

## **GUIDELINES FOR THE GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION PROCESS**

### **Why am I going to graduate school?**

Do you need a graduate degree for your dream job? Do you need a graduate degree to get promoted in your current career? Do you want to learn more about your chosen field, and become recognized as a scholar and expert in that field? These are all good reasons to go to graduate school.

Do you love hanging out with your college friends so much that you hate to look for a job? Do you feel like you're just not ready for the "real" world? Are your parents bugging you to get a graduate degree? These are *not* good reasons to go to graduate school!

You should investigate whether your career goals require a graduate degree, or would be improved by having that degree. Some jobs may not require a graduate degree and might even prefer 'real world' experience. It is even possible to become overqualified for a job by holding a degree that entails a higher starting salary than employers normally pay for that position. In such cases, a graduate degree actually disqualifies one for the job. A graduate degree may make you more competitive in some fields, but you still need to balance the time and money commitment against the improved job prospects. Certain careers do require graduate degrees (e.g., teaching at a university).

Graduate school is a serious commitment, both for you and for the program that accepts you. You should not enter into this commitment without serious thought. Are you really ready for it? Are you ready for the heavy workload? Are you ready for the financial stress? If you really want a graduate degree, and you're motivated to do the years of work necessary to finish the degree, then read on.

### **Researching and Selecting Programs**

First you need to figure out what you want to do with the degree, and look for programs that specialize in your area of interest. It's also a good idea to visit the school, meet the faculty members you would be working with, and meet some current graduate students if possible. Are these faculty members known for supporting their students? Ask their current students! Graduate school is difficult under the best of circumstances: if your advisor is not going to help you, it will become impossible.

How many programs should I apply to? Three to five is a reasonable number. Fewer than that leaves you with fewer choices. More than that might suggest that you don't really know where you want to go or what you want to do. Also, the more applications you complete, the less time you spend per application, which suggests that the quality of your applications will suffer. The same is also surely true of the letters of recommendation you will be asking for from your college professors.

Be honest with yourself. Don't apply to programs you know you would never attend, but seem great in theory. On the other side of that coin, if you are not willing to move to attend a great graduate program or make some life adjustments, you should reconsider

how important a graduate degree is to you. There are fewer positions for graduate students than there are opening slots for students into medical school. Even top students may move across the country to go to the schools that accept them. Programs are aware that students sometimes choose graduate programs primarily out of convenience (“it’s the only program within commuting distance”), and that can be a flag that you may not be completely committed. You must also consider that many jobs that require graduate degrees also entail moving to a new location (university professor, for example). If you’re not willing to relocate, then these occupations may not be suitable for you.

Do not just select programs based on overall reputation. You will be working with a specific adviser – more closely than you have probably worked with any undergraduate professor. There are superb researchers at small, little recognized programs who may be working on exactly what interests you. A renowned, large anthropology program is not useful for graduate training if no one in that program is involved in the type of research that motivates you. The graduate adviser can have a lot of control over your project and your ability to pass a thesis defense and earn a graduate degree. You are trying to identify potential good mentors and colleagues whom you can work under and with for a significant period of time, and who could have a major impact on your career.

Should I go to graduate school if I have to pay for it myself? That depends on how much you will be borrowing! A general rule of thumb is to go with the money: if University A offers you funding but University B does not, then University A clearly wants you more than University B does. They will probably give you better support in other areas as well. Programs and universities may provide tuition and fee waivers, stipends, or teaching or graduate assistantships—or none of these. Also, living expenses vary from location to location. A \$7,000 stipend goes a lot farther in Urbana, IL than in Stonybrook, NY. Take all of these factors into consideration to determine what you will be paying when you accept an offer from a graduate program. Whatever you do, don’t borrow more money than you can pay back – remember anthropologists don’t usually make huge incomes.

### **Terminal Masters vs. PhD**

Some graduate programs only provide terminal masters degrees, some programs may only permit application for a doctoral degree, and some allow you to select either option. Some programs that in theory allow you to apply for a terminal masters or PhD program may in reality be less inclined to take students interested in a masters degree only. If there are only a few available spots for graduate students, and there are plenty of good doctoral applicants, sometimes programs would rather invest time and resources into those who want to go farther with training. That is: many PhD programs will take an applicant who wants “just” the masters less seriously. However, students may leave a program after getting a masters, even if their original intent was to work for a PhD (this happens for a variety of reasons). Many programs confer a masters to students as they are in the process of working towards a PhD. Some programs require a paper or thesis, some programs have qualifying exams, some programs simply require a set of courses to be completed for a masters, if students are continuing to work on the PhD.

Bottom-line: each program is unique. Investigate individual programs so that you understand the types of students in the programs and the requirements of the programs, *before you apply*.

### **When to Apply to Graduate School**

This question involves two levels of decision-making: When should you apply in terms of due-dates and deadlines for graduate school applications, and when should you apply in your life trajectory.

