

HOW TO APPLY TO GRADUATE SCHOOL






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How to Apply to Graduate School

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A. Choose a Program

1. Define your purpose

Why are you going to grad school? You need to clearly define your purpose for grad school and how it relates to your subsequent career.

Here are some advantages of attending graduate school:

- Increase your earning potential and accelerate your career
- Increase your credibility with employers and colleagues
- Prepare for a career in academia
- Gain the knowledge and skills necessary to change your career

Reconsider your decision to go in the following cases:

- You can't identify a clear purpose of how it will benefit your future career goals
- You think it will help you figure out what you want to do
- You want to go just to delay career decisions or life responsibilities

2. Timeline

Below is a suggested timeline for your grad school preparation. No matter where you are in the process, keep in mind that each program has deadlines you need to meet.

Junior Year (Fall)	Junior Year (Spring)	Junior Year (Summer)	Senior Year (Fall)	Senior Year (Spring)
Explore programs	Build relationships with professors for recommendation letters	Consider taking an entrance exam prep course	Take the entrance exam	Complete and submit applications to graduate schools prior to the deadline
Attend graduate school fairs	Request program information and material	Visit schools of interest, if possible	Request letters of recommendation	Request new transcripts for application
Maintain a strong GPA	Make note of admission requirements and deadlines	Obtain job/internship; volunteer or job shadow in a related field	Begin the application process early (Sept / Oct / Nov)	Visit with financial aid counselor at graduate school
Research areas of interest	Begin gathering study materials for entrance exams	Register for entrance exam test	Retake entrance exam (if needed)	Accept or decline offers
Visit with faculty and professionals in your fields of interest		Study for the entrance exam		

3. Decide which programs to apply to

There are many important things to consider when choosing a program and a school. Below is a checklist of items to consider as you look at various schools.

Checklist of things to consider	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Program content <input type="checkbox"/> Alignment with your career goals <input type="checkbox"/> Reputation/ranking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Of the school <input type="checkbox"/> Of the specific program <input type="checkbox"/> Faculty accessibility <input type="checkbox"/> Job placement rate and services <input type="checkbox"/> Size of program <input type="checkbox"/> Length of program <input type="checkbox"/> Accreditation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Location <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Cost of living <input type="checkbox"/> Climate <input type="checkbox"/> Facilities (classrooms, labs, libraries) <input type="checkbox"/> Cost <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Cost per credit, per course, fees, and program total <input type="checkbox"/> Availability of financial aid including scholarships <input type="checkbox"/> Reviews from current and former students

Questions to ask your program(s) of interest	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> What is the admission deadline for the program? <input type="checkbox"/> What are the admission requirements? <input type="checkbox"/> What graduate exams does the program accept? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Minimum Score Requirements <input type="checkbox"/> Minimum GPA requirements? <input type="checkbox"/> How many letters of recommendation? <input type="checkbox"/> Is there an essay? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Do they require an interview of each applicant? <input type="checkbox"/> What is the cost of the program? <input type="checkbox"/> Are there scholarships/assistance available? <input type="checkbox"/> How long is the program? <input type="checkbox"/> What is the acceptance to applicant rate? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Do they accept applicants every semester? <input type="checkbox"/> How many are admitted each semester/year? <input type="checkbox"/> Are there prerequisites to the program? <input type="checkbox"/> What is the placement rate after graduation?

Which programs to apply to? Safety, match, & stretch!

Once you've gone through the checklist and identified which programs look like a good fit for you, divide them into three categories: *safety*, *match*, and *stretch*.

- **Safety**
 - You are a *very strong* candidate. You are fairly certain you will be accepted, as you exceed the academic requirements and the average applicant qualifications for GPA, class ranking, work experience, and entrance exam scores (GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT, etc.). You are confident that you can afford the tuition, whether through financial aid or other means.

- **Match**
 - You are a good candidate. You fall within the average range of applicants for GPA, work experience, and entrance exam scores. The program has a moderate acceptance rate.
- **Stretch**
 - You are a possible candidate. You fall on the lower end—or even below—the average range for accepted students. The program is highly competitive and has a low acceptance rate. It may be more expensive, but there are opportunities for financial aid, including scholarships.

