



CENTER FOR  
CAREER DEVELOPMENT

# GRADUATE SCHOOL ADMISSIONS GUIDE



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## WHAT IS GRADUATE EDUCATION?

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### **Comprehensive exams**

**(comps)** Written or oral exams administered at the end of coursework for graduate programs. Oral exams are administered by a committee of faculty members from the program. Students may or may not be allowed to appoint members to the committee.

Graduate education refers to formal study after receiving a bachelor's degree. It differs from undergraduate study in many ways, but a key difference is that **a graduate program is designed to specialize in an academic discipline or profession and therefore offers less elective coursework.** Classes tend to be smaller and are often targeted to a specific cohort, or the set of all students in the same year of the program. (For example, you may have heard a law student referred to as an 1L, 2L, or 3L, which means that the student is in the first, second, or third year of law school.) Graduate coursework is typically discussion heavy, and faculty expect graduate students to come prepared and actively participate. Besides coursework, graduate students may be expected to conduct and defend independent research, complete internships or fieldwork, or sit for comprehensive exams.

## WHAT ARE YOUR OPTIONS?

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Many fields may be open to you. You do not necessarily have to stay in the field you majored in as an undergrad, although you may be expected to complete additional coursework to get ready for graduate-level study in a different field.

Two types of graduate degrees, professional and research, can be earned at the master's, specialist and doctoral levels, as well as a number of combinations of these types and levels. You are encouraged to research your desired career path well before selecting the discipline or program you will pursue in graduate school.

## TYPES OF DEGREE PROGRAMS

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**Professional degree programs.** A professional program is designed to prepare those who intend to enter specific professions like law, medicine, college student personnel, education, accounting, and many others. These programs may have an experiential learning requirement such as an internship, clinical residence, or practicum.

**Research degree programs.** A research program is designed to contribute original research and a body of knowledge to a particular discipline like those that compose the humanities, the social sciences, the natural sciences, engineering, or communications and information.

## LEVELS OF DEGREES

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**Master's.** Master's degrees can be earned in most academic fields. The Master of Science (MS) and the Master of Arts (MA) are the most common degrees at this level. However, there are also specialized degrees, such as the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) or Master of Business Administration (MBA), that carry a label unique to a particular program. Some master's degrees are designed to lead to doctoral studies, while others, like the MBA, are the terminal—or highest—degree for a profession.

**Professional master's degree.** A professional master's usually indicates that the degree holder has a specific skill set needed to practice a profession or that the holder has enhanced a skill set to enable upward mobility in an existing career.

**Research master's degree.** A research master's provides experience in research and allows further specialization in a particular field. It can also lead to increased responsibilities and marketability in an existing career without the time and financial commitment of a doctorate. Full-time students usually complete a master's degree in two years. As part of both types of master's degrees, you may be required to write a master's thesis, complete a culminating project, or sit for comprehensive exams and often to complete an internship or a field experience.

### **Full load** 9 hours

(this is a heavy load in graduate school.)

**Specialist.** Specialist degrees are earned after a master's degree but before a doctorate and are usually offered in educational fields, including teaching, administration, or counseling (EdS) and school psychology (either an SSP or an EdS in school psychology). A specialist degree may require coursework, training, an internship, or a combination of experiences beyond those required for a master's degree. This type of degree usually prepares its holders to meet professional certification or licensing requirements.

**Doctorate.** Doctorates are considered terminal degrees and, depending on the individual program's requirements, may be entered either directly after a bachelor's degree or only after completing a master's degree. Be aware that many programs that offer admission after the bachelor's degree do not confer a master's degree if a student leaves the program after completing work comparable to the requirements of a master's programs. For such programs, students must complete all of the doctoral requirements in order for any coursework to be applied toward a degree. Other programs may grant a master's degree if the student decides not to continue the program to its end. It is essential to understand the degree options before committing to a program.

Like master's degrees, doctoral degrees may be either research driven or professional.

**Research-driven doctorates.** A research doctorate is the most common type of doctoral degree and typically involves training to do research that results in original additions to the body of knowledge of an academic discipline. It is the primary credential to teach or conduct research at the university level, though a wide range of career options is possible. The most common research degree is the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD, for the Latin *philosophiæ doctor*, meaning "teacher of philosophy"). There are others, however, like the Doctor of Education degree (EdD or DEd) awarded by some colleges of education.

Depending on your program of choice, a thesis may be required. A thesis research paper is completed after coursework for a master's degree; the length varies up to 75 pages or more. Some programs offer a nonthesis path which gives the option to take additional credit hours to substitute for a thesis.

Besides coursework, research doctoral candidates are expected to write and defend a dissertation—a book-length document that presents the candidate's research and findings—to a committee of scholars in the field, usually in the last year or two after completing all coursework. Candidates may also be expected to sit for comprehensive exams when they complete their graduate coursework. The research doctorate typically takes four to six years to complete, depending on a candidate's progress with the dissertation. On average, research doctorates in the humanities take the longest to complete.

**Professional doctorates.** The most common professional doctorates are the Doctor of Jurisprudence (JD, for the Latin *juris doctor*) in law and the Doctor of Medicine (MD, for the Latin *medicinæ doctor*). The candidates for these professional doctorates typically complete the degree in a prescribed amount of time and often progress together in a cohort. A dissertation is rarely required for a professional doctorate, but depending on the profession, a comprehensive exam, a licensure exam, a certification exam, or a combination of these is often required.

