Grad School 101: Everything You Need to Know

Office of Career Strategy
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Overview: Ask the Right Questions

I. Why grad school?
II. How do I fund grad school?
III. How to identify programs?
IV. How to identify and connect with potential advisors?
V. What do I need for an application?
VI. What does the timeline look like?
VII. I’ve been accepted, now what?
I. Why Grad School?*

• Grad school is a process. Strategize!

• 3 steps:
  • Clarify career goals
    • Can a grad degree help?
    • Financial goals
    • Time off: pros/cons?*
  • Consider why *not* to go
    • Job market anxieties
    • Familiarity with school
    • External pressures
  • Master’s vs PhD?
Examples of Grad Degrees

• Master’s degrees
  • Research master’s (thesis)
  • Terminal master’s (applied)

• Doctoral degrees
  • Ph.D.: original research, historically an academic track
  • Professional doctorate: combination of applied research and practice

• Key point: What do you want to do?
II. How Do I Fund Grad School?

• Always ask about funding!
  • Ph.D. vs. M.A.: duration and funding

• 9 month vs 12 months? For how long?
  • Private vs public
  • Leases and living expenses
  • Consider how far the money will get you in that particular city/town

• Where does the money come from?
  • Research/teaching and other distribution requirements?
    • Additional opportunities, such as campus jobs
    • Time commitment?

• How are taxes accounted for?
II. Funding “Insider” Knowledge

• Know what’s covered. Out of pocket expenses?
  • Tuition and fees
  • Books and research materials
  • Healthcare costs
  • Relocation expenses

• Personal circumstances: family, pets, car/parking, food, childcare, relocating with a partner, etc.?

• Funding the MA?
II. External Fellowships

- Fellowships in your field
  - e.g. NSF GRFP, Hertz, Ford, Soros
- Diversity fellowships/scholarships
- Location-specific fellowships
  - e.g. Rhodes Scholarship, Knight-Hennessey, Schwarzman
- Often overlap in necessary application requirements, sometimes can apply at same time as applying for school
- Fellowships Office is a great resource!
III. How to Identify Programs?

- Research vs applied programs
  - Applied programs: you may have other criteria

- Research questions to ask:
  - Who’s publishing?
  - What are they saying?
  - Are they in a new, exciting area of research?

- Who to ask?
  - US News & World Report may be a good place to start, but should not be the only place
  - Faculty, deans, DUS, TFs, PIs, alumni
  - Explore websites: If not updated, ask DGS!
III. How to Identify Programs?*

• You’ve scoped out the field, now start critically evaluating the programs

• Some personal considerations:
  • Departmental reputation
  • Research specialties
  • Degree requirements
  • Time to degrees
  • Job placement after graduation
  • Community & inclusion
  • Location & affordability
IV. How to Identify Potential Advisors?

• Advising and mentoring are not always synonymous
  • Advising as more content-based
  • Mentoring can be more holistic

• Both are relationships & processes
  • Subject to change over time
  • Multiple mentors for multiple purposes

• Know where they are in their career
  • tenured vs tenure track

• Academic components:
  • Topic, approach, region, time period, etc.

• Professional strengths:
  • Research, pedagogy, letters/connections

• Personalities and human traits:
  • Race, gender, age, etc.
IV. Identifying Advisors in STEM

• Often one-on-one advising
• Connect with faculty in 1-2 labs/program via email
  • Send CV/Resume and transcript (unofficial or official)
  • Are they accepting students?
  • Bonus if you can tell them you are applying for NSF!
  • If possible, set up a time to Skype/call
• Include names of professors that interest you in your personal statement
• Consider options for financing that, such as the campus diversity office if you’re a woman or an underrepresented minority in a STEM field
IV. Identifying Advisors in the Humanities

• Often (but not always!) one-on-one advising
• Identify prospective programs
  • Should have at least 1 potential advisor (ideally tenured)
  • Have a back-up advisor
  • Identify another person or two who could shape your work
• Reach out to those faculty
  • Briefly introduce yourself, interests, and research questions (if applicable)
  • What kinds of approaches do they value? Advising styles?
    • What do their grad students say?
  • Are they accepting students?
  • Funding? (may or may not know: website/DGS often better informed)
• Approach this process in conjunction with the personal statement
IV. Identifying Advisors in the Social Sciences

