

COASTAL CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

THE ULTIMATE

[GRADUATE SCHOOL]

GUIDE



Helpful information and exercises for prospective graduate students.

INTRODUCTION

If you are considering graduate school for your future, you are probably asking yourself **MANY QUESTIONS**:

- **Is graduate school the best option for me now?**
- **What are the benefits and challenges?**
- **What's the difference between undergrad and graduate school?**
- **Should I seek a master's or doctoral program?"**
- **Which graduate programs should I apply for?**
- **What's involved in an application to graduate school?**
- **What are admissions committees looking for?**
- **Who can help me? What resources are available?**
- **What are some alternatives to graduate school?**



These are all important questions to consider, and they should be considered carefully.

This guide is organized around the main aspects of the decision-making process and application, which can help address many of your questions.

Because these decisions and your application for graduate school are complex and time consuming, this guide was prepared to provide critical information and advice. This guide also contains questions to ask yourself and exercises to help you prepare your application for graduate programs. Be as honest as possible with yourself, and talk about your answers with close friends and family. You may need to adjust the wording of your answers for your application, but it's important to begin with an honest self-assessment as you prepare your application.

Using this guide and working on these exercises can help you get started in the right direction. Additional resources and tools are incorporated within this guide. However, remember to also seek help from other people: faculty, advisors, graduate students, postdocs, peers, and career counselors. This guide is meant to provide an overview and does not cover everything.

As you address multiple decisions, this can be a stressful time period. But it may help to realize that you are not alone, many others have approached these decisions and have successfully embarked on new adventures. So, remember to find friends to encourage you in this process. We wish you the best in these new adventures.

UNDERGRADUATE vs GRADUATE (PhD) PROGRAMS

The experiences of an undergraduate and graduate student can appear deceptively similar. They are both at a university doing coursework and research. However, there are significant differences. Not understanding the depth of these differences can hinder your chances of being admitted and succeeding in graduate school.

UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS

You are a student at Coastal Carolina University

- Focus on courses and grades
- More objective evaluations of performance from exams and homework
- Feedback is relatively frequent
- Most activities and performance evaluations are individualistic

YOU APPLY TO A UNIVERSITY OR COLLEGE

- Your interests can be very broad
- You can apply to a discipline or major
- Extracurricular activities are valued

GRADUATE (MS, MA, MSED, PhD, EdS, PSYD) PROGRAM

You are a student of "Dr. Z" (research advisor)

- Focus on research
- More subjective evaluations and longer periods without concrete feedback
- Collaboration and independence are valued together, which will likely appear to be counter-intuitive—most activities and performance evaluations are individualistic
- Relationship-driven

YOU APPLY INTO A SPECIFIC GRADUATE PROGRAM

- Your interests need to be much more specific
- You apply into a specific field within a discipline
- Some programs require you to apply to work directly with a specific professor
- Extracurricular activities are valued less, unless they demonstrate critical skills related to your field

MASTER'S vs DOCTORAL PROGRAMS

While a typical 4-year undergraduate program refers to pursuing a bachelor's degree (often BS or BA degree), a graduate program can refer to pursuing a master's or doctoral degree.

MASTER'S PROGRAMS (MS, MA, MSED, MBA, or MACC)

- Master's programs usually provide much less financial support.
- Master's programs usually last about 2 years, but there are shorter and longer programs, with the range usually between 1 to 3 years.
FOR EXAMPLE: The MBA program here at CCU is a 1-year program.
- All master's programs require coursework, and only some require research that leads to a thesis (a write-up of your research).
- Requirements for master's programs are usually less than those for doctoral programs.

DOCTORAL PROGRAMS (PhD, EdS, PsyD, etc)

- Doctoral programs usually provide financial support.
- Doctoral programs have a wide range of typical lengths, from 3 to 8 years.
- The length of the program is very specific to the field.
- In some doctoral programs (e.g., some engineering programs), you earn a master's degree before earning a PhD. But in many other programs, the master's degree is not required before pursuing a PhD.
- All doctoral programs require research that leads to a dissertation (longer than a master's thesis, a write-up of multiple years of research).
- For some doctoral programs, if you are not able to complete all of the requirements, you might be allowed to exit with a master's degree.

SELF-ASSESSMENT and SELECTING PROGRAMS

As you consider graduate school, you may need to begin by asking whether graduate school is your best option. Working on these preliminary exercises below can help you confirm or correct your decisions, better understand your motivations and qualifications, and prepare you for your next steps.

As you work on these exercises and answer these questions, try not to force your responses into what you think other people want to hear. Take the time to slow down and carefully consider these questions. It's important to be honest with yourself, so that you develop an accurate self-assessment. You can adjust your responses into a positive light for your specific applications later.

ASK YOURSELF SOME PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

- Why do I want to go to graduate school as opposed to other options?
- What are alternatives and their pros and cons? Make sure that you're motivated and committed to persisting through your decision. Superficial motivations (e.g., my significant other/friends are doing the same; I don't like the alternatives) probably won't sustain you when challenges arise.
- How will my different options impact the people around me?
- How did I make difficult decisions in the past?
- What was my decision-making process?
- What were some valuable and less valuable aspects of my past decision-making process?

