

The Gamecock's Guide to GRADUATE SCHOOL



APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

DECIDE IF GRADUATE SCHOOL IS FOR YOU

Take this brief survey to assess your motivation to continue your education. Label each statement below as True (T), False (F), or Unknown (U):

- _____ 1. If I do not go to graduate school now, I may never go.
- _____ 2. I can get a job in my field without a graduate degree, but not in my specialized area of interest.
- _____ 3. I am unsure of my career goals and graduate school will help me clarify my interests.
- _____ 4. I am actively exploring both graduate school and direct entry into the marketplace.
- _____ 5. My professors/mentors are encouraging me to attend graduate/professional school.
- _____ 6. I cannot work in my preferred field of interest without a graduate degree.
- _____ 7. The job market is crowded, and a graduate degree will make me more competitive.
- _____ 8. A graduate degree will significantly increase my entry level salary.
- _____ 9. I like school; I am not ready to leave the structured academic environment.
- _____ 10. I have career-related experience as part of my background.
- _____ 11. I have always known that I would go directly from undergraduate school into graduate study.
- _____ 12. Most students enter my field of graduate study directly from undergraduate school.

My primary reason for considering graduate school now is:

The academic programs of study I am considering are:

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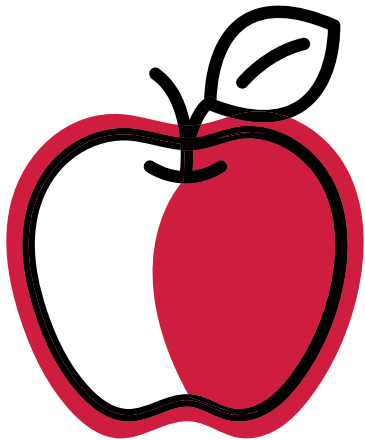
Career Center

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

TYPES OF GRADUATE STUDY

PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS

- Emphasize the practical application of knowledge and skills. They include dental, medical, veterinarian, law, paralegal, and business schools.
- Many do not require applicants to have a specific undergraduate degree; however, specific (related or rigorous) undergraduate courses may be an important factor. Typically, professional schools are interested in how academically challenging your previous coursework was.
- Often evaluate applicants heavily according to responses to application essay questions and/or a personal statement. They are concerned with responses to ethical/philosophical and scenario questions.
- Interested in an applicant's background in terms of community service, leadership, campus and association involvement, work experience, and the result of tests such as the LSAT and MCAT.
- More students go directly into professional schools immediately following undergraduate education than those who go directly on to graduate school.



GRADUATE SCHOOLS

- There are many specialized paths to consider when applying to graduate schools. For example, a student interested in counseling could earn either an M.Ed. (Master of Education) in Counselor Education, an M.A. (Master of Arts) in Counseling Psychology or a M.S.W. (Master of Social Work).
 - Each program may have an entirely different philosophical approach and may better prepare students for working in different areas of the market.
 - Some programs prepare students for careers as professors or researchers, and others prepare students for careers in varying areas of industry such as business or government.
 - It is important to have a solid grasp of the specialty area you want to pursue and the industry area in which you wish to work when choosing a graduate program.
- Interested in an applicant's background in terms of community service, leadership, campus and professional association involvement, work experience, and the results of standardized tests (some programs require both general and subject area exams and have minimum standards for admittance).
- Some may require you to obtain a credential file, typically seen in education and pharmacy programs.
- Graduate degrees may or may not increase salaries depending on the academic area.
 - This is something you'll want to investigate.
- Many students take time off between undergraduate and graduate studies to acquire valuable work experience and further confirm their specialty area of choice.
 - Some industries and graduate schools prefer this! However, there isn't usually a right or wrong way to go about it. Many people work before applying to graduate school and many go directly in after graduation with a bachelor's degree so either option is fine.



