

# How to Get Into GRADUATE and PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL

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# HOW TO GET INTO GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL

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## **Know why you want it.**

Are you thinking seriously about going to graduate school? Congratulations! Through your undergraduate experience you have developed a desire to specialize further and excel in a particular area of scholarship. At least, we *hope* that's why you're considering an advanced degree. If you're planning to attend graduate or professional school because you don't want to face the prospect of looking for a full-time job, or because you feel that someone "expects" you to go, you should reconsider your objectives and/or wait until you are ready to attend school for more appropriate reasons.

## **Prepare for it.**

Most people who apply to graduate school have no idea what is in store for them. They don't know what they should do, or when. Because of this, the admissions process can seem (and be) overwhelming.

Understanding the basic issues and timeline can reduce your confusion as well as help you organize a plan that will work for you! With persistence, you can put yourself at the front of the line of candidates for admission to graduate school.

Read this booklet. Use it as a checklist and reminder of the things you need to know and do. Use it to get what you want and need in graduate school.

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# EVALUATING AND CONTACTING THE SCHOOLS

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## Where should you look?

When you've made the decision to go to graduate school and have a good idea of what you want to study, you can begin to look for schools.

Many factors can influence your choice of a graduate school: reputation, size, program that specializes in your area of interest, and so on (see below). It's difficult to evaluate a school's quality because there are so many variables to consider. [US News and World Report](#) and other publications try to rank schools. They do this because students desperately want to know which schools they should consider attending. Many students want to be told by an "authority" that one school is better than another.

In reality, a comprehensive look at **all** available information will guide you to the best programs and opportunities for graduate study in your area of interest. Complete lists of graduate programs in your field are in [Peterson's Guides to Graduate Schools](#) (in Career Services), but it's best to start by choosing a more manageable list using some of the criteria listed on the bottom of this page.

## How should you choose and evaluate the schools?

*Consider the following indications of a program that is suited to your needs. \**

•**Reputation**--Is the program/institution recognized nationally? Regionally? Locally? (Ask faculty members and practitioners)

•**Faculty research specialties**--Are faculty members conducting research in areas of interest to you? (Ask them directly; read their publications.)

•**Faculty prominence**--Are professors in the program recognized leaders in their field? Are they widely published? (Ask Capital faculty; scan appropriate journals; request faculty biographies or publication lists.)

•**Method of Study**--Does the program emphasize theory? Practice? Research? A combination? (Read and compare program literature; talk with faculty and current students or graduates.)

•**Flexibility**--How much of the program can be tailored to fit your interests? What courses are offered outside the department which would enhance your core curriculum? (Ask faculty members; peruse university catalogs.)

•**Geographic Location**--Do you want to live in this area for the time it will take to complete your degree? (Talk to others who've lived there.)

•**Financial Assistance**--How expensive is the school? What types of financial help are available, and how much could you expect to receive? (Ask faculty members or graduate admissions office staff about likelihood of receiving different types of aid and assistantships; apply for fellowships and loans.)

•**Help with Post-Graduate Employment**--Where do graduates of the program typically find work? How much assistance is offered to job seekers? (Talk to graduates of the program; gather information from their career services office.)

•**Academic Support**--How extensive is the library collection, how up-to-date is the computer or laboratory equipment? (Visit the facilities; talk to faculty members and students.)

•**Campus/Community Involvement**--Are there opportunities for involvement and/or leadership outside the program? (Request information about the community at large; talk to others in program.)

*\*Excerpted from Vassar College Office of Career Development. Used with permission.*

## When should you ask for information?

Ideally, begin asking graduate schools for information at least **15 months** before you plan to attend. You can contact them even *earlier* than that. If you plan on applying to a very competitive program, get information on the school's admission requirements during your junior year so you'll have more time to make yourself a stronger candidate. Your tendency might be to procrastinate. After all, "it's not important, since you're not even into your senior year at that point", right? Wrong! Don't be fooled into that way of thinking!

## What should you ask for?

When you call or e-mail, ask for:

- descriptions of programs in your field
- application materials
- information on financial assistance (assistantships, fellowships, etc.).

*You can also request information on housing.*

In addition to contacting the graduate school in general, you should call, e-mail, and/or visit the **particular department(s)** to which you are interested in applying. They will gladly talk with you, and you can get a better idea of whether this area of study, this school, and this community are for you. You will probably learn more from talking with people than you will from reading. (See the section "IS AN INTERVIEW IMPORTANT?" on page 13 for more information).

Also, you will want to find out whether you meet specific requirements for admission. If you are lacking any requirement, demonstrate your willingness to work at meeting it. In addition to this, you will also become acquainted with the people who may be reviewing your eligibility for admittance. Show them your interest and enthusiasm!

## When should you apply?

After you have assessed all the pertinent information from your narrowed down list of schools, you can begin the application process. (You might want to apply only to those schools that you are honestly considering, since applying is expensive! On the other hand, you might consider a *range* of schools -- including those that will surely accept you, the "long shots," and those in between.)

Application deadlines vary. Occasionally, the deadline will be during fall semester the year before you plan to attend. *Make sure that you check!!* More commonly, the deadlines will be sometime after December. Either way, apply after September unless otherwise instructed. It's best not to apply before the beginning of the current school year; they might assume that you are applying for the current year.

