

Graduate School Preparation Guide

INDIANA STATE UNIVERSITY CAREER CENTER

The decision to attend graduate school should not be made lightly. You will invest many additional semesters of study, as well as financial resources, and you want to make sure it's a well-researched, thought-out decision. Some of the questions to ask yourself include:

- Why do I want to attend graduate school? Is the location important, am I willing to relocate? Am I looking for an on-campus, online, or blended program? Should I attend full time or part-time?
- Am I considering graduate school because I'm not currently finding job opportunities?
- Am I clear about my short and long-term career goals? How will an advanced degree help me?
- Have I researched my chosen career to determine the optimum timing for graduate school? Would I be better advised to work a few years before pursuing a graduate degree?
- Does my chosen field require an advanced degree? Will it make me more marketable in the future? How will I finance graduate school? What is the time commitment?
- Do I understand the differences between the graduate degree options in my chosen field? Is a master's or doctoral degree more beneficial for my career goals?

Websites that can help you with your search:

- www.gradschools.com
- www.princetonreview.com/grad-school
- www.petersons.com/graduate-schools
- grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools
- www.graduateguide.com

The Career Center has a variety of resources to assist you in evaluating schools, preparing for admissions tests, and writing personal statements. Schedule an appointment with a Career Coach or come in during walk-in hours Monday-Friday, 10am-12pm and 1-3pm if you'd like to discuss your options.

CREATING A PLAN

May (One full year before you wish to start Graduate School)

- Begin researching graduate schools. Programs in graduate school are highly specialized, so it is important to do your research on which program will lead you towards your ultimate career goal.
- Look at the professional experience and research done by faculty in your programs of interest. Depending on the type of graduate degree you are interested in, you will spend a lot of time learning and working with these individuals. Make a list of your top ten schools. It could also be beneficial to shadow a class witnessing the learning environment firsthand.

June

- Research admission requirements for programs in your geographic target area. Every program is different, but most require at least a 3.0 GPA and a minimum graduate admissions test score. It is important to determine if you will be required to take a graduate school admission test and when applications are due.
- Often schools will take into consideration letters of recommendation, personal statements, and your interview. Also, some schools may give a conditional admission for those with below the minimum GPA or test score. Entrance exam requirements vary from program to program and from school to school.

July

- Contact the colleges/universities of interest and research the program, the college, financial aid, and assistantships. A good question to inquire about is research, fellowship or assistantship opportunities (this is a great way to fund your graduate education and get related experience). Try to narrow your list to your top five schools.

July Cont'd

- Start preparing a résumé with your related experiences and accomplishments. Many programs ask for a résumé as part of selection process.

August

- Narrow your list to the top five schools and begin looking for open houses or informational sessions for a feel of the campus, speak with current students and faculty, and Admissions representatives about your program of interest.
- Graduate schools *usually* ask for 3-letters of recommendation. Ask primary faculty members, supervisors, or and/or staff advisors. Provide references a copy of your current résumé as a guide when writing your letter of recommendation. Give them plenty of time and always remember to thank them!

September

- Sign up to take any required Graduate Admission tests. Keep in mind it will take approximately six weeks for your scores to be sent to the graduate schools and you want colleges to have the test results before they begin reviewing graduate applications.
- Some graduate schools require applicants to write a personal statement as part of the application process. You can ask a faculty member or the Career Center to review it.

October

- Non-refundable application fees cost \$30-\$100 per application. Application fees can sometimes be waived by attending a graduate school open house or during fee waiver periods.
- Take a standardized test(s). If you are not happy with your score, you may need to wait one month or longer before retaking it.
- Order transcripts from all post-secondary institutions. The ISU Office of Registration and Records can be reached at 812-237-2020 or ISU-ORR@mail.indstate.edu.

November

- Complete the applications and be certain to follow the instructions exactly. Of your top five schools, apply to at least four schools.

Late December/Early January

- Submit all of your graduate applications no later than January 15 (unless the deadline is earlier). This helps give you better selections with assistantships, fellowships, and/or financial aid packages. Many graduate programs send out acceptances as early as March for the fall term.

January/February

- It is always a good idea to have “Plan B,” and explore job opportunities if graduate school is not an option for you at this time.
- The majority of graduate programs have an April 15 deadline for accepting or declining attendance into their program.

PAYING FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

Grants: FREE MONEY from the state & federal government or the university. Commonly **need-based**.

Scholarships: FREE MONEY. Financial reward commonly given on the basis of **academic achievement**. Some take into account financial need.

Assistantships: Part-time position working on-campus, in a university department office. Commonly cover tuition & some positions also provide a small stipend (paycheck).

Loans: designed to help students pay for post-secondary education and the associated fees, such as tuition, books and supplies, and living expenses

TIPS FOR PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Personal statements are a top selection criteria admission offices and departments use when evaluating applicants for graduate school. It is important to represent yourself in a way that gets the reader's attention. The following are guidelines to get you started. Once you have a draft, make an appointment to have a career coach review your materials.

What are graduate schools looking for?

- Academic ability, experience and passion for your chosen area of study
- Character (are you the right fit for their program?), ability to communicate, persistence and dedication (will you stick with the program and finish?)

Important questions to answer in graduate school applications:

- Why do you want to go to graduate school? Why do you want to study in the field you've chosen? Why their school, rather than others? How does the program fit into your future goals?

DO'S AND DON'TS OF PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Do's

- Have an opening, compelling sentence that is attention-grabbing
- Provide evidence and examples illustrating who you are, how you have developed, and what matters to you. Show how you are unique and what you will bring to the program.
- Discuss intellectual and career goals, mention noteworthy and appealing features attracting you to the program or institution, and customize your statement for each application.

Don'ts

- Do not restate your résumé or transcript, avoid writing a laundry list of your personal traits
- Do not beg or appear desperate; do not think being qualified will automatically get you in; do not get bogged down in details
- Stay away from using clichés, emotion, or unusual language

The most common mistakes

- Not demonstrating personality, character, motivation, and a fit with the specific program
- Writing what you "think" they want to hear

FOUR-STEP PLAN TO WRITING PERSONAL STATEMENTS

Step 1: Brainstorm	Step 3: Write
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What have I done? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Academic career, Extracurricular activities, Employment, and Accomplishments • What have I learned? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Significant life experiences, Failure or setback from which you learned • How does a graduate degree fit into your intellectual and career goals? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start the essay strong; the first impression matters • Keep it engaging and interesting but be careful with humor • Tailor essays to each school and incorporate the department's mission statement • Never blame, brag, beg, or bore • Remember you are selling yourself
Step 2: Plan	Step 4: Edit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose best experiences for each question/application • Create a brief outline for each essay • Tell stories interestingly, yet professionally • Keep an organized structure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask yourself, "How will this sound to graduate schools?" and "What does it say about the person who wrote it?" • Be sure it fulfills length requirements • Get feedback from someone who knows you well, someone who does not know you well, one who has been or is currently a graduate student, and someone who is a great writer