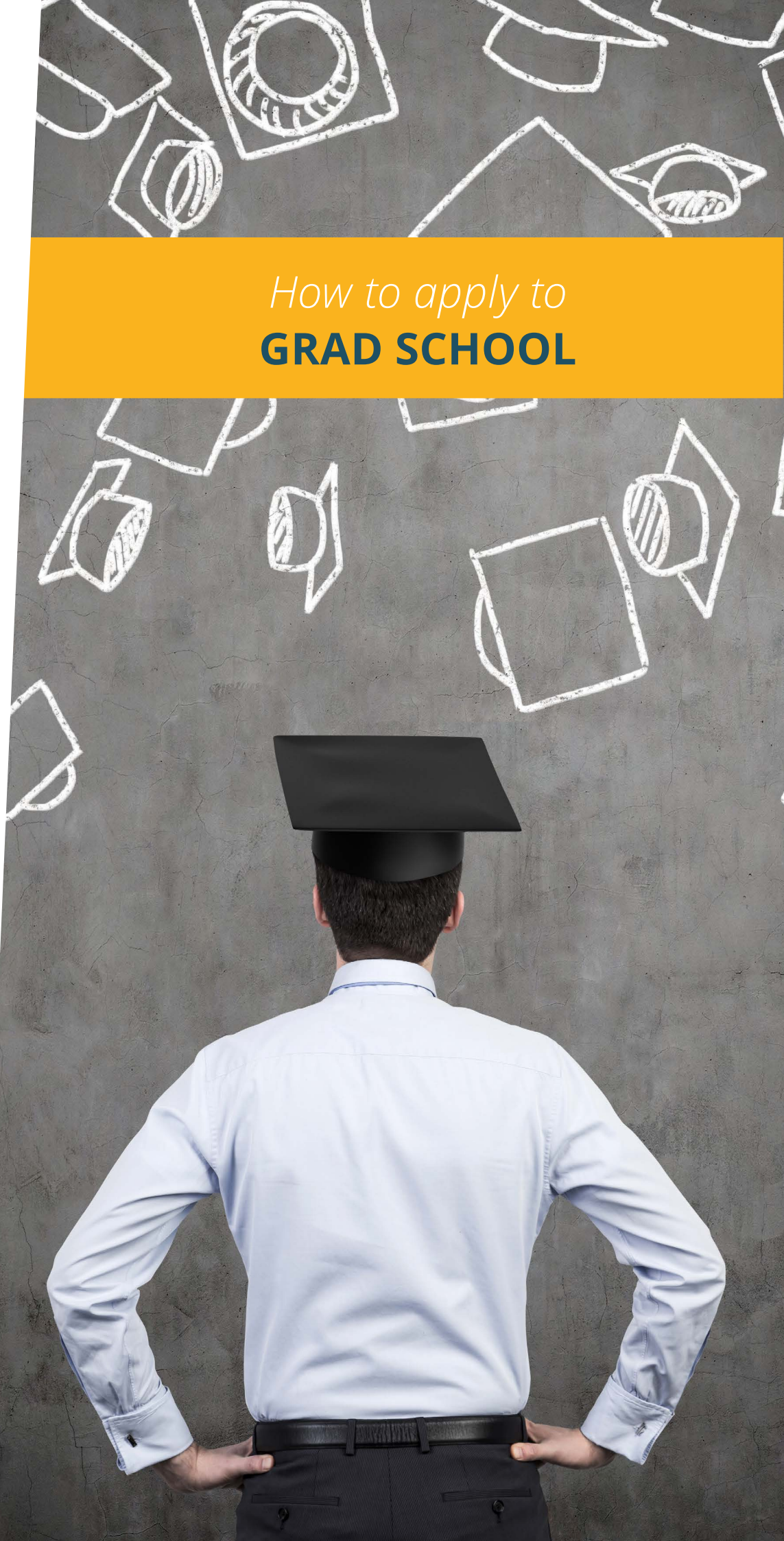




TopUniversities.com

*How to apply to*  
**GRAD SCHOOL**



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How to Apply to Grad School  
[www.TopUniversities.com](http://www.TopUniversities.com)

