

Graduate School...Masters and Doctorate

Master's or Doctorate?

Information provided by Kaplan Test Prep - Kaptest.com

The two most common graduate school degrees awarded are master's and doctorates.

The Master's

A master's program will usually award an M.A. or an M.S. degree. But there are a number of other variations on these letters, especially outside the arts and sciences. A doctoral program will typically award a Ph.D. - again with some variations, such as the Ed.D. in education. Full-time master's programs are generally one or two years long. Students generally fall into two categories:

- Those on an "academic track," where degree programs focus on classic research and scholarship.
- Those on the "practical track," where the degree program is actually professional training that qualifies you to enter or advance in a field such as social work or education.

The ominous-sounding label "terminal" means that this degree is considered an end in itself. In some fields, a master's degree is considered the "terminal professional degree" - that is, it provides the knowledge and training you need to join a profession.

Terminal master's degree programs are usually a lot like undergraduate school. You are expected to maintain at least a "B" average. Academic programs focus on coursework, research, and papers. Before you graduate, expect to write a thesis (a 50- to 100-page paper) demonstrating your grasp of scholarship and research in your field.

Programs in social work and education also have a practical dimension, requiring candidates to work in classrooms, clinics, and other professional settings. These programs generally take longer to complete than other master's programs. Fieldwork or additional coursework will likely take the place of the thesis.

The Doctorate

Doctoral programs are one of the most - if not the most - rigorous professional training programs. They are designed to create scholars capable of independent research that will add new and significant knowledge in their fields. Expect a multi-year program typically taking anywhere from four to seven years to complete - and sometimes even longer.

From the outset, you will be regarded as a junior colleague in the field. Your first year or two in the program will be spent on coursework, followed by "field" or "qualifying" exams - either oral, written, or both. Once you've passed those exams, demonstrating that you possess the basic factual and theoretical knowledge of your field, you will then be permitted to move on to independent research in the form of your doctoral dissertation.

Your Advisor

The person responsible for overseeing your transformation from apprentice to professional is your advisor. The person responsible for finding the right advisor is you.

Your advisor will be your mentor - helping you shape your dissertation proposal, steering you through the writing and defense of your dissertation, and hopefully recommending you for jobs when you have your degree. He or she may even employ you as a research or teaching assistant.

To put it bluntly, your relationship with your advisor will directly determine the quality of your program.

Two Paths to a Ph.D.

There are two basic ways to enter into the doctorate system. One is to get a terminal master's degree and reapply to Ph.D. programs. The other is to go directly into a doctoral program.

Starting With A Terminal Master's Degree

The terminal master's gives you flexibility. If your interests change or you decide against the doctorate, you graduate, not quit.

The terminal master's can also be a way into doctoral programs that might not accept you on the basis of your undergraduate record. This works better in some fields and programs than others. Before you decide on this course, check with doctoral programs that interest you to ensure that master's grades are seriously considered in the admissions process.

On the other hand, continuing for the doctorate means reliving the application process, sometimes even retaking the GRE. And, if you decide on a different school, it could mean pulling up stakes both academically and personally.

Starting in a terminal master's program can cost more, since master's students generally receive less financial aid than doctoral students. Additionally, completing a master's degree followed by a separate doctoral program can take longer, depending on how your master's-level work is evaluated.

Going Right Into A Doctoral Program

In many Ph.D. programs, there is no terminal master's degree - the master's is simply the first stage of Ph.D. completion. A specified amount of coursework is followed by a thesis and qualifying examinations. The master's is awarded after "satisfactory completion" of these requirements.

Although many students who enter doctoral programs continue on to get their degrees, admission to this type of program is no guarantee that you will actually go on to earn the Ph.D. You can be asked to leave, or strongly discouraged from continuing in the program if faculty decide you cannot meet the requirements. The master's degree is then a sort of consolation prize.

Which Is Best For You?

Well, it all depends on your area of interest and your professional goals. If you want to join academia and teach or research at the university level, you'll likely need a doctorate, regardless of the field. It's also virtually impossible to work as a clinical or research psychologist without the doctorate.

