

FAQ: Applying to Graduate School

by Prof. John E. Ebel, Dept of Geology and Geophysics, Boston College

What is the purpose of graduate school?

Undergraduate education gives students a broad, general education. Graduate education provides students with more advanced learning in a specialized discipline or sub-discipline. Graduate school gives an in-depth understanding such that the student becomes something of an expert in the topic of study. A good graduate program also teaches advanced skills in such areas as problem-solving, mathematics, writing, oral presentation, and technology, each as applied to the particular field of study.

What is the different between M.A./M.S. and Ph.D. programs?

M.A./M.S. and Ph.D. students usually take the same courses, although Ph.D. students may be required to take more courses than M.A./M.S. students (sometimes the opposite is true). The major difference between these degrees is in the level of original thinking that is expected. Ph.D.'s are trained to be leaders of research and research groups, conceiving and promoting new ideas. M.A./M.S. students, on the other hand, are trained to participate as part of a team carrying out advanced work. They may or may not become team leaders.

When should I go to graduate school?

Graduate school is appropriate at any age and stage of life. Some students go to graduate school directly after finishing their undergraduate education. However, many others undertake graduate studies after having been out of school for some period of time. You should go to graduate school when you are ready to get the most out of the experience. The purpose of graduate schooling is to learn material that you expect to use professionally or want to know for personal satisfaction.

Where should I apply to graduate school?

You should apply to graduate programs that offer courses of study that you are interested in and that have faculty who are known for their expertise in your area of interest. Evaluate faculty and student publications, presentations at meetings, etc. Make contacts with the faculty to learn their interest in you and for you to learn if you want to study with them. Also, evaluate the graduate students in a graduate program—you can learn as much from your fellow students as from the faculty.

Always remember one thing: if you are in doubt about whether or not you are qualified for a graduate program, apply to that program and let them make the decision about whether or not they want you. You may not be a good judge about which graduate programs will want you as a student and which will not want you.

How important are my test scores and grades for my graduate school application?

Graduate applications are evaluated by the department to which you apply, and every department evaluates graduate applications differently. Some departments take test scores like the GRE very seriously, and some do not. Some put a heavy emphasis on grades and GPA, while others evaluate the subject matter of the courses you took. For many graduate programs, a B average in a suite of challenging, advanced courses may be more attractive than a straight A average in a curriculum dominated by easy courses with little or no advanced material.

What is a Curriculum Vitae (CV)?

A CV is a summary document listing all of your professional experience and publications or other products. You should list and briefly summarize each professional position you have had, state all professional affiliations in professional societies (and any offices held), mention any awards or scholarships you have received, patents acquired, and list all publications, both those pertinent to your work as well as other published material of note. Special items such as project reports, computer programs, conferences organized, etc., should also be mentioned. A CV should be concise but informative about all aspects of your professional work.

How should I write a statement of purpose?

A statement of purpose is used by the faculty evaluating graduate applications to determine how well an applicant will fit into their graduate program. A statement of purpose will also be used to help match up a graduate student with interested faculty. Be as specific as possible about your goals for graduate study and for your professional aspirations beyond graduate school. Also, give a concise summary of any relevant work or experience in your background that has prepared you for graduate work or has honed your professional interests. Also, be sure your statement of purpose is well written, since it may be the only writing sample upon which your written skills can be evaluated directly.

How important are letters of recommendation for my graduate school application?

Letters of recommendation from faculty members who have taught you or supervised a major piece of work (i.e., undergraduate thesis, summer research project, laboratory research assistant, etc.) are the most valuable if they substantiate your capabilities, especially the ability to do creative work with minimal supervision. Letters from persons outside academia are less useful, since they seldom can evaluate the potential for outstanding academic performance.

What financial aid is available for graduate school?

Financial aid can take the form of tuition remission credits (they defray the tuition costs of courses), assistantships to help with teaching or research, and fellowships (you get paid to go to school with no work required in return). Assistantships and fellowships may be available from the university, and they can also be sought from government and private agencies. Government and private loans are also available. There are many sources of graduate school funding available, and so it is to your advantage to learn about them and apply for them.