FACTORS TO CONSIDER

GEOGRAPHICAL AREA

- Consider whether you can afford in-state vs. out-of-state tuition, how much you can spend on travel expenses, how far you want to be from loved ones and how far-reaching the reputation of the program is.

FINANCES

- Consider how much you can pay toward tuition, books, housing, living expenses, etc. Are you interested in fellowships, scholarships, tuition waivers or graduate assistant stipends, and are they available?

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

- Does the school offer graduate assistantships (GA)? If so, are they related to your studies and will they afford you related practical or professional experience, or only teaching experience?
- Is there a field education piece built into the program that gives you class credit to work in the field?

REPUTATION

- Are the programs accredited by the appropriate accreditation boards?

QUALITY

- Explore the value of the academic courses, the library, the equipment or labs, advising, etc.
- Does the program use cutting edge technology? Are the textbooks and practices up to date?

DEMOGRAPHICS AND CULTURE

- Consider these factors for both the student body and the faculty. What is your impression of faculty/student interaction? How is the morale of the department? Do you “fit” with the environment?
- Does it seem like an inclusive, varied environment welcoming to people of all backgrounds?

PUBLICATIONS AND FACULTY RESEARCH

- How well known are professors in the academic marketplace?
- Do you wish to study or conduct research under a particular “expert” in the field who teaches at a particular institution?

REQUIREMENTS

- How many credit hours (or years) is the program?
- Does the program require students to take comprehensive finals (final exams which cover the entire curriculum), or research and write a thesis?

PREPARATION/PLACEMENT RECORD

- What types of positions have previous graduates of the program gone on to hold?



WRITING A WINNING ESSAY

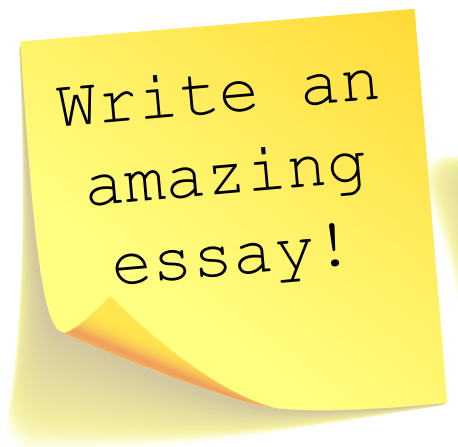
Writing an essay or personal statement is often the most difficult part of the application, as well as the most distinguishing. It is the one portion of the application that allows you to really set yourself apart and tell the admissions committee what you have to offer that is unique from other applicants. It should be something that only you could write and does not resemble what all other applicants are likely writing. Keep it well thought out, clear, offering succinct statements showing that you have a definite sense of your goals, and be grammatically perfect.

TYPES OF ESSAYS

- Some programs request only 1 or 2 paragraphs about why you want to pursue graduate study. Others require 5 or 6 separate essays in which you are expected to write at length about your motivation for graduate study, your strengths and weaknesses, your values and philosophies on a given topic, your greatest achievements, an influential life event and solutions to hypothetical problems.
 - Business schools are notorious for requiring several time-consuming essays.

CONTENT

- A graduate school essay should be essentially a statement of your ideas or goals. Usually, it includes a certain amount of personal history, but you do not have to supply autobiographical information unless required by the school.
- In deciding whether to include personal history, consider its influence on your future plans and ability to distinguish you further from other applicants.
- Keep your essay positive and upbeat. It is better not to mention low grades or test scores unless specifically asked to.
 - If negative circumstances must be addressed, they should: 1) be in the past; 2) be currently resolved; and 3) be unlikely to recur.
 - Avoid long, tedious excuses. You may also wish to ask for one of your references to address these issues in the recommendation letter.