*Remember to save copies of all your application materials in case something gets lost or misplaced!*

## Are deadlines different for fellowships & assistantships?

Sometimes the deadline for application to the graduate program is different from the application for assistantships and fellowships (both are described later in this booklet). A general rule for these is to **APPLY EARLY!** Most schools begin screening for such positions early in February and they usually accept candidates as they go. In other words, if you apply early, you'll have a better chance for financial assistance, and career-related experience opportunities.

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# THE APPLICATION PROCESS

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## What information is needed to complete the application?

You usually need to submit three letters of recommendation, an autobiographical statement of your interests and goals for graduate study, graduate admission test scores, and official undergraduate transcripts. In addition, some schools will want to interview you prior to acceptance into a graduate program.

Suggestion: If you know them personally, ask alumni of the graduate department, or others with degrees in your graduate field of study to write a recommendation letter for you. For medical school letters of recommendation, ask a physician whom you know well, or for whom you have worked. Let these people help you!

## How do you get letters of recommendation?

Letters of recommendation are primarily written by faculty or internship/research supervisors who are familiar with you and your work as an undergraduate. The committee which will review your application will want to know about your performance as a student, your abilities, and your capacity for doing graduate work. Forms for these letters come with the application materials provided by the university, or can be downloaded from their web site.

## Whom do you ask?

Although graduate schools want to hear from your professors, they **may** state that you can include letters from employers.

## Procedure for *requesting* letters of recommendation:

- a. Make personal contact with the potential writer (in person, by telephone, or by e-mail).
- b. Ask, "Will you write a positive letter of recommendation for me?"  
If the answer is "no", ask someone else!

## Procedure for *obtaining* letters of recommendation:

- a. Discuss the recommendation letter with the writer. Ask what information is needed from you, and also decide whether you want to waive your right to see the letter. You may want to discuss this option with the person writing the letter for you. "Waiving your right" is often recommended, but it is not always the best option for you. For more information about this, ask us in Career Services.

- b. Provide the writer with materials that will make writing the reference letter easier so that it will be completed sooner! *This is essential.* Think about it--these people have to write many letters. Even if they are happy to write letters of recommendation for you, writing can be something of a chore; they have to recall everything about you before they begin to write. Help yourself by helping them. Make a list (it doesn't have to be typed) of all the classes you had with them, the projects you completed, the grades you received, the papers and tests you took; anything that you think might be important as they are writing. Also, include a copy of your resume, a list of relevant personal and social experiences, and any other information they may have requested. If you have already completed it, you might also want to include a copy of your statement of purpose. Your professors will really appreciate being able to refer to these lists while writing their letters!
- c. Provide the writer with one recommendation letter form, which will be supplied on their web site, or mailed to you by the graduate school to which you are applying. Be sure to paperclip a note with the *deadline* (determined by you) to the form.
- d. Provide the writer with a stamped envelope, pre-addressed to the graduate school department (or follow other instructions provided by the graduate school).
- e. Send a thank-you note to the writer at the deadline. It's important to show appreciation (and if they haven't written the letter by then, your note will jog their memory). You might want to consider following up *before* the deadline, too.

### **What is an autobiographical or personal statement?**

In your application to graduate school there is usually a section in which you write a personal statement or a statement of purpose regarding your goals and your reasons for considering their school. Sometimes the particular department to which you are applying will also request an essay about yourself and your interest in that particular field of study.

These short essays, usually 300-500 words, are a very important part of the application. If you are applying to a number of schools, don't simply copy the same personal statement on to all of the applications. Usually the questions are worded in a slightly different way, and the school will be able to tell if you are not responding specifically to their question. Read the question carefully, then respond to it honestly and intelligently. For help in this area, read How To Write a Personal Statement, on page 18.

In general, your statement will cover your background and your preparation for graduate or professional school. Be specific as you identify events and experiences that exemplify your motivation. In addition, discuss your plans for the future, and your goals as they relate to this advanced degree. If your background includes work experience (especially CLL students), make sure that you emphasize how it relates to your goal, or how it affected your decision to pursue an advanced degree. Life experience is valued! Pay close attention to grammar and spelling. When it comes down to a decision by the review committee, this could mean the difference between accepting your application and rejecting it.

*When you've written your statement, bring it to Career Services, to the Peer Writing Tutors in the Center for Academic Achievement, and/or to one of your professors for assistance with "fine tuning" it. It is always helpful to have someone else's feedback.*

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## ADMISSION TESTS

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These are standardized measurements of knowledge and ability. Often the department to which you are applying has established a set score as one criterion for entrance into that department. *It is important that you prepare for these tests in advance; scores are taken seriously by the admissions committee.*

### GRADUATE RECORD EXAMINATION (GRE) (Page 7)

This is the most common examination for graduate school. It consists of three parts. The GRE General Test is the test taken by everyone. This test measures your abilities in three areas: verbal, quantitative, and analytical writing. The specific department to which you are applying may request that you also take a GRE Subject Test. This is a separate test that measures your abilities and knowledge in a specific academic area, like psychology or chemistry.

