



Tips for Applying to Grad School

IN THE
HUMANITIES AND
SOCIAL SCIENCES



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You will also want to decide whether to enroll in graduate school directly after your undergraduate studies or take a gap year (page 10) to pursue a post-baccalaureate course of study, volunteer, travel or gain additional research experience.

Once you decide on a degree program, you will want to gather information on potential schools (page 12) and departments and make an application list, plan, and budget (page 17). As you add schools on to your application list, seek out fee waivers to ease the cost of applications.

In the spring and summer before you submit your applications, you should plan to assemble the main components of your application: entrance exam scores (page 14), statement of purpose (page 22), resume or biosketch (page 19), and letters of recommendation (page 26). Plan on spending late summer and early fall filling out and submitting your applications (page 29). This process can be quite time intensive. It is best to start early.

As you assemble your materials for your application to PhD programs, you may be thinking, "I successfully applied to college, how is this any different?" On the surface, it doesn't seem very different. You will be gathering information about potential schools, taking a standardized test and submitting scores to schools, writing some essays, putting together a CV, and asking individuals that know you well to write letters of recommendation. It all sounds very familiar and to some degree it is—but there are some key differences that are important to keep in mind so that you can apply to the institutions that are right for you and put together a strong application.

1) You are no longer applying to be a student, you are applying to be a junior colleague. Unlike college admissions, the individuals reading your application, and making the decision of who to interview and/or admit, are faculty.





Therefore, as you put together these different pieces, particularly as you select your letter writers, work on your Statement of Purpose, and for those in the humanities and social sciences, work on a writing sample, remember that your audience is essentially those professors that are lecturing you and/or that have mentored you through your research. Consider what these faculty would want or need to know to determine if you should be their junior colleague.

2) As a PhD student and junior colleague, you will no longer be just a consumer of knowledge, you will also be a producer. Taking classes will be a small fraction of your PhD. The PhD is about developing new ideas and making discoveries. Consider what you need to tell the committee in your statement and who can speak to your potential to contribute to the knowledge of your field. Also consider whether the institutions you are thinking about applying to will provide you with the resources you need to be successful; and whether the faculty in the departments or program you are considering support your scholarly interests. Remember, although you are applying to become their future colleague, they will also be yours.

Once your applications are submitted and under consideration by admissions committees (page 31), you will have to wait to hear about interviews and acceptances. Be prepared for interviews (page 34) and the post-interview process (page 36) if you are in a field that typically requires them. If all goes well, you will have multiple competing offers and will need to decide between them (page 38). If you do not happen to get accepted, do not be discouraged. Trying again the next year usually results in application success.

TIPS FOR APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

What Do You Get From a PhD?

IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

By Rochelle D. Smith
Assistant Provost, Diversity Initiatives
Washington University in St. Louis

Before you start researching potential schools and programs, you may be asking yourself if a PhD is right for you. This article describes the many benefits of a PhD, as well as some of the strategies PhD students can deploy to get the most out of their degrees.

The PhD, or the Doctorate of Philosophy, is the highest degree in research. This degree is awarded to individuals who have contributed to “the creation of new knowledge” by deeply studying a particular area of research, and advancing it by discovering or uncovering a new method, approach, design or protocol. Eight primary benefits of obtaining the PhD in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) are:

1. Qualification for the highest academic and research positions
2. Diverse career options (3)
3. Higher lifetime economic gains
4. Funding for living expenses and tuition waivers



ACTION ITEMS

1) Schedule three 15-20 minute informational interviews with three individuals who have earned the degree you want to pursue.

2) Conduct a cost-benefit analysis (1) for choosing to pursue a PhD.

3) Sign up for TLA Connect (2) to meet potential mentors.



5. The sense of accomplishment from completing an advanced degree and academic respect
6. Mastery of disciplinary skills such as statistical analyses, close textual readings, ethnography, and survey design
7. Development of critical thinking skills to understand and digest complex scholarly materials and participate in the relevant discourse
8. Leadership skills development

Due to the depth of the research PhD students conduct, completion of the degree takes longer than undergraduate study. Effective mentoring and consistent monitoring of progress can accelerate your progress while simultaneously maximizing the number and quality of research and professional tools that you acquire. You can sign up for a mentor through TLA Connect.

The First Two Years: Typically, doctoral programs begin with coursework and a qualifying exam. You will have the opportunity to develop your core areas of knowledge and add new, critical tools to your toolbox, as well as get to know potential dissertation advisors.

You and Your Mentor: Your relationship with your dissertation advisor will be central to your graduate career after your courses and exams. This close, often lifelong, professional relationship is one of the most valuable things that you get from a PhD program. You and your advisor will be responsible for setting key milestones and ensuring that you reach them as you develop your research question, conduct your doctoral research, go on the job market, and establish your research agenda at a new research institution.

Midway Through Your Program: Completing your PhD is a lot like completing a marathon; midway through you have loosened up and begun to hit your stride. It is a wonderful



feeling to be at the cutting edge of research and pushing the boundaries of what we know. But even while you are in the groove, the end can feel a long way off. Make sure there are concrete, realizable goals built into your research. Savoring these accomplishments will help fuel you toward the finish line.

Finishing: You've almost made it! In your final years, you'll be writing up your research and preparing to go on the job market. You have added tons of new tools to your research toolbox. You have developed a network of fellow scholars, including both peers and mentors. And you have added to the sum total of human knowledge through your doctoral research. Now it is time to begin putting together your job market dossier, which will feature your research and research skills, teaching accomplishments, and anything else job applications call for. Take this opportunity to highlight all of the above accomplishments. Focusing on all you have gotten done will give you momentum for the job market, as well as navigating well-intentioned questions from family and friends around the holidays (4).

The depth of knowledge gained by earning the PhD is very rewarding. It is a worthwhile endeavor and one of the best ways to find career and personal fulfillment, and at the same time provide the world with expertise and information that can eliminate suffering and provide information to make life better for humankind (5). To really gain additional insight, set up short informational interviews with three individuals who have a PhD in your area of interest.

