

# Applying to Graduate School:

Choosing graduate programs

Filling out applications

Getting good letters of recommendation

Writing an effective personal statement



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# Is Graduate School For You?

Graduate school differs from your undergraduate work in that it involves specialized knowledge and concentrated study in a particular area. A graduate program provides you with more focused coursework and research which will prepare you for a profession or for doing advanced research. When you begin looking at and considering graduate education, you will find that there are two categories of graduate degrees – professional (i.e., MBA, MD, and JD) and research (MS and PhD). In addition, there are two levels – master’s and doctoral.

A professional degree at the master’s level, like an MBA or a Master of Engineering, is a degree that provides you with the specific skills to practice a profession. Professional degrees at the doctoral level are the MD for medicine and the JD for law.

A research degree at the MS level can provide you with additional research skills to get a better job than with the BS; however, the most common research degree is the PhD. The PhD provides you with the skills to do research in both industry and academia. To teach at the college level you will need the PhD. The first one or two years of the PhD include coursework and research. At the end of this period, you will be advanced to candidacy and begin doing your original research which leads to the thesis and final oral examinations.

Making the decision to continue on in graduate study is a long-term commitment. People offer many explanations for their own decisions about further schooling. For some, the decision is personal – the challenge, sense of achievement, personal growth, or a love of study and campus life. For others, it is a specific career development; an advanced degree is necessary or will increase qualifications and, therefore, competitiveness in the job market. It is usually a combination of several reasons. It may be worthwhile to examine your own reasons for pursuing graduate study. Knowing why you are going to graduate school will help you get what you want from advanced study. It will help you maintain the motivation and dedication which are so important to success in a graduate program.

The first step in deciding on further education is an honest evaluation of your strengths. While there is no standard or ideal profile for graduate students, some of the qualities important for success are:

- Intelligence
- Initiative
- Persistence
- Motivation
- Ability to develop good work relationships.

Second, you will want to evaluate your career goals. Deciding to go to graduate school is an important point on your career path. Taking an advanced degree may enable you to get a new and better-paying job, to change careers, or to keep up-to-date with advancements in your field. The traditional career choice for PhD holders is academia – both research and teaching. However, there are other opportunities to do research in corporations or government agencies. A PhD is generally a serious commitment to teaching and/or research.

A professional or MS research degree may enhance your career in a specific field. The professional MS degree is less of a commitment than the PhD with regard to time and money, but the PhD may provide you with the greatest opportunities for freedom and flexibility to meet your career goals.

Many students have expressed an interest in pursuing a dual MD/PhD degree. The application process for medical school is the same as the PhD program. If you are interested in applying for an MD or MD/PhD program please contact the Career Development Center to schedule an appointment with the Premed Advisor.

# Choosing a Graduate School

After making the decision to go on to graduate work, the next step will be selecting the graduate school and program best suited to your needs. Talk with your advisor and other faculty for their opinions. In addition, the Career Development Center has many general guides which describe graduate programs (see the Resources section).

There are many criteria that students use to determine the program best suited to their needs. The most important factor in your decision should be how suited the graduate program and the institution are to your needs, your academic and career goals, and your interests.

Other factors such as geographic location and size of the school may affect your decision about which graduate school to attend. A large school may provide you with a wide variety of academic fields and extracurricular activities from which to choose, while a small school may allow you to have more personal attention.

Geographic location becomes important when you have a family to consider or other personal reasons for wanting or not wanting to make a major move.

By all means, do not limit your search to U.S. graduate schools. Studying abroad can be a richly, rewarding experience. A vast pool of highly respected graduate schools is available abroad. Be sure to conduct your search just as you would for domestic graduate school programs. If you are interested in studying abroad, please contact the Fellowships Advising and Study Abroad office.

The decision about which graduate school to attend should not be made lightly. Do some research. Talk to faculty members you know – they are an excellent resource. Ask them where they did their graduate work and ask them about other graduate programs.

When evaluating programs, there are some things you may want to assess: department, faculty, program, facilities, and selectivity.

When looking at a department, evaluate the quality of the academic department itself. While the institution may have an excellent reputation, some departments will be weaker than others. Likewise, a less well-known or lower-rated institution may have an excellent department in your particular area of interest. There are published ratings of graduate departments (see Resources). Use these with an open mind; recognize that the listings can demonstrate a bias toward reputation and establishment.

