Eight Tips for Getting into Grad School

1. **Allocate six months, or more, of preparation time prior to your application deadlines.** Even for strong applicants, it takes a few months to research schools, manage the recommendation process, hone your pitch and your personal statements, and score high on required admissions tests. Graduate school is an investment in your future and a carefully considered admissions process can maximize this investment.
2. **Be clear about your motivations.** Graduate school may or may not be part of your master plan for you. Considering why you’re going will help determine which program is right for you, whether it be full- or part-time, or master’s vs. PhD. Understanding your motivations is also the first step in building a case for why you should be admitted. Schools will ask you why you’re a good fit for their program, and you won’t be able to answer that question effectively without knowing what you want.
3. **Solidify strong recommenders.** If you are an undergraduate student planning to apply to graduate school immediately after graduation, be sure to develop relationships with your professors (think “office hours”) so that you can eventually ask them to write a compelling letter for you. If you graduated one, two, five, or ten years ago, and have chosen to return to the academic environment, you need to consider whom to ask to write your letters of recommendation. Former professors may still work if you have kept in touch (be sure to remind them, with details, about who you are). A current boss may be one of the strongest possible recommenders from the schools’ standpoint, but not everyone wants to divulge to their current employer that they are thinking of jumping ship to pursue grad school. Consider a former supervisor. Another idea: if you serve on the board of a professional or non-profit organization, do you work closely with staff, or a fellow board member, who might be willing to write a letter on your behalf? That can be especially helpful if they went to grad school too. In some cases, a personal reference can work well if they can speak to your ability to manage the rigors of graduate level education. The key is to seek recommendations from people willing to write a compelling and convincing case for your candidacy.
4. **Research graduate schools – beyond the websites.** Referring to specific programs, professors, and unique qualities of a target program can help build a case for why you and that program are well matched. Visit schools at least once and reach out to make meaningful connections within those programs. Highlighting specific programs, clubs, courses, and individuals in your essays and interviews makes your interest in a program more credible and convincing. If you can, arrange to speak with a current student or recent alum – they can give you invaluable insider’s perspectives that can’t be obtained through research alone.
5. **Know how you compare as an applicant – your points of similarity and points of difference.** It’s good to have something in common with other applicants, for it helps admissions officers to understand your background and how you fit into the applicant pool. It’s also advantageous to be different from other applicants. To understand these points, you need to step into the shoes of an admissions officer and view your application from their perspective. A safe way to do this (without risking your relationship with admissions departments) is to speak with current students and alumni of the departments you’re applying to, especially individuals who have taken an interest in admissions. Explore, for example, how your undergraduate major puts you in a certain category of applicants – or how it sets you apart. In your pitch and personal statements use your points of similarity to help admissions understand where you come from and why it makes sense for you to go to grad school *there*. Use your points of difference to show why you’re special among grad school applicants. In the ideal result, you’ll fit in *and* you’ll stand out.
6. **“Tell and Show” – why you’re a good fit.** Your resume *tells* everything you’ve done, and your application, personal statements, and essays need to *show* why you’re the ideal candidate. Your essays can show, rather than tell, with a rich story. Think about:
   1. What, specifically, did you accomplish?
   2. What was the task you set out to do?
   3. What were the obstacles you encountered and how did you overcome them?
   4. What was the outcome?
   5. If this was a group achievement, what was your specific role within the larger group?
   6. Consider the strengths you bring from your achievements and how they might be of benefit to the program you plan to enter. For example, consider your leadership skills, critical thinking, multicultural awareness, public speaking, and so on.

The basis of your essays need not be only work- or school-related examples. You can draw from almost anything that helped shape you into the person you are today, such as major life events, community service work, hobbies, and so on. Thinking of your accomplishments in this way will help lay the foundations for your personal statements later.

1. **Practice your pitch.** Practice your pitch for why you want to go to grad school. Whenever you talk with your friends, family, coworkers, and other professionals about your plans to go to grad school you have an opportunity to tell your story. Pay attention to which parts people remember, which parts make their eyes light up, and which parts they get confused about and ask questions about. You’ll naturally make adjustments in how you tell your story, and it will improve on each retelling.
2. **Nail the exam.** Make a comprehensive plan to prepare for your admissions test. You want to ensure that your intelligence manifests as it should on your application, and even a few extra points are worth fighting for. For many graduate programs, GRE scores are the primary determinant of grants – scoring higher on the test could mean you go to grad school for free. In the case of business school, more than half of admissions officers identify the GMAT as the most important factor on an application, and it’s a test the top scorers spend over 100 hours preparing to take.