ASSESS YOUR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

- Self-assessment tools can help you discover your strengths, so that you address them meaningfully in your conversations and applications. Tools such as StrengthsFinder and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator can be helpful, and your university might have centers that can provide workshops to understand and apply your results.
- Writing down your past patterns of success and achievements. This exercise involves writing stories of when you thrived and reflecting on patterns of behavior and circumstances that helped you to succeed. This helps you to identify your strengths and reflect on your values and priorities.



ASSESS YOUR QUALIFICATIONS FOR GRAD SCHOOL

Are you a standout or star candidate? Candidates with this profile typically have the following characteristics. But please don't automatically rule yourself out of admission into a top-tier program! The only way you'll know if you qualify is to apply.

- 3.5 GPA or higher (same or higher in your major)
- GRE scores: Roughly between the 90th - 75th percentile
- Research experiences (multiple experiences including summer programs, with one experience lasting at least 9 months) leading to a presentation (oral or poster) at a conference, or in a publication
- Relevant coursework and internships or jobs in your field
- Research methods or statistics courses, for those in social or quantitative fields
- Strong letters of recommendation (with at least one from a professor who supervised you in research) that tell detailed personal stories about you as a researcher/scholar and compare you to others who have gone on to succeed in graduate school
- Excellent writing ability. This is particularly important in the humanities, where writing samples are often required with your application

If you believe that you're not a standout candidate, here are some options.

- Apply to more graduate programs (possibly 8 or more) to increase your chances of getting admitted—both top-tier and second-tier programs.
- All programs should have at least two faculty you'd be happy to work with.
- The importance of strong recommendations and excellent research experience increases.
- Have a recommender or two address how perceived weaknesses in your application (e.g., low grades in your first year or GRE scores) don't reflect your true promise and be sure to address these unusual aspects in your personal statement.
- If you're able, take graduate-level courses, get more research experiences, participate in a post-baccalaureate program, or pursue a master's degree to transition into more competitive doctoral programs.
- But don't automatically rule yourself out of admission into a top-tier program!
- You have to apply to be admitted - the admissions committee will determine if you are a good fit for the program.

CONDUCT INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

- Find graduate students, postdocs, faculty, and professionals who seem to be doing what interests you, and ask them to chat with you briefly.
- Ask them about their work:
 - General responsibilities, challenges, and benefits;
 - What a typical day looks like;
 - Strengths and skills that have helped them to succeed;
 - Their career path and their motivations at critical decision points.
- See if you can envision yourself in a similar role and career path.

SEEK COUNSEL FROM FACULTY AND CAREER COUNSELORS

- Talk with faculty who know you to help you determine whether you have the essential qualifications to succeed in graduate school (this will also help you when you need recommendation letters). Faculty can also suggest specific graduate programs and universities to consider.
- Build your network of support—these folks will get you through! As you reach out to people to help you plan for your future, work intentionally to build your support network. Reach out to new people and re-connect with past acquaintances.
- Who are faculty who share your research interests?
 - a. Can you think of certain professors you felt a strong connection to?
- Who are more advanced students who can share with you how to succeed in this new terrain?
- Who are scholars across the country (graduate students and faculty) you can work with or just talk with about your research and career?
- Who are friends outside of your field who will sustain you and remind you of the world outside of academia?
- CCU also has academic advisors and career counselors who can provide career self-assessments, mock interviews, and other resources to help you prepare as well!



SEEK RESEARCH EXPERIENCES AND INTERNSHIPS

- Whether or not you attend graduate school, research experiences and internships are vital in preparing you for a wide range of options, and they can also help you decide between graduate or professional programs, master's or PhD programs, applying to graduate school immediately or delaying for some time, etc.
- Internships while not required for all majors at CCU, provide valuable professional experiences, research, community building, and mentorship. You can also figure out if you want to work for a similar company following graduation!

SEARCH ONLINE FOR SPECIFIC UNIVERSITIES AND PROGRAMS

- This is where to begin if the previous steps seem to confirm that you have the essential qualifications and sufficient motivation for graduate school.
- Try to identify the programs that your peers (with similar interests and academic credentials) were admitted into and have succeeded in. Rankings of graduate programs within your discipline might also help, but don't get caught up too much in rankings. It's much more important to find a program and school with faculty that matches your skills and interests.
- Organize each program's application requirements, deadlines, and specific faculty with whom you're interested in working.
 - i. Use our Graduate School Worksheet to help you stay organized!

IF YOU'RE THINKING OF CHANGING DISCIPLINES BETWEEN YOUR UNDERGRAD PROGRAM TO YOUR GRAD PROGRAM

- You might be considering changing fields for a number of reasons. Perhaps CCU does not offer a specific field as a major and/or research opportunities in your desired field. Your interests might have also evolved as you discovered a particular field late in your undergraduate program, and it was extremely difficult to change majors.