**Dissertation** Extensive research paper completed after coursework for a doctorate; usually more in-depth than a thesis and may exceed a hundred pages in length.

# GRADUATE SCHOOL WEBSITES

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This list is not by any means comprehensive, but it can give you a good start as you begin looking into graduate school options.

## GENERAL SITES

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**Grad School Tips** [gradschooltips.com](http://gradschooltips.com)

Advice about how to get into graduate school, reasons to consider graduate school, and information on applications, essays, and interviewing.

**Gradschools.com** [gradschools.com](http://gradschools.com)

Details about graduate schools and programs. Resources section has more than 50 articles on applying to grad schools, including several on application essays.

**Graduate Guide** [graduateguide.com](http://graduateguide.com)

Detailed information about grad schools, financial aid, and loans.

**Kaplan Test Prep** [kaptest.com](http://kaptest.com)

Free graduate school entrance exam materials and paid exam preparation courses.

**Peterson's Online** [petersons.com](http://petersons.com)

Information on finding the right graduate school, test preparation, and paying for graduate school.

**Princeton Review** [princetonreview.com](http://princetonreview.com)

Information about different graduate programs and careers, entrance exams, scholarships, and financial aid.

**U.S. News & World Report Best Graduate Schools Ranked** [usnews.com/best-graduate-schools](http://usnews.com/best-graduate-schools)

Explore more than 2,000 graduate programs including the resources and tools to help you find the best program for you.

## UT RESOURCES

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**College of Arts and Sciences Advising** [artsci.utk.edu/advising](http://artsci.utk.edu/advising)

Pre-law and pre-health advising.

**Graduate Catalog** [catalog.utk.edu](http://catalog.utk.edu)

**Graduate School** [gradschool.utk.edu](http://gradschool.utk.edu)

**Office of Undergraduate Research** [ugresearch.utk.edu](http://ugresearch.utk.edu)

**UT Libraries Subject Guides** [libguides.utk.edu](http://libguides.utk.edu)

Professional journals and publications in specific fields of interest.

## PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL RESOURCES

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**Association of American Medical Colleges** [aamc.org](http://aamc.org)

Information on professional development groups, MCAT, medical schools, jobs, surveys, and data.

**Business School Comparison** [mba.com/school-search](http://mba.com/school-search)

**Law School Admissions Council** [lsac.org](http://lsac.org)

In-depth information about the law school application process.

**Law School Comparison** [Istreports.com/compare](http://Istreports.com/compare)

**Medical School Comparison** [apps.aamc.org/msar-ui/#/landing](http://apps.aamc.org/msar-ui/#/landing)  
Comprehensive comparison tools to help find the best fit.

**Official GMAT site** [mba.com](http://mba.com)

Provides in-depth information about MBA programs as well as the GMAT.

## DECIDING WHETHER TO GO

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Examine your reasons for applying before going any further. While the decision is ultimately yours, by looking closely at your motivations and commitment to advanced education, you increase your chances for long-term success in both graduate school and your career. Take a moment to answer the questions below, then compare them to the statements to help decide how to proceed.

### Be honest with yourself and answer these questions:

- Are you willing to invest the time, energy, and money associated with going to graduate school? Have you thoroughly investigated the costs?
- Are you prepared to spend the majority of the next two to seven years studying while living on a meager budget, accruing loan debt, or both?
- Can a single topic or narrow range of topics sustain your interest for the next two to seven years?
- Are you a viable candidate for graduate school? Do you meet the minimum requirements for the programs that interest you?
- Do you have the career-related work experience that might help you get into graduate school?
- Does the idea of initiating and carrying out independent research excite you?

### You should consider graduate school if

- Your research shows that your desired profession either requires an advanced degree or heavily favors people with advanced degrees.
- Your research shows that advanced education greatly increases your chances of advancement in your field.
- Your research shows that you need an advanced degree to increase your earning potential. You are confident that your increased earnings will outweigh the time, money, and energy you will invest in a graduate degree.
- You have a passion for your field of interest and appreciate the rigors of scholarly work.

### You should do further research or consider other options if

- You do not know what to do with your life and hope you will find direction in graduate school.
- Your major was really interesting, but you do not know what kind of job you can get. You assume that if you go to graduate school, the job search will be easier.
- You plan to go on to graduate school in the same discipline as your undergraduate major, but you are not really sure if you want to continue studying this field. You wish you could change subjects but do not know how or even whether changing is a good idea.
- You are not ready to join the world of work just yet—college was fun, so grad school must be, too!
- All your friends are going on to graduate school, so it must be the right thing to do.
- Your parents agreed to pay for it.

If your reasons for going to graduate school indicate that you need to do more research, or if you answered no to several of the questions, consider visiting a career consultant in the Center for Career Development.

But if you are now more certain than ever that graduate school is for you—please continue along in this guide!

## THE SUCCESSFUL APPLICANT

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Programs vary in competitiveness and in what they value most in candidates. Some universities have separate requirements for the graduate school and departmental admission. Keep in mind that satisfying the minimum requirements for admission does not guarantee acceptance. The average qualifications of current students are a more accurate predictor. Requirements generally include four areas:

**Satisfying the minimum requirements for admission does not guarantee acceptance. The average qualifications of current students are a more accurate predictor.**

**Grade point average.** The minimum is often 3.0, but average GPAs of graduate students are often much higher. Some programs weigh grades in specific courses more heavily; for example, performance in science prerequisites counts heavily for medical school.

