

# Graduate School Guide



Center for  
**CAREER**  
Development

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

# Considering Graduate School?

The pursuit of a graduate degree involves a significant commitment of time, money and energy, so it's important to consider the path carefully. A few reasons you might consider graduate school:

- Advanced degree is required for entry-level roles in a field.
- A passion for research and desire to contribute to the body of knowledge within a specific field.
- Seeking in-depth knowledge, especially if changing careers.
- Planning for career advancement or starting own business.

## First, reflect on your WHY and WHEN.

- Why do you find this degree or program compelling?
- How will this course of study support your career growth?
- Is it necessary/would it be helpful to gain professional (or life) experience first?
- Do you want to take a break from academia before graduate school, or do you want to enroll right after Princeton?
- Do you have a source of funds for educational and living expenses, or might it be best to build up some savings before enrolling?

## Common Graduate Programs

### Graduate Certificate

Short period of study (one to two years) in a specialized topic after undergraduate education. Courses are generally at the graduate level and may be applied towards a master's degree.

### Master's Degree

Advanced degree for demonstrating a high level of mastery in a particular subject area. Typically takes two years full-time or three years part-time.

### Specialized Master's

Professional degrees in select fields like business (MBA), fine arts (MFA), library science (MLS), public administration (MPA), public health (MPH), and social work (MSW).

### Doctors of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

Research degree (marked by intensive, theory-based research in the form of a dissertation) that qualifies the holder to teach and conduct research at the university level or work in a specific profession.

### Professional/Clinical Degree

Rigorous, practice-based doctoral study for entry into specific professions such as educational administration (Ed.D.), law (J.D.), medicine (M.D.), and psychology (Psy.D.).

## Next, do your homework.

### Learn the Lingo

Program names and departments are not universal. Terms like humanities and liberal arts, or engineering management and industrial engineering, may be used interchangeably or represent different tracks at different institutions.

### Ask Your Professors

Princeton faculty can help you hone in on nuances among programs and support you as you consider both a list of potential schools and an optimal enrollment timeline.

### Chat with Current Students and Program Alumni

Use LinkedIn, TigerNet and other tools to identify students and graduates of programs you're considering, especially those whose research was guided by the faculty whose work interests you. Knowing where they are now can help you assess a program's fit for your career interests.

### Browse Program and Departmental Websites

Read through required/elective courses and review faculty research interests.

### Peruse Third-Party Guides

U.S. News, Gradschools.com and Peterson's offer insights into locale, campus life and overall reputations. Give more weight to a specific program than an institution as a whole in your assessments.

### TIP

Schedule a one-on-one appointment with a career adviser to work through your plan. The Center for Career Development also offers programs throughout the year to help you explore options.

# Graduate School Worksheet

Gather the information you need to consider if a particular graduate program is right for you. This is a comprehensive list and not every item will apply to you or your specific considerations.

**TIP:**

[Download this worksheet and add a column for each school you're considering!](#)

