

APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL: A “HOW-TO GUIDE” TO THE PROCESS

IS IT THE RIGHT TIME TO APPLY?

Your decision to enter into graduate school will be determined by your readiness. Will you decide to enroll right after graduation or will you decide to wait a few years to work or take classes? The average duration of graduate school in biology is 4-6 years. Thus, you will need to make a strong commitment to the pursuit of a PhD. If it takes a couple of years to address personal, educational, or experiential concerns, take the time and be fully prepared for graduate school.

GETTING STARTED

You should ideally begin your graduate school application process as early as possible, preferably in your second year. At the minimum, you should begin at least one year prior to the start of the graduate school year.

- **Identify your interests:** What type of graduate school department or training do you want to focus on? Do you want to apply to a specific department or to an interdepartmental program? Think about what classes or research was of interest to you at Brown to help decide. Talk to your academic advisor, course instructor or research advisor to learn more about the field and graduate studies in that discipline.
- **Identify specific schools and programs:**
 - Visit the [Peterson's Guide](#) website to search for specific programs.
 - Examine graduate school catalogs and programs on-line.
 - Talk to individual professors in your field of interest.

WHAT GRADUATE SCHOOLS EVALUATE IN CANDIDATES

Most graduate programs evaluate applicants in four areas: grade point average (GPA), letters of recommendation, statement of purpose, and research/practical experience. Each program weights the areas differently and also compares applicants within each year's pool.

- **GPA:** The GPA is a standard evaluation tool used by graduate programs. It can be calculated as a cumulative average, the most recent school year, average in the sciences, or average in your major. Each program may look at different aspects of your GPA.
- **Letters of Recommendation:** On average, you will need three letters from various people who can judge your qualities and potential in graduate school. Typical writers include faculty members at Brown, internship supervisors, employers, or others who can judge you on a personal and academic level as well as address your potential for success in graduate school.
- **Statement of Purpose:** Your personal essay is a very important part of your application package. The statement is usually 500-1000 words of text. It should include your reasons for wanting a graduate degree, your career aspirations, and experience that makes you a viable candidate for acceptance. It is essential to have your statement proofread by a faculty member for help in revisions.

- **Experience:** Most, if not all, graduate programs look at your practical experience in a research setting. The issue is not that you have specific experience in a given area, just that you have performed research and are aware of the time commitment, exactness of the work, and high failure rates. There are opportunities to do a research project in the department during the school year or summer. It is highly recommended that you engage in a research internship during the summer or academic year at an outside university or company. Some programs even require that an applicant have a published research paper.

FINANCIAL AID INFORMATION

Most Ph.D. graduate programs provide awards for enrollment that include a tuition waiver and stipend for living expenses for doctorate programs. (Masters programs rarely offer this level of financial support) These awards may consist of a fellowship or a research/teaching assistantship. The Brown University predoctoral stipend for fiscal year 2024 (FY24) is \$45,699 and for FY25 is \$49,012. Other graduate programs or NIH training fellowships may pay a different amount for a stipend so check with each program.

In addition to institutional awards, students can apply for fellowships directly from the National Institutes of Health ([NIH](#)) or from private agencies like the Howard Hughes Medical Institute ([HHMI](#)) or disease foundations.