### LAW SCHOOL ADMISSION TEST (LSAT) (Page 9)

This consists of five test sections including "Passages" (reading comprehension), "Relationships" (analytical), and "Arguments" (logical reasoning), along with one writing sample. Capital provides assistance as you prepare for Law School, including LSAT prep classes and "Mock" LSAT. Your advisor has information on all these services.

### MEDICAL COLLEGE ADMISSION TEST (MCAT) (Page 11)

The test consists of physical sciences, biological sciences, verbal reasoning, and a writing sample (essay). Take the MCAT in April or August the calendar year *before* you plan to enter medical school. Also get an AMCAS packet for distribution of your materials to medical schools. Your advisor should know when you are taking it so that he/she can help you prepare. This will give you practice and will ease your anxiety when you have to take the real thing!

### GRADUATE MANAGEMENT ADMISSION TEST (GMAT)

This test is generally required for admission to graduate schools of business and management. It is similar to the General Test of the GRE. The GMAT measures verbal and mathematical skills and is broken into seven timed sections. The test does not measure specific knowledge, but rather, it measures verbal and mathematical skills developed over a long period of time.

*Additionally, check with Career Services and your local public library; they have recent publications about these tests that will help you in preparing for them.*

#### **Other tests:**

- In addition, special tests are sometimes used (e.g., Dental School (DAT) and Pharmacy School (PCAT). For information on these, ask in Career Services.
- Music schools generally require music theory & music history placement tests.

# GRADUATE RECORD EXAMINATION

## Introduction

- The majority of graduate schools use GRE scores as a significant factor when selecting applicants for their programs.
- The test is composed mostly of standardized, multiple-choice questions used to assist graduate schools in finding a common measure to compare applicants.
- Although most schools use the GRE *general test* in their application process, only some schools require a *subject test*.

## Testing

- The General Test is offered only on *computer*.
- You need little or no computer experience to complete the computer based general test. However, it is helpful to have basic typing skills to complete the analytical writing section.
- The computer-based test is adaptive. Your answers will direct the difficulty level of subsequent questions.

## Test Sections (General Test)

### *Verbal*

- Consists of sentence completions, analogies, reading passages, and antonyms.
- Contains thirty multiple-choice questions to be completed over thirty minutes.

### *Quantitative*

- Consists of quantitative comparisons, problem-solving questions, and data interpretations.
- Contains twenty-eight multiple-choice questions to be completed over forty-five minutes.

### *Analytical Writing*

The writing assessment focuses on your critical reasoning and analytical writing skills.

It is composed of two tasks:

- Present your perspective on an issue forty five minutes.
- Analyze an argument thirty minutes.

### *Experimental*

- This section is used to evaluate future test questions and *will not* be scored. It may be a verbal, quantitative, or analytical writing section and can vary in length. This section *will not* be identified as experimental, so you need to do your best on every section!

### *Research*

- Some general tests include a research section. This section may be verbal, quantitative, or analytical writing and *will not be scored*. If included, the research section will be at the end of the general test, can vary in length, and *will* be identified as a research section. You do not need to complete the research section if you don't want to. They'll provide a small incentive.

## Subject Test Information

- Subject tests are offered in biochemistry, cellular and molecular biology, biology, chemistry, computer science, literature in English, mathematics, physics and psychology.
- Just because a subject test is offered in your academic area, don't assume it is an entrance requirement for every graduate program. See your prospective school's application information before you register for a subject test.

## **Registration**

The GRE *General test* is administered by computer and is available year round. In the Columbus area, three sites are available. Register online at [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org), or contact one of the centers below:

Groveport Prometric Testing center, 4363 Professional Pkwy, 835-0112  
Worthington (two Prometric Testing centers at this location), 431-2083  
Ohio State University, 292-2241  
General Information, 1-800-GRE-CALL

*Cancellations and reschedules must be at least seven days in advance of your scheduled date.*

To register for the *general test* by mail, pick up a GRE bulletin in the Career Services Office. *Subject tests* are administered only on scheduled dates and are given in paper and pencil format. Normally test dates fall near the beginning of November, December, and April. To register for a *subject test* on-line using a credit card, visit [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org). To register by mail, pick up a registration packet in the Career Services office.

## **Scoring**

- Scores for the verbal and quantitative sections of the general test range from 200 to 800. A subtest score of 500 is often considered a minimum acceptable score. The analytical writing section is scored using a six point holistic scale. Each test is reviewed by two trained evaluators.
- Individual subject test scores can range from 200 to 990.

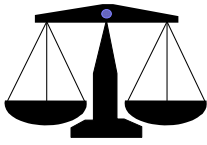
## **On-line Resources**

- [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org) This is the official GRE website. It provides comprehensive test preparation resources, including free software (PowerPrep) with 2 full actual GRE tests.
- [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com) Peterson's provides a sample questions as well as tips and strategies. They also offer a fee-based practice test. Go to test preparation and then download free software and look for the GRE practice test information.
- [www.kaptest.com](http://www.kaptest.com) Kaplan's site includes a free practice test. It also provides some good information on the subject tests, especially psychology.

## **Printed Resources**

- [\*Princeton Review's Cracking the GRE\*](#) - Included are four full-length GRE CAT exams on CD-ROM, plus additional practice questions in the book.
- [\*Peterson's GRE Success\*](#) -This resource includes five full-length practice tests and a CD-ROM with additional practice sessions.
- [\*Kaplan's GRE\*](#) - Kaplan provides its readers with five full-length practice tests, including four CAT tests on CD-ROM.