Consider applying to **at least 2 schools** in each category—that way you might be accepted at a *stretch* school, but you'll still have solid options even if you're not. Rank order these schools as you apply, so that if you're accepted into multiple programs, you know which one you will choose.

One way to rank order the programs is to use a spreadsheet. You can create your own, or make a copy of this [spreadsheet](#) to use.

Need more help? Schedule an appointment at suu.edu/careercenter!

B. Write a Personal Statement

1. Definition

Your personal statement, also called statement of purpose or letter of intent, is a brief essay—in the form of a letter—about why you want to study in a specific program. It not only includes how you would benefit from that program, but also how you would benefit that school as an alum.

2. Follow instructions exactly!

The number one most important rule is to always follow their specific instructions and examples! The information here is a good general guide, but if they ask you to do something different, do it their way!

3. Format

The format of your personal statement is similar to a cover letter. See the attachments for specific examples. The header and fonts should match the resume/CV you submit. At the top, include the date, addressee, mailing address, and salutation. In the middle, write the content in paragraph form. At the bottom, include a signature (required on a formal document) and your typewritten name.

Unless the instructions specify otherwise, the main body should be 250-750 words, or approximately 3-6 paragraphs.

4. Content

Tell your story. There should be a narrative running through the three main ideas below. For example, are you a first-generation college student? Do you come from a minority background that shaped your life and your goals? Was there a key experience in your life that put you on this path toward graduate school? Telling a compelling personal story will help the admissions team see you as an interesting individual who can contribute to their program and their school.

3 main ideas. There are three main ideas you address in your personal statement: What led you to our program? How do you connect with the program? What are your future goals? Write 1-2 paragraphs for each.

Section 1: What led you to our program?

In this section, share your background and the unique experiences that led you to where you are today. Explain how you became interested in this field of study.

Section 2: How do you connect with the program?

Make a personalized connection to the school and the program. Address why you are a good candidate—what are the skills, experiences, and strengths you will bring to your studies? Also write about why you like the program. Importantly, you should also share which professor(s) you look forward to working with. If research will be a part of your program, address specific research those professors have done that you are interested in contributing to.

Section 3: What are your future goals?

Finally, explain what you intend to do with your degree after graduation. Pitch yourself as an alum of the program. How would you make them proud?

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C. Write a Resume / CV

1. What is a graduate school resume/CV?

A graduate school resume/CV is a document that accompanies your entrance application for a graduate school program. It is intended to provide more information about your experiences and accomplishments than is available in your other documents and to help the application committee better understand how you are a great candidate for their program. Whether a particular program calls it a resume or a CV, you'll want to follow the tips and format here, as the grad school resume/CV is slightly different from both a standard job application resume (which is shorter) and a typical academic CV (which tends to be longer).

Following is a comparison of the similarities and differences between a graduate school resume/CV and a typical job search resume.

How is a graduate school resume/CV similar to a job search resume?

- Professional layout - the document appears professional, it is easy to find each section, and, generally, it appears easy to read
- Targeted - it is targeted to the skills, experiences, and accomplishments which the program is seeking in candidates

- Clean and crisp language - Use the PARQ rule: Start each bullet with a **P**ower verb; state the **A**ction you took; show the **R**esults (how you made a difference, who you helped); and **Q**uantify with numbers
- No typos or grammatical errors

How is a graduate school resume/CV different from a job search resume?

- It is not limited to one-page
- Include all your experiences - in addition to your degree(s) it will include research experience, class projects, extra-curricular activities, volunteer work, internships, etc. which are relevant to your application

Most common sections include (in order of importance based on what you want the committee to see first):

- Objective statement (not necessary but can be used)
- Education
- Certifications/Professional Development
- Academic Experience/Highlights
- Volunteer Work, Community Service, Internships/Practicums and/or Extracurricular Activities
- Employment
- Other sections can be included based on your experiences and how relevant they are

2. Resume/CV Layout

When choosing the order of your resume, consider what you want the admissions committee to see first. Remember to ensure that your resume is easy to read and looks professional.

Objective Statement - A short sentence describing your objective of admittance into their program. This is an optional section. Make sure to address their program specifically.

