SCHOOL OF HUMAN ECOLOGY
ADVISING & CAREER CENTER

GRADUATE SCHOOL GUIDE

A helpful resource for preparing to apply for an advanced degree

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Welcome to the SoHE Graduate School Guide!

This guide is intended to support you in thinking about graduate study: whether and when it is the right step for you personally and what you need to prepare for graduate program applications.

Most graduate programs have their own application process, there is not a Common App like for undergrad. (There are exceptions: AMCAS and AACOMAS for med school applications, for example.) However, there are similar requirements, which have been outlined in this guide.

We hope the key takeaways from this guide are:

(1) You need to have thoughtfully reflected on your decision to pursue graduate education and know which programs are the right next step for you and that you can afford graduate school (money, time, energy-wise).

(2) Your application materials should be tailored to the programs to which you are applying. Demonstrate why you belong at that particular institution and why that program is the right fit for you.

You are not alone in this! SoHE Career Advisors and faculty are available to support your reflection and application processes. We want you to be successful Human Ecologists at any level!

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Is graduate school the right option for me?

Reflect on your motivations and goals. Graduate school is an investment that does not always guarantee financial or career gains, so it is important you assess whether and when it is the best option for you.

### CHECK THE BOXES THAT APPLY TO YOU:

- □ My family or friends think I should go to graduate school.
- □ I’ve always been curious about ________ (field of study).
- □ Graduate school seems better than entering the job market (with a Bachelor’s degree).
- □ I want to live in a new place, so graduate school seems like a good way to do that.

**If you’ve checked any of these and less than 3 to the right, you should probably do some more career exploration before going to grad school.**

### CHECK THE BOXES THAT APPLY TO YOU:

- □ I have a good idea about what work I would like to pursue, and I’m sure it requires a higher degree.
- □ I’m ready to handle the financial cost of graduate school because I know it will open the door to specific job opportunities.
- □ I have talked with people who are working in my field of interest and I’m pretty sure I would like the daily work.
- □ I already have the momentum and discipline school requires - I’m motivated to finish a higher degree now instead of waiting a few years.

### MORE TO THINK ABOUT:

**Describe in detail the career you want to pursue. (You’ll be expected to have clearly defined goals to get into graduate school.)**

Is a grad degree a requirement for your career (will it make employment easier)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who wants you to go to graduate school? (Is it your interest/motivation to go for an advanced degree, or are you responding to others?)</th>
<th>Can you handle the financial strain of graduate study?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Will the time/money you spend on grad school repay you for money/experience you would have earned if you took a job immediately after undergrad?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What can you do with your Bachelor’s degree?</th>
<th>What other avenues are available to you for continued learning? (examples: professional workshops, community college classes, continuing ed seminars and certifications)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td></td>
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</table>

If you put off grad school one or more years, what could you gain?
Is graduate school the right option for me?

When should I go to grad school?

This depends on you and the program(s) you want to apply to. Often it is recommended that students start prepping for graduate school applications a year and a half before they would start the program. Here are some other points to consider:

**Reasons to Go to Grad School Immediately After Completing Undergrad:**

- I am in school-mode: I have the momentum and discipline to continue focusing on academics.
- I have fewer obligations now than I will in the future (bills, family, etc).
- My desired career requires further education even for entry-level positions.

**Reasons to Wait to Go to Grad School:**

- I want to confirm my career goals by getting more experience.
- I want to be more financially secure.
- I want more experience (1) because the grad program requires it, (2) to bring a broader worldview to my studies, and/or (3) to improve my chances of getting in.
- I want to have an employer pay for my additional education.

What if I shouldn’t go to grad school right now? What should I do?

Great question! We’ll give you some ideas here, and your career advisor is a great person to talk to about post-college and career planning. Set up an appointment with your career advisor on Starfish, or email careers@sohe.wisc.edu to get connected.

