

Timeline (for the year you apply to graduate school)

April – May

Write an academic CV. Take it to the Careers Office or your departmental advisor for editing.

Get 3 letters of recommendation from your favorite/most applicable professors. Send them an e-mail listing your accomplishments inside/outside school and why you're interested in pursuing graduate school (and thank them for being great teachers/mentors). Keep a copy so that when it comes time to submit, you can just e-mail them the copy you have, and jog their memory.

June – July

Save a pdf copy of your unofficial transcript. Some schools won't ask for an official copy because they know it costs you money. So they'll accept an unofficial copy until you officially start graduate school (they'll ask for an official transcript before you enroll).

Start studying for the GRE. The GRE is not an impossible test, but the questions are designed to be weird and tricky. Buy a practice book/take a prep course so you become familiar with the kinds of questions they'll ask.

Research professors and programs. You can narrow the search based on research topic (eg. effects of pesticides on invertebrates), location (eg. coastal cities), program (eg. focused on forestry issues), or individual labs (eg. early career professors with smaller numbers of students). Block off a couple of mornings in the early summer to make yourself some coffee and do some Google searching of people/schools. Take a couple hours (2-3), see what/who you find, and keep notes for yourself as you go. If you get overwhelmed, stop and come back to it later. This does not need to be accomplished in a single day – finding a grad mentor is a process.

Ask others for advice. E-mail your professors and arrange phone calls/meetings with them if you feel comfortable. Let your former TAs and mentors know you're looking at grad school. Chances are, they've got connections and they might know of people looking for students.

August

Take the GRE. Taking it early will give you time to re-take it in the fall if you are not happy with your scores. However, don't push yourself to take the test more than twice. Your test scores are important, but not everything. Your application will weigh your GREs, your GPA, your past work and research experience, and your interest/connection with your potential advisor equally.

E-mail potential advisors directly. Keeping to this schedule will put you ahead of the curve. Most professors get e-mails in October when they are in the midst of teaching and overwhelmed with things to do. Make yourself stand out and reach out to them early. Keep your first e-mail to them short and to the point.

Follow up. If you don't hear from someone don't take it personally. E-mail them 2 or 3 times to prove you're really interested.

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Keep track. Make an Excel spread sheet of who you e-mail, what their research interests are, and when you hear back from them. You should e-mail *at least* 30 professors directly to keep your options open. Funding for science is decreasing, so you should expect that right away about 50% of the people you e-mail won't have money for new students.

Sample introductory e-mail

Hello Dr. Ramirez,

My name is Heili Lowman, and I am currently a fourth year student at the University of California Santa Barbara studying ecology and evolution. I am in the process of looking at graduate school programs in plant physiology, and I recently came across your website. Your research on plant-fungal interactions sounds really interesting, and I would like to hear more about it. Would you be willing speak with me about some of your current projects? I would be happy to discuss via e-mail or over the phone, whichever is easiest for you. I have also attached my CV to this message for your reference. Thank you very much for your time.

Best Regards,
Heili

Attachments: H_Lowman_CV_2017

September

Schedule calls. Try to arrange a few calls with professors to get to know them a little better.

Draft a personal statement to prepare for applications. Update and use your CV as a reference. Take it to the Careers Office or your departmental advisor for editing.

October

Narrow down your options. Seriously consider who you've talked to, who seems interesting, who has funding, and which programs seem like they might be the best fit.

November

Start your applications. Confirm with the professors you're most interested in that you are applying so they can be sure to support your application in front of the department's committee. Remind the professors that wrote you letters that they will need to submit by the application deadline (give them a month's notice), and send their drafts from the spring as a guide.

December

Submit your applications. Review your applications and submit them ahead of schedule. This will leave you feeling less stressed and will give you more time to focus on wrapping up year-end work projects or studying for exams.

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General advice:

Network, network, network.

Good numbers to keep in mind:

- Research at least **50** people or **25** departments/programs.
- E-mail at least **30** professors directly.
- Talk to at least **10** professors on the phone/Skype.
- Apply to at least **3** graduate programs.

Remember – picking a graduate school depends on a lot of things – finding a good mentor, living in a place you'll enjoy, balancing your job security with that of your partner. You should make the decision based on lots of factors, so keep your options open at the beginning.

You should only apply to graduate schools you would really like to go to. One of the biggest differences between undergraduate and graduate applications is the idea of “safety schools”. You should not apply to schools that you are not very interested in because it means more application fees for you, and it wastes both your time and the time of the professor you're applying with.

Applying to grad school is much more about finding a good mentoring and project fit, so don't get caught up worrying about going to a name brand school.

Do most of your application research over the summer so that you can focus on your studies during the school year. If you've already graduated, you'll have time after work and weekends.

Myths about graduate school:

Myth #1: You have to know exactly what you want to study before you apply.

Truth: You DO NOT need to know exactly what you plan to do in graduate school before you start. I cannot stress this point enough. You should have a rough idea of the field you'd like to be in (eg. conservation biology) and what kinds of questions interest you. Otherwise, all you need to demonstrate to your future advisor is that you are smart, hard-working, and curious.

Myth #2: You have to go straight into graduate school after college.

Truth: You should go when it makes the most sense for YOU. “Losing momentum” if you don't go straight into graduate school from undergraduate is also a myth. And if you work in between, these are not “gap years” or “taking time off” – you are working hard, making money, and gaining life experience, far from “time off.”

Myth #3: Graduate students all become professors.

Truth: Graduate students become professors, high school teachers, policy writers, managers at non-profits/NGOs, the Chancellor of Germany (seriously, Angela Merkel has a PhD in physical chemistry), independent scientists, farmers, sustainability advisors to private corporations, etc.