

20 Questions About  
Applying to Grad School  
**ANSWERED**



Applying for grad school can feel overwhelming. We get it. That's why we at ETS have taken your top grad school application questions to our panel of experts. With decades of collective experience as graduate professors and deans, their answers can provide you with some helpful guidance to make your experience a little easier.

Read on to get their best advice with regards to finding the right program, crafting personal statements, submitting test scores, giving interviews and more.

## Meet the Experts...



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### 1. How many graduate programs should I apply to?

There isn't a magic number, but it's a good idea to consider applying to programs that vary in terms of caliber. Consider factors such as program reputation and selectivity, location, cost and funding opportunities when developing your list of potential programs.

It's important to be intentional and apply to the programs that match your educational and career goals. Thoroughly research each program by reviewing their websites and identifying the areas of research and disciplinary expertise of each faculty member. Consider how that information matches with your goals and interests. You will likely want to identify faculty who will be good, supportive mentors, so if you're unable to deduce that from the website, reach out to the Director of Graduate Programs or other contacts listed on the website to seek more information prior to applying to the program.

**THOROUGHLY RESEARCH EACH PROGRAM BY REVIEWING THEIR WEBSITES and identifying the areas of research expertise of each faculty member.**

## 2. How can I ensure that my application paints a clear narrative of who I am and clearly articulates my goals?

Graduate programs are seeking students with characteristics such as passion, motivation, goal orientation, resilience and the propensity for overcoming adversity. They are also looking for students with a clear commitment to the field of study. To evaluate whether your application meets these criteria, it's helpful to understand what admissions committees are looking for in each component of the application.

**WHEN THINKING ABOUT YOUR APPLICATION AS A WHOLE,** *it's a good strategy to have some overlap.*



Dr. Grijalva

- ✓ Application reviewers expect to learn more about your passions, personality and potential from your **personal statement and/or statement of purpose**. Make sure you have shared your unique strengths and background and why you feel you will be able to successfully contribute to the program. Think and write about what makes you a strong candidate for the program and clearly state your educational and career goals. Articulate why you are specifically applying to their program over other programs. Finally, share examples of how you exemplify some of the personal attributes described above, such as goal orientation and resilience.
- ✓ From your **GPA and transcript**, reviewers are looking to get a sense of your experience and academic abilities. Here's where you can demonstrate growth over time, pursuit of challenging coursework, passion for a particular subject matter, well-roundedness and cross-discipline interests.
- ✓ From your **GRE® test scores**, reviewers are looking to understand your proficiency in cognitive and critical thinking skills that extend across most graduate programs, including verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning and analytical writing. Here's where you can cross-validate, or reinforce, the skillset exemplified by your GPA and transcript, or balance out any shortcomings in those areas. It's also an opportunity to demonstrate that you have the necessary skills to be successful in a particular graduate, business or law program.
- ✓ **Letters of recommendation** are unique as a third-party assessment, and decision makers expect those letters to endorse your skills and attributes, affirm what they have gathered about you from other submitted materials, and present concrete examples of your skills, experiences and attributes. Ensure that your letter writers are familiar with your achievements and can provide specific examples. Give them a copy of your resume and plenty of advanced notice so they aren't rushed to meet your request.

When thinking about your application as a whole, it's a good strategy to have some overlap. Admissions committees see many applications in a short period of time. So, if your personal statement/statement of purpose, transcript and a letter of recommendation all show your commitment to the field, or multiple components of your application show your perseverance and ability to overcome adversity, that's a good thing. If you have lengthy gaps between life experiences, provide a brief explanation in your personal statement.

### 3. How can I be sure that my essay clearly articulates why I'm applying to a specific program?

Graduate programs are seeking students with a clear commitment to the field of study. They want to know that you've thought about how you can contribute to the field and how this particular program can help prepare you to do so. They also want to know that you've done enough research about the program offerings and faculty expertise to feel confident that you would be a good fit. You need to convince the admissions committee that you have the skills and drive to be successful in — and contribute to the success of — their program. Your personal statement and/or statement of purpose will be one of the sources of information they consider to determine whether they, too, feel that your skills, experiences and goals fit well with their program mission and objectives.

