



GRADUATE/PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL 101

A GUIDE TO RESEARCHING OPTIONS AND APPLYING

CAREER
CENTER



NEBRASKA
WESLEYAN
UNIVERSITY

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Considerations

After obtaining your bachelor's degree, you may be thinking about continuing your education through graduate or professional school. Graduate school awards academic degrees such as a master's or doctorate, providing opportunities for advanced study of a topic or area of interest to prepare you for original research or relevant careers. Professional school offers advanced degrees that prepare you for specific careers in professional fields such as medicine, business, ministry, or law. Before you begin researching institutions and programs, you should first consider your own reasons for wanting to attend. Even after weighing the pros and cons, the decision can be difficult. Think through the following considerations to determine if an advanced degree is right for you.

☐ **Your goals.** Many seek a higher degree to enter a certain profession, advance within a current company, or to enhance career options. Ask yourself if your goals align with your desire to attend graduate or professional school. Going because you are avoiding the job market or because you feel like you don't have any career options are NOT good reasons.

☐ **Your future salary expectations.** Even though a graduate degree holds the potential to increase your salary, sometimes a degree will make you less marketable in a particular industry or profession, pricing you out of a job. Also, keep in mind that obtaining a graduate degree can be expensive—be sure to evaluate how much you are likely to earn with a professional degree compared to how much the degree is going to cost you.

☐ **Your intended field of study.** Unlike undergraduate education, graduate school is not the time to explore career options. Be sure to apply for programs that will interest you, help you achieve your short-term and long-term goals, and build upon the knowledge you obtained through your undergraduate studies and work experiences.

☐ **Your needs within a program.** You'll want a graduate school that fits your interests, needs, and personal criteria (such as geographic location, size of the institution, and reputation of the degree program). Keep in mind that graduate programs are very competitive and most programs can only accommodate a limited number of students each year. You may be competing against a large number of students for a limited number of openings. Admission offices are looking for students who stand out amongst the competition—students who will be most likely to contribute to the institution's research programs and/or reputation. Ask yourself if you are up to this challenge. What makes you stand out? What unique skills, qualities, and experiences can you bring to the program? If accepted into a program of your choice, can you commit the time and resources necessary to fulfill the demands of the program?

☐ **Your intended workload and lifestyle.** In graduate school, for example, the typical weekly workload with a full-time assistantship is 20 hours of work for the assistantship assignment, 12 hours in the classroom, and a *minimum* of four hours of reading and coursework outside of the classroom *per credit hour* taken. As a prospective graduate or professional school student, do not expect to have a vibrant social life. Even though you will not have an abundance of free time, you will become close with other graduate students in your program. This network of fellow graduate students can be very helpful, as you will most likely want the advice and support of others who are going through similar experiences.

☐ **Your finances.** A graduate degree holds the potential to enhance your career and increase your earning potential. However, these perks do not come without a cost. Be sure to evaluate fully how much a graduate degree is going to cost you before making a final decision about whether to attend graduate school at this time. Some of the cost factors you should consider include:

COST FACTORS	
Tuition & Fees	Know the total of tuition AND fees. Ask about any possible financial aid. This may be in the form of assistantships, scholarships, or other special programs/grants. See page 9 for more information.
Living Expenses	Consider your cost of living in comparison to your income. Based on your location, how much will your rent, utilities, groceries, entertainment, and other bills cost you each month?
Loss of Income	Many institutions discourage full-time graduate students from holding jobs in addition to assistantships and coursework. For some, this can mean quitting a job to enroll. Know approximately how long it will take you to complete the program and how much debt you will accrue during this time. Will your advanced degree give you the potential to earn an adequate salary and pay off debt within a reasonable time frame?

☐ **When you should go.** Since an advanced degree is required in certain professions (law, medicine, dentistry, etc.) you may seek additional schooling right away. Another common reason to go directly to graduate school is a strong interest in a particular discipline. Some employers, including those in management, social work, and elementary/secondary education, might recommend gaining practical work experience before pursuing a graduate degree. They believe you will be better qualified with a couple of years of work experience before obtaining an advanced degree. Thorough research into your area of interest should provide you with the information necessary to make a wise choice. Work experience before graduate school will also help you gain a different perspective than your undergraduate educational experiences and may help you better understand the theoretical concepts taught in graduate programs. Work experience will also help make your application to graduate schools stronger, especially if you have a low or mediocre undergraduate GPA or graduate entrance examination score.

REASONS TO GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

- ☐ You have a passionate interest in a narrow topic or an unusual combination of topics.
- ☐ You have a vocational interest that carries a graduate degree credential as an entrance requirement.
- ☐ You are currently seeking career advancement within your organization.
- ☐ You have a genuine love for learning and enjoy school.
- ☐ You find your current career unrewarding and would like to transition into a new career.
- ☐ You would like to enhance your education and explore theories you have about a topic.
- ☐ You are excited about the opportunity to participate in research.

REASONS NOT TO GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

- ☐ You're going to please someone else.
- ☐ You're uncertain about what subject to study.
- ☐ You're trying to avoid the job market.
- ☐ You're unable to motivate yourself to set priorities, use good time management skills, and meet deadlines.
- ☐ You're not yet ready to deal with the fast-paced and stressful environment of graduate school.