Each department is made up of individual faculty members. Find out who they are, what their areas of specialization are, and what research interests they are currently pursuing. Good sources of information are college and department catalogs, publications in journals, and university web pages. You may find that some departments have brochures or annual reports which list faculty research interests and publications, and many faculty members have their own web pages. You may also want to consider the ratio of faculty to students and the impact that will have on potential contact with faculty.



When evaluating the program examine the curriculum for breadth and diversity; keep in mind your personal goals and academic needs. Questions to ask yourself include:

- Is the program interdisciplinary?
- What are the philosophy and methods of instruction?
- What is the graduate student culture like in the department? Are there weekly gatherings, seminars, etc.?
- How much will I interact with my advisor and other students?
- What kind of relationships will I have with my advisor and other students?

You may also want to evaluate the facilities at each institution. You can get an idea about the available research facilities from the school catalog or from a visit to the campus. Ask about libraries, laboratories, research facilities, and cooperative arrangements with other research, educational, and professional organizations.

Finally, you may want to determine how selective the program is. What is the ratio of applications to acceptances? Highly selective schools will accept highly qualified candidates. Be honest about your chances of getting in. Academic achievement is determined by two things: where you took your BS and your own efforts toward that degree.

Graduate school and the challenge of applying can sometimes be an emotional roller coaster. Students often feel pressured by the amount of time involved in completing the application. You may feel that you cannot rise to the occasion, meet all of the deadlines or gather all of the documents needed to complete the process. However, do not succumb to the pressures of the process.



No doubt, graduate school is a competitive process. Schools are reviewing applications and letters of recommendation with an eye towards finding the best candidates for their school. To ensure that your application is among those considered, be sure to complete the application in its entirety and submit all required materials on time.

Some students are concerned that their GPA score will eliminate their chances of being considered. Although GPA scores may be important, most schools take many other variables into consideration when selecting a candidate. Many students have been selected for graduate school with average GPA scores.

You may also consider taking a hiatus before going on to graduate school. A hiatus will give you an opportunity to do a more thorough search for a program and school that is most suitable to your needs and plans for the future and can serve as a much needed break after undergraduate school.

# Financing Your Graduate Education

One of the most common questions asked by many graduate school applicants is “How do I pay for graduate school?” Basically, there are three types of financial aid available: fellowships, assistantships, and loans.

## Fellowships

Fellowships for graduate education generally are based on academic merit. They provide a tuition and living expense stipend, and are designed to bring the most qualified students into graduate programs. Fellowships fall into two categories: portable and institutional. Portable fellowships are offered by a sponsor for graduate study at an institution of the applicant’s choice. Institutional fellowships are offered by a school or one of its departments for study there. These in-house fellowships can be awarded by the department or, in some cases, by a centralized fellowships office.

For more information about fellowships, contact the Fellowships Advising and Study Abroad Office at extension 2150.

## Assistantships

Assistantships generally fall into two categories: research (RA) and teaching (TA). A TA may be involved in leading discussion sessions, supervising lab work, grading assignments, or meeting with students. RA’s are employed in labs helping faculty with research projects. With an RA or TA, you will generally have a reduced or waived tuition and some stipend for living expenses. RA’s and TA’s are awarded by the school, and application is made at the same time as your application to graduate school. Assistantships and fellowships may be available for a master’s degree, but are limited at that level.

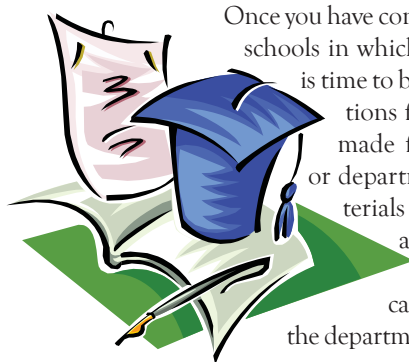
## Loans

Loans can be an important source of funding. Loans can be taken out from any lending institution; however, there are federal loans with low interest rates that are designed specifically for students. The Perkins Student Loan and the Stafford Loan are both need-based. Academic institutions will certify that you fall within federal limitations on income and assets based on current federal criteria. Generally, all graduate students are considered to be financially independent, so a parental contribution is not expected.

Timing is of the essence when applying for graduate funding. Typically, you will apply in one year for support during the following year. The majority of application deadlines fall between October and April, so it would be wise to begin gathering information and submitting applications at the beginning of your senior year.



# The Application Process



Once you have compiled a list of graduate schools in which you are interested, it is time to begin applying. Applications for graduate school are made for a specific program or department. Application materials may be received from a central office, but the evaluation of you as a candidate is made by both the department and the institution.

