Graduate School APPLICATION GUIDE

A "how to" guide to help you on the path to graduate school

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

A guide to applying to graduate school

Welcome to this guide to applying to graduate school. In this guide, we'll work to demystify the graduate school application process and provide some practical advice to help make your application as strong as possible. We'll also provide advice on getting started and what to keep in mind when considering grad school.

Although this guide focuses on the UBC application process, much of the advice here could be applied to other graduate school applications.

grad.ubc.ca

Follow us @ubcgradschool or #UBCGradJourney

Cover image: Aerial view of Irving K. Barber Learning Centre
Credit: Paul Joseph, UBC Brand & Marketing, UBC Studios

Table of contents

Getting started..... 4

The path to graduate school | Your starting point | Step-by-step
Types of graduate programs | What's the difference between undergraduate study and graduate school?
What to think about when considering graduate school

Financial considerations..... 12

Funding sources | Financial considerations | Costs and financial planning | Tips on funding

Applying to graduate school..... 15

Program search | Admissions requirements review | Components of a graduate school application

Statement of interest..... 19

What to include | Top tips

Reaching out to prospective supervisors..... 22

How to reach out | Top tips | How can you grab the attention of a potential supervisor?
What are supervisors looking for?

Reference letters..... 26

Current student or recent grad vs. Experienced graduates | Who to ask?
How to ask | Top tips

Interviews..... 30

How to prepare | Types of interviews | What to wear| Top tips

Online application..... 33

Online application | Top tip | What are graduate school admissions committees
looking for? | Things to avoid

Additional resources..... 36

Getting started

Aerial view of UBC Vancouver campus.
Credit: Hover Collective. UBC Brand & Marketing.

Musqueam house post

So you're thinking of going to grad school?

Deciding to go to graduate school is a big decision and often a difficult one if you don't have a clear understanding of what graduate school will be like. It is important to go to graduate school for the right reasons. Here are some such good reasons:

- Being fascinated by a given field.
- Answering that deeper question that has been bugging you for years.
- Desiring to be part of an intellectual or professional community.
- Gaining qualifications for an upward career progression.
- Acquiring expertise in order to change sector or professional area.
- Gaining experience and entry requirements for an academic career.

Sign up for our monthly newsletter GradProspect for application advice and the latest news from UBC's graduate community.

The path to graduate school

We recommend giving yourself plenty of time to think about and plan your graduate school application.

Your starting point

How you approach the path to grad school and the grad school application may differ depending on your starting point. Are you a current student? Or a recent grad? Or maybe you have been away from academia for a few years?

Here are some top tips and things to think about depending on your starting point.

