

# Applying to Graduate School and Requesting Letters of Recommendation

## MAKING THE DECISION TO APPLY

Before jumping headfirst into the application process, ask yourself some important questions:

- What are my short-term and long-term goals?
- Why is graduate study necessary for me to accomplish my goals?
- What career opportunities are available to me at the bachelor's, master's, or PhD level?
- Am I willing to invest the time, effort, and expense to undertake graduate study?
- Do I have the motivation, aptitude, self-discipline, self-confidence, interpersonal skills, and persistence required for a graduate degree?

Answering the questions above will give you a sense of where you would like to land once you finish your graduate program, which will help determine what type of study is right for you.

It is also important to talk with people in your field of interest; ask them for advice and find out how they ended up where they are today. This input will not only help you decide if graduate school is right for you, but also will show you what types of programs can help you reach your goals.

If you need help with assessing your interests and whether graduate school is the right next step, please schedule an appointment with a Pre-Graduate Advisor in the Career Center.

## SELECTING TARGET SCHOOLS & PROGRAMS

Once you have decided to apply to graduate school, you should begin to write your personal statement. Even if only in draft form, your personal statement will help direct your search process and lead you to consider the best schools for your interests. It also will enable you to talk to others effectively about your graduate school goals.

Deciding whether to pursue a master's degree or a PhD will focus your search. A master's degree is generally a two to three year program that involves coursework and possibly a practicum. In certain fields, such as social work and business, obtaining a master's degree may be a career-oriented decision which qualifies you for specific certification, licensure, specialization or promotion. A PhD involves original research that culminates in a written dissertation. Most PhD programs include the master's degree study. Should you decide after completing the master's portion that you do not want to continue, you may be able to leave the school with a master's degree.

Funding is a factor that may influence your choice in graduate programs. PhD programs often provide funding, including tuition remission. Many master's degree programs are not funded, but may offer a

teaching or research assistantship with a partial or full tuition waiver. You may need to rely on student loans to help fund your master's program if it is not part of a PhD. Scholarship and fellowship options may also be available at particular schools.

At this point in the process, as you narrow down your choices, talk to current graduate students and faculty members at Washington University. As current graduate students have recently gone through the search process, they will be able to give you advice in your search and explain what the factors were in choosing their current program. Your professors may be able to give helpful insight on the faculty and departments at other universities. The individual faculty members at universities will play a much larger role in your target graduate schools than they did when choosing an undergraduate institution. You will want to study under a professor who works in a specialized area within your field. You might find graduate programs based on where authors of your favorite journal articles or books currently teach. You should also speak to the faculty, students and alumni of the universities that interest you. On the next page are some questions to ask in your search.



**Academic Programs:**

- Does the school offer a wide variety of courses and disciplines, or is it especially strong in certain areas?
- Is a thesis required for a master's degree? What about exams?
- How many credit hours are needed for a degree?
- How long does it take to complete the program and what is their retention rate?
- Is the program accredited?
- Is there a time limit for attaining a degree?
- Is this department a priority on campus? Is it well-funded? Does it have good facilities?
- Does the school have library holdings that relate to your field of interest?
- What is the process to move from coursework to exams to dissertation work for a PhD?

**Faculty:**

- Is the faculty well balanced in terms of educational experience, or do most of them come from the same school or schools?

- Does the faculty have professional experience outside the academic community?
- Are professors recognized as authorities in their fields?
- What is the faculty's publication/presentation record?

**Student Body:**

- What is the size of the student body?
- What is the size of the department?
- Is this a place where I would feel comfortable?
- Will I feel challenged academically by my fellow students?

**Lifestyle & Finances:**

- What is the cost of living in the area?
- Is the school located in a place where I would feel safe?
- Are assistantships, grants, tuition remission or financial aid available?
- Do I qualify for student health insurance?
- What do graduates typically do with their degrees?

