Thinking about Graduate School? Here’s how to decide if Grad school is the right fit for you.

OVERVIEW OF GRADUATE & PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS

Higher than a bachelor’s degree, an advanced or graduate degree is generally a master’s or doctorate degree. Usually a graduate school degree is research based, especially PhD programs. A professional degree centers on curriculum and experiences that lead to better preparation for a career. An advanced degree is required for certain professions such as allopathic (MD) and osteopathic (DO) doctors and attorneys (JD), which in the US are required doctoral degrees for the respective professions. Popular professional master’s degrees including the MBA (business), MSN (nursing), and MS in Engineering. There are innumerable academic master’s and doctoral degrees covering at least as many areas as undergraduate degrees. Typically with a full-time schedule, a master’s degree will take one or two years to complete and a doctorate degree will take three to five years (usually more with a research and a dissertation; seven years would not be unusual for completion of an academic PhD). Gradschools.com is a good place to start a search of thousands of graduate degree options.

DECIDING TO GO TO GRADUATE OR PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL

Ideal reasons include:
• A clear sense of the desired career with an advanced degree helpful, if not necessary, for entry or advancement
• A love for scholarly pursuit, especially when the goal is a research based doctorate degree; expect immersion in several years of studying and doing research in a particular academic discipline
• Making a career change that has little or no connection to your undergraduate major
• Working intentionally toward a goal versus postponing career decisions avoiding a job search.

If you’re unsure, answering questions like these can help in evaluating your decision to pursue an advanced degree:
• What do I want to accomplish in my lifetime?
• What are my long-term and short-term professional goals?
• Is graduate school necessary for me to achieve these goals?
• Am I simply postponing my career planning and decision making?
• Will the amount of time and money spent on a program ultimately translate into greater career mobility and financial possibilities?
• Am I willing to meet the extensive research, course work and major paper demands of another academic program?
• Would continuing education alternatives, such as University Extension, vocational school, community college, or professional seminars and workshops assist in achieving my goals?

APPLYING TO GRADUATE OR PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL

Keep in mind that thorough research and information gathering for your area of interest is critical. The checklist and timeline that follow provide general information and guidelines. Although successful applicants prepare and apply for advanced degrees in diverse ways and within varying timeframes, it is best to begin as early as possible to build a strong academic foundation, a competitive undergraduate GPA, and positive, significant working and academic relationships. You will need a competitive GPA and usually two to three letters of recommendation to successfully apply to graduate and professional degree programs. Many programs require a standardized exam such as the MCAT, GMAT, LSAT or GRE. You may see required GPAs listed at 3.0; however, most competitive GPAs are higher especially for doctorate degree programs and highly ranked universities. Some prep programs in medicine and law have competitive GPAs in the 3.25 to 3.5 range.

Graduate & Professional School Preparation Checklist

The following are general recommendations of activities to engage in throughout your time at UCLA in order to gain exposure to career options and develop relevant skills and experiences to make yourself competitive for admissions. These are not mandatory in order to be admitted and a candidate may be successful without completing a number of these steps.

- Attend relevant events at the Career Center including:
  - JumpStart Series
  - Admit UCLA: Graduate & Professional School Fair
  - Health School Fair & Conference
  - Information Sessions by Graduate and Professional Schools
  - Workshops on topics including Personal Statements, Interview Preparation, Resume Writing, and more
- Maintain a strong GPA. GPA typically weights more heavily in
admissions decisions than major, so declare a major in which you can perform well.

- Meet with an academic advisor in your major or College counseling unit (College Academic Counseling, Academic Advancement Program, Athletics, or Honors Program) to discuss course planning, major selection and degree requirements.

- Schedule a Graduate or Pre-Professional School Advising appointment at the Career Center to discuss any non-academic aspect of preparing for graduate or professional school including: exploring your career interests and options; application process and timeline; personal statement critique; guidance on asking for letters of recommendation; preparing for the interview; searching and applying for research, internships, and other experiential opportunities; and more.