- **MOST IMPORTANT:** Contact real people doing the jobs you are interested in so you can test things out before spending lots of time and money on education (job shadowing and informational interviews).

- Get an entry-level job in an area of interest to gain more experience and exposure to the field. *See SoHE career guides by major for tips on job searching and building application materials (sohe.wisc.edu/students/career-development/finding-internship/).

- Participate in a service program to build leadership skills and gain experience (for example: AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, City Year).

- Volunteer or do an internship to gain experience and exposure to your field of interest.

- Build business skills in companies that like to hire undergrads (for example: Epic, Enterprise, Oracle, Target, the list goes on!) *note they may have early hiring timelines

- Teach English abroad and see more of the world. *Note many programs have early application deadlines.

- Take a year to work a “survival job” or temp job that offers flexibility, so you have time to explore fields of interest.

- **REMINDER AGAIN:** Visit a career advisor for support in exploring careers and making an action plan tailored to your interests.
Can I afford graduate school?

Costs of Graduate Study
When exploring the financial aspects of graduate study, the best places for cost and funding information are the financial aid office at the institution to which you are applying and/or the department offering the program. Of course, you’ll want to consider cost of tuition and fees as well as living expense estimates.

Budgeting
Make a budget to consider what you will need for income while attending graduate school (for example: income from a job, loans, or other funding). *More loans info on page 17 (“Financial Aid”). Don’t forget to consider cost-of-living for the communities where institutions of interest are.

Existing Student Loans
If you have student loans from undergrad that will follow you to graduate school, you’ll want to explore your options for repayment. Certain federal loans can be placed in deferment where interest does not accrue while you are in grad school, but other loans don’t have this option. Forbearance is when you enter a period of non-payment, but interest still accrues, thus increasing the cost of the loan over time. There are other repayment plan options that could be available to you, depending on the lender, that you could choose to use if you’re able to pay on loans while attending grad school.

Retirement and Other Goals
Don’t lose sight of other long-term financial goals as you consider investing in graduate education. Do you want to buy a house or car or have another major expense in the near-ish future? How will you save for other expenses? Don’t touch retirement savings to pay for grad school, and if you don’t have a retirement account, start one before grad school if at all possible. Putting a little into retirement savings early almost always pays off more in the long run than large late investments. (moneyunder30.com/beginners-guide-to-saving-for-retirement)

Return on Investment
Especially if you are unsure about whether an advanced degree will open doors to higher earnings and be worth the cost, explore the return on investment of graduate school with this tool: moneyunder30.com/is-graduate-school-worth-the-cost. It can help show you when you will have paid for graduate school and out-earned what you could have earned without the degree. Not sure about potential salaries for occupations of interest? Check out CareerOneStop.org and ONetOnline.org to search salary ranges by jobs and locations.
What should I study?

Perhaps you have a broad interest for your career path (for example: counseling, non-profits, youth work, food insecurity, higher education, homelessness, etc.) and aren’t sure what advanced degree program will be most beneficial for that field. The truth is that in many fields people enter with a range of graduate experiences. This is why you have to do your research to explore what you are most interested in and what is valued in your field. Here are some things to consider:

Research or Professional Graduate Study

**RESEARCH:** If you want to go into research, expect a graduate program to be 3-7 years and to require a thesis/dissertation. Teaching assistantships are very common with research grad study.

**PROFESSIONAL:** If you want applied training and to not do research, consider professional grad study. These programs typically are 1-3 years and may or may not require a “thesis” project.

Licensing

Certain fields, especially when you are working directly with people, require licensing and specific educational experiences to be eligible for licensure. Licensing can differ by occupation and state. Often, there is a continuing education portion of the license to be able to renew it in the future. Do your research and pay close attention to location differences or reciprocity of licenses across states.

