



Applying to Graduate School

Formal applications vary from one institution to the next, but most applications usually consist of the following components:

- An application (and application fee)
- Graduate admissions test scores
- Official transcripts
- A separate financial aid application
- An application essay or personal statement
- Letters of recommendation
- Résumé or curriculum vitae (CV)
- Academic writing sample (occasionally)

Show your depth! Candidates who show strength in a combination of the requirements—academic preparation (including GPA), test scores, experience, degree-related goals, and recommendations—have the best chance for selection.

Understand the requirements & be a great record-keeper

Keep detailed records noting admission requirements and application deadlines. Note that law schools and most health-professions programs (medical school, veterinary school, etc.) have centralized application procedures; if applicable, familiarize yourself with these systems and their timelines as early as possible.

Create “The Spreadsheet.” The Spreadsheet will list all the programs to which you want to apply, their deadlines, and every component their applications require. Laying out this information will allow you to prioritize your work and will let you see overlap between applications (e.g. essays that can be used for more than one program).

Keep track of nonrefundable application fees (typically \$40–\$120 per application); they may limit the number of schools to which you apply. *Note, however, that fee waivers are often available.*

Don’t wait until the last minute to apply. If admissions decisions are made on a rolling basis (that is, qualified applicants are accepted as they apply), you should apply at the earliest possible date for the best chance of admission. Early application is also an advantage if you are applying for financial aid.

Follow up with each program to make sure your application is complete. Leave time to chase down a letter of recommendation or to follow up on a request for additional information, if needed.

Learn about Transcript Options

All transcripts must be “official.” Typically, they need to be sent to admission offices directly from the Office of the Registrar. If you are required to submit all of your supporting documentation together (transcripts, letters of recommendation, and other addenda), Grinnell allows you to order a copy of your transcript and then choose “Hold for Pickup.” When you pick it up, you can request that it be placed in an envelope, which will then be sealed and signed across the back flap. Such transcripts are considered “official” (provided you keep them sealed).

Résumé or curriculum vitae (CV)?

Many graduate school applications require either a curriculum vitae (CV) or a résumé. A résumé is typically only one or two pages and focuses on work and volunteer experience. A CV is longer and focuses on academic activities and achievements, research, publications, and other relevant information. You want graduate schools to have as complete an image of you as possible, and a CV can include information that might not fit in other sections of the application. *Once you have put together your résumé or CV, we encourage you to have someone at the CLS review it for content and formatting.*

Letters of recommendation

Most institutions request that you submit between two and four letters of recommendation as part of your application. (Note that medical schools are an exception; Grinnell prepares committee letters for its applicants.) You should obtain recommendations from people who are qualified to evaluate your academic or work potential and performance based on personal observation. Faculty members and supervisors from work are natural choices; the best—as in most illuminating—letters of recommendation can be written by people who know you and your abilities and character traits well (regardless of whether the letter-writers are “famous”). Keep the following factors in mind:

Nature of relationship: Your referees need to know you well enough so that they can make good assessments of your academic and work abilities. You might find it worthwhile to have a meeting with potential referees before they write your letters of recommendation. Do not hesitate to ask potential referees if they feel they know you well enough to write a strong recommendation.

Additional materials: At some point, make sure to talk with your referees about your reasons for applying to graduate or professional school. Give (or e-mail) your referees copies of your résumé (or CV), material about the programs, and recommendation forms (if required) or suggestions for areas to highlight in their letters. If hard-copy letters are to be submitted (rare these days), provide your referees with stamped, addressed envelopes. Even if you’re not finished with your personal statement, give a copy to your referees in advance. Ideally, all of the pieces of your application will fit together and complement each other; your referees can tailor their letters to your needs only if they know what the rest of your application will look like.

Communication: Send thank-you notes to those who assisted you in your application process. (Yes, sending them via e-mail is fine—just make sure to be sincere.) Then, once you’ve been accepted and have decided what you’ll be doing, let your referees know—and thank them once again for their involvement in helping to make your postgraduate plans.

The application essay

Most institutions will ask that you submit an essay with your application—often referred to as a “statement of purpose” or “personal statement”—in addition to basic data requested on the application form itself. Personal statements give you the opportunity to supplement the standard application materials with your own goals and objectives with respect to the particular programs to which you’re applying. Typically, programs will offer suggestions on items to consider, such as your reasons for applying in relation to experiences, personal goals, and professional expectations. *Don’t overlook the value of the personal statement!* In most cases (with the major exception of applications

to medical schools), your personal statement will be your only chance to shine as an individual: it stands in for the interview. The best personal statements are, when possible, tailored to individual schools. After reading your statement, you want the readers to understand your goals—and how going to their particular program is the next logical step in achieving them. **In general, a chronological or developmental approach is not effective. Better is to BLUF: present the Bottom Line Up Front.** Clearly state your goal at the beginning of your essay, and connect everything you write back to that goal. Your statement should demonstrate:

- A clear long-term career goal, supported by the short-term goal of the degree or certification for which you are applying
- Preparation—indicated by *concrete details* about your experience and education—for graduate-level work
- Your specific areas of interest and, in the case of research-oriented degrees (PhD, academic master’s programs), a research plan
- Specific reasons why the program you are applying to—yes, your statement should be tailored for each program!—is an excellent fit for your interests and goals
- Commitment to your chosen path and the maturity needed to complete the degree

Follow length guidelines carefully; do *not* go over a statement maximum, but remember that brevity is valued. Admissions committees appreciate applicants who can be **concise** and to the point.