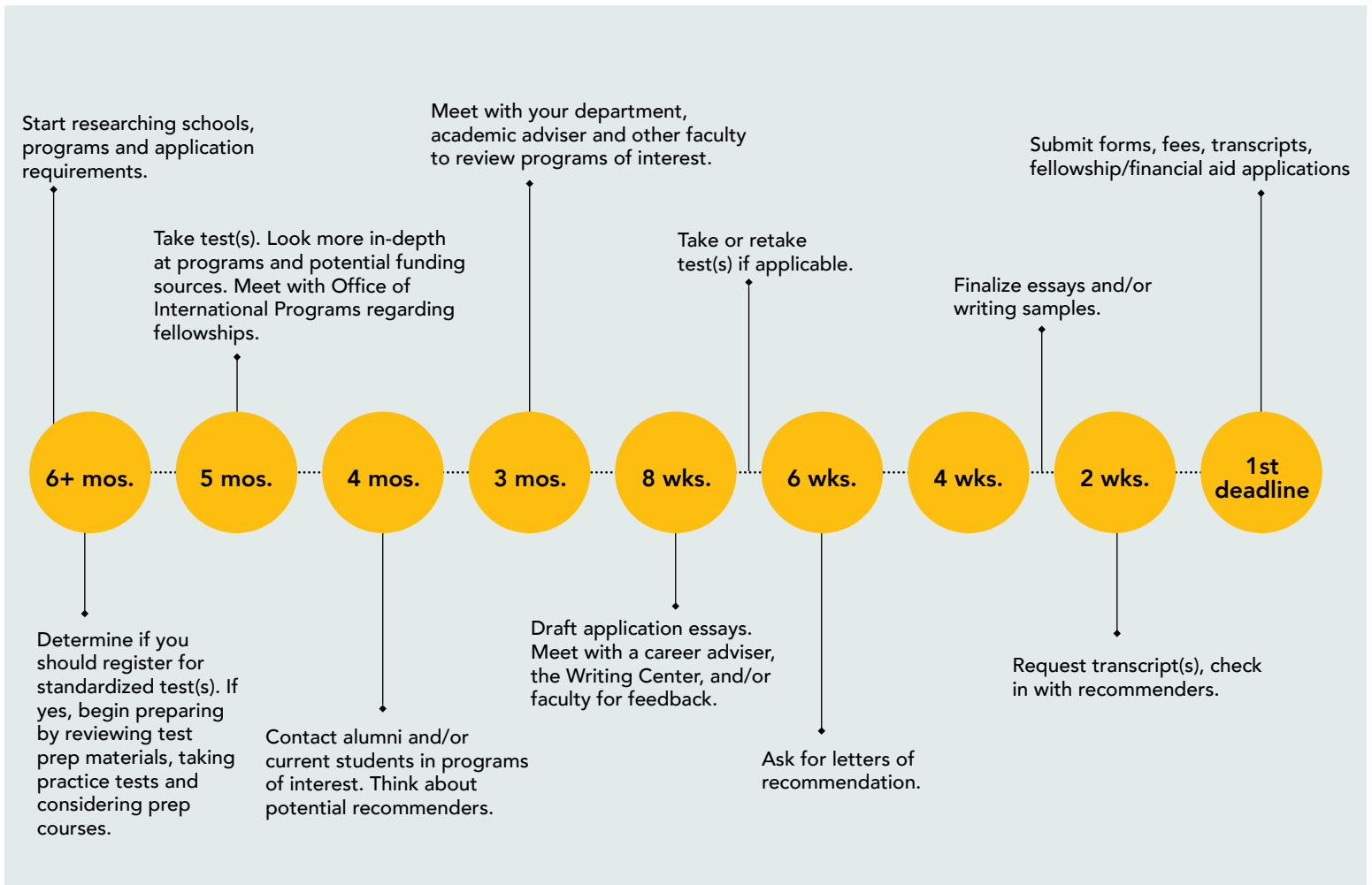
Factors to consider	Information to find for each graduate program
<b>TYPE OF PROGRAM</b>	
Degrees granted	What degree(s) fit your interests? Are transitional (M.S.-to-Ph.D.) and joint (M.S./MBA, J.D./Ph.D.) degrees an option?
Time to degree completion	What is the minimum, maximum and average time commitment? Are there caps on funding or years of study? Besides full-time enrollment on campus, are there other options such as part-time study and/or online classes?
Graduation requirements	Beyond coursework, are there internship, thesis or comprehensive exam requirements to earn a degree?
Support for research interests	Which faculty study what you want to study? What is the organizational culture of the department and research groups?
<b>QUALITY AND REPUTATION</b>	
Reputation of faculty and alumni	Is research prioritized? Where do faculty publish and present their work? Where do graduates of the program work now?
Admission standards/ averages	What characteristics and skills describe the successful applicant?
Institution and program accreditations	What governing bodies have vouched for both the school as a whole and the program in particular?
Alumni satisfaction	How do graduates of the program rate the support and guidance they received for both their studies and their future career plans?
<b>INSTITUTIONAL DEMOGRAPHICS</b>	
Diversity of faculty/student body	What traits/characteristics are important to you in finding a sense of belonging at the institution?
Faculty-to-Student ratio	How large are the classes? How many people share the same lab? How many advisees does a dissertation chair have at a time?
Geography/Local region	What's the area like? Are housing, transportation, entertainment available? Do you need a car? Can you find work/volunteer roles? Do advanced students live in community or finish research elsewhere?
<b>COST AND FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE</b>	
Fellowships/Assistantships/Scholarships	Is funding included? Where and when can you apply for consideration? Are there caveats or stipulations for using funds? What external organizations might offer funding or loan payback plans?
Cost of living (housing, transit, meals)	Do grad students typically live on campus? What's the average rent off-campus? How much is public transit? What's the cost to park a car?
<b>CAREER PLANNING</b>	
Program focus (academia vs. industry)	What type of work do most of the recent graduates of the program pursue? What are the long-term marketability and job prospects for alumni?
Summer options (research, internships)	Do you want to spend your time doing academic research? If so, is funding provided? If you want an internship, will faculty support you?
Career services offered to grad students	Are there career advisers dedicated to grad students? Who helps with an academic job search? Can alumni use the school's career center?