Location

*Where* you want to study is very important to consider in addition to *what* you want to study. Certain professional graduate programs may set you up for certain licensing. If you are interested in doing research with a particular population or getting connected with specific types of organizations, do you have access to that where your program is located? Grad school is likely going to be a couple or more years of your life – so where do you want to spend that time? If there is somewhere in particular you want to live, does it make sense to move there and then apply for graduate school?

Informational Interviewing

Informational interviews are great ways to get more information about what it is actually like to work in a field as well as learn what your options are for occupations and education. Perhaps you know someone in the field you want to learn more about. If not, ask people you know who they might know in that field. Then request an informational interview. People love to talk about themselves and what they do, so don’t be shy! Just be sure to be flexible with their schedule and needs. You should be prepared to talk about your own goals and interests and have a list of questions ready to ask.

**EXAMPLE REQUEST for informational meeting**

“Hello. My name is Hannah, and I just finished my junior year at UW-Madison where I’m studying Interior Architecture. I really enjoy designing spaces that highlight natural beauty, so I want to explore how I might be able to do this further with a degree in architecture. My coworker, Sam, gave me your contact info. He was really proud to brag that his cousin is an award-winning architect! I would really appreciate an opportunity to talk with you for 20-30 minutes about your background and current work. Can we set up a meeting time? Thank you.”

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS for an informational meeting**

- How did you decide this field/occupation was right for you?
- How would you describe a typical workday or work week?
- What do you like most about your work? What do you like least?
- Do you have any recommendations about coursework/training you think would be important for me as I look to enter the field?
- Is there anything you wish you would have known before starting work in this field?
- Who else should I talk with to learn more about this field? Can I use your name when I contact them?
# Options with the Human Development and Family Studies major

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Can I Do With HDFS?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>COUNSELING</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EDUCATION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HEALTHCARE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ADVOCACY &amp; NON-PROFITS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BUSINESS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RESEARCH</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many occupations and career paths within these areas don’t require an advanced degree! Again, do some exploration to determine whether graduate school is the right fit for your goals and interests.
Where should I study?

Researching graduate schools

Talking to folks with the degree you are interested in can give you insight into which programs and schools might be good for you to explore. Check out professional associations and organizations relevant to your interests as they often provide professional and academic information and inspiration. Some even advertise or rank graduate programs related to the field. And, of course, you can also look at particular school/program websites for information.

For more general searching of graduate school options, check out:

- Petersons.com
- GradSchools.com
- GraduateGuide.com

Questions to consider (depending on your needs/wants/goals)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Logistics</th>
<th>“Fit”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who are the faculty? What research is being done? Who teaches the courses?</td>
<td>Is it possible to take classes part-time or defer admission or “stop-out” for a period?</td>
<td>Where is it located? Do I imagine myself living there? Does it mesh with post-grad plans?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the reputation/ranking of the program/ school?</td>
<td>What support services are available?</td>
<td>What do graduates go on to do (and what is the placement rate)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the size of the program? Who advises/mentors students?</td>
<td>What funding is available? (e.g. assistantships/ scholarships)</td>
<td>How diverse and inclusive is the student population/faculty/community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long does it typically take to complete the program?</td>
<td>What are the costs?</td>
<td>How competitive are the students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are course and program requirements (e.g. thesis, practicum)?</td>
<td>How extensive are the library holdings and other research facilities?</td>
<td>Are there opportunities to get involved on campus/in the community?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are Master’s and Ph.D. programs separate or not?</td>
<td>What are the admissions requirements?*</td>
<td>When are courses offered? What can be done at virtually?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ultimately the most important question is: **Can I see myself as a student here?**

*Thinking About Admissions Requirements While Still in Undergrad*

Experience: If you are planning to go to grad school right away, are you getting enough experience outside of the classroom? Internships, part-time/summer jobs, volunteer opportunities, etc. can bolster your application and help you long-term so that you aren’t coming out of graduate school over-educated and under-experienced.

Even you plan to wait to go to graduate school, there are things you might want to consider while still working on your undergraduate degree.