**Test scores.** Test type and score requirements vary by institution and program. Typically there are minimum scores, but again, average scores of the students in the program are often much higher. Some programs place more emphasis on particular sections of the test (for example, quantitative or verbal). Check each program of interest for specifics.

**Relevant experience.** Experience gained through internships, fieldwork, a practicum, volunteering, independent study, or research is often a factor. This requirement varies depending on the type of program.

**References.** References and effective networking with members of the faculty and staff can sometimes move your application to the top of the stack. Look for any opportunity to make contacts at your undergraduate school, at institutions of interest, and in your field.

### TIPS FOR SUCCESS

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#### Prepare

- Build good writing skills and research techniques. Keep your eyes open for opportunities to get involved with your faculty members' research.
- Focus on getting good grades, especially in your last few years of college. Many graduate programs value excellent recent academic performance. Pay special attention to coursework that may be weighted more heavily, like courses in the sciences for programs in health care fields.
- Consider a test preparation course, especially if you struggle with standardized testing. But consider your budget—these courses can be expensive!
- Study resource guides for writing top-notch personal statements and essays and have your statement critiqued by a competent reviewer.
- Develop and maintain a portfolio, including letters of references, writing samples, and relevant projects.

#### Explore

- Keep current on trends and skills in your chosen profession, such as artistic techniques, computer skills, communications skills, or analytical skills.
- Gain experience in the field—for example, volunteer at a hospital or clinic if you are considering a program in a health care field.
- Set up informational interviews with people in the field and alumni of the graduate program you are considering.
- Visit your top graduate schools and request an appointment for an informational interview with the chair of the program or a professor.
- Gain undergraduate research experience. Visit UT's Office of Undergraduate Research to get started!

## CHOOSING A PROGRAM

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Once you decide that graduate school is the right next step on your career path, you must then answer a very important question: *Where will I go?*

You'll need to explore a number of programs to find the best fits and increase your chances of being admitted. However, graduate school application fees can range from \$50 to \$100, so you should apply only to programs that can meet your needs and satisfy your goals. You may start with a list of 10 to 15 programs, but a good rule of thumb is to narrow your application list to about six, using the Rule of Six: two "reach" programs, two in the middle of the pack, and two safe bets.

### GATHER INFORMATION

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There are many resources available that can assist you in gathering the information you need to make a well-informed decision about your program. Below you will find some great starting points.

**UT faculty.** Members of the UT faculty have attended and taught at a number of universities and may be able to provide inside information or suggestions about programs you should consider.

**Program students and alumni.** Alumni and current students will give you the most honest information about the quality of the program and its faculty. Ask your program contact to schedule time to speak with current students during a campus visit.

**Program websites.** Visit each program's website for general information such as the program's mission, faculty qualifications, admission and graduation requirements, and deadlines. But don't stop there—contact the school for more details.

**Graduate school websites.** These sites can provide a wealth of information on graduate school in general or on specific fields. Many of them also provide search functions to help identify programs that meet your needs. See the list in the "Graduate School Websites" section of this guide.

**Professional associations.** Some associations provide print or online guides to graduate programs. Find professional associations for your field (e.g., the American Counseling Association) with the *Encyclopedia of Associations*, the Center for Career Development "What Can I Do with This Major?" resource, or online search engines, or by asking professors and professionals in the field.

**Academic journals in your field.** The best programs generate the best and the most frequently cited articles, so look in the journals for articles and research reports that interest you, then check to see which programs the authors are associated with.

### QUESTIONS ABOUT PROGRAMS

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**Accreditation.** There are two main types of accreditation: institutional and program specific. You need to determine the proper accreditation for degree programs in your field. While accreditation is not necessarily the key indicator of quality, you could face negative consequences if either the institution or program that confers your degree is not accredited. NOTE: A school that is not properly accredited may not volunteer this information, so dig deep.

**Admission standards.** Most schools publish this information, so look for the number of applicants compared with the number of acceptances and the base requirements for admission, which usually include undergraduate grade point average and scores on standardized tests.

**Multicultural/diversity opportunities.** Better programs tend to be diverse because diversity of all types often can signal a broader worldview. Examine the composition of both the faculty and the students in the program and determine a mix where you'll feel both comfortable and appropriately challenged.

**Reputation/ranking.** Lots of different organizations rank graduate programs, so while rankings are an important measure of quality, you also need to investigate the source of the rankings. Examples of organizations that rank graduate programs include U.S. News & World Report and *Business Week*.

**Size.** Evaluate the size of both the program and the university. Just as with your undergraduate school, you need to find a size that feels right for you. Examine the resources available to the program as well as the faculty–student ratios.

**Faculty.** Are the program's faculty well published? Do they publish in well-regarded peer-reviewed journals? What are they currently researching? Does this research match your interests? Are they available or do they travel frequently? (Consider, though, that their invitations to be presenters or speakers at prestigious conferences can be a big plus for you if they take their grad students along to network with the top people in the field!)

**Current students.** Request contact information or arrange a talk with current students to learn the pros and cons of the program from an insider's view.

**Student life.** What is the student population? How large is the graduate program? What is the student–faculty ratio? What is the average age of the students enrolled? Do students attend primarily full or part time? Are there any student organizations? Where do most graduate students live with respect to the campus? What support services are on campus?

**Location.** Where is the school located? What is the climate? What recreational activities are available? What is the social atmosphere? Can you be happy in this environment for the duration of your program?

