Applying to Graduate School: The Timeline

Inside, you'll find a recommended timeline and key action steps to help you navigate the graduate school application process.

This document provides a sample timeline and checklist to guide the graduate school application process. While the timeline can help you stay organized and on track, students should adjust it based on their individual goals and program requirements.

Those applying to professional programs (e.g., Medical, Law, Nursing, or Business School) may need to complete additional steps. Resources for these are included at the end. The Career Development Center offers services and materials to support your graduate or professional school planning. Learn more at wku.edu/career/.

Graduate schools may consider a variety of materials when evaluating your applications. Below is a list of the most commonly requested items used for evaluation of a candidate's application for graduate school.

Keep in mind that each graduate program is different and may require materials or actions not included in this list. Always check with the schools to which you are applying to make sure you have submitted all necessary materials by established deadlines.

General Application: You will be asked to fill out a general application form that includes identifying information and asks you to indicate the program to which you are applying.

These are often done online and will have functions that allow you to attach additional application materials prior to submitting.
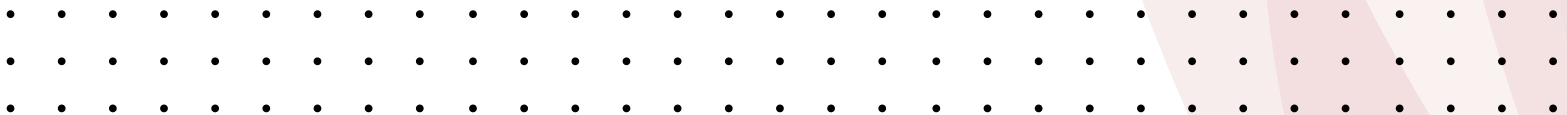
Transcripts: Graduate programs typically require transcripts from all colleges attended. Some require official transcripts sent directly from the registrar, while others allow unofficial copies to be uploaded with the application.

If unofficial transcripts are accepted initially, official ones may be required upon admission.

Always check whether your program needs official or unofficial transcripts at the time of application.

Grade Point Average (GPA): Most graduate schools will look at your undergraduate GPA as part of the application process.

They may be concerned with your cumulative GPA, subject-specific GPA, or both.

Most graduate programs will publish GPA ranges of successful applicants on their websites or in printed information materials.

Graduate Examination Scores: Many programs require applicants to complete specific admissions tests and submit their scores. The most common exam is the GRE, which includes a general test covering quantitative, verbal, and analytical writing skills and, in some cases, subject-specific tests.

It is crucial to verify which exam(s) your intended program requires. Other common graduate admissions exams include the GMAT (business), MCAT (medical), LSAT (law), and DAT (dental).

Personal Statement: Personal statements are essays submitted with the general application. It is usually between 500 and 1000 words, but schools vary on word and page limits.

Personal statements may require applicants to respond to a specific prompt and typically include why they are pursuing graduate school, their reasons for choosing a particular program or field, relevant goals and passions, notable accomplishments, research or work experience, and future career aspirations.

Have your personal statement reviewed by multiple individuals prior to submitting your application. The Career Center provides free drop-in advising where you can have your personal statement critiqued.
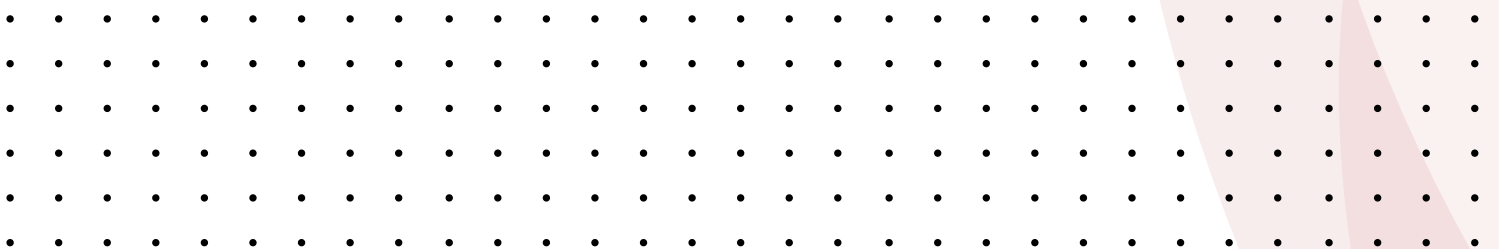
Recommendations: Many graduate applications require 2–3 recommendation letters and/or rating forms from individuals who can speak to your potential for success in graduate school.

