

Fast Facts on Applying to Graduate School

Don't just choose a Program, Choose a Supervisor

As a graduate student, the supervisor of your research program has a tremendous influence on your development as a junior scholar, and on your ability to win grants and gain employment. An excellent supervisor will be someone you come to know and rely on, who is intellectually inspiring, and who keeps your best interests at heart. Choose carefully.

To start, consult your current university undergraduate advisor and/or professors. If someone at another university is recommended, take this seriously and read his or her work. Ask the graduate students in your department about the universities they attended and if there were academics they would recommend?

Shop around: Attend a conference in your specialization

Start by picking a local conference in your area of specialization, and then attend as many sessions as possible. Figure out what kind of scholar captures your attention, whose work captivates you? How do they interact with their colleagues and students at the conference? If you feel comfortable, introduce yourself and thank them for their talk. Then follow-up by checking out their department's graduate program website, and if this seems suitable, send them an email asking if they are taking on new students in the coming year. A brief précis of your proposed project (no longer than a paragraph) and a bit of information about yourself would be helpful: they are also looking for a good fit. Potential supervisors will carefully choose students they find compatible with their interests and working style.

A rule of thumb: Apply to at least THREE graduate schools

Nothing is certain except that there is a large degree of uncertainty about what the next year will bring in terms of your acceptance into your first-choice program. You can count on: sudden decreases in the amount of funding available at some schools; the unexpected movement of a potential supervisor from one university to another; and that a potential supervisor will be on sabbatical or unavailable to take on new students. Three graduate schools gives you a chance to consider the best funding package offered, should you be successful in the application procedure at more than one school.

Choosing a program: Browse widely

Consider this an opportunity to dream about the possibilities of living and studying elsewhere in the world. Find out where the best places are for training in your specialty, in a language in which you are competent. Also keep in mind academia is a field where the more contacts you have, the easier it is to facilitate your research and your future career. Therefore consider institutions other than where you have completed your bachelor's degree, institutions in Canada and internationally. Some universities, for example, require students to complete their MA and PhD at different institutions, meaning you need to branch out.

The Letters of Reference: Whom to Ask

A referee for graduate school should be an academic who can evaluate your academic work. If you had an honors supervisor, or a supervisor for a previous degree, NOT including a letter from them would be noticed. If, for any reason, you cannot include such a letter, I recommend

diplomatically stating why you have asked someone else. It should be someone for whom you did exemplary work in an area that would suggest your potential as a graduate researcher and writer. For many programs, you need two letters of reference to accompany your application. Also be respectful of the amount of time that is necessary to write an initial letter. I now ask students for drafts, meaning they provide me with all the pertinent information that is needed to make their letter as up to date as possible. Also you improve your chances of landing an offer by treating all referees thoughtfully and courteously, giving everyone at least one-month leeway in writing letters.

The Applications Package: Read the application materials carefully

You will be asked to supply a curriculum vitae (CV), two letters of reference, a program or research proposal, a sample of your written work, transcripts from ALL institutions attended after secondary school, and an application fee. You might also be asked to provide proof of language competency meaning if English or French is not your first language, you just provide a Test of English as a Second Language (TOEFL) score as well as the Graduate Records Examination (GRE) score.

The Applications Package: Deadlines

Application due dates are generally January first in the year you are applying for a September admission. Some universities issue only paper transcripts, you will need to plan time for these to be delivered to you and then scanned and uploaded to our admissions system. Graduate Records Exam (GRE) scores are often required and you should schedule your GRE test in advance.

Building your Reputation: Grades

Your reputation is not built on high grades alone, however many programs and funding agencies place a high value on your GPA. For your partial GPA based on the final two years of coursework, an A minus average or above is likely to be a baseline for acceptability, and an 'A' average is likely needed to attract scholarship funding.

After Receiving an Offer

A Letter of Offer is a contractual offer, often with financial obligations flowing in both directions. Go over it carefully, and seek advice from a professor at your current institution to ensure you understand the terms, and what might be unforeseen by you in accepting such an offer (e.g.: uncovered costs, strict visa requirements). When you reach your decision regarding all offers, you should contact the program administrator, your potential supervisor, and also **don't forget to login and accept the offer on the admissions system (this is critical)**. And last but not least, please remember to thank those who have invested their time and efforts on your behalf.