Pursuing a graduate degree has many advantages. While no reason is conclusively right or wrong, the decision to attend graduate school needs careful thought and a thorough examination of your career goals.

It is human nature to want something more and something better. This applies to our work and educational life as well as to our personal needs. There is conclusive evidence to support higher wages and upward mobility for those with professional and advanced degrees. The workplace increasingly has little room for an unskilled workforce. Wages earned by the unskilled and less educated are substantially less than those with college degrees, specializations, certifications and licenses. The rapidly changing economy means a rapidly changing workforce. Workers will be required to be life-long learners to remain current and relevant in the current and future economy. Graduate education may be required if you want to advance in your chosen career path. When deciding on a graduate program, The Peterson’s Guides are an excellent resource for accessing a complete list of colleges and universities that offer various programs. Also, you may view the requirements and processes for admissions. Select several programs to apply to that meet your career and educational needs. Have several “plans of action” so if your first choice does not work out for you, you are able to pursue your second or third choice. When look at programs, check the numbers of students enrolled in programs and the percentage rate of those accepted to those applied. This can give you valuable information when applying.

Listed below are some of the reasons people choose to pursue graduate school.

- You need the credentials the graduate degree offers to pursue your chosen, and perhaps, dream occupation. (good reason)
- You are unsure of your career goals and you would like to “just get started” to see what interests you. (risky reason)
- You want in-depth study in an area of particular interest to you. (good reason)
- You are already in the habit of being a student and continuing your studies in a grad program makes sense. (more career planning may be needed)
- You are having difficulty finding a job and grad school seems like a good alternative. (risky reason)
- You believe that a graduate degree will broaden your career options. (A graduate degree will narrow your career options because you are specializing)
- Your loan re-payments will begin soon and you have not yet obtained employment. Enrolling in a graduate program may allow you to defer your loans. (risky reason)

Before committing to a graduate program, ask yourself several questions as you think through the grad school decision. The answers to these questions can help you determine when the best time to pursue grad school is and if you have the information you need to select the program and school that will best meet your educational career goals.

1. Do you have established career goals?
2. Do you want to change your career and need additional education and/or credentials to do pursue your chosen occupation?
3. Do you want to advance in your current job/career and to do so will require a graduate degree?
4. Could you find a job/career with the education/credentials you currently have?
5. Can you commit to a complete grad program (2-5 years)? (Most graduate programs do not allow for transfer credits from other universities or allow a change of academic programs without substantial loss of previously earned graduate credits.)
6. Are you aware of the career opportunities, average wages earned and the need for employees in your career of choice?
Admissions Essays

Writing your graduate admissions essay is a vital component of your application to graduate school. Programs are increasingly looking to admissions essays to gauge a student's fit for a particular program or school. The essay is your opportunity to make an impact on admissions committees. This does not mean that the other components of your graduate school application are not important, they are.

Be prepared to spend a great deal of time writing your essays.
- Be clear about what the program is asking you to write.
- Answer the question(s) that have been asked.
- Pay attention to the length requirements of the essay. You may find some programs asking for as few as 500 words and others may give no length requirements. If you are not provided with information regarding the length of your essay, you may want to contact the graduate program to which you are applying and ask what the admissions committee expects.

Questions to consider when preparing an admissions essay:
- Who has been the most influential person in your life (remember to relate all mention of situations and circumstances to your graduate school and career goals)?
- What experience(s) have you had that have shaped and molded your decision to pursue this program/career.
- Describe your commitment to the profession/career and demonstrate past examples of perseverance.
- What educational experiences have been relevant to your professional objective?
- Have you performed any research in your chosen academic field? Describe your research, state your hypothesis and briefly report your results.
- Do you have life experiences in other areas that demonstrate character, commitment and drive? Describe these experiences.

Grade Point Averages

Some students may find it necessary to explain their GPA's in their admissions essays if their undergraduate grades are close to or lower than the minimum requirements. Please note that although you may have a lower GPA than what is required, many programs will look at the whole application to determine if you will be accepted. When addressing the issue of undergraduate GPA's, do not make the entire essay a litany of reasons why you did not do well academically. Such essays do not provide admissions committees with all the necessary information needed to determine your fit for the academic program.

Your overall GPA may be extremely important. The more competitive the program, the more critical your GPA will be for acceptance into a graduate program. Some programs have many applicants and are very competitive and selective. The use of minimum GPA's may be a way to narrow the applicant pool or select only those who are most academically prepared. If you are concerned that your GPA does not meet or exceed the programs standards, considering addressing your GPA in your admissions essay.

There are many reasons why students have lower GPA's than they wish. Some of the reasons may include working while attending school, unclear educational goals, badly chosen educational goals, immaturity or illness. When explaining your situation, describe what you believe to be the reason for poor grades, what your strategy was to turn your academic situation around and the outcome of your implemented strategy. Consider the wording of the following:
“As a first and second year student, I enjoyed the freedom of college life. My first two years demonstrated that I was immature and irresponsible to my academic and professional goals. In the summer prior to my junior year, I had the opportunity to work as a laborer and found the work physically difficult and intellectually stagnant. I saw what a lack of education might provide me and I vowed to take responsibility for my choices. As a result, I earned a GPA of 3.5 in my last two years of my undergraduate program. While my cumulative GPA is lower than I would like, I found the motivation necessary to improve my academics.”

Obviously every situation is different and the wording you choose needs to reflect your circumstances and experience. Remember to include the following (as briefly as you can so as not to make this the entirety of your essay):

- Describe the situation
- What strategy did you implement to improve your grades and attitudes about education?
- What was the outcome of the strategy you implemented? What did you learn about yourself and your career goals?