Before you begin writing, reflect on why you are going to graduate school, why you are interested in that particular program and how that program matches your goals. Think about how your experiences so far have helped to shape you and how they will assist and guide you through the graduate program. The personal statement and statement of purpose are opportunities to share not only how this program fits what you need, but also how you fit what the program seems to be all about. Make an outline of the points you want to make, beginning with brief bullets and then building them into full sentences. Let the words flow and get your thoughts down. If the graduate program to which you are applying provides essay prompts,

***YOU NEED TO CONVINCe THE ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE THAT YOU HAVE THE SKILLS and drive to be successful in — and contribute to the success of — their program.***



**Dr. Grasso**

or instructions, make sure your essay addresses their requests. Begin each paragraph with a main point, and support that point throughout the paragraph, using examples as appropriate. Let your draft sit for a day or so, and then return and reread it. Does it clearly articulate why you are applying to the program, what you hope to get out of it and what you think you can contribute to the program and/or field? Does each paragraph start with a main point and provide supportive thoughts? Read the essay aloud to ensure it reads smoothly. Check the word count to make sure it meets the program's guidelines and run checks for spelling and grammar.

Once you have a strong draft, you may want to ask a professor to read it. Alternatively, you could take it to the writing center on your campus with the essay guidelines and ask them to review it to ensure that it is clear, compelling and meets the requested criteria. Work with them to improve your essay... it's okay to ask for help.

#### 4. How can I show my personality in my personal statement in a professional way?

The personal statement is a way to demonstrate your commitment to the field, but also your passion, values, personal qualities and experiences. The key is to show your personality in a professional way. Programs make a financial and reputational investment in their enrollees, so it's essential that they identify applicants whose goals align with program offerings and are motivated to complete the program even when life presents significant challenges. But they're also looking for evidence of experiences and personal attributes that will be valuable in your chosen field. Regardless of whether there is a specific prompt the program wants you to address or whether the directions are open-ended, you'll want to ensure the essay portrays your passions and personal qualities with a level of maturity expected of graduate students.

The personal essay is just that — it's personal. So, it should be specific to you — your goals, your experiences, your personal attributes. While an essay is only one source of information admissions committees will consider, the ability to hear from you in your own voice can set you apart from other applicants. Write about the unique ways in which you feel you can contribute and why you are excited about attending their university. It's even better if you can write about something specific and unique to you in your essay that may not be highlighted elsewhere in your application. Give examples, where you can, to show why your experiences and preparation make you a good fit for the program.

The essay also may be an opportunity to address unexplained issues. For example, you may want to address a gap in your education or specific challenges and barriers you faced in the pursuit of your education and what motivated you to persist and overcome them.

Your tone should be professional in respect to the formality of the application process. It is respectful to those who will read your essay to ensure that you carefully checked the essay for relevance, tone, grammar, punctuation, and spelling, and that you appropriately addressed the essay instructions provided by the program.

*The personal essay is just that — it's*  
**PERSONAL.**



Dr. Ackerman



**IF THE PROGRAM ONLY REQUESTS ONE OF THESE STATEMENTS, they are likely looking for a blend of both.**



**Dr. Augusto**

## 5. How should my personal statement differ from my statement of purpose?

Some programs request a personal statement, some request a statement of purpose, and some request both. While both are requests for you to submit an essay, the application instructions should articulate the specific information they are asking you to provide. Not all programs provide robust instructions, so don't be afraid to ask. In addition, these guidelines can help:

Programs that request a **statement of purpose** are looking to understand your academic interests, affirm your preparedness for graduate-level work and evaluate your fit with the proposed program of study. It should include a description of your research interests, including any subfields or interdisciplinary areas, as well as your future career plans. It should describe what experiences have prepared you for advanced study or research in the degree program, including the relevant skills you gained from those experiences and any tangible outcomes, such as publications, presentations or recognitions. It's also appropriate to include additional information that demonstrates the subject-matter knowledge or general skills (e.g. leadership, project management or communication) you have acquired through employment, internships, teaching, service, artistic or international experiences. Be sure to address why you believe the program to which you are applying is best suited for you to accomplish your career goals.