Strategies for Researching Programs

Once you have made the decision to pursue graduate or professional school, the next step is to research programs, identify your options, and narrow your list. Below are some strategies to get you started. Also, don't forget to check out career.nebrwesleyan.edu for downloadable resources to organize your school search as well as links to program comparison websites and professional associations.

INTERVIEW ALUMS Schedule interviews with alumni of the programs you are considering. This can be in person, over the phone, or via email. Ask about their impressions of the program, how well the program prepared them, problems they faced at the institution, and professors they liked or disliked. Use the Career Assistance Network on the Career Center website to find alumni in your area of interest.	CONSULT PROGRAM WEBSITES Program requirements, fees, deadlines, financial aid opportunities, and course offerings change frequently, and the most current information can typically be found on the institution's website. Seek contact information for an admissions representative to ask any additional questions.
MEET WITH FACULTY Meet with NWU faculty members to find out information (either from their own experiences or from their colleagues' experiences) about programs at other institutions. They may recommend programs or put you in contact with a faculty member at another institution.	RESEARCH ONLINE COMPARISONS Reference reviews, comparable information, and ratings about programs you are considering. Sources such as Peterson's Guides, U.S. News & World Report, and The Princeton Review profile schools and programs, detailing tuition, enrollment, demographics, and faculty.
SEEK PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS Professional associations can be found for many fields of study. Websites of these associations will typically list graduate or professional school programs pertaining to their field. Use these sites to identify all your options.	VISIT If a visit to a school fits your schedule, go! Call ahead to make an appointment with the institution's graduate advisor in your field. While on campus, check out the institution's facilities and resources and talk to current students.
EVALUATE Using all the information you've collected, begin to evaluate your preferences and narrow down your options. On your list, consider having a "safe school" (you are almost positive you can get admitted to), a "maybe school" (you can probably get admitted to), and a "reach school" (it would be a stretch, perhaps even a miracle, to get admitted). Remember, don't spend time and money applying if you wouldn't attend.	

Questions to Ask

An excellent way to gather information about a graduate program is to speak to current or past graduate students and faculty members during a campus visit or interview. Remember to ask questions in a polite manner that conveys you are expecting to gain information, not in a suspicious manner that suggests you expect to uncover problem areas. There are many factors you will need to consider before making your decision. Here are some possible questions to keep in mind.

Student Body

- ☐ What are the career goals of currently enrolled students?
- ☐ What are the careers of graduates of the program?
- ☐ What is the size of enrollment in the school, the graduate school, and your department?
- ☐ How many students are full-time, and how many students are part-time?
- ☐ What is the breakdown of the student population by geography and undergraduate institution?
- ☐ What is the breakdown of the present student body according to age, gender, and race?
- ☐ How much time do students have to work on their own research?
- ☐ What is the academic ability of students upon entering the program?
- ☐ What are the achievements, knowledge, and skills of students upon degree completion?
- ☐ What do current students and graduates have to say about the program?
- ☐ How satisfied are current students and graduates with various aspects of the program?

Curriculum

- ☐ What specific degrees does the school offer?
- ☐ Is the program accredited? Most professional schools have an accrediting body that ensures a certain quality of education.
- ☐ Will the curriculum allow for tailoring degree plans to meet specific career goals?
- ☐ What areas of concentration does the program offer?
- ☐ What are the required courses in each program and how many electives are offered?
- ☐ What type of thesis, oral, and written comprehensive exams are required?
- ☐ What is the average length of time it takes to complete the degree?
- ☐ What values, attitudes, and knowledge are considered outcome goals for the program?
- ☐ Is the entire program available via distance learning (online)? If so, how does it compare?
- ☐ Does the program offer any online classes? Are there classes that must be taken online?
- ☐ Can the program be taken part-time?
- ☐ Are night and weekend classes offered?

Admission

- ☐ Which admissions qualifying tests are required?
- ☐ What are the admission policies of the program?
- ☐ What is the application deadline and fee?
- ☐ What is the average undergraduate GPA of students admitted to the program?
- ☐ What percentage of applicants were admitted in the previous class?
- ☐ Of the admitted students, what proportion of them dropped out on their own?
- ☐ How many students were dropped for academic reasons in the past year?

Resources

- ☐ Does the program have any planned practical experiences? Where at and doing what?
- ☐ What assistantships and scholarships are available, and how likely are you to receive one?
- ☐ What is the estimated cost for tuition, general fees, books, and living expenses?
- ☐ What lab, library, research facilities, and computer resources are available to students?
- ☐ What career services, counseling, medical, and housing facilities are available?
- ☐ What student support groups are available in the department?
- ☐ What community, social, cultural, academic, and entertainment resources are available?

Faculty

- ☐ How many full-time/part-time faculty members are in the department?
- ☐ How many full-time faculty members hold doctorates?
- ☐ What post-doctorate learning experiences have the faculty members had and when?
- ☐ What have the faculty members published lately?
- ☐ How often can students see or speak with faculty members and advisors?
- ☐ How concerned are faculty members about student development?
- ☐ How are students assigned to a faculty advisor?
- ☐ How many advisees does each faculty member have?