Information sources include: [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org), [www.kaptest.com](http://www.kaptest.com), [www.review.com](http://www.review.com), [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)



# LAW SCHOOL ADMISSION TEST

## Introduction

- The LSAT is *not* a knowledge-based test. It will not require you to recall specific information. Instead, it will assess your ability to think logically, quickly, and thoroughly. Determining your critical reading and analytical skills is the test's main objective.
- The LSAT is required for consideration to any law school that is a member of the Law School Admission Council (LSAC).

## Test Sections

- **Logical Reasoning**
  - Consists of two, thirty-five minute sections. Each section contains approximately 25 questions.
  - Assesses your ability to understand, analyze, evaluate, and manipulate arguments.
  - Comprises approximately 50% of your total score.
- **Reading Comprehension**
  - Consists of one, thirty-five minute section. This section contains approximately 27 questions.
  - Assesses your ability to work with main ideas, details, inferences, logic, and extrapolation. Requires an ability to handle complicated text.
  - Comprises approximately 25% of your total score.
- **Analytical Reasoning**
  - Consists of one, thirty-five minute section. This section contains approximately 23 questions.
  - Assesses your ability to focus on multiple facts simultaneously. Requires ability in sequencing, grouping, and matching.
  - Comprises approximately 25% of your total score.
- **Writing Sample**
  - This section is not scored. Your writing sample is sent to each school to which you apply.
  - Consists of one, thirty-minute section. This section requires you to compose one written essay. You will be given two writing prompts to choose from.
  - Assesses your ability to write effectively and create a sound and persuasive argument.
- **Experimental**
  - Consists of one, thirty-minute section. The number of questions in this section varies.
  - This section is not scored. It is used to evaluate future test questions.

## Test Registration Information

The LSAT is administered four times per year, usually in February, June, October, and December.

To register by *phone*, call (215) 968-1001.

To register by *e-mail*, go to [www.LSAC.org](http://www.LSAC.org).

To register by *mail*, pick up a registration booklet in Career Services.

## Registration with the Law School Data Assembly Service

- Registration with the LSDAS is required for application to any ABA approved school.
- LSDAS sends a report to each school where you apply. Each report contains:
  - an undergraduate academic summary
  - copies of your transcripts from any undergraduate, professional, or graduate schools you have attended
  - your LSAT scores and writing sample
  - copies of your letters of recommendation
- To register by *e-mail*, go to [www.lsad.org](http://www.lsad.org) and click on LSDAS subscription.
- To register by *phone* (an automated system), call (215) 968-1001. (To utilize the phone service, you must have completed the telephone worksheet in the registration booklet, available in Career Services.)
- To register by *mail*, pick up an LSAT registration booklet in Career Services. There is an LSDAS registration form in this booklet.

## **Scoring**

- You will receive the following score information:
  - An overall score ranging from a 120 to a 180.
  - A score band which indicates a range of scaled scores above and below your overall score. This band is meant to assist law schools in determining statistically where a test taker's score would fall approximately two out of three times with a 68% level of confidence. The score band normally ranges plus or minus three points from the overall score. For example, a student who scores a 145 would have a score band of 142 – 148.
  - A percentile score which ranks you among a large sample of other LSAT test takers.
  - More than 50% of test takers score between a 145 and a 159. Scoring above a 160 can often significantly increase your percentage rank.
- Your scores are valid for five years after you take the test.
- If you take the exam more than once, Law Services reports the average score, each separate score, and each cancellation. Most schools will not question one (or maybe two) cancellation(s) on your record, but will question multiple ones. Also, be aware that you cannot take the LSAT more than three times in any two-year period.

## **On-line Resources**

- [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org) - This is the official site of Law School Admissions Council. It offers information on registration, dates, deadlines, preparation, and a free practice test. It also includes resources for your law school search and information regarding LSDAS.
- [www.kaptest.com](http://www.kaptest.com) – (Go to LSAT under the “select a test” option) Highlights from Kaplan’s site include detailed information about recent tests, descriptions of each test section, and details regarding scoring.
- [www.review.com](http://www.review.com) – Princeton Review provides articles discussing your law school search process and the transition into your first year. Median LSAT scores from well-known law schools are also included.

## **Printed Resources**

- Cracking the LSAT (From the Princeton Review) – This resource includes two full-length tests as well as study strategies and test taking tips.
- Kaplan’s LSAT – Highlights from Kaplan’s resource include five full-length tests, (four of which are on the included CD-ROM) as well as study strategies and test taking tips.
- Master the LSAT by Jeff Kolby and Scott Thornburg – This book contains a practice test composed of actual LSAT questions. Study strategies and test taking tips are also included for each test section.
- The Peterson’s Guide: Graduate Programs in Business, Education, Health, Information Studies, Law & Social Work – This volume of the Peterson’s Guide includes general information and contacts for many law schools. Some schools include average LSAT scores in their profile.