- The admissions committee may be trying to evaluate some, or all, of the following things from your essay:
 - A clear reflection of your writing abilities, both grammatical and creative.
 - The clarity, focus and depth of your thinking.
 - Level of maturity.
 - Reasons for deciding to pursue graduate education in a particular field and at a particular institution.
 - Motivation, commitment, and enthusiasm to pursue a particular field of study.
 - Major area of special interest.
 - Expectations you have regarding the program of study and career opportunities.
 - Immediate and long-term goals and how previous research, education, and work experience relate to your future plans.

APPROACHES/TIPS

- Jot down the most unique things about you. List your goals, accomplishments, and influences.
- Concentrate on the opening paragraph. Avoid "I have always wanted to be a ____." Consider opening with an epiphany – the moment you realized your passion.
- Have an angle or a "hook" that emphasizes a distinguishing characteristic about you or a life event.
- Tell a story. Even if it includes autobiographical information, it does not have to be written chronologically.
- Demonstrate that you have researched the program(s) and know why you are choosing to apply.
- Consider the reader's point of view. Avoid any statements that could be interpreted as dishonest.
- Less is more. Illustrate the salient points in depth and refer to supporting materials for more detail.
- Open or end with a quote that has relevance to you, your philosophies, or the field.

Source: Asher, D. (2008). *Graduate admissions essays: Write your way into the graduate school of your choice*. Berkeley: Ten Speed Press.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS AND TIMELINE

JUNIOR YEAR: FALL AND SPRING

- Review the list of graduate programs attending each career fair to plan your visits, or attend the USC Law School Fair if you're interested in a legal career.
- Determine your area of interest and whether you prefer an academic or professional based program.
- Determine your financial resources. Consider how this may affect your choice of programs in-state versus out-of-state (tuition differences), how many programs you will apply to (application fees) and whether you will need to obtain a paid assistantship or other paid work while in school.
- Research related institutions and programs. Use websites such as:
 - [PowerSchool](#)
 - [Peterson's Grad School Search Tool](#)
 - [National Center for Education Statistics \(NCES\) College Navigator](#)
 - [Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health \(ASPPH\) Academic Program Finder](#)
- Talk to advisors/professors about the application process.
- Register for appropriate graduate admissions tests (i.e. GRE, GMAT, MCAT, LSAT).
 - Take practice exams if desired.
 - Order books to study.
- Write a resume and have it critiqued at the Career Center. You may wish to include this in your application.
- Ask supervisors/professors for letters of recommendation. Provide a copy of your resume to assist them.

JUNIOR YEAR: SUMMER

- Investigate national scholarships.
- Take required graduate admission tests.
- Write schools of choice for application materials (both for programs of study and assistantships).
- Visit institutions of interest, if possible. If not, call to discuss programs with appropriate admissions coordinators.
- Write your application essay. Have it critiqued by the Career Center and/or a writing professor.
- Check on application deadlines vs. rolling admissions policies.
- For medical, dental, osteopathy, podiatry, or law school, you may need to register for the national application or data assembly service most programs use.

SENIOR YEAR: FALL

- Obtain letters of recommendation.
 - This process will vary depending on the application — some request surveys to be completed by your references and others may need you to upload a letter as a PDF to the application.
- Request official copies of transcript from the Registrar's office and send separately, or with application, as requested.
 - This usually has a small fee you'll pay to the university. They will directly send the official transcript to your graduate school — it is not supposed to be altered/opened by you.
- Take graduate admission tests if you have not already done so.
- Apply for financial aid or student loans, as well as scholarships, if desired or necessary.
- Send completed applications in advance of the deadlines.

SENIOR YEAR: SPRING

- Check with institutions before deadlines to make sure files are complete.
- Interview at institutions that require an interview for either program admittance or assistantships.
- Visit institutions that accept you, investigate housing options, and make final decision.
- Talk to students currently enrolled in the program.
 - Research on [LinkedIn!](#)
- Send deposit to institution of choice to hold your spot.
- Make housing arrangements such as completing application for graduate housing or an off-campus apartment.
- Notify other institutions that accepted you so that they may admit students on their waiting lists.
- Send thank you notes to people who wrote your recommendation letters and inform them of your success.