**HOW TO APPLY**

You should apply to three or more different schools to increase your chances of admittance. As you probably did when you applied to undergraduate institutions, you may wish to select a "safety" school, as well as a "reach" school, to give yourself more options.

Generally you will be applying directly to a specific department or program. Your application will be evaluated both at the departmental and institutional level. If possible, arrange to visit the schools before applying and meet with faculty members. Your application will generally consist of an application form, a personal statement, letters of recommendation, official transcripts, and a GRE score report.

## PERSONAL STATEMENT AND WRITING SAMPLE

The personal statement is your opportunity to show the admissions committee who you are and why you are a good fit for their program. They want to see that you are prepared for graduate school, have demonstrated intellectual growth, and are focused and interested in a particular field. Specifically, they want to know what has influenced your interests in the field, what study or research skills you've gained, how you might contribute to the academic community, and what you would like to do with your degree. Use the answers to the questions asked earlier to help mold your statement. Be yourself!

It is a good idea to start your personal statement early. You should tailor your statement for each application you submit, addressing your fit into each particular program. For doctoral programs especially, a department may request a brief writing sample from you. This would typically be a research paper in your field of interest. Clean up a copy of a paper from a class or prepare a chapter of your senior thesis to submit.

The Writing Center is a great on-campus resource for personal statement reviews and offers workshops on this topic throughout the year.

## THE GRE & MAT

Most graduate programs will require you to take the Graduate Record Examination. There are two types of Graduate Record Examinations: the General Test, which is usually referred to as the GRE and the Subject Tests. You may have to take more than one.

The GRE is a computer-adaptive test, which means the computer program decides what questions to ask you next based on your previous answers. If you answer a question correctly, you will be rewarded with a harder question, which will improve your overall score. The GRE is broken up into three type of questions: verbal, quantitative, and analytical writing. You can learn more at [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org).

Subject tests in biochemistry, cell and molecular biology, biology, chemistry, computer science, literature in English, mathematics, physics, or psychology may also be required based on the schools and programs to which you apply. Subject Tests are given at paper-based test centers in November, December and April.

It is possible that a school might require the Miller Analogies Test (MAT) instead of the GRE. The MAT is a high-level mental ability test requiring the solution of problems stated as analogies. The 120 partial analogies are to be completed within 60 minutes. For more information on the MAT, speak with a graduate school advisor in the undergraduate College of Arts & Sciences.

## REQUESTING LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Letters of recommendation serve as an objective assessment of how you have demonstrated graduate program qualifications. They also assess your ability to understand the differentiating aspects of a specific program and the skills, backgrounds, and abilities necessary for that program. Deliberately selecting recommenders to respond uniquely to the program's criteria demonstrates that you've reflected on what it takes to succeed in the program, and who can best reveal that to the panel of reviewers. The individuals you choose as your recommenders give graduate programs an understanding of your network and "career" mindedness. Your reach within your current sphere is an indicator of the kinds of opportunities you will take advantage of in their program.

### **How can you build a solid foundation for strong recommendations?**

- If possible, plan to take a number of smaller, upper-division courses in your major or intended field. Courses that require larger research projects or presentations are ideal, as these skills are critical to many fields. Try to take multiple courses with professors who you've enjoyed, and with whom you hold common interests. Consider developing a relationship with at least one professor in an adjunct field (ex: religion and history, or economics and political science).
- Attend lectures and symposiums. If you're really interested in the topic, approach the speaker or a professor with a couple of specific questions or comments. You can also follow-up with an e-mail or letter afterwards to thank the speaker for their time, pose your questions, and inquire about how to pursue the topic further.
- Visit professors during their office hours. Learn more about the professor's research or publications, and prepare a mental agenda or list of questions you'd like to cover.
- Consider undergraduate research. Inquire about research projects through the Office of Undergraduate Research ([ur.wustl.edu](http://ur.wustl.edu)), your academic department, or specific professors. You can work with a faculty member on one of their projects, or invent your own guided by a professor in the field.
- Write an Honor's Thesis or undertake a longer term research experience as an independent study course under the guidance of a professor in your intended area of study.