Graduate/Professional School Timeline

The application process is often very long and time consuming. Keep in mind that all dates indicated below are approximate, and you will need to check deadlines for specific programs because they vary from one institution to another. Healthcare programs, especially, may have earlier deadlines. Know that some programs may even have deadlines in August; an entire year before the start date.

JUNIOR YEAR

January – April

- ☐ Determine areas of interest/subjects you may want to study. Talk to NWU faculty in your area of interest about recommended institutions.
- ☐ Start browsing the websites of graduate school programs to decide where you would like to apply. Review program catalogues to understand what is offered in their respective curricula.
- ☐ Determine the admission requirements and application deadlines for programs you are interested in.
- ☐ Determine which graduate admissions test(s) you will need to take (see page 6-7 for more information).
- ☐ Register and prepare for appropriate graduate admissions test(s). Take practice tests. Don't procrastinate- establish a study schedule and stick to it!
- ☐ Consult study books to learn how to answer test questions and what to expect. A small selection of these books can be checked out in the Career Center. You can also access online study guides sponsored by NWU Student Affairs Senate here: portal.mometrixlibrary.com
- ☐ Begin budgeting for the application process - it can be very costly.

SUMMER BETWEEN JUNIOR AND SENIOR YEAR

May – August

- ☐ Meet with a career counselor to discuss programs, schools, and career options.
- ☐ Review graduate program information to narrow your choices.
- ☐ Create an organized document of schools/programs to which you want to apply (like the ones provided on the [Career Center website](#)). Include the application requirements, test requirements, fees, and deadlines.
- ☐ Visit schools of interest, if possible.
- ☐ Take required graduate admissions test(s) that you registered for in the spring. If you have not registered for graduate admissions test(s) yet, do so now.
- ☐ Once you know the prompt, draft your personal statement/ application essay.
- ☐ Take a draft of your personal statement to the Career Center for feedback. The Career Center is also available for essay critiques, as are many individual faculty members.
- ☐ Begin to research sources of financial aid and apply for fellowships, assistantships, and scholarships.

SENIOR YEAR

September – October (or 10-11 months prior to starting)

- ☐ Review your list of programs. Do not forget deadlines.
- ☐ Continue to hone your personal statement. Complete supplemental applications and essays when required.
- ☐ Ask professors and internship supervisors to write letters of recommendation. Provide reference writers with a link to each program's recommendation form. Give them a copy of your resume and your personal statement.
- ☐ Take admissions test(s) if not already completed.
- ☐ Continue to research sources of financial aid and apply for fellowships, assistantships, and scholarships.
- ☐ Draft possible budgets based on financial aid, cost of school, and cost of living.

November – December (or 8-9 months prior to starting)

- ☐ Know the process required for submitting your transcripts to the school (mail or electronic, official or unofficial). Transcripts will be needed from each institution in which you earned academic credit.
- ☐ Finalize your personal statement.
- ☐ Finish filling out applications and make sure that you have completed all admission requirements.
- ☐ Submit your applications. If you can, submit early.
- ☐ Make sure you receive confirmation that your application has been successfully submitted. If you have not received notification or if you experience an error while submitting, contact the school as soon as possible.

January – March (or 5-7 months prior to starting)

- ☐ Finalize all paperwork for financial aid. Fill out the FAFSA. Check with the schools you applied to and find out if additional information is required.
- ☐ Start scheduling and preparing for admission interviews. Before any actual interviews, schedule a mock interview with the Career Center.

April – May (or 3-4 months prior to starting)

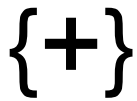
- ☐ Discuss acceptances, rejections, and other career options with a career counselor or faculty member.
- ☐ Visit schools to which you have been accepted.
- ☐ Choose a school and notify them of your acceptance.
- ☐ Notify other schools that accepted you of your decision so that they can admit students on their wait lists.
- ☐ Send thank you letters to those who wrote you recommendation letters and helped with your application.

Taking a Transitional Year

Taking a year off should not be a spur-of-the-moment decision, but rather a heavily researched and planned experience. Graduate and professional school admission panels will question your reasoning for taking a year off—if you plan out your transitional year experience, you will be well-prepared to respond to their inquiries. You should be able to anticipate and answer the types of questions admissions representatives will have, including:

- ☐ What made you decide to pursue a transitional experience before applying?
- ☐ How will your transitional experience make you a better student?
- ☐ What have you learned from your transitional experience?
- ☐ What obstacles did you face during your transitional year and how did you overcome them?

By anticipating these types of questions, you will be better prepared to communicate the value of your transitional year experience in interviews and in your personal statement. If you intend to take a transitional year, be sure to meet with family members, faculty, advisors, and a career counselor to discuss the pros and cons of your plans.



