

Applying to Graduate School – Frequently Asked Questions

1. What are the differences between Master's, PhD, and MFA programs?

The main difference between master's and doctoral programs has to do with the level of specialization and expertise attained in your field. A master's provides less opportunity for specialization in a particular area in your field, as well as less opportunity for advanced research. Master's programs in English provide a general education in literary studies at a considerably more advanced level than undergraduate programs. MA, M Ed, and MS programs generally require 30 credits of coursework beyond the bachelor's degree, a comprehensive exam, a written thesis of at least 30-50 pages, and reading ability in a foreign language. However, some master's programs, such as those in education and social work, may have different requirements, including teaching and internships. Most students complete a master's program in 2-3 years.

A doctoral program not only will expect you to have a higher level of demonstrated accomplishment and academic experience in your field upon entry, but will also expect you to choose a specialization (such as, in English studies, Victorian studies, gender theory, or African-American literature). Doctoral programs provide intensive academic study and research training with the aim of preparing students to be college professors and scholars. Most doctoral programs require 60 credits of coursework beyond the bachelor's degree. Most programs also administer two exams (a written comprehensive exam approximately half way through a student's coursework and an oral exam focusing on the student's area of specialization upon completion of coursework). All doctoral programs require a dissertation, a book-length manuscript of the student's original research in a specialized area, and a final, oral defense of the dissertation. A doctoral program generally takes at least 5-7 years to complete.

An MFA program, whether in creative writing, art, film, music, or dance, is considered a professional degree. MFA programs in writing typically require students to complete at least 30 credits of coursework, divided between writing workshops and literature, but with greatest focus on developing the student's writing craft. Students also generally work individually with one or more of the writing faculty. In order to complete an MFA program successfully, students produce the equivalent of a thesis, a substantial body of work (a novel, memoir, collection of stories, or collection of poems) of publishable quality. MFA programs generally take 2-3 years to complete.

There are substantial differences between master's and doctoral programs in terms of financial aid availability. See question #23 for details. In general, almost all doctoral programs provide substantial support in the form of fellowships, scholarships, stipends, teaching and research assistantships, tuition remission, and so on. Many institutions, particularly private ones, waive tuition entirely and provide stipends for living expenses. Financial aid at the master's level is much more limited.

2. How do I determine whether to pursue a Master's, PhD, or MFA?

The degree you should pursue depends largely on your career goals and, to an extent, your preparation to do advanced graduate level work. If your goal is to be a published creative writer, and perhaps an editor or a teacher of creative writing, you should pursue an MFA. Admission to MFA programs depends largely on your potential and accomplishment as a writer, as demonstrated by a sample of your work (submitted with your application). However, almost all MFA programs also place substantial weight on your academic preparation, as demonstrated by your academic record.

If your goal is to be a primary or secondary school teacher, a master's in education is the logical degree to pursue. Aspiring secondary school teachers often pursue a master's in their intended academic area, such as English, as well as a master's in education, or a program that combines both.

If you want to be a college professor, qualified to teach undergraduate and graduate students, and to conduct research and publish in your area of expertise, you should pursue a PhD. You should not expect to compete for a full-time, tenure track position at a college or university without a PhD.

3. Do I have to get a master's degree before I get a doctorate or apply to a doctoral program? Should I get a master's first?

You do not need a master's degree in order to pursue a PhD. Some outstanding students go directly from their undergraduate studies to a doctoral program. While there are some doctoral programs that prefer students with no graduate experience, most programs these days accept students either with some master's credits or with a master's degree. (You should not, however, expect to have all your graduate credits accepted by a doctoral program, and there are some that don't accept any.) Admission to doctoral programs is generally far more competitive than to master's programs. Some of the very top doctoral programs in English, for example, accept less than 5% of applicants, and even slightly less competitive top programs accept no more than 15% of applicants. On the other hand, some competitive master's programs may accept at least 25% of applicants, and less competitive programs accept a substantially higher percentage.

