

Applying to Graduate School

...for a Ph.D.

THE BASIC QUESTIONS

- **WHAT is the Ph.D.?**

Obtaining your Ph.D. in any field consists mainly in learning how to do research. Graduate students engage in course work and large amounts of structured reading, and they must pass “comprehensive exams.” But the major enterprise in graduate school is the three-pronged process of research, writing, and publishing. During graduate studies, students complete a master’s thesis and a dissertation along with juggling other research activities and projects. The goal of most doctoral students is to become a professor; others aim to do research in industry, government, or another type of organization.

- **WHO should go?**

People who love research, scholarship, and teaching for their own sake and for the difference they can sometimes make in the world.

- **WHO should NOT go?**

Graduate school is not for everyone. People who simply want more undergraduate courses should not go because graduate school is more about knowledge production, not consumption. It is also not for people who are in a hurry to get a real job. Nor is it for people who are trying to avoid getting a job.

- **HOW LONG does it take?**

Earning a Ph.D. varies in terms of length of time to complete. Typically, programs in the U.S. take from five to eight years of study and research, organized by a single department or by an interdisciplinary program at a university, which culminates in a doctoral degree.

- **HOW MUCH does it cost?**

The cost of graduate and/or professional school varies; so also does the type of funding. Financial support takes many forms: scholarships, fellowships, assistantships, loans, etc. **Typically, students pursuing graduate studies in Sociology and other social sciences not only have all of their TUITION WAIVED, but they also receive a graduate assistantship THAT PAYS \$15K-25K per year!** Grad programs also offer health insurance coverage or inexpensive health insurance policies. For more info on paying for graduate school, see <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-graduate-schools/top-graduate-schools/paying> and <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-graduate-schools/paying/articles/2013/03/12/use-these-5-strategies-to-pay-for-graduate-school> and <http://www.youcandealwithit.com/borrowers/graduates/how-to-pay.shtml>

HOW TO DECIDE IF YOU WANT TO GET a PH.D.

- **GET advice**

Your undergraduate education will not enable you to decide whether to go to graduate school. Ask advice from your professors and actively explore the possibility of graduate school. Get advice from different people. If your major department has a graduate program, talk to some of the graduate students presently enrolled. (For a list of Sociology’s grad students, see <http://sociology.nd.edu/graduate-program/student-directory/>.) Make a guess at the field/topic that you might want to study in graduate school and identify a professor who knows something about that topic. Then, talk to that professor and ask questions.

- **TRY your hand at research**

Start getting involved in research as an undergraduate so that you can make a well-informed decision about continuing research in graduate school. Undergraduate research projects can take a wide variety of forms, from assisting faculty and grad students in their research to conducting your own research for a senior thesis. Take challenging courses. Develop your writing & analytical skills. Complete a research apprenticeship via the Sociology Department's SOC 35900, Sociology Research Apprenticeships. Apply for a research grant.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS

- **Choosing the appropriate school/program**

Use faculty as resources. Take writing samples to faculty and ask for their feedback. Find out where the good programs are, given your interests. Consider a range of programs. Though one professor may be what draws you to a program, do not let that be the deciding factor because professors move. Make a holistic decision, based on the array of faculty, the research areas represented among the faculty, fellowships & scholarships, location of school, local cost of living, and what you feel is the right fit for you. Expect to apply to six to nine schools, depending on the level of competition in your area.

- **Deadlines**

Applications for most Ph.D. programs are typically due in December or January. You should start the application forms by the summer or at least by September of your senior year if you plan to start graduate school right after your undergraduate program. You should also apply for fellowships and scholarships at the same time. Pay attention to deadlines. Ask people in the department about the major fellowships in your area and seek out fellowship lists on the Web: <http://careercenter.nd.edu/for-undergrads/postgraduate-education-service-fellowships/graduate-school>. GREs are also necessary for most Ph.D. programs. (It's best to take the GREs while still in college, while your mind is still fresh, especially with respect to subjects like math.) A lot of students take the GREs twice, taking the first set early, in case they want to re-take them.

- **The "Statement of Purpose"**

You will need to explain why you want to go to graduate school and include some idea about what sort of research you would like to conduct. You should write about a page and half on the subject **and take it to the professors from whom you have been getting advice. Do not be surprised if it takes three to four tries to get it right.** Be concrete; avoid inconsequential details. Start with a hook, but avoid being cute. Tailor your statement to fit the departments to which you are applying; show the admissions committee you have done your homework. (For more input on writing personal statements, visit <https://www.e-education.psu.edu/writingpersonalstatementsonline/node/1984>.)