- Get involved in student organizations or service projects through the Community Programs Office (CPO). Consider joining groups that are relevant to your interests and offer opportunities to serve the community and/or develop your leadership skills. After a year in an organization, consider moving into a leadership role or initiating your own student organization or service project.

- Gain internship, work, or volunteer experience relevant to your career goals. Seek and apply to opportunities in Handshake.

- Visit the Center for Community Learning for information on service learning courses, community-based research, internships for academic credit, the Civic Engagement Minor, and AmeriCorps scholarship programs.

- Get involved in research at UCLA or other campuses. See the Undergraduate Research Center-Sciences or Undergraduate Research Center-Humanities, Arts & Social Science for information about options, programs, and research scholarships.

- Apply for special summer pre-professional or research programs.

- Develop relationships with faculty and supervisors in order to be able to obtain strong letters of recommendation. How? Visit office hours, try to take multiple courses with the same faculty member if possible, ask about opportunities to support their research or help them in the classroom.

- Keep a journal of your meaningful experiences, accomplishments, challenges, and realizations to draw from for your application essays and interviews.

Additional Law-School specific items:

- Consider applying for the UCLA Law Fellows Program or another appropriate law school prep program.

- Attend the Career Center’s Law JumpStart program to meet admissions officers and attorneys.

Additional Health or Medical School specific items:

- Visit prehealth.ucla.edu

**APPLICATION TIMELINE**

The following are general recommendations to use as a guide when planning for graduate or professional school. Most deadlines for Fall admission are between December and March of your senior year if you do not plan to take a gap year. Some schools follow a different schedule, so be sure to check with your prospective programs for specific deadlines and adhere to them carefully.

**The Year Before Applying**

- Register and study for the entrance exam (MCAT, LSAT, GMAT, GRE, etc.).
  - Consider taking a free practice exam early on in order to understand your baseline and where you need to place most of your studying efforts.
  - Give yourself about three months to study. Try to take the exam several months prior to the application deadline so you have time to re-take the exam if needed.

- Research your graduate programs of choice.
  - Familiarize yourself with deadlines and requirements, as they vary by program.
  - Create a list of schools with their deadlines, requirements, and essay prompts.

- Request letters of recommendation.
  - Provide recommendation letter writers with a copy of your resume, transcript, and a summary of aspects of your academic/professional/personal life accomplishments for consideration.
  - Store your letters confidentially with Interfolio Dossier or a similar service until you are ready to apply.

- Begin developing your personal statement at least three months before applying to ensure you have sufficient time to gain various perspectives and go through multiple revisions.

- Obtain official transcripts from all post-secondary institutions you have attended.

- Complete the central application for professions who accept one (medical school and most health professions, law school, and others).

- Practice your interview skills utilizing InterviewStream, a mock interview at the Career Center, or a mock interview with any trusted friend, mentor, or relative.

- Complete the FAFSA.

**Additional Law School specific items:**

- Attend a Law School Forum to meet law school recruiters face-to-face.

- Pay for the Credential Assembly Service (CAS) long before your first law school application deadline.

- Register with the Candidate Referral Service (CRS) so law schools can recruit you.
View your Academic Summary Report in your LSAC.org account once all US/Canadian undergraduate transcripts have been summarized to ensure completion and accuracy.

**AFTER SUBMITTING YOUR APPLICATION**

- Maintain a strong GPA.
- Continue to stay involved in relevant activities and positions.
- Complete secondary/supplemental applications if applicable (this is the case if you initially applied to multiple programs through a central application service, most commonly for medical school, other health schools, and law school).
- Continue to practice and prepare for interviews.
- Meet with college and major advisors to review graduation requirements.

**WRITING YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT**

Graduate programs may ask you to submit a Personal Statement, a Statement of Purpose, or both. Both documents are opportunities to set yourself apart and demonstrate what makes you unique from other applicants who may have similar grades, scores, and extracurricular experiences.