• Programs generally assign provisional advisors
• May be poor form to reach out
  • Ask faculty in your discipline about the protocol
• Identify clusters more than individuals
• At most, send a brief intro email to potential faculty
  • Are they accepting students?
  • Funding? (especially for lab-based social sciences)
IV. How To Identify Potential Advisors?*

• Selection stage depends on discipline
  • Know departmental policies on formally declaring an advisor
  • General patterns: humanities, social sciences, STEM
  • At most institutions, you can change your committee up until your defense

• Advising models (at least on paper)
  • Individual
  • Co-advising
  • Collective
IV. How Do I Contact Faculty?

- **Purpose:** Ascertain that you and the program are mutually compatible
  - Contact multiple faculty/program

- **Update your CV**
  - Current faculty are your best source of advice

- **Write a brief, specific, professional inquiry email**
  - Introduce yourself (academic background)
  - Ask clear questions
  - Suggest multiple meeting times: be flexible
  - Proofread, no emojis
  - Send logistical questions to departmental admin, not faculty

- **Academic tone:**
  - Play to your strengths: write with confidence as a professional
  - Discuss research experience and next steps as you currently envision them
  - Demonstrate that you’re a serious candidate who has done their homework

- **Treat every faculty interaction as a program interview**

- **Be patient:**
  - Consider follow-ups if you don’t hear back within reasonable time frame
  - Consider merits of working with responsive faculty
V. What Do I Need To Apply?

• Universally required:
  • Application itself
    • Data entry takes time
  • Transcripts
  • Recommendations (typically 3)
    • Request 1-2 months in advance
  • Personal/research statement
    • Draft early

• Often required:
  • Standardized test scores (GRE, GMAT)
  • Humanities: writing sample (~25 pgs)

• Supplementary components:
  • Diversity essay
  • Optional fellowship competitions (internal or external)
V. Application Component: Letters of Rec

• Typically need 3
• Only professional/academic references: faculty, supervisors, internship directors, etc.
  • Their specific positivity outweighs their title
• Ideally ask in person with follow-up email attachments
  • 1-2 months in advance
  • Approach them with hard copies: CV/resume, personal statement draft, program info, etc.
  • Explain to them: why them, why grad school, why those programs?
  • Explicitly ask: “Can you write me a specific positive letter?”
  • Friendly reminders 2 weeks out
• Have alternatives: junior faculty, lecturers, etc.
• Check the application interface regularly
• Be prepared to write your own
  • OCS here to help format/edit
• Not applying right away? Consider collecting in advance and storing on a service like Interfolio
• Handwritten thank you cards & updates!
V. Application Component: Personal/Research Statement

- Research emphasis may vary slightly
  - Personal vs research statements
  - Applied MA vs research PhD
  - Direct BA/BS to PhD vs applying with a Master’s
- What are these?
  - NOT your undergrad statement
  - NOT cover letters
  - Intellectual autobiography: college and beyond
- “Personal” in academic sense: introduction, background, and fit
  - Open with a relevant anecdote related to your interests
  - Capitalize on your Yale experience: relevant coursework/research
  - Meaningfully name-drop current and prospective faculty
- Clearly articulate your academic interests and research questions
  - Not a dissertation prospectus!
- Research statement: even more research focused
  - Move between big picture questions and prospective research design if relevant
  - Structure: question, lit review summary (more big picture than citations), how you position yourself in current debates/why grad school
- Universal guidelines for tone:
  - Can you do research in your field?
  - Balance between coachability and specificity
  - PhD admissions committees will read you as a future colleague
- Can preface writing sample in the humanities (where you want to demonstrate rather than state the kinds of approaches that you value)
- Sometimes diversity statement required (California schools)
V. Personal/Research Statement: Writing Tips

Recommended paragraph structure summarized:

1. **Intriguing lead**
   - 1-2 sentences, be creative concise
   - Segue into more important points

2. **Academic trajectory**
   - Always ask yourself, Why grad school? Why this field (if transitioning)? Why here?