**Finances.** What is the tuition for the program? What kind of financial assistance is available? Is there a variety of assistantships, fellowships, grants, and loans? Make sure you examine all associated costs, including tuition, books and supplies, housing, and miscellaneous fees and expenses.

**Fit with your career interests.** If you have a specialized career interest—like environmental law, for example—you need to know whether the program offers courses and experiential opportunities in that area and whether it has faculty members with research interests that will allow you to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and contacts to start your professional career successfully.

**The future.** Does the program assist with the job search after you receive your degree? Where do the graduates end up working? What opportunities for internships, research, and jobs are available while you are in the program?

**Graduation requirements.** Does the program require an exit project, such as a thesis, dissertation, or comprehensive test?

**Residency requirements.** Are you required to reside on campus full time at the university? This requirement will vary based on the institution or program.

# GRADUATE SCHOOL DECISION TABLE

Rate each option on a scale of 1 to 10 for each criterion. Multiply the subtotals for your top 10 criteria by 2 to give them greater weight. Make as many copies of this table with your completed values list as you need to rate all of the programs you have identified as possibilities.



SUBSTANDARD: Offers little to nothing to fulfill this value  
 MEETS STANDARDS: Offers basic resources to fulfill this value  
 EXCEEDS STANDARDS: Offers excellent resources to fulfill this value

Top 10 criteria/values	Universities/programs		
	MS Nursing-UGS	MS Nursing-UHA	MS Nursing-UT
1. Diversity Initiatives	7	7	10
2. Scholarship Opportunities	9	10	10
3. Post-Graduation Job Rate	10	10	10
4. Admissions Qualifications	10	10	10
5. Cohort Size/Mid-Size University	9	9	6
Other criteria/values			
Within 60 miles of family	3	9	6
TOTAL Points for University/Program	56	58	64
TOTAL Points for University/Program			

Top 10 criteria/values	Universities/programs		
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			
10.			
Other criteria/values			
TOTAL Points for University/Program			

## APPLICATION MATERIALS

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**Most programs will not begin to review your application until your file is complete, and they are unlikely to review it at all if anything is late—so start early!**

A complete graduate school application usually consists of some or all of the following elements:

- Application form (online)
- Application fee
- Official transcripts
- Admission essay
- Resume (or list of experiences)
- Recommendations or evaluations
- Entrance exams
- Interview and campus visit

Most programs will not begin to review your application until your file is complete, and they are unlikely to review it at all if anything is late—so start early! Be sure to call or email to confirm the receipt of all your materials. If you call, record the date and the name of the person you speak with.

Get organized, using the Graduate School Application Record in this booklet if you need help getting started. You can use this format or create one for yourself to ensure you meet all your deadlines with well-prepared materials that display your qualifications in the best light.

### APPLICATION FORM

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Locate the appropriate application form as soon as you know that you are interested in a program. Most forms are available online. The form comprises standardized questions that the program will use to track your application and ensure that you meet minimum qualifications. Your answers to the questions should be clear, consistent, and accurate. Be sure to use your full legal name on all pages. Remember, most programs receive many applications and may be looking for quick ways to eliminate applicants. A small error or an unprofessional-looking application may be all they need to send yours to the bottom of the stack.

### APPLICATION FEE

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Application fees can be as high as \$100 per school. Budget \$350 to \$650 to cover your fees. These fees are typically not refundable for any reason, so do your research and be fairly certain of your interest in a school before applying.

### OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPTS

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Almost all programs require an official transcript from every postsecondary institution you have attended, even if you took only one course there. An official transcript bears the university's seal and the signature of its registrar. You must order these and usually pay a small fee for each one. Information on ordering official UT transcripts is available on One Stop's website, [onestop.utk.edu](http://onestop.utk.edu). Contact the registrar's office at other schools for official transcripts from those schools. You may also want to check the availability of grades for the most recent term, depending on your desired program's requirements.

## **ADMISSION ESSAY**

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Also called a personal statement, letter of intent, or letter of purpose, the admission essay is your chance to influence the admissions committee beyond what is apparent in a transcript or resume. While most schools want you to address basic questions to gauge your interest in the field, program interest, and your candidacy qualifications, the wording of the essay question varies from school to school. Pay very close attention to how the question is worded and be sure to completely answer each question that is actually asked. Do not make the mistake of trying to write one essay to cover all your applications.

For more detailed information, see the “Graduate School Admission Essays” section of this guide. Personalized help is available from a career consultant in the Center for Career Development or from the Writing Center.

## **RESUME**

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Graduate schools often ask for resumes—or at least a list of experiences—in addition to your GPA and test scores. A resume for a graduate school application is essentially the same as for a job search; however, it’s a good idea to structure the resume to highlight the skills and qualifications that would be valued in a particular graduate program, like research experience, related jobs, or activities. For additional information, visit a career consultant in the Center for Career Development or review materials available at [career.utk.edu](http://career.utk.edu).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

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While your grades, test scores, and experience will weigh heaviest in admission decisions, a well-written recommendation can often be a deciding factor, especially if you have any weak spots in your qualifications. You will typically be asked for two or three recommendations, but the number required varies from school to school. A program may provide a recommendation form to give to your recommenders or simply request a letter.

