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Introduction to Grad School

Applications, Documents, Timelines, and What to Expect



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Before We Start: Sign In

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Hi, I'm Khushi



- Career Peer at the UMBC Career Center
- Graduate student here at UMBC
- I help students with applications, statements, and CVs every week
- I have been through a graduate application cycle myself

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What You'll Walk Away With

By the end of today, you will be able to:

- Decide whether graduate school makes sense for you, and when
- Name every document a typical application asks for
- Explain the difference between a personal statement and a statement of purpose
- Ask for a letter of recommendation the right way
- Know what applying actually feels like, so none of it catches you off guard

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Today's Plan

1. Is grad school for you, and when?
2. The timeline: working backwards from a deadline
3. Your documents: statements, letters, CV, admission exams
4. Choosing programs and paying for them
5. What to prepare for mentally

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Quick Check-In

1. You are definitely applying this cycle
2. You are thinking about it but have not committed
3. You are here because someone told you that you should go
4. You already know which programs you want
5. You have asked a professor for a letter before
6. The phrase “statement of purpose” means nothing to you yet

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PART ONE

Is Grad School For You?

Reasons That Hold Up, and Reasons That Don't

REASONS THAT HOLD UP

- The field you want requires the degree to practice at all
- You genuinely want to go deeper into the subject
- You have a specific career that needs it, and you have conducted career research
- You want to do research, and you have tried research and liked it
- It is funded, and the cost to you is low

REASONS WORTH QUESTIONING

- You are not sure what else to do after graduation
- The job market is scary right now
- Your family expects it
- You want to delay student loan repayment
- Everyone else in your major seems to be applying

A reason on the right is not disqualifying. It just needs a reason on the left next to it.

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Types of Graduate Degrees

DEGREE	EXAMPLES	TIME	WHAT IT IS
Master's	M.A., M.S., M.Eng., MBA, MPH	**1–2 years**	Depth in one area. Sometimes a thesis, sometimes coursework only.
Doctorate	Ph.D.	**4–7 years**	You learn to do original research and write a dissertation.
Professional	M.D., J.D., D.D.S., Pharm.D.	**3–7 years**	Licensed practice. Separate admissions world and separate tests.
Joint	M.D./Ph.D., J.D./M.B.A.	**6–8+ years**	Two credentials at once. Long, and usually heavily funded.
Certificate	Post-bacc, graduate certificate	**6 mo–2 years**	Targeted skills or credentials without a full degree.

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The Money Question

“Is this program funded, and what does funding actually cover?”

Funded Ph.D. programs are the norm in many fields

Tuition waived plus a stipend, in exchange for teaching or research. In the sciences and much of the social sciences, an unfunded Ph.D. offer is a red flag worth asking about.

Master's programs are often not funded

Many are designed as revenue for the university. That is not a scam, but it does mean you should know the full cost before applying, not after you are admitted.

Funding is not only about tuition

Ask about the stipend amount, how many years it is guaranteed, whether summers are covered, and what health insurance costs.

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PART TWO

The Timeline

Most Deadlines Fall in December and January

That means the real work starts about 12 months earlier.

SPRING	**Junior year, or 18 months out**	Explore fields, build faculty relationships, try research if your field expects it
SUMMER	**12 to 15 months out**	Draft your statement, shortlist programs, take or schedule your test
FALL	**3 to 4 months out**	Request letters, finalize statements, submit
WINTER	**Deadline season**	Submit remaining applications, complete FAFSA (financial aid form), prepare for interviews
SPRING	**Decisions**	Offers arrive, visit day programs, decide by April

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18 to 12 Months Out: Spring and Summer

SPRING OF THE YEAR BEFORE

- Narrow down what you actually want to study
- Build real relationships with two or three faculty, ideally in office hours
- Get research or relevant experience if your field expects it
- Start a running list of programs in a spreadsheet
- Check whether your target programs require an admission exam

THE SUMMER BEFORE

- Write a rough first draft of your statement, however bad
- Cut your long list down to five to six programs
- Take your test as early as possible
- Research funding: assistantships, fellowships, external awards
- Check that your transcript is accurate and request a copy

Summer is the quietest time you will have.