- If you are contemplating changing fields, plan your transition carefully. Talk with individuals (faculty, graduate students, and staff) in both your current field and new field, and ask if your transition would be feasible. Learn about the different expectations in graduate applications and programs for each field.
 - i. Example: Engineering graduate programs often involve more coursework, the transition from a chemistry undergraduate program into a chemical engineering graduate program can be difficult. The feasibility of this transition depends on whether your coursework and research experiences provide sufficient preparation for the new program.
- Furthermore, because many universities encourage interdisciplinary research projects, transitioning fields or departments within graduate school is often simpler than trying to make a transition during the admissions process.
 - i. You might consider staying within the field of your undergraduate program for graduate school, and then making the transition after you've been accepted and started graduate school. You might also consider applying to more than one graduate program within the same university to see which graduate program admits you, if the university allows applying into more than one graduate program. Many universities (but not all) allow you to apply to only one graduate program.



SUGGESTED GRADUATE SCHOOL PREP TIMELINE

This suggested timeline is for students planning to attend graduate school immediately after earning a bachelor's degree, and can be easily adjusted for students planning a post-baccalaureate or gap-year experience or for master's students applying for doctoral programs.

FRESHMAN AND SOPHOMORE YEARS

- Do well in your coursework
- Meet with academic advisors to plan your coursework and help you consider graduate programs
- Develop relationships with faculty
- Actively seek and participate in research and/ or internship opportunities while at CCU during the academic year and over the summers

SUMMER BETWEEN SOPHOMORE AND JUNIOR YEARS

- Apply for and participate in research and/or internship opportunities while at CCU or study abroad! Many application deadlines are in the fall or spring before the summer

JUNIOR YEAR (OR ONE YEAR BEFORE APPLICATION SEASON)

- Participate in research during your time at CCU
- Identify graduate programs and fellowships that are relevant for your future plans
- If possible, attend conferences in your discipline, especially if they include sessions for prospective graduate students or graduate school fairs

- If possible, join professional organizations related to your intended career field. The cost is much more reasonable while you are a student!
- If possible, start visiting institutions with graduate programs that interest you
- If needed, prepare for taking the entrance exams in your chosen field
 - a. Utilize our Library's website (Learning Express) for free preparatory exams and study information!
- Take the necessary entrance exam (if needed)

SUMMER BETWEEN JUNIOR AND SENIOR YEARS

- Apply for and participate in research and/or internship opportunities while at CCU or study abroad!
- Identify graduate programs and fellowships that are relevant for your plans

SENIOR YEAR (or in final year during application season)

- Participate in research and/or internships at CCU (or abroad)!
- If possible, attend conferences in your discipline, especially if they include sessions for prospective graduate students or graduate school fairs

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER

- Actively seek and apply for application fee waivers
- Contact faculty members to seek their advice and ask if they are willing to write you a strong letter of recommendation
- Identify graduate programs and fellowships that are relevant for your plans

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER/DECEMBER (depending on the application deadline)

- Complete and submit application materials
- Ask your letter writers to submit their recommendation letters, providing all the forms, information, and deadlines
- Order transcripts through WebAdvisor (if official transcripts are required)
- If needed, confirm that all of your application materials were received

JANUARY/FEBRUARY/MARCH OF SENIOR YEAR

- If appropriate, look into visiting institutions on your own
- Some programs typically include interviews (e.g., in bioscience fields) or recruitment trips for admitted students
- Admissions offers with financial aid packages are provided around this time
- If you have been admitted into multiple programs, reach out to others to help you make your decision, and review the other section of this document with further suggestions on making your decision

APRIL 15

- Most universities participate in the CGS (Council of Graduate Schools) resolution, which allows admitted students to have time to make a decision and respond by April 15
- After you have made your final decision, thank all of your friends and colleagues for their assistance and inform them of your final decision
- If you declined admission from some institutions, remember to still thank them for their offers, because you'll likely encounter the faculty and scholars again



ADVICE ON NON-TRADITIONAL PATHS BETWEEN UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES and GRADUATE DEGREES

As you consider all possibilities, you might be thinking of not pursuing graduate school immediately after finishing your undergrad degree. Or you might be thinking of returning to school after a break to pursue a graduate program. There are several related paths:

FRESHMAN AND SOPHOMORE YEARS

- Apply for and participate in a post-baccalaureate program as a bridge between finishing your undergraduate degree and starting graduate school (ex: Accelerated Bachelor's/Master's Program Plan or Transitional Study while at CCU)
 - Work with your academic advisor or faculty advisor to determine when you should begin this process.
- Take a gap year (or more) to earn more income in the "real world," to shift to a new research area, to take additional courses, to take care of personal or family needs, or for other reasons.
- Apply for and get admitted into a graduate program, and then defer your admission for one year.
 - Many, but not all, graduate programs will allow admitted students to defer their admission for one year. This is something to request only after you've been admitted.