Pros of Taking a Transitional Year

- ☐ Gaining additional experience that will help you enhance your resume and clarify your life and career goals.
- ☐ Having unique experiences (e.g., volunteer experience, international experience, or research opportunities) before entering graduate school or the conventional workforce.
- ☐ Giving back to society through volunteer or service work.
- ☐ Establishing residency in a different state to reduce your graduate school tuition costs at a public university.
- ☐ Studying for a graduate school or professional school admissions test (GRE, LSAT, MCAT, etc.).
- ☐ Working to pay off your debt and loans or to save up for graduate school.
- ☐ Traveling and/or working in another city, state, or country.



Cons of Taking a Transitional Year

- ☐ Negative or unsupportive reactions from your friends, family, advisors, and faculty.
- ☐ Potential difficulty obtaining reference letters for your applications without ready access to faculty members.
- ☐ Possibility of having to pay a fee to participate in some volunteer, service, or study abroad opportunities.
- ☐ Low or nonexistent compensation for your transitional year experience.
- ☐ May need to start payments for undergraduate loans.
- ☐ Life circumstances could change making it more difficult to go back.

Transition Year Checklist

- ☐ Contact professors, advisors, and faculty members while you are still on campus to line up a few reference letter writers. Keep in contact with these individuals and update them on what you are doing during your transitional year to ensure up-to-date letters of reference.
- ☐ Visit the Career Center for a resume and cover letter critique. If you shape up your resume and cover letter while you are still on campus, you can easily tweak these documents later to include your transitional year experiences and to make them targeted to a specific graduate school or program. Remember that we do meet with alumni as well!
- ☐ Consider taking the appropriate admissions exams while you are still on campus. After you leave NWU it may become more difficult for you to find the time, resources, and places to effectively study and prepare for the exams. Most exam scores are valid for five years.
- ☐ Consider taking one or two graduate-level courses during your time off to improve your GPA, get a feel for what graduate school is like, and stay committed to your education.

Admission Policies & Procedures

The admission process involves hard work and the coordination of many resources. The key to success is careful planning based on correct information.

APPLICATION & FEES

The application process and requirements vary from institution to institution, and sometimes even between programs at the same institution. Familiarize yourself with the expectations and plan ahead since processes can take approximately six months to a year, depending on the program. Most applications are completed online and will contain varying parts. Applications also often require a non-refundable application fee. Save a copy of all forms and payments you submit, keeping all files in one place for easy reference.

Make sure your application is complete and submitted before the deadline—sometimes, unexpected issues with the application portal may arise, so you will want to give yourself time to address any issues. If the schools you are applying to have **rolling admission**, you should apply *as early as possible* because applicants are reviewed as their applications are received. Even schools with a regular admission process like to see applications submitted in advance of the deadline. Be sure to enclose all required fees, essays, and related information.

Several professional associations host online, centralized application systems for students applying to programs in professional areas. Here's a list of organizations and application systems:

Central Application Service for Physician Assistants	CASPA
American Medical College Application Service	AMCAS
Associated American Dental Schools Application Service	ADEA AADSAS
Pharmacy College Application Service	PharmCAS
Physical Therapist Centralized Application Service	PTCAS
Law School Admission Council	LSAC
Optometry Centralized Application Service	OptomCAS
Allopathic Medicine (M.D.)	AMCAS
The American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine Application Service	AACOMAS
American Association of Colleges of Podiatric Medicine's Application Service	AACPMA
Veterinary Medical College Application Service	VMCAS
Schools of Public Health Application Service	SOPHAS
Communication Science and Disorders	CSDCAS

Know that professional programs may also require their own supplemental application, which is more specific to your fit in their program. These supplemental applications will sometimes involve responses to essay questions. Be sure to read all correspondence you receive from the schools to ensure you're not missing any additional information.

TRANSCRIPT

Every graduate institution requires at least one undergraduate transcript in support of your application for admission. If you have attended more than one college or university, include copies of transcripts from each school to show all credits earned toward your degree. Remember to consider any dual-credit courses completed in high school.

ADMISSION TESTS

There are a number of different tests graduate schools use for admission, so it is very important to know exactly which test each school you are considering requires. Scores on these tests are used not only for admissions decisions, but also for fellowships, grants, and assistantships. Many master's and doctorate programs require students take a general exam called the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), though many programs have started to eliminate this requirement. Check with each program you are applying to about whether this exam is required.

There are also GRE subject tests that are sometimes required by graduate programs. The subject tests further demonstrate one's knowledge in a particular area. You'll find these GRE subject tests in psychology, physics, and mathematics, just to name a few. Unlike the GRE General Test, which can be taken at any time, the subject tests are offered three times a year in September, October, and April.

Professional schools most often require the tests below:

Business School	Graduate Management Admission Test	GMAT
Dental School	Dental Aptitude Test	DAT
Law School	Law School Admission Test	LSAT
Medical School	Medical College Admission Test	MCAT
Optometry School	Optometry Admission Test	OAT

You should begin preparing for the entrance exam by familiarizing yourself with the exam content and format and by completing practice exams several months prior to taking the exams. Check the Career Center website at career.nebrwesleyan.edu for a list of test preparation resources. You can also access online study guides sponsored by NWU Student Affairs Senate here: portal.mometrixelibrary.com. A limited number of study guides are also available for checkout from the Career Center.