### **Whom should you ask?**

In general, follow the guidelines provided by the program or institution. For graduate schools, you will want to ask professors, and at least two recommendations should come from professors in the discipline. For medical school, your recommendations should demonstrate how prepared you are for medical school, as well as your character and drive toward a career in medicine. A supervisor from your internship or volunteer experience might write a letter on your behalf.

Review the qualifications each program is looking for. Do they ask you to respond to specific questions or address certain issues in your personal statement? Can you sense any criteria in their Program Requirements that you might want to address through your recommendations? Applicable skills often include: research, writing, public speaking, analytical thinking, intellectual maturity, language acquisition, time management, and commitment.

For example, if the application materials state, "Strong preference will be given to applicants who are adequately prepared to meet the language requirements for the doctorate (German, French, and Latin)," and you've taken coursework in German, you might want to ask a German professor to write you a letter describing your language abilities. If an application states that "applicants should be explicit about their research interests and specific about which faculty member they would like to work with as their advisor," asking a professor in your field to comment on your sustained interest in a topic, success in courses the professor taught on the topic, or the strong interest you've displayed in working with a specific faculty member would greatly benefit your application.

You want your recommenders to cite specific examples and anecdotes that support the criteria to which you've asked them to respond. For example, say you asked Professor Green and Professor Smith to write your recommendations, and in a recent course with Professor Green you gave a presentation she deemed outstanding, then you want her to cite that specific example when the recommendation asks for examples of your oral communication and research skills. However, if you completed a collaborative project in Professor Smith's class with three other students that earned you an A, then Professor Smith should comment on collaboration, but not oral communication and presentation skills.

Be sure to evaluate whether or not your recommenders really know you well enough to write you a strong recommendation. An average or form recommendation is quite obvious to an admissions committee and will not help your application. Consider asking someone who knows your work more intimately over a



well-known star in the field who wouldn't remember if you attended her large lecture class.

### ***How should you ask and when?***

Timing is important - try to avoid rush times for faculty such as just before the semester begins or during midterms, and ensure that you're giving the faculty member plenty of time to write the recommendation, normally no less than a month. Plan to attend their office hours or make an appointment. When possible, be prepared with your personal statements for each program, any recommendation forms, your resume and/or print out from WU's co-curricular portfolio, copies of any graded papers or supporting documentation from coursework, and a cover letter that includes:

- An initial thank you for agreeing to write a recommendation.
- Overview of where you are applying, including the specific programs.
- Due date for each of the programs with a little padding just in case they run into conflicts.
- Instructions on where you would like each recommendation mailed, e-mailed, uploaded, or faxed. Provide any postage necessary, though usually envelopes and paper are not necessary as the professor will use their own letterhead stationery.
- A reminder of the areas on which you would like the faculty to focus.

When asking, use phrases that will provide faculty with outs so they can signal that a mediocre or weak recommendation would result; for example, "Professor Smith, I'm planning to apply to PhD programs in political science this year. I've taken several classes with you, including [enter small class name] where I wrote a paper on [enter topic], which you graded highly. I was wondering if you feel you know my academic work well enough to write a letter of recommendation for me."

If the professor hesitates, suggests another writer, or you receive a lukewarm reception, proceed with caution. Most recommendations are closed, which means that you will not see what they write. Allow them opportunities to politely decline to write a recommendation, such as, "I understand if you feel overwhelmed with your course load and impending book publication this fall. I appreciate your consideration of my request."

If your recommender enthusiastically consents, be prepared to provide them with relevant information to ensure that they do not write a "form" letter. Even professors who you perceive know you well might resort to a formatted letter if they're too embarrassed to admit that they don't remember specifics or are too rushed to give the letter adequate reflection.