These are not uncommon paths, and so many students will be considering these possibilities. As you consider your options, it'll be important to plan your time wisely and reflect on how graduate admissions committees and employers will perceive how you used your time.

If the time between finishing your undergraduate degree and applying for graduate programs is long (i.e., several years or more), graduate admissions committees might question your commitment to their graduate program. However, you might have legitimate reasons that will be acceptable to the admissions committee. For example, you might have wanted to gain more research experience in a new direction by working as a research assistant, you might have had to work to earn more income to help support your family, or you might have needed to take a break to take care of dependents.

As you consider your specific circumstances, it's essential to consider how the admissions committees will perceive your decisions and for you to craft an acceptable explanation that relates to both your commitment and competence (Hint: personal statement). To guide you in crafting your explanation, try consulting with the faculty who will write your recommendation letters.

You can draft a description and ask your faculty letter writers how they would respond. Your description should provide a story that explains the major decisions that you made and explains why their graduate program fits as the next step in your storyline.

If your storyline does not appear to have any clear directions, or if it appears that you tried some alternatives that didn't work out and graduate school is a last resort, admissions committees will likely be skeptical of your commitment and focus. The important messages are provided here for your consideration:

- If you're finishing your undergraduate degree now and planning to pursue a graduate degree after a break, wisely plan your break. Be deliberate and plan a timeline of activities, so that you don't lose your focus.
- Carefully consider how you'll explain your story in your application and anticipate how graduate admissions committees will perceive your commitment and preparation. Your explanation should address the major forks along your path and convince the admissions committee that you'll remain committed and persist through the whole graduate program.



FUNDING GRADUATE STUDIES

Most graduate students receive financial support for the length of their program, including tuition and living expenses, graduate assistantships, scholarships, etc. Funding packages vary by department and University, depending on teaching and research requirements. Some resources and information are provided below.

GRADUATE ASSISTANTSHIPS (GA)

- Typically covers some or all of your graduate tuition
- Grow professionally through the development and application of discipline-based knowledge

FELLOWSHIPS

- Usually cover tuition and provide a stipend for your living expenses
- External fellowships can be used at most accredited programs
- Start looking early at funding sources and opportunities
- Many are restricted to US citizens/permanent residents
- Federal agencies, private foundations, corporations, and professional organizations offer awards for graduate study
- Internal, university-sponsored fellowships: based on faculty/department nominations

RESEARCH ASSISTANTSHIPS (RA)

- Can provide a salary and cover tuition
- Perform research as directed by faculty
- Your work might not be directly related to your own thesis research

TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIPS (TA)

- Usually provide a salary and cover tuition
- Might include grading papers, teaching (lectures or TA sections), and/or holding office hours
- Required by some departments for degree
- English proficiency may be required, or you might need to obtain additional language training

PREPARING YOUR APPLICATION

From taking standardized tests to writing personal statements, applying to graduate school can take quite a bit of time. The earlier you start, the easier the process will be and the more time you will have to tackle any possible hurdles that may appear along the way.

1. Personal statements
2. GPA and transcripts
3. Entrance exam scores (GMAT, GRE, LSAT, MCAT, DAT, MAT, etc.)
4. Letters of recommendation
5. Biographical information from your essays or résumé/ curriculum vitae (CV) that describes your academic, research, and professional experiences
6. Writing sample (for some programs in the humanities and social sciences)
7. Interview (for some graduate programs)

In general, faculty and admissions committees use these components to determine if you are a suitable candidate for graduate school. In particular, they are trying to determine if you are a suitable candidate for their specific program.

GATHER INFORMATION ON EACH OF THE GRADUATE PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

- Get online applications started and create online accounts.
- Find out about application fees and look into application fee waivers and their deadlines.
- Many universities give waivers for participants in diversity graduate-prep programs.
- Check if there is a separate application for financial support.
- Mark deadlines and take them seriously!
- Find out about testing and course requirements for the programs.
- Are entrance exams required or recommended?
- Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Test of Spoken English (TSE)

TAKING THE ENTRANCE EXAMS

- o Check if graduate programs in your field typically require GRE exam scores for general and subject tests. Many graduate programs require them, but these GRE requirements have recently been changing.
- o Start preparing early (junior year of college).
- o Take a practice exam to determine where you currently stand:
 - i. Free from our Library's website and search for Learning Express
- o Use online and university resources.
- o Practice, practice, practice!
- o Find out how far you are from the scores you need to be competitive.
 - If you're scoring pretty well, prioritize:
 - a. Getting more familiar with the computer-based exam and its format
 - b. Learning the way the different question types work and the types of wrong answers associated with certain question types
 - c. Getting comfortable using educated guessing when stumped
 - d. Increasing your focus and endurance
 - If you're further away from good scores, take more time to study and:
 - a. Focus on replacing your current problem-solving approaches
 - b. Try not to worry so much about how you're doing while studying.
 - c. Focus on observing your problem solving and improving it.
 - d. Embrace your mistakes and errors—learn from them so you don't make the same errors on the exam.
 - e. While you're studying, practice managing anxiety, tension, and attention for optimal performance.
 - i. Self-care is important when preparing for the next step in life.