GPA and coursework: Many graduate programs have GPA requirements and want to see challenging coursework within your major.

Standardized Exams: If you have to take a standardized exam for entrance, are there prep resources on campus you have access to now that you won’t have access to in the future?

Academic Reference(s): Many graduate programs will want at least one academic reference who can speak to your academic ability. Foster and maintain relationships so potential references will remember you.
Application Timeline

It is typically recommended that students start prepping for graduate school applications a year and a half before they would start the program.

1.5 - 1 Year before anticipated start date
• Research programs/schools
• Look at funding options
• Visit schools and meet people in the dept. of interest
• Look at application timelines and requirements to plan
• Schedule and start prepping for any required exams

6 months before due dates
• Start applications (when available)
• Reach out to ask for recommendations
• Request transcripts
• Take any required exam
• Draft personal statement and get feedback

Due Dates
• Submit applications (according to deadlines)
• Prepare for possible admissions interviews (depending on school/ program)

Acceptance!
• Once you've made a decision, don't forget to update those who have helped you (esp. recommenders)
• Confirm and set up funding (if applicable)

Don't forget to do your FAFSA as soon as possible for the appropriate academic year.
When preparing materials for grad school applications, remember to:

1. Follow all application directions
2. Proofread, proofread, proofread
3. Tailor materials to the institution (as appropriate) – make sure you are responding to their prompts and describing why you belong at that particular school

**Common Application Materials**

1. Resume or curriculum vitae
2. Transcript(s)
3. Letters of recommendation
4. Standardized test results
5. Personal statement

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**Resume/Curriculum Vitae**

A graduate school application will usually ask for a resume or curriculum vitae (CV).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resume</th>
<th>Curriculum Vitae (CV)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competency based – skills and abilities</td>
<td>Credential based – education/training and experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showcases relevant competence, work history, accomplishments</td>
<td>Showcases relevant certifications, research, publications/presentations, affiliations, in addition to education and experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brief and concise (1-2 pages)</td>
<td>Comprehensive and concise (multiple pages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="https://sohe.wisc.edu/students/career-development/finding-internship/">SoHE Career Guides</a> provide detailed explanations of how to put together a resume</td>
<td>The <a href="https://writing.wisc.edu/handbook/assignments/cv/">Writing Center</a> provides guidelines for putting together a CV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both a resume and CV should:

- be tailored for the graduate school program – this can be done through use of keywords, as well as order of sections and titles of sections (for example: Healthcare Experience, Research Experience, etc)
- use bullet points with action verbs focused on strengths and skills
- represent you as the well-qualified applicant
- NOT include personal interests nor personal info (like picture, birthdate, marital status, nationality, etc.)

**Transcripts**

Graduate schools use undergraduate transcripts to confirm degree completion and to assess both coursework taken (breadth, challenge) and your performance (grades/GPA). If you submit transcripts prior to graduation, schools may also request verification of your degree once you have completed it.

All college transcripts are usually required, as are official transcripts, which are sent to the graduate school directly from your undergrad institution(s). It typically takes several days or more for an institution to process and send a transcript, so plan accordingly!

Request your official UW-Madison transcript through the [Registrar’s Office](https://registrar.wisc.edu/transcript/).
Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation (LOR) can factor heavily in an application as they provide evidence from real people either in the field or in academia who can speak to you being a qualified applicant. Most commonly a graduate school application requests three letters of recommendation.

A good letter writer (in the view of graduate admissions) is someone who knows you well AND:
- has evaluated you academically in an upper-level course (especially a professor), OR
- has earned the degree you are seeking in your graduate work, OR
- has an advanced degree & has supervised you in a job/internship aligned with the grad program.

What if I decide to wait to apply to grad school? How do I ask professors for a LOR?

(1) Talk with professors while you’re in undergrad about the possibility of pursuing grad school in the future. Maintain the relationships after you complete your degree so that you are still memorable when it comes time to ask for the LOR.