¹ www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_08.htm

² www.leadershipalliancealumni.org

³ www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-getting-hiring-phd-humanities-can-best-business-move-lisa-niles

⁴ http://annekrook.com/?page_id=905

⁵ www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-getting-hiring-phd-humanities-can-best-business-move-lisa-niles

TIPS FOR APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

Taking Stock of Your Graduate School Options

IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



ACTION ITEMS

1. Focus on the tasks and challenges you enjoy to identify potential degree programs.

2. Evaluate programs on fit, support, and quality of life.

3. Narrow till you have a list of schools that is feasible in terms of time and money.

**By Dr. Don C. Brunson
Assistant Dean, Graduate School
Vanderbilt University
and Dr. William Wittels
Program Manager
The Leadership Alliance**

Few decisions produce as much anxiety as those regarding the decision to go to graduate school. You may be wondering, "Should I go to grad school? Will it get me a job I want after investing all that time and effort? If I go, what kind of graduate degree should I get?" If you're asking these questions, know that you are not alone. The vast majority of people in or who have gone to graduate school, including your advisors, found themselves asking these very same questions. This article discusses strategies for taking stock of your graduate school options and putting together your graduate school list.

Like so many questions relating to graduate school, you should focus on fit. In this case, you should focus on the fit between the mode of thinking and the kind of skills you would acquire in graduate school and the kinds of problems, puzzles, and challenges that you would like to confront on a daily basis. If you find yourself "in the zone" when trying to answer a question to which no one knows the answer, then a graduate degree that gives you the skills to do that, such as a PhD, is probably right for you.

"Focus on the fit between the mode of thinking and the kind of skills you would acquire in graduate school and the kinds of problems, puzzles, and challenges that you would like to confront on a daily basis. "

More narrowly, if the kinds of puzzles that you love tend to concern practices of expression under conditions of inequality, for example, then a degree in anthropology or comparative literature is probably right for you.

Ultimately, you're choosing to learn a mode of thinking and problem solving that you'll be able to carry with you into whichever job you have. In the case of a PhD, you're learning methods for critical thinking and knowledge production that you can use in academia, industry, or government. Master's degrees emphasize the practical tools of a discipline while also exposing you to some of the research elements of that discipline. JD-PhD programs train you to think like a lawyer and a researcher (1).

Those modes of thinking and problem solving are relevant to myriad jobs across academia, industry, and government. You will be able to deploy them in some capacity in any of those areas. By focusing on the skills you want to use, rather than the job you want to have, you guarantee that your graduate training will pay dividends in your career.

To start building your school list, begin researching schools according your academic interests and the skills and training you wish to acquire. Research can be an interdisciplinary pursuit, so use specific search topics. Rather than searching for "LatinX Studies," consider searching "18th-century migration in Latin America." Since your interests might not fully match those of prospective faculty mentors, consider pursuing opportunities on projects that are similar. That way, you will acquire tools ultimately needed to undertake the research that you want.





Once you identify a department/program, visit its website to learn more about faculty research interests and the department's philosophy on graduate education. Search for a graduate education administrative person (the title will be different at each institution). This person will often have access to information and other resources that might be very useful to you. Feel empowered to conduct "informational" interviews with representatives from prospective programs or e-mail faculty and graduate students in prospective programs. Be aware that some PhD programs, such as some in Public Health, may require you to have a master's before applying. Make sure to note any requirements about previous degrees as you research programs.

Once you have a "long-list" of programs that interest you, start narrowing based on priorities: the "fit" between you and the research, the level of support you are likely to receive, and the appeal of the university and the city as a place to make your home for the next 4-7 years. Ensure that your list has at least a few programs that you would consider to be "reaches." The number of schools you apply to will depend on how much time and money you estimate you can put into the process. That said, apply to at least five or six schools. Also be aware that applying to more than a dozen schools will tax your time and your wallet (if fee waivers are unavailable). By utilizing these strategies, you should successfully identify programs that match your interests and put you on a pathway toward your ultimate goal.

¹ www.proffellow.com/fellowships/fully-funded-jd-and-phd-programs-in-law/

TIPS FOR APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

Is a Gap Year Right For Me?

IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

By Rochelle D. Smith
Assistant Provost, Diversity Initiatives
Washington University in St. Louis

You may be considering taking time off before graduate school. This article covers strategies for making the most of your time off should you choose to take it.

The gap year has gained popularity among prospective students pursuing all types of advanced degrees since the 1980's (1). Recently, the popularity of taking a gap year has increased even more with high profile figures such as Malia Obama deciding to take a sabbatical before entering Harvard (2). Today, undergraduate students have more opportunities to take a gap year that will prepare them for their next academic journeys.

The complex undertaking of weighing the costs and benefits of this time off varies according to the student. Let us explore three of the top reasons one might want to take a gap year before graduate and professional school and discuss how to make the decision, what to do and when.



ACTION ITEMS

- 1. Have a concrete plan regarding how you will spend your gap year.**
- 2. Your gap year experience should include an intensive research experience that provides you with a level of independence.**
- 3. Consider applying and deferring if your priority is taking a break.**



"The complex undertaking of weighing the costs and benefits of this time off varies according to the student. In all cases, have a clear plan and specific goals that further your graduate education."

1. Bolster your Academic Profile: For many students switching fields or who came to their field of interest late in their undergraduate careers, a postbaccalaureate course of study often makes sense. Working at your alma mater with a faculty mentor can also prove a valuable experience. Some students may also want to take courses after graduating to raise their GPA or have time to improve entrance exam scores to make themselves more competitive for top-ranked professional or graduate schools.
2. Travel: Many students apply to the Fulbright (3) and other merit-based programs that involve travel. If a fellowship is unavailable, but you still want to travel, you may wish to "apply and defer" while still in school. Applying as an undergraduate allows for travel without the constraints of needing to attend admissions interviews.
3. Take a Break: The motivation might be to mature, gain more life skills or prepare for the rigor of advanced education. Students who have spent the better part of 17 years in school might also want to "recover" and reward themselves by taking some time off to do something different. This approach is very tricky, and if not planned correctly, can backfire. Admissions committees will want you to speak to how you spent your time since graduating. So the time off should involve working or volunteering in the field of interest.