When you are deciding whom to ask for a recommendation, consider asking a professor in your field who knows you well and can vouch for your academic or research abilities. Build relationships with professors early so they can report on more than just your grade in a class. You may also want to ask someone in your field, preferably someone with an advanced degree, who has supervised you through an internship, a fieldwork experience, or a job.

**NOTE:** Recommendations from family members, members of the clergy, and politicians are strongly discouraged. Not only are their comments less relevant to your academic qualifications, they can actually be detrimental to your case.

Remember that you are asking recommenders for the favor of their time and effort, so treat them with care and consideration. Keep these pointers in mind:

- *Start thinking about potential recommenders early.* Visit professors during office hours, get involved in research or community service projects, and have conversations with supervisors about your career goals. You want to enable someone to know your abilities and career goals and be comfortable talking about you to professional peers.
- *Your recommenders are busy.* Start asking for recommendations early in your senior year, with plenty of time before your deadline. This typically means you need to be lining up recommenders in the early fall of one year if you plan to attend graduate school in the fall of the next year.

**NOTE:** If you are planning to take a year or more off before beginning graduate school, make sure to let your recommenders know you are planning for asking them for a recommendation and stay in touch with them via LinkedIn, an email update each semester, phone calls, or meetings.

- Schedule an appointment with each potential recommender to talk about how your chosen program aligns with your career goals and why you think you are a good candidate. This may spark their memory about some positive things they can write about you.
- *Be sure to give each recommender a list of schools you are applying to with instructions and deadlines for each letter or evaluation form.* Provide your contact information if they should need to reach you, and any pertinent information that will help them write an appropriate letter. You might include your personal statement and resume to help jog their memories.
- *Remember that writing recommendations is optional for the recommender.* If you notice that a person you asked for a recommendation seems hesitant, move on to an alternate. You do not want to run the risk of their writing a poor recommendation.

## ENTRANCE EXAMS

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Most graduate and professional schools require your scores on at least one standardized test for admission. Programs typically require a minimum score for consideration, but getting that score does not guarantee admission. We encourage you find out about the average scores of students admitted to a program you are interested in.

### Standardized Exams

Many programs require one of these standardized exams:

- Graduate Record Exam (GRE) general and subject test—required by many academic master’s and doctoral programs. [ets.org/gre](https://ets.org/gre)
- Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT)—required by MBA and other management programs. [mba.com](https://mba.com)
- Law School Admission Test (LSAT) [lsac.org](https://lsac.org)
- Medical Admission Test (MCAT) [students-residents.aamc.org](https://students-residents.aamc.org)
- Dental Admission Test (DAT) [ada.org/en/education-careers/dental-admission-test](https://ada.org/en/education-careers/dental-admission-test)
- Optometry Admission Test (OAT) [ada.org/en/oat](https://ada.org/en/oat)
- Pharmacy College Admissions Test (PCAT) [pcatweb.info](https://pcatweb.info)
- Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)—English proficiency test for international students. [ets.org/toefl](https://ets.org/toefl)
- Miller Analogies Test (MAT)—accepted by a variety of graduate programs. [pearsonassessments.com/postsecondaryeducation/graduate\\_admissions/mat.html](https://pearsonassessments.com/postsecondaryeducation/graduate_admissions/mat.html)

### Exam Preparation Tips

- Prepare for and take the test early! Take entrance tests at the end of your junior year so that you can submit your application materials early and have time to retake the test if necessary. Be sure to plan according to admissions deadlines; refer to the application timeline in this guide to plan your schedule.
- It is not advisable to take an exam with no preparation, even for practice or to see how you will do.
- Practice tests for many different entrance exams are available free of charge at [varsitytutors.com/practice-tests](https://varsitytutors.com/practice-tests).
- Sign up early! There are no registration deadlines for computer-based tests (GRE General and Written Assessment, GMAT), but registration is first come, first served. The registration deadlines for GRE subject tests are approximately six weeks before the exam dates. Late registration is available for some tests for an additional fee.
- Special accommodation for students with disabilities can be arranged with prior notice. Check with each testing organization to verify their policies.

## **INTERVIEW AND CAMPUS VISIT**

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You may find that the admissions committee for your prospective program wants to meet with you in person to discuss your goals and your fit with their program. Don't panic! Schedule a mock interview with a career consultant at the Center for Career Development. Scheduling your appointment early allows time to process your consultant's suggestions and possibly do a follow-up mock interview. For more information, visit [career.utk.edu/students/prepare-for-graduate-school/interviews-campus-visits](https://career.utk.edu/students/prepare-for-graduate-school/interviews-campus-visits).

Whether the program requires an interview or not, do plan to visit your top choices if you can. While you are there you will want to talk with graduate admissions, faculty, and current students to gain a better understanding of how the program fits your criteria. You should sit in on a class, if possible, and visit the community to gain a feel for the surrounding areas. We suggest contacting the program in advance to determine if they offer a formal visitation or if they can help you plan an informal visit. Regardless of formality, remember that while you might be there to gather information about their program, they will also have the chance to learn more about you—so be professional and prepared at all times!

# GRADUATE SCHOOL ADMISSION ESSAYS

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An essay or personal statement is one of the most important components of your application. For the best chance of success, begin by studying this section carefully.

## SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

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Before you start writing, organize your thoughts, goals, and experiences by answering the following questions:

1. What is the most unusual/unique thing about you?
2. Who and what were intellectual influences on you?
3. Which writers, articles, or books in your field of study have impacted you?
4. Who were your favorite college professors, and why?
5. What is the best paper, exam, or lab you wrote in your major, and why?
6. What is the most important concept you have learned in college?
7. Define your career goals as specifically as possible.
8. What are your plans? How will graduate education facilitate those plans?
9. What is your five-year goal? Ten-year goal?
10. What is the historical background to choosing those goals?
11. When and why did your interest in the field begin?
12. What work or volunteer experiences influenced your choice?
13. How have you prepared yourself to succeed in graduate school?
14. What personal attributes make you likely to succeed in the profession you have chosen?
15. Discuss any research you've been involved in. What were the outcomes?

Adapted from *Graduate Admission Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice*, 4th edition, Donald Asher, Ten Speed Press, 2012

## TIPS FOR PREPARING YOUR ESSAY

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### General Tips

- Your essay should be typed, not handwritten, and error free.
- Essays range from a general comprehensive personal statement to responses to very specific questions. Read the questions! Make sure you respond to the questions asked. Follow instructions regarding length of essay. If there is no limit, two double-spaced pages is good rule of thumb.
- Use a strong opening sentence or paragraph. Try to grab the reader's attention.
- Be clear and concise. Organize your essay effectively.

### Content Tips

- Include a combination of personal and academic information.
- Discuss the history of your interest and your goals for obtaining a graduate degree.
- When talking about yourself, use examples rather than just stating facts.
- Do not simply repeat information found elsewhere in your application, such as extracurricular activities. Go beyond the obvious and indicate how these activities have influenced you or your choice of career.
- Substantiate your academic preparation and ability to perform. Be as specific about your career goals as possible. Emphasize your passion for the field.
- Indicate some knowledge of the program to which you are applying—the more specific, the better.
- Be yourself. Don't write what you think the admissions committee wants to hear.
- Be positive and enthusiastic. Help the admissions committee learn who you are beyond the numbers.
- Avoid controversial topics like politics and religion. Don't criticize the profession that you plan to join. Avoid clichés (for example, "I want to be a doctor because I'm good at science and I like to help people.")
- Your statement can include some explanation of less-than-stellar grades or test scores.

### Before You Send

- Ask yourself and others if your essay is relevant, interesting, and memorable.
- Always have someone proofread your essay—particularly a professor or someone familiar with admission essays.
- Don't send the same essay to several schools if the questions asked are different. Be careful to never send an essay to one school with the name of another school in the text! This happens, and it's a serious turnoff to admission committees.

## RESOURCES

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Several books and websites contain general information about writing a personal statement as well as examples of graduate admission essays. Among the good ones:

- *Graduate Admission Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice*, 4th edition, by Donald Asher, Ten Speed Press, 2012
- *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School*, 3rd edition, by Richard Stelzer, Petersons, 1997
- Center for Career Development information:  
[career.utk.edu/students/prepare-fo-graduate-school/admissions-essays](http://career.utk.edu/students/prepare-fo-graduate-school/admissions-essays)
- Essay Edge sample essays: [essayedge.com/samples](http://essayedge.com/samples)
- Grad School Essay Writing: [accepted.com/grad/personalstatement](http://accepted.com/grad/personalstatement)

# GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION RECORD

Make as many copies of this table as needed to track progress on your graduate school admissions applications.

University/program: \_\_\_\_\_

URL (web address): \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Completed application	Delivery method (or other instructions)	Final deadline	Date sent	Receipt confirmed	Contact person
Program application form				<input type="checkbox"/>	
Transcripts				<input type="checkbox"/>	
Letter(s) of rec				<input type="checkbox"/>	
(name)	Requested <input type="checkbox"/>	Meeting date: (person/phone)		<input type="checkbox"/>	
(name)	Requested <input type="checkbox"/>	Meeting date: (person/phone)		<input type="checkbox"/>	
(name)	Requested <input type="checkbox"/>	Meeting date: (person/phone)		<input type="checkbox"/>	
Personal statement				<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Required <input type="checkbox"/>	Prep/research <input type="checkbox"/>	Draft <input type="checkbox"/>	Critiqued <input type="checkbox"/>	Completed <input type="checkbox"/>
Tests (GRE, LSAT, etc.)	Test type:	Final deadline:	Scheduled: (date)/(location)	<input type="checkbox"/>	
		Reg. deadline:	Date sent:		
Financial aid	Type(s):	Application deadline:		<input type="checkbox"/>	Awarded \$:
Interview	Yes/no (phone/in-person)	Date:	Agenda confirmed <input type="checkbox"/>	Arranged travel (if applicable) <input type="checkbox"/>	
Campus visit	Yes/no	Date(s):	Agenda confirmed <input type="checkbox"/>	Arranged travel <input type="checkbox"/>	

## FINANCIAL AID

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Financial aid is available for graduate school, although competition for the various forms of aid for graduate study is often greater than you may have experienced in your undergraduate program.

### FINANCIAL AID SOURCES

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The most common forms of aid are fellowships, assistantships, grants, and loans. An aid package may consist of a combination of these funding sources.

**Fellowships.** Fellowships cover living expenses and often tuition in return for research or work on a project. Fellowships may be single- or multi-year awards and are usually based on an individual's merit as measured by grades, GRE scores, publications, and letters of recommendation.

**Assistantships.** Assistantships are campus-affiliated work assignments (for example, graduate teaching instructor, research associate, or paraprofessional) that provide a stipend and often waive tuition and/or other fees for a designated number of work hours. Talk with administrators of your program about the availability of assistantships with your department. Assistantships may be available elsewhere on campus, often within student services units. These may or may not relate to your field of study.