Before registering to take a test, keep these considerations in mind:

☐ **Give yourself time to prepare.** Standardized tests measure the same skills, in the same way, every time you take them. Do not waste money on the registration fee if you haven't had time to fully prepare; rather, consider taking a free practice test first (versions of which are available for most admissions tests at portal.mometrixelibrary.com). Also, before registering for an actual test, look at your schedule and be honest about how much time you'll have to commit to studying and preparing. Then, pick a date far enough in advance that you will have adequate time to prepare. Register early as testing centers have a limited number of seats available on each test day.

☐ **Give yourself enough time to report your scores before admission deadlines.** Most admission offices will not look at your application until it is 100% complete—which means you must have reported the appropriate standardized test scores to the schools in advance of their individual admission deadlines. If you register to take your admissions test in the spring or summer before you intend to complete your undergraduate degree and apply to graduate school, you will have enough time to report your scores before admission deadlines pass.

☐ **Know your testing location.** When registering, you'll be asked to select a testing center. Consider where you will be living when taking the test to choose a convenient location. Alternatively, some tests are offered in an online, live, remotely-proctored setting. Know that the requirements for acceptable remote testing environments are strict, so you should carefully consider how you can meet those requirements when deciding if a remote setting or a testing center will work best for you.

If taking the exam in person, there are several testing centers in and around Lincoln. However, not all centers offer the same tests. Below you'll find a list of local testing centers and the graduate/professional school exams they offer:

GRE, DAT, LSAT, OAT	GMAT, MCAT
Pro-Metric Center 5715 S. 34 th St. Lincoln, NE 68516	Pearson Professional Center 300 North 44 th St. #104 Lincoln, NE 68503

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Your personal statement (or statement of intent/statement of purpose/application essay) is your chance to speak for yourself and supply admissions committee members with information to support and supplement your application, transcript, and letters of reference. Be creative and informative. Make logical connections between the program/intended occupation and your own personal skills, abilities, and accomplishments. Admissions committee members will be reading your statement and examining how clearly you think, how well you have developed your plans for graduate school, and the degree to which your interests and strengths fit in with those of the program to which you are applying.

It is a good idea to personalize your essay to the specific program or school for which you are applying, unless your essay is being submitted for a centralized application system for multiple schools. If that is the case, save the personalization for any supplemental application essays. More information on the personal statement can be found on page 10-12 of this handbook.

LETTERS OF REFERENCE

Letters of reference are a required part of the application procedure. Generally, letters are to be provided by faculty members or past employers who are in a position to assess your aptitude and motivation for graduate study. It is important to choose reference writers who know you well and can attest to your abilities, accomplishments, and character.

Collectively, your letters should reflect a balanced picture of you, so seek a mix of letter writers. When choosing writers, think about how the combination of references could reveal your different experiences and characteristics.

Politely ask your professors or employers if they are comfortable writing a positive letter of reference for you. You might say something like this:

"Dr. Lang, I will be graduating in May and I'm looking forward to attending (a physics graduate program, chiropractic school, etc.). I realize how important references can be, and I would like to know if you would be comfortable writing a positive letter of reference?"

If you receive a response that is less than enthusiastic, consider asking someone else. The person may be too busy, or may not know you well enough to write a good letter. Give your writers at least four to six weeks to write and submit your letter.

Schedule a brief meeting with your reference writers to inform each about your goals and achievements. Provide your writers with a copy of your resume, personal statement, and any information you have about the program and institution. If the person recommending you is expected to comment from a certain angle, be sure they know it. Additionally, you will want to inform them what attracts you to the particular programs for which you are applying and about your future goals. It is also helpful to research the procedures for submitting the letters so you can provide your reference writers with helpful instructions for submission.

Share with your reference writers that date by which you hope to submit your full application. Politely check in with your reference letter writers periodically to see if they have completed and submitted your letters.

Don't forget to send each reference letter writer a sincere thank you letter or card once they have written and submitted your letter.

INTERVIEW

An interview may be required by the institution or the program to which you are applying. If the school does not require an interview, it would still be advantageous to schedule a time to meet with a faculty member or chair of the department. This will provide an opportunity for you to visit the campus to make sure that it is a good fit for you. It is also a good time to find out more about the school and program.

Treat your graduate school interview as you would a job interview; dress professionally and be prepared to talk about your academic and career goals. More about interviewing can be found in our Health Professions Interviewing Handbook, or our more general Interviewing Handbook. Contact the Career Center if you would like help preparing or to schedule a graduate or professional school mock interview.

SPECIAL ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS

Some schools or programs require a work sample or a portfolio. Be sure to get started early if you are preparing a portfolio, as it takes time and resources to create a neat, professional, and impressive display of your work. Also know that some institutions require that you have an undergraduate degree in the same subject as your intended graduate major. Review the program's website or speak with a graduate advisor from the program to be sure that you are meeting this and any other special admission requirements before applying to the program.