¹ www.forbes.com/sites/tanyamohn/2016/11/11/gap-years-on-the-rise-and-not-just-for-college-students

² <http://college.usatoday.com/2014/11/03/the-case-for-taking-a-few-years-off-before-grad-school/>

³ <https://us.fulbrightonline.org/>

TIPS FOR APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

What Information Should I Gather?

IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

By Dr. Winona Wynn
Associate Professor
Heritage University

Gathering relevant information about potential graduate programs (1) requires patience and persistence. This article guides you through the process of researching potential programs and their scholars.

As with any new endeavor, it can feel like there are myriad things you do not know. As a first step, it may be useful to momentarily reflect on diverse questions shared by others who are also conducting their search and are intent on completing their applications for fall deadlines.

How do I glean information from program websites?
Where do I find reliable rankings? (2) Who will help develop and shape my research interests? (3) How do I reach out to programs of interest? Why is it important to connect with both professors and graduate students?
When do perceptions of who I am become less of a focus than the relentless pursuit of my goals? (4)



ACTION ITEMS

- 1. Track your exploratory grad school program searches with a detailed spreadsheet.**
- 2. Record your "pros and cons" about graduate programs you research.**
- 3. Involve your current mentors EARLY in the process---grad program suggestions, guidance with emails, etc.**



As an emerging scholar, you have honed the skills needed to research and analyze relevant information. These skills will serve you well toward the end of compiling a reasonable working list of ten of the best graduate programs (see page 7), a list from which a final choice will rise to the top! Compiling your findings within a reasonable timeframe (one month) will complement your overall timeline (see page 40) for the graduate application process.

Begin by looking at a few programs in your field to get a feel for what the programs are like and how they tend to differ. Accessing graduate school and graduate program sites will offer a complete set of information regarding expectations, financial support and application deadlines. Also, consider research opportunities offered by centers or institutes within the larger university community.

Reviewing the biographies and research interests of professors and current graduate students in programs of interest is recommended; doing so will offer multiple perspectives. To follow-up your review, draft a brief email to several (not all) graduate students in individual programs inquiring about their research and their experiences in the program. As you review publications of professors in your programs of interest, ask for guidance from your current mentors regarding ways to draft a two or three sentence email expressing your interest in their work. Be sure to ask if they are planning to mentor students in the near future.

Note the qualities that are the most important to you in a graduate program, listing pros and cons as you sort your findings. Remember to prioritize graduate program ranking, reputation, and research interest match, as you consider the general appeal of the institution itself.

Finally, consider applying for travel fellowships that will allow you to attend national student conferences or professional society conferences where you can present your research and network with faculty and program directors to discuss their research and graduate programs (5).

¹ www.gradschools.com/get-informed/before-you-apply/choosing-graduate-program

² www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools

³ www.rackham.umich.edu/downloads/publications/mentoring.pdf

⁴ www.reducingstereotypethreat.org/support/

⁵ www.cur.org/resources/students/presentation_opportunities/

TIPS FOR APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

Scheduling and Prepping for Entrance Exams

IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

By Dr. Elizabeth Bowman
Assistant Director, Graduate Programs in
Biomedical Sciences
Vanderbilt University

The GRE is a common component of the graduate school application process, though many programs are dropping this requirement. Read through the application requirements of your schools of interest to see if this is the case for those programs. This article explains the GRE, when to take it, how to prepare for it, and other topics relevant to it.

Overview: The GRE is the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). For better or worse, most PhD programs still require the GRE for admission. There has been a large national debate about the relevance of the GRE in evaluating prospective students. Some schools have eliminated this requirement, but most programs still require it. Before discussing your GRE preparation, you should know that the GRE is only one component of your application. Therefore, you should try to set aside your test anxiety, knowing that other parts of your application are more important than your GRE scores.

When to Take the GRE: Plan on taking the GRE at least three months before your first applications are due. That will give you enough time to reschedule the exam in the event of an unforeseen emergency and still be able



ACTION ITEMS

- 1) Create a plan for studying and stick to it.**
- 2) Identify GRE resources and start studying.**
- 3) Schedule the GRE well in advance of your application deadline.**



to send off your official scores. While most graduate applications are happy to accept your unofficial scores for consideration (which you can view and forward to five schools for free as soon as you finish the test) some programs may require you to send in official reports, which can take 4-6 weeks to process after your test date.

That said, the concepts tested in the GRE are based on fundamentals that you likely covered in high school or college. Thus, you can take the GRE at any point as an undergraduate and do about as well as you likely would do at a later point. You might want to consider taking the GRE at a time that you can focus on studying for the test. Consider studying during the summer when you may be doing research but likely are not taking any other classes.

While you may want to consider taking the test early to give you enough time to retake it, I would like to strongly urge you against planning on taking the GRE multiple times. Instead, prepare well to take the test once and do your best. If you prepared well the first time, it is unlikely that you will do significantly better after multiple attempts. That said, do leave yourself enough time to be able to reschedule the test in case of an unforeseen issue on the day of your test, such as the flu or a family emergency, that may adversely affect your performance on the test.

Cost: The GRE costs \$205. For more information on budgeting for the exam and your application fees, see "Budgeting for the Application Process" on page 17 of this guide.

Preparation: Test preparation courses can be expensive. The great news is that there are many excellent free resources to help you prepare for the GRE and you should not feel obligated to pay for an expensive prep course. ETS, the company that makes the GRE, has many free resources (1) and the test sites Magoosh (2) and Kaplan (3) have some excellent free resources in addition to premium services for which they charge. There is no right way to prepare for



the GRE. My best suggestion would be to set aside time where you are strongly focused on preparing, commit to it, and dive in.

Create a schedule and follow it seriously. Buy one prep book to expose you to the content (there really is little difference content-wise between all of the big test prep companies, including ETS), making sure your prep book includes a lot of practice questions. Get used to approaching the questions with the right mentality by seeing questions over and over again through practice tests.

You can do anywhere from two weeks of intensive studying to two months of spaced out studying. Either way, if you are using free test prep trials, make sure you only start those when you are intensely preparing.