You may want to apply to several different departments that have programs which suit your needs. Doing this gives you the greatest opportunity for acceptance. Be sure to apply to some programs at prestigious universities as well as those programs that can serve as insurance (or those where you feel certain you will be accepted).

The application process can take a lot of time, energy, and money (depending on how many programs to which you apply). Application fees may range from \$40 - \$100. You may want to look into application fee waiver programs. These programs are available to applicants who show significant financial need.

Find out the application deadlines for each school in which you are interested. Deadlines can vary dramatically. Highly selective schools may have deadlines as early as December of your senior year while the latest deadlines may be April or May of your senior year. Medical school deadlines can be as early as August preceding your senior year. By then, the schools will want to have a completed application file for you which consists of the application, the statement of purpose, letters of recommendation, transcripts, and standardized test scores.

## The Application Form

Application forms for many schools may be accessed online. In most cases, you will also have the option to download and print the form for completion at a later time. It is important that you provide complete and accurate information when completing the application form. When applying online, the computer will give you a prompt if you have incomplete information.

If you decide to submit a paper form, be sure to complete the form accurately and neatly. Paper forms should be typed, if possible. Whether completing the online or paper form, be sure to carefully read the instructions prior to completing the form and check carefully for typos, spelling, or grammatical errors. Carefully check the school's website to determine if additional forms are required to be submitted with the application form. If additional forms are needed, they will also be available on the website and may be completed online or downloaded.

You may also have the option to request that a printed version of the application packet be mailed to you. When requesting an application packet, be sure to specify the program to which you are applying in order to ensure the receipt of all the necessary forms. Remember that some schools have an early decision program and it is to your advantage to apply early to those schools.

## Statement of Purpose

Writing the statement of purpose is often the most time-consuming and difficult part of applying to graduate school. It is a significant part of your application for a number of reasons. First, it provides the faculty with an important impression of you as an individual. Second, it is a way to measure your writing ability. Thus, it pays to be extremely thorough when checking for spelling and grammatical errors. Finally, the statement of purpose can be used to determine your enthusiasm for the field, your maturity, and your creativity.

A good first step, even when you are simply considering graduate school, is to write a general statement of purpose. This will help you clarify your goals. A general guide is to end up with a document that is no more than 2 to 2.5 double-spaced pages. This should be adequate for any application. There are two types of statements: (1) the general, more comprehensive statement which allows you the most flexibility – you determine what you want to say, and (2) a statement that is in response to more specific questions which provides you with more direction.

When writing the general statement you should use a relaxed, conversational style rather than a formal, stilted style. A general statement should clearly present to the committee how and why you became interested in a particular area of study. It should also provide them with a pattern of growth and interest over a period of time. Try to make your statement interesting and dynamic. Be articulate. Some topics or questions you may want to consider when writing your general statement are:

1. Why are you applying? In what area of study do you want to specialize? What are your research interests?
2. What are your career goals (both short- and long-term)?
3. What makes you a special and unique applicant? What did you study in your undergraduate years? What special preparation did you receive?
4. What about your extracurricular activities? Talk about your accomplishments and responsibilities. What are your strengths and weaknesses?

5. What are some of the problems you have had and how did you resolve them? Make any explanations of problems positive and always articulate resolution of the problems. If you have any challenging or special experiences, describe them. These are the things that make you stand out and stay in the minds of the admissions committees.
6. What do you know about the field? How did you get your information?
7. Do you have any work experiences that have contributed to your growth? Describe them.
8. What skills do you have that will help you succeed?

Here are some tips from the book *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement* (copies are available for use in the Career Development Center library).

1. Find an angle.
2. Concentrate on the opening paragraph and grab the reader's attention.
3. Tell what you know. Detail your interests and experiences in the field. Be specific. Use professional jargon to convey this information. Do research if you don't have enough information. Remember, what you choose to say reflects who you are.
4. Review your life carefully – include facts that are extremely relevant to your career choice.
5. Be selective. Do not talk about high school accomplishments or experiences, religion, politics, or personal views.

## Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation can make the difference between acceptance and rejection. Often an admissions committee will use them to make a decision between two applicants. Good letters should describe your positive qualities that would make you a successful graduate student and ultimately a successful professional. Letters should include information on:

- Your character
- Coursework in which you did well
- Research experience
- Your abilities as a team player
- Whether you are a self-starter
- Your communication skills

Many of you will ask: “Whom do I ask to write a letter of recommendation?” Obviously it is more desirable to have letters from the most significant person you can find – someone of the caliber of Richard Feynman would be good! Unfortunately, not all of us know someone like that well enough to enable them to write a strong letter for us. In that case, it is best to have a letter that is well-informed and enthusiastic. It should specifically and positively describe you to the admissions committee. A weak letter from a well-known name could actually have the opposite effect.

When asking for a letter of recommendation from a faculty member, you may want to develop a “cheat sheet” which will help the professor to remember who you are, and thus write a better letter. The cheat sheet could include the following information:

- Your relationship with the recommender. What did you do that he or she should remember?
- Your statement of purpose.
- Your qualities. Be specific.
- Grades – both overall GPA and GPA in your major.
- Strong and weak areas. Again, whenever you talk about problems, always indicate how the problem was resolved.
- Honors and awards. Professional recognition in your field.

- Classes that you have taken, especially under the professor.
- Other faculty and staff who have known you and your work.
- Other information which would help them write a good letter.

Begin early. Ask your recommenders at the beginning of your senior year or earlier. Discuss with them why you are going to graduate school and to which programs you are applying. Listen to them. If you sense reticence, if you hear time constraints, or if they don’t feel they have known you long enough or well enough – back off. A weak or unenthusiastic letter can be detrimental to your application.



If you apply for admission online, many schools will require that you submit the names, titles, addresses, institution or business names, and email addresses of your recommenders as part of the application process. Your recommenders will receive instructions from the school on how to submit their letters of recommendation electronically.

After your recommenders commit to writing a recommendation for you, don't be passive about your letters. Keep checking back with them until it happens. When it does, be sure to write a thank-you note. Your recommenders may also be interested in knowing where you finally decide to go to graduate school – after all, they had a hand in the process of getting you there.

## Recommendations Checklist

1. Try to develop relationships with potential recommenders long before you approach them to write a letter.
2. Determine who can be your best advocate.
3. Writing letters of recommendation is not easy. Discuss with your recommenders what they will say. If you would like them to address a particular point, ask them if they can do that.
4. Give recommenders a cheat sheet of information about you.
5. Keep recommenders up-to-date on your accomplishments.
6. The best references are from those people who know you well and can write positive, strong letters about you. However, do not ask friends, relatives, or influential people who don't know you well.
7. Graduate schools seem to prefer and give more weight to confidential letters of recommendation, thus provide each recommender with stamped, addressed envelopes to each school.
8. If the school require the letter of recommendation to be submitted online, make your recommender aware of the requirement.

## Transcripts

It is your responsibility to have an official copy of all your college transcripts sent to each school to which you are applying. For those of you who transferred to Caltech from another school, you will have to contact the other school to get complete transcripts. Most requests must be in writing – be sure to allow enough time to do this. At Caltech, requests for official transcripts should be directed to the Registrar's Office at least five days before you need it mailed. There is a charge for each official transcript requested.

## Tests

By the end of your junior year, you should have determined whether you have to take any of the standardized tests such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT), the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT), or the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT). Each school will tell you which tests may be required. These tests are offered on a regular schedule and results are not usually available until six weeks after the test is administered. The Career Development Center has information bulletins for some of the tests mentioned above. You can also borrow or buy study guides that will help you become familiar with the test formats, and several of the testing organizations have web sites with sample questions and test-taking tips (see Resources).

## Application Checklist

1. Customize the essay to each school.
2. Don't exaggerate. Admit your weaknesses but show how you resolved them.
3. Avoid pretentious adjectives and resume-like lists.
4. Detail specific experiences.
5. Don't quote from the school's catalog.
6. Proofread, proofread, proofread – for content, grammar, and spelling.
7. Have someone else proofread.
8. Limit your statement to 2 to 2.5 pages.
9. Submit your application early.
10. Use the correct envelope for each application.

## The Notification Process

You may receive replies as early as March or April, or as late as June. In some cases, you may be placed on a waiting list from which you may be selected as vacancies occur. These could be filled as late as immediately prior to the beginning of a new term.