If you are considering applying to doctoral programs directly from undergraduate studies, you should consider the following: 1. Are you among the very top students in your department? The most competitive doctoral programs expect students to have a 4.0 GPA (or very close to it), GRE scores in the top 10 percentile, and be able to demonstrate the ability to write and conduct research at the graduate level. If your undergraduate academic portfolio does not meet these standards, pursuing a master's degree first can be an effective way to enhance your academic credentials and improve your chances of admission to a doctoral program. 2. Are you absolutely committed to being a scholar and professor? Doctoral studies require enormous dedication and time. If you are not

absolutely sure that you want to enter the professoriate, it may be advisable to begin with a master's program. 3. Are you willing to relocate, either for graduate school or professionally, or both? This speaks to your professional commitment.

If you are in doubt, speak to professors in your field or to department advisors, or both, in order to get an objective assessment of your chances of being accepted at a doctoral program of your choice, and to get advice about whether to start with a master's program (from which you may be able to transfer to a doctoral program).

4. How can I compare programs in my discipline so that I know which is best for me academically and professionally?

Research is essential. Guidebooks and professional organizations such as the Modern Language Association can provide comprehensive information about faculty reputation, student placement, teaching and research opportunities, financial aid, and so on. Look at the web sites of programs in which you are interested: look at course offerings, faculty, requirements, etc. It is important to remember, though, that each program has its own strengths and weaknesses. For instance, an English doctoral program may be among the top ten for Victorian literature but may not be as highly rated in Renaissance literature. If you are applying to doctoral programs, research the faculty in whatever specialization you are interested in and talk to faculty in that specific area in your department. This is less important, but still useful, when applying to master's programs. If you are applying to MFA programs, note the writers who are part of the permanent faculty and those that visit occasionally, and look for writers whose work you admire or to which yours is similar in style, genre, or subject matter. If you are pursuing a graduate degree in education, be sure to consult job placement statistics, degree requirements, faculty listings, and course offerings at each school in which you are interested.

5. How can I best determine which schools are likely to accept me?

Begin by researching the discipline. There are books, organizations, and online sources that rate programs within each discipline and provide information about each program's admissions standards. For example, the most competitive programs in some disciplines have acceptance rates as low as 2%. Other very fine programs in the field may admit 25% of applicants. (Program size will play a large role in this.) Many programs will provide applicants with general admissions standards, which may include the range of test scores and GPA's that applicants are expected to have. Finally, talk to faculty in your field who are knowledgeable about graduate programs in your discipline.

6. How many schools should I apply to? How much does it cost to apply?

There is no set number, and the number of schools that a student applies to may vary widely from discipline to discipline. Many students apply to up to 10 schools. As a general rule, you should focus on those schools to which you have a reasonably good chance of being accepted (based on a combination of your academic qualifications, test scores, and the particular program's profile of successful candidates). You may certainly apply to your top-choice school, even if it is unlikely that you will be accepted. While having a "safe" school is often a good idea, make sure it is one that you would actually feel good about attending. It is never a good idea to apply to only one school. Application fees vary by school and program. Some are as high as \$125. However, if you can demonstrate severe financial hardship, you may be able to get the fee waived.

7. How important is it to make contacts with faculty and students at the schools in which I'm interested?

This is more important when applying to doctoral and MFA programs than it is for master's programs. Current graduate students can provide information and perspective about the program that you won't get from guidebooks, online sources, catalogs, or faculty. Many programs have graduate student organizations, and it is often possible to contact them by phone or e-mail either with specific questions about the program or to talk more generally. Establishing contact with faculty members at specific programs, particularly in your intended area of specialization, can be an important part of the application process. Making a favorable impression – which means being informed about the program and the professor's research, asking specific questions, and presenting yourself as a serious, committed student – can only enhance your application. Even if the professor is not on the admissions committee, she will very likely know someone who is and may well pass along her favorable impressions. She may also be able to refer you to other faculty members in the department with whom you can speak.