3. **Research interests as you currently envision them. In some fields, it may be appropriate or even necessary to propose a dissertation project. Talk to your faculty so you know the conventions of your discipline!**
   - Pro tip: be concrete, don’t simply rehash your CV

4. **Argue that you and THIS program are mutually compatible. Depending on the field, refer to specific faculty (especially if you’ve been in touch).**
   - Remember: They’ll want to read you as a future colleague. Who are you in conversation with? How do you expect to contribute to the literature?
   - NB: This is the part that you’ll need to tailor to each institution

5. **Articulate your career goals beyond the program. If you’re applying to a research Ph.D., know that many faculty will expect to hear that you plan to pursue a tenure-track job (regardless of any reservations you may have about that).**

- Statements vary in length: aim for 2 double-spaced pages
V. Research Statement: STEM

• Research statement for NSF funding very technical
• Include citations to demonstrate background knowledge
• Explicitly state objectives, hypotheses, and experimental methods
• You want to demonstrate that your research is novel and exciting, but also achievable
• Include separate sections for “Broader Impacts” and “Intellectual Merit” and make sure to **bold**
• Ask to see previous examples of research statements or find online
VI. What is the Application Timeline?

Spring/Summer Before

- Identify your field and begin making a list of programs/advisors
  - Keep a spreadsheet!
- Talk to your faculty, TAs, alumni of programs
- Determine test requirements and prepare/take (e.g. GRE, subject tests)
- Anticipate the costs
  - Application fees: fee waivers?
    - Application fees
    - Transcript fees: official vs unofficial
  - Test(s): dates, expenses, prep
  - Research funding options

September

- Reach out to faculty (discipline specific)
- Start drafting and editing personal and research statements
- Consider writing sample (if needed)
- Finalize your list
  - Dream schools, probable admits
  - No magic number, but 6-7 common
- Request recommendation letters
- Know your deadlines!
  - Keep a spreadsheet!
VI. What is the Application Timeline?

November/December

- Request transcripts from Registrar
- Finalize statements and writing samples
  - Different for different schools!
- Confirm recs and test scores received by correct department(s)
- FAFSA and Fellowship Applications
  - Ford pre-doc due Nov.
  - NSF GRFP due in late Oct./early Nov.
- Submit ASAP!
  - Utilize spreadsheet to keep track of multiple components

After Submission

- Send fall transcripts if necessary
- Acceptances usually Jan-March
  - Follow up with DGS if needed
- Visiting schools (typically Feb-April)
  - Research Ph.D. programs: fully funded
  - Types of visits:
    - Grad school wide
    - Departmental
    - Diversity recruitment weekends (sometimes occur before app deadline)
- Evaluate and negotiate acceptances and waitlist notices
  - Talk to faculty and OCS!
- Decision Day: April 15
VII. I’ve been accepted, now what?*

• Congratulations!

• Considerations:
  • Finances, program/institutional quality, program size, faculty diversity, relationship between faculty and students, location
  • Personal circumstances: family care, childcare, pets, relocating with a partner, etc.
  • Know your non-negotiables!

• Relative importance:
  • School “prestige,” location, absolute stipend amount generally less important
  • Research match is key if you want to be a researcher, and so is placement. Advising match also very important.
  • Other considerations: additional research/teaching resources/opportunities
  • Institutional culture very important: Are they genuinely committed to diversity and equity? Is there a community there for me?

• Line up schools in pairs to narrow selection

• Get inside scoop from current/recent alum

• Reasonable expectations: consult your network, schools may continue to reach out, open line of communication with prospective faculty/grad students

• Communicate with current faculty, etc.

• Only commit to one program
  • Only decline when you know
  • Be professional when declining: a would-be advisor may become an external reader
  • Inform new advisor(s) of your decision

• April 15th: National Decision Day

• Bottom line: This is your choice!
Writing Resources

• Grad Peers at Office of Career Strategy
• Yale College Writing Lab
• Residential Writing Tutors
• Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning
Questions?

Make a one-on-one appointment with us through OCS!

- [Yale Career Link](#)

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