The **personal statement** is an opportunity for you to provide additional information that may aid the selection committee in evaluating your preparation and aptitude for graduate study. It's a chance for you to describe how your unique character and experiences will enable you to contribute positively and effectively to not only the department, but also the academic field. Consider whether there are educational, personal, cultural, economic or social experiences that have shaped your academic journey, and if so, how that was the case. Describe challenges or barriers that you have faced in your pursuit of higher education and how you overcame them. Strong examples can help form a lasting reminder in reviewers' minds.

If the program to which you're applying only requests one of these statements, it's likely they are looking for an essay that blends some of both (although the essay instructions provided by the program should always be your guide). Schools always want to hear about your interest in the field and why you think their program is the best to help you achieve your academic and career goals. It's important to demonstrate that you are familiar with and have studied the program and the areas of expertise of the individual faculty. Perhaps there is a faculty member that you would like to study with because his/her research matches yours. Be sure to include information about your academic and non-academic experiences that have shaped your journey thus far, and information about challenges you've overcome along that journey.

**GRADUATE PROGRAMS**  
*are looking for evidence that you can overcome obstacles.*



**Dr. Felder**

**6. How can I present obstacles I've overcome in my personal statement without sounding clichéd?**

The first step is understanding what graduate programs are looking for. A graduate degree can open a world of career opportunities but — as is the case for all goals worth pursuing — obtaining that degree can be challenging. During your time in grad school, you will likely be faced with challenges related to your education, such as a setback in your research, as well as life challenges such as issues related to your family, finances or employment. Graduate programs invest financial and reputational resources in each enrollee, so they are looking for evidence that you can overcome obstacles. They are not, however, looking for your whole life story. Everyone has obstacles in their lives, so best not to dwell on yours.

Rather, write about one or two challenges you faced in a matter-of-fact tone, how you responded to those challenges and what you learned. Perhaps you were able to solve the problem or make certain decisions to persist despite those challenges. Perhaps you needed to take action or explore other resources to support your ability to overcome the obstacle. Perhaps these actions served as turning points that assisted in your personal or educational development. The key is to briefly touch upon the challenge and show your persistence, problem-solving skills and growth.

**7. How can I include specific examples in my essay and stay within the word limit?**

Drafting a graduate school essay is as much about what to leave out as it is about what to include. Putting a word limit in the application instructions challenges you to share priority information in a focused and compelling way. Essay reviewers want to understand key points about your experience and glean information about your personal attributes, but they also need to accomplish this task quickly.

In turn, then, you need to design an essay response that tells a succinct narrative and shares priority information in a persuasive way. Including specific examples helps bring your narrative to life and can make your essay memorable. The best way to address this challenge is to start with an outline of the points you want to make and what example best highlights each point. Prioritize your points and examples based upon which you think the admissions committee will most want to hear, and which are most relevant in presenting yourself as a promising applicant for their program. Start to draft out your essay and just let the words flow without restrictions — some people like to hand-write their first draft so they can focus on expressing their thoughts and are less likely to edit as they write. Once you have an essay drafted, let it sit for a day before returning to the essay with fresh eyes. At this point, you can



evaluate whether the examples you chose are the best examples to support your main points and edit the essay to fit within the word length requirement. And remember, once you have a strong draft, it's okay to ask for help from a professor or someone in the writing center on your campus. Sometimes another perspective can help you be more succinct or better make your point.

***ONCE YOU HAVE AN ESSAY DRAFTED,  
let it sit for a day before returning to it.***



**Dr. Grasso**

**8. What is the best way to approach a diversity statement?**

Graduate education places high value on innovative scholarship and research, and so it follows that it also places a high value on diverse perspectives, which are viewed as a catalyst for innovation and for solving societal problems. In asking for a diversity statement, graduate programs want to ensure that you, too, understand the value that diversity brings and how you can advance diversity within your program.

Think about the ways in which your life experiences and educational background informed your understanding of the barriers facing groups that are underrepresented in higher education, as well as provided benefits and privileges to those from traditionally majority groups. Describe how your race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic and cultural background can add value to your classes, discussions and assignments and how you see yourself contributing to diversity in your profession after you earn your advanced degree. Share examples that demonstrate your active engagement in programs or activities focused on increasing participation by diverse groups. State how you have or intend to engage in scholarly discourse, research, teaching, creative efforts, and/or community initiatives that have the potential to advance diversity and equal opportunity in higher education and society.

***DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES ARE VIEWED AS  
a catalyst for innovation and for solving  
societal problems.***



**Dr. Grijalva**

## 9. Can my letters of recommendation come from outside of academia?

Different programs have different requirements about who your recommenders should be. If applying to a business, law or other type of professional school, you might be asked to get a letter from your supervisor at work. With most graduate programs, however, faculty are seeking information about your academic potential, and faculty members who know you well are best able to speak to your aptitude and characteristics for graduate-level work. You may want to prioritize your letters of recommendations from individuals who can speak to your academic ability or your experience related to the specific field of your intended graduate degree. For example, you may want a set of recommendation letters that would include one from a professor in a related subject, one from a research supervisor, and one from an internship or work supervisor. You want to pay close attention to the specific requirements of the graduate school to which you are applying. If you're unsure whether the person you plan to ask is an acceptable reference, ask the program to which you are applying.

Be respectful of the individuals you approach to write a letter. Ask whether they have time and whether they are willing to write a strong letter and what information you can help provide so they can do so. Ask faculty that you have worked with or who are knowledgeable about your strengths. Finally, even if they know you well, supply a copy of your resume and personal statement to anyone you select to write a letter to expedite their recall of your accomplishments and so that they can draw appropriate examples as needed.

**ASK FACULTY THAT YOU HAVE WORKED**  
*with or who are knowledgeable about  
your strengths.*



Dr. Ackerman

## 10. How should I draft my own letter of recommendation if my mentor asked me to?

Letters of recommendation have a unique role as the only third-party validation of your academic potential. Letter writers also offer an additional perspective about your personal attributes and experiences. Some faculty who are pressed for time or who don't know the student that well ask their students to draft the letter for their review and signature. While initially it might sound advantageous to be able to describe yourself exactly as you'd like to be described, once you consider that other applicants may have letters by renowned leaders in the field or esteemed alumni, you may start to see how this request could disadvantage you. So, the first step is to consider whether you have a better alternative.



If securing a recommendation from this particular mentor seems the strongest path forward for you, begin by preparing an outline of your letter by making a list of your strengths, skills and abilities. Begin the letter with a statement about its purpose and the capacity in which your reference knows you. Highlight your best qualities in the most positive light possible. Make reference to key points in your resume or CV. Write it as if you were the professor and remember to refer to yourself in the third person.

**A good letter of recommendation will:**

- ✓ Begin with a statement about the letter’s purpose and a description of how the recommender knows you, how long they’ve known you, and how they are familiar with your work.
- ✓ State why they think you’ll be successful in the program using specific examples where possible.
- ✓ Highlight a few of your top qualities and the situation in which they witnessed those qualities.
- ✓ Offer a clear recommendation statement with superlatives, e.g. “She is one of the most determined/inquisitive/impressive students I have encountered in my 8 years running the research lab at the school. I highly recommend her to your graduate program.”

When sharing your letter draft with your recommender, also provide information about your career goals, your resume/CV and your personal statement. Your recommender may wish to draw information from those sources to supplement your draft.

## 11. What should my resume or CV include?

Resumes and CVs show reviewers how you have applied ideas and concepts learned in the classroom and can indicate any specialized experience that may benefit their program. Graduate programs may request a CV as a way to determine whether you possess the skills and dispositions needed to conduct extensive research and make substantive contributions to your selected field. Professional programs, such as business, law and some health programs, may request a resume that details your past work or internship experiences as proof of the practical skills you’ve developed that can be advanced in the classroom.

If you are applying to graduate school directly after undergrad, it’s advisable to work with the Career Center on your campus to develop and review your resume or CV. Remember: They do this for a living, and they are there to help you.



