

Is Graduate School Right For You?

Graduate school is a big investment, both financially and personally. Before deciding to pursue an advanced degree, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you have defined career goals?
- Have you completed an internship or other work experience in your chosen field?
- Does having a degree affect your employability in the occupation you are pursuing?
- Have you met all of the prerequisites needed to apply?
- Are you ready for another 2-5 years of school, homework, and deadlines?
- Can you afford the academic and personal expenses of another degree, including potentially deferring a full-time income for another 1-5 years?

If you answered yes to the above questions, you might be ready to continue your education. There are many benefits to gaining a graduate degree, as well as some areas of concern.

Potential Benefits	Potential Areas of Concern
Personal Satisfaction Greater earning power Advance your career Enhance your education Receive recognition Research opportunities Upgrade your education Enjoy travel opportunities Access to advanced equipment and tools Higher potential for future promotion Employer incentives Be part of a chain of knowledge To stand out among colleagues Realization of interest Work on advanced projects	Highly competitive Enables the "professional student" mindset Requires ability to set priorities Relationship strains Stressful Writing a thesis Requires support Might take 2–7 years of your life Extra cost of education Graduating with a large debt No guarantee of higher salary Return on investment might be slow



Understanding Your Wants, Needs, and Values

Considerations:	Reaction:
Regional: Where do you want to go? Are you open to areas outside your comfort zone? How far away is your support system (family/friends)? Do you want to be able to travel on weekends? Big city? Small town? Location of institution? Size of institution?	
Graduate Experience: Are practicum/internship experiences a part of the program? How long is the program? Will you have summer/winter classes? How many credits do you need to graduate? Who are your faculty (adjunct professors, full-time, practitioners, etc.)? What is the focus of the program (administrative, personal, research, theory, etc.)? Is your program based on a cohort model? Can you attend part-time?	
Financial: How will you pay for tuition? Are there opportunities for graduate assistantships at your institution? Will you be able to hold a job during your program? What is the basic financial aid package you would need? Do you have access to loans or savings?	
Partner/Family: What does your partner or family need while you are in graduate school?	
Future Plans: Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years?	
Mentorship: Are there professionals you can see in a mentorship role for you? What have you and your mentor discussed?	

Timeline for Applying to Graduate School

May – August: Define Your Goals and Prep for Tests

- Define your goals for attending graduate school
- Create list of schools you would like to apply to
- Take prep tests for any admission exams
- Look into fellowships, assistantships, and other sources of graduate financial aid
- Take the earliest sitting of your admission exams, so you can retake them if needed

August - October: Gather Applications and Take Your Exams

- Find application materials online or request materials from each school you're considering
- Begin writing your personal statement
- Meet with the people you'll ask to write letters of recommendation

October - January: Write a Personal Statement and Apply for Federal Aid

- Finish writing your personal statement
- Request transcripts
- Apply to your graduate schools (most graduate applications are due between January and March)
- Fill out the FAFSA
- Call your prospective schools to ensure they received all of your application materials

February - May: Weigh Your Options

- Compare offers (you should start to receive admission offers around May).
- Look into alternative loan programs, if your financial aid package does not cover what you need it to.
- **Accept a program's offer!**

Expand the Timeline

By no means is this timeline encompassing of everything you need to do to prepare for graduate school. **You will want to create your own graduate school timeline for each school you might be looking at and put down the application due dates, as well as any other important dates that might affect your application process.** Graduate school timelines are there to help you with your own individual schedule, so make sure that yours is serving you personally and in the best way possible.

How to Write a Personal Statement

Personal statements (also called "application essays" or "statements of purpose") are essays written in response to a question or questions on a graduate or professional school application form. The personal statement is your opportunity to sell yourself in the application process, and may be a general and comprehensive statement or a response to very specific questions. By asking for a personal statement the admissions committee wants to know:

- What interests you about the program?
- What will you contribute to their program in terms of research, seminar discussions, conferences and other collaborative opportunities?
- What makes you a special, unique, or distinctive candidate?
- What are your short-term and long-term goals?