WRITING YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Your personal statement should focus on two main aspects: your competence and commitment.

Your personal statement must demonstrate to the admissions committee that you have considered graduate school and their specific program seriously. It's your opportunity to summarize your academic and research experiences. You must also communicate how your experiences are relevant to preparing you for the graduate degree that you will be

pursuing and explain why a given program is the right one for you.

The personal statement is where you highlight your strengths. Make your strengths absolutely clear to the reviewers, because they will often be reading many other statements. Your self-assessments and honest conversations with peers and advisors should have also revealed your strengths. But you must also address (not blame others for) weaknesses or unusual aspects of your application or academic background.

IDENTIFY YOUR STRENGTHS

Identify your strengths in terms of competence that indicate that you will succeed in the graduate program and provide examples to support your claims. Start your statement by describing your strengths. Because faculty will be reading many statements, it's important to start off with your strengths and not "bury the lede."

- Consider traits of successful graduate students from your informational interviews, and identify which of these traits you have.
 - These traits could involve research skills and experiences, expertise in working with techniques or instruments, familiarity with professional networks and resources in your field, etc.
- Write concise summaries and stories that demonstrate your strengths, e.g., how your strengths helped you to achieve certain goals or overcome obstacles.
- Summarize your research experience(s).
 - What were the main project goals and the "big picture" questions?
 - What was your role in this project?
 - What did you accomplish?
 - What did you learn?
 - How did you grow as a result of the experience(s)?

ADDRESSING WEAKNESSES OR UNUSUAL ASPECTS

- o Identify weaknesses or unusual aspects in your application—e.g., a significant drop in your GPA during a term; weak GRE scores; changes in your academic trajectory, etc. Don't ignore them, because ignoring them might be interpreted as blind spots for you. If you're unsure if a particular issue is significant enough to address, seek advice from faculty mentors.
- o Explain how you'll improve and strengthen those areas or work around your weakness. Determine how you will address them in a positive light, e.g., by discussing how you overcame obstacles through persistence, what you learned from challenges, and how you grew from failures. Focusing on a growth mindset or grit might also help.
- o Deal with any significant unusual aspects later in the statement to allow a positive impression to develop first.
- o Explain, rather than provide excuses—i.e., address the issue directly and don't blame others (even if you believe someone else is responsible). Draft it and get feedback from others to see if the explanation is working as you want it to.
- o Provide supporting empirical evidence if possible. For example, "Adjusting to college was a major step for me, coming from a small high school and as a first-generation college student. My freshman GPA was not up to par with my typical achievements, as demonstrated by my improved GPA of 3.8 during my second and third years in college."
- o Be concise (don't dwell on the issues), but also be complete (don't lead to other potentially unanswered questions). For example, if a drop in grades during a term was due to a health issue, explain whether the health issue is recurring, managed now with medication, resolved, etc.

EXPLAIN YOUR COMMITMENT

Explain your commitment to research and their graduate program, including your motivation for why you are applying to this graduate program at this university. Be as specific as possible. Identify several faculty members with whom you are interested in working, and explain why their research interests you.

1. Descriptions of your commitment should explain why you're passionate about this particular academic field and provide demonstrations of your commitment with stories (e.g., working long hours to solve a problem, overcoming challenges in research, resilience in pursuing problems). Don't merely assert your commitment.
2. Explain why you are applying to graduate school, as opposed to seeking a professional degree or a job. Discuss your interest and motivation for grad school, along with your future career aspirations.

WRITING YOUR DIVERSITY STATEMENT

- o Read the instructions for statements related to diversity carefully. Many universities have subtle, and yet significantly different approaches to asking similar questions.
- o Review online statements related to diversity, inclusion, and equity from the university's leadership.
- o Being aware of different approaches to diversity may help you to communicate your own perspectives.
- o Review how the graduate program or university classifies diversity categories, in terms of race/ethnicity, gender identity, first-generation students, LGBTQ+, communities, undocumented and DACA students, veterans, former foster youth, religion, etc.
- o If you identify as a URM (under-represented minority) in your discipline, consider how aspects of your identity have shaped your academic journey and informed your research and career interests. Be sincere and genuine and avoid superficial or hyperbolic "overcoming all barriers" and "I'm the little engine that could" appeals.
- o Whether or not you identify as a URM in your field, you can share how you participated or led activities that broadened participation in your field and promoted diversity and inclusive practices, e.g., mentorship or outreach programs, community-building events, professional development activities for underprivileged students, etc.
- o Deciding whether or not to disclose aspects of your personal identity can be difficult, especially when dealing with less visible aspects of identity. Consider talking with close friends who have navigated similar paths or reaching out to our Intercultural and Inclusion Student Services office.
 - i. It might also help to observe if the graduate program (from websites and your personal interactions with contacts at the university) appears to operate from a "deficit model" or superficial "checkbox" approach to diversity, or has developed a more sophisticated framework in diversity.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE: subtle aspects

- o Make sure you are addressing what the admissions committee requires you to include.
- o Think in terms of engaging faculty in a conversation rather than pleading with them that you should be admitted. Ask reviewers to read drafts with this concern in mind.
 - i. Career Services and the Writing Center can also review for you!
- o With later drafts, try developing an overall narrative theme. See if one emerges as you work.
- o Write at least 10 drafts and expect your thinking and the essay to change quite a bit over time.
- o Read drafts out loud to help you catch errors.

