for a company that imports or exports potash, then your unusual story about an ancestral smuggler would make a great hook. Otherwise, you might have to dig a little more into your own life experiences. Here are a few examples of hooks that work:

- **Aspiring speech language pathologist:** Inspired by her brother’s struggles with a language disorder.
- **Aspiring geologist:** Survived the 2011 New Zealand earthquake that devastated the town of Christchurch.
- **Aspiring oncologist:** Became a family caregiver after her mother was diagnosed with lung cancer.

Once you've found your hook, writing the rest of your personal statement shouldn't be too challenging. Be passionate about why you want your degree and what you plan to do with it, but don't be overly dramatic or flowery. Knowing what to avoid is just as crucial as knowing what to write. Here are some of the assertions that kill personal statements:



- I want this degree because I love books.
- I want this degree because I have a love affair with earthquakes.
- I'm applying because chemical engineering fascinates me.
- I'm honored to apply because your school is so great.
- Since I was a kid, I've known that I wanted to become a snake venom milker.

Most personal statements include at least one of these types of statements, and that's why they go into the rejection pile. Instead, use your essay to tell the story of your past experiences, present work, and future objectives.

Letters of Recommendation

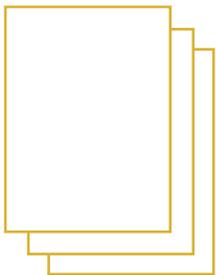
Some schools have specific requirements for recommendations. Look for a minimum and maximum number you can submit, and check whether specific people must provide them. For instance, Boston University School of Medicine requires a letter from the Health Professions Advisory Committee. Ask your recommenders to write the letter on official letterhead, with a handwritten signature.

Insider's Tip:

Most grad schools prefer confidential letters, which means you won't see them before the recommender submits them. The letter should be labeled with "confidential."

Resume or Curriculum Vitae

Do not submit the same resume you use for job applications. Since you're applying to grad school, you need to focus on your educational history. Include academic elements such as:



- Academic institution, degree, and years attended.
- Major academic achievements, including published papers and awards.
- Teaching experience, if applicable.
- Research experience, if applicable.
- Professional affiliations.
- Special qualifications.
- Employment history.

Note that you can ditch the one-page rule that applies to job seekers' resumes. Your resume or CV for grad school may be several pages long. You may need to add additional sections to highlight certain accomplishments.

Interview

Each grad school has its own particular formula, but often, applications have to pass an initial screening before the applicant is invited for an interview. If you're invited, it means they're already somewhat interested in you, but you're probably still competing with hundreds of other applicants. If you aren't invited, take the initiative to call the admissions office and request an interview.

Solid prep work is essential for an interview that's memorable for the right reasons. Don't dive haphazardly into interview prep. Have a plan that looks something like this:



1. Research the school, program, faculty members, and notable alums. Know who will interview you (it may be a panel) and know their academic backgrounds.
2. Decide which background and academic information reflects your best qualities. Know the accomplishments that you want to highlight during the interview.
3. Practice your responses to typical interview questions.
4. Look professional.
5. Follow up with a thank you note.

Common interview questions to practice answering include:



- Tell me about yourself.
- Why are you interested in XYZ school?
- Which major trends in your industry interest you?
- Tell me about your most significant accomplishment.
- What do you do for fun?
- What are your career goals?
- Do you have any questions for me?

Insider's Tip:

Some interviews are "closed file." The interviewer won't have access to your file, and you'll have to provide specific information like your GPA.

In terms of looking professional, your clothing can't be too formal—short of wearing a tuxedo. Wear your best suit or dress, closed-toe shoes, and minimal jewelry and makeup.

Your body language is also important. It's normal to be nervous, but try not to show it. Avoid crossing your arms or slouching in your chair. Try to look relaxed, but also alert and attentive. Remember that it's alright to pause to think for a few seconds before you answer a question.