Note: You may not be able to adhere to this exact timetable if your application deadlines are very early, as is the case with medical schools, or if you decide to attend graduate school at the last minute. In any case, keep in mind the various application requirements, and be sure to meet all deadlines. If deadlines are impossible to meet, call the institution to see if a late application will be considered.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

A personal statement or graduate school essay is an opportunity to sell yourself in the graduate school application process. Your goal is to help the admissions committee understand YOU personally and see what sets you apart from other applicants. Although requirements vary from school to school, with some programs requesting only 1-2 paragraphs and others requiring multiple essays, personal statements generally fall into one of two categories:

1. The general, comprehensive personal statement:

This allows you freedom to write what you want to write; however, you can run into the pitfall of being too broad.

2. The response to specific questions:

Your statement should respond specifically to the question or questions being asked. This type of statement makes it easy to formulate what you want to say but can stifle creativity.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU BEGIN WRITING

Writing a personal statement can often be the most difficult part of the application process. Spend some time reflecting on your life experiences, events, and achievements relevant to your career choice and application to graduate school. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is unique about you or your life story?
- Have you had to overcome any unusual obstacles or hardships (for example, economic, familial, or physical) in your life?
- What in your life has shaped you or influenced your goals?
- When did you become interested in this field?
 - How have you learned about this field—through classes, readings, seminars, work or other experiences, or conversations with people already in the field?
 - What have you learned about this field that has deepened your interest and your belief that you are a good fit?
 - What insights have you gained?
 - If you have worked or had internships or leadership experiences, what have you learned 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?
- What personal qualities, values and skills do you possess that would improve your likelihood for success in the field?
 - How can you convey and demonstrate that you have these characteristics?
- What makes you a superior candidate for graduate school and what is going to make you more successful in the profession or field than other applicants?
- Why should the admissions committee be interested in you?
 - What are the most persuasive and undeniable reasons you can give the committee to admit you into their program?



GETTING STARTED

TELL A STORY

Use the opening paragraph to grab the reader's attention. This paragraph becomes the framework for the rest of the statement. If you distinguish yourself through your story, you will make yourself memorable.

TAILOR YOUR ESSAY

Many schools ask similar but different questions. If you are applying to several schools, you may think you can use the same statement for all applications. Do not do this! It is important to answer each question by tailoring your answer to the question. It is equally as important to mirror yourself to the culture of the institution, for example if the college is well known for community service or research point this out as a value of yours.

FIND AN ANGLE

Most people's lives don't come pre-packaged with cliffhangers or dramatic plot twists. What makes an essay stand out isn't a soap-opera storyline — it's perspective. Zero in on a moment, theme, or question that feels like *yours*, then frame it so the admissions committee sees not just what happened, but how you think about it. That angle is your hook.

BE SPECIFIC

Use specific examples to validate your statements and ideas; if you state that you would make an excellent lawyer back it up with specific reasons why you believe that to be true. Include details about your experiences in your field of interest. Use industry lingo. Refer to job shadowing, internship, work, research, and leadership experience as well as classes and conversation you may have had with people in the field. You can also draw from seminars or conferences you have attended as well as books you have read. Your desire to enter into your chosen field should be logical, the result of specific experience that is described in your statement. Use sensory details to help set scenes, make sure your reader is right there with you. Share your emotions because this will give the admissions committee a better idea of who you are.

BE THOUGHTFUL AND HONEST

Remember a strong personal statement is reflective; it demonstrates that you have thought about and gained a clear understanding of your experiences and what you want in your future. It does not simply tell the admissions committee what you think they want to know; but it gives them a clear and compelling picture of you instead! You are the focus of the personal statement, it is all about your achievements, your obstacles, your goals, your values. Be sure not to exaggerate your qualifications or experiences, either.