Consult your professors, professionals in your field of interest and your career services office. Ask others to review your admissions essay. Seek feedback and suggestions to strengthen your essay. Have your essay reviewed for grammar, spelling and other typos. A persuasive and well-written admissions essay may tip an admissions committee to accept you over other qualified applicants.

Print Resources for Writing Admissions Essays and/or Personal Statements Available in the Career Services Office

Accepted.com: [http://www.accepted.com/grad/default.aspx](http://www.accepted.com/grad/default.aspx)

Quintessential Careers: [http://www.quintcareers.com/graduate_school.html](http://www.quintcareers.com/graduate_school.html)

Graduate Admissions Essays; Asher, Donald

Perfect Personal Statements; Stewart, Mark Alan

Peterson's Perfect Personal Statements: 3rd Edition, Stewart, Mark Alan; Peterson’s

Essays That Worked for Law Schools: Revised and Updates; Edited by: Curry, Boykin, Kasbar, Brian, Baer, Emily, Angel Ballantine Books: New York

Law School Essays That Made a Difference; The Princeton Review
Standardized Admissions Exams

Most graduate programs require a standardized admissions exam. The type of exam depends on the academic discipline you are pursuing. The scores an applicant receives on entrance exams is a factor in applicant acceptance. The weight of entrance exams varies from program to program. There are a few programs that no longer require standardized entrance exams and there are some programs that put less emphasis on the scores. Some graduate programs will only require a standardized entrance exam if your GPA does not meet the program’s minimum GPA requirement. The programs that do not require a standardized admissions test and those who place less emphasis on the tests may view the student’s cumulative GPA as a better predictor of success in graduate school. Most importantly, remember that each graduate school and each academic program within the graduate will consider different aspects of candidate’s applications.

Below is a list of graduate and professional school admissions tests.

- Graduate Records Exam, GRE: [http://www.ets.org/gre/](http://www.ets.org/gre/) (Also listed are subject tests)
- Graduate Management Aptitude Test, GMAT: [http://www.gmac.com/gmac](http://www.gmac.com/gmac)
- Medical College Admission Test, MCAT: [http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/](http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/)
- Optometry Admission Test, OAT: [http://www.opted.org/info_oat.cfm](http://www.opted.org/info_oat.cfm)

Check the graduate schools and programs you are considering to determine which entrance exam is required.

Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendations are very important to the acceptance process. You need to select your recommenders carefully. Ask those who can speak to your academic performance, your interest in the academic area, personal qualities that have shown you to be an excellent student, your abilities to interact effectively with others and any outstanding quality or situation that has prepared you for this particular course of study.

Usually, recommenders who will have the most positive impact on your application are professors, especially those in the academic area you are pursuing. Employers can also provide powerful recommendations especially if you have worked in the same field as you are planning to study. Recommendations from friends, relatives and co-workers will not have the same impact that professors will. Please allow plenty of time for your recommenders to prepare and send the letters. When requesting a letter of recommendation, include a copy of your resume. This allows the recommender to look at the totality of your education and experiences and craft the recommendation based on your interests, education and experiences.

Portfolios

Some academic disciplines require a portfolio or samples of your skill level. These disciplines may include photography, creative writing, graphic design, studio art, education and even business. Each program has its’ set of requirements and any program may request samples of previous work or research. Save your research papers and projects! You may need them to demonstrate your skills and abilities.
Financial Aid

Financing graduate education is different than financing undergraduate education. There are far fewer grants (money that does not have to be paid back) available to graduate students. Where grants are available, these are often restricted to specific programs and specific student needs. Many graduate programs have fellowships and assistantships. These are programs that assist with the cost of attending graduate school. Many of these will require you to work as a Teaching Assistant or a Research Assistant. Fellowship and assistantship programs need to be applied for and deadlines vary. However, the competition for these types of funding is competitive. You stand a greater chance of being offered a fellowship/assistantship if you apply early.

There are graduate schools/programs that do not have fellowships or assistantships. In these cases graduate students who need financial aid may find it necessary to apply for student loans. There are maximum loan amounts that students can be awarded so if you are planning to pursue graduate education, make sure you are not over-borrowing for your undergraduate studies.

Prospective graduate students should contact the Financial Aid Office where they are applying to graduate school. They will provide you with your options to finance your graduate education. Most colleges and universities that offer graduate programs have many scholarships especially for graduate students.

Finally, there are a number of philanthropic organizations and foundations that grant scholarships to individual students. There are literally thousands of scholarships available. However, each organization and foundation has criteria for awarding scholarships and the student’s challenge is finding the organization/foundation that will fund the individual. Scholarships are awarded by academic discipline, gender, minority status, last name, state or city of residence or age to name only a few.

Website and Career Services Office resources on Graduate Education financial aid:

- **Fast Web**: http://www.fastweb.com/
- **The Smart Guide to Financial Aid**: http://www.finaid.org/
- **Federal Student Aid**: http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/
- **Graduate Guide**: http://www.graduateguide.com/
- **Grad School.com**: http://www.gradschools.com/
- **Grad View**: http://www.gradview.com/index.jsp
- **Scholarsite**: http://www.scholarsite.com/

**Print Resources**
- Getting Money for Graduate School; Thomson/Peterson’s
- Paying for Graduate School: Without Going Broke; Diffley, Peter and Russo, Joseph
- Scholarship Almanac; Peterson’s
- Scholarships, Grants and Prizes, Thomson/Peterson’s
- Yale Daily News Guide to Fellowships and Grants; Cohen, Justin and Ali, Mohamadi
- Free Money for Graduate School, Blum, Laurie