- o Expect the “you” that emerges in your essay to be incomplete... that’s OK. You’re sharing a professional/ scholarly slice of “you.”
- o Avoid humor and flashy openings and closings. Think of pitching the essay to an educated person in the field, but not necessarily in your specialty. Avoid emotionally laden words (such as love or passion). Remember, your audience is a group of professors! Overly emotional appeals might make them uncomfortable. They are looking for scholarly colleagues.
- o Remember whatever you include in the personal statement, it could be shared with many.

REQUESTING RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

As you progressed through the decision-making process in the earlier parts above, you should have had several significant conversations with faculty. These conversations will help you immensely as you seek several faculty to write recommendation letters on your behalf. That conversation will also help the faculty write meaningfully about your strengths. It’s best to avoid situations where faculty will only be able to write superficial letters where they will simply report your letter grade from a course.



CHOOSE YOUR RECOMMENDERS THOUGHTFULLY

As you ask for a reference letter, specifically ask if the recommender will write a strong letter on your behalf. Although it will likely be an awkward question to ask directly, it's much better to find out in advance if they would submit a lukewarm letter. It is not uncommon for admissions committees to receive negative or lukewarm reference letters, which will significantly hurt your chances for getting admitted. Moreover, if the potential letter writer indicates some hesitation to write a strong letter and mentions any concerns, this will help prepare you to either thank them and move on to another potential recommender, OR address the concerns in your personal statements and/or interviews.

The letters of recommendation should support your claim that you have considered graduate school seriously. The letters must identify your strengths that will exemplify how you will become a successful graduate student. Letters that simply confirm grades received in courses are of little value to an admissions committee, since they will have your transcripts. Your letters of support should add new dimensions rather than be redundant.

WHO SHOULD WRITE YOUR LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION?

Ideally, you should select research mentors and faculty who can speak to your abilities to be a successful graduate student. Some ideal options are:

- o Faculty research mentors (most important reference)
- o Employer or supervisor during an internship or job in a field related to your discipline (it's much better if the employer has a graduate degree)
- o Postdoctoral research mentor (if they worked closely with you in your research)
- o Faculty instructor (who can comment on more than simply your grade)
- o Academic advisor

Letters from these individuals are not recommended for your graduate application:

- o Family or friends
- o Religious advisors
- o Graduate students who have not completed their graduate degree
- o Employer or supervisor in an unrelated field or discipline
- o Faculty member in an unrelated academic discipline who can only report your final grade

Identify five or more faculty members whom you might ask to write a recommendation letter for you. Many programs require three references, but you'll probably need to identify more references and use them for different programs and universities depending on the faculty members' experiences and backgrounds. Admissions committees also value receiving reference letters from faculty who are very familiar with their university or graduate program, from having attended that university's graduate program or from having been a faculty member at that institution.

For each request for a recommendation letter, make it as easy as possible for the faculty to complete your request. If you make it difficult or leave out essential details, you may annoy them and cause them to be less than excited to write a strong letter on your behalf. Remember that you may be asking them to submit multiple letters for different programs, so this will consume significant time and energy from them. For each request:

1. Provide the name of the university and type of program to which you're applying, along with clear instructions on how to submit the letter, deadline (remember to give them extra time if this is your first request to them), and if you'll be asking for additional letters in the near future. You may want to check their calendar if they'll be unavailable for a significant time period before the deadlines, which often occur around the end of the fall term, which is a busy time for most faculty.
3. Provide a short summary of strengths and research experiences, along with your CV or resume and personal statement, to refresh their memory of your background, strengths, and motivations for that particular program.
4. Provide an email reminder about 10 days before it's due. If you haven't heard from them, consider one more gentle reminder a few days before the deadline.
5. Provide an update to your letter writers after you receive invitations to interview or admissions offers, and when you make your final decision.



INTERVIEWING AND TALKING WITH PROSPECTIVE FACULTY

The graduate application process varies broadly and depends on your specific academic program. The variations might include:

- o Admission decision based only on an online application
- o Admission decision based on online application and interviewing with faculty
- o In the cases where you are admitted to work with a specific faculty member, you should contact faculty directly
- o Admission decision based on online application and interview trip
- o A short list of applicants are invited for an on-campus interview trip
- o Admission decision based on online application and recruiting trip
- o Applicants are admitted first, and then invited for an on-campus recruiting trip

Because of the range of possible application processes, it's critical to learn about each program's requirements. For some graduate programs, you will need to directly contact faculty because a specific professor will decide whether to admit you as their own graduate student. In these circumstances, make sure to contact the faculty directly. (When contacting faculty for the first time, see the next section below for suggestions.)