The path to graduate school

Top tips if you're currently in academia

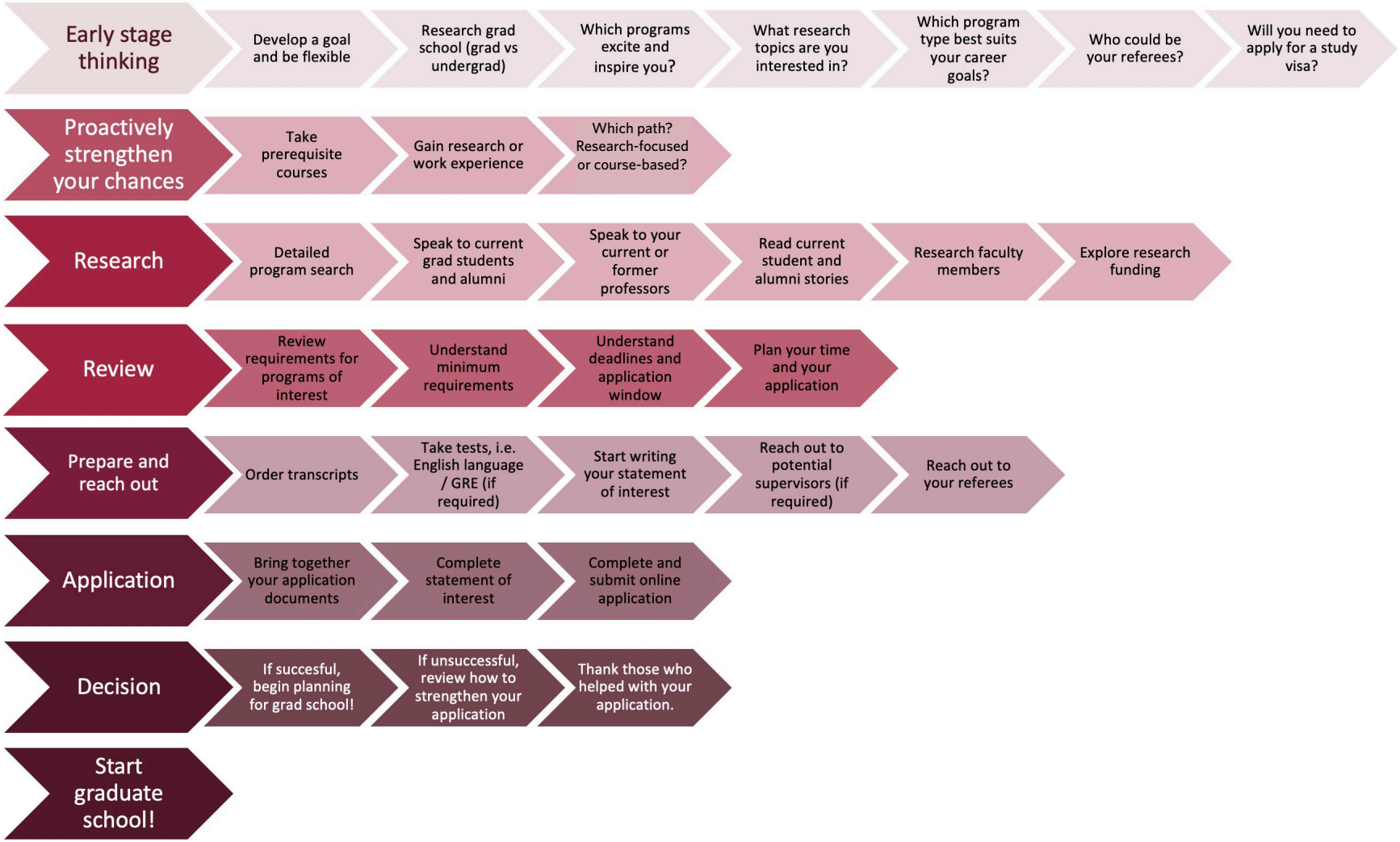
- Connect with current professors who could be future referees. Nurture those relationships and ensure that the professor is aware of your work.
- Look ahead and make sure you are taking the courses that are required for the graduate program you are considering.
- If you are interested in a research-focused graduate program, consider doing a research placement, e.g. as part of co-op, summer research placements or other such programs – this will help you understand if research is really what you enjoy, and may be looked at favorably during an application.
- Speak to current grad students in your department, faculty, or university, and go to research nights/events or graduate student panels. Read graduate student stories. Learn what grad school is all about.

Top tips if you are a recent grad or if you've been out of academia for a few years

- Reconnect with professors who could provide you with references and advice on grad school.
- Think about which of your current or recent work colleagues and managers could provide you with a professional reference (if applicable to the application).
- Reflect on what work and life experience you can bring into a graduate program.
- Utilise alumni resources and careers services for advice on applying to graduate school.
- If you are a working professional, explore potential professional development support from your employer and consider tax benefits which may be available.
- Connect with thought leaders in your proposed field. They could be helpful in identifying areas of focus for a research-focused degree.

Step-by-step

This chart shows some stages and steps to take along the path to grad school.



What's the difference between undergraduate study and graduate school?

Graduate school is different than undergraduate study in several ways. At the graduate level, you will focus more on a specific area, developing greater independence, understanding, and critical thinking skills. Students also develop deeper abilities in creating new knowledge, especially in research-focused programs, and in rigorously analyzing and using information and knowledge.