Example: To obtain admittance into the Master of Arts in Professional Communication program at Southern Utah University

Education - Typically this will be the leading section of your resume/CV. Include the degree(s), university/college, city/state and/or country, and date(s) of graduation. You may consider including the following subsections: Relevant coursework (especially if they were prerequisites for admittance into the program), GPA, dean's list recipient, honors coursework, etc.

Example:

B.S., Psychology – Minor: Communications **April 2022**
 Southern Utah University, Cedar City, UT

- Relevant Coursework: Interpersonal Communication, Organizational Communication, Developmental Psychology.
- GPA: 3.87 - Dean's list: Five-time recipient

Certifications/Professional Development - Provide other certifications and/or professional development accomplishments which are relevant to your application.

Academic Experience/Highlights - Highlight relevant academic experiences and accomplishments. Focus on experiences such as research, academic projects, presentations, lab assistant work, etc. These would be experiences which you were most likely not paid for but which are experienced in or along with your classroom experience. Allow these experiences to show how you are academically prepared to excel in their graduate program.

Volunteer Work, Community Service, Internships/Practicums and/or Extracurricular Activities - Graduate schools greatly appreciate the experiences and efforts made outside of the classroom. Include your experiences in clubs, athletics, student government, community service, internships, practicums, and volunteer work. These are the types of activities which will help you stand apart from other candidates and prove that you are proactive.

Employment - List paid employment experience while attending college. It is very unlikely that you should include paid employment from high school unless you feel it will help your application. Include 2-3 bullet points for each position to highlight the skills, characteristics, and accomplishments which the admissions committee will be interested in.

Additional Sections - Before you add any additional sections, ask yourself the question “does this help my bid to get into graduate school?” If yes, then add it, if no, consider omitting the information. Other sections could include leadership experience, foreign languages, memberships, etc., which you could not reasonably place into one of the other sections.

3. Follow instructions exactly!

Again, the number one most important rule is to always follow their specific instructions and examples! The information here is a good general guide, but if they ask you to do something different, do it their way!

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D. Prep for the interviews

Interviews for grad school are very similar to interviews for jobs. They already are impressed enough with your application to consider you for admission, and want to get more details to see if you will be an asset to their program, school, and alumni community. In addition to the list of questions below, please see the main Interview Tips page at suu.edu/careercenter/interview-tips.html to get more information on interview prep.

1. Questions often asked in grad school interviews

- Tell us about yourself.
- What are your career goals and how will this program help you accomplish those?
- How will you contribute to our program?
- What are your research interests?

- Tell us about a time you have failed.
- Why are you interested in our program?
- What are your hobbies and interests?
- Why should we consider you over another candidate interested in our program?
- What other programs have you applied to and why do you want to attend our program?
- What questions do you have for us?

2. Questions you should consider asking

- What percentage of your students are employed after graduation and where are they typically employed?
- What is the average time that it takes a student to find a job after graduation?
- Why would you say students are choosing your program over other universities' programs?
- Do you require practical experiences from your students such as internships?
- Do you assign program mentors to students? If not, what support is offered to students who have questions or need help?
- How would you describe the surrounding community off-campus?
- What do students typically do before or after classes?
- What resources are available to help pay for this program (e.g., TA-ships, Assistantships, Fellowships)?
- What are you most proud of in regards to your program?

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E. Attachments

1. Example personal statement
2. Example resume

John Doe

Home: 444.555.9999 • Mobile: 444.666.7777 • johndoe@email.com • linkedin.com/in/johndoe

Objective

To obtain admittance into the Master of Arts in Professional Communication program at Southern Utah University

Education

B.S., Communication (Strategic Communication) – Minor: Psychology **April 2021**
Southern Utah University, Cedar City, UT

- GPA:3.8 – Five-time Dean’s List recipient
- Related Coursework: Strategic Communication Writing, Research Methods, Persuasion, and Advertising Psychology

Academic Experience/Highlights

Research Assistant, Southern Utah University, Cedar City, UT **January 2020 – April 2020**

- Studied the effects of negative speak on classroom climate under the direction of Dr. Ima Gonnahelp
- Elicited the participation of 50 volunteers and ensured their mental well-being during the research process
- Collaborated with a team of five students by sharing responsibilities and following up weekly to ensure we met all deadlines
- Collected, input, and analyzed data in SPSS, and interpreted results using statistical methods