Graduate school is not a good investment (for you or the program) if you are simply unsure of what you want to do with your bachelor's degree, you don't want to move away, or you are trying to fill time. Graduate school is not simply an extension of your undergraduate education. It is more demanding and challenging, it involves developing different skills and abilities, and is not for the faint of heart.

For most archaeology students, taking time off between the undergraduate degree and graduate school (one or two years) is an excellent strategy. It allows you to develop in some different ways, explore different opportunities outside academia, and get to know more about what you might want to do with your future career(s). [See the notes on 'Real World Experience' below.] The opportunity to make contacts outside the university can also be extremely valuable. If you have experience working with a CRM firm, you may have already become involved in projects that you want to pursue with a thesis. Graduate programs are sometimes linked to CRM firms, allowing you to integrate paid work or funding from a CRM firm with your research. Moreover, you may be better able to support yourself through graduate school doing something you enjoy.

In other subfields, experiences, as part of work or outside of it, can also be really important. Such experiences might include traveling abroad or doing volunteer work that would allow you to gain skills and experience related to your intended field of study. And, if you do a superb job as a volunteer, your supervisor is a great person to ask for a recommendation. So, even if you are waiting tables to make ends meet for a time, volunteer as a docent at a local museum; attend public meetings, talks, or colloquia related to your field; serve as an unpaid research assistant for someone else's project (common for primatology field research). Keep yourself invested in the field and known to that community.

Pursuing graduate school directly after undergraduate studies can be a good option for some students if they are very directed in the topics they would like to research and study in graduate school and if they have already had field or other applied experience as an undergraduate (e.g., internships, work outside of the university). For some programs, a gap between undergraduate school and graduate school may suggest an undesirable lack of focus or academic inclination that will lessen the competitiveness of your application. If you are spending several years or more away from academia, be prepared to discuss in your statement or application letter why you took that time, and what you did with it. (This is another reason why volunteer activities can be useful.)

Most graduate programs have deadlines for applications in December and January. Some may have earlier deadlines in November. Some may allow applications late into spring. Research these deadlines early. Deciding on graduate programs you would like to attend should not be a last minute activity. You don't want to miss out on the perfect school because you didn't know the application was due last week. Programs may notify you of acceptance at various times throughout the spring into summer. April 15 is a commonly recognized deadline for sending offers to prospective students (The Council of Graduate Schools: <http://www.cgsnet.org>). However, when applicants are notified depends on the application review schedule of the program, university policies, and also whether or not you have been waitlisted (your position in a possible queue of potentially acceptable applicants).

**Important note:** Public, private, and university fellowships and scholarships may require separate applications and may have different due dates than the graduate program application.

### **Statement of Purpose/Application Letter**

Graduate programs will typically request a "statement of purpose" or application letter that includes information on your future academic and career goals, why you are interested in graduate school, and why you are interested in that particular graduate program.

First, follow the directions for these letters precisely, and be meticulously careful about proofreading. Not addressing questions or points that are required, going over page limits, and having writing errors is an instant signal to reviewers that you either don't care about the application that much, you are sloppy, or you don't know what you are doing.

If there are no page limits provided, don't write a book. Reviewers are reading lots of applications. If you keep yours short and well-written, but full of information, it will be appreciated. Usually one to two pages is a good length. Your letter should make a clear statement near the beginning of your interests and goals on two levels: 1) your research interests including the subfield of anthropology, the geographic region of interest, and the topic (e.g soil analysis, religious traditions, forensic analysis) that you want to study in the program; and 2) the possible careers you wish to pursue upon completion. The former should be strongly emphasized, the latter mentioned, but not highlighted. The letter should make a clear case, without getting too specific, for why this program is the best choice to help you realize these academic goals. This will include knowledge of faculty research, streams within the program, research topics of other graduate students, and courses offered. You may not mention all of the above, but you need this information to tailor your statement to the program. You want to indicate that you have done research on the particular program. Be sure to find out in advance what research the faculty in the graduate program do. If your research interests do not clearly align in some way with faculty research interests, you will probably not be admitted to the program, regardless of the strength of your academic record.

You want your letter or statement to make you stand out, so make sure to include accomplishments and activities that highlight experiences and accomplishments—such as your senior project, field experience, etc.— that make you a great selection for the strengths of this particular program, and relate to your goals. Providing descriptive and specific examples that document your goals and achievements is better than generic statements. You want to strike a balance between demonstrating confidence and presenting your achievements, without seeming arrogant and entitled.

Given the importance of your statement of purpose, it is a good idea to have your advisor, or another mentor, review it and give you feedback before you submit it with your application.

