Graduate and Professional School Application Preparation

CSE Career Services can help you prepare for the graduate/professional school application. Pre-health students can obtain information and help preparing for health programs through the Pre-Health Student Resource Center, which offers courses, online workshops, and information sessions.

GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION PROCESS:

It is important to evaluate your decision to pursue a graduate degree. Is it required for your field, such as medicine, law, university teaching, or research? Don't make the assumption that a graduate degree will lead to more job prospects or a higher salary. Your decision to pursue a graduate degree should not be based on the job market or the uncertainty of your next step. Make sure you have a specific outcome in mind, and do your research to determine if obtaining a graduate degree will help you reach your career goals.

Do Your Research and Make a Spreadsheet:

- First, define your criteria: location, institution type, degree type, structure of program, financial support, program ranking, etc.
- Next, conduct research on the schools you are considering. Consider creating a spreadsheet to keep your information organized. Start with gradschools.com and petersons.com to search by program type and location.
- After you have narrowed down your options, visit the individual websites of those institutions to gather specific information.
- Other helpful resources are faculty and alumni, as they can often give you specific information on programs. If possible, visit the institutions of interest and talk to faculty and current graduate students. If you cannot visit, make contacts and gather as much information as possible in order to make a confident decision.

Note Deadlines for Application Materials:

After you have decided on potential graduate programs, the next step is to start your online application. The requirements and deadlines will vary; however, the deadlines are typically between December and March. Apply as early as possible for institutions with a rolling admission policy.

Graduate/Professional School Admission Exams:

The most common exam is the GRE; however, pay attention to the admission guidelines to ensure you take the right exam. For information on types of exams, visit Mometrix. For information on the GRE, visit gre.org. It is recommended that you create a study plan and allow adequate time to prepare for admission exams. Note deadlines of exams and register early, as registration fills up quickly. You may consider purchasing a test prep book, such as Kaplan or Princeton Review. Preparation materials and practice exams are available through SMART Learning Commons in 204 Walter Library.

Personal Statement/Essay:

Most graduate and professional school programs will have specific criteria they would like you to include in the form of an essay. The essay should be clear and concise and it should showcase the depth of your thinking. The essay should be a reflection of who you are, why you have chosen the field, and why you are a good candidate. See Page 2 to help you get started.

Diversity statements:

It is becoming increasingly more common for academic institutions to ask for a diversity statement as a part of the application process. This typically a short document one page or less that demonstrates your commitment to fostering values of diversity, equity and inclusion at the institution. A few resources to consider while writing a Diversity Statement can be found below:

- Times Higher Education Diversity Statements
- Colgate Guidance on Crafting Diversity Statements
- Diversity for Social Impact How to Write a Diversity Statement
- OnGig Examples of Diversity Statements

Letters of Recommendation:
Most graduate programs will require two or three letters of recommendation for your application. It is essential that you choose professional references, including faculty, and that you choose individuals who know you well enough to compose a strong letter. Once you have identified those individuals, set up a time to talk with them about your goals. Bring a copy of your application materials. Be sure to note if the program requires the letters to be submitted directly or with your application.

Financial Aid:
Financial aid for graduate school is primarily in the form of assistantships, fellowships, and student loans. Investigate your financial aid options at each institution. Note the deadlines for financial aid, as they may be earlier than the application deadline.

Completed Applications:
It is a good idea to make backup copies of your application materials. After you submit your application materials, follow up to make sure they have been received and your file is complete. It is your responsibility to make sure the admissions committee has your completed application.

PERSONAL STATEMENTS:

The admission process for graduate and professional school is more competitive today than ever before. Undergraduate grades and entrance-exam scores don't tell the entire story. Graduate and professional schools are also looking for applicants who are interesting, articulate, and distinctive, with different points of view, ambitions, backgrounds, and career interests. So how do the decision-makers look at students beyond the application? The answer: through essay questions on the application (commonly referred to as personal statements), as well as letters of recommendation and in-person interviews.

The personal statement portion of a school's admissions application presents a great opportunity for you to market yourself to the school/program. A "Statement of Purpose" varies slightly from a "Personal Statement." Read about the differences at Petersons.com.

THE QUESTIONS:
Personal statement/essay questions can vary among schools. Some provide very little guidance on what to write, while others ask specific questions. Some schools require a specific word, character or page limit, while others do not. Some schools require one personal statement, while others may require several essay questions. Pay attention to the guidelines for each school/program you apply to.