Programs typically prefer faculty who have taught or supervised you academically, or managers who have overseen your professional work.

Mentors and colleagues may also be appropriate if they can comment on your relevant abilities. Avoid using personal relationships such as family or friends as recommenders.

Resume or Curriculum Vitae: You may be asked to submit a resume or curriculum vitae (longer academic resume) so that admissions committees can evaluate your relevant experience (i.e., work, experiential learning, and/or research experiences).

For help writing resumes and curriculum vitas, drop into the Career Development Center and speak with a Career Coach and/or visit the Career Development Center website at wku.edu/career.

Writing/Work Sample: Some graduate programs will ask you to submit a sample of your writing or portfolio items as part of your application.

Follow directions for what kinds of samples to submit. If you are unsure, call the admissions office or department to which you are applying to clarify.

Related Coursework: Sometimes admissions committees will look favorably on applicants who have taken coursework related to the subject they wish to study in graduate school.

For example, many graduate programs like to see coursework in research methods and/or statistics in preparation for graduate research.
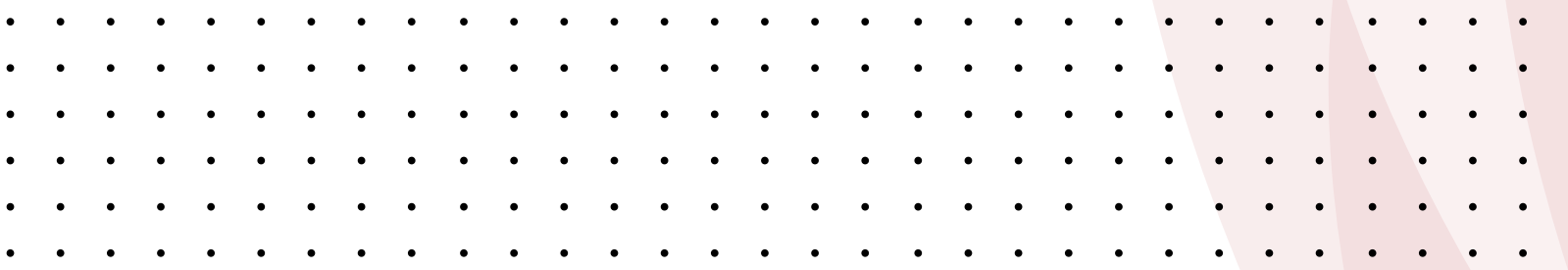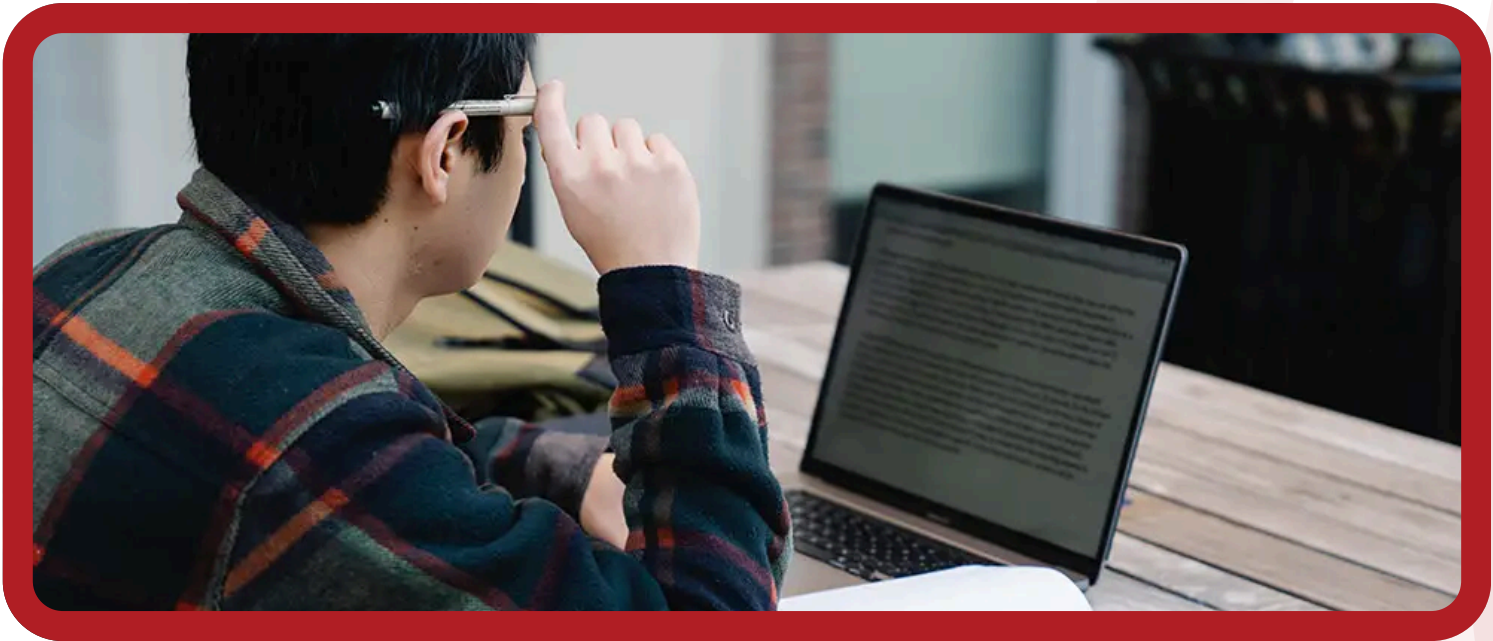
Interview: Some graduate programs require applicants to interview as part of the application process. Usually, this happens after applications are submitted and the faculty have identified their top candidates.

