

10 Steps for Thinking About Graduate School

No one should lunge at graduate school. Getting an advanced degree can take years and can cost tens of thousands of dollars if you're not lucky enough to land a fellowship. And no one should begin planning for graduate school in October of their senior year. Putting together a good application—one that can really sell—is the product of years of careful planning and doing the right stuff to get yourself ready for graduate work in your desired field.

How do you do this? Follow our step-by-step guide to getting ready for the graduate school of your choice:

1. Don't fixate too early. There's no point making a decision about whether to go to graduate school until you've finished about half of the courses in your major—especially the upper-division or advanced courses. Only then can you see whether you like the field enough to devote yourself full time to working in it, and whether you're good enough in it to make it your profession.

Rule of Thumb. You ought to be getting mostly A's (or at least more A's than B's) in your major area if you're seriously thinking about graduate school. At many of the better schools, only 1 in 10 applicants gets in, and it's likely that the one won't have had too many B's and C's.

2. Get the tools. Many graduate programs expect you to have certain skills by the end of your undergraduate career—perhaps the ability to read in one or more foreign languages, proficiency in statistics, or competence in some particular science. Make sure you know what's needed for your field and that you've taken the courses—even if not required for the undergraduate major—that furnish the relevant skills. Otherwise, you might have trouble getting into grad school in the first place or have to play catch-up once you get there.

3. Don't overload with one professor. It's tempting to take four or five courses with one professor, especially if you like him or her and are getting good grades in his or her courses. But there's a pitfall: Exposure to too few points of view might stifle your development in the field. In any case, you'll need at least three different letters of recommendation to apply for graduate school. Cast your net too narrowly and you'll come up short, come application time.

4. Take the professional-level courses in the department. Focus on the harder courses, and be sure not to skip the junior seminar, senior colloquium, senior thesis, or any course specially tailored to the needs of majors. This is where you can distinguish yourself as a serious player in the field, at least among the undergrads. And that's just what you need to do to position yourself for grad school.

Extra Pointer. Skip the "throw-away" courses, those courses taught by less-than-stellar professors or intended for the general university population (and hence too easy to prepare you for grad school). If you ask, your undergraduate adviser can steer you away from these.

5. Try before you buy. If you can, as a senior take a graduate course (especially if there's one in the subfield in which you are interested). Or do an internship or join a research project with a faculty member in your area of interest. That way, you'll get a taste of graduate school or graduate-level projects—all the while building up those relationships that are going to net you those stellar letters of recommendation.

6. Get at least 600s on your GREs. Some universities won't even consider you for admittance to the graduate school if your Graduate Record Exam scores are below 600. For top grad schools, 700 is the floor.

7. Get three bang-up letters of recommendation. Grad schools pay lots of attention to both what the letters of recommendation say and whom they are from. Good letters come from tenured faculty in the field who have a national reputation in the field, have given you an A, and can talk about you and your work in detail. Less good letters are ones written by someone whom no one in the field has ever heard of; from faculty in fields other than your major (unless you're going into a joint graduate program); and, worst of all, from family members, your minister, or Facebook friends.

You can also run into problems if you lack a letter from a key person in your department. It's a red flag in many grad schools if you're interested in a particular subfield and don't have a letter from the faculty member in that field at your college. So, plan ahead. When picking courses, think about building up the contacts that will net you the three strong letters you need for grad school.

4-Star Tip. Be sure to save all your graded work and give it to the professor when it comes time for letters of recommendation. That way, the prof will be able to incorporate specific information about the nature and quality of your work, rather than just writing how nice you are to be around. A more informed—and specific—letter is a better one.

8. Give a great sample. Many graduate schools ask you to provide a writing sample, and the sample can be critical after the first cut in the admissions process. Be sure to submit a strong sample—one that has a topic, methodology, and quality of argumentation and writing that demonstrates your readiness for graduate-level work. Pay special attention to the suggested length; a school that expects a 20-page journal paper will not be happy to receive your 100-page senior thesis. (Conversely, a school that's looking for a journal-article size paper won't be bowled over by your four- to six-page short paper.) If you're not sure what's expected, ask

the undergraduate adviser or a faculty member you trust for guidance on this all-important but often underworked component of your application.

9. Write a killer personal statement. The personal statement you send in should focus on the one or two projects you'd like to pursue once you get into graduate school. Be sure to include evidence that you actually have the intellectual tools and the background to do what you're proposing. Your personal statement is meant to be an intellectual plan, not a general autobiography or your musings about the state of the field or a testimony about how much you love the field—at least if you hope to get into graduate school.

10. Don't romanticize grad school. There's lots of drudge work and many courses to be taken in all aspects of the field you're going to be studying. Don't think, if you're going to grad school in psychology, that every course will be probing the minds of death row inmates or improving your parenting skills. And keep in mind that grad school is a long haul. Several years of your life could be a big bite if you think that economics might be kind of fun so that you can figure out whether the stock market will be hitting 14,000 again in your lifetime. Make sure grad school is really for you—and that you know what it really involves—before you send in that application.