Advice on applying to graduate school

Writing your personal essay

- Your objective is to give the admissions committee a clear idea of what you are interested in studying and a sample of your writing.
- Your statement should be tailored to the graduate program to which you are applying.
- It should be well organized, concise, and have no errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling.
- In other words, you need to show that you have the basic foundation for a career as a professional in your chosen field.
- Begin by creating a draft, and then refine it.
- Your essay should reflect what is special or impressive about you, without sounding arrogant.
- Answer the explicit and implicit questions. Why do you want to go to graduate school? What are your career aspirations? What background, in particular research, scholarship, intern, service or life experience, do you have that prepares you for this next step? What is it about this particular graduate program that appeals to you? Are you interested in working with particular faculty? Within this graduate program or field, what are some topics that interest you? Why are you a good match for this graduate program?
- If you need to explain poor GPA or GRE scores or a difficult undergraduate year, do so without making excuses. State what the problem was, and then what you did about it.
- Indicate your immediate degree objective - master degree or a doctoral degree, and why. Don’t leave the committee to guess.
- Re-read your draft, using this list as a checklist.
- Lastly, be sure that the essay that you submit is your own work. As per the academic honesty code of the university, that is expected and required.

Do you need a master’s degree to get a PhD? It depends on….

- Your baccalaureate course work and experience, e.g., if you changed undergraduate majors late or had difficulty at first with your major or have no undergraduate research experience, you probably would benefit by completing a master’s thesis first.
- The discipline you have chosen for a PhD, i.e., some disciplines or graduate programs require a master degree to enter the PhD program.
- Whether you are changing fields, i.e., then you would need sufficient foundation courses in the newly chosen field, which a master’s degree would provide.
- Whether you want to test yourself and/or your interest in advanced work in your chosen discipline before committing to a PhD program.

If you have a strong academic record, are not changing disciplines, and seek a career in academia (at a four-year college or university), then skipping the master’s step will cost less and save time.

Financial aid 101

Master’s degree programs
At public doctoral research universities, master programs typically have either a strong research component or intense professionalizing component. Students are stepped through the programs quickly, and are well positioned for master-entry level jobs paying on average $10,000 more per year than baccalaureate-entry level jobs. In terms of life-time earnings and job satisfaction, it pays to get such an advanced degree. Because tuition at public institutions is low (that is, subsidized by the state), financial aid for master’s students is generally limited. Well-qualified students may obtain some aid, campus jobs and/or entry into fast-track programs.

**Doctoral degree programs**

Except for professional doctorates (e.g., medicine, law) where financial assistance is usually in the form of loans, public doctoral research universities typically provide financial support for many students for at least part of the degree. Financial aid generally falls into these categories:

- Teaching assistantships – Apprenticeships in teaching that assist students in developing skills needed for jobs in academia. Usually a stipend plus tuition scholarship.
- Research assistantships – Apprenticeship in research, usually with a stipend and tuition scholarship paid by an external grant obtained by faculty or the university.
- Institutional fellowships – Typically requiring no service, such that students are free to concentrate on studies and research, and usually with a stipend and/or tuition scholarship funded by endowment.
- External fellowships – Typically federal or foundation funds awarded to students, and so portable, with a stipend, and either fellowship or university providing tuition scholarship. Usually require no service, such that students are free to concentrate on studies and research.
- Loans – Many students carry loans. Getting through programs quickly is the key to keeping loan level manageable. University financial aid office can provide guidance. Again, in terms of life-time earnings and job satisfaction, it pays to get an advanced degree. A doctoral degree on average means $27,000 or more per year in earnings than a master degree.

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