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<th>Personal Statement</th>
<th>Statement of Purpose</th>
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<td>Storytelling of experiences related to who you are &amp; how they shaped your interest in the field.</td>
<td>Focuses on your reasons for applying; include professional &amp; intellectual &amp; research interests and the expertise you have gained</td>
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<td>Tell a Story: For personal statements, engage the reader, use a writing style that is fresh and active. Don’t be afraid to use dialogue and descriptive language. Back up statements with examples and details.</td>
<td>Show That You Know Something: The main section explains what you know and who you are. Show knowledge of your field (e.g., a specific research focus) or your profession. Show how you will impact the field, or what has impacted you in the pursuit of your field.</td>
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<td>Have an Angle: Even if your life has been less than dramatic, you still have a story to tell. The best approach to the “angle” is to find a THEME that can unify all your paragraphs.</td>
<td>Focus on Your Specific Research or Professional Interests Within a Particular Field: Detail how your academic and professional experiences have developed those research or professional interests and prepared you to pursue them at a higher academic level. Include courses, experts whose work you admire or aligns with your interests, and factors such as internship opportunities or opportunities provided by the school’s location</td>
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<td>Pay Special Attention to Your “Lead”: In the first paragraph, you will either grab attention or you will lose it. Use the lead to set the tone and direction for the statement. Note: the lead can, but does not have to be an attention grabbing story. The goal of the lead is for the readers to know who you are and what your goal is by the end of the first paragraph.</td>
<td>Your Research Interests &amp; the Program: Explain how your research interests can be pursued at this particular institution in this particular program.</td>
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*Adapted from the UCLA Undergraduate Writing Center’s “Writing Personal Statements.”*
TIPS FOR THE WRITING PROCESS:

- Remember that the personal statement should be personal. Use this opportunity to stand out from the crowd. Who are you? How is your story different from others?
- Avoid repeating information they already know from your application or resume.
- Start several months before the application is due so you have time to write multiple drafts.
- Have multiple people read it and offer their feedback. Since there is no objective “right” or “wrong” way to write a statement, it will beneficial to hear the perspectives of various people.

ASKING FOR LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Before You Ask
- Make sure to have all the proper forms required for the school, program, or award.
- Draft a list of your accomplishments, achievements or personal characteristics that you would like the letter writer to address.
- Update and revise your resume, as it pertains to the current goal.
- Draft a personal statement or brief explanation of why you are applying to this program, school, award, internship, etc.

Who Should You Ask?
Professors who have taught you, supervisors, advisors who know you very well, person in the profession whom you have shadowed or with whom you’ve worked.

Letters of recommendation should not be written by relatives, friends, roommates, or anyone who does not know you well enough to write a strong and personalized letter.

How to Ask
- Send an e-mail, follow up with a phone call
- Go to office hours or schedule an appointment
- Ask if there is anything the letter writer would like you to bring (resume, copy of paper, list of achievements, personal statement, etc.)

What to Bring
- Your letter to the author, explaining what the letter is for and thanking them for their time
- Copy of targeted resume
- List of accomplishments, skills or personal characteristics you’d like the author to address
- Confidentiality Waiver
- Additional forms required (if any)

If you are not using an electronic filing service and are requesting the author to mail the letters directly to the schools, provide stamped, addressed envelopes.

When to Ask
- At least 3-6 weeks before the deadline, but earlier is better (even months early)
- Let them know what the deadline is and exactly where the letter should be sent.
- Try to avoid high traffic times for requesting letters (late Fall Quarter and late Spring Quarter) or times when pros/staff may be leaving for summer or winter breaks.
- START EARLY – Make it a point to start building relationships with professors, supervisors, mentors and professionals as early as possible.

Follow-Up
- If you have not heard from the letter writer, send a friendly reminder one week prior to the deadline (e-mail or phone call).
- Send a thank you letter after they have submitted the letter (or as part of your gentle reminder)
- Inform the writer of the outcome of your application, once complete.