

## APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL: A PRIMER

Much of what follows is drawn from the book *Graduate Admissions Essays* by Donald Asher. If you're really interested in going to graduate school, you should consult this best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process. Use the following as a kind of brief excursion into the topic to test the waters. The advice given below is geared toward applications to Ph.D. programs that require a 6 to 10 year commitment from a student. Professional programs (law school, public policy, and so on) may have different procedures.

Here's a brief list of what follows in more detail below:

1. Figure out what you want to study
2. Figure out where you want to study.
3. Take a closer look at the programs that most attract your interest.
4. Write your admissions essay.
5. Ask for letters of recommendation.
6. Visit the school, talk with prospective faculty members, get the inside scoop from graduate students already in the program.
7. Apply to several programs
8. Ten Things to Do if You Don't Get In

### **1. Figure out what you want to study**

Graduate programs expect you to have a fairly well-developed plan of what you want to study at the time of application. I write this sentence with two caveats. First, the programs won't expect you to know something you haven't already studied, so don't be afraid if there are gaps in your plan. In fact, identifying those gaps and talking in the essay (see below) about how your intended program will fill those gaps will demonstrate an appealing sophistication to admissions committees. Second, it is not unusual for students to change their minds upon arriving to graduate school or in the course of their studies. Do not feel that you have to stick with your original research plan. Instead, recognize that graduate admissions committees are looking at how well you fit with what they have to offer. If you write an application that says you want to conduct Japan studies and the program you apply to specializes in Latin America, then the committee is unlikely to see a fit. If, however, you apply for research on Latin America to a program that specializes in Latin America and *later* change your topic to Japan, while the switch may be difficult (and you might consider transferring schools if faculty find your new topic too far outside their expertise), at least both you and the program were honest with each other during the course of events.

In brief, while you need not know exactly what your research will look like, a well-thought and specific plan of study communicates a few important lessons to the admissions committee. Your readers will recognize the strength of your intellectual skills and your ability to create a proposal. They will also assess that you have put careful thought into your subject matter such that, even if your plans change, they are unlikely to change so much that your intended program couldn't address the new topic.

If you really, really know you want to go to graduate school but are stumped for what to study, it is probably worth your while to wait on your application and explore topics on your own.

## **2. Figure out where you want to study.**

Here are the best sources for learning about possible graduate programs.

Professors

Other students and alumni

Peterson's guides

Specialty guides in the field of your choice

Academic journals in your field (where are the people who publish on topics of interest to you?)

National Research Council

World Wide Web

## **3. Take a closer look at the programs that most attract your interest.**

Here are additional questions to consider once you have a sense of which programs are appropriate for you. Some questions are a bit obvious. Some questions may not be a priority for you. Figure out what matters to you most and compare schools according to your own criteria. The questions are phrased such that you can pose them to faculty members and graduate program administrators, alike. Posing these questions to graduate students in prospective programs as well as faculty and administrators will likely reveal important and different perspectives on how the program operates.

1. What do you teach here?
2. What is the largest and most typical class size for a graduate class?
3. Are classes restricted to graduate students or are undergraduates common in graduate classes?
4. What are the criteria and process for selecting teaching assistants, research assistants, and fellows?
5. I will probably need financial assistance. Can you tell me how most students fund their studies here? (Note: "Financial aid" is not a phrase people use in graduate school. Talk about "support" and "assistantships.")
6. Will I develop my own topic, or will I be expected to work on a professor's ongoing research?
7. What is your attrition rate? (That's the drop-out rate in common parlance, but ask for the "attrition rate.") Of those who don't finish, what are their reasons?

8. What kind of student thrives in your program?
9. How reliable is your financial aid year to year? Is the first-year offer always sustained given attainment of academic goals?
10. What is the age, race, gender balance, ratio of married/single, and geographical origin of graduate students in the program? (In other words: Are there other people like me?)
11. Which professors have won awards and grants lately (and presumably need graduate assistants)?
12. Can you tell me about your placement rates and types of jobs obtained by recent graduates? (Avoid relying on answers that are based on testimonials and anecdotal evidence.)
13. May I meet some currently enrolled students (in person or via phone or via email)? (Be sure to ask about the students' research topics and be sure to take notes on which specific professors they mention.)
14. How can I be a strong candidate for this program?

#### **4. Write your admissions essay.**

The admissions essay should demonstrate a number of points. In addition to your overall interest, it's crucial to show that you have the basic skills to carry out the kind of graduate work expected of you. Admissions committees are looking for people who are a good bet for a successful graduate career. Some basic skills include the ability to formulate projects, persevere in the face of obstacles, conduct independent research, live overseas (a good one for cultural anthropology), as well as basic knowledge in your chosen topic. Remember, you need not be an expert in these areas. Instead, you want to give the admissions committee something to work with other than the raw numbers provided by your GPA, GRE scores, and so on. The following exercises are meant to get you started on personalizing and deepening your application.

##### *Writing Exercise, Part 1*

Build a table of your research projects, volunteer, work activities or other experiences you think relevant to your application. This table is not unlike a resume that would have paragraph-length descriptions of the jobs you've held. Include in the table your level of interest in the topic, the level of interest you think this topic has for a general audience, and the professors/advisors working on the topic. Use working titles for the project as a short hand. Use this material along with the information in *Writing Exercise, Part 2* to demonstrate your capabilities and interests.

Example: Designed and conducted original research into qualitative and quantitative properties of a meteorite sample using atomic absorption spectrophotometry, emission spectrophotometry, induction coupled plasma, and laser spectrophotometry under the direction of Prof. Super Star. Results presented at the Argonne National Laboratory during annual meetings of International Association of Amateur Astronomers, 1999.

