

GRADUATE SCHOOL IN 10 EASY STEPS

Your decision to go to graduate school involves more than just picking a school, applying and waiting to hear about acceptance into a program. The experience you have in graduate school will, in many ways, shape the opportunities you have to pursue your dreams of a career. So think about the career you want, then think about how graduate school will help you to go where you want to go in life.

There are three basic factors that will help you along in pursuing the career you want: your qualifications, what you know and who you know. Your choice of graduate school will be both a function of where you stand now and how you want to grow in each of these areas.

The following steps are not really easy. Each involves self-examination, and matching what you want against the reality of what is available. At the time that you are looking, it may be that what you think you want is not available. You will need to be creative, flexible and trust in your own ability to make decisions. Find out your alternatives, then choose the one that brings you closest to the direction you want to go, even if it is not your ideal.

The following guidelines are a place to start on the path of discovering your options. It is an iterative process. What you decide in step 1 may be later modified by what you learn in step 3. You may want to keep a notebook and jot down your ideas for each step on a separate page; add the modifications that arise during the process.

THIS IS THE BASIC PROCESS:

1. Decide what options you want to pursue in a career.
2. Identify institutions with the type of program you want.
3. Identify professors who do the type of research you want to do.
4. Study and take the required exams e.g. GRE, and TOEFL for international students.
5. Write, then phone professors to identify who has open research and teaching assistantships.
6. Apply for scholarships and fellowships for which you are eligible.
7. Write for application materials from universities that are realistic options.
8. Submit application materials at least one month prior to due dates.
9. Check with the Graduate School Offices to be sure application is complete and accepted.
10. Recontact the professors with whom you are interested in working, to affirm your interest.

HERE ARE SOME MORE TIPS ON THE BASIC PROCESS:

1. Decide what options you want to pursue in a career. (prior to September of senior year)

Do you want to teach at a university, community college or high school? Do you want to do research as a principal investigator, a lab manager or a technician? As a researcher, would you want to work at a university, government or private institution? Do you want to be more actively involved in hands-on management? For example, would you want to be involved in managing a refuge, park, private ranch or nature reserve? Would you want to work within an educational program at a protected area or a zoo? Would you want to be directly involved in managing captive populations of animals in a zoo or breeding center?

If you are not sure about your answers to these questions, start gathering more information. Volunteer to help on projects of graduate students and professors. Look for opportunities to do internships at the type of institutions where you think you might want to work. Find out about the professional organizations in your area of interest. Do a special project of your own, within a class you are taking, as a special problems course or as an honors/senior thesis. One of the best ways to find out more about professions is to attend the annual meetings of professional organizations. Contact professors with your interests and see if you can join a van of students going to the meetings. Talk to graduate students and researchers, look at position announcements in newsletters, get a feeling for the "flavor" of the programs at different universities.

Decide whether you want to pursue basic science, applied science, or some combination. Decide whether you want to focus in one discipline, or plan a strategy to give you strength in interdisciplinary studies. Decide whether you really need a PhD for your career, or if a masters is sufficient. For many hands-on jobs, a masters is preferable, and there are several programs that include an internship to give you experience working within the type of organization where you would like to work. Do you want to pursue a masters degree and see how it fits your interests and talents prior to committing to a PhD? A PhD program is not for everyone, despite the prestige it conveys. It requires dedication, sacrifice and willingness to fit within an institutional structure (and a certain amount of insanity as measured against the "normal" world!). Find role models in the type of career you are considering, and ask them how they got to where they are.

2. Identify institutions with the type of program you want. (September)

There are three ways to do this: talk to people, look at guides to graduate programs, and look at catalogues/program flyers from the institutions that interest you. Ask professors and graduate students which institutions they feel have the best programs for your area of interest. If they disagree, ask why. The Peterson's Guide contains general descriptions of all graduate programs in the U.S.A. However, you may find the guides from professional societies to be more informative. For example, the Animal Behavior Society provides a guide cross-referenced by state, researcher, taxonomic species and research question. In 1985, World Wildlife Fund put out a guide for programs in Wildlife and Natural Resource Management in North America. Currently, Wildlife Conservation International maintains a data base on graduate programs in Conservation Biology.

3. Identify professors who do the type of research you want to do. (September October)

Networking is the key to successful searching for jobs as well as graduate programs. Make a list of the names and research topics of people whose work interests you. You may find these names in your readings for classes, in the journals of professional societies and in your discussions with professors and graduate students.

Do your homework. Go to Citation Index and find out who has been citing these researchers. Find their most recent work and read it. Be prepared to talk with them about their current interests at meetings or over the telephone. Think about how their interests are similar to yours, but also how your unique set of skills, experiences and knowledge might contribute to how they want to develop their programs. Read between the lines and figure out whether they are more interested in a set of research questions, or in a taxonomic group. The two approaches are very different and often researchers interested in "questions" may be somewhat cool to someone who loves to work with a particular species (and vice versa!).

4. Study and take the required exams e.g. GRE, and TOEFL for international students. (Oct.)

Graduate students screen applications to assure they meet general university entrance requirements, based on Grade Point Average and performance on the Graduate Record Exam. If your GPA is 3.2 or above, your application will generally pass university entrance criteria. This corresponds to 8 on a 10 point scale for international students. The requirement for the GRE is a combined score of 750 on the analytical and verbal exams, and for the TOEFL is 425.