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# Application checklist

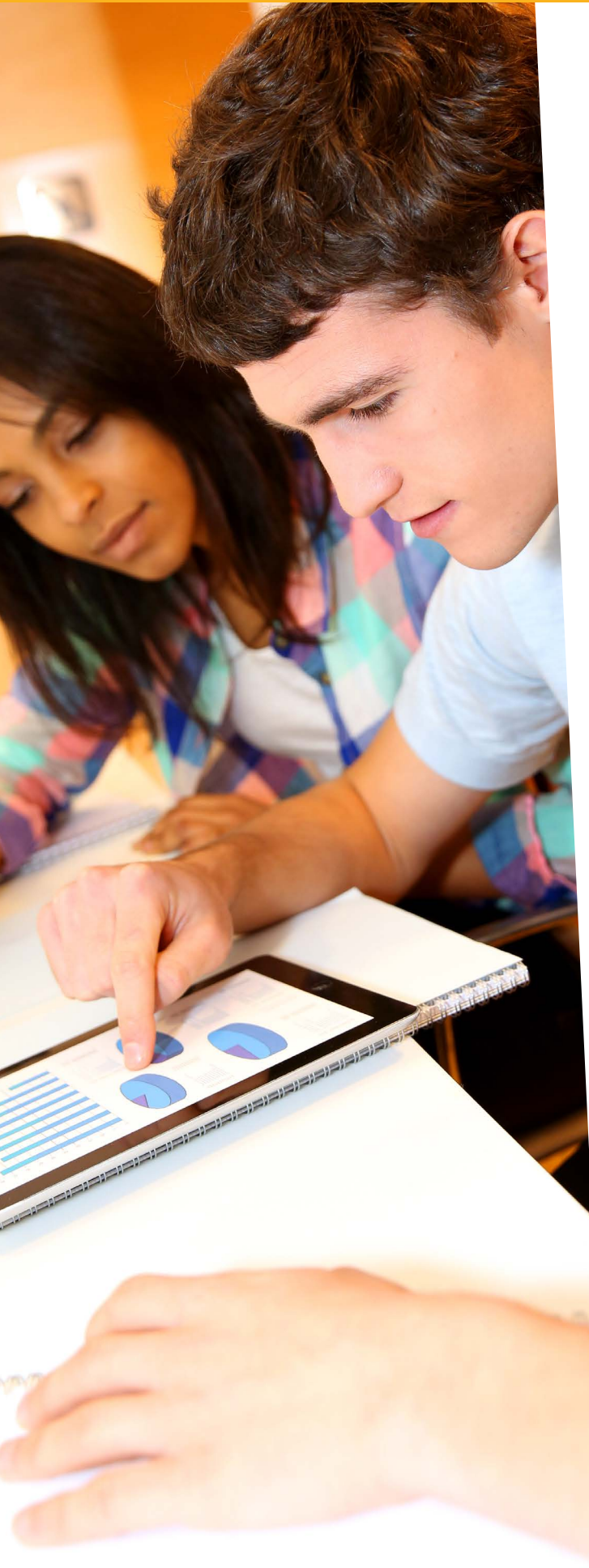
Applying to graduate school can often be a long and demanding process. Make sure you don't forget anything! Here's a checklist of some of the documents and information you may be asked to submit...

- ✓ Standardized test results
- ✓ References
- ✓ Transcript
- ✓ Personal statement/research proposal
- ✓ Funding plan/applications
- ✓ Application fee
- ✓ Proof of proficiency in the language of study
- ✓ Writing samples, depending on your subject
- ✓ CV/résumé

Your timeline of deadlines will largely depend on your country and university of study. Graduate schools in the US, for instance, tend to run on December deadlines for courses starting the following academic year. In the UK, on the other hand, most universities will accept applications until July, for courses commencing in September of the same year.

Keeping in mind you may have to sit some admissions exams and/or language proficiency exams, it's best to start applications as soon as you can. This will give you the best chance not only of gaining a place, but also securing funding.

To stay on target, consider using a dedicated calendar, diary or smartphone app to keep track of all the relevant deadlines and tick off tasks as you complete them.



# Standardized exams

Most standardized tests required for graduate school applications follow a predictable framework, with each paper being a slight variation on a preceding year's. Test takers who score higher marks in these exams have simply spent lots of time practicing, and learned to understand how marks are awarded. There are lots of online resources to help you prepare, including free platforms such as **QS LEAP**, and the organizations which run the exams also offer plenty of guidance and test prep materials.

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## IELTS and TOEFL

The two most commonly taken tests of English language for grad school admissions are the **International English Language Testing System** (IELTS) and the **Test of English as a Foreign Language** (TOEFL). Both test listening, reading, speaking and writing skills in English. Before registering to take one, check to make sure it's accepted by your chosen grad school/s, and allow plenty of time to prepare and to re-take if necessary.

As well as taking practice tests and using online test prep resources, most students also prepare for these English proficiency exams by spending more time listening to, writing, reading and speaking the language. Try listening to podcasts before bed or on your daily commute – there are thousands to choose from, on topics ranging from pop culture to philosophy and sports to sci-fi. Watch TV shows and films in English (without subtitles), and read English-language magazines and newspapers. The wider the range of material, the better – and keep a notebook to jot down new words and phrases.