**★Capital offers a Kaplan-sponsored LSAT practice test each year.  
Contact Tom Maroukis for more details.**

Information sources include: [www.lsac.org](http://www.lsac.org), [www.kaptest.com](http://www.kaptest.com), [www.review.com](http://www.review.com), [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)



# MEDICAL COLLEGE ADMISSION TEST

## Introduction

- The MCAT is not just a science test. Although knowledge of fundamental physics, general chemistry, organic chemistry, and biology *is* assessed, analytical reasoning, abstract thinking, and problem solving skills are *just as important*.
- The vast majority of medical schools will require MCAT scores as a part of your application.

## Test Sections

- *Verbal Reasoning*
  - Consists of 65 multiple choice questions (9-10 passages with 6-10 questions each)
  - 85 minutes in length
  - Assesses critical reading skills
- *Physical Sciences*
  - Consists of 77 multiple choice questions (10-11 passages with 4-8 questions each / approximately an equal number of chemistry and physics questions)
  - 100 minutes in length
  - Assesses basic knowledge of chemistry and physics, as well as analytical reasoning and data interpretation skills
- *Biological Sciences*
  - Consists of 77 multiple-choice questions (10-11 passages with 4-8 questions each and 15 stand alone questions)
  - 100 minutes in length
  - Assesses basic knowledge of biology (approximately 65% of questions) and organic chemistry (approximately 35% of questions), as well as analytical reasoning and data interpretation skills
- *Writing*
  - Requires the composition of two essays
  - 60 minutes in length (30 minutes for each essay)
  - Assesses ability to think critically, intellectually organize, and interpret data
  - The AAMC website provides a list of sample writing items ([www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org))

## Registration Information

- The MCAT is administered two times per year, in April and August.
- You can receive registration forms:
  - By picking up a registration packet in the Career Services Office
  - By requesting one on-line at [www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org)

## Registration with Application Services

- Registration with AMCAS and AACOMAS is a common practice. These services facilitate the application process by distributing your application, official transcript, and two most recent MCAT scores to participating schools of your choice.
- Students choosing not to participate with AMCAS or AACOMAS must independently contact prospective schools for application information.
- Applicants may submit their information using AMCAS-E or AACOMAS online. A traditional paper application may be submitted also. (The paper application is less common.)
  - The AMCAS-E® can be downloaded at [www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org).
  - AACOMAS can be downloaded at <https://aacomas.aacom.org/>.

- AMCAS begins accepting application materials each year on June 1. Materials are available in Career Services in April.
- AACOMAS' application cycle begins each year on June 1.

### **Scoring**

- The verbal reasoning, physical sciences, and biological sciences test sections each receive an individual score ranging from a 1 to a 15.
- The writing section is scored alphabetically with scores ranging from J to T (with T being the highest).
- The average score individually for the verbal reasoning, physical sciences, and biological sciences sections is an eight. The average writing sample score is an N. A composite score of 30 in combination with a strong GPA is considered competitive.
- MCAT scores are valid for three years.

### **Resources**

- On-line
  - [www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org) - This is the official website of the American Association of Medical Colleges. For MCAT and AMCAS information, select the "Medical Schools" section.
  - [www.aacom.org](http://www.aacom.org) - This is the official website of the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine. For direct information about how to utilize this application service, select the "Apply to Medical School" section. To learn more about AACOM select "About AACOM" to obtain this information.
  - [www.review.com](http://www.review.com) - Princeton Review provides articles discussing your medical school application process, a customized medical school search feature, information on the MCAT, and a free on-line practice test.
  - [www.kaptest.com](http://www.kaptest.com) - (Choose MCAT under the "Test Information"- "Select a Test" option) Kaplan's site provides an overview of each test section, information about recent tests, and details regarding scoring.
- Print
  - Handbook for Pre-Health Students (Part 1 and 2) – A comprehensive source of information for pre-health students development by the Capital University Biological Sciences Department.
  - Kaplan's MCAT Comprehensive Review – Kaplan's resource includes an intensive science review, an in-depth verbal reasoning section, and a CD-ROM with timed practice test sections and a detailed scoring analysis. One full-length practice test and two full-length verbal reasoning tests are included.
  - ARCO's MCAT Sample Exams – This resource includes three full-length practice exams and other sample questions with detailed explanations.
  - Flowers and Silver MCAT – This book focuses on the MCAT's science sections. Sample questions and explanations are provided both in the text and on the included CD-ROM.
  - Medical School Admission Requirements – The AAMC publication provides admission criteria information for each medical school in the United States and Canada.

Information sources include:

[www.aamc.org](http://www.aamc.org), [www.kaptest.com](http://www.kaptest.com), [www.review.com](http://www.review.com), [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), [www.bn.com](http://www.bn.com)

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## FINAL APPLICATION TIPS

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### The mystery of your application file

Generally, the graduate admissions office has the responsibility of collecting information and maintaining a file on you; when your file is complete, they will send this information to the graduate department you request. However, the specific department to which you are applying may require a separate application as well as a writing sample, a portfolio, or even a separate essay about your intent for graduate study. Be sure that you know and understand all admission requirements for both the graduate school in general and the particular department. Remember, your application will **not** be reviewed until **all** criteria are met and **all** information is received in the appropriate department.

