Applying to Graduate School

Once you have selected the school to which you want to apply and have researched the program, your next step is to complete the application.

Be sure you know the deadline to apply. Applications are often accepted in late December or early January for the following fall semester, but some schools have a “rolling admission” process or different application cycles, so be sure to get the deadlines and instructions from each school. Once you have these, you may wish to prioritize applications or schedule your work in order to complete the applications on time and with as little stress as possible.

Be sure to prepare all documents required by your school. The following are typical admission materials, but you should check with each graduate program before proceeding:

- Application(s)
- Official transcripts
- Statement of purpose
- Critical writing sample
- Entrance exam scores (e.g., GRE, MCAT, LSAT)
- Letters of recommendation
- Curriculum vitae or resume
- TA/fellowship application
- Application fees

Consider writing to relevant faculty members at your chosen schools. Let them know of your scholarly interests and read their published works. You can ask them questions about the program and their research, but keep it balanced between general inquiry and professional dialogue. The more they can get to know you as an individual, the less your name is just one of many on an applicant list.

Take the appropriate graduate entrance exams well in advance. Be sure you have completed these exams in advance of your application deadline and request your scores be sent to your schools of choice.

Complete and submit the application and all required materials on time. Make sure there’s nothing missing and follow the directions. You can always ask questions directly of the graduate program.

*The Hubbard Center holds a Graduate and Professional School fair every year. Don’t miss it!

Request letters of recommendation from faculty members who know you well enough to discuss your work and potential in detail. Good letters of recommendation are essential to a quality admission application. Graduate admission committees need letters that speak specifically to your accomplishments and potential as a graduate student. Generic statements about you doing well in a class or general reference to your GPA are not helpful.

Begin early and ask for lots of feedback on writing your personal statement. This is a critical piece of your application, so spending time to work on multiple drafts is necessary. Ask peers, faculty or other advisers, including the writing center, to provide you feedback.

Polish a writing sample. If requested, your writing sample should reflect your best work as it relates to what you want to pursue in your graduate program. Work with faculty on revisions and improvements, being ready to turn in a clean copy without edits, comments or grading.

Apply for teaching assistantships and other available fellowship programs. There is usually a separate application for financial support opportunities. Most schools can direct you to other funding possibilities.
There are several components to a successful graduate school application. You should be attentive to each part of the application, ensuring that you answer questions fully and you provide the information desired to maximize your application’s potential.

**Writing Your Personal Statement**

A personal statement is your intellectual narrative about a selection of specific and relevant accomplishments. It provides the admission committee a sense of your priorities and judgment to get to know you more personally. A statement goes beyond your academic abilities to your fit to that particular program and your faculty members’ scholarly interests. For guidance on writing the personal statement, please refer to the Hubbard Center’s *Write Your Personal Statement* handout.

As you contemplate writing the personal statement or statement of purpose for entry into graduate school, it is helpful to consider the context of graduate education. As you write your statement, consider the following points:

- **Every program is different, so what they look for in the statement is different.** It is important to be familiar with the program in explaining your particular fit. It is also critical to follow the prompt and answer what is asked.

- **Make the statement personal.** Why do you want to pursue further study? Why did you pick this particular program? What is special about you?

- **If there is something that stands out, good or bad, the admission committee should understand it.** For example, if there is a gap in your education, if it took longer to complete your bachelor’s degree or if you failed a class, then provide an explanation so you don’t leave the committee wondering what happened.

- **Consider how you add diversity to the program.** This can come from any particular background or experience you have; adding diversity typically helps strengthen a program and can be good to share. But what you share is your personal choice. Also know that, by law, admission committees and faculty cannot ask questions about many personal topics.

- **Avoid being overly formal and overly informal.** The key is for them to like you; this comes from a balance between being professional and respectful but not too formal. This is often the first introduction to prospective faculty and first impressions are important. This is hard to do, which is why it is so important to have multiple readers give you feedback on your writing.

- **Don’t include irrelevant information.** Admission committees are busy so don’t give them more to read than necessary. Include only pertinent facts that strengthen your candidacy and program fit. Focus on your preparations for graduate school, what makes you want to pursue advanced studies and what it is you want to do at the proposed graduate school and down the road.

- **Be sure your spelling and grammar are checked and rechecked.** The quality of writing in your application reflects the care and attention to the work you will do as a graduate student.

*Faculty members in graduate programs take very seriously the participation of their graduate students in their own learning and the success of their graduate students upon completion of the program.*