If you're considering social work, health care, education, or engineering, a master's degree usually provides the professional qualifications you need to move past entry-level jobs or onto a higher-paying career track.

In industry, science Ph.D.s can command significantly higher salaries than those who hold master's degrees. In areas like history or English, on the other hand, a Ph.D. primarily qualifies you for college and university teaching. Unfortunately, these jobs are so scarce that many new Ph.D.'s don't land tenure-track jobs. The alternative is usually work in publishing or related fields, which are not always the most lucrative professions either.

Admissions Tips

Information provided by [Kaplan Test Prep - Kaptest.com](http://Kaplan_Test_Prep - Kaptest.com)

The most important thing to do when applying to graduate school is to determine the admissions requirements for the programs to which you are applying.

Expectations may vary from program to program. For example, if you are applying to a counseling psychology program, the admissions office will most likely be looking for experience in the "people-helping" profession. On the other hand, if you are pursuing an academic career via graduate school, the admissions committee will be more interested in your publications.

Admission Requirements

Some admissions requirements tend to be common to most grad school admissions offices. They include:

- Undergraduate GPA (especially in your major)
- GRE* scores
- Letters of Recommendation
- Personal Statement

For information on writing your personal statement and getting strong recommendations, click on those areas. But in addition, keep the following basic tips in mind as you begin the application process.

Application Tips

- Photocopy all applications and keep a comprehensive file on each school that records all of your interactions with that school in it.
- Follow all rules set forth by the application. If you have questions or are tempted to "break a rule," be sure to call the admissions office and ask for advice.
- Put your name and social security number on any additional pages.
- Make certain the presentation of your application is both neat and professional looking.
- Have someone proofread your essay(s) and application. A single mistake can cast doubt on your application.

Graduate School Personal Statement Secrets

Information provided by Petersons.com

The best way to approach your personal statement for graduate school is to imagine that you have five minutes with someone from the admissions committee. How would you go about making the best case for yourself while holding the listener's interest? What would you include and omit in your story? Figuring out the answer to these questions is critical to successfully preparing an effective statement.

To arrive at these answers, you should begin by asking yourself two specific questions:

- Why have I chosen to attend graduate school this specific field, and why did I choose to apply to this particular school's program?
- What are my qualifications for admission?

The answers will not necessarily come easily to you, but this exercise will have great practical benefit in readying you to write an outstanding personal statement. By answering each question thoroughly, you will have given much thought to yourself, your experiences, and your goals, thereby laying the groundwork for formulating an interesting and persuasive presentation of your own personal story.

As the founder of EssayEdge.com, the Net's largest admissions essay prep company, I have seen firsthand the difference a well-written application essay can make. Through its free online admissions essay help course and 300 Harvard-educated editors, EssayEdge.com helps tens of thousands of student each year improve their essays and gain admission to graduate schools ranging from Harvard to State U.

Having personally edited over 2,000 admissions essays myself for EssayEdge.com, I have written this article to help you avoid the most common essay flaws. If you remember nothing else about this article, remember this: Be Interesting. Be Concise.

Why Graduate School?

Graduate school is a serious commitment, and it may have been your goal for a long time. Describing your early exposure to a field can offer effective insight into your core objectives. Watch out, however, that you do not your point in such a cliched, prepackaged way as to make your reader cringe. For example, you should not start your essay, "I have always wanted to" or "I have always known that _____ was my calling." Instead, you should discuss specific events that led to your interest in the field.

Graduate school is, of course, a means to an end, and admissions committees prefer students who know where they're going and to what use they'll put their education (though the occasional soul-searcher, who may exhibit exceptional raw potential, is welcomed). For many people, the long-term goal is to work in academia, and to differentiate yourself in such cases, you can stress more specific objectives such as your research interests.