Interviews can be conducted via phone, live video call, or in person. If you need help preparing for an interview, drop into the Career Development Center and speak with a Career Coach.

Deadlines: Perhaps one of the most important items of the graduate application is the deadline! It is imperative that all required materials be submitted by the program's deadline, which is usually publicly posted on their website.

Keep in mind that some schools require two applications, one to a general graduate school, and one to your desired graduate program. It is recommended you keep track of all required application deadlines.
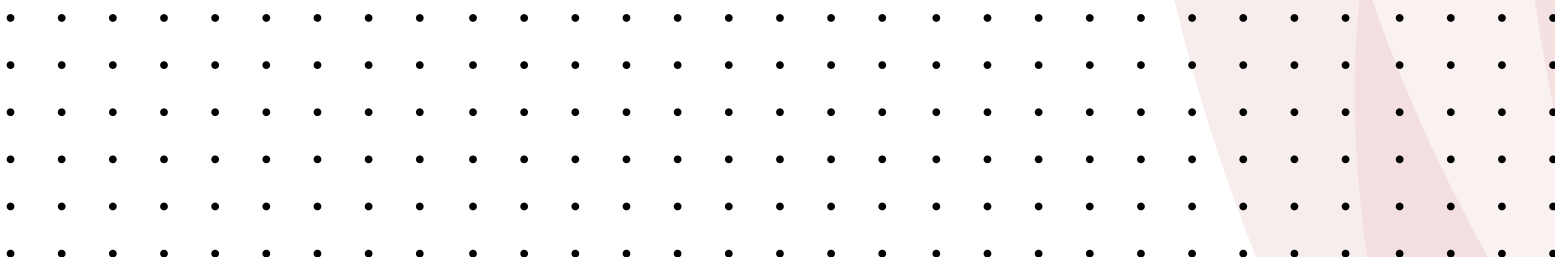
- Become familiar with campus resources and services to help you acclimate to college life.
    - The WKU Student Life has excellent resources to support your transition to college. Visit their website at: wku.edu/studentlife to find ways to access services, become involved on campus, make friends, and find support.