**IT'S  
ADVISABLE**  
*to work with  
the career  
center on  
your campus  
to develop  
or review  
your resume  
or CV.*



**Dr. Augusto**

**A resume typically includes the following information:**

- ✓ **Contact details**, including your full name, address, phone number, email address and a link to your LinkedIn profile if you have one.
- ✓ **Academic history**, including schools attended from high school on, title of degree obtained and the year you graduated. It's also optional to include your GPA or school-related honors or extracurriculars (e.g. graduated magna cum laude or was editor of the school magazine).
- ✓ **Professional and internships experience**, including the name of the organization, job title, employment/internship dates and a summary of your achievements and responsibilities.
- ✓ **Publication citations**, including co-authors, publication date, summary, volume, page and DOI number.
- ✓ **Conference or paper presentations**, including the presentation title as well as the event, venue and date where you presented.
- ✓ **Coursework** especially relevant to your intended graduate program.
- ✓ **Awards, grants and scholarships**, including the name of the award, the organization that gave the award, the year received and any other pertinent details.
- ✓ **Professional associations**, including the organization's name, location or chapter and the dates of active membership.
- ✓ **Licenses and certifications**, including the name of the license or certificate, the date you earned it and the institution that awarded it.
- ✓ **Professional skills**, such as software that you are proficient at using.

**12. How can I prove I'm a good candidate if my background isn't directly related to the field I'm interested in?**

Graduate programs want to be assured that you have a strong passion for the field and program to which you are applying, and that you are confident in your chosen path. Examples from your academic and professional background can help demonstrate your commitment, even if your background isn't directly related to your intended field.

Your personal statement and statement of purpose are venues for you to explain why your background isn't directly related to your field of interest and do your best to minimize the gap and show how it can be overcome. This is your opportunity to articulate why you are

interested in the field you are applying to and how the skills, strengths and experience you've acquired can help you succeed in the program even though your future focus is somewhat different from your original plan or earlier interests. One way to do this is to clearly articulate the "transferrable skills" you've developed that are required to do well in many types of graduate programs, such as knowledge in experimental design, data analysis, surveys, longitudinal research, problem solving or professional writing.

## **LEAN HARD ON DESCRIBING** *the "transferrable skills" you've developed.*

### **13. How can I balance out my low GPAs or other application weaknesses?**

Graduate programs request so much information in your application so they can get a complete picture of who you are and what you can bring to the program and field. Multiple sources can confirm information about you. For example, a letter of recommendation may confirm information about your personal attributes described in your personal statement as well as the academic experiences detailed in your resume. The key is to have more than one source that demonstrates particular competencies. Many programs see GRE scores as a way to confirm your academic skills, so many applicants look to use GRE scores as a way to balance out low GPAs. GRE scores could help you make the case that your grades are not representative of your true abilities. Relevant work or course-related experience can help balance out a lack of direct research experience. A strong recommendation from your employer may lessen concerns that you don't have strong connections with your faculty members.

Your personal statement and statement of purpose are also important because they give you the opportunity to showcase your strengths and explain any perceived weaknesses. If your GPA is low, briefly describe why in your essay. You need to convince the reviewers that you have the drive, passion and ability to succeed in their program.

### **14. How close to my application deadline should I take the GRE® General Test?**

It's best to test two months before your application is due so you can retest if you aren't happy with your scores. If that is not possible, four weeks will suffice. Schools you've identified to receive scores will get them the same day you do (10-15 days after testing) if they receive scores electronically and about a week after that if they prefer paper score reports, depending upon the school's location and the speed of the mail service.

*Have more than one source that demonstrates*  
**PARTICULAR COMPETENCIES.**



**Dr. Felder**

## **GRE SCORES BALANCE OUT DIFFERENCES** *in GPAs and the assumptions that could result.*

### **15. Should I submit GRE® scores if the program says they're optional?**

Here are three reasons you might want to submit GRE scores:

**YOU DON'T WANT TO SUBMIT LESS INFORMATION about yourself than other applicants.**



**Dr. Grasso**

- ✓ **To present yourself on equal footing with other applicants who are submitting scores, so you are not disadvantaged.** Some graduate programs have a test-optional policy, so you can decide for yourself whether to submit GRE scores. However, keep in mind that even those schools that say they're test optional typically still consider GRE scores if you submit them. You don't want to submit less information about yourself than other applicants.
- ✓ **To provide another reliable source of information about your cognitive skills.** As graduate programs are making admissions decisions, they typically consider many different factors about applicants, including your academic background and readiness, personal attributes (such as whether you demonstrate perseverance, responsibility and collaboration skills) and career goals and interests. They review all of the pieces of your application portfolio to learn as much as they can about what makes you who you are and for evidence that you would be a good fit for their program. Each source adds another layer of information and corroborates, or validates, the information found in other sources. By submitting GRE scores, you're allowing schools to corroborate information about your cognitive skills, which they also get from your transcripts, GPAs and other sources.
- ✓ **To balance out differences in undergraduate GPAs and the assumptions that could result from those differences.** While it may seem that undergraduate GPAs are standard or comparable across schools, they are not. They vary greatly. GPAs can vary based on the rigor, or difficulty, of the undergraduate school and undergraduate major. They can also vary based on country — for example, schools in the U.S. and India have different grading scales. GPAs can also vary due to grade inflation, which is a term used to describe the tendency for institutions to award progressively higher grades for work that would have received lower grades in years past. As a standard measure, GRE scores can help mitigate the effects of variability inherent in GPAs. GRE scores can also help make your case if you are coming from a lesser-known institution.

## 16. Should I take the GRE General Test at home or in a test center?

That is completely up to you, based on your needs and preferences. Some people feel that a test center can provide an escape from a busy home environment and assurances of strong internet connectivity. Others feel that their home is a safe oasis that can prevent distractions from other test takers and where they feel they'll be most comfortable.

Whether you take the test at a center or at home, the process is standardized to reduce variability to the greatest extent possible. Score reports do not designate where you took the test, so it's really up to your preference!

**CHOOSE TO TEST AT A CENTER OR AT HOME**  
— *wherever you feel you'll do your best.*

## 17. What is a good GRE score to aim for?

The GRE General Test actually provides three separate scores because the test is composed of three independent measures: Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning and Analytical Writing. Offering three separate scores gives you multiple opportunities to demonstrate your critical thinking, reasoning and analytical writing skills. It also gives programs flexibility to give each score more or less weight based on the skill level their program requires. For example, some programs may be looking for a higher score in one section and pay less attention to the scores of other sections. The scores should never be added together.

So what are good GRE scores, then? The answer to that question is: It's up to the programs you're considering applying to. Graduate, business and law programs decide for themselves what skill level is necessary for applicants to be successful in their programs, and how much emphasis they will place on test scores versus other information you submit with your application. Many programs post this information clearly on their application requirements web page. Rather than publish minimum scores you must achieve, many programs publish stats from their most recently admitted class. If the program publishes average GRE scores, remember that many of the scores submitted fell below this number. Score ranges can be more helpful as they offer more detail about the typical scores accepted in the previous semester.

Admissions priorities, policies and expectations can change from year to year, and the members serving on admissions committees also change frequently, so don't be discouraged if your GRE score falls below published numbers, especially if you feel that other components of your application, such as your undergraduate grades, research or employment experience and strong recommendation letters, can help balance out those scores.

**DON'T BE DISCOURAGED**  
*if your GRE score falls below published numbers.*



Dr. Ackerman

## 18. How can I achieve the scores I want on the GRE® General Test?

Test preparation strategies vary based on individual preferences, but in general, ETS recommends following these five suggestions:

- ✓ **Give yourself plenty of time.** Avoid the stress that comes with feeling unprepared by planning well in advance. Ideally, it's advisable to take the test two months before your application is due so you have the option to retest if you aren't happy with your scores the first time.
- ✓ **Take a timed practice test early so you can identify where to spend the majority of your prep time.** On the GRE website, you can find information about a series of POWERPREP practice tests. These are great practice tests to take, as they most closely simulate what it's like to take the test — they are timed and the interface is identical to the actual GRE test. All accommodations available on the actual test are available in the POWERPREP practice tests. The free versions return scores on the Verbal Reasoning and Quantitative Reasoning measures. The POWERPREP PLUS Online versions, available for a fee, also return scores on the Analytical Writing measure.
- ✓ **Develop your study plan.** Knowing your areas for improvement and how much time you have until test day, determine how many hours a week you can devote to studying, and what areas you'll focus on each week.
- ✓ **Determine what test preparation materials you will use.** The GRE website provides access to excellent free and low-cost official preparation resources from the makers of the test. In addition, ETS offers a free, 2-hour, virtual prep workshop every month, during which assessment specialists who actually work on the GRE test provide strategies for tackling each question type. They also hold a live Q&A session so you can ask any questions you may have. And of course, there are many other companies that provide test prep services for a fee.
- ✓ **Take another practice test.** After you've spent time shoring up any weaknesses, test yourself again to gauge your progress and identify any lingering gaps where you can focus your remaining efforts.