AVOID COMMON MISTAKES

DO NOT INCLUDE SOME SUBJECTS

Do not mention potentially controversial subjects (for example, controversial religious or political issues), and do not discuss money as a motivating factor even if it is true for you.

RESEARCH, IF NEEDED

If a school wants to know why you are applying to it rather than another school, do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs. Do you have current faculty that went to this institution? Does the school setting provide an important geographical or cultural change for you? Is there faculty doing research that is of interest to you? All of these may be worth mentioning in your essay.

BE METICULOUS

Type and proofread your statement very carefully. Express yourself clearly and concisely.

FOLLOW DIRECTIONS

Answer only what is asked and stay within word limits.

AVOID INFORMALITY AND CLICHÉS

Avoid slang, clichés, and contractions. Keep your writing formal.

DO NOT OVER SHARE

The essay is not the place to unload frustrations or provide a detailed overview of your childhood. Ask yourself would you feel comfortable discussing this in a face-to-face interview. If you are still unsure ask a Career Center expert.

AVOID MAKING EXCUSES

The admissions essay is a place where you can add a personal touch to your application. It is where you can provide context for your accomplishments. Although you can use the essay to explain poor grades, keep your explanation succinct; do not make your admissions essay an explanation. Admissions committees have heard it all and although they may empathize with your situation, their concern is locating applicants who will excel in their programs; therefore, you should focus on your strengths rather than explaining your weaknesses.

KNOW YOUR DEADLINES

Allocate enough time to have a few people proofread your personal statement, and for you to make revisions. Ideally, you should allow enough time to go through the proofread/revision process three times and still be well under your deadline.

SAMPLE 1

As a fresh graduate, the word overwhelmed captures my thoughts following my first day of clinical training for my new job as a Newborn Hearing Screening Technician at the University of Virginia Hospital. Many of the infants were too active to complete the testing, and the protective, hormonal new mothers were understandably reluctant to have a trainee testing their newborns' hearing. Admittedly, my training days shattered my confidence from many hours studying within the comfort of academia. However, I found renewed determination in reflecting on my path to this job. Specifically, the remarkable impact of speech therapy for a member of my own family sparked my ambition to serve an active role in meeting the communication needs of individuals. This inspiration motivated my commitment to my undergraduate program and led to continued success in my professional experience as a newborn hearing screening technician. Ultimately, this position reaffirms my passion for meeting the communication needs of others every day and thus, solidifies my interest in attaining my master's degree in speech pathology.

As the months passed, the initial feelings of insecurity in my new position diminished as I became more confident in handling the babies, interacting with emotional parents, and ensuring accuracy in performing hearing screens. I continue to reflect on the importance of my role as the first step in detecting hearing loss in infants and its profound impact on their future well-being. I experience reward in engaging with glowing new parents and families of diverse backgrounds. I enjoy learning from the physicians, nurses, and other medical professionals while being immersed in a collaborative setting at one of the nation's best hospitals. I am fortunate to be reminded of the preciousness of life in my interactions with the families and their new babies. In such touching moments of my job experience, it is easy to understand my passion for this role.

However, like my turbulent training experience, my position is not without the day-to-day challenges presented in a fast-paced hospital environment. Some days, I feel pressured in scheduling screenings for over a dozen infants as my pager rings incessantly for impending discharges. Other moments,

I am frustrated when I must troubleshoot equipment issues. I have difficult conversations with concerned parents when I occasionally have a child who does not pass the initial hearing screen and will need to follow up with an audiologist. At times, the social circumstances of some families I encounter can be emotionally taxing.

Nevertheless, the most trying moments of my job experience reveal my true ambition to meet the communication needs of individuals and play a role in ensuring their future well-being. The physical and emotional drain I may experience some days at the hospital is temporary, but the impact made through my work surpasses any of these trivial challenges. I realize the impact in a child's life by meeting their communication needs outlasts the momentary ache in my feet or frustration over equipment issues. That being said, my passion for this work is resilient in the face of challenges, motivating me through not only the rewarding moments, but more importantly, the challenging moments.