When thinking about grad school it's important to consider carefully which type of program is best for you and your goals. Watch this video for a detailed breakdown of program types at UBC.

Broadly speaking at UBC we have two types of graduate programs, Research-focused and Course-based. All doctoral programs e.g. PhD, DMA, EDD are research-focused. So it's at the Master's level, where you'll have research-focused and course-based options.

Types of graduate programs

Research-focused

Thesis-required or thesis-optional

- In-depth research
- PhD: Dissertation
- Master: thesis required and thesis optional programs
- Some coursework (usually in the early phases of a program)
- Completion when coursework and individual research component are completed.
- Some flexibility on program length, depending on research progression

Course-based

- Coursework within set curricula (required and elective courses)
- Usually set program length
- Final project, capstone, or graduating paper
- Cohort-based
- Completion after all required coursework has been concluded

Photo by Nick Morrisson on Unsplash

What to think about when considering graduate school

There is a lot to think about and consider when it comes to grad school.

Here are some important areas of consideration.

- **Consider your goals.** It's important to think about what you want to get out of grad school, including what sort of job and career you might want to have afterward. Know that career ambitions can evolve over time, however if you have firm career ambitions, be aware of the type and level of education that would be expected or beneficial.
- **Type of degree and study.** Consider whether a research-focused, or course-based program would be best for you; also, whether a master's or doctorate is your goal. In some disciplines, a master's degree is generally required for entry into a doctoral program; for others, it is common to transfer to a doctorate from the master's without completing the master's degree, or in some cases enter directly from the bachelor's.
- **Be open to the fields you can move into.** Don't assume that if you didn't study a certain subject at undergraduate level that you can't study at the graduate level. Many programs recruit from a wide variety of (related) fields. Explore and follow your passions! Think about how your background beyond undergraduate coursework has prepared you for a specific program or research area.

What to think about when considering graduate school

- **Reputation.** Academic reputation may be an important consideration, either of the institution or faculty supervisor for research-focused programs. Learn about the reputation and rankings of institutions you are interested in. Although rankings are highly subjective, they do influence reputation. A reputation of an institution for excellence or for excellence in a particular field may be beneficial for entry into future studies or work.
- **Facilities.** Does the institution you are considering have the facilities to support your studies? Access to the right facilities, libraries, labs, resources and equipment can impact your graduate studies.
- **Lifestyle.** Think about the sort of lifestyle you want to have as a grad student. This will be impacted by factors such as campus size, whether the campus is in a city or rural setting, and the student life and culture of the university.
- **Location.** Where in the world will you study? Think about how this will impact your life and importantly is it a place where you could live in the future? Be aware about any licensing/professional requirements if applicable.
- **Financial considerations.** Graduate school is a significant financial investment and that is something you should consider from the start. The next section takes a deeper look at finances and financial planning.

DOWNLOAD THE VIEWBOOK FOR MORE INFO ON PROGRAMS

DOWNLOAD

Financial considerations

The Transcendence Fountain, in front of Thea Koerner House at Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.

Funding sources

Depending on the type of program you enter, the financial picture may be different. Your financial opportunities include: merit-based scholarships (based on your record), need-based funding (such as loans or bursaries), assistantships (teaching, research, academic), employer support, foreign government support, work possibilities while studying, as well as tax credits/ incentives.

Course-based master's – Most of these programs will require you to pay tuition and to self-fund your studies. Students in these programs are eligible for a few merit-based awards, but significantly less so than those in research-focused programs. Some programs may have entrance or similar awards.

Research-based master's – Many such master's programs will provide some merit-based funding and/or opportunities for assistantships. Some UBC programs guarantee such support. Most international students will qualify for the International Tuition Award that will lower tuition annually by up to $3,200.

PhD – At UBC, the median average funding received by PhD students is approximately CAD $36,000 per year, provided through a combination of funding sources such as scholarships, teaching or research assistantships, and supervisor grants. While funding amounts vary by discipline and individual circumstances, all PhD programs guarantee a minimum funding package of at least CAD $24,000 per year for the first four years of study.

