

Applying to Graduate School



Regardless of discipline, graduate school applications often require the same basic components:

- Transcript(s)
- GRE or other standardized test scores
- Letters of Recommendation
- Admissions Essay/Personal Statement
- Resume or Curriculum Vitae (CV)

Transcripts

Your transcript(s) provide information about your academic background for a prospective graduate school. The courses you've taken (e.g. related subject matter, pre-requisites, and level of challenge), history of successful completion, and GPA equivalent tell the admissions committee about who you are as a student.

You won't typically include your transcript in the application that you submit to the graduate program. Instead, the Registrar's office at your school sends it. This means that you'll have to visit the Registrar's office or website to request your transcript by completing forms for each graduate program to which you'd like to forward a transcript. Begin this process early, because schools require time to process your forms and send the transcripts (sometimes as much as 2 weeks). You don't want your application to be rejected because your transcript was late or never arrived. Sometimes transcripts never arrive, due to the hazards of snail mail. This means that you want to submit your request for transcripts early enough to request them again in the unlikely event that you need to. Be sure to check that your transcript has arrived at each of the programs to which you've applied.

Graduate Record Exam (GRE) or Other Standardized Test Scores

Many graduate programs require standardized exams, such as the GRE, for admission; however, law, medical, and business schools usually require different exams (the LSAT, MCAT, and GMAT, respectively). Each of these exams is standardized, permitting students from different colleges to be compared meaningfully. The GRE is similar in structure to the SAT, but demonstrates your potential for graduate level work.

Some programs may also require the GRE Subject Test, a standardized test that covers the material in a discipline (e.g., Psychology and Biology). Most graduate admissions committees are inundated with applications, so they apply cut-off scores to the GRE and only consider applications that have scores above the cut-off point. Some, but not all, schools reveal their average GRE scores in their admissions material and in graduate school admissions books, such as the Petersen's Guides.

Take standardized tests early (typically, the Spring or Summer of Junior Year, before you apply) to guide your selection of programs to which to apply, as well as ensure that your scores arrive to the programs early, before the admission deadline.

Letters of Recommendation

The GRE and GPA components of your application portray you as a numerical value. The letter of recommendation is what helps the committee to begin thinking of you as a person. The quality of your letters rests on the quality of your relationships with professors. Make a good impression on professors, make research contacts with faculty, and seek out experiences that will set you apart from other students.

Take care and choose appropriate letter writers. Do not ask for a letter from a professor who knows nothing more about you than the fact that you passed their class - such letters do not enhance your application, but detract from it. Be courteous and respectful in asking for letters and provide enough information to help the professor write a helpful letter.

Letters from employers can also be included if they address your experience, skills and knowledge related to your field of study (or your motivation and quality of work, overall).

Admissions Essay/Personal Statement

The admissions essay is your opportunity to explain why you are applying to a graduate program. Carefully structure your essay. Be creative and informative as you introduce yourself and explain why you want to attend graduate school and why each program is a perfect match to your skills.

Before you begin writing, consider your qualifications. First think about who will be reading your statement and what they are looking for in an essay. Not only are they committee members, they are scholars who are searching for the kind of motivation that implies a dedication to their field of study; and they are looking for someone who will be engaged in their work.

Explain your relevant skills and experiences in your essay. Focus on how your educational and occupational experiences, such as research, led you to this program. Don't rely only on emotional motivation (such as "I want to help people" or "I want to learn"). Describe how this program will benefit you (and how your skills can benefit the faculty within it), where you see yourself in the program and how it fits into your future goals. Be specific: What do you offer? Some programs require students to complete one or several admissions essays on specific topics, such as addressing questions to illustrate applicants' critical analysis skills. Always answer the question.

Résumé or Curriculum Vitae (CV)

While your admissions essay provides the opportunity for you to highlight your most relevant experience, there is often a character limit. Therefore, graduate schools may also ask applicants to upload their résumé or CV, in order to get a broader sense of your background. A resume and CV are similar in that they're both documents summarizing your professional experience, education, skills and achievements. A résumé (French for "summary") is a shorter document (1-2 pages) that provides a concise overview of related professional and educational experience. A CV (short for the Latin phrase "curriculum vitae," which means "life's work"), on the other hand, is a longer, more detailed document (2-6 pages) focused largely on academic work and research.

Interview

Although it's not always a part of the process, some graduate programs use interviews to learn more about their applicants. Sometimes what looks like a great match on paper isn't in person. If you're asked to interview for a graduate program, remember that this is your opportunity to determine how well a fit the program is for you, as well. In other words, you're interviewing them, as much as they are interviewing you.