Presenter – Festival of Excellence, Southern Utah University, Cedar City, UT **March 2020**

- Increased community understanding of effective communication by presenting on how coaching communication affects the motivation of youth athletes
- Connected 50+ audience members to the research content by developing a compelling PowerPoint slideshow and talking points to convey key findings clearly
- Ensured accurate understanding of the topic by answering audience members’ questions post presentation

Volunteer Work

Volunteer – Food Pantry, Southern Utah University, Cedar City, UT **January 2019 – Present**

- Increased food security for needy families by gathering 2,000+ donations of non-perishable food items per quarter through activities such as Bread and Soup Night
- Monitored food safety by inspecting donations from campus partners and community members
- Maintained food supply levels by conducting regular inventories and strategically planning initiatives to gather needed supplies

Volunteer – Alternative Break, Comalapa, Guatemala

December 2019

- Provided much-needed shelter for 3 underprivileged Guatemalan families by building new homes
- Worked with teams of 10-15 and communicated clearly to ensure tasks were completed without duplication of effort
- Learned how to operate construction tools, the basics of framing, and local roofing techniques
- Developed a greater appreciation for the people and cultures of Guatemala

Extracurricular Activities

NSLS – Honor Society, Southern Utah University, Cedar City, UT

August 2018 – April 2020

- Inducted into the National Society of Leadership and Success (NSLS) for outstanding academic achievement
- Enhanced leadership skills through leadership training and broadcasts from national leaders
- Volunteered to make a difference locally through Adopt-a-Highway cleaning, reading to children at the public library, and making toy cars at The Happy Factory

Student Programing Board, Southern Utah University, Cedar City, UT

August 2019 – April 2020

- Fostered student connections to the university and each other by collaborating with a team of 15 student leaders to plan and carry out 10+ school-wide activities
- Marketed activities to 11,000 students by working with graphic designers and on-campus partners to publicize the events in accordance with university policies and procedures
- Reported on attendance and feedback for each activity using Google Docs, and shared results with team members to drive future decision making
- Increased activity success by building relationships with faculty, staff, and student leaders across campus

Experience

Outdoor Recreational Guide, Fish Camp, Lake Powell, UT

May 2019 – August 2019

- Instructed 300+ members and guests in use of fishing gear; assisted members with catch and release protocol
- Managed, cleaned and organized Fish Camp by stocking supplies, feeding fish, tying hooks, and monitoring inventory
- Ensured safety of 300 members and their children by teaching proper boat protocol

Summer Internship, Nevada State Parks, Caliente, NV

Summer 2017 & 2018

- Provided fun, engaging outdoor recreation activities for 500+ visitors by leading events
- Staffed the visitor center desk to provide orientation, answer questions, collect fees, and help guests plan their visits
- Inspected and monitored 20 recreation sites to keep safety regulations up to date

First & Last Name

Phone Number(s) • Email address • Personalized LinkedIn URL

Date

The header on your statement of purpose should exactly match the header on your resume/CV.

Name of Addressee

Position of Addressee

Company Name

Company Address

City, State, Zip

Never use "To Whom It May Concern". If you don't know their last name or position title, it is acceptable to use "Dear Application Committee".

Dear Mr. / Ms. / Mrs. / Dr. Lastname (or Position Title):

Section 1: What led you to our program? In this section, share your background and the unique experiences that led you to where you are today. Explain how you became interested in this field of study.

Section 2: How do you connect with the program? Make a personalized connection to the school and the program. Address why you are a good candidate—what are the skills, experiences, and strengths you will bring to your studies? Also write about why you like the program. Importantly, you should also share which professor(s) you look forward to working with. If research will be a part of your program, address specific research those professors have done that you are interested in contributing to.

Section 3: What are your future goals? Finally, explain what you intend to do with your degree after graduation. Pitch yourself as an alum of the program. How would you make them proud?

Sincerely,

Signature

We **strongly** recommend you hand-sign the Statement of Purpose. There are many ways to do this, including a.) using an ink pen, b.) drawing on a digital device, c.) scanning an ink signature, d.) taking a photo of an ink signature, and e.) e-signature apps.

Your Typed Name