### **Letters of Recommendation: Etiquette and Considerations**

Writing a good letter of recommendation takes time and effort. Respect that your letter writers are doing work to help you, and make things as easy on them as possible. If you are sloppy, rude, or not timely in requesting letters of recommendation, how can a referee write about how responsible and diligent you are? Your adviser, instructors, and other faculty members are not required to write recommendation letters – you are requesting them to do so. As a general principle, you will receive better support if you take the trouble to ask each referee individually rather than sending out a group email request. If you can't take the time to approach a mentor individually, then why should they take the time to write you an individual letter? If you use informal slang or “textspeak” in your request, then referees may fear that you will also present inappropriately to the prospective program. Writing letters of recommendation reflects on the reputation of the letter writers, so they will be less willing to write letters for students whom they cannot depend upon to perform well and present appropriately.

Before submitting a person's name as a reference, ask them to make certain it is okay to do so. Once someone has agreed to write recommendation letters for you, provide them with information on:

- deadlines for specific programs (*make sure you give the adequate time to write the letter – one month is recommended*)
- special considerations you want the reviewer to consider (absences or activities, experiences, or projects that you may have had relevant to the application or program, of which the reviewer may not be aware)
- particular formats for letters (hard copy, on-line submission system--make sure links are correct if you are directing a reviewer to a website)
- provide all the necessary forms and/or stamped envelopes (as needed)
- You might also want to provide a copy of your statement of purpose or application letter.

**\* For best results, request and fill out the “Graduate Program Letter Request Form” and accompanying “Request for Evaluation” form. The letter request form includes all the information referees might need to write a strong letter, and a checklist to be sure you included everything.**

### **Should I waive my right to view recommendations letters?**

Waiving your right to view recommendation letters is standard procedure. If you do not waive your right, it is going to be a flag for the readers of your recommendation letters. Waiving your right means that your referees can be completely honest in their evaluation of you; they do not have to “run the letter by you”, and do not have to worry about possible repercussions for being honest. That does not mean you should fear referees are going to write bad things! But, to those reading the letters, it means they can put a lot more faith that the evaluation is complete and not full of unwarranted praise. So, when the letter states how wonderful you are, people can believe it.

### **Graduate Records Examinations (GREs)**

Most graduate programs will require you to take the GREs, which are standardized tests most similar to the SAT test with quantitative, verbal, and writing sections. Before you take the GREs, invest some time in preparing yourself, especially if you haven't taken math in several years. For example, you can find sample tests online (go to the Educational Testing Service website), you can take a prep course, or you can buy *The GRE Test for Dummies* or other similar preparatory books. The weight given to GRE scores varies among graduate programs. Some programs use GRE scores as an initial filtering process, and won't look at applications with scores below a certain value. On the other hand, a less than great score might not keep you out of some programs. Higher scores, however, are always better. GRE testing times may fill up quickly, so it is best to book your test well in advance of when you may wish to take it.

### **Grade Point Averages and Transcripts**

Your GPA is an indication of your academic abilities generally, and specifically in the particular discipline you are attempting to pursue. GPA does matter in a few ways (but it is not everything). Some programs may use GPA as an initial criterion to qualify or disqualify students for further consideration. Frankly, if you have a 'C' average you are unlikely to be competitive. Some programs will even provide as part of their information to applicants a base GPA for qualifying to enter the program. Other programs will provide some information on the average GPA (and GRE scores, for that matter) of entering students. This will help you determine if you are likely to be competitive to be accepted into a particular program, and whether it is worth your money and time to apply at all. The GPA of courses in your intended area of study is even more important than overall GPA. You want to pursue a degree focusing on zooarchaeology and you have a GPA of 3.8 overall, but received a 'D' in your zooarchaeology course? Not good. If your areas of interest for graduate study and your performance in those areas don't seem to jive, it should cause you to consider whether you are really pursuing something that is a strength for you. If there are discrepancies or special circumstances for why your GPA does not provide a good reflection of your academic abilities, you need to address this in your application letter.

### **Importance of 'Real World' or Research Experience**

Do you want to stand out from all other applicants? Nothing will help you do this better than “real world” or field experience in the area or a related area of your intended graduate program. If you have presented work at professional conferences or coauthored

a paper in a scholarly journal or other publication, that is fantastic. Likewise, if you have received funding for your research project, or if you have had a research assistant position, these are also indicators that you have already been engaged in scholarly work, you know what it entails, and you have had success in that realm. Just as importantly, experience in your intended graduate discipline will let you know whether you really seriously want to be doing the work and research that follows as a career. Graduate school will end; it is not an end in itself. (If it doesn't end, you have other problems!) If you don't really know what you want to do with your life, graduate school can be a waste of your time and money if you don't like what comes after it.

In applied fields such as Museum Studies, entry positions require between three to five years of experience working in a real life museum setting. This means that internship and volunteer experience is as important as the graduate degree itself. For purely academic careers such as professorships, however, the real measure is successful completion of academic research culminating in scholarly products such as conference presentations or published articles. Although experience is crucial in all cases, you must be aware of the values and requirements in the particular career path you wish to pursue, and tailor your pre-graduate and graduate work to them to the greatest extent possible.