

APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

A "HOW-TO GUIDE" TO THE PROCESS

IS IT THE RIGHT TIME TO APPLY?

Your decision to enter into graduate school will be determined by your readiness. Will you decide to enroll right after graduation or will you decide to wait a few years to work or take classes? The average duration of graduate school in biology is 4-6 years. Thus, you will need to make a strong commitment to the pursuit of a Ph.D. If it takes a couple of years to address personal, educational, or experiential concerns, take the time and be fully prepared for graduate school.

GETTING STARTED:

You should ideally begin your graduate school application process as early as possible, preferably in your sophomore year. At the minimum, you should begin at least one year prior to the start of the graduate school year.

- **Identify your interests:** What type of graduate school department or training do you want to focus on? Do you want to apply to a specific department or to an interdepartmental program? Think about what classes or faculty member's research was of interest to you at PC to help decide.
- **Identify specific schools and programs:**
 - *The Peterson's Graduate & Professional Programs 2002, Volume 3: Graduate Programs in the Biological Sciences* is available in the Science Library for information on each institution.
 - Visit the World Wide Web and look at graduate school catalogs and programs on-line.
 - Talk to individual professors in your field of interest.

- The [GRE Search Service](#) is a computer-based service that matches prospective graduate students with participating graduate schools. To register for the FREE GRE Search Service, use the [online GRE registration](#) form.

WHAT GRADUATE SCHOOLS EVALUATE IN CANDIDATES:

Most graduate programs evaluate applicants in five areas: grade point average (GPA), [Graduate Record Exam](#) (GRE) scores, letters of recommendation, statement of purpose, and research/practical experience. Each program weights the areas differently and also compare applicants within each year's pool.

- **GPA:** The GPA is a standard evaluation tool used by graduate programs. It can be calculated as a cumulative average, the most recent school year, average in the sciences, or average in your major. Each program may look at different aspects of your GPA.
- **GRE:** Most graduate programs require the GRE. It not only can be used for acceptance into the school but as a part of merit-based fellowships or assistantships. The general test, a computer-based exam, consists of three parts: Verbal- 30 multiple choice questions covering reading comprehension, analogies, and sentence completion; Quantitative- 28 multiple choice questions covering basic concepts of arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and data analysis; Analytical Writing- two analytical writing tasks: a 45-minute "Present Your Perspective on an Issue" task and a 30-minute

"Analyze an Argument" task.

Starting on October 1, 2002, the General Test will be composed of verbal, quantitative, and analytical writing sections. The verbal and quantitative sections will be unchanged from their present content. The current analytical section will no longer be part of the General Test. The computer based general test is offered at various Computer-Based Testing (CBT) programs. See the pre-Grad web site for [locations in New England](#).

Many schools also require a subject test in a specific area of the sciences. The GRE Subject Tests are designed to help graduate programs and fellowship sponsors determine the abilities of prospective students in specific areas. There are currently eight subject tests offered:

[Biochemistry, Cell and Molecular Biology](#) [Literature in English](#)

[Biology](#) [Mathematics](#)

[Chemistry](#) [Physics](#)

[Computer Science](#) [Psychology](#)

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION:

On average, you will need three letters from various people that can judge your qualities and potential in graduate school. Typical writers include faculty members at PC, internship supervisors, employers, or others that can judge you on a personal and academic level.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:

Your personal essay is a very important part of your application package. The statement is usually 2-3 pages of double-spaced text. It should include your reasons for wanting a graduate degree, your career aspirations, and experience that make you a viable candidate for acceptance. It is a good idea to have your statement proofread by a faculty member for help in revisions.

EXPERIENCE:

Most, if not all, graduate programs look at your practical experience in a research setting. The issue is not that you have specific experience in a given area, just that you have performed research and are aware of the time commitment, exactness of the work, and high failure rates. There are opportunities to do a research project in the department during the school year or summer (see the [Research page](#) on the [Biology homepage](#)). Highly recommended is to do a research internship during the summer or during the year at an outside university or company.

FINANCIAL AID INFORMATION:

Most graduate programs provide awards for enrollment that include a tuition waiver and stipend for living expenses. These awards may consist of a fellowship or a research/teaching assistantship. The National Institute of Health (NIH) predoctoral stipend for 2002 is \$18,156. One stipulation of federal money is the payback agreement- for every year of federal support received, the recipient has to be employed in a science-related field for a year. Failure to do so results in financial responsibility to payback some of the administered aid.

In addition to institution awards, students can apply for fellowships directly from the [NIH](#) or from private agencies like the [Howard Hughes Medical Institute](#) (HHMI). HHMI predoctoral fellowships are for five years and start at \$21,000.