It is common for students in doctoral programs to hold assistantships for some or all of their time in their program. In research-driven fields, it is more likely for students to be supported by program funds, but in some areas, like law and medicine, students are much less likely to receive assistantships.

**Grants.** Grants are awarded to cover expenses associated with carrying out research or other specific projects, such as expenses for travel, materials, or computers.

**Loans.** Loans are available from the government and private sources. They are similar to those you may have taken out as an undergraduate.

**Financial aid opportunities for diverse populations.** Some institutions offer application-fee waivers and other forms of funding in order to help diversify their student body. Outside scholarships and specialized funding may also be available. If you are part of an underrepresented group, research any special funding options within your chosen program and from outside sources.

**Scholarships.** Many colleges and academic departments offer scholarships. Scholarship opportunities typically have qualifications. Check with financial aid or department for more information.

**Tuition Assistance or Reimbursement.** Some employers offer opportunities for you to continue your graduate education. Tuition assistance is money the employer pays for your tuition as long as you meet certain qualifications. Tuition reimbursement requires that you invest in your education upfront, and the employer will give you money back after you completed a specified amount of time.

## FINANCIAL AID RESOURCES

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The following sources of information can help you find and understand your financial aid options for graduate study:

- US Department of Education, Find and Pay for College:  
**[www2.ed.gov/students/college/aid/edpicks.jhtml](http://www2.ed.gov/students/college/aid/edpicks.jhtml)**
- UT Graduate School Funding:  
**[gradschool.utk.edu/graduate-student-life/costs-funding](http://gradschool.utk.edu/graduate-student-life/costs-funding)**
- Fastweb: Free Scholarship and College Searches and Financial Aid Tools—free scholarship search site that has 500,000 scholarships worth more than \$1 billion. Registration is required. **[fastweb.com](http://fastweb.com)**
- FinAid: The Smart Student Guide to Financial Aid—comprehensive annotated collection of information about student financial aid on the web. **[finaid.org](http://finaid.org)**
- GradSchools.com—information on financial aid programs, resource providers, and loans, assistantships, fellowships, and scholarships.  
**[gradschools.com/financial-aid](http://gradschools.com/financial-aid)**
- UT Center for Career Development, Grad School, and Financial Aid:  
**[career.utk.edu/students/prepare-for-graduate-school/funding-graduate-professional-school](http://career.utk.edu/students/prepare-for-graduate-school/funding-graduate-professional-school)**
- CashCourse—online personal finance tools help you build real-life-ready financial skills. Free, but registration is required. **[cashcourse.org](http://cashcourse.org)**
- [scholarships.com](http://scholarships.com)—Free scholarship website where you can search nearly four million scholarships, along with other financial aid, including grants and more. **[scholarships.com](http://scholarships.com)**

## APPLICATION TIMELINE

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You need to begin preparing to apply at least a year before you expect to enter a graduate program. For most, this means the spring of junior year or summer before senior year.

Application deadlines for a fall start date usually occur in January and February but may be as early as November or December, especially for highly competitive programs or those with early acceptance. This timetable is approximate—it's best used as a guide to adapt to your personal situation. As you build your timetable, pay close attention to deadlines and try to complete applications well before the due date.

### SPRING OF JUNIOR YEAR—SUMMER BEFORE SENIOR YEAR

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- ❑ Decide on the type of graduate program that is consistent with your career goals.
- ❑ Meet with knowledgeable faculty members to discuss your goals and learn about potential programs.
- ❑ Prioritize your values and criteria regarding the selection of the graduate program that will be consistent with your career goals. See criteria table on page 11.
- ❑ Identify an initial list of five to 10 prospective graduate schools based on your career goals and values. Use the current edition of Peterson's Guides to Graduate Programs, the Peterson's website at [petersons.com](http://petersons.com), or the resources at [career.utk.edu](http://career.utk.edu).
- ❑ Research each prospective graduate school and review course catalogs, applications, financial aid information, and other literature that is relevant to your decision-making process. It may be necessary to visit the websites of both the graduate admissions office and the specific program to view all relevant information.
- ❑ Sign up for entrance exams (e.g., GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT) required by your program of choice. Be aware of deadlines and frequency of testing dates. Consider preparing for the test and taking it now to allow time for retesting if necessary.
- ❑ Some professional programs—law and medicine, for example—use a clearinghouse for applications. If you apply to program that uses a clearinghouse, begin gathering the required information.
- ❑ Begin looking into financial aid, such as loans, scholarships, fellowships, and graduate assistantships.

### AUGUST–SEPTEMBER

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- ❑ Begin writing a rough draft of your personal statement or essay. Polish it as much as possible, keeping in mind that you will tailor a final version for each program you are applying to.
- ❑ Take entrance exams if you haven't done so already.

