

# Winning acceptance to the graduate program of your choice



## Finding the program that is right for you: advice from a graduate programs advisor

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Tip 1: Don't just choose a university or a program, **choose your graduate supervisor**

As a graduate student, the supervisor of your research and your program can have a tremendous influence on your development as a junior scholar, and on your ability to win grants and gain employment. An excellent supervisor will be someone you know and rely on, in whom you trust, who is intellectually inspiring, and who keeps your best interests in mind, sometimes over the whole arc of your career. Choose carefully!

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Tip 2: Ask for recommendations for supervisors from people you know, drawing on their wider networks

You can start with the suggestions of your major undergraduate (or Master's) professor. If someone at another university is recommended, take this seriously and read some of his or her academic papers. Ask the graduate students in your department about the universities they attended—was there someone there they would recommend?

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Tip 3: Shop around!  
Attend a conference in your area of specialization

If you can afford to travel, or if there is a conference near your residence, you can do even more research on potential supervisors, as follows: Go to as many papers of interest as you are able. Whose work captivates you? How do they interact with their colleagues and students at the conference? If you feel comfortable doing so, introduce yourself and thank them for the talk.

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Tip 4: Follow up with enough detail to spark interest

If you find the potential supervisor is in a department that seems suitable, follow up with an email and ask if he or she is considering taking on any students in the coming year. Including a brief précis of your proposed project, and a bit of information about yourself would be helpful; potential supervisors will also be looking for an excellent fit.

Potential supervisors will often carefully chose students they find to be compatible with their interests and working style. They will look for trustworthy individuals. After all, they will be spending two to six years in close proximity to their students.

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Tip 5: Apply to at least three graduate programs that interest you.

Nothing is certain except that there is a large degree of uncertainty about what the next year will bring to the fortunes of your first-choice program. You can count on: sudden decreases in the amount of funding available at some schools; the unexpected movement of a potential supervisor from one university to another; and that a potential supervisor will be on sabbatical or otherwise unavailable to take on students. Changing family, health and financial situations for the applicant can also make a difference.

Applying to at least three graduate schools also gives you a chance to consider the best funding package offered, should you gain entrance to more than one school. At some universities, including the University of Alberta, competitive funding recruitment packages are offered to desirable applicants when there is an indication that they have other prospects.

Browse widely! You might consider studying anywhere in the world, not just elsewhere in the country

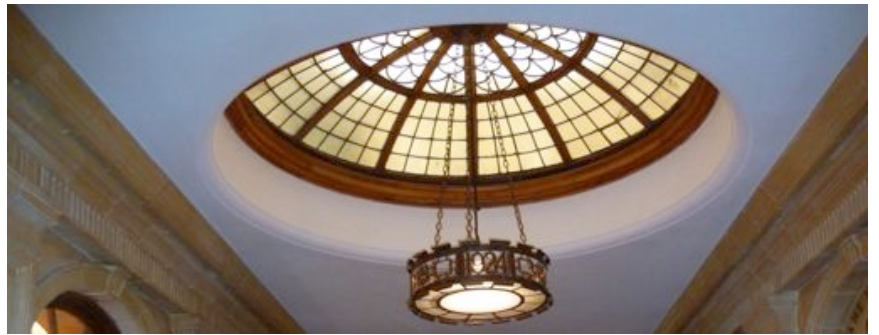
Consider this an opportunity to dream



Find out where the best places are for training in your specialty, in a language in which you are competent. If you have had an excellent experience at your undergraduate institution, there is all the more reason to see what the rest of the academic world has to offer. You can apply close to home, but also consider whether you might be able to accept an opportunity to go far afield, should an attractive offer be made.

An application is not a final decision on your part: leave the doors open. Besides, the commonplace saying, “an ‘expert’ is someone from out of town,” might well apply to your advantage, upon your return to Canada.

## Letters of Reference



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Tip 6: Approach your potential referees carefully.

Ask: “Would you be able to provide a *strong* letter of reference?”

You should approach a referee at least three weeks to a month in advance of your first request for a letter. If at all possible, let your prospective referee know in advance with an email that you would like to seek their advice on graduate schools. (Most will have the idea that a request for a letter might be part of this consultation.) If possible, visit during their posted office hours—be careful with their time. You should both gather their advice on graduate schools, and ask if they would be willing to provide you with “a strong letter of reference.”

If the professor does not already know you well, you should be prepared to supply him or her with a piece of work you wrote for their class, and even if they do know you well, it is helpful to supply an unofficial transcript, as they might not have ready access to records of the grade they gave you in a course, and will need to know about your grade point average and other courses taken to fill in some details.

If the professor would be unable to provide a strong letter (as opposed to ‘a’ letter), or if they ask if perhaps there would be someone who knows you better (especially after you have provided the above-mentioned materials to jog their memory), it is most likely time to ask someone else.



My professor  
said “yes!”

... Now what?

Do not make your referee hunt for a reference form template, due date, or address of the institution you are applying to. Provide all of this, plus a url to the graduate program’s website, and check the form or referee instructions to see if there is anything else your referee might need to know to fill in details properly. This could include, depending on the institution: your date of birth, permanent home address, middle name, citizenship, or year matriculated. As a referee, I have found that if a student provides pre-addressed envelopes to the proper person at the target institution, even if I do not use the envelope, there will be a non-confidential reminder I can put somewhere on my desk to remind me that I have a letter to write.