¹ www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/prepare/

² <https://gre.magoosh.com/>

³ www.kaptest.com/gre/free/gre-practice

TIPS FOR APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

Budgeting for the Application Process

IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



ACTION ITEMS

1) Make a budget for the application process.

2) Plan for testing fees, application fees, and, in rare instances, travel fees.

3) Seek out fee waivers at conferences, through summer research programs, and directly from prospective departments.

By Dr. Keisha John
Associate Dean for Diversity and Inclusion
College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
University of Virginia

Many students are surprised by the overall cost of the application process. This article details the major cost categories for applications, as well as some strategies for reducing those costs. The budget for the application process falls into three categories: tests, application fees, and interviews.

Tests: The general GRE test is \$205, and subject tests are \$150 each. Therefore, a student who needs to take both would need at least \$355 just to take the tests. Some students may be eligible for waivers via their school or the GRE fee reduction program which decreases your cost by at least half. In addition to paying to take the exam, all students will need to study for the exam. Most students can prepare on their own using ETS materials or other online resources. These can cost anywhere from \$20 to \$200. If you need the structured classroom setting to prepare, then a formal class through your university or a test preparation company may be for you. However, be prepared to pay anywhere from \$500-\$1000 for these classes. Some universities offer discounts to help students enroll. Additionally, some summer programs offer GRE preparation as a component of their program. To reduce some of these costs, see the GRE Fee Reduction Program (1) as well as ETS's free GRE resources (2).

Application Fees: These fees can range from \$50 to \$150. For a student applying to ten schools, this could mean another \$1500. Some schools and programs have removed this financial barrier. However, if you are applying to schools that still have application fees, there are ways to see if you can waive those fees.

Many summer programs provide waivers to past participants who apply to their graduate school. Some alliances provide waivers to students at their partner schools. For instance, Leadership alliance participants can apply to graduate programs at member schools for free (3). You should attend fairs and conferences as most programs provide waivers to students that visit their tables or booths.

You may request a waiver directly from the school. However, be advised that most graduate programs have a statement such as the following regarding fee waivers: Requests for application fee waivers will only be considered for U.S. citizens or permanent residents on the basis of significant financial hardship, or if an applicant has participated or is currently participating in one of the following programs: AmeriCorps, BUILD Program, COMPASS, CORO Fellows, FAF, Fleet Fellows, GEM, IIE/Fulbright, IIPP, IMSD, IRT, JSI, Leadership Alliance, LSAMP, MARC, McNair, Mellon Mays, NSF-REU, NYC Urban Fellows, Peace Corps, PPIA, Questbridge, RISE, SINIS, Truman Fellows, U.S. Military, or Yellow Ribbon Program. If they don't have a list or a site specifically for fee waivers ask the program coordinator if it is possible for them to provide a waiver.

In summary, students should budget approximately \$1000 to \$3000 for the application process. The high end of \$3000 is needed if they do not pursue any fee waivers and pay for a test preparation class.

¹ www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/about/fees/reductions/

² www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/prepare/

³ www.theleadershipalliance.org/community/members



TIPS FOR APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

Revising Your CV, Resume, or Biosketch

IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

By Dr. Chloe N. Poston
Associate Director
The Leadership Alliance

A CV or curriculum vitae is an extended resume that accompanies your GRE scores, academic transcripts, and personal statement to complete your graduate school application. Your CV is a great place for you to highlight your academic history, research interests, relevant work experience, honors, and accomplishments. Your CV is also a great place for you to demonstrate extensive knowledge in the field and your academic potential. Use the tips below to develop a CV that will make your application stand out.

1. Sections Matter: Most CVs will have education and employment information, but you will need to create additional sections to really tell your story. (1) For example, if you have extensive volunteer experience, then you should have a “community service” section. If you have been a TA, then you should add a section on teaching experience. Other sections to consider include conference presentations, awards and honors, publications, and leadership roles. If you don’t have at least two bullets for a section, consider renaming it something broader.



ACTION ITEMS

- 1) Use sections to highlight your experiences and research skills.**
- 2) Focus on key accomplishments rather than making a laundry list.**
- 3) Keep the information relevant to graduate school.**
- 4) Proofread, proofread, proofread.**



2. Accomplishments Come First: You want the reader to be immediately impressed by you and your work to date, so you should place your proudest academic achievements first. Often this comes in the form of an honors and awards section that appears just below the education section. Remember that your CV should show that you will be a great academic, so scholarships, conference presentations, and publications should also be featured prominently on the first page of your CV.

3. Stay Relevant: Your CV for graduate school should be focused on your academic career. The jobs you've held that are not relevant to your research should not appear on your CV. You should also focus on your undergraduate (and post-baccalaureate career if applicable), rather than your time in high school.

4. Proofread and Format. For some people who are considering your application, the CV may be the primary document they use to review your academic history. Proofread for typos that could make you appear careless and create clean formatting that is easy on the eyes. These are two small steps that can leave a negative impression when overlooked. Ask someone else to review your resume for typos and formatting suggestions. Then find an additional person and ask them to read your resume in three minutes. Time them and then ask them questions about you as a candidate. This exercise will highlight which information is readily accessible and memorable.

¹ www.prepscholar.com/gre/blog/how-to-write-a-cv-for-graduate-school/

TIPS FOR APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

Writing an Outstanding Statement of Purpose

IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



ACTION ITEMS

1) Focus on writing a narrative of how your experiences shaped your interests.

2) Connect this narrative to the program. Cite the research interests of three of faculty members in your statement.

3) Proofread multiple times and ask multiple people to read your statement.

**By Dr. William Wittels
Program Manager
The Leadership Alliance**

The statement of purpose is one of the most important elements of your application. This article offers a framework for thinking about your statement that should help you write a memorable and effective one.

Your statement of purpose is your only opportunity to tell application reviewers your story in your own words. Knowing your story makes your application much more memorable and, as a result, helps you stand out from the larger application pool. Moreover, it is your best opportunity to tell the application reviewers why you are a good fit for their program. They are planning to invest significant resources in the graduate students that they admit. Knowing that you are applying to their programs for compelling reasons is a central motivation for every decision to accept.