**TAKE A TIMED PRACTICE TEST EARLY SO**  
*you can identify where to spend your prep time.*



Dr. Felder



## 19. How can I make a good impression in my interview?

Programs use the interview to ensure there is a good fit between the applicant's aspirations and the department's offerings, and they will likely ask for clarification around specific points in your application to help them do that. The interview is also an opportunity for decision makers to experience your nonverbal and verbal communication skills first-hand and get a better sense of other interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

Before the interview, prepare, prepare, prepare. Become familiar with the university, the department, the faculty and their research, and the general campus and learning environment. Read some of the publications of the faculty member(s) you would like to work with. If you are still an undergraduate, visit your Career Center on campus and set up a mock interview. Ask faculty about what questions they would ask in an interview so that you can be better prepared. Know why you want to attend this graduate program and what you bring to the program. Prepare answers to questions that interviewers are likely to ask and prepare a few questions to ask them in return. Finally, consider what you are wearing and what your background will look like if you are doing a video chat. Keep it clear of items that can be a distraction from the focus on you.

**IF THE PROGRAM**  
*hasn't informed you who you'll be interviewing with and their roles, ask.*



Dr. Grijalva

### Questions you should be prepared to answer:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why do you want to study in our program?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- If accepted, what will be your biggest challenge here?
- How has your professional experience (or education) prepared you to succeed in this program?
- What are your career goals? How will studying here help you achieve those goals?
- What do you see yourself doing five years from now?
- Describe your greatest accomplishment.
- Describe challenges you've overcome to get where you are today.
- What do you do in your spare time?
- What unique qualities do you think you have to offer this program?
- What appeals to you most about our program?
- How do you motivate yourself? How do you deal with stress?
- What is your plan B? If you were not accepted into the program, what are your plans?
- What is your definition of teamwork? Success? Leadership? Fairness?

If the program hasn't informed you who you'll be interviewing with and their roles in the program or at the university, ask. Learn as much about them and their research as possible. Also ask how long the interview is scheduled to be so you can gauge the length of your answers.

On the day of the interview, be on time or early and be ready; have your application materials, including your resume, statement of purpose and personal statement, with you.

During the interview, be a thoughtful listener. Be genuine, respectful and courteous. Look at the people you are interviewing and gauge their expressions so you know they are understanding you and that the length of your responses are appropriate. Ask questions that show that you are sincerely interested in their program and want to know more — remember that you are interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you. Your interviewers are likely the faculty members you'll be working with, so try to imagine what that would be like.

**ASKING QUESTIONS**  
*shows that you understand that the interview is mutual.*



**Dr. Augusto**

## 20. What questions should I ask during my interview?

It's essential to ask questions during the interview because it shows that you are interested in the program, but also that you understand that the interview is mutual — you are interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you. Avoid asking questions that are too basic; you should have done research on the program and various faculty members before the interview and asking questions that are too basic may show that you didn't. However, it's perfectly fine to ask for further clarification around content you read on the website or have gathered from other sources.

### Questions to consider asking:

- What factors are most important in admitting students, or what skills and attributes does the program value most in its students?
- What do you love about this program that you think other schools might not offer?
- Do students usually publish or present papers?
- How are advisors assigned?
- What kind of experiential learning opportunities are there? Teaching assistantships? Adjunct positions? Internships? Research opportunities?
- What kind of library resources are available?
- Is there support to submit research grant proposals?
- Where have alumni of the program gone? Where do they work?
- What financial assistance is offered? Are there scholarships/fellowships to apply for?
- Is there funding to present at conferences?
- Is office space available?
- How would you describe the culture of the program?

### ***Need more resources?***

We hope you found these answers helpful as you prepare to embark on the journey to grad school. For more information about the GRE General Test, visit [ets.org/gre](https://ets.org/gre).