Note: Read the instructions carefully. Sometimes schools will ask for a statement of purpose describing your specific research interests in lieu of, or in addition to, a personal statement that emphasizes your character and qualities. For these types of essays, you can assume that

a faculty member will be reading your statement, but it should still be accessible enough for a non-specialist to understand. Remember that such essays should also still aim to engage the reader in a way that conveys your own enthusiasm for the subject matter.

Avoid mistakes like discussing the school's rank or prestige, or simply offering generic praise. Instead, mention faculty members by name and indicate some knowledge of their work.

Consider contacting faculty members first and discussing their current research projects and your interest in studying under them. Then refer to these contacts in your essay.

Why Am I Qualified?

The way to prove your qualification is not to list attributes you believe you possess but to discuss concrete experiences that show your abilities and qualities. As always, details are paramount. The rest of your application has already summarized your accomplishments and your activities. Show the reader what you did in concrete terms, and again, highlight your active roles.

The experiences that demonstrate your qualification are not necessarily distinct from those that explain your motivation. You shouldn't plan on dividing the essay into two separate sections for each, but rather organize the structure by topic and extrapolate insights as they develop. It's important that you think of the essay as an integrated whole, not as a checklist of questions you must answer.

Focus on research experience, since research will be your main job for the duration of your studies. Be specific about what you did. If you worked for a year under a professor, you might consider emphasizing one particular project and exploring that in depth. The experience does not have to have been a major undertaking: Any practical experience can be used as long as you demonstrate your enthusiasm and aptitude for the field of study.

Remember to keep the discussion personal. Do not get bogged down in minute details and jargon. Ultimately, the focus of the story should remain on you and your growth or success.

TOP 10 GRADUATE SCHOOL ESSAY WRITING TIPS

1. Don't Write a Term Paper.

As a prospective graduate student, you may be tempted to try to impress your reader with an already tight grasp of academic style. Resist this temptation! You will have plenty of time to produce labyrinthine sentences and sophisticated vocabulary. Your reader will have seen too many essays to appreciate bewilderingly advanced prose. Write clearly and personally.

2. Don't Bore the Reader. Do Be Interesting.

Admissions officers have to read hundreds of essays, and they must often skim. Abstract rumination has no place in an application essay. Admissions officers aren't looking for a new way to view the world; they're looking for a new way to view you the applicant. The best way to grip your reader is to begin the essay with a captivating snapshot. Notice how the slightly jarring scene depicted in the "after" creates intrigue and keeps the reader's interest.

Before: I am a compilation of many years of experiences gained from overcoming the relentless struggles of life.

After: I was six years old, the eldest of six children in the Bronx, when my father was murdered.

3. Do Use Personal Detail. Show, Don't Tell!

Good essays are concrete and grounded in personal detail. They do not merely assert "I learned my lesson" or that "these lessons are useful both on and off the field." They show it through personal detail. "Show don't tell," means if you want to relate a personal quality, do so through your experiences and do not merely assert it.

Before: If it were not for a strong support system which instilled into me strong family values and morals, I would not be where I am today.

After: Although my grandmother and I didn't have a car or running water, we still lived far more comfortably than did the other families I knew. I learned an important lesson: My grandmother made the most of what little she had, and she was known and respected for her generosity.

Even at that age, I recognized the value she placed on maximizing her resources and helping those around her.

The first example is vague and could have been written by anybody. But the second sentence evokes a vivid image of something that actually happened, placing the reader in the experience of the applicant.

4. Do Be Concise. Don't Be Wordy.

Wordiness not only takes up valuable space, but also confuses the important ideas you're trying to convey. Short sentences are more forceful because they are direct and to the point. Certain phrases, such as "the fact that," are usually unnecessary. Notice how the revised version focuses on active verbs rather than forms of "to be" and adverbs and adjectives.

Before: My recognition of the fact that the book was finally finished was a deeply satisfying moment that will forever linger in my memory.

After: Completing the book at last gave me an enduring sense of fulfillment.