# The Application Process

## APPLICATION TIMELINE

The graduate school application process is very different from the undergraduate process. Each institution has its own unique application and deadlines vary by degree and program. Look carefully at application requirements, including whether standardized test scores are required, optional, or not accepted. Admissions decisions often involve department faculty, not just admissions counselors.

The general timeline below applies primarily to master's and doctoral programs. Business, law and health profession schools have different requirements and processes.



## APPLICATION COMPONENTS

While your application is comprised of many individual parts, think of it as a complete package:

### Standard

- Transcript(s) from all universities attend
- Resume (for Ph.D., expand to 2 pages to highlight research).
- Letters of recommendation
- Application essay(s)

### Program-specific

- Standardized test scores
- Writing samples, portfolio
- Interview, audition

### TIP

**Who knows you is more important than who you know!**

A letter from someone lesser-known who can speak to your capabilities in detail is stronger than one from a prominent individual who cannot.

## LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Graduate and professional school applications typically require two to four recommendation letters, which some admission committees consider the most significant part of your application. Although recommendations are confidential, there are certain steps you can take to help your letter-writers help you.

**Understand the process:** Each program will provide specific instructions on how letter-writers should submit recommendations.

**Consider who to ask:** Academic references (JP and thesis advisers, for example) are most common, although some programs accept or prefer employment-related references. Choose people who know you well and can convey your dedication to continued education, preparedness for rigorous independent work, and passion for your chosen field of study.

**Give them something to work with:** Arrange a chat with each recommender to share an overview of your goals and ask if they would write a recommendation. State why you would like this person to write it. Provide a copy of your application essay(s), your CV or resume and additional insights — such as work from their class — to help them frame their individual letter.

**Be respectful:** Provide sufficient lead time, generally 4-6 weeks, for your recommenders to draft and submit their letters. Remember, students typically seek recommendations during what is often a busy time of year for faculty.

**Save copies:** If you might defer your application, you may wish to hold onto drafts of your recommenders' letters. Saving them on your computer, in the cloud or through a fee-based site like Interfolio are options to consider.

## TRACKING YOUR APPLICATIONS

Create a spreadsheet like this to keep your applications in order.

School	Program	App. Deadline	App. Fee	Test(s)	Essay(s)	Transcript(s)	Letters of Rec.
ABC University	Ph.D. in (program)	Dec. 15	\$100	GRE General	Statement of Purpose	Requested Dec. 1	Prof. A Prof. B Prof. C

## ADMISSIONS EXAMS

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In recent years, many programs have made test scores optional. Speak with your faculty or a career adviser to consider if taking the exam is the right step for you. Some exams are only offered at specific sites and times of year; others are offered through computer-delivered testing at home or regional test offices, meaning you can sit for the exam just about any day of the year anywhere in the world.

Most graduate programs do not “superscore” test results, meaning you can only submit one set of test results even if you took an exam multiple times. Choose exams, test dates and prep steps wisely. Check test websites for details on scoring, retesting, fee waivers and other considerations.

### TIP

GRE, GMAT, and LSAT scores are valid for five years (two to three years for the MCAT, depending on school). Consider taking the exam as a student or recent graduate while you’re still familiar with studying and taking standardized exams, even if you aren’t sure if or when you’ll apply to graduate school.

## APPLICATION ESSAYS

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Applications for admission to graduate school (and often for fellowships/scholarships) generally require a personal statement, statement of academic purpose and/or a diversity statement.

**Statement of Academic Purpose (SOP):** Requested primarily for doctoral degree programs, your SOP should emphasize your preparedness for the rigors of extensive independent research. Use this as an opportunity to convey your academic background, research interests and career goals. Demonstrate your familiarity with the faculty and their research, and how your interests align with and complement their work.

### Common Graduate Admissions Tests

**GRE:** Accepted by most graduate programs, top-tier MBA programs and select law schools in lieu of the LSAT. General test covers verbal and quantitative reasoning and analytical writing. Subject tests cover specialized knowledge in math, physics and psychology.

**GMAT:** As the global standard entrance exam for MBA programs, the GMAT measures your ability to analyze and evaluate written material, think critically and solve problems.

**LSAT:** Assesses key skills for success in law school: reading comprehension, analytical reasoning and logical reasoning. The most commonly accepted exam for admission to ABA-accredited law schools.

**MCAT:** Required by nearly all U.S. med schools, the exam tests knowledge that medical educators, physicians, students and residents have identified as keys for success in the practice of medicine.