### How to be sure that your file is complete, and that you have the "green light"

Make sure your file at the schools of your choice is complete before the end of January (or earlier, if a school has an early deadline---Duke is one of these schools, for example). Fortunately today many schools have an on-line application system so you can check to see what is missing from your file. If the schools you are applying to do not have an on-line application system, call them **weekly** if necessary in order to find out what is missing. You need to track down those missing components and have them sent to the school! If the school isn't contacting you, it is likely that your file is incomplete. Don't sit shyly at home, afraid that they don't like you, while your chances for graduate school fizzle. Don't assume that all items which are mailed (or items which people TOLD YOU were mailed) actually arrived at the graduate school! *Personally make sure that your file is complete.*

### Is an interview important?

Most graduate schools do generally not require an interview, although initiating an informational interview can be a bonus on your side.

Many students are reluctant to request an interview. It's important that you understand the opportunity you can create for yourself by visiting the schools personally. Many students don't realize that graduate school faculty choose who they want to admit as their advisees--naturally, if a faculty member knows who you are, you have an advantage over someone known just on paper. This can potentially tip the scales in your favor; it can also help you to make a better decision.

If you are applying for a fellowship or assistantship you are more likely to be *asked* to interview. Prepare for the interview by finding out what you can about the university and the department of study to which you are applying (graduation rates, reputation, enrollment, names of faculty and their areas of interest, who you want to work with, etc). Know solidly what your aspirations are and be prepared to verbalize your goals, interests, and enthusiasm for graduate study! Give some thought to what you want to do after graduate school; it is a common interview question. For some programs, the interview is also a time to show that you are well-rounded and aware of current events. If *you* are initiating the interview, make sure that you prepare a list of questions (see page 2) which will help you to evaluate the school and its program(s).

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# GRADUATE/PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL ADVICE

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from Dr. Peter Horn

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## Application-Realism

Apply to at least two fall-back schools as well as those you would most like to be admitted to. Recognize that the importance of pursuing a graduate career exceeds that of going to a particular school. Since most people are not accepted at most places they apply to, it is foolish not to apply to programs you feel certain (not merely hopeful) will accept you.

One analogy is that of the athlete who plans only for what he or she will do upon turning pro. There are only a few student-athletes per hundred thousand who can afford to think this way. For everyone else, this may be a pleasing fantasy, but should be hedged by realistic alternative plans.

## Beyond grades

Understand that only having a high grade-point average may not be enough. Given grade inflation at every college and university, a 3.5 or 3.8 does not assure a person of admission to graduate or professional programs, especially highly desirable programs at nationally-known universities.

If your GMAT, LSAT, MCAT, or GRE score is inadequate, your chances are seriously diminished. Students consistently fail to prepare for and to appreciate the sorting effect of these test scores, widely viewed as the most reliable indicator or predictor--whether rightly or wrongly--of ability. It would help to determine the minimum scores, the average scores and the range of scores of people who are admitted by the programs. Contact the graduate admissions personnel at the universities for specifics. Some extracurricular activities count more than others. Appreciate that networking, relevant extracurricular activities, well-chosen recommendations, and high standardized test scores may also be decisive.

## Planning and preparation

Faculty advisors and students need to work together actively in planning for students' graduate careers, whenever possible. Thus, faculty should do more than sign students up for classes needed to graduate, and students ought to be proactive in pursuing their career/educational goals. Plan strategically for graduate school and be determined and focused on that goal. Identify people and institutions in the vicinity that can be useful for your goals. This does not mean using people, but it does mean reaching out to community resources that could enable you to grow and that are expressions of your level of seriousness about that discipline.

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# FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

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Something that very few people seem to know is that you generally don't have to pay your way through *graduate* school. There are some, but most students have their tuition waived and receive a monthly "stipend" while going to school. This situation is achieved typically through an assistantship or a fellowship.

This is NOT the case for most *professional* schools (Law School, Medical School, Veterinary School, MBA, etc.). You must seek out other forms of financial aid (discussed on the next page).

## What are assistantships and fellowships?

These are excellent forms of financial assistance, and you don't have to pay anything back! Usually your graduate application form is the same form by which you will indicate your preference for these awards, although some programs require separate applications.

### Assistantship:

Sometimes this is also called a Graduate Assistantship or a Graduate Associateship. The details vary with the field and the school, but the general idea is that you work for a certain number of hours per week, and in turn you have your tuition waived and you receive a monthly stipend (an amount of money that should be enough for you to live on). It's a great deal both from a financial standpoint and from an experiential standpoint. These positions are often Teaching Assistantships (TAs) in which you teach entry level undergraduate courses. Other alternatives are Research Assistantships or Administrative Assistantships. It's best if you work in a position that relates to your future career!

### Fellowship:

These are given to the most outstanding students. Fellowships are identical to assistantships in terms of the financial benefit; tuition is waived and you get a monthly stipend. The difference is that fellowships do not require you to work for your waiver and stipend.

If you attend graduate school on a fellowship, consider getting some work experience on your own, through an internship or "practicum" in whatever area you hope to be employed. Remember that although recommendations from your graduate professors will carry weight in your job search, work experience is often important too.

## What other kinds of financial aid are available to graduate students?

There are other financial aid benefits available to students pursuing graduate study. Special fellowships, scholarships, and grants may be awarded nationally in your field; these are awarded for special merit or talent and are very competitive. You can find the addresses for these special scholarships in Peterson's [Grants For Graduate Students](#), available in the Library. Also consider using the Grants Database, available through Dialogue Information Services at the Library.

