

A Few Grad School FAQ's

Should I (can I) take a year or two off before starting grad school?

- Absolutely! It usually doesn't hurt your chances of getting accepted, and it might actually make you more enthusiastic about going back to school.
- It's smart to have some money in the bank before you start grad school.
- If you use that time to get hands-on experience in your field (e.g., work as a research assistant, get an internship) then you'll actually increase your chances of getting accepted to a good program.

Should I get a separate MA and PhD, or go straight for my doctorate?

- Many programs allow you to skip the MA step and head straight for your PhD. This is faster and therefore appealing.
- Doing a MA in one place and then a PhD at another school will almost certainly cost you an extra year or two.
- However, the investment is worth it! A couple of extra years are well worth the networking you'll gain from attending two different schools.

How do I choose a program that's right for me?

- Geography, expense, and family ties may all be practical concerns – don't ignore them.
- Ideally, you think extensively about exactly what you would like to do with your degree, what type of research you want to do, and then you think about the folks that are doing that research. Figure out where they are and go there.

How do I get accepted?

- Getting into grad school is very competitive these days!
- Apply to several at different levels – a top program, a medium program, and a bottom program as your fallback.
- Don't bother applying to a school you wouldn't really be willing to attend.
- Study for and do well on your standardized tests (GRE's, etc.)
- Good letters of recommendation make a real difference (see below).
- Research, field experience, and/or internships are critical! At very least, try to find a summer field school in your discipline. Anything that demonstrates your experience and dedication to the field will help.
- Get in touch with your prospective graduate professor in advance. Having someone "on the inside" who is interested in taking you on will facilitate your acceptance to the program.

How do I ask a professor for a letter of recommendation?

- First of all, give some thought to whom you will ask for a letter. Letters are taken more seriously if the prof has known you for three semesters instead of just one, if you have done a special project for that course instead of just the standard exams, if you have gone out of your way to get to know the professor, e.g., by making a good impression during class discussions or office hours.
- In short, we can't write about you if we don't know you. So get to know your professors!
 - When the time comes to ask for a letter, do it right: Don't just plan to send your prof a brief email request and be done with it. Here is what I ask students to provide if they want a really good letter of rec:
 - A cover letter reminding me of classes you took from me, special projects you did, and all of your grades.
 - Information about the programs to which you are applying, so that I can tailor the letter appropriately.
 - A copy of the statement of purpose that you are writing for those programs, even if it's still in draft form.
 - All of the forms that the colleges want, already filled out (i.e., with your name and address at the top, etc.).
 - Waivers of access signed! *Mandatory*, a letter will not be written without a waiver of access.
 - An addressed and stamped envelope for each letter.
 - Write on the envelopes the due date for each letter.
 - Paperclip all of the forms and instructions and info about each program to the envelope – make it as easy for the prof as possible!
 - Put all of this into a large envelope and get it to the prof at least a month in advance.
 - About a week in advance, email the prof to say thanks – that's a great reminder.
 - Let the prof know what happens! You are cared about you and the prof will want to hear how you're doing, so keep in touch via email when you have time.
- By the way, much of this process is now being done on line. When you submit your application, you will include the prof email address and the school in question will contact him/her for an on-line letter. Please contact the prof in advance to get an okay before supplying an email address as a reference.