Focus on articulating three kinds of fit:

1) The fit between you and your chosen field (i.e., why you want to get a PhD in your chosen field and are likely to excel in it). 2) The fit between you and the program to which you are applying (i.e., why this particular program will be the best place for you to go). 3) The fit between the program and your plans after graduate school (i.e., why this particular program will be the best launching pad for your research and teaching career).

Think of the statement of purpose as a narrative, with you as the protagonist. Part of that narrative is your story of who you are, why you want to get a PhD in your chosen field, and the experiences that led to and deepened your desire for getting a PhD. The other part of the narrative describes why going to the program to which you are applying will result in your becoming a thriving scholar in your chosen field.

To the end of telling that narrative, many statements (1) of purpose follow a similar, four-part structure.

1) Introduce yourself and your motivations. Articulate your fascination with the questions that bring you to your field of study and root that fascination in an experience or set of experiences. You are the protagonist of this narrative. You need to show your readers what motivates you on this journey.

2) Develop your backstory. Here you should summarize your previous academic, work, and volunteer experiences. For PhD programs, be sure to highlight any research experiences you have. This section should not read like a laundry list of the items already on your resume. Pick the most important experiences and highlight them.

3) Connect your backstory to your next chapter. Elaborate upon your experiences to show why they are relevant to graduate school. If you are highlighting your accomplishments as an undergraduate, focus on why they have put you in a position to thrive in graduate school. If you have taken time off for work or a post-baccalaureate course of study, explain how those experiences have prepared you for graduate school, particularly if you are changing fields.

4) Preview your next chapter. Describe what, if admitted, you plan to study. Be specific both about the questions you would like to research and why the program is a good fit for that. Carefully study the current research of the faculty and be sure to highlight the research interests of three of them in your statement.





Throughout this narrative, be as specific as possible about your experiences and intentions. Use a formal, but conversational tone. Do not try to impress with technical jargon or disciplinary vocabulary. Be selective in your choices of what to highlight. You will not have enough space to follow a “more is better” strategy when choosing experiences and interests to emphasize. If you have a poor grade or two on your transcript, feel empowered to explain the reasons behind that grade if it reinforces your overall narrative as a researcher. For example, particularly intense volunteering may have distracted you from your coursework while also sparking the research interest that has led you to apply to grad school. If the explanation for the grade is personal, such as an illness or a death in the family, try to address it in an addendum to your application.

Be sure to proofread multiple times and have multiple people review your statement. Ask roommates, friends, or coworkers to read for clarity and grammar. Ask one of your undergraduate mentors to give you feedback on how you are describing the three kinds of fit discussed above. Above all, be true to who you are, what you have done, and what you want to do. If you get accepted on the basis of an inauthentic statement, you will likely find yourself in a graduate program that is a poor fit for you and will stifle your growth as a scholar. You want to join a program in which you will thrive. A compelling, authentic statement of purpose will help you toward that goal.

¹ <https://www.prepscholar.com/gre/blog/graduate-school-statement-of-purpose-sample/>

TIPS FOR APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

Getting your Writing Sample Right

IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

**By Dr. William Wittels
Program Manager
The Leadership Alliance**

A writing sample is often a crucial part of an application to grad school in the Humanities and the Social Sciences. Prospective programs use them to gauge your ability to analyze ideas, criticize arguments, and synthesize new concepts. They also use them to understand better your scholarly interests and whether you are a good “fit” for them. So it is vital that you choose your writing sample carefully or even write a new one for your applications if none of the writing you have done previously reflects your current interests. This article describes how to choose or write, and then edit your writing sample.

Choose a paper that features compelling content, a clear structure, and effective prose.

The content should be relevant to your chosen area of study, but also distinct and thought-provoking. The faculty who are reading your applications are also reading dozens of other applications. Your topic and analysis should stand out - in a good way. Avoid mere summaries of core literature. Show your readers that you are capable of independent, creative thought. If you have published something in your field in a student or peer-reviewed publication, be sure to use that piece as its publication signals the strength of your writing.

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www.theleadershipalliance.org



ACTION ITEMS

1) Pick (or write) a paper relevant to your field of study.

2) Make sure it is no longer than a typical seminar paper.

3) Edit carefully. Readers notice errors and unclear sentences.



Do not submit a paper that breaks from the traditional format or structure of the program's field of study. A non-traditional structure for your paper may be engaging to a reader who has the time to appreciate it. Application readers often do not. A paper with an unusual structure runs a significant risk of alienating and confusing your reader. You should structure your paper to make your content as clear as possible. And you should follow all structuring guidelines relevant to your field of study. (The same goes for your citations.) If you generated the paper in response to a prompt, be sure to include it.

Remember that longer is not necessarily better. Unless otherwise specified, choose a paper that is between 10 and 20 pages, which is roughly the length of a typical seminar paper in graduate school. Submitting a paper that is too long - especially one that is longer than the specified maximum - will reflect negatively on you as an applicant. The faculty who evaluate your application are often overloaded with work. They appreciate the cap on length because they have precious little time to dedicate to evaluating applications. As a result, they do not look kindly upon students who disregard those instructions.

Be sure to edit your paper, paying careful attention to the prose. Have a friend or roommate read it for clarity. Also, ask your letter writers if they would be willing to give you feedback on your sample. Do this early in the process, as they are likely to be busy. They are invested in you; they'll want to help if given the appropriate notice!

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TIPS FOR APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

Contacting Your Letter Writers

IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

By Dr. Keisha John

Associate Dean for Diversity and Inclusion College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences University of Virginia and Dr. Ja'Wanda Grant

Special Assistant to the Provost for Scholar Development and Institutional Alliances, Xavier University of Louisiana

Having effective letters of recommendation is crucial for successful applications. This article explains who to ask for letters of recommendation, as well as how to ask for them and follow up on your requests.

Who to ask: Your potential reference writers should know you in an academic or research capacity. If you are applying to a PhD program, your primary letter writers should be individuals that can speak about your research capabilities and those who have taught you in one or more class in which you received a B or better grade. If you are applying to a summer research or internship program, your primary letter writers should be instructors for courses in which you performed well, supervisors who know your work ethic and problem-solving abilities, and other professional references who can speak to your interest in research and how it connects with your long-term goals.

