



Get Your Game On: Prepping For Your Grad School Application

An Accepted.com Report

by Rebecca Blustein

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Should You Apply?

It's not too early to start training for next year's application marathon. If you're considering a Master's or PhD program, you can reduce stress later by putting in some serious mind work up front—now, before you start the actual application process.

The first question you need to ask, and it's a big one, is: *“Is this degree for me?”*

How can you evaluate whether a degree program is for you? First, ask yourself why you want to go to grad school. Is it because you need a particular credential to pursue (or advance in) your chosen career? Is it because you envision a career in research (whether in academia or industry) and this program is the way to gain those advanced skills? Or is it because you've been in school all along and aren't sure what else to do? Is your reason simply that grad school feels like the “next step” you ought to take? Can you think ahead to your longer term goals? Be honest with yourself, and if your reasons for pursuing advanced study don't ultimately seem compelling—in other words, if graduate study would just be a time-filler or a way of putting off thinking about your goals—you might want to reconsider.

If you have clear post-graduate goals, think critically about the financial impact of your decision. We've posted recently on the [Accepted.com blog](#) some discussion about the advisability of grad school in the Humanities; while that's not a topic we'll get into here, if your goal is to be a professor, you'll probably want to take into account the health of the academic job market in your chosen field.

Now is also the time to make an honest evaluation of your credentials and preparation. Do you have the training you need to begin a grad program in your field, or will you need to shore up your skills in certain areas (such as languages or statistics) before applying?

As for deciding whether to pursue a PhD versus a Master's degree: Are you the kind of person who thrives in the environment you'll likely encounter in a PhD program? That is, do you enjoy research, and do you work well on your own? Are you organized and self-motivated? Are you prepared for the number of years that PhD study entails? Do your long-term goals require a PhD?

Next: I'll discuss how to focus your school search. What makes a program right for you?

Choosing Programs to Apply to

As you bring your interests into focus, start to create a list of target programs. Many factors will influence your decision-making process. Here are some things to think about:

- Do you have geographical considerations? (Do you need to be near family, or in a certain city where a spouse works?)
- What are the strengths of the programs that interest you? If you're looking to work in industry, does the program offer networking/internships/career placement? If you're considering a PhD, is the program strong in your subfield?
- If you're planning to apply for a PhD program, is there a faculty member in the department who is doing work in your area of interest, or who could serve as your mentor/research supervisor?
- How many students does the program accept each year? (Some doctoral programs enroll as few as 3-4 students annually, so know that even if your credentials are stellar, you should have more than one plan!)
- Is there funding available?
- For PhD programs: Does the university publish the average time-to-degree of students in the program? (This is sometimes rather different from the stated program length you'll find in the program catalog.)
- Are there opportunities to work as a teaching or research assistant? If grad students in the department are expected to teach, is there a mentoring program in place? How many semesters do students TA?
- If you're hoping to work as an academic, inform yourself about the structure/expectations of your discipline. Do the programs you're looking at have a strong record of placing their PhDs in post-docs and tenure track positions? (Do the professors you're thinking about working with have such a record?)
- If you have a good relationship with a current or past faculty mentor, ask for advice about programs and potential grad advisers you should consider.

Next: I'll address how to develop a concrete description of your research interests.

How to Write about Your Research Interests

The most common challenge that my clients face when writing a statement of purpose (SOP) for a Master's or PhD application is how to describe, in concrete terms, what their research interests and goals are. It's one thing to express interest in a field, or explain where that interest came from—but when it comes to setting out some plans and goals, people get a bit anxious.

This is understandable—some people worry they'll be held to their still-evolving ideas as if they were chiseled in stone; and others simply haven't thought those ideas through very much yet. Take a deep breath! No one's going to produce your SOP when it's time for you to start writing your thesis and expect it to correspond exactly—everyone knows your knowledge and ideas will develop throughout your grad program. On the other hand, the SOP is the way for the committee to see that you possess depth of interest and comprehension in your field, and that you understand what goes into research. If you talk about ideas that are too vague or nebulous, or that aren't addressable by your discipline, then you risk sounding naïve.

Here are some questions/pointers to help you focus and narrow your interests:

- What are the broad research questions/issues that interest you? Can you describe your interests in a sentence? In a paragraph? Try to create a summary of your interests that you can work with.
- Within those broad areas of interest, have you begun to focus on more specific questions? If you're not sure what the current questions/problems are in your field, now is the time to start catching up—look at recent journal publications, go to conferences if you can, etc. Reading the lit in your field will also give you a sense of how to frame your ideas in the language of your field.
- Have you done any research in this field already? If so, do you intend to build on your previous work in grad school or go in a new direction?
- How will your research contribute to the field?
- Some projects described in SOPs are achievable in the short-term, while others are big enough to last a career. If your interests/goals fall into this latter category, acknowledge the fact that you're being ambitious—and try to identify some aspect of your interests that you can pursue as a first step.
- Use your SOP to demonstrate your skills (and past experience) in your field, as well as to define the next steps you intend to take.
- Focusing your interests will also involve more detailed research about the programs you

plan on applying to. Who might be your research supervisor? How do your interests relate to the work this scholar or scholars are doing now? How would you contribute to the department, and to the discipline?