UBC invests heavily in research programs, keeping tuition costs relatively low by comparison to institutions internationally. Tuition is less than $6,500 annually for many graduate students in research-focused programs.

Costs and financial planning

Our cost of living estimator is a great place to learn more about typical costs for a student living in Vancouver. These include costs for tuition, accommodation, utilities, transport, and food.

As you think about applying to graduate school it's essential that you consider your financial plan. Creating a multi-year budget can reduce stress and problems later on. The cost of living estimator is a good tool for building your budget. When doing so, remember to add in a buffer or contingency funds for any unexpected expenses.

Tips on funding

- Similar to a program application, give yourself time to do your research, explore options and familiarize yourself with application timelines.
- The first award can often be the hardest to get. The next ones are often easier. Success breeds success.
- It's important to try. We hear from many successful students that they never thought they would get the award. If you don't apply, you'll never know. If you are not successful in the first round, try again.
- Don't just go for the biggest and most well-known funding options. For some research areas, there are very specific award opportunities, and they may be less competitive due to the narrow scope of eligibility.
- The largest funders for domestic students and permanent residents are the Tri-Agencies (NSERC, SSHRC, CIHR). Recently, some Tri-Agency awards have also been made available to international PhD students. International students should also explore other options such as the Vanier, Killam, 4YF, and Affiliated Fellowships (Doctoral, Master's), as well as home government or country-specific awards. In some cases, you may be able to apply for funding opportunities while still enrolled at your current institution, even before receiving an admission offer to a graduate program.

Applying to graduate school

The Irving K. Barber Learning Centre sits in the center of campus. Credit: Hover Collective, UBC Brand & Marketing.

Coral. Credit: Patrick Keeling, UBC's Biodiversity Research Centre

Applying to graduate school

Program search

UBC offers more than 350 different graduate degree options. You can explore these options using our Graduate Degree Programs page. Here you can search by Faculty, degree level, mode of delivery, and program.

Be sure to explore all of the various options and program types associated with your area of interest as there may be alternatives within a department or in other departments that suit your aspirations better.

Program pages are packed with useful program information such as:

- An overview of the program, including coursework
- Admissions information
- Research areas and facilities
- Tuition & financial support
- Statistics such as application and admission numbers, average funding, and times to completion
- Potential supervisors
- And much more...

Link through to the program's website. Most programs at UBC will have their own websites in addition to their grad.ubc.ca program page. Familiarize yourself with both sites to get a full picture of your program of interest.

Read our current student and alumni stories. We have more than 600 stories on our site and they provide a great insight into life at UBC and graduate study in general. You can find student stories on program pages as well, to give you insight into what types of research students are doing in a particular program.

EXPLORE OUR DIFFERENT GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Find out how to search our program pages and find the program for you.

Admissions requirements review

Once you've selected the program or programs to which you want to apply it is time to review the admissions requirements.

To begin you should review UBC's Minimum Academic Requirements. These minimum requirements ensure that students have the necessary preparation to enrol in graduate programs.

Minimum academic requirements are based on the country you received your academic credentials from and form the basis of admission to any UBC graduate program.

The minimum admission requirements are common to all applicants. The graduate program that you are applying to may have additional requirements.

Grad school program admission requirements can differ by faculty, department, and program. *Even within the same department, programs can have different admission requirements and processes*.

You'll find the admission requirements for each program on the program page under ***admission information & requirements.***

Judith Mank lab, UBC 2020. Photo: Paul Joseph.

Components of a graduate school application

Graduate school application components differ by program. Below are the most common components you can expect to see.

- Application form and application fee
- Transcripts of all post-secondary courses/degrees previously enrolled in
- Support from prospective supervisor (some research-focused programs only)
- Reference letters
- Statement of interest/research statement
- English language test scores

Depending on the discipline you may see other requirements such as:

- GRE or GMAT scores
- Creative work portfolios
- CV/Resume
- Writing sample

Statement of interest

The Nest offers food, informal learning spaces, and is a focal point of student life on campus. Credit: Hover Collective, UBC Brand & Marketing.

