

# Selecting and Applying to Geoscience Graduate Schools

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Before you apply:

1. Perform well in your classes. **GPA** is one easy way for reviewers to see what kind of student you are. If you didn't perform well early in your academic career, make the most of the time you have left, especially in your geoscience classes. They'll appreciate improvement throughout your career.
2. Study for the GRE and get the highest marks you can. Learn about the test and the strategies that will help you do well. The best way to do this is to take as many practice tests as you can. Also take the test as early as you can and not during your busy semesters. Summer is a great time to get this out of the way. Make sure you take your practice tests seriously.
3. Become involved in extracurricular activities in the geosciences and look for ways to separate yourself from other applicants. **Ask a professor or TA if you can help them with their research, join various geoscience groups, attend and present at meetings, apply for scholarships or grants, learn applicable skills, and try to secure internships or positions in research programs.** These things are great ways to gain more experience and can also help you figure out what you want to study in graduate school. If you're not sure about a given opportunity, try it anyway. You might end up really liking something you thought you wouldn't. These opportunities will also strengthen your network which will pay off when you need letters of recommendation.

The application process:

1. **Research the schools you might be interested in.** You can look at their rankings online, but their ranks aren't always that important. However, the higher ranked schools may have better funding or extra opportunities for you. Look at their department sizes, strengths, weaknesses, support staffs, resources, locations, degrees offered, and acceptance requirements for grad school (GRE, GPA, letters, etc.). Consider what you really want in a school. Also, make sure you have a thorough understanding of their deadlines.
2. **Apply early.** This will save you from a lot of stress during a busy fall semester your senior year. I would try to start your applications in the summer. This gives you enough time to complete them and makes you the first person on the list of applicants.
3. **Research professors you may want to work with.** Search through each department's website for professors that focus on things you might want to study (stratigraphy, structure, geophysics, etc.). You can also ask the professors or graduate students you know if they have any suggestions for you. If you're a little unsure about what you really want to do research on, that's ok. Just narrow the subjects to between 1-3 things and go with it. Look at people's projects and consider their locations,

implications, applications, whether they are field intensive or lab intensive, whether they are industry focused or not, large or small budget, etc. Try to get a sense of their reputation and where they stand in the geoscience community.

4. **The most important thing you can do when you apply is to contact the professors or research scientists you are interested in working with.** This person will be your research supervisor while in school, will be you with financial support during your graduate career, and they have an enormous say in whether you will be accepted into the program or not. It is critical to develop some relationship or familiarity with them so that they favor you over the other applicants. E-mail them with your background, skills, distinctions, and research interests. Maybe read a few of their papers to get a sense of what they really study and mention them in your e-mail. If they don't get to you right away, don't take it personally. Just politely e-mail them again to remind them that you're interested doing a PhD or MS with them. You can call them too. If you can't get a hold of them, contact the department and ask if they can assist you. Also, contact more than one person in the department. These people may also have some say in your acceptance and may even end up on your committee or teach some of the courses you'll be enrolled in.
5. **The second-most important part of your application is the statement of purpose or letter of intent.** This is a summation of your graduate/career goals, research interests, why you are interested in the degree, why you want to work with a particular professor/researcher, your qualifications, your experience, your achievements, and why you would be a good fit at that school. Do not write an anecdotal essay about your life since birth. Just be direct, follow the prompt, and make a strong case for yourself. This is also a good time to explain how you've improved as a student if your grades weren't so great early in your academic career. Make sure you have a couple of people look over it and make sure that there are no typos or spelling errors. Simple grammatical errors will lead to your demise. Part of the assessment is in your writing skills, so do your best. Once you have a decent letter for one institution, you can use that as a template for the other schools you apply to. You just have to make sure that all the information that is specific to that school is switched out and correct for the appropriate application.
6. **Letters of recommendation are another big part of your application.** It's another way for the review committee to learn about you as a student. Ask professors you've had in the past that might know you well or that know you're a good student. If you made an A in a class that is applicable to your graduate research interests, ask the professor if would write you a favorable letter. It's part of their job, so don't be shy. Just make sure you give whoever you ask several weeks to prepare a good letter for you. They have lots of things on their plate, and may need some time to get the letter ready. Also, it is a good idea to check up on them to make sure they didn't forget to send it in. This can happen in a busy semester, so keep in touch with them often until you know the institution gets the letter. Lastly, use academic recommenders, not industry ones. These are the most applicable for your purposes. If you can help it, try to ask professors that have some connection with the school you are applying to. Maybe

they know your potential advisor, or they may have actually attended that school in the past.

