

APPLICATIONS TO GRAD SCHOOL (hints from Donald Asher, Asher Associates, a profit-making company that works with students to enhance applications; notes taken by G.J. Anderson from a 26 Oct. 2002 presentation in Arlington, VA.) Colleagues –discard or use with appropriate undergraduates as you see fit. GJA

GENERAL

unemployment for PhDs is 2nd lowest (to physicians?) 0.8% in 2001
second highest average pay (to physicians, dentists, lawyers)
PhDs who do NOT get academic positions earn more pay....

Search 20 schools; but apply to two each of 'safe', 'probably/maybe' and 'reach' schools.

Be passionate about the topic you wish to study – in your letter, in all your correspondence, written or verbal, with people at the places you apply to.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK – know something about the program and about the professors and their work at the places you apply – this is *essential* - *never* apply to 'dear professor' or 'I would like to know more about your program'; know who and what you are dealing with.

Prepare your materials carefully to allow the graduate programs you are interested in to make an intelligent (the right one!) decision about your application.

Preparation – get an internship if you can; that is, get paid to learn what you need to learn, and make connections; don't just 'hold a job' if you have a choice.

Money – borrow money to go to grad school if you need to; it pays to borrow in the sense that you borrow money to replace low earning years (just working to make \$\$) with high earning years (jobs you get after you complete your PhD)

Further Reading – see attached pages for some books that Donald Asher recommends.

In addition, he recommends:

Real Guide to Grad Schools (for English majors)

How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation by David Sternberg

Getting What you Came For by Robert Peters

*Educational Rankings*____(year-whatever year) by Lynn D. Hattendorf, ed.

GRES

Students:

Worry too much

Prepare too little

Make your first attempt the best you can do

Quantitative Section – spend about 1 min / question

Writing section

2 parts

- 45 mins writing on an issue – your OWN opinion
- 30 mins writing an argument – do NOT add an opinion; simply make a good argument, but do not base the argument on, “I believe,” “In my opinion,” etc.

Format – Think before you write

Then – Introductory paragraph
Series of numbered points
Closing paragraph

Do not use complicated sentences or constructions, do not engage in obfuscation.

Do practice essays – find topics at
<ftp://ftp.ets.org/pub/gre/awintro.pdf>

This section is ‘graded’ by high school teachers ‘moonlighting’ by evaluating these exams – Keep that in mind when you write, i.e., the level of the reader evaluating the writing.

CALENDAR FOR GRADUATE APPLICATIONS

“On time” is 30-60 days ahead of the closing date for applications, NOT the closing date itself. Many programs start making decisions as soon as applications are received, and it is harder to ‘dislodge’ someone with your application than it is to get an established position in the first place.

Establish correspondence with the graduate programs you are interested in – so you are not just another applicant, and so that you have someone to communicate with.

There are three ways to stand out:

1. write to individual professors, ask for clarification on applications, or even better something about their research, or propose some area for study - seek advice
2. visit the department / programs of interest – let them get to know you as a person, not just a paper application
3. submit an outstanding work sample, your best paper, a writing sample, etc., as appropriate.

NOTIFICATION DATES – the NEGAP nationally recognized date for offers is 15 April – you have until this time to let a program know that you will or will not accept their offer; however, common courtesy would dictate that if you are not going to accept an offer that you let the program know as soon as possible (this serves your interests in the broadest sense too).

1 April – If you have not been offered acceptance or been rejected by this date, write a note or email asking how things are going.

4,5,6 April – if you have not heard by these dates, have a professor call and make a further verbal recommendation for you, and ask how things are going.

RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

Ask your potential referees, “Would you be comfortable writing a strong letter of recommendation to ... for me?”

You might also ask, “What kinds of things would you be able to say about me?”

Make it easy for your referees to write good letters for you – provide them with grades, your latest resume, a list of honors/awards/activities, a copy of one of your best graded papers (from their class perhaps?), make a list of ‘talking points / highlights’ that they might wish to include in letters.

PERSONAL LETTER/ ESSAY

Asher has a whole book on this topic, “Graduate Admissions Essays” (2000, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, Toronto), so look there for considerable help. Here are a few points made –

Names your letter would benefit from including: that of the faculty member you might like to work with, names of former mentors, names of some of the major contributors to the fields you are interested in (in the context of, “Wilson’s book on biophilia really peaked my interests in”).

Great opening line, “In reading your paper on _____, I was delighted to find a common interest in _____.”

Do NOT say, “I always was, wanted, to be....whatever”

Do NOT fail to say why you are selecting the particular program/place to apply. Put geography in the letter somewhere; people in Storrs want to know that you would like a rural setting, and those in New York that you would be able to handle ‘the city.’

There are two essay types – pure academic, and slightly personal; the latter is more successful.

Come off as an unusual, thoughtful, mature, well prepared applicant who will succeed anywhere. What is *unusual* may not be *rare*. Don’t come off as ‘odd;’ that won’t help you most places. But usual in some places is unusual in others, e.g., Asher gave the example of a woman from California beginning her letter with, “when the earthquake struck, I was in charge of my dorm, and successfully guided everyone out”.

Also See Stephen Stearns' Advice for Graduate Students:

<http://www.yale.edu/eeb/faculty/stearns/gradadvise.html>

Best Sources to Learn about Graduate Programs

Professors

This is your best source. Professors know you, they know which programs favor students from your school, they know the relative quality of graduate programs in their fields, and they even have personal friends at graduate programs where you might like to apply.

Other Students and Alumni

Students and alumni have similar information. Alumni at graduate programs will give you the most honest information about the quality of the program and the faculty.

Peterson's Guides

Peterson's guides have every accredited program in the United States. They're a little dense and boring, but if you want to learn about programs there's no other complete resource. All major university libraries have a full set of Peterson's guides.

Specialty Guides

Find specialty guides for your field, for example, *Graduate Programs in Neurosciences*, by asking professors for reference to them, by using the subject search engine at amazon.com, or by using the subject search engine on CD from *Books in Print*, available from your university bookstore. Some associations also print guides to graduate programs. Find out about them by looking up the association's HQ phone number in the *Encyclopedia of Associations*; then just call them and ask them.

Academic Journals in Your Field

Top students should get grad school ideas directly from the academic journals. The best programs generate the best and the most articles, so look in the journals for writing and/or research that interest you. Then find out where the article writer teaches.

Research-Doctorate Programs in the United States

This is the best source for unbiased, multivariable analysis of graduate programs. It is the result of a National Research Council-funded study, limited to the top programs in 41 major subject areas. This is a much more sophisticated resource than the "beauty pageant" unilinear rankings of business magazines (see below).

Educational Rankings Annual

A compendium of data from other sources. Expensive, but can be very useful. Check your library.

The Gourman Report

Another "ranking" book, with methodologies that are never fully explicated. Can be useful.

The Business Magazine Rankings

Business magazines are in the business of selling business magazines. Their editors usually know less about higher education than they know about automobiles, which is not a lot. These "rankings" are not useful *per se*, but you can get ideas to investigate further.

World Wide Web (www)

Online data are voluminous but shallow, and can be downright misleading (for example, some sites list schools in order of having paid a subscription fee). Use the Web to investigate schools you're already interested in, in this order: university-department-faculty-specific faculty member's research interests-his or her advisees (i.e., currently enrolled graduate students). Also, watch carefully for information on related labs and institutes, which might interest you more than the main department.