If you have not already done so, start developing professional relationships with potential letter writers. During summer research experiences off campus you should make every effort to meet regularly with the faculty member supervising your research.



ACTION ITEMS

- 1. Identify potential writers who can write strong letters.**
- 2. Ask them at least three months in advance of the application deadline.**
- 3. Send timely reminders if your writers are slow to upload your letters.**



Yes, you may work closely with a graduate student or postdoc. However, the letter should come from the faculty member. Therefore, schedule one-on-one time with the faculty mentor to discuss your progress and your summer, undergraduate, and graduate goals. Ask if they have suggestions regarding classes, majors, and potential graduate programs. Look for other alignments, not only with the research but your personal and academic journeys, hobbies or interests. Do stay in touch once you have completed the summer. Three recommended messages are: 1) a thank you and update once your next semester starts, 2) a holiday greeting, and 3) a spring semester update.

For references on your campus, we highly recommend that you visit professors during their office hours and talk about anything other than passing the next exam or that particular class. Instead, you can discuss your progress towards career goals and ask them about their trajectory. Given that you are on the same campus you have more opportunities to develop and sustain your professional relationship. Make use of every opportunity for them to get to know you in and out of the classroom.

How and when to ask: Time and context are very important. Schedule a virtual or in-person meeting to request the letter. You should reach out at least three months before the due date of the letter. For seniors, this may mean speaking with them in the spring of your junior year or during the summer. Ask your letter writers if they can provide a **STRONG LETTER** of recommendation. Please do ask this question. Also, you should come to the meeting prepared with a draft of your resume as well as your statement of purpose. Share with the letter writer why you are asking for the letter and how you believe they can advocate for you. Provide examples that may be used for the letter. For example, you can ask that your letter writer discuss the creativity and initiative you displayed when you tackled a recently opened archive or new data set. Perhaps your research is still being used by the faculty member, which speaks to your ability make substantive contributions to ongoing research efforts. You can discuss passions you have pursued while maintaining a strong academic and research record. Therefore, share your

formal and informal leadership roles outside the archive or classroom. In addition, if you have anything in your record that you believe may be viewed as a blemish or red flag, please discuss this with them. Your letter writers may be able to convey better why your first semester grades or less than expected exam scores are not true reflectors of your accomplishments and future potential.

Once you have had this meeting and you are confident that they will provide a strong letter, follow up with an email within 24 hours of the meeting. In the email include the list of applications with their deadlines, your resume, statement of purpose and a bulleted list of potential topics to include in their letter. See an example of this bulleted list below. Also, let them know that you will add their information to the application as soon as it is open. Once the applications are open (typically in July or August for PhD programs) provide the recommender's information as most of the systems send an initial email as well as reminders. If the application requires letter submissions via postal mail, provide the letter writer with pre-addressed, postmarked envelopes as appropriate.

Reminders are necessary: Many online applications have trackers for application completion. You should use these to check on the status of your letters. We recommend that you send a reminder if your letter is not submitted two weeks before the due date. This message can be a simple email asking if they need any additional information to complete their letter. You can also send it as an update informing them that you have submitted your required application components and that you are grateful to have them serve as a letter writer. The next, and hopefully final, reminder should come two days before the due date. At this point, you need to be a bit more direct as outlined in the following example.

Dear Professor X,

I do hope all is well. I am emailing to remind you that the recommendation letter you agreed to submit for my application to XYZ is due in two days. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to ensure the timely submission of your letter. Thank you for your continued support. Sincerely, Student. Please remember to thank them once they have submitted each letter. Handwritten thank you notes are highly suggested when possible.

In summary, only ask those who know you in an academic or research capacity if you want a strong letter. Give them all of the resources they need to advocate for you and provide adequate time to compose a strong letter. Send gentle reminders within the two-week window for submission if they have not completed their letter. Thank them after they have submitted your letter of recommendation.

TIPS FOR APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

Filling out and Submitting Your Applications

IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



ACTION ITEMS

**1. Inventory everything
you have to do.**

**2. Manage these tasks
with a Gantt chart.**

**3. Reward yourself for
finishing tasks and
meeting goals.**

**By Dr. William Wittels
Program Manager
The Leadership Alliance**

You can do yourself a huge favor while simultaneously increasing your chances of getting into graduate school just by having a practical plan for filling out and submitting your graduate school applications. You will be doing yourself a favor by avoiding the terrible panic of filling out an application last minute. Moreover, you will be increasing your chances of being accepted by ensuring that your application has minimal errors - from typos to using the name of the wrong university in your application. This article describes approaches for keeping yourself on track.

Start with an inventory of all the individual application elements for each of your applications, the due dates for each of the applications, and whether they are rolling. Knowing what you have to do and dates by when you have to complete tasks will allow you to “work backward” to plan when to start them. To complete this inventory for each application, read the application instructions, the FAQs, and click through the online application as a “dry run” without submitting anything.

Be sure to keep an eye on tasks that are required, but are not part of the application system, such as reaching out to letter writers and filling out your Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) (1).

Next, assess the time that each element will take. Remember that most applications take several hours to fill out aside from the time it takes to write your statement of purpose and secure your letters of recommendation and transcripts. Include time for editing, checking, and rechecking each element of your application. Typos and other errors can contribute to a perception among members of the admissions committee that you don't follow through on projects with diligence and care.

Then organize the tasks into a Gantt Chart (2) by start date and end date. The end date for every element of the application should be at least two weeks before the deadline. If the application is rolling, prioritize it and try to finish it early. To determine the start date, block out double the amount of time you think each task will take you if all goes well. Unexpected delays always crop up. For items that require multiple drafts, such as a statement of purpose, include each draft as well as reviews by other people as separate tasks.

To keep yourself on schedule, enter these dates and track your progress toward them with an app like Trello, (3) Google Keep (4), or even an old-fashioned desk calendar. Hold yourself accountable to your application calendar. Pick rewards for reaching goals (5).

Finally, keep the faith. Filling out applications is arduous but will pay off in the end.

