

Graduate school

Whether, why, and how to apply

Outline

1. **Graduate degrees: Professional vs. academic**
2. How to choose a graduate school
3. Getting letters of recommendation
4. How to write a statement of purpose

Is graduate school for you?

Graduate school is a means to an end.

- Does the career you envision require a graduate degree?
- What degrees do people with those jobs hold?

Professional vs. Academic degrees:

- Professional degree programs prepare you for a particular career.
- Academic degrees prepare you to do research.

Professional Degrees

Some professional masters degrees:

- MPH (master of public health)
- MBA (master of business administration)
- MLS (master of library science)
- MPA (master of public administration)
- MSW (master of social work)
- + some specialized MS (master of science) and MA (master of arts) programs

Often require internships or projects (rather than a thesis)

Some professional doctorates:

MD, JD, “practice doctorates” in various fields

Academic masters degrees

MA (Master of arts) and MS (Master of science)

Is an MA or MS useful? It depends on the field and the program

What about a masters degree in anthropology?

- A masters degree can help if you want to practice archaeology (e.g., CRM).
- A *specialized* masters program *may* help in other areas (e.g., museum work)
- but most anthropology masters degrees are just a step towards a Ph.D.

Academic doctorates (Ph.D.)

This is a research degree. It will prepare you for research in academia, and research-related activities in some other non-academic institutions.

Is it for you?

- Do you opt for term papers, if given a choice?
- Do you enjoy doing the research?
- Do you find it rewarding to develop a research question?

If you don't like doing research papers, you will hate doing a dissertation!

Research careers in academia are very competitive

“Of the ca. 13,000 doctorates in anthropology conveyed in the US between 1985 and 2014... **we estimate that approximately 21% obtained tenure-track faculty positions in anthropology** in the US...

The outlook for tenure-track faculty positions in anthropology, as with many other disciplines, is somewhat bleak under our current models of graduate education...”

Speakman et al. 2018. Market share and recent hiring trends in anthropology faculty positions. *PLoS One*.

Other options for Anthropology Ph.D.s

What about the 79% of Anthropology Ph.D.s who do *not* get tenure-track jobs?

“Contingent faculty” who teach by the course are poorly paid and vulnerable

There are research careers in government, industry, and NGOs. A Ph.D. may help for high-level positions in these organizations.

How do you get those jobs? You can improve your chances by

- Choosing a research area of wide, applied interest
- Getting transferable research skills

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How to choose a graduate school

For a professional degree program:

- What specializations do they offer ?
- How - and how many - of their graduates are employed in their chosen field?
- + Available funding, support, internship placements, program details

For an academic degree program:

You will be working closely with a major advisor in a mentor-mentee relationship, with 2-4 additional faculty on your supervisory committee. That relationship is key.

- Your search should focus primarily on finding appropriate advisors
- + Available funding, support, program details, graduate placement

How to find mentors (academic degree programs)

- Ask your professors for recommendations
- Many professional organizations have a “places to study” link on their website
- Departmental websites have summaries of faculty interests, with links
- Did you read a paper that you found exciting? Look up the author(s)
- Did you hear an interesting conference presentation? Talk to the author(s)

Then look them up:

- Read their work (search scholar.google.com) - is it interesting?
- Are their papers widely cited? (a measure of influence in the field)
- Do they have funded research? (not a deal-breaker, but helpful)
- What are their students doing?

How to get potential mentors to choose you

Contact them!

Explain who you are and why you are writing:

I'm interested in applying to the U of X to study Y I've done [mention research, experience, and/or a faculty contact]. I'm interested in your work on Z [show that you are familiar with their work].

Find out whether they might be interested in you:

(For a potential major advisor:) Are you taking new students? Would the U of X be a good fit with my interests?

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Letters of recommendation

Who to ask:

- Professors who know you well (research mentors, etc)
- Employers/supervisors if your work role showed skills and responsibility

If they say yes, help them with specifics

- Remind them of your work in their class, project, etc.
- Tell them your plans
- Show them a statement of purpose, written work, anything that will help them put specific information in their letter.

Letters of recommendation (continued)

Follow up:

Make sure your letters have arrived, remind them if necessary! Check a week before the deadline, and follow up.

Waiving access:

On your application you will be asked whether you waive access to the recommendations (this means that you will not be able to see the letter)

You should waive access; readers will then know that the letter is honest

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Statements of purpose

The statement should...

- **indicate your aims** (research interests, if an academic program). This will show focus, and knowledge of the field.
- **explain why the program is a good fit** for your aims. This will show you are knowledgeable about their program and faculty.
- **describe prior research and other professionally-relevant experience.** Explain who you worked with and what you did. This will show that you are likely to succeed.
- **be interesting, organized, and well-written.** This will show your ability to think and write clearly.

Statements of purpose: Tips

- **Start early.** This is a difficult document to write!
- **Edit.** Try to get comments from faculty you know. Proofread it again.
- **Take a professional tone.** The faculty will be evaluating you as a future professional. Write like one. Don't gush. Avoid platitudes and cliches.
- **No childhood references.** Normally nothing prior to college (unless relevant, and if so, make the relevance clear).
- **Put some punch into it.** What inspired you? What drives you? (Show how, don't just say it).
- **Follow directions.** These may be different for each school.