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Senior Year: Fall Through Spring

SEP	Open applications and see exactly what each one asks for. Ask for letters now, not in November.
OCT	Retake the test if needed. Finish writing samples. Submit anything with early or rolling deadlines.
NOV	Final revisions on statements. Send recommenders a gentle reminder with the deadline list.
DEC	Most deadlines land here. Submit, then confirm every letter was actually received.
JAN	Late deadlines. Complete the FAFSA. Start preparing for interviews.
FEB–MAR	Decisions begin arriving.
APR	Compare offers and funding. Visit if you can. Most funded offers are due back by April

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PART THREE

What You'll Actually Need

The Application Packet

Almost every graduate application asks for some version of these.

- **Statement of purpose** Usually 500 to 1,000 words. The single most important thing you write.
- **Personal statement** Sometimes separate, sometimes the same document under a different name.
- **Letters of recommendation** Usually three. Almost always academic for research programs.
- **Transcripts** Official, sent from the registrar. Order them early.
- **CV or resume** Academic format for research programs, can be longer than one page
- **Admission Exam scores** If the program still requires them. Many no longer do.
- **Writing sample** Common in humanities and social sciences. Often 15 to 25 pages. Information available in our career guide.
- **Application fee** Typically $50 to $130 per program. Fee waivers exist and are underused.

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Statement of Purpose vs. Personal Statement

Programs use these terms inconsistently. Read the actual prompt, every time.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Answers: what do you want to study, why here, and are you ready?

- Academic and forward-looking
- Names specific faculty and why their work fits yours
- Evidence of preparation: courses, research, methods
- Mostly about the work, not about you

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Answers: who are you, and what shaped you getting here?

- More narrative and personal
- Background, obstacles, what drives you
- Where you explain a gap or a rough semester
- Still ends by connecting to the work

If a program asks for only one, it almost always wants the statement of purpose.

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What Goes Into a Strong Statement

Open with the work, not your childhood
Skip “Ever since I was young.” Start with the question or problem that interests you now.

Show evidence, not enthusiasm
“I am passionate about neuroscience” proves nothing. Two semesters in a lab proves something.

Name faculty, and be specific
Not “your distinguished faculty.” Name two or three people and say what about their work connects to yours.

Explain your preparation honestly
Which courses, which methods, which tools. What you can already do.

Say what you want to do after
You do not need certainty. You need direction.

Tailor the last paragraph to each school
Everything else can be shared. That paragraph cannot.

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Mistakes That Sink Statements

- Sending the same statement everywhere with the school name swapped in
- Naming a professor who has retired, moved, or is not taking students
- Spending three paragraphs on childhood and one on your actual preparation
- Listing your resume in prose instead of explaining what it means
- Apologizing for weaknesses instead of briefly explaining and moving on
- Going over the word limit, which reads as not following directions
- Letting AI write it, which admissions readers are increasingly good at spotting

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Activity: Write Your Opening Line

Two minutes. One sentence. The hardest sentence in the whole application.

WEAK “Ever since I was a child, I have been fascinated by the human mind.”

STRONGER

“While coding interview transcripts for Dr. Patel's lab, I noticed that participants described pain differently depending on who was in the room. I want to study why.”

It is concrete, it shows you have done the work, and it ends on a question worth four years.

Something you did → something you noticed → what you want to know

Do not have research yet? A class, a job, or a reading will do.

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Letters of Recommendation: Who to Ask

You usually need three.

ASK SOMEONE WHO

- Knows your actual work, not just your grade
- Has supervised you in research, a project, or a job
- Has had you in more than one class if possible
- Can speak to how you think, not just that you showed up
- Will say yes enthusiastically when you ask
- Avoid personal references which are different from academic or professional references.

THE QUESTION TO ASK, WORD FOR WORD

“Do you feel you could write me a strong letter of recommendation?”

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How to Ask, and What to Give Them

Ask at least a month ahead. Two months is kinder.

Once they say yes, send them a single email containing:

- **Your CV or resume** So they can see everything, not just what they remember
- **Your draft statement of purpose** So the letter and the statement tell the same story
- **An unofficial transcript** Useful context, and saves them asking
- **The list of programs and deadlines** In a simple table, sorted by date
- **A short reminder of your work together** “I took your methods course in Spring 2026 and wrote my final paper on...”
- **Clear submission instructions** Portal link, upload or email, and anything they must attach

Then send one short reminder a week before the deadline.

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Your Grad School CV

A job resume and an academic CV are not the same document.

