

Eight Tips for Getting into Grad School

1. **Allocate six months or more 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 admission tests. Graduate school is an investment in your future, and the admissions process can maximize this investment.
2. **Be clear about your motivations.** Graduate school may or may not be part of a master plan for you. Considering why you're going will help you understand what program is right for you – such as full-time vs. part-time, or master's vs. PhD. Knowing 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.** For an undergrad student planning on applying to grad school immediately after graduation, be sure to develop relationships with your professors (think "office hours"), so you can eventually ask them to write a compelling letter for you. Check out your college Career Center regarding setting up a letter of recommendation file. They can send your recommendation letters to the schools you want (and you won't have to keep pestering your profs to get it done). 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 kept in touch. 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. Here's another idea: if you serve on the board for a professional or not-for-profit organization, do you work closely with staff or a fellow board member who might be willing to write a letter on your behalf – especially if s/he went to grad school. In some cases, a personal reference can work well, too, if s/he can speak to your ability to manage the rigors of graduate level education. The key is seeking 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 in 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 to a current student or alum – s/he can give you an invaluable insider's perspective that can't be attained by 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; then admissions officers can understand your background and know how you fit in. It's also advantageous to be different from other applicants. To understand these points, you need to step into the shoes of an admissions official 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. 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:

- What did you accomplish specifically?
- What was the task you set out to do?
- What were the obstacles you encountered, how did you overcome those obstacles?
- What was the outcome?
- If this was a group achievement, what was your specific role within the larger group?
- Consider the strengths you bring from your achievements and how they might benefit the program you plan to enter (i.e. leadership, critical thinking, multicultural awareness, public speaking, etc.)

The basis for 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 – major life events, volunteer work, hobbies, etc. Thinking of your accomplishments in this way will help lay the foundation for your personal statements later.

7. **Practice your pitch.** Practice your pitch of 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 get better and better.
8. **Nail the exam.** Make a comprehensive plan to prepare for your admissions test. You want to ensure that your smarts manifest as they should on your application, and even a few 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 in an application, and it's one that top scorers spend over 100 hours preparing to take.

** Prepared by Kaplan Test Prep **

For more details on applying to graduate school, please visit the following:

- Applying to Graduate & Professional School – <http://careers.washington.edu/students/workshopsandclasses> - click on Workshop Slides
- Thinking about attending law school – <http://www.washington.edu/uaa/gateway/advising/prelaw/>
- Medical, Dental, Veterinary, etc. – <http://www.washington.edu/uaa/gateway/advising/prehealth/>
- Pre-professional programs – <http://www.washington.edu/uaa/gateway/advising/degreeplanning/preprofs.php>
- UWCC Web Resources – <http://careers.washington.edu/Resources/Web-Resources> - click on Graduate School