6. Graduate School/ Life Balance

School/life balance is a lofty goal, especially if you're also juggling a job and the needs of your family. Accept that perfect balance every day is not a reasonable goal, as failure to achieve perfect balance may only cause more stress for you. Instead, think of your daily juggling act in terms of quality of life. Every day, try to do one thing that improves your quality of life. Remind yourself of that one accomplishment when getting through the day seems impossible.

Schedules

Once you're accepted into grad school, try to nail down your anticipated schedule as soon as possible. Talk to your supervisor about rearranging your work schedule if needed. These days, many employers are far more accepting of flex time and telecommuting. If you can't schedule a class on a week night or weekend, perhaps you could put in some hours at the office on Saturdays.

If you have a family, now's the time to sit down together to discuss what you need from them. You might need someone else to take on a few extra domestic responsibilities, like preparing meals or picking up the kids from gymnastics practice.

It's tough to know exactly how much time you'll need to spend on your studies each week until you actually start your classes. Give yourself more time than you think you'll need to review notes and work on assignments each week. Know your limitations. If you have trouble thinking straight at 11 pm, plan to study at 11 am.

Time Management

In grad school, time management becomes your best friend. Only you know exactly what works for you, but here are some pointers:



- Tell yourself you have less time to get something done than you actually do.
- Organize your tasks according to priority.
- Carry study materials with you everywhere you go. Take advantage of the few minutes spent waiting in lines, for instance.

And a few random study tips:



- Speed read a chapter or a section. Then go back and read it again, slowly. Next, close your eyes and ask yourself questions about what you've just read.
- Read a passage out loud to yourself if your mind starts wandering. Ignore the odd looks you get from passersby.
- Stand up every 30 minutes to stretch and give your eyes a rest. Limit your stretch breaks to two minutes.

Maintaining Wellness

Even the most exercise-averse individuals may find themselves longing for the gym a few months into grad school. Don't wait this long to give yourself the gift of good health. Your brain will thank you. Clear cognition is dependent on healthy nutrition and physical activity. In fact, working up a sweat improves cellular health and circulation in the brain, which leads to better fact retention.

Maintaining physical wellness is one crucial step in preventing burnout. Grad student burnout is no laughing matter. It looks a little different in everyone, but it's not unusual to feel as though you're having a mental breakdown. The signs of burnout may include:



- Being overcome by physical exhaustion.
- Falling asleep in random places.
- Lying in bed at 2 am, wide awake.
- Becoming unreasonably angry about minor issues.
- Having trouble concentrating and remembering.
- Feeling as though you just can't take it anymore.

With burnout, there is often a feeling that there's no time for anything. If this happens to you, remind yourself of this ancient [Zen saying](#): "You should sit in meditation for 20 minutes a day, unless you are too busy. Then you should sit for an hour."

Doing nothing seems like the last thing you should be doing (or not doing) when you're staring at a mountain of work. But the simple truth is that it's impossible to accomplish anything in the midst of a brain meltdown. Be gentle to yourself. Reduce your responsibilities as much as possible, and then focus on just one thing at a time. Pretend that this one thing is the only task you have until you're done with it.

Sometimes, taking a leave of absence is the best thing you can do for your education. Check with the appropriate office at your school about leave of absence policies. In most cases, you can take leave for either personal or medical reasons, and you can usually renew the leave two or three times once the initial period is over. Do check whether your financial aid will still be there once you get back.

There's no secret formula to succeeding in grad school, and it isn't a quick fix for your career. It's a major commitment that requires hard work, persistence, and a willingness to temporarily forego the finer things in life, like having plenty of time to clean the house and cook dinner.

However, many highly successful grad students share a few things in common. Most notably, they find a great mentor, which might be a faculty advisor or an industry professional. Nurture your relationship with your mentor by requesting reasonable amounts of his or her time, asking for feedback, expressing interest in your mentor's work, and accepting constructive criticism with professionalism.

Successful grad students are also:

- Time management gurus.
- Networking aficionados.
- Goal setters and planners.
- Diehard optimists.

There's no question that grad school is a tough, long haul. But once you have your diploma in your hands, you'll look back and realize that grad school was definitely rewarding and maybe even fun. And you'll probably never have to do it again!