Statement of interest

A statement of interest is a summary of your academic and/or professional goals and how these align with the graduate program.

What to include

Show your understanding of the field of study

For research-focused programs, describe your previous research experience and how it has informed your current interests. Demonstrate your understanding of the field of study and have a detailed sense of the research that you want to conduct. Your previous education should have prepared you for this research, even if it was in another field. You will not be held to this proposal as interests and opportunities can shift, but you should be ready to discuss some specifics of your plans, especially when applying to PhD programs.

For course-based and professional graduate programs describe your knowledge of the field of study and how it relates to your goals.

Show your motivation – Explain your motivation for proposing a particular research path or aiming for a professional goal. Detail why you are interested in this program and university. Programs love to see what new perspectives, interests and passions you'll bring to the department and to the field of study!

Tell your story – What has brought you to this point of applying and why are you interested in this particular field of study? Describe your academic or professional background and how it relates to the program. If there are elements in your trajectory that might be difficult for admissions committees to understand, address these. For example, many applicants in coming years will have missing or unusual grades from a semester during the COVID pandemic. Or, you may have faced particular obstacles in your trajectory. If you are comfortable sharing these and they explain an aspect of your trajectory, you should mention them.

If you are making a career change or switching to very different areas of interest, do not let admissions committees guess at that, but tell them why you're making the switch and how you've prepared yourself for this new direction.

Top tips

Stay within the word count – Pay attention to program-specific requirements, such as word or page count, and any particular information they would like to see addressed in your statement.

Write several iterations – Gain feedback on each draft from people in your network. You could ask professors, current graduate students, colleagues, friends, and family to review your statement. Ultimately, your materials should make a reader enthusiastic about your application, but it might take several tries to reach that level.

Grammar and clarity – Be sure to proofread thoroughly for spelling mistakes and typos. Make sure your statement of interest is clear and concise. Avoid repetition and be specific.

Reaching out to prospective supervisors

Reaching out to prospective supervisors

For many research-based programs, you will be required to obtain a commitment from a faculty member to supervise you before you apply. If you are required to find a supervisor, you should do this by reaching out to them directly with the graduate program.

Check if you need to reach out to a supervisor in ***'Admissions Information and Requirements'*** on the program page. Find your program of interest in the graduate degree programs listing.

Find UBC supervisors by using research supervisor search and research projects search tools. This is also a useful way to identify suitable programs. Keywords listed by a supervisor may overlap with your interests even though they supervise in a program that you had not thought of looking at.

How to reach out

Step 1 – Get to know the research of faculty members. Read their recent research papers, take a look at departmental websites. Many faculty members have become increasingly careful about how they portray their research online, so look for what they say their current research interests are. Be sure your interests align in topic or methodology or in some other meaningful way.

Step 2 – Check if they are accepting new students, as declared either in their grad.ubc.ca supervisor profile or on their personal profile/website.

Step 3 – If the faculty member is open to new students, contact them through their preferred way if outlined on their site, or use the 'supervision enquiry' form on the Graduate Studies supervisor profile page.

When reaching out, describe your background and your interests. You are coming to graduate school for education, so your interests may not be fully formed, but a supervisor wants to be confident that you understand their field in broad strokes and have ideas for your contributions.

Top tips

- One of the most common mistakes potential applicants make is sending a generic (cut-and-paste) email to many faculty, often including those working far outside the applicant's area of interest. Do your homework on the faculty members you'd be interested in working with (Steps 1-2, above), and craft your email to them specifically. Don't be overly focused too soon, however; it's fine to contact a few faculty who can potentially guide your work.
- It's ok to follow up with a brief email if you haven't received a response within 1-2 weeks.
- Consider all potential supervisors. Some very prominent supervisors do not have capacity for new students or have little time for mentoring. New faculty are often looking for graduate students and may have more openings, but have a more limited track record.

How can you grab the attention of a potential supervisor?