- ❑ Review the literature for all the prospective graduate schools you have identified and begin your elimination process by comparing the programs across at least these five areas:
  1. The nature and structure of the program—course requirements, internship requirements, thesis requirements, electives, various tracks or specialties
  2. The specialties and areas of research of faculty members who teach within the graduate program or department
  3. How your career objectives line up with where the graduates of this program find work
  4. Financial aid options and what you need to do to pursue graduate assistantships and other forms of financial aid
  5. What the university and specifically the graduate program value in candidates—GPA, standardized test scores, personal statement or essay, interview, letters of recommendation, related experience
  
- ❑ Consider initiating an exploratory discussion by phone, over email, or in person with the department chairperson or a faculty member at each of your prospective universities. Establishing relationships with faculty at prospective graduate programs is especially important when applying to research-based doctoral programs.
  - Introduce yourself and ask the contact whether he or she would be able to schedule a time to talk with you about their program. Don't assume that they have 20 to 30 minutes to speak to you right then.
  - During the informal phone discussion, you should ask questions related to each of the five areas listed above. This discussion serves three purposes: First, it enables you to continue the elimination process while exploring the programs in greater depth. Second, you develop a contact and build rapport with a faculty member or the department chairperson. Third, initiating this discussion and asking quality questions can make a good first impression.

## **OCTOBER–NOVEMBER**

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- ❑ Generate a final list of universities to which you want to apply. The Center for Career Development recommends applying the Rule of Six—choose two “reach” programs, two in the middle of the pack, and two safe bets.
- ❑ Adjust your timeline based on deadlines of your selected programs.
- ❑ All entrance exams should be completed by this time.
- ❑ Finalize versions of your personal statement to address each program's specific requirements.
- ❑ Order transcripts from all of your postsecondary institutions.
- ❑ Complete application forms.
- ❑ Meet or communicate with your recommenders again to discuss your program choices and give them information they will need to write the recommendations.

## **DECEMBER–JANUARY**

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- ❑ Submit all applications even though they are not yet due. Many schools pay special attention to early applications, and programs with rolling admissions may fill their seats before the stated application deadline. Call to check that all materials were received.
- ❑ Complete the FAFSA to qualify for federal aid. You'll fill out the same form for grad school that you did for college. Get the FAFSA in as soon after January 1 as possible.
- ❑ Research deadlines to apply for graduate assistantships offered by your program or other departments on campus. Keep in mind that financial aid deadlines can precede admissions deadlines in some cases.

## **FEBRUARY–MARCH**

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- ❑ Contact the schools on your final list and plan a visit to meet with faculty members and current students in the program. These visits can help you make the best decision for yourself and also increase your chances of being admitted into the program. You should continue to ask more specific questions within each of the five areas of exploration listed above. **IMPORTANT:** If you plan to speak to a faculty member, be sure to first explore some of their research or other published work.

## **APRIL–MAY**

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- ❑ You should start to receive admission offers around April. Compare offers based on your top values.
- ❑ Assess your financial aid package. If it doesn't quite meet your needs, look into alternative loan programs. Remember that each loan program sets its own terms, so compare terms carefully.
- ❑ Make a decision—call other programs to decline or withdraw.
- ❑ Write thank-you letters to those who helped you during this process.

## HOW CAN THE CENTER FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT HELP?

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### **Meet with a career consultant early in the process:**

- Discuss your career objectives and goals for graduate school.
- Get help answering questions about the various parts of the application process, including admission essay or personal statement reviews.
- Assistance with part-time job search.

### **Attend annual events sponsored by the Center for Career Development and the Graduate School:**

- Don Asher, “Gaining Admission into Highly Competitive Graduate Programs,” fall semester
- “Writing Personal Statements and Admissions Essays” workshop through the UT Writing Center at [writingcenter.utk.edu](http://writingcenter.utk.edu)
- Law school admissions workshop sponsored by UT Law and College of Arts and Sciences Advising, fall and spring semesters, and Law School Fair
- Grad School Prep Month events at [career.utk.edu/graduate-school-prep-month](http://career.utk.edu/graduate-school-prep-month)
- Pre-Health Prep Week events through the Center for Career Development, spring semester

**Visit the Center for Career Development graduate school website** at [career.utk.edu/students/graduate-school](http://career.utk.edu/students/graduate-school) for excellent materials and links to relevant information.

## TEN THINGS TO DO IF YOU DON'T GET IN

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1. Apply earlier. Avoid submitting your application the last six weeks before the deadline.
2. Apply to more schools. Six schools is usually considered a prudent minimum: two safe schools, two middle-of-the-pack schools, and two “reach” schools.
3. Apply to more safe schools. Even students with 4.0 GPAs can and do get rejected.
4. Visit the targeted school in person and impress them. Schedule a campus tour and/or appointment to speak with someone in your program of interest.
5. Go to summer school at your targeted school and impress them! It’s easy to get into summer school even at Harvard.
6. Take one class at a time in your target program as a non-degree-seeking student and impress them! Remember, your most recent grades count the most, and your classes may roll over into the program once you’re accepted.
7. Get entry-level experiences in the targeted field—for example, internships or even volunteer work.
8. Work in a “real” job in your targeted field. There’s no substitute for actual experience and recommendations from supervisors in the profession.
9. Get an intermediate qualification, like a master’s degree or even a credential.
10. Try again when you’re older. Many times that’s all it takes.

**NOTE:** Consider contacting a professor at a university where you didn’t get in to ask for advice on how to become a more competitive applicant. They are often willing to give you helpful insights to use when you reapply. Such feedback takes you out of the dark about why you didn’t get in and gives you a chance to beef up your weak areas!

Adapted from *Graduate Admission Essays: Write Your Way into the Graduate School of Your Choice*, 4th edition, Donald Asher, Ten Speed Press, 2012



Student Union, Level 2

Monday Friday  
8 a.m.-5 p.m.

865 974 5435

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CENTER FOR  
CAREER DEVELOPMENT