8. How can I make contact with faculty at the programs to which I am applying?

This is most typically done when applying to doctoral programs, but is also sometimes done when applying to MFA programs. The most effective way to do this is through an introduction by a professor in the English department. Don't be shy about asking them if they know anyone that you can talk to. Obviously, professors who know your work best will be more likely to make a call or send an e-mail on your behalf. If this is not possible, you can certainly write an e-mail to a particular graduate faculty member to introduce yourself and ask either for a meeting (if this is geographically feasible) or a phone conversation. If you choose to write a "cold call" letter, it is absolutely essential to know the professor's work,

the program's strengths and weaknesses, and to talk briefly but specifically in your letter about your own research interests as they relate to the professor's area of research. It is also essential to treat the e-mail as formal communication, as you would a letter. The e-mail should come from your Hunter account, not a personal account. An alternative method is to call the program and ask if it is possible to speak (preferably in person) with a program officer, a member of the admissions committee, or a liaison between the program and prospective students. Some programs also have a recruiting day where they host prospective students and provide an opportunity to talk with various faculty members and graduate students. Some programs will also permit prospective students to arrange to sit in on a seminar session. This is much more common in doctoral programs.

9. What part does the reputation of my undergraduate school play in an admissions committee's decision?

It is often true that when considering candidates of roughly equal qualifications, the committee may consider a candidate's school, and particularly the reputation of the specific discipline at that school. This is why it is important to take a challenging course of study that includes advanced courses, directed independent study, honors seminars, and where applicable, research experience. Participating in nationally recognized fellowship programs, such as Mellon or McNair, can also significantly enhance an application. The fact is, there's nothing you can do directly about your school or department's reputation and ranking, so focus on everything that you can control.

10. What standardized admissions exams do I need to take?

This will be determined by your discipline. All doctoral programs, and many master's and MFA programs, require the GRE, and many doctoral programs also require subject tests. Professional schools require exams specific to that area (LSAT, MCAT, and so on). You should find out what exams are required from each school to which you plan to apply, and you should do so at least one semester in advance of the application deadlines.

11. How important are standardized admissions exams?

The weight placed on these exams varies according to discipline and to individual schools. Most programs tend to have baseline scores below which they will usually not consider a candidate. However, it is not unusual for students with very high test scores to be rejected in favor of someone with only fair scores if that student has other outstanding qualities, such as a high GPA and impressive research and writing skills.

12. How important is my overall GPA? Do graduate schools focus primarily on grades in the discipline or field that I am pursuing?

Graduate and professional schools obviously place greatest emphasis on grades in courses related to your field, but they do consider the totality of your academic record. While it is unlikely that a poor grade in a required math class will adversely affect your application to a PhD program in English, for example, a pattern of mediocre or poor grades outside your major field, especially in related disciplines, will likely have an adverse effect. Conversely, outstanding grades in courses removed from your discipline can significantly enhance your chances. Many programs also look favorably upon a candidate who has pursued a particularly challenging course of study (a double major, a number of upper-level electives outside a student's discipline, and so on), even if it has resulted in a somewhat lower overall GPA.

In short, while most schools do have some general GPA scale for evaluating candidates, they almost always place your GPA in the context of your particular undergraduate course of study. In the case of MFA candidates, your writing sample will also carry a good deal of weight, as is the case for doctoral applicants.

13. What if I have a very high GPA but do poorly on the GRE?

The weight given to standardized admissions exams varies from program to program and discipline to discipline. If your exam score is not reflective of your academic accomplishments and capabilities, it is often a good idea to ask one of your faculty recommenders to address it in the letter. This can be particularly effective if you have taken advanced courses or done independent study with that professor. It is generally not a good idea to try to explain a low test score in your personal statement. If English is your second language, the admissions committee will know this, and will take it into consideration when looking at your scores. They understand that many outstanding non-native speaking candidates score somewhat lower on the GRE.