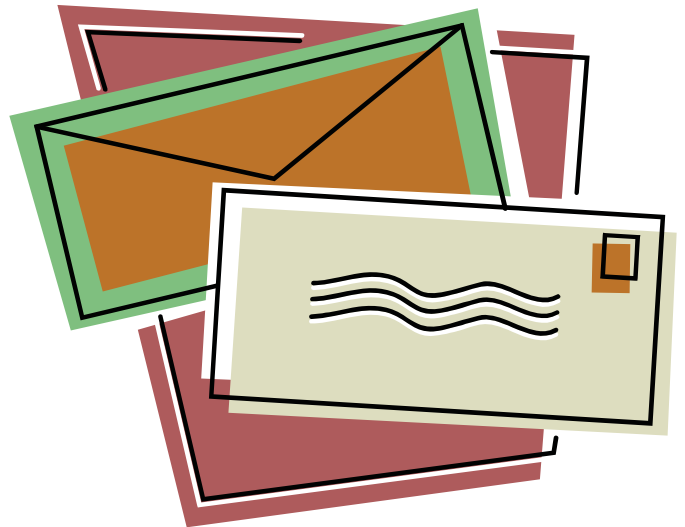
Before you begin receiving acceptances and rejections, rank the schools according to your preferences. As soon as you receive two offers, politely decline the less attractive one. Continue this process until you make your final choice. This may make it difficult if you have heard from School #2 but are still awaiting a response from School #1.

Before being pressured into sending a fee to a second-choice program, try to speed up the first-choice school with a polite inquiry about the status of your application. If they intend to notify applicants shortly, try to stall the other school. If there will be considerable time between the deadline for one school and the notification date of another, you may have to decide if you're willing to pay for a guaranteed spot you may not use.

## The Wait List

Being on a school's "wait list" or "holding list" is similar to being at the end of a long line for tickets to a popular event. Your chances of getting in depend on how many are ahead of you. Here are some proactive things you can do if you end up on a wait list:

- Apply to more schools.
- Take an intermediate degree, especially if you're switching your area of concentration.
- Take additional classes and reading in your major field of study.
- Attend summer school at your target institution.



# Things You Should Know About a Graduate School

## Ask the Graduate Department:

- What are the academic regulations/ requirements for graduating?
- What percentage of the students pass the qualifying exams the first time? How many chances are there?
- Are a large percentage of the students graduating with only a terminal master's degree? Why?
- What is the average time to obtain a PhD?
- When (and how) do you choose your advisor? How difficult is it to switch advisors after, say, a year?
- Who selects the dissertation committee?
- Is the support offered as a teaching or a research assistantship? How much is the stipend?
- How many working hours per week are expected for a TA or RA?
- Are you guaranteed support for the entire time, or is it on a year-by-year basis? If it is year-by-year, what would disqualify you?
- Is there a teaching requirement? How are teaching assignments made (lottery or choice)?
- What sort of computing facilities do they have?
- What are their provisions for housing, health insurance, day care, etc.?

## Ask current students:

- Do the different research groups interact? Is there any collaboration within the department or across departments?
- What is the actual time commitment for a TA/RA? Is the TA/RA stipend enough to live on in that area? Do the students have enough time for a social life? Is the type of social life you desire available?
- What are the environs like? Do you like them?
- Do graduate students have access to athletic and other university facilities?
- Is there a graduate student organization?
- Are the provisions for housing, health insurance, etc., adequate?

## Talk to current graduate students before you choose an advisor to learn:

- Do most of the students like working with this research advisor?
- What is the average time for a PhD in his/her lab?
- How much monetary support is there for research?
- Is the prospective advisor sensitive to issues of women, minorities, and international students?
- How independent is the research of the students?
- Do the students work together (with other students and/or the advisor)?
- Is the advisor personally involved in the research? How frequently is the advisor available?
- Do the students present their work at national conferences? Who pays for attending such conferences?
- Does the advisor take an active role in placing his/her students? Do the students go into industry or academia?
- How quickly does the advisor publish completed work?

## Specific issues for women:

- It has been said: “Do not go to a place where there are no women faculty.”
- Talk to women graduate students in the department!!
- Do they have women’s support groups? What do they do? Do they have one specific to your field?
- Is there a women’s center?

## Helpful hints to new graduate students:

- Choose a research area that you are interested in (as opposed to picking an advisor because s/he is a nice person). However, still choose an advisor with whom you get along.
- Choose an advisor with broad research interests.
- Your advisor should be willing to help you get through in a timely manner; i.e., assist you with meeting the deadlines for preliminary exams, proposal preparation, and dissertation.
- Your advisor should give you some research freedom. Do not let yourself be a laboratory technician for five years.
- Attend research seminars offered at your university and annual meetings of professional organizations.
- If possible, participate in drafting grant proposals so you will know how to write successful ones.
- Try to cultivate your “third recommender.” Most post-doc positions will require three letters of recommendation.
- Make an effort to present your work at department and professional meetings.