5. Do Address Your Weaknesses. Don't Dwell on Them.

The personal statement may be your only opportunity to explain deficiencies in your application, and you should take advantage of it. Be sure to explain them adequately: "I partied too much to do well on tests" will not help your application. The best tactic is to spin the negatives into positives by stressing your attempts to improve; for example, mention your poor first-quarter grades briefly, then describe what you did to bring them up.

6. Do Vary Your Sentences and Use Transitions.

The best essays contain a variety of sentence lengths mixed within any given paragraph. Also, remember that transition is not limited to words like *nevertheless*, *furthermore* or *consequently*. Good transition flows from the natural thought progression of your argument.

Before: I started playing piano when I was eight years old. I worked hard to learn difficult pieces. I began to love music.

After: I started playing the piano at the age of eight. As I learned to play more difficult pieces, my appreciation for music deepened.

7. Do Use Active Voice Verbs

Passive-voice expressions are verb phrases in which the subject receives the action expressed in the verb. Passive voice employs a form of the word to be, such as was or were. Overuse of the passive voice makes prose seem flat and uninteresting.

Before: The lessons that have prepared me for my graduate studies were taught to me by my mother.

After: My mother taught me lessons that will prove invaluable as I pursue my research interests.

8. Do Seek Multiple Opinions.

Ask your friends and family to keep these questions in mind:

- Does my essay have one central theme?
- Does my introduction engage the reader? Does my conclusion provide closure?
- Do my introduction and conclusion avoid summary?
- Do I use concrete experiences as supporting details?
- Have I used active-voice verbs wherever possible?
- Is my sentence structure varied, or do I use all long or short sentences?
- Are there any clichés such as "cutting edge" or "learned my lesson?"
- Do I use transitions appropriately?
- What about the essay is memorable?
- What's the worst part of the essay?
- What parts of the essay need elaboration or are unclear?
- What parts of the essay do not support my main argument?
- Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This must be the case.
- What does the essay reveal about my personality?

9. Don't Wander. Do Stay Focused.

- Many applicants try to turn the personal statement into a complete autobiography. Not surprisingly, they find it difficult to pack so much information into such a short essay, and their essays end up sounding more like a list of experiences than a coherent,

well-organized thought. Make sure that every sentence in your essay exists solely to support one central theme.

10. Do Revise, Revise, Revise.

- The first step in an improving any essay is to cut, cut, and cut some more.

SAMPLE ESSAY

I have been planning a career in geological sciences for several years, but as an undergraduate I concentrated on getting a solid background in math and science. After graduation, I took a job to allow myself time to thoroughly think through my plans and to expose myself to a variety of work situations. This strategy has been very valuable to me in rounding out my career plans.

During the past 18 months I have had firsthand experience with computers in a wide array of business applications. This has stimulated me to think about ways in which computers could be used for scientific research. One idea that particularly fascinates me is mathematical modeling of natural systems, and I think those kinds of techniques could be put to good use in geological science. I have always enjoyed and been strong in areas that require logical, analytical thought, and I am anxious to combine my interest in earth science with my knowledge of, and aptitude for, computer-related work. There are several specific areas that I have already studied that I think would lend themselves to research based on computing techniques, including mineral phase relations in igneous petrology and several topics in structural geology.

I have had both lecture/lab and field courses in structural geology, as well as a short module dealing with plate tectonics, and I am very interested in the whole area. I would like to explore structural geology and tectonics further at the graduate level. I am also interested in learning more about geophysics. I plan to focus on all these areas in graduate school while at the same time continuing to build up my overall knowledge of geology.

My ultimate academic goal is to earn a Ph.D., but enrolling first in a master's program will enable me to explore my various interests and make a more informed decision about which specific discipline I will want to study in depth. As far as long-term plans, I hope to get a position at a university or other institution where I can indulge my primary impulse, which is to be involved in scientific research, and also try my hand at teaching.

My decision to focus on math and science as an undergraduate and to explore the computer industry after college has equipped me with a unique set of strengths to offer this program. The depth of my interest in geology has only grown in my time away from academia, and although I have identified several possible areas of specialization through prior studies, I look forward to contributing my fresh perspective on all subjects.