Once you get your test results, you need to decide whether to submit them or re-take the exam, based on the minimum scores required by your university. Scores are valid for two years and there are no restrictions on the amount of times you can re-sit, though you will be





asked to wait for 12 days between tests. Scores generally take 15 days to be published, so make sure you have plenty of time before the admission deadline.

### GRE

Some graduate schools, especially in the US and Canada, ask applicants to take the **Graduate Record Examination** (GRE). This is a standardized test that can be taken at over 1,000 testing centers worldwide. In some regions, the test is computer-based and can be taken all year round, while in other locations, it is paper-based and can be taken on specific dates thrice a year.

The GRE General Test is split into three sections: verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning and analytical writing. In the first section, you will be asked to read and interpret chunks of text. In the second, you will be tested on your ability to interpret sets of numerical data, and in the third section, you will be asked to write two essays. You may also be asked to take a GRE Subject Test, which will test your knowledge in the subject you wish to study.

Official scores take about 10 to 15 days to be sent to universities for computer-based tests, and five weeks for paper-based tests. With the computer-based test, you can re-sit every 21 days, up to five times a year.

### MCAT

The **Medical College Admission Test** (MCAT) is a standardized multiple-choice exam run by the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), and is required to enter most US and many Canadian medical schools. It consists of four sections: biological and biochemical foundations of living systems; chemical and physical foundations of biological systems; psychological, social, and biological foundations of behavior; critical analysis and reasoning skills.

To prepare, you should familiarize yourself with the format of the test, and take advantage of the free online study resources provided by the AAMC. You may also want to invest in some practice papers, available for purchase on the MCAT website.

Scores are valid for two to three years, depending on each university. Official scores are released online approximately 35 days after testing. It's advisable to sit the test a year before you hope to enter medical schools.

### LSAT

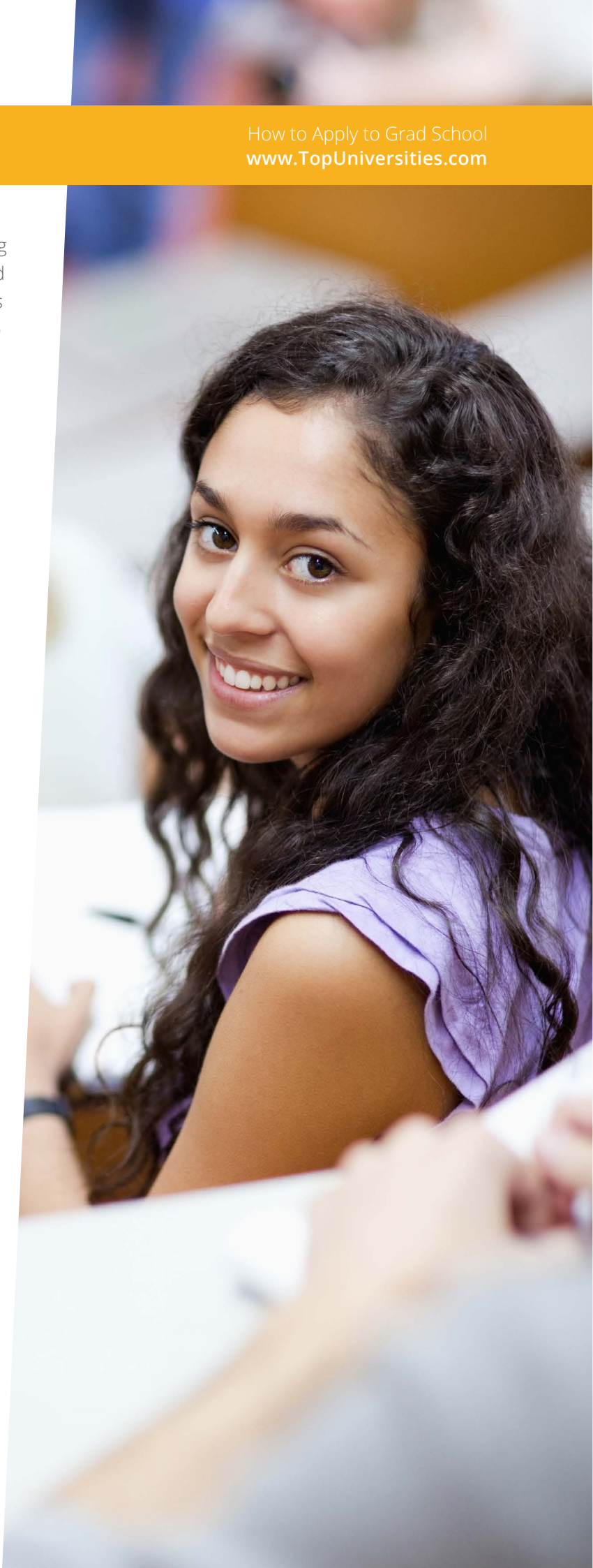
The **Law School Admission Test** (LSAT) is a multiple choice exam designed to test skills considered necessary for entry to law school, including reading, comprehension, organization, critical thinking, and the analysis and evaluation of arguments. It can be taken in various locations across the world, and is most commonly required by law schools in the US and Canada, but also in a growing number of other countries.