# Resources

## Publications

- Chemical Sciences Graduate School Finder*, American Chemical Society.
- Financing Graduate School* by Patricia McWade, Peterson's Guides.
- Graduate Admissions Essays – What Works / What Doesn't and Why* by Donald Asher, Ten Speed Press.
- How to Get into the Right Business School* by James L. Strachan, VGM Career Horizons.
- How to Get into the Right Law School* by Paul Lermack, VGM Career Horizons.
- How to Write a Winning Personal Statement* by Richard J. Stelzer, Peterson's Guides, Inc.
- Inside the Law Schools* by S. F. Goldfarb, Penguin Books USA.
- Looking at Law School* by Stephen Gillers, ed., Penguin Books.
- On Being a Scientist*, National Academy Press.
- Peterson's Graduate and Professional Programs* by Casey Hegener, Peterson's Guides.
- Peterson's Grants for Graduate Study & Postdoctoral Study*, Peterson's Guides.
- The Directory of MBAs* by Edward More O'Ferrall.
- The Gourman Report: A Rating of Graduate and Professional Programs* by Dr. Jack Gourman, National Education Standards.
- The Grants Register: The Complete Guide to Postgraduate Funding Worldwide*, St. Martin's Press.
- The Princeton Review: Cracking the LSAT* by Adam Robinson, Random House.
- The Princeton Review: The Best Law Schools* by Ian Van Tuyl, Random House.
- The Woman's Guide to Navigating the Ph.D. in Engineering and Science* by Barbara B. Lazarus, Lisa M. Ritter and Susan A. Ambrose, Wiley-IEEE Press.

## Web Sites — General Information

- Kaplan On-line: information on standardized and computer adaptive testing, grants, fellowships, application process, etc.  
<http://www.kaplan.com/>
- Peterson's Education Center  
<http://www.petersons.com>
- Princeton Review: information on standardized testing, admission to medical, law, and business school, etc.  
<http://www.princetonreview.com/grad>
- U.S. News & World Report: Graduate and Professional School Rankings  
<http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/grad>
- Graduate School Program Information, search by subject area  
<http://www.gradschools.com>

## Web Sites — Applying to Graduate and Professional Schools

Educational Testing Service: general information about GRE, GMAT, & LSAT

<http://ets.org>

Graduate Record Exam

<http://www.gre.org>

Preparing for Graduate School Admissions Essays (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Writing Center)

<http://www.rpi.edu/dept/llc/writecenter/web/gradapp.html>

Faculty Advice for Undergraduates Considering Graduate School (by Phil Agre)

<http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/page/grad-school.html>

## Web Sites — Financial Aid

FinAid! The SmartStudent Guide to Financial Aid

<http://www.finaid.org>

Graduate Fellowship Database (University of Notre Dame)

<http://www.grad.nd.edu/gfd>

Graduate School Fellowship Database (Cornell University)

<http://www.gradschool.cornell.edu/index.php?p=132>

## Web Sites — Business, Law, and Medical School

MBA Explorer

<http://www.mbaexplorer.com/>

American Bar Association Approved Law Schools

<http://www.abanet.org/legaled/approvedlawschools/approved.html>

Law School Admission Council Page (LSAT information)

<http://www.lsac.org>

Pre-Law Student Web Resources (USC)

<http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/cas/Pre-Law/new/links.html>

MCAT

<http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/start.htm>

Association of American Medical Colleges

<http://www.aamc.org>

# Timetable for Applying to Graduate School

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Spring of Junior Year  
or Summer Months

Talk to faculty advisors and career counselors  
Review college websites  
Request catalogs or download pertinent information  
from website  
Find out about tests  
Plan ahead for costs: application and test fees  
Consider taking standardized tests early  
Write statement of purpose

September

Request application forms  
Register for standardized tests  
Start asking professors for letters of  
recommendation

October

Take standardized tests  
Continue gathering information on schools

November

Order transcripts  
Prepare financial aid forms

December

Last chance for standardized tests  
Submit applications  
Check on transcripts and letters of recommendation  
Visit schools

January

Check with schools to make sure they have received  
all materials

February / April

File IRS forms if necessary for financial aid  
Letters of acceptance/rejection usually sent by April

Note: Deadlines will vary for each school and from year to year. Be sure to verify all deadlines well in advance.

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