Offer the materials you've brought to the meeting and ask if they'd like you to e-mail them a reminder one week prior to the due date. Some professors may prefer an e-mail of your materials in addition the hard copy. They will use these materials to paraphrase in their own letter.

### ***How should you follow-up and confirm that your letters have been received?***

On the due date you provided your faculty member, confirm that the letter has been received by contacting the receiving body or checking Interfolio. If the letter is delinquent, you've built in enough padding to allow you to contact the faculty member to check on the status of the letter. Call and e-mail the faculty member to inquire into the status of the letter. Be respectful and understanding.

Once you've confirmed that the letter has been received, write a thank you to the professor for their time and thoughtful consideration of your skills and achievements. Mail it to their office.

### **What can you do if you do not have strong enough letters of recommendation to support your application?**

If you are in a large major, started your planning late, and haven't developed strong relationships with appropriate professors, selecting recommenders can be stressful; however, you have several options. Seek the advice of a Pre-Graduate Advisor in the Career Center, Deans in the College of Arts & Sciences, or your major advisor. You may decide to delay graduate school for one year and apply to a transitional program or other short-term opportunity between now and then. Plan to take a smaller course in the field at a local college or university, and make a point to get to know the professor. You might also choose to do research or work in an academic library where you can work alongside professors in your field.

### **What if I plan to take a year or two off between graduation and medical school or graduate school?**

First, schedule an appointment with a career advisor to develop your plan. Second, meet with your major advisor, pre-professional advisor, or someone else in the field to review your options. Third, inquire about recommendations now, especially if you've narrowed your options down to a couple of types of graduate programs. The Career Center recommends a service, Interfolio, where you can store your recommendations until you apply. These recommendations will be considered valid for a couple of years so it is worth pursuing them now while your academic work is fresh in your professors' minds.

## **TIMELINE**

The following is a recommended timeline for your graduate school search and application process. Schedule an appointment with a graduate school advisor in the School of Arts & Sciences, a career advisor, an academic dean or a faculty member to talk about how to adjust this schedule to fit your needs.

### **Spring Semester - Junior Year**

- Talk to faculty, especially potential recommenders, about your plans; get their advice
- Start thinking about the GRE (and Subject Tests if appropriate)
- Create a tentative list of programs and begin to research them more closely

### **Summer - after Junior Year**

- Register for and prepare to take the GRE General Test
- Request letters of recommendation (faculty may have more time during the summer)
- Begin writing personal statement
- Research funding options beyond what universities offer

### **Fall - Senior Year**

- Have your personal statement critiqued by faculty advisors and the Writing Center
- Contact faculty and current students of programs to which you are applying

- Take the GRE Subject and/or General Tests
- Apply for scholarships with early deadlines
- Request letters of recommendation at least one month before deadline; give recommenders a copy of your personal statement and other application materials
- Have transcripts forwarded to programs; if possible, arrange with Student Records to send a transcript that includes your senior fall grades
- Submit completed applications by mail and/or online; it's best to get applications in early!
- Complete financial aid forms and apply for relevant scholarships

### **Spring - Senior Year**

- Visit top choice schools, if possible; ask current graduate students in these departments what it's really like
- Compare financial aid offers; consider negotiating
- If you are applying for need-based financial aid, you may need to file a FAFSA with the Federal Government's loan program at [www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov)



## RESOURCES

- Career Center handouts: “Applying to Law School,” and “Applying to Medical School”
- Chronicle of Higher Education: [www.chronicle.com](http://www.chronicle.com)
- GradSchools.com: [www.gradschools.com](http://www.gradschools.com)
- Grad Source: [www.gradsource.com](http://www.gradsource.com)
- Peterson’s Guide: [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com)

Remember, if you need help with any step of the graduate school application process, make an appointment with a graduate school advisor in the undergraduate College of Arts & Sciences (314-935-6800) or a career advisor (314-935-5930).