(2) Ask professors if they would prefer to write “general” letters of recommendation. You would keep them in a safe place (for example: Interfolio.com) and, when it is time to apply, ask recommenders to update the letters.

(3) If you fall out of touch with professors, you can still reach out in the future when you are ready to apply, but make sure to do so several months out to give time for backup recommenders. You want to be sure a LOR is strong and personalized, so help professors remember you and update them about your life by providing sufficient information (see LOR checklist below).

LOR Checklist

- Identify 3-5 potential recommenders
- Ask top choices 4-6 months before due date if they would write you a strong LOR (this gives you time to ask an additional recommender if necessary)
- Once they say “yes,” provide recommenders:
  - your resume/CV
  - your personal statement draft or explanation of your intentions for graduate study
  - relevant info about the programs you are applying to
  - submission process and due date
  - any other info they request (for example: what you hope they will highlight in a letter, transcripts, etc.)
- You should waive your right to view the LOR – this signals to the writer and to the institution that you trust the recommender to be candid in their recommendation
- Check in a couple weeks before the deadline if they have not yet submitted the LOR (this gives you time to pursue a fallback if necessary)
- After they have submitted the LOR, send a “thank you” email/note
- After your decision (even if you don’t go), provide a follow up to recommenders letting them know your next steps and to say “thank you for your support” again
Application Materials (Testing)

Required or Not?
Research graduate programs of interest to determine whether you are required to submit certain test scores. It is possible to find programs for most advanced degrees that do not require testing for admission. More programs are becoming test-optional to increase equity and access.

GRE
The Graduate Record Examination (GRE) is commonly required for grad school applications. It consists of three sections: analytical writing, quantitative reasoning, and verbal reasoning. There is a raw score and associated percentile ranking which compares your score to other GRE test-takers (this is often the focus for admissions). Weight of the GRE in the application process varies. More competitive programs will want a more competitive GRE score, and certain programs will value quantitative more than verbal or vice versa. Perhaps if you didn’t do so well in a statistics course, a program will want to see a higher quantitative reasoning score. Doing your research about institutions expectations for the GRE will help you determine what goals to set for scores.

Studying for the GRE
It is advisable to study for the GRE to understand the question formats and to review math concepts if you haven’t taken a math course in a while.
❖ ETS, the makers of the GRE, have information about test structure and content. (ets.org/gre/revised_general/about/structure/, ets.org/gre/revised_general/about/content/).
❖ For studying for the quantitative reasoning (math) section, ETS has a guide to free Khan Academy lessons/videos to access for review (ets.org/gre/revised_general/prepare/khan_academy).
❖ A great way to start studying is to take a practice GRE to see what you need to practice more.
   • [ETS.org/gre](https://ets.org/gre): make an account to access free overviews of the GRE and two free practice tests
   • [Kaplan](https://kaptest.com/gre/free/gre-practice-test-options): make an account to access a free practice GRE
     *Kaplan has other free GRE prep resources - explore their website for events/videos/etc.
   • [Test-Guide](https://test-guide.com/free-gre-practice-tests.html): free practice test sections of the GRE

Other Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MCAT: Medical College Admission Test. DAT: Dental Admission Test. OAT: Optometry Admission Test. *Use the Pre-Health Advising Center (prehealth.wisc.edu) as a resource for test prep.</th>
<th>LSAT: Law School Admission Test. *Use the Center for Pre-Law Advising (prelaw.wisc.edu) as a resource for test prep.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English exams (like TOELF – Test of English as a Foreign Language) may be necessary for international students applying to graduate schools.</td>
<td>GMAT: Graduate Management Admission Test. May be required for business school, though many accept the GRE. Do your research on the differences between the GMAT and GRE to determine which might be a better option for you (check out: <a href="https://princetonreview.com/business/gmat-vs-gre">princetonreview.com/business/gmat-vs-gre</a>).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Application Materials (Personal Statement)

Personal Statement
Most graduate school applications require one or more essays, commonly known as a personal statement. The personal statement or collection of essays are an opportunity for the admissions committee to put an actual person to a test score and GPA. It is an opportunity for you, the applicant, to demonstrate you have done the necessary reflection to know grad school and this program is the right next step for you. Through the narrative analysis of aspects of your personal, educational, and professional history, you are making explicit connections between your background and your goals and this grad program, albeit in a relatively short amount of space. You want to be enthusiastic, honest, confident, and succinct.