PLANNING & TRACKING YOUR APPLICATION PROCESSES

It is a good idea to prepare a document for keeping track of the application processes with each institution. Read over the website for each program and break down the application steps into smaller assignments, such as registering for the GRE, taking the GRE, asking a certain professor for a letter of reference, verifying that your professor submitted the letter of reference, etc. Everyone has their own preference for planning, organizing, and tracking; find what works best for you and be sure to keep your plan updated. The [Career Center website](#) has a downloadable template for tracking applications.

Financing Your Advanced Degree

Obtaining an advanced degree is expensive. On top of tuition, books, and fees, you'll of course incur the cost of living (e.g., housing, meals, transportation). These factors will vary based on the location of the program. Financial support for graduate education also varies widely based on institution and program. If you are applying to graduate school, assistantships or fellowships may be available; however, this is not the case for most professional schools. Begin the research process early to identify potential funding sources. Also, check to see if specialized financial support exists for your particular field. Be sure to talk to the financial aid office at the schools to which you are applying to see what options may be available to you.

TYPES OF FINANCIAL AID

FELLOWSHIPS At the graduate level, the equivalent of a scholarship is a fellowship. Monetary awards, fellowships are usually given based on academic merit. Specific programs and universities have their own fellowships.	EXTERNAL FELLOWSHIPS & GRANTS These may come from federal and state government and private foundations. Fellowships and grants are given out to the student or paid to the university on your behalf. These awards can be used at any institution of your choice. They have different application deadlines and the level of competition and funding varies.
ASSISTANTSHIPS Teaching or research assistantships are often available through academic departments or programs of study. Assistantships may involve working 10 to 20 hours per week in exchange for a stipend and tuition fee reduction. You may be responsible to pay other fees associated with being a student.	RESIDENT ASSISTANTSHIPS Some institutions have programs in which graduate students earn a stipend plus room and board (or both) by working as assistants in undergraduate residence halls. Consider contacting the school's director of residence life to inquire about such opportunities.
WORK-STUDY PROGRAMS Provides part-time jobs for students with financial need, allowing them to earn money to help pay education expenses while enrolled in school. It's available to full-time or part-time students.	LOANS Both federal and private loans require an application process. Take time to fully understand the repayment plan and the interest rates before signing a legal document. Some professional degrees may qualify for a loan forgiveness plan.
SCHOLARSHIPS Research online to find scholarships specifically for graduate or professional school. While there are fewer available for an advanced degree, certain fields may have financial opportunities available.	YOUR EMPLOYER If your desired program is connected to your current role, some employers may agree to pay for your advanced degree. Know that this agreement may require that you work for the organization for a certain period of time after school, or pay back part of the tuition.

If you are a U.S. citizen or permanent resident, once accepted into a program, it is a good idea to file for Federal Student Aid by completing the FAFSA. This can be done online at <https://studentaid.gov/>. In almost all cases, graduate and professional degree students are considered independent and do not supply parent income information on the FAFSA. Seeking an advanced degree, you qualify for various direct unsubsidized federal loans, which offer several repayment plans in contrast to private bank or credit union loans. You may also qualify for aid from other federal agencies, state aid, or school aid.

IN-STATE VS. OUT OF STATE

When choosing to attend a state institution, you will find tuition prices are higher if you are not a resident of the state. As an independent student (post bachelor's degree), either you or your spouse must have been a state resident for one, sometimes two years (depending on the state) before the first day of classes to claim residency. There are many nuances, so it is best to consult the Office of Admissions at the college or university you are seeking to attend. They will be able to decide whether you do or do not qualify. Each college's decision is binding only at that college.

Crafting Your Personal Statement

The personal statement or graduate school essay is your opportunity to describe who you are and why you are uniquely qualified for acceptance into a program, beyond GPA and standardized test results. Challenging, this essay requires you to outline your strengths confidently and concisely, while representing your goals, experiences, and qualifications in the best possible light.

Schools receive an abundance of applications from individuals with strong GPAs and test scores, but they have a limited number of offers they can extend. The personal statement plays a significant role in determining who gets an interview (or, if no interview, who gets in). You can greatly improve your chances by submitting a well-written and interesting essay that honestly expresses your individual voice.

As you respond to essay prompts, think about the admissions committee who will read your statement and what you want them to understand about you. While your personal statement is only one of many factors considered, it provides context for the rest of your application.

PERSONAL STATEMENT VS STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

While personal statements are standard for many graduate and professional programs, some programs require applicants to submit a statement of purpose (instead of or in addition to the personal statement) in their application. While the personal statement and statement of purpose share a similar goal—to tell the admission's committee why they should select you to join their program—there are key differences between these two documents.

A **personal statement** primarily focuses on what makes you unique, creating a narrative about relevant life experiences, skills, personality traits, motivations, and academic and career goals that describe why you are a great candidate for that program.

A **statement of purpose** primarily focuses on research goals, emphasizing technical skills and academic interests as they relate to your current research. While a personal statement is approached as a narrative, a statement of purpose is approached with clear and concise language. It is important to make connections between your research interests and those of current program faculty, demonstrating how their mentorship and collaboration will align to advance research in a chosen field. In addition to explaining how the program will prepare you for success in your future research endeavors, it is also a good idea to describe how you will help *them* advance research in an area of interest.