7. **Apply to multiple schools.** Apply to ones that you think are the best fit or to ones that are well-ranked, but also apply to several back-ups. It's a competitive ordeal, so it's best to have a few options. The more schools you apply to, the better chances you have. Just remember these things take time, so start early.
8. **Visit the schools you want to apply to if you can.** You can meet your potential advisor, department heads, and even current students. You also can get a feel for the school and the area you'll living in for the next few years. Contact your potential advisor and the department staff for visiting information. They may be able to help you with travel arrangements, travel funding, and other helpful information for your visit.

After you apply:

1. Make sure all of the required items have reached the school you have applied to on time. It is easy to forget to send something in or overlook something they may want. Each school has a slightly different application and application system, so be aware of what they need from you and when they need it. Don't assume everything is there. Contact the department if you are unsure about your application status.
2. Maintain contact with your potential advisors. This could help push your application through, but be sure not to come off as annoying.
3. Once everything is in, focus on graduating. Keep yourself busy. Waiting for application decisions is the worst part of the entire process. A lot of things go into an acceptance decision, so just be patient and stay positive!

Acceptance offers:

1. Thank whoever has admitted you. The ball is in your court. Tell them that you are excited, but that you need some time to decide. Make sure you understand the offer acceptance deadlines well.
2. Take some time to make the best decision for you. There's a lot to think about. The more schools you get in to, the more complicated it can be.
3. Do not decline any offers until you have made your final decision and the acceptance paperwork has been received by the school you have chosen. Once that is secure, you can start to decline your other offers.
4. When declining offers, be direct and thank the people who have accept you. Don't burn any bridges. The geoscience community is surprisingly small.
5. If you don't get any offers, find out how you can improve and try again. Don't give up!

## Applying for Graduate School Timeline

This list assumes you are applying to start graduate school in a **Fall** semester.

### Basic info:

- Grad school applications deadlines are usually in Dec/Jan. This means if you want to start grad school Fall 2016, then you'll be completing applications Dec2015/Jan2016.
- Some schools accept students in spring and fall semester, some only accept in the fall
- Most schools want you to have an advisor(s) picked out before you apply to their school. This means you need to contact professors and apply once they encourage you to or else you won't be admitted even with good grades/GRE score.

### Summer before applications are due:

- Get a general idea of what you want to study for graduate school (big topic interests such as structural geology, stratigraphy, geomorphology, etc..)
- Before you waste your time looking for a professor at your favorite school, make sure you will have the credentials to get in the school. Some schools list GRE/GPA requirements and others don't. If you have questions email the geology department's admissions contact. The big name schools are a lot more competitive to get into so look into back up school possibilities.

### GRE: take it by October/November at the latest.

- The semester will be very stressful and studying for the GRE sucks on top of school work.
- Start to find professors at your favorite school choices that research your field of interest. The more people you look up, the more choices you can narrow down later. Keeping an Excel sheet of possible professors is a good way to stay organized.
  - If you can't find professors you like then read some publications online and search the authors whose papers interested you

### Start of fall semester that you'll start your applications:

- Around September email professors you want to work with for graduate school.
  - Your email should include:
    - Introduce yourself and where you currently go to school
    - say when you want to start grad school
    - what degree you want: masters or PhD
    - your brief field of interests and how it's related to their research (you know this from reading their recent publications/web pages)
    - ask if they are interested in potentially taking on a student and if they have funding to do so (that means do they have research money to fund your research)
    - why you're qualified (research/work experience, leadership positions, whatever)

**October/mid semester/Nov:**

- Keep contacting professors if you need to keep track of all application deadlines. Some have priority deadlines to be considered for funding.
- have 3 people willing to write you a letter of recommendation

**November:**

- start applications to schools where professors have encouraged you to apply
- Application costs:
  - applications: (\$50-\$100)
  - GRE scores: ~\$27 to send per school
  - transcripts: (\$10 from UH plus all schools you transferred credits from)

**December/January:** deadline time!

- applications usually want one or two essays written
- make sure your references submit their letters on time
- call and make sure your transcripts were received if you get worried

**After applications:**

Most graduate schools will get back to you late February – late March, but keep in contact with the professor and department

- Arrange school visits, don't let the professor you want to work with forget you exist!