- Visit an academic advisor to discuss potential academic pathways and options for coursework enrollment.
    - For help identifying your academic advisor, visit Academic Advising: wku.edu/acdc/.

- Drop-in at the Career Development Center for assistance in exploring your values, interests, and skills and how these may relate to your choice of a potential major/occupation.
    - You can access several resources online at wku.edu/career and/or drop-in to speak with a career coach Monday through Friday, 8:00 AM – 4:30 PM.

- Begin a practice of attending faculty office hours to gain strategies for maintaining a high GPA and strengthen relationships with faculty and begin cultivating potential graduate school references.

- Explore options to participate in research related to your field of interest.
  - The Office of Research and Creative Activity provides support and guidance for undergraduates seeking research opportunities. Visit their website for more information and resources: wku.edu/research/undergraduate_research.php
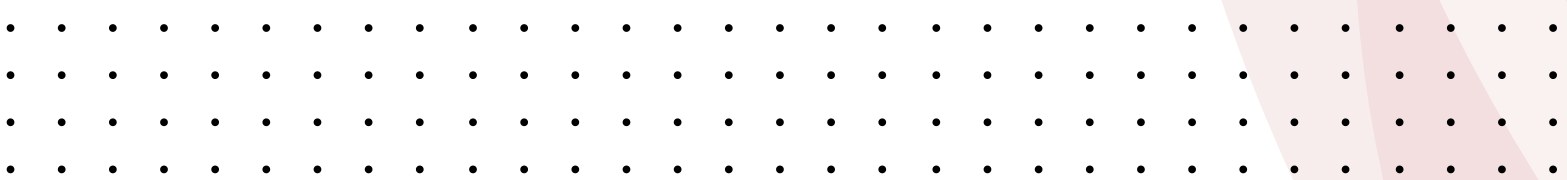
- Get involved in activities (on or off campus) that relate to your values, interests, skills, or potential fields of interest.
  - The Department of Student Activities works to provide co-curricular activities for those who want to become involved at Western Kentucky University.

- Choose a major and check-in with your academic advisor to stay on-track. Both the Advising and Career Development Center can assist you with choosing a major.
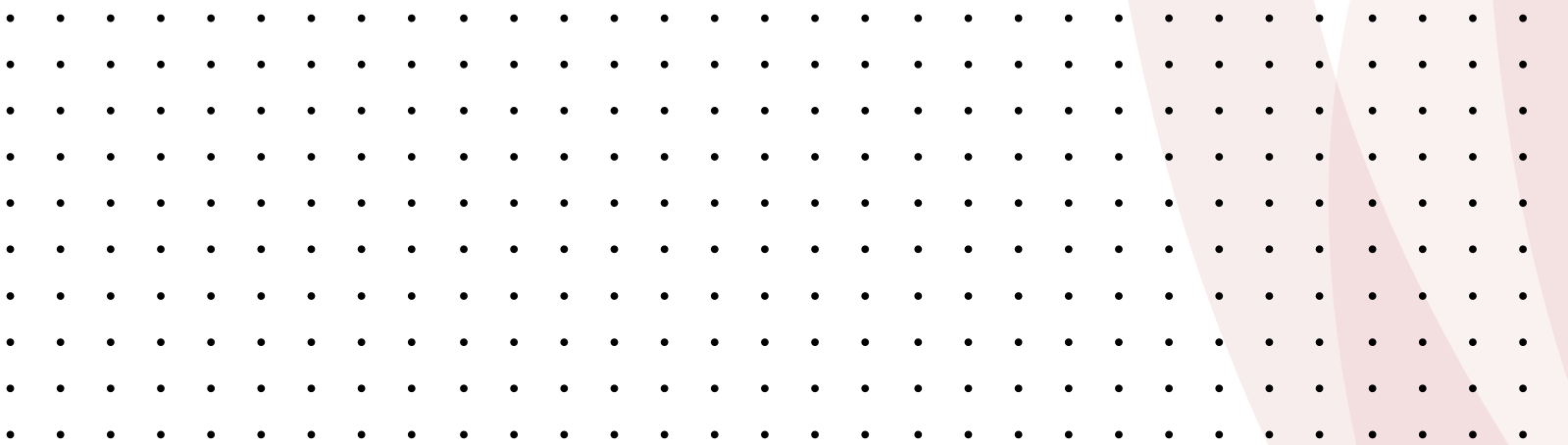
- Visit the Career Development Center and/or your designated college Career Coach to explore graduate school/occupational options related to your interests and career goals.
  - Drop-in hours for career coaching at the Career Development Center are 8:00 AM – 4:30 PM, Monday through Friday. To identify your Career Coach, visit: wku.edu/career/appointments.php
  - To view resources related to WKU graduate programs, visit The Graduate Studies website at: wku.edu/graduate

