

Grad School: Getting In

Fast Fact: Each year, approximately one-quarter of the graduating class goes on to graduate school.

Getting into grad school is far from a slam-dunk. Undergraduates are up against not only their peers, but also nontraditional students who have been in the work force and are returning to school enhance to their skills.

Set yourself apart from the competition and stand out to graduate school admissions recruiters with these helpful tips.

Do your homework.

Thoroughly research the schools that fit your area of concentration. Take a look at the scope of their programs, investigate their requirements, find out about financial aid options and processes, and so forth. Get the lay of the land. Graduate school admissions recruiters want to see that you are genuinely interested in attending their institution, so learn all you can and make an informed decision about the schools you would like to attend.

Ask questions.

Tammy Manka, associate director of graduate admissions at Marywood University, recommends scheduling a campus visit (or two) to get a better feel for a school than what's on the website or in marketing materials.

And ask plenty of questions.

"Ask for a meeting within the department you're interested in. Research the area where the school is located. Is it a place you can see yourself living for two-plus years? And ask to speak to an alum, if possible," she suggests.

In addition, "Be sure you have a good understanding of what the program offers that you're looking for, and what you're looking for that it doesn't offer," says Ellen Driscoll, associate director of graduate admission at Suffolk University in Boston. "Be realistic. Given what you know about the program, be honest with yourself about your appropriateness as a candidate."

Understand each school's application process.

Once you've done your homework and narrowed down your choice of schools, make sure you have your materials together before you start applying. Every school is different, and you may not have to send the same packet of information to each one.

Do the schools require scores from standardized tests like the GRE, MCAT, or GMAT? Give yourself plenty of time to take (and retake, if necessary) the required tests.

Do you need to provide a writing sample? Carefully craft your sample.

"We look for quality as well as content," Manka says. "We want to see that the applicant can write at a grad school level. Think about what you're writing."

Do you need a list of references? Lisa Palacios, director of student recruitment at the University of Texas - San Antonio, recommends putting together a packet of information for references—a school brochure, information about the program you're applying for, and a copy of your resume so they can refer to it if necessary. Your references are vouching for your academic performance as well as professionalism, so give them the tools they need to write you a glowing referral.

Don't procrastinate.

Graduate schools have firm deadlines that they expect applicants to meet. These deadlines are in place for a number of reasons, not least of which is financial aid. Make sure you give yourself enough time to complete in-depth documents like the FAFSA (Free Application for Student Aid) or any financial paperwork. Keep track of necessary deadlines. Don't leave everything until the last minute.

Tailor your materials and check your work.

It sounds simple, but Driscoll recommends applicants read directions carefully.

“Make sure you’re sending admissions materials to the appropriate place, that you have all materials in the form that the school requests, and that you have all of the credentials the school is asking for,” she says.

Manka echoes that, and says that one of her pet peeves as a graduate admissions representative is receiving poorly written application information. She receives materials riddled with spelling and grammatical errors, or addressed to the wrong school.

Double- and triple-check your application packets before mailing them out. Spellcheck your application and have someone proofread it—spellcheck doesn’t catch everything, and certainly won’t catch a missing word, misplaced comma, or garbled sentence. Verify school addresses and check that you have addressed your materials to the appropriate contact person.

Having trouble deciding on a field?

Maybe you aren’t ready for graduate school. Talk with a career counselor to clarify your reasons for attending grad school and to identify the major that fits best with your goals.

Tips for graduate school applicants

If the program allows it, reach out to the program director in advance of applying to show that you’re a serious candidate. This can also help you get a sense of whether you are a good fit for the program (and give the admissions staff a sense of how good a fit you are).

If your program requires standardized testing, prepare for the test. That might mean a formal prep course, if you’re so inclined, but the key is to know what to expect—don’t go in cold. And, take the test well in advance of the deadline—early enough to allow you to retake it if necessary.

Experience can make all the difference in being chosen. If you CAN get experience, get it. If you HAVE experience, make sure that your resume is complete, accurate, and demonstrative of your work.

Courtesy of the National Association of Colleges and Employers.