It will be important in your decision-making process to determine if you envision working closely with that faculty member and if you have complementary working and communication styles. The faculty member will also want to assess your experiences and how you work by communicating with you. Thus, you will want to sharpen your interview skills as you communicate with faculty.

To Sample email to a faculty: Bcc

Cc

M.S. in Marine Science: Coastal Marine and Wetland Studies at CCU

Dear Dr. Joe Smith,

I am currently a senior and a Marine Biology researcher at Coastal Carolina University, and would greatly appreciate an opportunity to briefly speak with you about your research and the M.S. in Marine Science: Coastal Marine and Wetland Studies program at Coastal Carolina University.

I am seeking to pursue a PhD in Coastal and Marine Systems Science after I complete my master's program, and my research advisor (Professor Chauncy Chanticleer) spoke highly about Coastal Carolina University's graduate program. I am particularly fascinated by XYZ. I have conducted similar research here which included XYZ adjacent. These are further described in my attached CV.

I carefully reviewed your website, and would greatly appreciate speaking with you on the phone for approximately 15 minutes to learn more about future directions of your research, particularly on developing mathematical models. I am available during these time slots. Please let me know if any of these work for you, and I'd be happy to offer more time slots if needed.

- September 1, Wednesday 12-5 pm
- September 3, Friday 12-7 pm
- September 6, Monday 12-7 pm
- September 7, Tuesday 9-12 pm

Jackie Smith
Coastal Carolina University student
jsmith89@coastal.edu (cell) 843-555-1954

Send | v

TIPS:

- Use a brief subject line
 - Avoid vague subjects (e.g., "question" or "request")
- Address them by their full name and professional title
 - Don't use "Hi" or "Hey" or other informal greetings
- In the very first sentence, quickly summarize who you are and why you're contacting them
 - If a person known to the professor suggested that you reach out to them, include that info also
- Explain why you're contacting them specifically
 - Describe your highlights briefly
 - Attach CV and/or a link to your LinkedIn profile
 - Include other links as needed
- State your request; be specific
 - Make it easy for them to say yes to your request; provide ample times when you're available
- Include your full name
 - If you're in a graduate prep program, include that information
 - Include your email and phone number

Some graduate programs will invite you to conduct a phone interview or invite you to the university for a campus visit (common in the biosciences). The interview is your opportunity to more thoroughly demonstrate that you have what it takes to be in the graduate program. You will want to show your understanding and enthusiasm for the research that you have done. Some suggestions to prepare for the interview are provided below.

1. BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

- a. For campus visits, it's OK to ask what is expected of you and how to prepare (e.g., if your travel expenses will be covered, how to dress, if you should bring your CV, etc.).
- b. Learn about the faculty and people you will be meeting or communicating with. Read about the research interests of the faculty, including abstracts or papers. Prepare at least 1-2 specific research questions for each interview.
- c. Review the research that you conducted. If it was published or presented at a conference, reread the paper, abstract, or poster. Prepare a brief (1-2 minutes) oral summary of your past work. What was the research question? How did you address it? What did you specifically complete and achieve? What are some possible questions that faculty might ask?
- i. Prepare detailed questions you have of the program you are considering. Generic questions (e.g., tell me about your program) indicate that you didn't read the basics on their website, and so won't leave a positive impression. Determine what's important for you (specific research facilities, professional development activities, student groups, opportunities for collaborations, etc.) and research them online.
- d. Determine and list the questions you have about the program, university, and location of where you are visiting. What are you hoping to see and learn?
- e. Conduct a mock interview with a friend or an advisor at your career center.
 - i. Ask a peer or friend (e.g., a current graduate student or postdoc who is familiar with

graduate school interviews) to help you sharpen your interview skills.

- ii. Come prepared to the mock interview in professional attire and with your materials (CV, papers, etc.)
- iii. If possible, video record your mock interview. Although many cringe at watching themselves, the video can be incredibly helpful in revealing blind spots.
- iv. If your interview will be conducted via Skype or another video platform, some helpful tips are provided in this YouTube video.
- v. After the mock interview, ask your peer for honest and critical feedback. Listen actively without being defensive and allow your peer to speak openly, so that you will improve.

2. DURING THE INTERVIEW

- a. For campus visits, dress appropriately (usually business casual, but be comfortable); be on time; organize your papers (e.g., résumés/CVs, slides or images, questions). Even for phone/Zoom interviews, dressing professionally will help you to mentally prepare for the interview.
- b. Speak enthusiastically about your work. Highlight your research accomplishments and/or professional growth. If asked to speak about a weakness, phrase your answer in a forward-looking manner to demonstrate learning and growth, and awareness of your weaknesses.
- c. You'll want to sound positive and enthusiastic. But avoid excessive enthusiasm, which could be interpreted as naiveté or desperation. This is a tough balance to achieve, so practice with others.
- d. Listen actively to your faculty interviewers as they talk about their research. Ask questions, using your prepared lists. Take notes to remember comments and suggestions.