14. Will one bad semester or a couple of poor grades hurt my chances of acceptance?

A difficult semester, especially early in your college career, will generally not greatly affect your chances. A poor semester in your junior year, especially in courses in your major, may be more problematic, unless there are legitimate extenuating circumstances such as a health problem or family crisis. The academic "bump in the road" is something that you can discuss in your personal essay, as long as you are not making excuses and instead stress in a forthright manner how you have overcome adversity and learned from the experience. You should certainly talk about your academic record with whomever writes your

recommendations and decide together how best to address the situation (if it needs to be addressed at all).

15. Do test prep courses make a difference?

The simple answer is yes, but to varying degrees.

16. How important is the personal essay? How important is the writing sample?

Assuming that you are in the final applicant pool, the personal essay can be the determining factor in acceptance or rejection. In other words, it is an absolutely essential part of your application, and while some disciplines may give it more weight than others, an ineffective personal essay will surely compromise your chances of being accepted. See the personal essay guide for a step-by-step approach. You should also seriously consider taking a personal essay writing workshop or working with someone individually on the writing process. The writing sample is a crucial element of applications to PhD, MFA, and many master's programs in English and other disciplines. Along with the personal essay, it is the best way to distinguish yourself from other candidates. Your sample should be the strongest piece of critical research, or creative writing in the case of MFA applications, that you have produced. It is essential to pay close attention to page length requirements from each school. It is also essential to start thinking about and working on your writing sample well in advance of the application deadline. If possible, talk to the professor for whom you wrote the paper for advice on strengthening it and, if necessary, either expanding or excerpting from it. For PhD applicants, it is usually most effective to submit a writing sample in the particular area on which you intend to focus. It is also important for you to talk about your research in your personal essay, just as it is important for MFA applicants to discuss their creative work in the personal essay.

17. Should letters of recommendation be from professors in the discipline I am pursuing? Can they be in a related field?

The most meaningful and effective recommendations usually come from faculty in your field, especially full-time faculty, and especially those with whom you have worked in advanced classes and/or projects. After all, graduate programs want to know about your academic and/or creative work and potential in that specific discipline. It is important, though, to follow the directions on each application form. Some may ask that one of the recommendations be from an advisor or from faculty in a related field, or in some cases from a non-academic source.

18. What if I don't know any full-time faculty in my discipline?

The short answer is, get to know someone, either by taking a course, doing an independent study, or through an introduction. If this is absolutely impossible,

speak to an advisor in your department (or the department chair) about the situation. In general, recommendations from adjunct faculty, particularly those without a PhD, don't carry nearly as much weight as those from full time faculty.

19. How do I approach professors for letters of recommendation?

Writing letters of recommendations is part of a professor's job, but obviously those who know you and your work well will be more receptive to and enthusiastic about writing a letter on your behalf, and they will be able to write stronger, more informed letters. It is advisable to talk about what the professor will address and stress in the letter. Most professors will gladly discuss this with students, but there are some who would prefer not to. You shouldn't worry about those who do not want to discuss the letter with you, as long as they have assured you that they will write a positive, substantive letter on your behalf. In any case, when you approach someone to write a recommendation always offer samples of your work (both from classes you've taken with that professor and other classes in the field), a copy of your transcript, a list of the schools to which you are applying, and, if possible, a draft of your personal statement. Just as important, tell the professors when the application deadline is. Also be sure to indicate that you have waived your right to see the letter of recommendation on your application because letters without that waiver are often taken less seriously by admissions committees. Finally, it is always important that the letters and your personal statement be complementary and consistent.

20. When should I start the application process?

Applying to graduate school is a time consuming process, and attention to every detail is vital to your success. It is essential to research schools and programs during the semester before you plan to apply, if not earlier.

21. What if I'm ready to apply now but I haven't met all of the programs' pre-requisites?

In general, graduate schools expect you to have completed all pre-requisites by the time you complete your BA. Those that make exceptions usually say so in their bulletin or on the application. But you should know that even if you are not required to complete pre-requisites until after a decision has been made on your application, you may be at a disadvantage compared with applicants who have already completed them.