- Explore options for participating in experiential learning opportunities related to your field(s) of interest, such as internships, co-ops, and job shadowing.
  - Visit the Career Development Center's drop-in advising hours or your college Career Coach for assistance in locating and preparing for experiential learning opportunities
  - Use Career Center online resources to aid your search for experiential learning opportunities:

    - Career Center Library links: wku.edu/career/careerguide.php

1st Semester

- Research and identify graduate programs/schools you might be interested in attending.

- Consider length of program, cost, location, size of program, cultural fit, faculty research fit, alumni employment data, etc.

- Become familiar with the application requirements and deadlines for these schools. Most department webpages for graduate programs have data and information about these topics. You might also consider contacting department admissions representatives with specific questions.

- Create an application action plan to assemble materials necessary for graduate school applications in accordance with application deadlines associated with your specific schools of interest. For assistance creating your plan, visit the Career Development Center.

- Cultivate references for use in applications by creating and maintaining meaningful relationships with professors, mentors, faculty advisors, and supervisors.

- Explore opportunities for taking leadership positions in organizations with which you are involved.

- Apply for/participate in research opportunities related to your field of interest. You may consider developing your own research independently or participating in a faculty-led research initiative on-campus.

2nd Semester

- Continue to apply for/participate in experiential learning opportunities related to your field(s) of interest.

- Prepare for/take graduate school admissions examinations according to requirements for your programs of interest (GRE, LSAT, MCAT, GMAT, etc.). Keep in mind that each examination has different timelines for reporting results. You will want to make sure you give yourself enough time to prepare for the exam and for results to be reported to your desired schools by the application deadline.

- Review faculty information at desired programs to identify research fit. It may be helpful to reach out to faculty you are interested in working with to inquire about specific projects and areas of interest for future research. Also consider contacting desired programs to speak with current graduate students about their experiences in the program. These contacts may also be on program websites.

- Explore graduate school funding options including scholarships, financial aid, assistantships, tuition waivers, and external funding options. Schools and individual programs may have varied types of funding, so it is important to clarify what is available with the specific program/school to which you are applying. Below are some general funding resources:
  - WKU Department of Student Financial Assistance: wku.edu/financialaid/
  - US News "Paying for Graduate School" resource page: www.usnews.com/education/best-graduate-schools/top- graduate-schools/paying

- Begin crafting your personal statements and assembling other application materials required by your programs of interest. You can have these reviewed by Career Coaches at the Career Development Center. - Review the Career Development Center's "Personal & Writing Sample Examples" Guide at: wku.edu/career/documents.