However, your application is going to be compared with those of other students when it is passed on to the departmental program to which you apply. Generally, a student with a GPA less than 3.5 and GRE less than 1000 will be less competitive. This is where good GRE scores can make up for a low GPA. Remember that other students study for the exams and you may be at a disadvantage if you do not. You can always retake an exam if you are not happy with your score. If this concerns you, arrange to take the GRE in the summer and retake it in the fall. In many university communities, there may be extracurricular study classes to assist you; or you may purchase one of the study guides or use a computer packet available at the Learning Resource Department of the library. Ask at your career placement office for more information.

For international students, it is important to focus on the TOEFL. Often language difficulties will make it hard to score well on the GRE. There are ways to enter the university even if the TOEFL score is low; however, you may be required to take English language courses until the TOEFL is passed. This takes time away from the graduate program.

5. Write, then phone professors to identify who has open research and teaching assistantships.

Most students are supported by research and teaching assistantships in graduate school. Each professor has certain control over such resources available, so it is very important to correspond directly with the professors to find the opening you want. Write a letter and send a resume, but also state in your letter that you will call the professor. Often a quick phone call can save a lot of waiting and paperwork if a professor currently has no openings.

6. Apply for scholarships and fellowships for which you are eligible. (May- Sept.)

If you can get a fellowship, you can write your own ticket! Most professors will work with a fellowship recipient to prepare proposals for a research project that will support you as a research assistant. However, be aware that there are no promises that proposals will be funded, and you may need to be flexible in finding support after the fellowship expires. Once a fellowship recipient is "in the system" usually support is found each semester, but you may not know for sure until the beginning of each semester!

You can apply for fellowships from the National Science Foundation, the Graduate School of the university where you are applying as well as other sources. Peterson also publishes a guide to fellowships and scholarships for graduate students. As you look through it, you will see many awards have special restrictions and application deadlines often well in advance of the time students start thinking about applying.

For international students, contact the American Embassy in your country for a list of fellowship opportunities. For example, in Mexico fellowships are available through Fulbright, Rotary International and CONACYT. Each of these has special restrictions and emphasis, so talk with someone who has had experience in preparing your application to be most competitive.

7. Write for application materials from universities that are realistic options. (Oct.)

Once you have narrowed your list to 3-5 universities that seem to be good prospects, write for the application materials. An address for the university is usually on the Graduate Catalogue. You may also purchase a graduate catalogue by writing to the given address. If you write to the graduate advisor of the department or the Graduate School, your letter probably will be processed by an office worker. Depending on their work load, there may be delays.

International students may be advised to phone or fax a personal contact in the department to facilitate their application process. Often experienced professors can help students in avoiding difficulties with the bureaucracy of paperwork. For example, if a student needs an acceptance letter prior to applying for a fellowship, sometimes it is possible to get a letter of "provisional acceptance."

International students will find special requirements. For example, many universities require a sponsor who will agree to "bail out" the student if there are financial difficulties. One reason for this is that some international students have been known to leave bad debts behind when they leave the U.S.A. The sponsor is legally responsible for paying in such unfortunate situations.

8. Submit application materials at least one month prior to due dates.

There is always a backlog in processing applications and in receiving letters of recommendation. If you submit your application early, you will have time to check that your application is complete.

Your choice of people to write recommendation letters can be very crucial to the success of your application. Pick someone who knows you, and who would be comfortable with telling you if they have any reservations about writing a recommendation for you. The catch on this is that you need to have already taken the initiative to get to know at least three professionals in your area. Often students will ask their advisor to write a letter, and certainly any supervisor for whom they have worked in a volunteer or paid position.

9. Check with the Graduate School Offices to be sure application is complete and accepted.

A few weeks after submitting your application, call to check that it was received and complete. Sometimes an application will not be considered complete until all letters of recommendation have been received. Often such letters get misfiled, or the students name is misspelled, or any number of other events occur. If there are problems, work through the Graduate School and departmental representatives to clear up any confusions.

10. Recontact the professors with whom you are interested in working, to affirm your interest.

When your application is forwarded from the Graduate School to the Graduate Advisor of the department to which you have applied, you want a professor to be waiting to pick your name off the stack of anonymous applications. Professors are looking for someone who shows initiative, who is going to be able to work independently, but also fit into a developing program. If you were a professor who had to choose between two students with equal qualifications, wouldn't you choose the one who had contacted you and seemed genuinely enthusiastic about the position?

Yes, there is a fine line between "badgering" and expressing interest. Read the non-verbal signals of the person with whom you are communicating. Be confident, but also respect their position. If you are not sure, discuss your communication with the professor, with one or more of the people you ask to write a letter of recommendation.

If a professor really wants a student, there are ways of smoothing bureaucratic tangles. For example, if a student does not have qualifying GRE's, a professor may offer to accept a student conditional on GPA performance during the first semester. Or if a given program requires students who do not have a MS to apply to the Master's Program prior to the PhD program, the professor may be able to advise the student on how to present qualifications for a "straight-shot" PhD. International students who do not pass the TOEFL may be advised to enter into a summer language program prior to starting graduate studies.

**REMEMBER, NETWORK, WORK HARD, DARE TO DREAM, AND BE REALISTIC!
BEST WISHES AND SUCCESS IN FINDING THE PATH THAT IS RIGHT FOR YOU!!**