From application to application, requested personal statements vary widely in length, ranging from a couple of paragraphs to a series of essays of a page or so each. Here are some tips for completing your personal statement:

- Answer each question asked and don't use the same statement for each application!
- Demonstrate your experience and make yourself memorable by telling a story
- Be specific with your experiences and your interest for your chosen career
- Grab the reader's attention in your opening paragraph
- Do some research into the school and program and find out what sets it apart from other schools you are applying to
- Be meticulous in writing your statement. Have other people read over it to ensure it is grammatically correct and the structure of the statement flows easily
- Follow the writing style requested (APA, MLA)
- Avoid clichés. Focus on what makes you unique!

Sample Personal Statement

Jacquelyn K. Samuels
UCLA Department of English

When I was younger I was inseparable from the library. I was constantly digesting new books and finding comfort in classic literature. As I look back, I realize the books I was most drawn to involved plots that tangled cultures and sociopolitical landscapes that were mysterious and fascinating to me. As an undergrad I majored in literary studies with an emphasis in world literature, and in order to round out my education, it seems only natural to pursue English and American literature.

Although, I am more familiar with the culture being discussed the sociopolitical landscape of English and American literature is still fascinating and new to me. I am especially interested in nineteenth-century literature, women's literature, Anglo-Saxon poetry, and folklore and folk literature. My personal literary projects have involved some combination of these subjects. I specialized in nineteenth century novels by and about women for the oral section of my comprehensive exams, and the subject of my honors essay, examined the relationship between "high" and folk literature through Toni Morrison's use of classical, biblical, African, and Afro-American folk tradition. I plan to work further on this essay, considering Morrison's other novels and preparing a paper for publication.

In my studies toward a doctoral degree, I hope to examine more closely the relationship between high and folk literature. In my junior year and my private studies of Anglo-Saxon language and literature, I have considered where the division between folklore, folk literature, and high literature lie. Should I attend your school, I would like to resume my studies of Anglo-Saxon poetry, with special attention to the folk elements found within its works.

Writing poetry also figures prominently in my academic and professional goals. I have begun submitting to smaller journals and I am gradually building a working manuscript for a personal collection of poetry. The dominant theme of this collection relies on poems drawn from classical, biblical, and folk traditions, as well as everyday experience, in order to celebrate the process of giving and taking life, whether literal or figurative. My poetry draws from much of what I read, and my academic studies influence my creative process by experimenting with the tools used by authors from the past.

In terms of a career, I see myself teaching literature, writing criticism, and editing or publishing poetry. Doctoral studies would be valuable to me in several ways. First, your teaching assistantship program would provide me with the practical teaching experience I am eager to acquire. Further, earning a Ph.D. in English and American literature would advance my other two career goals by adding to my critical and creative skills working with language. Ultimately, I see the Ph.D. as a professional stepping-stone and a natural end to my formal education; I enjoy studying literature for its own sake and would like to continue my studies on the level demanded by the Ph.D. program.

Letters of Recommendation

Most graduate schools will ask that you provide letters of recommendation emphasizing support of you furthering your education. A letter of recommendation is a written statement supporting your application for a specific internship program, fellowship, or graduate school. It differs from a reference in that it is always written and is addressed to a specific program. For some organizations they may provide you with a form that will include a confidentiality waiver.

How do I ask for a letter of recommendation?

- Prepare your request early – Ask your supporters at least six weeks before the deadline
- Choose appropriate people based on your application and area of study. Some programs will specify whom they want the letters from, and for others you will be able to choose from:
 - Faculty members
 - Former or current supervisors
 - Mentors/advisors
 - Administrators
 - Coaches
 - Contacts from volunteer work
- Call or personally visit your supporters to request their recommendation and discuss what you are hoping to gain from this educational opportunity
- Explain why you have selected them to write a letter of recommendation
- If you are unable to meet with them or call them, send a professional and well thought out e-mail, detailing the program you are applying for, what you hope to gain, and why you are asking for their support
- Make sure to provide your supporters with a current résumé, and the expected timeline for the application process

Follow-Up

- Send a thank you note immediately after your supporters have completed letters of recommendation

Inform your supporters once you have been accepted to your program and decided which program/school to attend. They would love to hear about your accomplishments