**Personal Statement:** Commonly required for master’s degree programs, personal statements may be thematic (e.g., about a specific challenge or accomplishment) or a narrative you want the admissions committee to know about you.

**Diversity Statement:** This covers how you will contribute to an institution’s approach to diversity, equity and inclusion. You should highlight your understanding of the varied experiences of people from underrepresented groups and write about your lived experiences or your work meeting the needs of a diverse group during your undergraduate studies.

## BASIC PRINCIPLES OF APPLICATION ESSAY WRITING

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### 1. Your essay is a story about you.

It's how the reader gets to know where you've been, where you are and where you're going. It lets an admissions committee know what you want to learn and what you'll do with that newfound knowledge. Your letters of recommendation will then support what you put forth in this essay.

### 2. Explain without exaggerating; illustrate growth instead of gaps.

Demonstrate that you can write with clarity in a formal, academic style. Showcase your preparation for advanced study and how your experiences have and will continue to inform your work. Admit imperfections in a way that emphasizes a lesson learned or a new start without inadvertently undermining your qualifications.

### 3. The "why" is as important as the "what."

It's not enough to state an interest in researching a topic. Instead, convey why you're interested in it, why this idea is worthy of research and how both you and the specific institution/faculty will benefit from the research. Tie your experiences together by telling a story about how something you learned prompted you to learn more.

### 4. Use the active voice.

**This:** "I sought out this opportunity to learn..."

**Not:** "This opportunity allowed me to learn..."

### 5. Show confidence by avoiding the phrase "I believe..."

Instead of writing what you believe, write so the reader believes you.

**This:** "I am a strong fit for this program because..."

**Not:** "I believe I am a strong fit for this program..."

### **You've been accepted! Now what?**

**Write** thank you notes to those who have supported you through the application process.

**Read** through acceptance materials: know what you were offered and by when you need to respond.

**Attend** admitted students' programs or schedule individual campus visits.

**Talk** with a career adviser, faculty member or other trusted person about your options.

**Work** out the logistics including financials, housing and enrollment.

# Funding & Financing Your Graduate Degree

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## INSTITUTIONAL FUNDING

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Assistantships, fellowships, grants and scholarships are commonly offered for graduate study (more often at the doctoral level than master's). Factors such as financial need, degree pursued and undergraduate GPA often determine eligibility. Funding applications often include additional forms and essays.

**Assistantship:** Generally covers tuition in exchange for part-time work assisting with research (RA) or teaching a course (TA). Residence halls and other campus offices hire graduate assistants (GA) to work with or supervise undergraduates, and are in turn granted housing, tuition and/or a cost-of-living stipend.

**Fellowship:** Monetary award to subsidize costs such as tuition, housing or professional development (e.g., academic conferences). Fellowships are typically merit-based, highly competitive and awarded to those who demonstrate potential to make a positive, lasting contribution to their academic discipline. Visit Princeton's Office of International Programs for more information about possible fellowship options.

**Grant:** Typically issued through the federal government and distributed by an institution, a grant is a form of financial aid that does not require repayment. Often provided based on financial need.

**Scholarship:** Merit-based funds offered to support students' educational pursuits. May be awarded by the institution as a whole or by a specific academic department. Criteria, application processes and maintenance of eligibility vary by institution.

## EXTERNAL FUNDING

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**Research organizations:** Some organizations (e.g., National Science Foundation, the Institute for Citizens & Scholars) often award fellowships to outstanding students in their field of study to be towards the cost of tuition and/or living expenses.

**Professional associations:** Grants or scholarships may be available through associations related to your field of study. Ask faculty, career advisers or industry representatives for suggestions of organizations to consider and tips for inquiring about funds.

**Employer benefits:** Many employers offer tuition assistance for an employee who is working full-time while taking classes part-time (i.e., evenings or on weekends, in-person or online). Some employers restrict what programs they'll cover or how much they'll pay. Often the funds are offered as tuition reimbursement at the end of a semester, meaning the employee must have the means to pay tuition when classes begin.

## SELF-FUNDING

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**Federal student loans:** Submitting a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) may qualify you for Federal Direct (Stafford) Loans, Direct Graduate PLUS Loans, or Federal Work-Study funds.

**Private bank loans:** You can apply for a private loan to cover costs. Approval is typically dependent on a strong credit score, which is a measure of confidence for the lender that the amount borrowed (principal) and the interest will be repaid.

**Personal savings:** Entering the workforce right out of college and setting aside funds in a savings account may delay your enrollment in graduate school but lessen the financial burden of borrowing funds.