- Reach out to potential reference contacts to ask if they will be willing to serve as your reference. Be sure to give references several weeks to craft and submit their references (do not wait until the last minute before the application deadline!); give them a copy of your résumé /CV and let them know the deadline by which the reference is needed.

- If you have not already, take your graduate entrance examinations and have test scores sent to desired institutions. Finish assembling application materials (test scores, personal statement, references, writing sample, résumé/CV, transcripts, etc.) and complete applications by the deadline. Continue to participate in extracurricular and experiential learning activities related to your field of interest.

- Complete interviews or applications/interviews for financial support (e.g. assistantships, fellowships, scholarships), if necessary according to the deadlines required by your programs of interest.
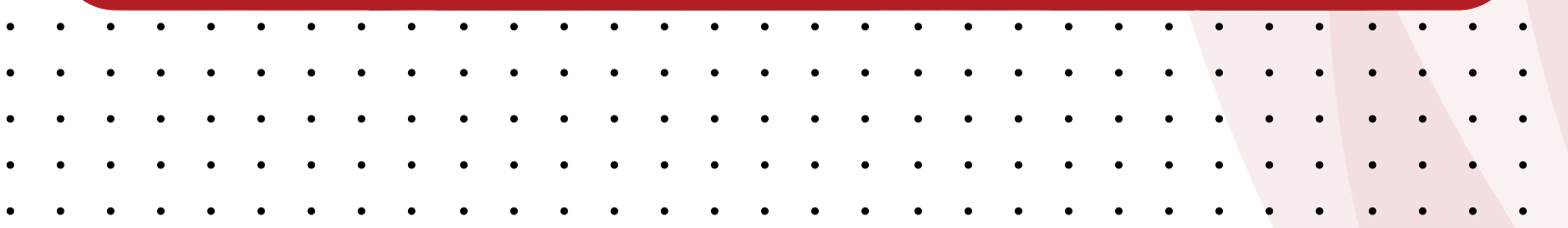
- If you were not admitted, consider ways to improve your application for the next round. You may ask for feedback from admissions representatives or faculty within your desired programs. Consider steps you might take between now and your future applications to improve your chances of acceptance next time.

- If you were admitted without funding, consider alternate options for funding your graduate school experience. There may be external funding sources with available funds or other on-campus experiences that can offer you financial support.

- Speak with department representatives from your desired programs and the campus financial aid office to determine what options/ resources might be available to help you.
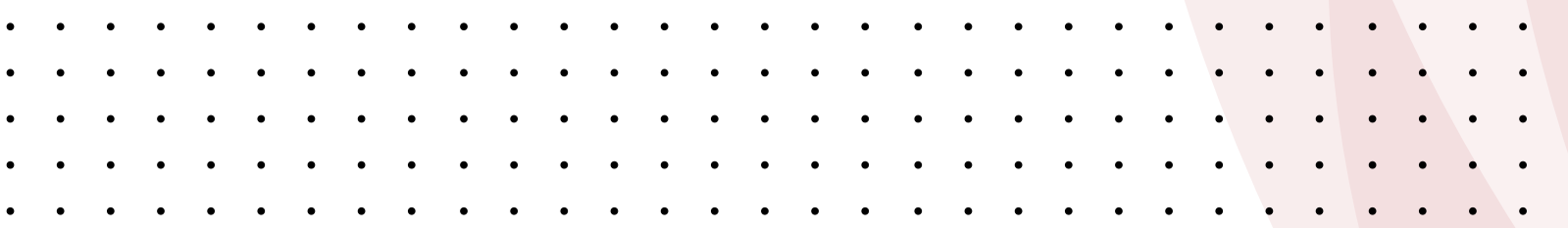
Resources

- www.GradSchools.com
- www.HigherGrad.com/grad-school-resources.html
- **Council of Graduate Schools**: www.cgsnet.org/data-insights/access-and-inclusion/national-name-exchange-for-students/nne-student-resources

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