- Your SOP will also address your longer-term goals (post-degree). Do you plan to pursue a career in research/academia? (For many PhD programs, this remains the department's formal expectation, even though many PhDs find employment outside the academy.) If you're applying for your MA/MS, be prepared to discuss what your plans are. How will the degree help you?

Next: I'll talk more about how to show you have the skills to succeed in grad school.

Your Skills

As I've been discussing, part of the pre-application thought process involves honest analysis of your achievements and abilities, along with your future interests. Grad school will give you the opportunity for deep, advanced study in your field—including theoretical/methodological approaches undergrads are rarely exposed to. As you prepare to apply, consider how to present your skills/accomplishments effectively, and determine whether you need to shore up any gaps in your record.

First, think about the skills you've gained so far, and think about the programs you're considering.

Do you meet the prerequisites for admission?

Challenges may arise if you don't have an undergraduate degree in the field you want to pursue. You may have to demonstrate that you have sufficient background if you don't have the degree to prove it. Does the department require any specific knowledge on entrance (such as statistics or foreign language fluency)? Can gaps be made up during your first semester, or do you need to remedy them before you apply?

Do you have research experience?

If yes, what type of project(s) did you complete? Did you participate in faculty research or conduct your own project? Did your work result in any presentations/publications? What did you learn about your field? What did you learn about the process of doing research/conducting a long-term project? How did this project make you interested in pursuing future research?

Have you done anything special to gain pertinent skills?

Did you take accelerated or grad level courses as an undergrad? Did you participate in an honors program? Are you planning to take any extra coursework before applying? If you're working, have you gained skills through your job that relate to your proposed program?

Next: I'll cover other preparatory topics such as lining up letters of recommendation and searching for fellowships.

Lining up Letters of Recommendation and Searching for Fellowships

These are also steps that you can start working on well ahead of next winter's application deadlines.

If you're still in college, asking professors now to be your recommenders will be straightforward; the benefit of doing this early is that the professors who work in your field will be able to give you advice about programs to consider, and might be able to introduce you to their colleagues who are doing research in your area of interest. If you're out of school, try to make contact with professors you had good relationships with. For doctoral programs, in particular, you'll need the majority of your letters to be academic references (rather than professional).

You can start early by discussing grad school with your faculty mentor(s), and later on, giving them a portfolio of information to help them write the letter (a list of the schools you're applying to, a draft of your SOP, etc.). If it's been a while since you took their class, it can be helpful to supply a copy of a project you completed for them—but in any event, try to meet with them in person if possible, and give them sufficient time to write your letter (a month is good). Follow up with a gracious thank you note.

You can also start [learning about graduate funding opportunities](#)¹ right away. Find out about what kind of funding packages are available at the schools you're considering. Do they fund MA/MS students, or just PhDs? What percentage of students is offered funding each year? Is there funding for international students? Does the school offer advising to help students apply for national grant programs like the NSF? Will you be considered for Teaching Assistant positions automatically, or must you apply?

Research your funding options and stay organized!

¹ <http://www.accepted.com/ecommerce/graduatescholarships.aspx>

About the Author

[Dr. Rebecca Blustein](#),² author of the popular ebook [Financing Your Future: Winning Fellowships, Scholarships and Awards for Grad School](#),³ is available to help you get organized during the pre-application season, as well as help you construct clear application essays and personal statements that communicate and persuade.

Epilogue

Thank you for signing up for this exclusive Accepted.com e-course. We hope you've learned important tips about getting a head start when it comes to preparing a winning grad school application.

If you still don't feel confident executing self-assessments and evaluating what you're looking for in a graduate program, then [Rebecca](#)⁴ and the rest of the talented and knowledgeable [Accepted.com staff](#)⁵ would be happy to help you. Even if you think you can accomplish these lofty goals on your own, a second set of experienced, objective eyes can add valuable perspective when you've just spent too much time thinking about your priorities and staring at a blank screen. Our services will prove extremely helpful when you reach the essay writing stage of your application process. Professional writers have editors for good reasons. Shouldn't you, like the thousands of clients who have worked with Accepted since 1994, have a pro on your side for something as important as your graduate application essay or personal statement?



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