WRITING YOUR ESSAYS:
- Assemble your applications and determine how many different essays you must write. If the program requests responses to specific questions, make sure you address each one. Always address why you are interested in that program/school and why you are a good fit.
- Consult friends and relatives for ideas; others may see us differently than we see ourselves. You may be overlooking some theme, angle, or aspect of your personality that might be obvious to others who know you well.
- Determine what makes you unique. What is your story? What experiences have most influenced your career decisions? What inspiring stories could you share about experiences in your life and the impact they had on you?
- Consider identifying a theme for your personal statement, and outline your approach to what content should be included that is relevant to your theme. For example, if your theme is "social change," identify what experiences or stories in your life have proven your commitment to social change or have influenced your interest in social change.
- Get feedback from others before completing your final draft. Faculty, friends, relatives, and CSE Career Services can all be good resources for obtaining feedback on your personal statement.
- Bring a draft to the Center for Writing for feedback.

TIPS FOR WRITING PERSONAL STATEMENTS:
- Strive for depth rather than breadth. Narrow your focus to one or two themes, ideas or experiences.
- Be yourself rather than pretending to be the "ideal" applicant.
- Get creative and imaginative, particularly in your opening remarks.
- Address the particular school's unique features that attract you and make you a good fit.
- Enlist others to proofread your essay for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage, flow, and style.
- Don't just repeat what is on your resume, expand upon it.

Purdue OWL offers tips and advice for writing your personal statement. See highlights below or visit their website.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:
- What's special, unique, distinctive, and/or impressive about you or your life story?
- What details of your life (personal or family problems, history, people or events that have shaped you or influenced your goals) might help the committee better understand you or help set you apart from other applicants?
- When did you become interested in this field and what have you learned about it (and about yourself) that has further stimulated your interest and reinforced your conviction that you are well suited to this field? What insights have you gained?

- How have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
- If you have worked a lot during your college years, what have you learned (leadership or managerial skills, for example), and how has that work contributed to your growth?
- What are your career goals?
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in your academic record that you should explain (great grades but mediocre LSAT or GRE scores, for example, or a distinct upward pattern to your GPA if it was only average in the beginning)?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
- What personal characteristics (for example, integrity, compassion, and/or persistence) do you possess that would improve your prospects for success in the field or profession? Is there a way to demonstrate or document that you have these characteristics?
- What skills (for example, leadership, communicative, analytical) do you possess?
- Why might you be a stronger candidate for graduate school—and more successful and effective in the profession or field than other applicants?
- What are the most compelling reasons you can give for the admissions committee to be interested in you?

GENERAL ADVICE:

Answer the questions that are asked

- If you are applying to several schools, you may find questions in each application that are somewhat similar.
- Don't be tempted to use the same statement for all applications. It is important to answer each question being asked, and if slightly different answers are needed, you should write separate statements. In every case, be sure your answer fits the question being asked.

Tell a story

- Think in terms of showing or demonstrating through concrete experience. One of the worst things you can do is to bore the admissions committee. If your statement is fresh, lively, and different, you'll be putting yourself ahead of the pack. If you distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable.

Be specific

- Don't, for example, state that you would make an excellent doctor unless you can back it up with specific reasons. Your desire to become a lawyer, engineer, or whatever should be logical, the result of specific experience that is described in your statement. Your application should emerge as the logical conclusion to your story.

Find an angle

- If you're like most people, your life story lacks drama, so figuring out a way to make it interesting becomes the big challenge. Finding an angle or a "hook" is vital.

Concentrate on your opening paragraph

- The lead or opening paragraph is generally the most important. It is here that you grab the reader's attention or lose it. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement.

Tell what you know

- The middle section of your essay might detail your interest and experience in your particular field, as well as some of your knowledge of the field. Too many people graduate with little or no knowledge of the nuts and bolts of the profession or field they hope to enter. Be as specific as you can in relating what you know about the field and use the language professionals use in conveying this information. Refer to experiences (work, research, etc.), classes, conversations with people in the field, books you've read, seminars you've attended, or any other source of specific information about the career you want and why you're suited to it. Since you will have to select what you include in your statement, the choices you make are often an indication of your judgment.

Don't include some subjects

- There are certain things best left out of personal statements. For example, references to experiences or accomplishments in high school or earlier are generally not a good idea. Don't mention potentially controversial subjects (for example, controversial religious or political issues).

Do some research, if needed

- If a school wants to know why you're applying to it rather than another school, do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs. If the school setting would provide an important geographical or cultural change for you, this might be a factor to mention.

Write well and correctly

- Be meticulous. Type and proofread your essay very carefully. Many admissions officers say that good written skills and command of correct use of language are important to them as they read these statements. Express yourself clearly and concisely. Adhere to stated word limits.

Avoid clichés

- A medical school applicant who writes that he is good at science and wants to help other people is not exactly expressing an original thought. Stay away from often-repeated or tired statements.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- The CSE Career Services Resource Center in 105 Lind Hall, 207 Church Street SE has resources to assist you with writing your personal statement.
- Watch the Preparing for Graduate/Professional School and Personal Statements Online Videos
- More tips for writing personal statements.