- Express a clear interest and understanding of the research they do and describe how your own interests and background align with them.
- Be as specific as possible.

What are supervisors looking for?

"I look for enthusiasm and the drive to succeed."

– Professor Robert Hancock

"I look for students who'll challenge me and say, why haven't you studied this? Isn't this important?"

– Professor Hadi Dowlatabadi

Reference letters

The Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre opened in 2016 and is a space for dialogue and learning.

Reference letters

Reference letters provide a glimpse into who you are and are crucial in the admissions process.

A minimum of two references are required for application to graduate programs at UBC. Each graduate program determines the type of reference (e.g. academic, professional) and number of references they require which can range from two to four.

An **academic** reference will speak to your academic history, character, research, and academic goals.

From a professor or academic supervisor who knows you well.

A **professional** reference will speak to your work history, skills and achievements.

From someone you have interacted within a professional setting, for example, your supervisor at work.

Current student or recent grad vs. Experienced graduates

Depending on your career stage, you may approach references differently.

Current students or recent graduates (1-3 years) focus on obtaining academic references from professors who taught you recently.

Experienced graduates with more time away from academia may be able to submit one or more professional references depending on the program.

Who to ask?

- Think about the people who can speak about your work and your promise in the fields to which you are applying. Consider people who know you and your work well and who are ready and willing to write a strong and well-informed letter.
- Consider the influence each letter writer has: the more prominent and established a person is, the more weight their letter might carry. Find the right balance between someone who knows you best, e.g. a postdoc, and someone who may know you less but is very established in their field.

How to ask

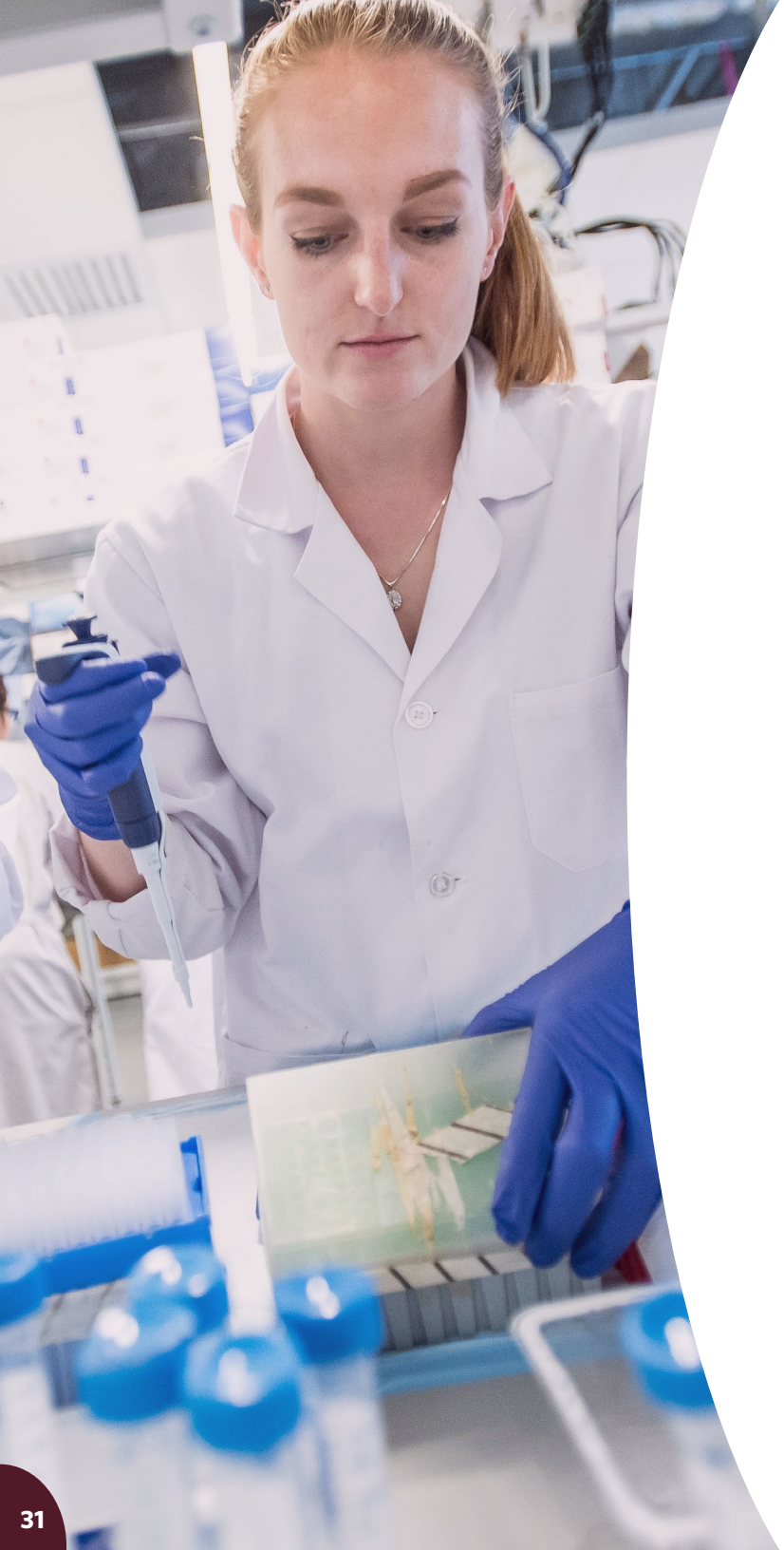
- Ask early, giving them plenty of time to write the reference.
- Offer to meet in person (or virtually) to re-familiarize your referee with who you are.
- You may need to remind them of a specific paper, project or experiment you worked on. Send attachments or links to specific portfolio samples.
- Let them know what your potential as a graduate student is.
- Provide details, documents, and any other information they may need as reminders to help write a great letter (one with specifics that show they truly know you and can speak to your work/ability). For research-focused degrees include a brief summary of your intended research.
- If you feel comfortable discussing this with a referee, consider which one of your qualities/qualifications they can speak to most effectively. Perhaps one letter will be able to speak to your research abilities based on a particular paper while another might offer a broader comparison with other students because the referee has taught you in multiple courses.