22. Is there an advantage to submitting my completed applications well in advance of the deadline?

Absolutely. The general rule is, the sooner, the better. Some schools have rolling admissions (even if they don't announce that on the application forms), which

means that they consider and admit candidates as they receive their applications. Even those schools that do not have rolling admissions sometimes give greater attention to applications received before the great rush at deadline time simply because they have more time to do so.

You should also know that submitting your application early can affect the amount of financial aid that you receive. While some schools may have deadlines as late as April 1, financial aid commitments, including fellowships, assistantships, and grant awards, are sometimes made before that. This is particularly true of doctoral programs.

23. What types of financial aid are available, and how do I know which ones I'm eligible for?

Master's programs tend not to provide generous financial aid, other than whatever few awards, fellowships, or teaching opportunities might be available. You should certainly submit work to the Hunter English department awards (one student won over \$10,000 in 2008!), and you should also research other Hunter College awards and scholarships for which you may be eligible. For instance, some alumni groups give scholarships of several thousand dollars specifically for graduate studies.

Financial aid for doctoral programs is far more generous and comprehensive. Many private institutions, and some public ones, waive tuition entirely and provide a living stipend as well. Others offer fellowships, scholarships, assistantships, and so on.

You should know that there are two basic categories of financial aid: **internal** and **external**. The majority of doctoral students receive some form of aid; master's students are often less fortunate.

External aid refers to national and state fellowships, such as awards given by federal agencies like the National Endowment for the Humanities or privately run groups like the Mellon and Ford foundations, which may be used for study at any accredited graduate school. There may also be state and local agencies, private foundations, and even unions that sponsor small fellowships or other types of assistance. The best single information source for grants, scholarships, fellowships, and financial aid, including those available to Hunter undergraduates, is the Grants Guide, published by the Office of Student Services, available online at studentservices.hunter.cuny.edu/grants. You should also consider making an appointment to see one of the Scholarship Advisors in the Student Services office.

Internal aid comes directly from the graduate school in which you enroll. Eligibility is determined through the information you provide on the federal financial aid form. If you hope to be eligible for any kind of internal aid (both merit and need-based), you must complete this form and submit it with your application. Make sure to note the deadline, as it may differ from the application deadline. Internal aid comes in a variety of forms:

- **Fellowships** generally include tuition remission and a stipend, and usually require minimal service, if any, in return for funding. These are the most

competitive awards and are usually merit-based, though financial need may be considered.

- **Teaching assistanships** generally include tuition remission plus a monthly salary. These awards require students either to teach one or two introductory level courses in the student's field or to assist a full-time professor with grading or leading discussion. Teaching assistanships are usually awarded on the basis of merit and financial need.

- **Research assistanships** generally include tuition remission plus monthly salary, and require students to assist a faculty member with his or her research. These are usually awarded on the basis of merit and financial need.

- **Need-based financial aid** is distributed to graduate students in much the same way as it is to undergraduates. Graduate students may receive tuition assistance through federal or state direct aid programs and may apply for student loans.

Again, it is important to remember that financial aid opportunities are limited in most master's programs.

24. What if I make too much money to qualify for financial aid?

You should never assume that you do not qualify for financial aid (unless, of course, you are independently wealthy). While you may not qualify for need-based financial aid, much aid at the doctoral level is based on merit. There are numerous fellowships, scholarships, and grants, both internally (through the particular program and university) and externally (through independent foundations, organizations, and even individuals). It is essential to apply for all the forms of financial aid that are available.

25. Should I bother applying to schools that I know will be too expensive to attend without financial aid?

This may depend on whether you are pursuing a master's or PhD. Many of the top graduate and professional schools are private institutions, which generally have higher tuitions than public universities. However, it can actually cost less for doctoral studies at a more expensive private school because they generally provide more generous financial support for their graduate students, often paying full tuition and substantial stipends. On the other hand, most institutions offer very little financial support for master's programs.

The fact is that you cannot know how much your graduate education will cost until after you have applied and been accepted. Don't limit your application choices based on what you think the costs may be.