In addition, three major federal loan programs are available for graduate students, these are: Stafford Loans, Perkins Loans, and Supplemental Loans for Students (SLS). Ask the graduate school for the name of the appropriate person or office on their campus whom you should contact regarding these loans.

If you are funding graduate school with a loan or with federal financial aid, one necessary step is the "Financial Statement for Students Applying for Financial Aid" (GAPSFAS). GAPSFAS stands for "Graduate and Professional School Financial Aid Service." Basically, this service performs the task of gathering financial information from you that is required by the universities to which you are applying. Your completed GAPSFAS form (provided by the school to which you are applying), will give the university adequate information about your income and expenses which will then enable it to assess your financial needs. GAPSFAS does not award financial aid; rather, it provides each school with financial information about you to help the graduate school determine your eligibility for financial aid.

Be sure to carefully read admissions and financial aid forms to determine when you should file your GAPSFAS form; schools vary in their deadlines but will require this completed form as a necessary part of your financial aid package as well as a requirement if you are applying for Federal Student Aid.

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## WHAT IF YOU ARE NOT ACCEPTED?

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Don't be discouraged. Don't give up.

1. Contact the admissions committee or department.
2. Learn their reasons for rejecting your application.
3. Don't immediately take "no" for an answer (unless their "no" is very adamant).  
If you're rejected, but you feel you can do the work, offer to attend with "conditional acceptance." This usually means you must maintain a "B" average (like everybody else). [Don't advertise that you are conditionally accepted...faculty and fellow students may expect substandard work from you (and find it a self-fulfilling prophecy)].
4. If their "no" is very adamant, ask if they will reconsider your application if you correct deficiencies, etc., and apply again the next year. Ask what you can do to offset their reasons for rejection.

*Something to consider:*

- If you feel that you are not ready for graduate study, it's okay to work for a couple of years before graduate school. There is nothing wrong with this, and it is the best alternative for many students.
- Many MBA schools require two years of work experience before they will accept you!

# HOW TO WRITE A PERSONAL STATEMENT

## by Kristin Bosc

### INTRODUCTION

The process of applying to graduate school is tedious. You've filled out applications, taken admissions tests, obtained letters of recommendation, and arranged to have your transcripts sent. The admissions committee has all your data, as well as the data of hundreds of other people. Now, what if you were given a few minutes to convince the committee members that you should be among the few chosen for the program? They already know your "numbers," what do you want them to know about you as a person? This is exactly the opportunity a personal statement provides you: the opportunity to show the committee that you are a person who will be a valuable asset to their program. Thinking of a personal statement as an opportunity, not as a chore, will put you in the right state of mind to begin.

### TYPES OF PERSONAL STATEMENTS

There are two basic kinds of personal statements: the general autobiographical statement, which allows you a lot of flexibility, and statements requiring you to respond to specific questions. In the latter kind, it is very important that you actually answer the question(s)! This may seem obvious but it's worth stating anyway: don't include a lot of irrelevant details. Be as creative as you can, but keep in mind the question you are answering.

### PERSONAL STATEMENT RULES

**The first rule in preparing either kind of personal statement is to allow plenty of time, preferably a few weeks. Also, keep in mind that different schools will have different requirements for personal statements, so you may have to write several. Following are some other rules that are crucial to follow:**

- 1) Always stay within the length limits (often one to two pages). If you were on the committee, would you admit someone who apparently can't follow simple directions?
- 2) There should be NO grammar or spelling errors in your statement. Have someone check it over; you never know whether a committee member will have an extreme distaste for split infinitives or misplaced apostrophes. Come to Career Services and we'll check it for you.
- 3) Always, always, always, type your personal statements and use a readable typeface. Fancy fonts make your statements stand out only because it's difficult to read.

When writing your personal statement, it's important to keep at least two general goals in mind. First, you want your statement to be memorable, to stand out from the rest (some suggestions for how to do this are discussed below). Second, remember that this is usually the only part of your application that directly demonstrates your writing ability. Your language should be clear and concise; try to avoid using a thesaurus or other sources to sprinkle your statement with big, "intelligent-sounding" words. The ability to communicate clearly is much more impressive than the ability to use big words.

## **BEFORE YOU BEGIN WRITING**

Before you actually begin composing your personal statement, start brainstorming. Remember, one of your goals is to make a lasting impression, so begin by thinking about what is truly unique about you. Some areas to explore include your unique history, skills, experiences, obstacles you have overcome, and people or events that have influenced you. These are good potential content areas for the general personal statement and are also often relevant for the type requiring you to answer specific questions. It's also important to examine your future goals. For example, why are you pursuing graduate study and why this particular degree? Once you have completed a thorough assessment of where you've been and where you want to go, it's time to begin the actual writing.

## **COMPOSING YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT**

Now that you've gotten some ideas about what makes you unique, ask yourself what you want the admissions committee to know about you that they can't learn from your application. If you reiterate what is in the application (GPA, for example), you're taking up valuable space in the personal statement – space you could be using to show the person behind the "numbers."