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Tip 7: Make it easy for the referee to write the letter by providing all necessary information in advance.

Your referee might spend any amount of time from one to three hours carefully crafting the first letter they write for you. Subsequent letters will take at least forty minutes, each. Expect that your referee will be writing for up to ten students in a particularly heavy week. That month from first contact, and at least two weeks notice for any letter will be gratefully remembered. When the question of student judgment, courtesy, and timeliness then comes up on a reference form, you will likely be lauded for your respectful approach. No matter how high the grades you received in your courses, you can better your chances of landing an offer by treating all involved thoughtfully.

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Tip 8: Be respectful of the time your referee will invest in your application.

A referee for graduate school should be a professional who can evaluate your academic work. Your optimal letter writer will be someone holding a doctoral degree, and a fixed academic address so that their letter can be followed up by the institution you are applying to for verification or further questions.

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Tip 9: Your academic referee should hold an academic position. .

## Letters of Reference (continued)

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Tip 10: If you do not wish to provide a reference from your former supervisor, find a way to sidestep.

Among your set of referees should be someone for whom you did *exemplary work*, in an area that would suggest your potential as a graduate researcher, writer or teaching assistant.

If you had an honours supervisor, or a supervisor for a previous degree, NOT including a letter from them would be noticed. If, for any reason, you cannot include such a letter, I would recommend diplomatically stating why you have asked someone else. You can state that your alternative referee is 'in the best position to speak to your strengths' as, e.g.: a researcher, a writer, a teaching assistant.

Please note that the head of your religious congregation or summer employment, or family friend is *not* an appropriate reference, unless such a "character reference" is specifically asked for in the application.

## The Applications Package

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Tip 11: Obtain a sample c.v. from a willing professor to use as a formatting guide.

## Read the application materials carefully.

Be prepared to supply a curriculum vitae (c.v.), a research proposal, a sample of your best written work, transcripts from ALL institutions attended after secondary school, an application fee, and proof of citizenship, in addition to two to three letters of reference. You might also be asked to provide proof of language competency, a background records check (if applying for a student visa) and, for many U.S. schools, a Graduate Records Examination (GRE) score.

Avail yourself of any workshops on applying to graduate schools that your university provides. Likely, there will be a workshop on creating a proposal, and c.v. Learn how to create a c.v., rather than a resumé, and have your efforts checked over by a professor or workshop leader.



# Deadlines can arrive surprisingly early in the year

Due dates for applications might be nearly a year in advance of your desired start date. If Graduate Records Exam (GRE) scores are required (as they are for many US schools) you might need to schedule your GRE test that far in advance. As some universities issue only paper transcripts, you will need to plan time for these to be generated and delivered. If you would like to study in the southern hemisphere, bear in mind that school years there often begin in January, and application deadlines will shift accordingly.

Deadlines for internal scholarship applications might arise before acceptances are offered to the program. Be sure to check the funding sections of websites at your undergraduate and target institutions.

With all of this to do by deadline, students sometimes neglect to notice precisely what they have been asked to include in the proposal, or statement of purpose. Before mailing, go back and ensure that you have answered all of the questions asked.

## Building your reputation

Your reputation is not built on high grades alone. The student who took all 'easy' courses may not be seen as intellectually adventurous. An interesting range of courses building in difficulty, with consistently improving grades (even if early grades are not excellent) will serve you well. In our department at the University of Alberta, for example, your grade point average (gpa), on the final two years of coursework would likely need to be an A- average or above. There are other ways, however, to increase the likelihood of the close consideration of your application.

Volunteer for a conference, student council, and/or an open house at your university. Remember to note these experiences on your c.v.

Apply for available grants and fellowships in advance of applying for a graduate program, if at all possible. If you are a Canadian, consider especially applying for a SSHRC or NSERC graduate scholarship, due in the fall of your fourth (graduating) year of undergraduate program. Even if you can only say you have a grant application pending, you will have demonstrated great promise as a potential graduate student to your target institutions.

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Tip 12: Demonstrate your potential for collegiality outside of the classroom

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Tip 13: Demonstrate grantsmanship.

## Accepting an offer

A letter of offer is a contractual offer, often with financial obligations flowing in both directions. Go over it carefully, and seek advice from a professor or graduate programs advisor in your area to ensure you understand the terms, and what might be unforeseen by you in accepting such an offer (e.g.: uncovered costs, strict visa requirements). When you reach your decision regarding all offers, write timely, clear and direct letters of acceptance (or regret) to the appropriate parties at the offering institution(s). If you need a bit more time to decide on your choice of institutions, communicate this to the appropriate parties, and you might find an extension is granted. In *all* cases, remember to thank those who have invested their time and efforts in writing letters or evaluating your application.

*With best wishes for your success,*

Andie Palmer

Associate Professor  
and Associate Chair  
(Graduate Programs)  
Department of  
Anthropology  
Faculty of Arts  
University of  
Alberta



*Compliments of  
The Department of Anthropology*



Our graduate program is now accepting applications to the thesis-based MA and PhD programs. Our deadline for receipt of all application materials is January 5<sup>th</sup>.

For more information, please visit [www.anthropology.ualberta.ca](http://www.anthropology.ualberta.ca).