Top tips

- Review the program website for the number of references required and what types of references they prefer (i.e. academic vs. professional). Most research-based programs require three references.
- Make it easy for referees. Provide as much of your application package as possible.
- Ask them why they think you'd be a great graduate student to start them thinking.
- Give referees a chance to understand what might be considered excellence in a particular field. This is especially true of non-academic referees who might have less of a sense of the admissions expectations of graduate programs.
- If you are asking a referee to write a letter who is not very familiar with North American universities, explain some expectations to them. If you are applying internationally, your referee might explain the meaning of your achievements (different grading systems, competitiveness of certain programs/institutions, etc.) to admissions committees.
- Provide them the opportunity to say no. You want to be sure that they have the time and knowledge to provide a strong reference.

Interviews

Walter Koerner Library offers spaces for teaching, learning and a Research Commons for graduate students.



Interviews

Preparation is key.

Not all fields and programs interview. Be sure to check the application process.

How to prepare

- Become familiar with the materials on the website that describe the program you are applying for.
- Reach out to people in the field who may have experienced grad school interviews.
- Re-read your statement of interest.
- Be ready to tell your story and show your knowledge of the field and motivation for continuing your studies. Detail why you've chosen this program and university.
- Be ready to articulate what you will bring to the program and department.
- Practice explaining your research idea to someone outside of your field.
- Practice talking about yourself and your research. Don't let the interview be the first time you do this. (That is, do a mock interview.)
- Be prepared to discuss your academic background and how it has prepared you for this program.
- Be prepared to share your expectations.
- Prepare some questions you might ask (e.g. typical time to completion, funding opportunities, sample of current student projects, student outcomes). Note: if this information is available on the website then ask follow up questions.

Types of interviews

There are lots of variation in graduate school interviews. Some are one-to-one meetings, others are a panel with two or more interviewers. Your program should provide details on the format of the interview and any specific preparation beforehand. If not reach out to them.

