

TEXAS  STATE
SOCILOGY®

HOW TO PREPARE FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

Graduate school is a *wonderful experience*. However, the application process requires a serious commitment and is a bit time-consuming. The hard work will pay off! Some of the following advice depends on where the school is located and your personal situation.

This handout is for students considering sociology or closely related fields, but much of the information is applicable to students interested in anthropology or psychology programs.

GENERAL ADVICE: PLAN AHEAD!!!! Do not procrastinate. You must “care” a lot about your application materials. Do not use short cuts. Ask someone to proofread all of your materials before you submit them, particularly your personal or academic statement. You want to impress the search committee and stand out among a competitive group of students.

We also highly recommend that you purchase a book that describes what graduate school is like: Jessica Calarco’s [*A Field Guide to Graduate School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum*](#). This book is available in the Texas State library.

How do I select a school?

- Determine your personal goals. For example, how important is being close to your family?
- Consider the cost and available financial aid. Some schools offer teaching assistantships or research assistantships to help pay for your tuition and books, but this type of funding is usually very competitive.
- Investigate the environment of the university or college, if possible. At least examine the web site!
- Become familiar with the ranking and academic reputation of the college or university. Some schools are more competitive than others are.
- Consider the geographic location very seriously. Do you have a climate preference?
- Apply widely. Ideally, you should apply to about 5-7 schools (there will be application fees). Apply to a few top ranked schools, where you think you probably will not be accepted. You might be surprised. Apply to a couple of schools where you are fairly sure you’ll be accepted.
- Consider your areas of interest (e.g., workplace, criminology, sex/gender, statistics). You want to be a good fit for the department. If you plan to study crime and deviance and no faculty in the department research crime and deviance, then you should look at other programs *particularly if you are applying to doctoral programs.

Where do I go for information? Talk to Texas State faculty about graduate school and the programs in which you are interested. Research the schools you are considering. Read the program webpages very carefully.

A checklist for applying to graduate school (varies--check with each graduate school/department to which you are applying):

1. Write to the department and graduate school: request admission and financial aid applications. **Check deadlines** for ALL applications. Deadlines in graduate school are often early. For example, if you are going to start graduate school in August 2023, application deadlines will be in December 2022 to January 2021 for Ph.D. programs. Master's programs usually have later application deadlines.

2. E-mail the graduate advisor if you have questions that cannot be answered based on the program website.

3. See if the programs require the GRE. Compare admission deadlines with **GRE test** dates and register for a GRE test. Study for and take the GRE. Study for months. Take practice tests. Spend *at least* a couple of months preparing for the GRE. Buy booklets and take classes to prepare you. Try to do the BEST you can the first time you take it.

4. Select the individuals who will write your **letters of recommendation**. Letters of recommendation are very important. *Generally* it is better to get letters from faculty in your field, and faculty who are "senior" as opposed to professors who have been teaching a year or two. Provide your references with previous class papers, a resume, your statement of purpose, and a list of all academic honors, activities, and volunteer work so that faculty can write you a very strong letter. Give them THREE WEEKS to write your letter. Provide them with your e-mail address, information about the school, the appropriate forms (if needed), whether the letters should be submitted online or not, your resume with highlights about academic honors, the addresses, and the due dates.

5. Compose your **statement of purpose**. Many schools require an academic statement about your skills and perhaps other information that isn't highlighted by your GRE scores, grades and recommendation letters. Think of this statement as a *scholarly, or professional* statement (even if it is referred to as a personal statement). In general, do not write personal or intimate details about your life. Spend lots of time working on this statement. Do your homework about the department so you can indicate why you want to be in that *particular* department. Ask a faculty member to read it for you BEFORE you submit it. Graduate admissions committee want to know whether the student is sociologically literate, focused, and well-trained. No "form letter" or vague statements. The admissions committee evaluates the statement according to some combination of the following criteria: (1) Does the student demonstrate a familiarity with sociology by stating possible research interests? (2) Does the statement indicate the student's strengths (background, experience, training, and education)? (3) Does he/she indicate why a particular school/department will hone his/her skills as a sociologist? (4) Is the student an excellent writer?

6. Complete and send all admission and financial aid applications. Some schools require writing samples. A senior project or a final paper from a research methods course would be an example of a good writing sample to send. Proofread carefully.

COMMON BARRIERS TO GRADUATE SCHOOL ADMISSION

- Missing deadlines: the most common, and the easiest to avoid
- Unrealistic assessment of admission criteria and unreasonable expectations of admissibility
- Inappropriate application essay
- Inappropriate undergraduate curriculum
- Weak or ineffective recommendation letters
- Didn't follow up: application or letters lost in cyberspace
- Weak objective scores (GRE or GPA)
- Lack of extra-curricular activities (depends greatly on academic discipline and program)
- Poor writing on the personal statement or the writing sample

What is the difference between a master's program and a doctoral (Ph.D.) program?

- Terminal Master's programs are generally less competitive.
- Master's programs take less time (2 years) vs. Ph.D. (5-6 years, from start to finish; 3-4 years after the master's).
- You can teach on tenure-track at universities if you have a Ph.D.
- You can't teach at certain universities if you have a master's and no Ph.D.

WHAT IS GRADUATE SCHOOL LIKE? A Basic Timeline

M.A. or M.S.

Year 1: Take coursework. Identify your research areas of interest

Year 2: Write a master's thesis or practicum. It is an original research project, in which you collect data (e.g., using surveys or in-depth interviews). Defend thesis and take comprehensive exams.

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Ph.D. (After you complete your master's thesis or practicum):

Year 1: Complete coursework.

Year 2: Write proposal for dissertation. Take comprehensive exams. Choose dissertation committee. Defend dissertation proposal (get committee approval on proposed topic and method for dissertation).

Year 3: Conduct research and write dissertation. Final: Defend dissertation to committee. Elation. Bliss.

WHY DON'T PEOPLE APPLY, WHEN THEY ARE INTERESTED IN GRADUATE SCHOOL?

Many people avoid graduate school because (1) they think it takes too long to get a Ph.D.; (2) they do not think they are skilled enough or smart enough; (3) they are not sure about what they want to do; (4) they have financial concerns (paying for graduate school).

(1) *Does it take long?* It depends on your perspective. If you enjoy school right now, you will enjoy graduate school. It is a great experience. Graduate courses are very different from undergraduate courses. You do have to take course work but you have more autonomy in your courses compared to undergraduate courses. You are more in control of your education. You have more opportunities to chase ideas.

(2) *What if you don't know what you want to do?* You will have more opportunities to do what you want to do if you have an advanced degree. Talk to a few faculty about what you can do with a master's versus a Ph.D. You might discover lots of things that interest you and occupations that you might not have considered prior to graduate school.

(3) *What if you are concerned about paying for graduate school?* Graduate schools offer teaching assistantships, research assistantships and other forms of financial aid. The types of financial assistance vary a great deal, but you can find out the type of assistance available by contacting the particular department that you are considering.

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Revised March 2021