To prepare for the test, take the practice questions provided on the website, learn to identify question types, familiarize yourself with the grading system, and estimate how much time to spend on each question. You may also want to purchase official/non-official LSAT prep textbooks.

### GMAT

The **Graduate Management Admission Test** (GMAT) is a standardized test designed to assess applicants' suitability for business school. The test is valid for five years, and has four sections: analytical writing, quantitative, verbal and integrated reasoning.

To prepare, take the official GMAT practice test available for free online. As with all of these standardized exams, you'll also find a range of printed and online resources available, both free and online.



# Academic references

A reference, also known as a letter of recommendation, is a document or online questionnaire submitted by a professional who is able to assess your capabilities and strengths. For grad school applications, you'll usually be asked to submit two references from professors who have taught or supervised you.

Only ask for references from professors who actually know you, and who you feel will be capable of describing your strengths and interests. First, approach your chosen tutors asking if they would be willing to recommend you. Be careful in how you phrase this request, allowing your professors enough leeway to refuse if they don't feel comfortable writing you a glowing reference. It's best to ask another tutor rather than risk a lukewarm reference, which could harm your application.

**Only ask for references from professors who actually know you, and who you feel will be capable of describing your strengths and interests.**

Once your chosen referees have agreed, schedule an appointment to outline your aspirations and intended research project, while refreshing their memory of your interests and achievements. Do this several months in advance of the deadline, to give your referees plenty of time to write a letter of recommendation, without feeling rushed. They will no doubt have lots of other commitments to juggle!

After meeting with your professors, email them with details of the deadline and required format for the reference. Some graduate schools will ask professors to complete an online form, while others will ask for a formal letter written in a specific format. Don't forget to thank your tutors in person or via email; you might even want to think about dropping them a thank you note or a token gift.



# Research proposals

Different countries and graduate schools ask for different levels of familiarity from a personal statement, but it's usually best to keep a research proposal fairly formal. Stay clear of unsubstantiated claims, attempts at humor and overly personal anecdotes. Be precise and methodical.

Some universities will specify what to include in your research. If no guidelines are provided, make sure you cover the following:

1. Summarize your research goals and question (thesis).
2. Explain how your work will build on existing research (with specific examples), and why this is an important question, outlining potential implications and applications.
3. Summarize your intended research methodology.
4. Explain how you are qualified to undertake this research, backed up with specific examples from your academic background and skillset.
5. Outline your particular interest in the department, course and university, with references to specific staff members, research groups, facilities and resources.

If possible, ask peers and tutors to review your proposal, giving feedback on both content and structure. As with any part of your grad school application, make sure it is 100% free of spelling mistakes or other errors.





# Admissions interviews

Before attending an admissions interview, spend some time researching the program and the department in depth. Make a note of course modules you're especially interested in, research specializations of faculty members that appeal to you, and facilities you're keen to make use of.

The more specific and focused you are in your answers, the better your chances of getting in. You should be able to explain in detail why you've chosen this particular institution, as well as talking at length about your future ambitions and interests.

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It's also a good idea to make sure you're up to date on recent developments in your field. You may be asked to comment directly on a particular development, or you may simply find this gives you more material to draw on during the interview discussion.

Finally, make sure you're ready to perform at your best by getting plenty of sleep the night before, eating a good breakfast, dressing so you look smart and feel comfortable, and arriving in plenty of time. Even if you're a bag of nerves on the inside, force yourself to smile – this will help you relax and help to create a positive first impression.



### What should I expect?

Graduate school interviews are similar to job interviews. Essentially, you'll meet with faculty members to discuss your application and plans, with the aim of identifying whether you are a good fit for the program.

Typical questions may include:

- Why do you want to study here?
- What in particular appeals to you about this course?
- What are your research interests?
- Where do you see yourself in five years?
- How are you qualified to undertake your research project?
- What have you read recently?
- What else are you interested in?