Things admissions committees may be evaluating about you from a personal statement:
- Writing ability
- Reasons for deciding to pursue graduate education at that particular institution
- Research, work, educational experiences
- Maturity
- Personal uniqueness – what do you add to the diversity of the entering cohort
- Motivation and commitment to the field

Tips for Crafting a Personal Statement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus on your background, abilities, goals, and motivation.</th>
<th>By their nature, statements are “personal” in that they ask you not only to tell things about you, but also to reflect on their significance to your past and future educational/career goals. The personal statement should highlight your skills, abilities, and character traits that correlate with success in graduate school and the field. Make the connection between your experience in school/work to grad school and how your experiences cultivated your interest in the field/this degree program. Stories about how you became interested might reference as far back as childhood, but skills, achievements, and activities that are more recent carry more weight.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less is more, i.e. strive for depth rather than breadth to maintain the statement's focus.</td>
<td>Organize your statement around a unifying theme rather than listing accomplishments. Choose what is most important to highlight and be sure to explain the significance of those points to make them relevant to the statement as a whole. Be concise. Follow length limitations. If no limit is specified, don’t make the statement longer than two pages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give good examples and explanations.</td>
<td>Use examples to show who you are. Anyone can say they are persistent. Prove it to the reader! Be careful that examples are evaluated and not just described. Explain how and why experiences had an effect on you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be thoughtful about including negative experiences.</td>
<td>If something in your academic record is weak or questionable, a thoughtful explanation/evaluation of the situation could help. Discussing a negative experience that taught you something valuable or helped you make important decisions can sometimes be a good way to provide insight into your character and goals. However, if you don’t want to draw attention to a particular situation (or have nothing positive to say about it, it is probably best to avoid bringing it up.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Personal Statement (cont.)**

## Tips for Crafting a Personal Statement (cont.)

| Help your reader. | Make sure you make connections between the info you are providing and your potential for graduate study and a career in the field. Don’t assume the readers will make the connections themselves. Additionally, members of the admissions committees will likely have varying levels of knowledge in your field; therefore, be thoughtful in your descriptions of any research or technical work you have done. |
| Focus on the particular institution. | Just as you would for a resume/CV or cover letter for a job, tailor your statement to the institution and the prompt(s). Do your research on the institution. Really make clear why you want to go there. How can this program help you achieve your goals? How do their resources relate to you? What do you offer the program? It is important to connect your experiences to the goals and requirements of the program to which you are applying. |
| Follow instructions. | Make sure that your statement is responding to the prompt question(s). If you are applying to several schools, you may find questions are similar across applications. HOWEVER, do not use the same statement for all applications. It is important to answer each question being asked, and if slightly different answers are needed, you should write separate statements. |
| Use good writing strategies. | You should write the statement in first person since it is about you. Try to avoid the passive voice (“be” verbs) to help decrease wordiness and give more energy/action to your writing. Formatting a statement with an intro, body, and conclusion gives it shape and helps the reader see the direction, recognize key messages, and understand the significance of what you have written about. |
| Proofread and get feedback. | Do not allow for any typos, misspellings, or grammatical errors in your final submission. Proofread and enlist the help of others to make sure the final statement is immaculate. Additionally, use others for feedback to ensure your message is clear and compelling and you are thoroughly answering the prompts. Often it is good to ask people both in your desired field and those who aren’t to read your statement. Use UW-Madison’s Writing Center (writing.wisc.edu) – they have specific support services for writing personal statements! |