Overall, my clinical experience as a Newborn Hearing Screening Technician gives me a unique perspective as an aspiring speech-language pathologist. My fulfillment in this role affirms that my meaningful work in life is using my talents to meet the communication needs of others and positively impact their future well-being. As an undergraduate student in the Arnold School of Public Health at the University of South Carolina, it would be a privilege to build upon my passion and experiences with the master's in speech pathology program's superior learning environment. Specifically, this program's unique collaboration with area medical facilities complements my health care interest and background. As I embark on my SLP training, I look forward to utilizing this program's exceptional clinical opportunities to find my niche as a future practitioner in the medical setting. In return, I am fully prepared to dedicate myself to the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders in the Arnold School of Public Health, particularly my budding, resilient passion for speech-language pathology emanating from my road to success as a newborn hearing screening technician.

SAMPLE 2

As an outdoorsy person I generally have little interest in movies, but Forrest Gump resonates with me on many levels. The story of a simple man with a heart for others living life the best he knows how, but I wonder if he may understand life better than most of us. "I don't know if we each have a destiny, or if we're all just floatin' around accidental-like on a breeze but I, I think maybe it's both," was his description of finding purpose. I don't recall a precise moment when I knew my purpose was to be a medical doctor. It is almost as if I always somehow knew but had to "float" a while letting life evolve unfolding my destiny. Preferring to take a bicycle apart rather than ride it or faking an illness just so I could go and ask my pediatrician questions about the human body, like Forrest Gump I could be easily misunderstood. My hands-on approach found trouble a time or two, but as time passed my floating revealed a propensity for kinesthetic learning, an analytical mind, and a servant's heart.

I was a well-rounded kid with above average grades and participation in clubs and sports with several leadership roles. Forrest Gump's mother told him his running shoes were magic by stating "they can take you anywhere" and I too was raised to believe anything is possible with hard work, determination, a little "floating" and a bit of divine intervention. A competitive gymnast in my youth translated into a coveted spot on the varsity cheerleading squad as a high school freshman, and as a high school senior and new track and field team member I qualified for the state meet in the triple jump event. With no formal swim training and after watching a few YouTube videos, I became a certified open water lifeguard to give back to a summer camp that had given so much to me over the years. Where there's a will there's a way is what I say, however I'm sure a lot of stars came into alignment during my floating years.

Forrest Gump proclaimed "I'm not the smart man. But I know what love is." Besides my love for family and friends, nothing has brought more joy than a summer in Guatemala helping the underserved population by teaching in impoverished elementary schools and aiming to empower the homeless community by providing education and health initiatives. A humbling experience, giving perspective to life and cause for self-reflection. During a moment when I thought my destiny may be to continue teaching English to the Guatemalan children, a missionary surgeon spontaneously floated into my life inviting me to scrub in on several surgeries with him throughout the summer. It was primitive and in earnest, quickly reminding of my desire to become a physician and serve underdeveloped countries through long term missions. Whether serving as philanthropy chair for my sorority, working as an applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapist for autistic children, or an emergency medical technician, for me, love is synonymous with helping others. As an exercise science major the focus has been on the study and application of relationships between fitness, diet, exercise, and health and I'm excited for the opportunity to delve deeper into medicine.

A simple person who appreciates the simple things with a dream of helping others. I believe all my floating has led to this place, where personality, passion, talents, and gifts meet my destiny. Forrest's mother said, "life is like a box of chocolates" and I would contend this applies to people as well; outwardly similar until pierced revealing its' surprising inside. Carmel, cherry, chewy nougat, coconut. Such is the need in the medical profession, a variety of personalities, gifts, passions, and talents. And to the second part of that most famous quote, "you never know what you're gonna get", I say with me you can count on commitment, dedication, and hard work on the inside, so take a chance and pierce the chocolate.



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