A large part of the interview is likely to be dedicated to detailed discussion of the subject you're planning to study, and you may need to think on your feet in order to quickly solve problems or evaluate scenarios. Some admissions interviews are also conducted alongside a formal examination or task – if this is the case, you'll usually be told what to expect beforehand. If in doubt about the format of the interview, simply email or call the university to request more details.

The interview should also offer a chance for you to ask questions in return. Use this as an opportunity to find out more about the program, changes in the curriculum, particular resources or research initiatives, or any other information not provided on the website. Remember, this is also your chance to evaluate whether this option is right for you.



# Funding options

There are lots of options to consider when seeking grad school funding, and most students will draw on a variety of sources. Some of the main avenues to pursue include:

## **Bursaries, grants and scholarships**

These are all sums of money awarded by a university, government, or other organization, which you are not expected to pay back. Bursaries are attributed based on financial need, while scholarships and grants may be based on a range of factors – including academic performance, research/career interest, demographics and background, as well as financial need. Entrance scholarships are awarded when you enroll for the first time, while renewable scholarships are renewed each year on the condition that you maintain high grades.

## **National research councils**

National research councils are government-funded agencies, usually specializing in awarding funding for research in a particular sphere, such as arts and humanities, medicine, or engineering. Depending on the country, you may either apply directly to the research council, or via your chosen institution. As well as national research councils, there are also international funding bodies, such as the European Research Council, which funds projects led by the best researchers of any nationality across all fields, provided they carry out their research in an EU country.

## **Assistantships**

You may consider applying for an assistantship, or 'studentship', which means you'll carry out tasks for your department, in return for a monthly wage and in some cases a tuition fee waiver. This means you'll spend a set amount of hours on tasks relating to research and/or teaching being conducted in your faculty. These arrangements are particularly common in PhD programs, but may also be available for students at master's level.

## **Student and professional loans**

Search online to see if you're eligible for student loans in your chosen study of country. Government-run loan schemes tend to offer the best rates, but if you're not eligible for these you could also consider a private-sector loan. Professional bank loans may be available for students who intend to work in the country or economic zone of study after graduation. These loans typically cover a few years of study, including



tuition fees and a portion of living costs, and have more accommodating rates and repayment terms than normal loans.

### Employer sponsorship

Some employers sponsor staff to undertake postgraduate education, particularly if the course of study is relevant to the field of work. Discuss this option with your line manager and HR department, explaining how the program would help you add value to your company.

### Charities and special interest groups

Charities and various other interest groups often dedicate a portion of their annual budget to funding graduate studies, targeting applicants by demographic and/or research interest. Awards are usually given for one year at a time, with the possibility of renewal.

### Crowdsourcing

You could also consider raising funds for your studies through a crowdsourcing website. Check out specialized platforms such as *StudentFunder.com* and *GraduRates.com*.



## QS Scholarships

QS offers a selection of graduate-level scholarships, worth a total of US\$1.7 million per year. To be eligible to apply, you need to attend a **QS World Grad School Tour** event – these are run throughout the year, in cities worldwide. Find out more [here](#).

# Unsuccessful applications

Rejections are an inevitable part of life, and there's always a chance that your grad school application will not be successful. Before deciding what to do next, try to find out what went wrong, and which part of your application let you down. Ask for specific feedback from the graduate school/s you applied to.

Once you have a clearer picture, you can decide whether to re-apply, and if so, what to focus on improving or changing. You may decide to target a different set of graduate schools, with admissions requirements that you're more likely to meet. You may need more time to work on your graduate admission exam scores, language proficiency or research proposal. Or this could be an opportunity to reassess your plans entirely – exploring a new academic or professional pathway that may actually turn out to be even more exciting than your Plan A.

If unsure about what to do, consider taking a gap year. This could be a good time to gain some work experience, save money, and perhaps even do some traveling or volunteering. Resist making any snap decisions or enrolling in a program you're not entirely convinced about. Instead, give yourself time and space to consider all the options and arrive at a clear decision.

Most importantly, don't take the rejection personally. Make the most of this opportunity to (re)assess your priorities. Spend time with friends and family. Exercise, try new things, and keep your mind open to fresh possibilities. You can't control what happens to you – only how you choose to deal with the bumps on the road.



Want personal grad school advice?

The QS World Grad School Tour – coming soon to a city near you – is your chance to meet representatives from leading grad schools around the world, all in one place. Discuss your options in person, attend free seminars, collect a complimentary copy of the QS Top Grad School Guide, and apply for exclusive scholarships. [Find your nearest event.](#)