## Steps for Starting to Write a Personal Statement

1. Before even looking at application prompts, do some self-reflection. Write down stories with tons of detail about people, experiences, situations, etc. that have been significant in your decision to pursue a field or further your education (i.e. motivating factors).
   a. When did you become interested in this field of study? What distinctive moments in your life story have led you in this direction?
   b. How have you been pursuing your interest so far? (e.g. education, work, volunteering)
   c. What have been situations or experiences that have forced you to grow or change?
   d. What experiences have made you decide on this degree program?
   e. What do you want/plan to do with additional education? What are your career goals?
   f. What is appealing to you about this field of study – what “fits” with you?
Personal Statement (cont.)

Steps for Starting to Write a Personal Statement (cont.)

(2) Write down thoughts/experiences that relate to the specific programs you are applying to.
   a. What appeals to you about each specific school/program/department? (Make sure to do this for every program you are applying for!)
   b. What do you bring to the program or student cohort that others could benefit or learn from?

(3) Look at the prompt(s). Are there any ideas you haven’t already addressed? Write out any additional thoughts/stories that respond to the prompts.

(4) Read through your stories. Is there a common, compelling theme that emerges? Or is there a singular event that clearly tipped you in this direction? What is your “hook” that will compel the reader to be interested in you?

(5) Outline the statement.
   a. What is the main theme?
   b. What stories/examples will you provide to demonstrate your preparedness and motivation? Which stories are most compelling?

(6) Write a first draft of the statement without consideration for length.
   a. Some prefer to start writing by focusing on the theme in the first paragraph. Others find starting with the body paragraphs makes it easier to discover the theme as they are writing, and then they go back to develop the introduction.
   b. The first paragraph ultimately will be the most important as it sets up the rest of the statement, draws in the reader, and presents your “thesis” (why this grad program, why right now). So, make sure you spend time crafting the introduction.
   c. As you develop the body paragraphs, make sure you are always showing who you are/what skills you have (through examples and details) rather than telling. Don’t just say “I want to help people” or “I am a good listener;” use examples to illustrate how you have done those things.

(7) You could choose to start editing for length before getting feedback, but it is a good idea to get feedback early so that you don’t over-edit.

(8) After the first round of feedback, more seriously edit.
   a. Are you showing rather than telling?
   b. Are you clear and concise?
   c. Is your writing style active and varied?
   d. Are you within length limitations?

(9) Get more feedback and continue adjusting.

★ Be true to yourself in this process. You’ll get conflicting feedback and/or you may feel like advice doesn’t fit your style or goals. There is no obligation to follow all advice – do what feels right for you!
### Application Materials (Prompts & Interviews)

#### Sample prompts from real grad school apps:

“A personal statement of 1,000 words or less from the nominee describing background, interests, plans for graduate study and career aspirations. The statement should include a discussion of some experiences and ideas that have shaped those interests, plans and aspirations.”

“Why do you want to go to graduate school?”

“The admissions committee requires every applicant to submit an original example of written expression. The purpose of this personal statement is to provide you with a flexible opportunity to submit information that you deem important to your candidacy. You may wish to describe aspects of your background and interests—intellectual, personal, or professional—and how you will uniquely contribute to the SCHOOL community and/or the profession. Please limit your statement to **two pages, double spaced.**”

“You are required to submit a personal statement. The statement is your opportunity to introduce yourself to the admissions committee and should include (1) what you think have been your significant personal experiences beyond what may be reflected in your academic transcripts and on your resume, and (2) your personal and career ambitions. No required length.”

**“In your statement, be sure to address fully each of the following questions:** Why do you want to pursue a career in ___? Why are you choosing the ___ Program? What do you view as barriers to obtaining your degree and what are your plans for overcoming them? How does your experience with and/or knowledge of diversity issues inform your desire to obtain a degree? How have your past and current volunteer, internship, fieldwork, employment, and/or other experiences prepared you for graduate studies? Indicate how these experiences have provided you with skills and an understanding of qualities such as leadership, creativity, ethics, and professionalism.