- **Letters of Recommendation**

The application to graduate school involves letters of recommendation, usually 3 to 4. Most of these letters will be from professors in the department where you did your undergraduate work, especially if you are planning to go on right after your undergraduate work. To get good letters, be proactive. Ask professors who are well known in their fields to write for you. **But make sure the professors know you.** Your writers will be asked to comment on your oral and written skills, your analytical skills, your leadership capacities, and your creativity. They will be asked to predict your success in graduate school and in the future. Make sure that each year you allow at least 2 professors to get to know you and your capabilities so that they can write with conviction. (Rating Scales are frequently included in letters of reference—see page 4 for an example of one.)

For more discussions on preparing for graduate school, see

See also: <http://www.idealists.org/info/GradEducation/Resources/>

Grad Skool Rulz: Everything You Need to Know about Academia from Admissions to Tenure (2011) by Fabio Rojas (<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/93455>)

...for a Master's Degree

- **WHAT is a Master's Degree?**

A master's degree is a type of graduate degree, earned after completion of an undergraduate degree. Master's degrees typically require 30 credits of coursework, which takes approximately 2 years of full time study; longer if one does it part-time. Though most master's degrees are 2 years, there are some that require only 1 year of full-time study, and others that require three years. Comprehensive exams and a thesis are required in some master's degree programs. And in some master's programs, internships and other applied professional experiences in the field of study are required.

- **WHO should go on for a Master's Degree?**

Those who want to practice a profession in which a master's degree is required will have to enroll in an appropriate master's level graduate program. Others may choose to pursue a master's degree to increase their earning potential, to qualify for a promotion, to assume more responsibility or greater autonomy in their work, or to distinguish themselves from the crowd. Other people who go on for a master's degree may want to increase their knowledge and skills in a field, expand their personal potential, make a career shift, or establish competency in research methods and statistics before applying to a Ph.D. program.

- **DIFFERENT TYPES of Master's Degrees**

- **Applied and/or Professional Master's Programs** (e.g., MBA.; MDiv; MEd; MHA; MPAS; MPH; MSW)
- **Research Master's Programs** (e.g., MS; MA)
- **Creative Master's Programs** (e.g., MFA; MMus)

- **THE APPLICATION PROCESS**

The application process is similar to that for applying to Ph.D. programs. (See page 2.)

FUTHER READING

- ***What Color is Your Parachute? 2014: A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters and Career-Changers*** by Richard N. Bolles (Ten Speed Press)
- ***The Graduate School Funding Handbook, 3rd edition*** (2012) by April Vahle Hamel and Jennifer S. Furlong (University of PA Press)
- "The Five Truths About Graduate School That Nobody Tells You" by Nicholas Lambert. Published on October 28, 2013 (<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/publish-and-prosper/201310/five-truths-about-graduate-school-nobody-tells-you>)
- "Do Everything and Make Connections: That's What You're Really There For" at <http://lifehacker.com/seven-things-i-wish-i-knew-before-going-to-graduate-sch-1609488711>

Rating Scales appear in many forms within letters of recommendation packets. Below is one example. Note the categories and then the characteristics under each category. Though these may vary slightly by program and university, overall there is a high degree of comparability among rating scales. Note also the use of a comparison group. Your recommenders will be asked to compare you to members of a specified class of student, e.g., majors in your discipline, undergraduates in Arts and Letters, students in the first year of graduate studies, etc.

Knowing the behaviors and competencies you need to display will help you to direct your efforts in your undergraduate studies and related activities. It will also help you to select people who can reasonably comment on such specific competencies when completing a recommendation for you.

Please rate the applicant on the following dimensions, comparing him or her with other students you have known.

| | Exceptional Top 2% | Outstanding Top 10% | Very Good Top 20% | Good Top Third | Average Middle Third | Below Average Bottom Third | No Opportunity to Observe |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Skills and Aptitudes | | | | | | | |
| Analytical skills | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Quantitative skills | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Oral/written abilities | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Creativity | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Natural Talent | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

| | Exceptional Top 2% | Outstanding Top 10% | Very Good Top 20% | Good Top Third | Average Middle Third | Below Average Bottom Third | No Opportunity to Observe |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Character Traits | | | | | | | |
| Intellectual curiosity | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Maturity/reliability/dependability | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Motivation/drive/industriousness | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Initiative/resourcefulness | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Self-discipline/focus | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

What is your overall impression of the applicant for graduate study?

- Outstanding
- Strong
- Average
- Marginal
- Uncertain

Please make a brief overall assessment of the applicant, commenting on the applicant's knowledge of his or her major field and on particular strengths and weaknesses. We appreciate your honest evaluation. If you think the applicant's grades or scores on standardized tests are misleading about the applicant's promise for graduate studies, please indicate why. If you do not know the applicant well, please feel free to say so and supply grades in your courses or other pertinent information from your records.