¹ <https://fafsa.ed.gov/>

² www.projectmanager.com/gantt-chart

³ <https://trello.com/>

⁴ <https://keep.google.com>

⁵ <https://medium.com/thrive-global/5-ways-to-recognize-and-reward-your-progress-1d85e346438>



TIPS FOR APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

The Admissions Committee Process

IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES



ACTION ITEMS

- 1) Gather available information about the committee's decision-making process.**
- 2) Focus on telling a compelling story about why you "fit."**
- 3) Bear in mind that there is no way to know exactly what a committee is looking for in a given year.**

By Dr. Sheila Thomas
Assistant Professor of Medicine
Dean for Academic Programs and Diversity
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Harvard University

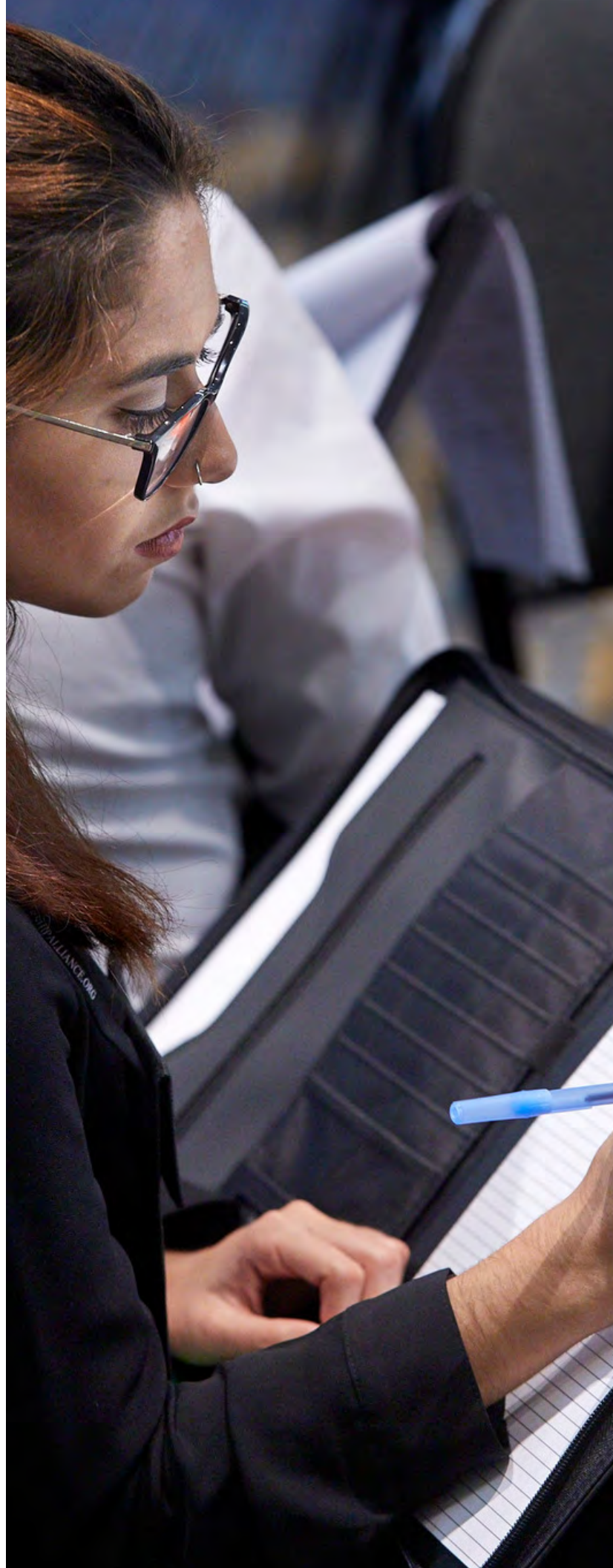
From a student's perspective, the admissions committee is the "black box" of the application process. Your application marches in; a decision comes out. But students are rarely privy to how admissions committees make their decisions. This article details the process of most admissions committees.

It's best to remember that the admissions committee process involves multiple stages, multiple people, and multiple application criteria. The number of applications that a program receives vastly outweighs the number of spots they have open. So the early stages of the process typically involve shrinking the pool of applicants to a manageable number of applications. For some programs, this process may be an administrative one, where they simply apply a cutoff according to applicants' GPA or GRE scores. In other cases, they may consider other elements of your application portfolio as well, but may only have time for a surface level review. Read the FAQ's and online descriptions of the admission's committee process for each of the programs you may apply to to get a sense of how they make decisions.

"It's best to remember that the admissions committee process involves multiple stages, multiple people, and multiple application criteria."

After this initial review, your application will head to the faculty on the admissions committee. The good news is that these faculty members are your future mentors and will be highly invested in the decision that they are making.

The bad news is that these faculty are serving on the admissions committee in addition to all of their other usual teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities. They have a very short window of time to read and assess dozens upon dozens of applications. Individual members of a committee will rate applications or compile a short list of potential applications on the basis of a wide range of criteria, though typically your statement of purpose (see page 22), letters of recommendation (see page 26), and writing sample (see page 24) are the most important at this stage. These elements take on this importance because members of the committee are trying not only to determine your academic abilities but also your fit with their program. Very often students who have demonstrated academic excellence as undergraduates and have high GRE scores are rejected for lack of fit.





From this pool of applications, which is typically only a fraction of the total applications the program received, the committees will choose a set of applicants for admissions. At this point, committees will often take into consideration factors that seem to have nothing to do with the pure merit of your application. If your discipline has multiple subfields, they will be looking for a balance between those subfields in the cohort they accept. They will be considering the overall makeup of their current graduate students and may seek to address imbalances by pursuing a particular mix of incoming students. In some cases, they may decline to offer you admission because they think you will be accepted and choose to go elsewhere. It is not uncommon for a student to be rejected by their safety schools, but accepted by their dream programs.

Throughout this process, applications that present a compelling narrative about why the applicant wants to pursue a graduate degree and why the applicant is a good fit for doing so at that particular program tend to be more successful than those that do not present that narrative. Remember that they see dozens upon dozens of applications. So your narrative as told in your statement of purpose, letters of recommendation, and even writing sample is your best chance of standing out.

