

The Fundamentals for Success

Your guide to putting together a competitive and well-rounded application for graduate school.

Step 1

The need for academic involvement

You need to be actively involved in your academic community. Academic involvement means increasing your research output by publishing, writing, presenting and attending conferences. It also means pushing your academic performance in coursework to the highest levels and maximizing your research experiences and relevant work/ volunteer experience on and off campus.

Step 2

Choosing the right reference

Your application relies on your choice of professors (professional contacts) who will take on the roles of referees. Admissions committees need to effectively gauge a candidate's research aptitude and future potential through the written words of those with whom he/she has worked closely in recent years.

Professors must be aware of your academic and research abilities, in addition to your overall student engagement and extracurricular activities. Because professors are most likely unaware of all your achievements, it's important to connect with them during your studies and build relationships. If you are in a program where research opportunities are not as common, go above and beyond in your class work to provide both yourself and your professors with more material for a well-rounded application. It is also expected that you provide your referees with an updated CV or resume that will highlight scholarly achievements and personal attributes.

Step 3

Writing your statement of interest

A statement of interest (also known as a Letter of Intent or Plan of Study) is a 500 -1000-word document to assist admissions committees in getting to know you on a personal level. It also provides supplementary information used in conjunction with transcripts and resumes. The statement summarizes any personal and academic experiences that prompted application to the specific program and includes evidence of individual suitability to the program's aims and objectives.

Translation – Why are you a good fit for the program? What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you? This is your time to shine! Be sure to have your statement reviewed by your campus writing department to ensure it is informative, well written and error-free.

Specifically, reviewers are evaluating your statement for the following three competencies.

1. Is the applicant curious? Applicants who are honestly interested in research tend to perform at higher levels once admitted.

2. Does the applicant have a history of success? This could be in any other aspect of an applicant's life. (Athletics, work history, awards of any type, etc.)
3. How has the applicant had to persevere? Graduate students will face challenges with their research. Students who have had experience working through difficult situations tend to have the skillset needed for overcoming these obstacles and successfully navigating their graduate degree.

Step 4

Secure external funding

If you are dedicated scholar who has consistently maintained a high first-class average throughout your undergraduate career, you could secure annual and multi-year merit-based scholarships from external funding agencies to support your graduate education. For the most part, students apply in the current academic year for what they propose to undertake in the following academic year. You are strongly encouraged to apply for all external scholarships in your field and it is recommended that you consult with your current department regarding eligibility. The potential of bringing external funding with you to a graduate program is an excellent way to make your application stand out from the pack.

Step 5

Confirming your application is complete

Applying to graduate school signifies you have made a very important decision about your future career direction. Ensuring you have completed the application process correctly and in a timely manner is essential to increasing your chances of pursuing this path. Each program has their own distinct application requirements; therefore you must do careful research on the specific requirements of the department in which you hope to attend. Do I need to secure a supervisor beforehand? Are there any entrance tests required? Do I need to submit a resume or CV? When should I order transcripts? Be sure to contact the program(s) to which you are interested in applying, as some program may have very specific application requirements. And ask questions! The onus is on you to submit the most competitive application possible. The work you put into it will determine your peace of mind come admission time.