Once you have some idea of the aspects of yourself that you want the statement to convey, keep these two guidelines in mind: 1) find an angle and 2) tell a story. You might choose to open by describing an incident that had a profound impact on you and your decision to pursue your chosen field or you might decide to take a developmental angle, showing how events throughout your life have shaped your interests. For example, you can look at your past experiences and write specifically about how they led you to an interest in this field; consider what you're doing now, in college, that reflects your continued desire to pursue this area in graduate study; finally, what do you think you'll do with the degree once you have it; do you have a goal in mind? Be creative; try to find an angle that portrays you in an interesting way. Since you are trying to capture committee members' attention, the opening paragraph is very, very, very important! Your story's beginning should make people want to keep reading.

## **WHAT TO AVOID**

There are some things you definitely want to avoid in writing a personal statement. Since you are trying to stand out, avoid clichés. "I want to be a doctor (lawyer, psychologist, social worker) because I've always enjoyed helping people" is a cliché. Don't use it! If helping others is truly your motivation, give examples of people you've helped and their impact on you or open the essay with a compelling story about a person you've helped. Also avoid controversial topics; chances are that someone on the committee will hold the opposing viewpoint. In general, you also want to avoid discussing high school accomplishments in a graduate school admissions essay. Finally, avoid turning your personal statement into a listing of accomplishments or experiences that reads more like a resume than a statement about you as a person. Remember, the point is to show who you are, not what you've done. If there's a particular accomplishment you want the committee to know about, build your story around it.

## **"SHOULD I ADDRESS SHORTCOMINGS FROM MY APPLICATION?"**

Students often ask if they should address points from their application that may reflect poorly on them (low GPA or test scores, for example). Some experts recommend doing so and others advise against it. Our opinion is, it depends. If addressing a shortcoming on your application fits in with your story, you can probably include it. For example, if your grades improved markedly during your later college years (but the early days are still affecting your overall GPA), you may choose to construct your story around an event or experience that motivated you to perform better. When deciding if there's a shortcoming from the application that you'd like to include in your personal statement, ask yourself if it seems as though you are making excuses. Stating that you were tired on the day of the GRE (LSAT, MCAT) or that you never do well on standardized tests tends to sound like excuse making. It's important to keep the tone of the personal statement positive, so if you can't put a positive spin on it, don't include it. A better approach would be to talk with people writing your recommendations and ask if they are willing to address the issue. A letter from a professor stating that your test scores aren't a good reflection of your scholastic ability is more convincing than if you state it yourself, and you won't be perceived as making excuses.

## **ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES**

Finally, remember that your personal statement really can have an impact on the decision to admit you to a graduate program. In addition to following the guidelines already discussed, there are a couple of other strategies that may help tip the scale in your favor. One strategy is to write the statement so that it emphasizes what the program emphasizes. If the program is very research-oriented, make sure your story includes something about your research experiences and interests. [Just as an aside---it helps if your research interests coincide with the interests of at least one faculty member.] If the program is more "hands-on," you'll probably want to emphasize field experiences you have had or hope to gain through the program. Obviously, this strategy requires that you know what the program emphasizes and will require you to do some research.

Research also forms the basis of the second strategy, which is simply to know, and to show through your personal statement, reasons for wanting to attend a particular program. There are numerous points you can mention---low faculty-student ratios, excellent research facilities, opportunities to apply what you learn in the community, the program's outstanding reputation, etc. Even if this information doesn't relate directly to the story you are telling in your personal statement, it's usually fairly easy to incorporate some points about the program in the closing paragraph. Remember, Career Services can help!

## **OTHER RESOURCES**

These recommendations pertain to personal statements in general. There are numerous Internet sites that offer tips for writing personal statements for particular fields of study, and many provide some sample statements. Simply type "personal statement" into a search engine.

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## IDEAL TIMELINE/CHECKLIST

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### Junior Year

- Investigate universities and areas of study.
- Talk with faculty in your department about graduate schools.
- Check [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com) and [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com) to help you narrow your choices.
- Develop a list of recommended schools.
- Investigate deadlines for GRE special exams (subject tests).
- Medical school students: take the MCAT in April, or wait until summer.

### Summer after

#### Junior Year

- Check web sites, or e-mail the graduate schools for bulletins and application forms. (If you get hard copies only, photocopy all the forms when you receive them so that you have a spare.)
- Contact the department directly, and request information on programs and degree requirements.
- Prepare for admission test(s)--if you need some tips on how to prepare, come to Career Services. Some people may choose to go ahead and take the admission test during the summer.
- Write your essays and have someone in Career Services review them.
- You may want to visit the university and arrange a meeting with someone in the department to which you are applying.

### Fall

#### Senior Year

- Take admissions test (if not taken in the summer).
- Obtain letters of recommendation.
- Send in completed applications. (Do you have photocopies of your completed forms?)
- Have Registrar's office send transcripts.
- Schedule interview (if needed).

### Fall/Winter

#### Senior Year

- Make sure you have submitted all materials by the stated deadlines.
- Call graduate school weekly if necessary to check your file, unless they have an web-based notification system.

### Spring

#### Senior Year

- Check on files.
- Send the required information and/or money to the institution where you have been accepted.
- Send thank you notes/emails to recommendation writers to inform them of your success.