CONTENT

First and foremost, answer all specific questions asked. Read the application instructions closely so you know the writing prompt. Beyond the prompt, admission committees generally want to know the following information:

- Who are you and why do you want to pursue a graduate or professional school education? Demonstrate specific knowledge of the field and/or your understanding of the profession. Do not tell them what they already know.
- What makes you unique? What would you contribute to the program? Present relevant and positive life experiences. Do not make excuses for anything negative in your application; rather, explain how those negative events positively affected you in your growth; show your perseverance to continue.
- What makes you qualified to follow this path? Explain your potential and your long-term goals.
- Why are you applying to that particular program or school? Address this only if the essay is going to one school.
- What experiences have motivated and reinforced your desire to pursue this advanced degree?
- For professional programs, consider what this field of study can offer that other professions do not. For instance, you can help people by being a teacher or social worker; what draws you specifically to medicine?
- What experiences have allowed you to develop the skills necessary to be successful in a particular profession?
- What have you learned and what do you want to learn more about?
- What individuals have shaped your life and influenced you to pursue this path?
- What will you contribute to the program?
- What do you want admissions committees to know about you that is not addressed elsewhere in your application?

PERSONAL STATEMENT FORMAT

The requirements for personal statements differ, but can generally follow this format:

Introduction	•Many personal statements begin with a catchy opening, often a distinctive personal example, as a way of gaining the reader's attention. From there, you can connect the example to the actual degree or career field you are seeking.
Detailed Supporting Paragraphs	•Subsequent paragraphs should address any specific questions from the application, why you want to go into this field of study, your own qualifications, your own relevant experiences (part-time job, job shadowing, internships, etc.), your compatibility with the program, your long-term goals, or some combination thereof. Each paragraph should be focused and should have a topic sentence that informs the reader of the paragraph's emphasis. You need to remember, however, that the examples from your experience must be relevant and should support your argument about your qualifications.
Conclusion	•Tie together the various points that you have raised in the essay, and reiterate your interest in this specific program or position. You might also mention how this degree is a step towards a long-term goal in a closing paragraph. Often relates back to the introduction in some fashion.

QUALITIES TO PORTRAY

Clarity of Thought	Honesty	Logic	Relatable to Diversity
Commitment	Humanity	Maturity	Resilience
Communication Skills	Individuality	Passion	Self-awareness
Compassion/ Empathy	Insight in the profession	Persistence	Sincerity
Distinctiveness	Integrity	Positivity	
Enthusiasm	Leadership	Realistic Perspective	
Genuineness	Lessons Learned	Reflectiveness	

IDEAS TO GET YOU THINKING

Personal statements need to be a distinctive representation of you. While this may sound obvious, it is important to showcase your uniqueness with personal insight and reflections about you and your experiences. To consider ways in which you might stand out from other applicants, use the questions below to begin brainstorming ideas.

- What particular courses, projects, readings, etc., have impacted your decision to pursue your chosen field(s) of study?
- What are your principal academic/creative interests beyond your concentration(s)? In what way(s) do you pursue these interests?
- What languages other than English do you know? How did you acquire this knowledge and how do you maintain your proficiency?
- Have you had a significant experience that impacted your academic and personal development (independent study, research experience, internship, teaching assistantship, workshop, leadership opportunity, etc.)?
- What has been your most meaningful intellectual/creative accomplishment in college and why?
- Have you studied or traveled abroad? What impact has it had on your studies, personal growth, world outlook, post-graduate plans, and career goals?
- Reflect on one recent particularly satisfying public service or volunteer activity in which you participated. Why was this endeavor important to you, and how did you make a difference?
- What are your post-baccalaureate plans? What profession/career do you aspire to and what do you wish to accomplish in this realm?
- Reflect on one recent specific experience or activity in which you demonstrated your leadership capacity and made a positive difference on campus or in the wider community.
- Do you have any special talents or hobbies that could be of interest?
- Is there an unusual family circumstance that you would like to mention?

PERSONAL STATEMENT DO'S AND DON'TS

DO:

- ☐ ...answer the prompt and keep in mind the purpose of the personal statement.
- ☐ ...organize your essay in a logical manner. It may help to develop an outline before you begin writing.
- ☐ ...highlight specific, unique accomplishments of which you are proud. Choose one or two significant and distinguishing experiences to elaborate on. Provide details—Show, don't tell!
- ☐ ...stick to recent experiences and accomplishments (rather than experiences prior to college).
- ☐ ...think from the perspective of the committee. What are they looking for in a candidate?
- ☐ ...be interesting and engaging. Use an active voice, strong verbs, and vary your sentences.
- ☐ ...use appropriate vocabulary and refer to your thesaurus judiciously.
- ☐ ...read, then reread several times over, specifically looking for grammatical and spelling errors.
- ☐ ...show yourself in action, rather than simply listing credentials and skills.
- ☐ ...keep the focus on you. Your statement should tell the reader why YOU are a great fit for their program.
- ☐ ...be sure you have an actual conclusion to your essay so that it does not look like you continued writing until you ran out of characters.
- ☐ ...verify that there are no inconsistencies between your personal statement and the rest of your application package (including your secondary applications).
- ☐ ...know the content in your personal statement and essays may be conversation material for your interviews.
- ☐ ...beware of formatting errors that result from copying from a word processing program and pasting into the online application. Usually, no changes may be made to your application after submission.
- ☐ ...demonstrate that your decision to gain an advanced degree has involved a series of thoughtful, conscious, and reflective decisions, not an epiphany or an instantaneous realization.
- ☐ ...maintain a professional tone. Humor is really tricky to pull off, and sarcasm should be avoided. Your application to professional/graduate school should be taken seriously.