INTERVIEWING:

The following information is helpful to review when preparing specifically for graduate school interviews. For more information regarding general interviewing preparation, please see our interviewing guide**.**

PREPARE QUESTIONS FOR THE INTERVIEWER/COMMITTEE:

At the end of your interview, it is likely that they will ask if you have any questions. This is your opportunity to ask anything that would be helpful as you assess your fit with the school and program. It is important to ask thoughtful questions that cannot be answered through basic research. Use the information you gain from researching the school and program to develop more in-depth questions. Below are examples of general questions that may be helpful to ask:

- Can you provide some examples of what alumni from this program are doing?
- What is the selection timeline? When will candidates be notified of their acceptance?
- I've read articles by Professor X. To what extent are students involved with this research?
- What do you view as the strengths of this program?
- Can you tell me more about your research area?

PREPARE TO ANSWER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

Know Yourself:

- Values, interests, skills, strengths, weaknesses, and accomplishments.
- Research experience and interests.
- Related experience to the program and success stories from your past.
- Why you want an advanced degree in this field and what your short term and long term career goals are.

Know the Institution:

- Research the institution, program, and coursework.
- Familiarize yourself with the faculty and their publications, as well as research/assistantship opportunities.
- Be ready to specifically articulate why the institution is a good fit for you.

Know the Field:

- Research current issues, trends, and challenges.
- Think about what you want to accomplish in the field.

Interview Preparation Tips:

- It's impossible to prepare for every question you will be asked; however, be prepared for questions directly related to the program objectives and the field. Before your interview, write down several stories that demonstrate the skills important to the graduate program (often you can find this information by reading about the program on the program website). This will help you prepare well thought-out examples for whatever questions they may ask.
- Each institution has a different interview process. Ask the program representative at each school about details regarding the interview day(s).
- The interview is usually conducted by faculty members and/or current students.
- Review the section below and the list of Practice Interview Questions on the CSE Interviewing Guide, and write down and practice out loud what your responses would be.

HOW TO APPROACH COMMONLY ASKED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

Behavioral Based Questions ("Tell me about a time," "Give me an example"): These questions are asked based on the assumption that past behavior predicts future performance. Therefore, they will ask you questions about the skills they are seeking and want to hear specific examples from your past that demonstrate these skills. Examples may come from work experience, internships, academic experiences, extra-curricular activities or volunteer work. The STAR (describe the Situation…Task… Action...Result) technique described below is useful for structuring your answers to ensure you are telling a detailed story. Before your interview write down several stories that demonstrate the skills that are important to the program and the field using the STAR technique, then practice telling these stories.

Situation/Task: Description of specific situation, project or task related to the skill sought.
Action: Description of specific steps you took.
Result: Outcome resulting from the action taken. Be specific. How did you know you were successful?

Tell me about yourself: This question is asked to learn more about you, specifically about your academic background and your experience related to the program. Think about describing your present and past experiences and future goals. In your response you can include:

- Your student status (*Present*) such as major, year in school, courses in progress, and interests related to academics, research, and career goals.
- Your related experience (*Past*): Internships, student organizations, research, work experience, course projects, and leadership positions (assume they have not read your resume).
- Qualities and skills you have that make you a good fit for (*Future*) the program and institution (use the research you did on the program to inform your answer).

What are your strengths? Research the program and the field to learn what skills and qualities are important to be successful, then identify which of these are your personal strengths. When asked "What are your strengths," name a few and give detailed examples of how you have demonstrated these strengths in the past. Remember, your examples provide proof.

What are your weaknesses? Be honest about your weaknesses. Tell them one of your weaknesses and then give an example of how you are working on that weakness. Be specific about the steps you've taken to manage this weakness.

Why did you choose your major? Answering this question gives you the opportunity to demonstrate why you are passionate about your field. Be specific about why you chose your major, what motivates you to be successful in your program of study, and what you have enjoyed most about your academic program (courses, projects, research, a certain specialization in your field). Explain to the interviewer how your major has helped prepare you for the graduate program.

What are your short term and long term career goals? Relate your goals to the program and why you want to pursue an advanced degree. It is okay to be somewhat vague about your long term career goals; however, indicate some possibilities for your future based on what you know about the field. Be sure to demonstrate that you have a commitment to your field and that you want to develop and grow as a professional.

Is there anything else you would like to share with us? Often this question is asked at the end of an interview. Your response should include any information you have not yet been able to share with the interviewer that would be important for them to know regarding your key qualifications and your interest in the program.

Why should we admit you? This gives you the opportunity to summarize why you are an excellent candidate for the program and what makes you stand out from other applicants. Most likely the interviewer is not going to remember everything you said from your interview, so when this question is asked, reiterate your qualifications (unique strengths, skills, and experiences relevant to the program). Leave the interviewer with a positive lasting impression.