WHAT AN ACADEMIC CV ADDS

- Research experience, with methods and your actual role
- Publications and conference presentations, even campus ones
- Posters, including URCAD
- Grants, awards, and funded research like a UMBC URA
- Relevant coursework and technical skills
- Teaching, tutoring, and mentoring

WHAT ALSO COUNTS

- A senior thesis or major capstone project
- Independent projects, even unfinished ones
- Study abroad and language proficiency
- Leadership in a discipline-related organization
- Writing published in campus outlets
- Lab or field techniques you can actually perform

Length is not the goal. A CV grows on its own. Yours should be two pages and honest.

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Admission tests

Many programs have made the GRE optional or dropped it entirely. Check each one.

GRE General Many graduate programs, where still required, some schools are bringing it back, check require.

GRE Subject Some programs in physics, math, psychology, chemistry

GMAT Business schools, though many now accept the GRE too

LSAT Law schools

MCAT Medical and dental schools

- Take it early so you have room to retake it
- If a program says optional, a strong score can still help and a weak one can be left out
- Budget for it. Registration and prep materials add up

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PART FOUR

Choosing Programs & Paying For Them

Questions to Ask About a Program

Rankings tell you very little. These tell you a lot.

- Are there at least two faculty I would want to work with?
- Are those people actually taking students right now?
- Is the program funded, and for how many years?
- What do graduates of this program end up doing?
- How long do students actually take to finish?
- What is the advising culture like, really?
- Could I live in this place for several years?
- Is there a community here, or would I be the only one in my area?
- What happens if my advisor leaves?
- Does the program support non-academic careers too?

The best source for all of these is a current graduate student in that program, which is Linkedin.

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Paying For It

Assistantships
Teaching or research work in exchange for tuition and a stipend. The main funding route for PhDs.

Fellowships
Funding with no work attached. Awarded by programs, universities, or outside bodies.

External awards
NSF GRFP, Fulbright, Ford, and field-specific awards. Apply separately, often in the fall.

Prestigious scholarships
Rhodes, Marshall, Gates-Cambridge, Truman, Goldwater. UMBC has an office for exactly this.

Federal aid and loans
File the FAFSA. Graduate students are independent for aid purposes.

Employer tuition benefits
If you are working first, check what your employer covers before you pay anything.

Many external awards close before applications are even due.

UMBC Office of Prestigious Scholarships

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PART FIVE

What to Prepare For Mentally

What Nobody Tells You About Applying

It takes far longer than you think
Not the forms. The thinking, the drafting, the waiting on other people. Budget months, not weekends.

You will feel underqualified reading the requirements
Almost everyone does. Admitted students felt that way too. The requirements describe a finished graduate, not an applicant.

Asking for help feels worse than it is
Faculty expect to be asked. Being asked for a letter is a normal part of their job, not an imposition.

The waiting is the hardest part
You will submit in December and hear nothing until February. Make a plan for that stretch that is not refreshing a portal.

Everyone looks more prepared than they are
The classmate who seems to have it together is also googling “what is a statement of purpose” at midnight.

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On Rejection, Fit, and Your Own Timeline

Admissions decisions are about fit and capacity, not about your worth.

A rejection often means something structural
The one professor in your area took no students that year. The cohort was four people. Funding was cut. None of that is about you.

Strong applicants get rejected routinely
People apply to ten programs and get into two. That is a normal outcome, not a failure.

There is no single right year to go
Deferring a year to strengthen an application or earn money is a strategy, not a defeat.

If you get in everywhere, something may be off
It can mean you aimed low. Range matters: reach, match, and likely.

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Where the Career Center Comes In

https://careers.umbc.edu/students/gradschool/

Statement and essay review
Bring a draft, however rough. This is the most useful appointment you can book.

Grad school CV review
We will tell you what you are leaving off, and you are leaving things off.

Mock interviews
PhD programs interview. We will practice with you.

Exploring whether to go at all
A Career Decision-Making appointment is a legitimate use of our time.

Drop-in hours
Mon to Thu, 2 to 4 pm. Math/Psych 201. No appointment needed.

Also worth knowing: the Writing Center will read your statement too.

UMBC Career Guide

Includes grad school prep, CVs, and personal statements

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Your Next Steps

1. **THIS WEEK**
   Pick three programs and actually read their requirements pages
2. **THIS WEEK**
   Identify the two or three faculty you would ask for letters
3. **THIS MONTH**
   Write one first draft of your statement
4. **THIS MONTH**
   Check whether your programs require a test, and book it if so
5. **ANYTIME**
   Book a Career Center appointment, or walk into drop-in hours

The terrible first draft is the one that matters. Everything else is editing.

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THANK YOU

Questions?

Last call to sign in

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