

## Effective Strategies for Researching & Applying to Graduate School

Once you have decided which field of study best suits your academic interests and career goals and which degree best supports these goals, you are ready to begin researching the schools and programs to best meet those needs.

### Begin the research and application process early.

It's best to begin the researching process for graduate schools far in advance of your selected starting date. The application process can take several months and you will need to allow enough time for the research leading up to the application.

If you are going to graduate school immediately after completing your bachelor's degree, it's suggested that you begin your research during your junior year. This will permit you to focus primarily on the application process your senior year.

### Utilize many sources in your research.

Remember, the more sources and resources you use in your research, the more likely you will find the program and or school that will meet your goals. Below is a suggested list you can use in your research.

- Professors
- Other Students and Alumni
- University Catalogues and Brochures
- University and Departmental Web Sites
- Specialty Guides in Your Field
- Academic Journals in Your Field
- Peterson's Guides
- Educational Rankings
- Accreditation
- Research-Doctorate Programs in the United States
- The Gourman Report
- Business Magazine Rankings

### Other considerations for your research

- Consider schools with several faculty members in your area of interest.
- Read publications by people in the field who interest you
- Find out if there are ongoing research projects in your program
- Visit the campus, faculty, and current students
- Visit the related facilities to your area of interest
- Become acquainted with the reputation of the faculty
- Discover the classes being offered
- Ask about the average time needed to complete your degree
- Research the career success of graduates in your program
- Consider how you will finance your degree

## The Application Process

Once you know where you want to apply, you need to discover as much as possible about the application process. The more you know about the process may help you in eliminating some of the stress involved.

It is very important to remember that the graduate admissions process will vary from school to school. Therefore, it is imperative that you be familiar with the process of each school and or program to which you apply. Often, your application will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- Your background preparation in the field of study
- Academic ability and or grade point average
- Possession of the prerequisite degree(s)
- Test scores
- Research ability
- Relevant experience (for professional programs)

The application generally has five parts: a questionnaire, a statement of purpose, your GRE scores, letters of recommendation and transcripts. Each piece of your application should work together to present you clearly and promote you in the selection process.

## The Statement of Purpose

Your statement of purpose should indicate that you have a clear purpose, the motivation to succeed and a realistic understanding of the academic experience. Test scores and transcript should speak to your academic ability, skills and background. Recommendation letters serve as a testimony to your academic achievement as well as your future promise. Your application should be neat and you should keep a copy for your files.

Good statements vary by discipline but they should always provide a clear picture of your interests, your background and your plans. Although there is no perfect formula for a personal statement, there are some basics that can be incorporated into one. As you write your statement remember the length, tone, writing style and the need for feedback and revision.

**Length:** In general, a good statement of purpose is around two single-spaced pages but no more than three. Often, shorter statements give too little information while longer ones are redundant and wordy. Remember, the content is more important than the length.

**Tone:** Do not misinterpret the meaning of personal for your statement. This document should be a professional statement. It's your opportunity to sell yourself as an asset to any program and or school.

**Writing Style:** Your writing must be clear and correct, free from grammatical and typographical errors. Remember, paying attention to detail and writing well are important

research skills. Also, your use of vocabulary should not distract the reader or cause them to doubt your writing ability.

**Feedback and Revision:** After you have written your statement, solicit feedback from professors and Career Service consultants. Be sure and allow enough time in the writing of your statement to permit this review.

After focusing on the how to write a personal statement, you will need to give attention to what you write in a statement. Often times this will be dictated to you by the school and or program to which you are applying. However, there are some key components that are usually addressed in a statement of purpose.

- Previous research experience
- Current and future research interests
- Other relevant experience
- Career goals

### Letters of recommendation

Applicants should seek letters that truly promote the candidate. Of the many letters that are written and submitted, most fail to achieve their purpose. To meet the goal of this letter, remember to provide the person writing the letter with information that will permit them to speak directly to the needs of the reader. A person who knows you well is important, but a person who knows the intended recipient can write a letter with results.

The following are important things to remember when asking someone to write a letter of recommendation:

- Make an appointment in which you alert your recommender you would like to discuss your interest in a program and the possibility of a letter.
- Ask your recommender, frankly, whether he or she can write you a strong letter.
- Allow one month for the recommender to submit a letter before the deadline.
- Give them the following printed materials:
  - The deadline for the letter
  - A one-paragraph summary of work or activities accomplished with the writer
  - Your draft letter of interest you will submit with your application
  - Your resume/CV
  - Be sure to waive your rights of access to the recommendation
  - Explain the scope of your plans. Ask your recommender whether he or she is willing to update the letter if your plans shift.
- Be sure to thank the person writing your letter noting that the letter has been received.
- If your plans change, bring or send to the writer updated copies of the printed support materials.

## Transcripts

Be sure and check your transcript for any errors and or omissions before having it sent.

## Examinations

It is important to be aware of the examination scores you must provide. If the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) is required, is it just the general examination or do you also have to take a specialized subject exam? The GRE web page contains useful information for persons preparing to take the exam.

Also, professional programs have specific examinations. Again, begin the process early enough allowing you enough time to prepare for the exams, take the exams and to have your scores sent directly to the schools and or departments.

*Adapted from [Applying to Graduate School](http://uchicago.edu) at [uchicago.edu](http://uchicago.edu), [Finding a Graduate Program](http://uw.edu) at [uw.edu](http://uw.edu) and the [Grad School Handout](http://gradschools.com) at [gradschools.com](http://gradschools.com)*

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