3. AFTER THE INTERVIEW

- a. Summarize your perceptions of the program, university, and environment.
- b. Make a table listing the pros and cons. List the people whom you met on your visit, and write a brief comment for each person to help you remember your interactions. Is it a good fit or you?
- c. Email your interviewers and thank them for their time. Follow up if you promised to provide any materials. Even if you determine that you don't wish to work with that faculty member, this isn't the time to burn bridges, and you might bump into them in the future.
- d. Reflect on your interview performance and make adjustments to strengthen your next interview.



HOW YOUR APPLICATION IS REVIEWED

The process of reviewing applications varies significantly from University to University, and from program to program.

- Some large programs will receive hundreds of applications, which might be reviewed initially by a committee that will "triage" the applications and make an initial cut.
- In smaller programs, all applications might be reviewed by all members of the admissions committee.
- The admissions committee will include faculty and might also include staff and/or graduate students.
- You as the applicant will likely not receive an update on the process until the final decision has been made.
- You might, however, be notified if a part of your application is missing, but you can't count on this. You'll need to make sure that all parts have been submitted by the deadlines.
- If you are offered admission, the financial package might come together or separately.

If you are offered admission, note that almost all universities follow the CGS (Council of Graduate Schools) resolution deadline of April 15. This means that you are under no obligation to respond to offers prior to April 15, and graduate programs should not pressure you to respond before April 15. However, they might request you to give a response earlier if you have already made your decision, so that they can make decisions and notify other applicants on their wait list.

If you are notified of being placed on a wait list for a highly desired graduate program, it'll be important to stay in communication with

the graduate program and to be responsive to their communications. Most (but not all) programs will provide their final decision by the April 15 deadline. As graduate programs might be making final decisions right up to and occasionally after April 15, stay in close communication with key contacts at the graduate programs.

If you have made your final decision whether to accept or decline an admissions offer well before April 15, please be considerate of those on the wait list by notifying the graduate program of your decision.

MAKING YOUR FINAL DECISION

At the initial stages of your application process, it may seem difficult to plan ahead and consider how you will make your final decision of which graduate program to attend. But thinking about your decision-making process will help you throughout the whole application process, because you will be more committed and focused. This commitment and focus will help sharpen your questions and priorities, and faculty will often admire applicants who have clear directions in their lives.



- Go back to your self-assessment exercises and reflect on your answers and responses.
 - o Have any of your answers or decisions changed?
 - o Have you learned anything new about yourself and about graduate school?
 - o Have there been any surprises?
- For those programs that have admitted you, prepare a table of characteristics, pros and cons, and your list of priorities.
 - o Determine what is important for you.
- If you get admitted, you may wish to consider deferring your start date for a year if you need to address other priorities in your life (e.g., taking care of family, marriage, children, other professional opportunities, etc.).
- If you did not get admitted into your desired or favorite programs, consider your options.
 - o Can you find further research, professional, or academic experiences that can help strengthen your application for next year?
 - o Can you obtain other training or education (certificate, master's degree, post-baccalaureate program, internship, etc.)?
 - o Consider your alternatives for other career directions.
- During your whole application process, you probably increased and deepened your network.
 - o Reach out to some of your new network to seek their counsel and advice. Reaching out to them can build your network and even prepare you for your next steps. Identify specific people whom you want to contact.
- Even if you are admitted into your favorite programs, it will help to go back and consider some of your basic questions.
 - o Attending graduate school is often challenging for most students,

and most graduate programs will be more challenging than undergraduate programs. This isn't a decision to be made lightly or quickly, and strengthening your commitment will help equip you with persistence when you face obstacles. Be aware of confirmation biases, where we often focus on information that confirms our beliefs and ignore other information that might provide a more balanced view. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What are some potential pitfalls as you consider starting graduate school? How will you address them? Who might help you? What are some possible resources?
- What are some possible challenges for each graduate program that you're considering? How will you address them? Who might help you?
- What are you looking forward to? Remembering the positive aspects often helps through depressing periods.

As you complete your decision-making and application process for graduate school, remember to go back and personally thank your many friends, mentors, and contacts who helped you through the process. This important exercise will help to increase your gratitude and strengthen your network for future opportunities. These relationships will likely continue as you advance in your scholarly field, and so it'll be important to maintain your network.

We hope that these resources, suggestions, and tools are valuable as you plan your academic career and approach forks along your path. We realize that the path can often be unclear and challenging. However, these challenges can help you learn more about yourself, deepen relationships with helpful friends, and prepare you for your next steps. We hope that this guide has shed some light along your path and wish you the best for your future.