TIPS FOR APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

Interviewing

IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

By Dr. Carina Beck
Director, Allen Yamell Center for Student Success
Montana State University

The process of in-person interviews for admission to graduate schools varies on the continuum between no interview to an in-person campus visit, with most schools leaning towards no campus visit until after being accepted into the program.

As you develop your action plan, develop a column in your spreadsheet that determines if, and when, an interview is required for admission. Follow these instructions, since as Dr. David Shorter from UCLA remarks, “most programs do not favor campus visits from prospective students before they have been accepted. Campus resources are already taxed with current students. Some places do not want to privilege those applicants who can afford to travel or those who are local. Keep in mind: You will have plenty of time after you are admitted to visit the department and talk over questions of fit.”

In rare cases, when you are asked to interview prior to program acceptance, take the experience seriously. Preparation is the key to confidence and your goal is to appear likable and competent – demonstrating you are authentically a good fit for the program and will be an asset to the program and discipline. Where possible, use your master spreadsheet to help you develop and



ACTION ITEMS

1) Note which programs may require an interview (most will not).

2) Prepare thoroughly, if asked to interview, and interview with confidence.

3) Follow up with a thank you note.



anticipate the questions you will be asked. You should expect to understand the concentrations or area of study of the faculty in the department. You should at minimum watch interview prep videos to gain ideas for how to approach the interview (1). Better yet, schedule a mock or rehearsal interview at your institution's career center. Where possible have your interview digitally recorded so you can observe where it may be appropriate to modify your interview style.

Finally, you should communicate your ability to "learn and pursue" new information and ideas rather than just your ability to "memorize and repeat" information. Having a pliable and inquisitive mind, shaped with a commitment to work hard will be one of the most important assets you can communicate (2).

The post-interview process can be taxing. Waiting is never fun or easy, but patience is truly a virtue in this instance. Be quick to write thank you notes and express your interest to be part of the program. Once those notes are sent, wait patiently until you receive requests for further information or until that important letter, email, or phone call is received advising you of the department's decision. If you receive a rejection or "alternative" notification from your top choices of institution, write a second thank you note and continue to express your interest. It is possible that the institution will eventually have a vacancy on their accept list and you might receive a secondary offer.

¹ www.bizvision.com/webcast/prod/79967?group_stream_idx=6697

² <https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Gentle-Guide-for-Applying/239768>

TIPS FOR APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL

The Post-Interview Process

IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

By Dr. Chloe N. Poston
Associate Director
The Leadership Alliance

Interviews for graduate programs are a great way for you to learn more about the department, potential research mentors and the resources available through the university. In some cases, the interview may be one hour and, in other cases, there may be a full day of meetings. Interview days can be exhausting, but there's still more to do after you've left a campus visit. This article details some simple, but effective, actions to take.

First, send a thank you email. Professors and graduate school administrators are incredibly busy people. Expressing your appreciation for the time that they spent with you will earn you bonus points. This follow-up also helps people remember who you are. In the note, you can include more information about a topic that was discussed in the interview or ask additional questions that came to mind since you left. (1)

Next, organize your thoughts on the department. If you are visiting several universities, you will want to keep track of how you felt each interview went, who you met with, and what you liked (and disliked) about the visit (2). Remember, interviews are a two-way street, and you should have lots of questions. The place where you earn your PhD will be your new home for 4-7 years.



ACTION ITEMS

- 1. Send a thank you email to the program representatives you met.**
- 2. Organize your notes before you forget any of the information you acquired.**
- 3. Stay connected through email, LinkedIn, or TLACconnect.**



You want to make sure you will be comfortable there. After the interview write down a few notes for your reference. Try considering the following questions as a start: Was the environment welcoming? Did you meet with a professor who could be a good research mentor? Was the city a place where you could see yourself living? How would you be funded?

If you take these notes within 48 hours of your campus visit, you'll be prepared to compare departments side by side when it's time to make a decision.

Last, stay connected. Networking is a large part of a research career. Visit day is an excellent opportunity to meet and engage with current and future scholars in your field. Even if you decide not to attend a university, staying in contact with the people you meet there could help you learn about new opportunities in the future. LinkedIn (3) is a powerful site for managing professional connections. Create a profile and search for the names of people that you've met. Then you can invite them to connect with you. Some people get several requests to connect, so change the generic request to something more personal that reminds the person of who you are and where you met. Once you are connected, you'll receive notifications anytime that person posts an article or shares a new opportunity. People you are connected to will also be able to follow your career trajectory and contact you.

By completing these three steps, you will remain memorable to the department, have the tools to compare the visit to other institutions and grow your professional network.

¹ www.gradschools.com/get-informed/applying-graduate-school/essay-writing/grad-school-interview-thank-you-letter

² www.themuse.com/advice/the-simple-tool-that-will-help-you-pick-the-right-grad-school

³ www.businessinsider.com/how-to-make-the-most-of-linkedin-2014-2

LEADERSHIP ALLIANCE

Timeline for Applying to Grad School

IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

14 months before applications are due

- ☐ Take stock of your graduate school options

- Have at least three conversations with people who have pursued the degree in which you are interested.

12 months before applications are due

- ☐ Start gathering information on prospective programs

- Conduct online searches of program websites
 - Set up informational interviews with representatives of prospective programs
 - Identify at least three faculty with whom you would be interested in working

10 months before applications are due

- ☐ Create your application list and application plan

- Narrow your list to a manageable number of schools (at least 5 or 6, but no more than 12)
 - Seek out fee waivers online, through summer program participation, and from school representatives at conferences

9 months before applications are due

- ☐ Schedule and start prepping for your entrance exams

- Schedule your exams at least 3 months in advance of your application deadlines, though it is recommended to take them earlier, during a window of time in which you can thoroughly prepare

6 months before applications are due

- ☐ Start assembling the core elements of your application

- Draft your personal statement
 - Revise your CV, resume, or biosketch
 - Select or write your writing sample

3 months before applications are due

- ☐ Ask your letter writers for letters and let them know where you will be applying

2 weeks before applications are due

- ☐ Finish filling out and submitting your applications

After the New Year

- ☐ Be on the look out for interview requests, if applicable