Example:

As a junior anthropology undergraduate student at Arizona State University, my mentor suggested I consider a public health track beyond graduation. Though my professor knew I loved anthropology for its teaching of human behavior, culture, and social patterns, she also knew that I

had a profound interest in health as a result of my background in athletics. Over the next two years, I explored public health through research endeavors and a subsequent public health related job opportunity and internship. As I learned more about this innovative and challenging field, I knew I had found the right vocation.

### *Writing Exercises, Part 2*

Answer these questions with a narrative essay of any length (a paragraph to several pages). Then, use this material to build your final essay. You may not include all the text that you develop from these answers, but you should start to see a compelling narrative that will clarify for the admissions committee what you want to study, how you got to this point in your career, your qualifications for work as a graduate student, and your overall amiability as a future colleague.

1. How did you first get interested in this field of study?
2. What has influenced this interest over time? What professors, classes, labs, papers, research projects, books or ideas have influenced you? What out-of-class experiences have interested you?
3. If your interest has changed over time, how has your prior interest contributed to your understanding of/approach to your current interests?
4. Make a list of all your undergraduate papers, labs, and research projects. If you cannot remember their exact names, approximate or paraphrase.
5. Do you have any publications or presentations at academic conferences? Are there publications you can submit or any conferences you can attend between now and when you begin your graduate studies?
6. What will you do between now and when you arrive at your graduate institution? Which classes will you take? What skills will you acquire? What internship, work, or community service experiences will you complete?
7. How have you researched your graduate school options to date? Have you visited schools? Researched them on the Web? Written to professors? Attended conferences?
8. Can you remember encouraging words that you received from professors, employers, coaches, or peers? If others have encouraged you to pursue your goals, can you remember, as exactly as possible, what they said to you? If so, make a list of quotes.
9. What is your GPA in the following categories: overall, year by year, over the last 4 completed semesters, in your major? Look at your transcripts and see if there are other ways of analyzing your GPA that might be of interest to the admissions committee.
10. How have you prepared yourself for success in graduate school? What body of relevant knowledge will you take with you? What study or laboratory skills will help you succeed? What personal attributes will help you?
11. Have you overcome adversity to get where you are? (Be brief.)
12. What makes you unique or unusual? List several things.
13. What are your leisure activities? What do you do when you are not being a student?
14. How might you contribute to the academic community you intend to join? How will that community benefit from being associated with you?
15. Can you name specific professors of interest at your top three graduate programs? List them along with their research/academic specialties.
16. What, specifically, do you want to study?

17. What will you do with this degree? Will you teach, do research, work in industry or government? (If you don't know, don't invent.)

### *Getting feedback*

You should share your application essay with anyone willing to read and comment on it. Look for more detailed help from the professors at your undergraduate school. You can share the essay with professors at your prospective programs, but, rather than seek specific feedback, do so as a way to spark or maintain a conversation.

### **5. Ask for letters of recommendation.**

Don't worry if this feels at all uncomfortable. Professors are not only accustomed to writing these, professors have also had to ask *their* advisors for letters. That said, the best letters of recommendation are written by people who can write specifically and confidently about your accomplishments and your ability to carry out a graduate program. If you're contacting someone you haven't seen or spoken with in some time, a brief note that requests a recommendation won't cut it. Let the professor know what you want to study and where. Show them you have done your homework about how the admissions process works. Instead of asking directly for the recommendation, ask professors if they will first look over your materials and assess whether they would feel comfortable writing a letter. If they agree, then send the professor a copy of your resume, your admissions essay, past papers you have written, and any additional materials you think relevant. Professors can use all this material to craft a letter. The more of a stretch the recommendation may be, the more information you need to provide in order to make the letter-writing easy.

### **6. Visit the school, talk with prospective faculty, get the inside scoop from graduate students already in the program.**

*Asher's Law: Thou shalt not call, write, nor visit any professor without having read some of his/her work first!*

Some schools have graduate administrators who can help coordinate your visit, make appointments with professors, and maybe even help with housing (often a couch at a grad student's home). Although visits and personal interviews are not a required part of the process, you should definitely consider visiting the schools that top your list. Do this after you have figured out what you want to study and have a draft or two of your essay completed. Use the visit to ask some of the questions listed above in the "Take a Closer Look" section. Get feedback from professors on your proposed research plan. Most importantly, figure out if this is a school that would work for you. How does the program compare in person to what you've read about in your research? Are the professors amiable and accessible? Is there camaraderie among the grad students? In addition to helping you make a better decision, a campus visit will make you stand out among the applicants. Professors will have a face to put with the name. They will see that your interests are serious, and they will be able to gauge better how you will fit within the overall program.

## **7. Why you need to apply early and to several programs**

Your application can be turned down for a number of reasons outside your control: bureaucratic glitches, someone's family illness, another person's poor memory, one person liked your application but was outranked by someone else, and so on. By applying to several programs you minimize the possibility that the unforeseen will affect your ability to go to graduate school.

## **8. Ten Things to Do if You Don't Get In**

1. Apply earlier (avoid the last six weeks before the deadline; an application in the early fall is best).
2. Apply to more schools (six is usually considered a prudent minimum: two safe schools, two middle of the road schools, two reach schools).
3. Apply to more safe schools (even 4.0 students can and do get rejected).
4. Visit and wow 'em (follow Asher's law).
5. Go to summer school in a targeted subject and wow 'em (it's easy to get into summer school).
6. Take one class at a time in the targeted subject and wow 'em (remember: your most recent grades count the most).
7. Get volunteer or internship experiences in the targeted field (even part-time, even unpaid).
8. Work in a "real job" in the targeted field (there's no substitute for actual experience and recommendations from supervisors in the field).
9. Get an intermediate degree (such as a master's or a certificate).
10. Get older and try again (many times, that's all it takes).