What to wear

- Dress professionally.
- Business formal is the expectation for most interviews. Choose clothes that are smart and formal but also comfortable.
- Dress slightly less formally for online interviews.
- Know the norms of your discipline. Some maybe more business casual than formal.

Top tips

- For virtual interviews, check your technology and practice using video calling software. Look your best by having good lighting and a nice background and be sure to look into the camera.
- Follow up with a thank-you email to those who interviewed you.

SIGN UP FOR AN INFORMATION SESSION TO GET MORE TIPS

REGISTER

Online application

The Buchanan Buildings are part of UBC's Arts and Culture District, and close to museums, art galleries and cultural spaces on campus.

Online application

Make time to explore the online application. You can come in and out of the system as many times as you'd like.

UBC's application has the following sections. You may not need to complete all of these sections depending on your program.

- Use of information
- Personal information and contact details
- Academic history
- Test scores
- Funding
- Experience and interests
- Additional questions
- References

Top tips

- Explore the application system early. Create a login and explore the various sections, specific questions, and what is required.
- Prepare answers to longer sections such as Statement of Interest offline and store these in documents from which you will copy into the application at time of submission – this provides documentation for yourself, helps with auto-correction in software, and avoids time-outs of the application and loss of data.
- Remember to save as you go! The system will not automatically save.
- Plan to submit your application ahead of the deadline to avoid last-minute glitches and panic.

What are graduate school admissions committees looking for?

- Strong record of academic achievement (good grades!).
- Good coursework background for the graduate program or relevant related work experience that demonstrates your rationale for pursuing grad studies.
- If you are moving from a master's to PhD – peer-reviewed publications and presentations.
- Excellent reference letters—referees who know you well and think highly of your potential.
- A complete application, free from errors, having met deadlines.
- Research experience—doing and presenting original work (research-focused programs only).
- Scholarships and awards – winning them in the past is great; having them secured for grad school is even better (research-focused programs primarily).

Things to avoid

- Submitting a statement of interest where there is no personalization to the program.
- Lack of insight or understanding or connection to the research being done in the program.
- Incomplete or late applications, asking for exceptions, or suggesting that programs don't really need something they are asking for.
- Sloppy writing, errors in the application.
- Trite comments and generalizations: "I have always dreamed of…", "The world is a place that…"
- Asking questions via email or phone when the answers are on the website. You are applying to an advanced degree for which independent research skills and preparation are key. Show that you can do your basic research and read available resources, like program websites, before you reach out to the program/university with questions that can be easily answered by yourself.
- Aggressive emailing or phoning about the status of an application.
- Be patient. Most universities will not respond to you overnight due to the volume of enquiries. Avoid creating more work by emailing multiple times or multiple people.

Additional resources

Our website is packed with application information and tools such as our graduate degree programs page where you can search the more than 300 graduate degree options available at UBC. Use our supervisor search to find UBC faculty members working in your area of interest and see open research projects. Read about our 12 faculties and find all of the application and admissions information you'll need to apply to UBC.

DOWNLOAD THE VIEWBOOK FOR MORE INFO ON PROGRAMS

DOWNLOAD

SUBSCRIBE TO OUR PROSPECTIVE GRAD STUDENT NEWSLETTER

SIGN UP

SIGN UP FOR AN INFORMATION SESSION TO GET MORE TIPS

REGISTER

If you feel grad school is right for you – and remember it's not for everyone – then treat the application as the beginning of your grad school journey. Be sure to approach the application in the same way you'll approach your studies.

Your journey starts now. *Good luck!*

WATCH OUR APPLICATION ADVICE VIDEOS

Tell us what you think

We want to keep improving this guide for future editions. Did we miss anything? What was helpful? What information would you like more of? Let us know what you think in this short feedback survey (1-2 minutes).

Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
170-6371 Crescent Road
Vancouver, BC
Canada V6T 1Z2

grad.ubc.ca

Follow us @ubcgradschool or #UBCGradJourney