- 12pt Times New Roman, Double-spaced, One inch margins, Approximately 5 pages (please number each page), Use standard essay format, Write one statement that addresses all five questions. Do not write five different statements addressing each question separately. Submit in PDF format”

#### Interviews

Depending on the program you are applying to, you may be interviewed as part of the process. The purpose is to assess your readiness for graduate study as well as confirm that you have thought through your goals and know this is the right next step. Typical job interview questions are likely (see [SoHE Career Guides](sohe.wisc.edu/students/career-development/finding-internship)). More sample questions:

- Why did you choose this career?
- Why did you choose to apply to our program?
- What do you believe will be your greatest challenge if you are accepted into this program?
- What courses did you enjoy most/least in college?
- How will you make a contribution to the field?
- How do you intend to finance your education?
- What skills do you bring to the program?
- If you’re not accepted into grad school, what are your plans?

**Questions you could ask to make sure it is a good fit for you:**

- What characteristics are specific to this program that make it stand out from competitors?
- Where are recent alumni employed? What do most students do after graduation?
- What are examples of planned practical experiences included in the program?
- What is it like to live in this area as a graduate student?
Financial Aid & Funding

FAFSA
You should complete the FAFSA as soon as you are able. The aid year for a given FAFSA period begins in June of the current year and goes to July of the next year. So, if your program started in fall of 2021, you’d complete the 2021-2022 FAFSA. If a program starts in the summer, talk to the institution’s financial aid office to determine which FAFSA application they will accept.

Graduate FAFSA Considerations
- Grad students are automatically considered independent students on the FAFSA, so there is no requirement to provide parental financial info.
- Grad students are eligible for the Unsubsidized Federal Direct Loan (provided they have not reached lifetime limits) and/or Federal Direct Grad PLUS Loan (which then requires an additional application).
- Grad students are not eligible for grants from the FAFSA.

Loan Options
Unsubsidized Federal Direct Loans
It is important to note that Unsubsidized Federal Direct Loans mean that interest accumulates while you are in school or in any grace, deferment, or forbearance periods and gets capitalized (added to the principal amount of the loan). For more information, check out: studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/loans/ subsidized-unsubsidized

Private Loans
Most financial aid offices have a private loan comparison tool available to assist students considering loan options. Private loans, of course, require additional applications through the loaning institution.

Choosing a Loan
Things to think about as you explore loan options:
- What is the interest rate? What fees exist?
- Are there grace periods? How long?
- Are there multiple repayment options? What are they?
- Does the loan require a co-signer? Who could that be?

Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program
Depending on your career path and loan situation, you may be eligible for Public Service Loan Forgiveness. Read up on this program carefully as there are a lot of requirements to qualify for forgiveness: studentaid.gov/manage-loans/forgiveness-cancellation/public-service

If you need a student loan to help cover living expenses, you may need to request that the financial aid office review your actual expenses as they may be higher than what is estimated for your cost to attend the institution.

Program Funding
Graduate programs may offer funding as part of acceptance (more common with Ph.D. programs), and that funding may or may not require some kind of work. Other students may be able to find tuition-remitting appointments in the department or on campus, like teaching and research assistantships. These appointments may also include a stipend and healthcare benefit eligibility. Ask questions of the program(s) to which you are applying to learn more about possible options.
Best of luck in your educational pursuits!

And don’t forget your SoHE Career Advisors are here to help:

**SoHE Advising & Career Center**

**Location**
1194 Nancy Nicholas Hall
Fetzer Center for Student Excellence

**Contact**
careers@sohe.wisc.edu
608-262-2608

**Appointment Scheduling**
Schedule career advising appointments through the Starfish app on MyUW or via the contact above.