Be **consistent** with the other material in your application, but do not simply repeat material that’s presented elsewhere. The personal statement is your opportunity to go into greater depth about experiences you have had that have brought you to this point in your life. You cannot—and should not—mention everything that’s on your résumé or CV in your personal statement: be selective. Don’t just describe what you did. Rather, write about how various activities or experiences affected you or made you feel: What did you *learn* when you did something? How did something *change* you as a person?

In your statement, beware of “empty” adjectives, such as...

admirable	engaging	incredible	rigorous
agreeable	engrossing	inspiring	riveting
amazing	enjoyable	interesting	stimulating
appealing	excellent	intriguing	stressful
awesome	exciting	marvelous	surprising
captivating	extraordinary	pleasing	thrilling
challenging	eye-opening	powerful	transformative
delightful	fabulous	remarkable	tremendous
difficult	fascinating	rewarding	wonderful

If you describe an activity with words like these, make sure that you also state *why* you found it to be interesting or inspiring or challenging. Include specific, **concrete** examples. Remember: Something that’s interesting or inspiring or challenging to you might not be the same to the people reading your application. It’s your responsibility to *show* the readers why something was interesting or inspiring or challenging to you.

USELESS SENTENCE = “The experience was remarkable, and I am thankful I was able to do it.”

BETTER = “The experience was remarkable because I witnessed the day-to-day pressures facing teachers who work in underfunded urban school settings.”

EVEN BETTER (*avoids the empty adjective altogether*) = “Through this experience, I witnessed the day-to-day pressures facing teachers who work in underfunded urban school settings.”

Have other people read over your statement! Don’t wait until the last minute to write this essay: it is an important piece of your applications and you have *complete* control over its contents. Plan plenty of time to revise, revise, and revise some more. One law school admissions dean, in fact, has said that, because you have almost unlimited time to write your personal statements, the end results can be just as reflective of your time-management skills as they are of your writing skills and your discernment skills.

And here are a few more hints:

1. Remember that different types of programs have **different expectations** in the statements of purpose you’ll write for them. For Ph.D. programs in the sciences, for example, remember that your readers will be scientists (the faculty members in the program to which you’re applying). It’s important that you write like a scientist. Your readers will care more about your research interests than about your non-scientific background and experiences, so focus on research. They want to be able to imagine you as a future colleague and as a contributor to your scientific field. (The point of this example applies to any practitioner-based field as well. For example, if you’re applying to programs in social work, education, criminal justice, or nursing, remember that your readers will be attuned to characteristics and attitudes of professionals in the “helping” professions—and they’ll be looking for such markers in your statement.)
2. You can often address the key question in a personal-statement prompt by writing something akin to: “I’m applying to the M.S.W. program at the University of Washington because I’m interested in helping families who are experiencing domestic conflicts.” But notice how one-dimensional that information is: So you’re an applicant who’s interested in helping families who are experiencing domestic conflicts. So what? Perhaps several other applicants are also interested in the same thing. You want to **differentiate and distinguish yourself** from them, so you should add an additional layer of explanation: you should add a “because” clause to your interests. “I’m interested in helping ameliorate domestic conflicts because. . . .” Including that sort of commentary in your personal statements will help them rise to the top. The readers will actually be getting to know you as a person—to know what makes you tick. There’s of course no right or wrong explanation as to why you’re interested in any topic; but it’s always good to provide one.
3. Avoid being declarative in your statements that describe the offerings or special characteristics of the programs to which you’re applying. Yes, it’s great that you’ve done your homework about the programs; but the readers will already know these things about their programs. Instead, incorporate your knowledge of the program in a dependent clause that hooks itself onto a phrase that tells the reader something about *you*—something he or she would otherwise not know (while simultaneously and eloquently indicating that you’ve done your homework about the program).

BAD = “The M.P.H. program at Northwestern would allow me to select two emphasis areas within a given concentration.” (*Too obvious. The readers already know this fact.*)

BETTER = “Because the M.P.H. program at Northwestern would allow me to select two emphasis areas within a given concentration, I would. . . .” (*You can demonstrate that you know details about the program while simultaneously telling the readers something captivating about yourself.*)