DON'T:

- ☐ ...exceed the limit. Most applications will give you a set length in words, characters (with spaces) or pages.
- ☐ ...procrastinate. Several drafts are often required.
- ☐ ...completely regurgitate your resume or information found elsewhere in your application.
- ☐ ...waste words (e.g., "in conclusion"), rather, be concise. Every single sentence must be crucial to the essay.
- ☐ ...consistently begin sentences with "I."
- ☐ ...try to impress with "million-dollar words." Avoid the use of slang, colloquialisms, idioms, or cliché statements.
- ☐ ...include any new ideas in your conclusion.
- ☐ ...plagiarize. Read sample essays only to get ideas.
- ☐ ...dramatize difficulties. Focus on how you overcame these difficulties, what you learned, and how you are a stronger person because of your experiences.
- ☐ ...speak in the negative about your experiences or others. Keep the tone of the statement positive.
- ☐ ...say anything potentially inflammatory or controversial, including strong statements regarding politics or religion, for example, and other polarizing topics. Be extremely cautious to avoid expressing any views that could be construed as derogatory to any group.
- ☐ ...overuse intensifiers. Words such as incredible, amazing, very, really, totally, best, most, etc. allow for writing to seem exaggerated when used too often, or when used without explanation.
- ☐ ...lie. This includes information that may be factually accurate but is presented in a misleading way.
- ☐ ...make excuses. If you need to address shortcomings (poor grades, misconduct, etc.), focus on what you learned from the incidents. Never blame anyone else for your mistakes or complain about a person or institution.
- ☐ ...say you know what it's like to be a _____ from [shadowing, volunteering, etc.]. Be careful how your experiences are conveyed. Your personal statement will be read by professionals in the field, don't exaggerate your preparation.
- ☐ ...claim that you plan to solve an immense world problem (e.g., world peace, cure mental illness, cure cancer or anything else). While you may have good intentions, these statements show a grave lack of understanding of the issue.

THE NEAR-FINAL DRAFT

The following questions are usually best to ask when reviewing a near-final draft of your personal statement:

- ☐ Does the opening sentence catch the reader's attention?
- ☐ Does the last sentence pull ideas in the essay together?
- ☐ Is the essay choppy or does it easily transition from one point to the next?
- ☐ Do any points remain vague, overly general, or incompletely illustrated?
- ☐ Does the essay adhere to character or word limits? Is it thoroughly edited?
- ☐ Does the essay use unnecessary adjectives and adverbs, especially intensifiers such as "unique" "entire" "overwhelming" "completely" "absolutely" "definitely"? A sentence without intensifiers has more power.
- ☐ Is it sincere and authentic?
- ☐ Does it have a consistent tone?
- ☐ Will you be able to explain all aspects of your statement if called in for an interview?
- ☐ And finally, does it prompt the reviewer to say: "I want to meet this person!"?

What Are “They” Looking For?

When considering your entire application, essentially, the admissions committee members are looking for someone who has a good chance to succeed and excel within the program and the field. They will look for various indications in your application that you can study at the graduate level. As far as specific parts of the application, it is impossible to know which will carry more weight than others. It might depend on the program and field, on the emphasis established by the committee members, or on the reader's personal values. They may look primarily at your grades or test scores, or they might pay closer attention to your personal statement to understand who you are and why you want to attend. In short, *any* part of your application may be the most important part for a particular program's admissions committee or for a particular reader, so you should ensure that every part of your application is as strong as possible.

REASONS FOR REJECTION

Admissions panels typically can't accept all applicants. There are various reasons why applicants are rejected, including:

- ☐ Poor grades or lack of academic prerequisites
- ☐ Low admissions test scores
- ☐ Weak, ineffective, or missing recommendation letters
- ☐ Missed application deadlines or incomplete application or file
- ☐ Not competitive within the pool of current applicants
- ☐ Research interests don't match those of the faculty
- ☐ Vague reasons for wanting to obtain an advanced degree
- ☐ Minimal exposure to the field or profession (lack of shadowing hours, work experience, or volunteer experience)

By planning ahead, applying early, and doing the research before you apply, you should be able to avoid most of these pitfalls. If you are rejected, see if you can schedule an exit interview to find out why. This way, you can use the committee's suggestions to improve any shortcomings and apply again. Over the next year, seek additional relevant experiences, review your application materials, and sharpen your interviewing skills. Know that the NWU Career Center is here to help you through your journey. If you have questions related to researching or applying to programs, wanting feedback on your personal statement or other admissions essays, or if you would like to practice your interviewing skills, contact us to schedule an appointment.