



Photo by Misha Bruk

School of Humanities and Sciences

# Guide on Getting into Grad School

A must-read guide packed with tips, resources,  
and activities for prospective graduate students

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# Table of Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction   | <b>4</b>  |
| Self-assessment and<br>Selecting Grad Programs       | <b>8</b>  |
| Funding Graduate Studies                             | <b>18</b> |
| Preparing Your Applications                          | <b>20</b> |
| Writing Your<br>Personal Statements                  | <b>24</b> |
| Requesting<br>Recommendation Letters                 | <b>30</b> |
| Interviewing and Talking<br>with Prospective Faculty | <b>34</b> |
| How Your Application<br>Is Reviewed                  | <b>40</b> |
| Making Your Final Decision                           | <b>42</b> |
| Additional Resources                                 | <b>45</b> |



## A Message from Dean Debra Satz:

Of all my goals as dean of the School of Humanities and Sciences (H&S) at Stanford, supporting graduate education is one of the most important, both to me personally and to all H&S faculty. Having mentored scores of outstanding graduate students in my 30 years as a faculty member, I understand how vital their contributions are to advancing knowledge about our world.

From a personal perspective, I also understand the challenges of considering and applying to graduate school. I was the first in my family to attend college, and there was no roadmap to graduate study. I know that navigating the application process can seem daunting.

As you face these challenges, I hope that you will not only use resources such as this guide, but also reach out to your peers and mentors. Graduate education is inherently social, just as the knowledge that you will produce in graduate school will require engagement with scholars in your field.

H&S offers the broadest educational experience of any school at Stanford, and we are committed to fostering and supporting new generations of scholars who reflect the diversity of intellectual perspectives, life experiences, and cultures represented in our world today. Such diversity is a fundamental part of our educational and research excellence.

I wish you the best on your academic journey, wherever it may take you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Debra Satz". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Debra Satz

Vernon R. and Lysbeth Warren Anderson  
Dean of the School of Humanities and Sciences  
Marta Sutton Weeks Professor of Ethics in Society



# Introduction

**IF YOU’RE CONSIDERING GRAD SCHOOL FOR YOUR FUTURE, YOU ARE PROBABLY ASKING** yourself many questions:

- Is grad school the best option for me now?
- What are the benefits and challenges?
- What’s the difference between undergrad and grad school?
- Should I seek a master’s or doctoral program?
- How will I fund my time in grad school? How does financial aid work in grad school, and what other kinds of financial support are available?
- Which grad programs should I apply to?
- What’s involved in applying to grad school?
- Who can help me? What resources are available?
- What are some alternatives to grad school?

These are all important questions to consider, and this can feel overwhelming. However, many people and resources, such as this guide, can help you through this process and answer many of your questions.

Because these decisions and your application for graduate school are complex and time-consuming, this guide was prepared to provide critical information and advice. Additionally, this guide contains questions to ask yourself and exercises to help you prepare your application for graduate programs. It can be tempting to skip these exercises, but they are essential and form the foundation of your application and your interactions with faculty. You are strongly encouraged to complete them.

Using this guide and working on these exercises can help you get started in the right direction. However, remember to also seek help from other people: faculty, advisers, grad students, postdocs, peers, and career counselors. Although this guide is meant to be comprehensive, your specific situation can only be addressed by close friends and mentors who know you personally.

As you address multiple decisions, this can be a stressful time period. But it may help to realize that you are not alone and that many others have approached these decisions and have successfully embarked on new adventures. So, remember to find friends to encourage you along your journey. We wish you the best.

Note: There is a wide range of possible graduate programs, including those that are research based (where you’ll spend a significant amount of time doing research to produce new knowledge and scholarship, e.g., PhD and some thesis-based master’s programs) and professional programs (e.g., MD, JD, or MBA programs, which are often required to enter into particular professions). This guide focuses on graduate programs that involve a significant amount of research to complete the graduate degree.

## Undergraduate vs Graduate (PhD) Programs

The experiences of an undergraduate and graduate student can appear deceptively similar. They are both at an institution of higher education doing coursework and research. However, there are significant differences. Not understanding the depth of these differences can hinder your chances of being admitted and succeeding in grad school.

### Undergraduate Programs

**You are a student “at institution X”**

- The primary focus is on courses and grades.
- Evaluations (i.e., grades) and feedback are relatively frequent.
- Evaluations of academic performance from exams and homework are relatively more objective.

**When you apply to a university or college**

- Your interests can be very broad.
- You apply to a discipline or major.
- Extracurricular activities are valued.

### Graduate (PhD) Programs

**You are a student of “Dr. Z” (research advisor) in a department/program at institution X**

- The primary focus is on research.
- Evaluations and feedback are much less frequent.
- Faculty evaluations of academic performance are relatively more subjective.

**You apply into a specific graduate program**

- Your interests need to be much more specific.
- You apply into a specific field within a discipline.
- Extracurricular activities are valued less, unless they demonstrate critical skills related to your field.



## Master's vs Doctoral Programs

While a typical 4-year undergraduate program refers to pursuing a bachelor's degree (often a BS or BA degree), a graduate program can refer to pursuing a master's or doctoral degree.

### Master's Programs (MS or MA)

- Master's programs usually last about 2 years, but there are shorter and longer programs, with the range usually between 1 and 3 years.
- Master's programs usually provide much less financial support.
- All master's programs require coursework, and only some require research that leads to a thesis (a write-up of your research).
- Requirements for master's programs are usually less than those for doctoral programs.

### Doctoral Programs (PhD)

- Doctoral programs have a wide range of typical lengths, from 4 to 8 years. The length of the program is very specific to the field.
- Doctoral programs usually provide some financial support.
- In some doctoral programs (e.g., some engineering programs), you earn a master's degree before earning a PhD. But in many other programs, the master's degree is not required before pursuing a PhD.
- All doctoral programs require research that leads to a dissertation (a write-up of multiple years of research, longer than a master's thesis).
- For some doctoral programs, if you are not able to complete all of the requirements, you might be allowed to exit with a master's degree.

## Master of Arts (MA) vs Master of Fine Arts (MFA) Degree Programs

An MA program focuses on deep study and analysis of a subject, perhaps culminating in a thesis (some MA programs involve only coursework). On the other hand, an MFA program focuses on the creation of a substantive work of art (such as a painting or sculpture, a piece of literature, or a musical piece). Many MFA degrees are considered terminal degrees, meaning they're the highest degree that you can earn in that particular field of art.



# Self-assessment and Selecting Grad Programs



“**M**y doubts delayed me from applying to PhD programs. A close friend persistently encouraged me to consider, ‘What job do I actually want?’ Over time, he helped me to think about what values I want to prioritize—knowledge, inquiry, autonomy, etc.—and to identify which industries might align with these values.

Of all the industries and jobs I listed and was qualified for, grad school was top of the list. Conversely, I took this real list of jobs and systematically eliminated options by preference. So, I asked myself this question then ran it back, and I reached the same conclusion.”

— Kristian Ayala, PhD student in English

**AS YOU CONSIDER GRAD SCHOOL, YOU MAY NEED TO BEGIN BY ASKING WHETHER** grad school is your best option. Working on these preliminary exercises below can help you confirm or correct your decisions, better understand your motivations and qualifications, and prepare you for your next steps.

As you work on these exercises and answer these questions, try not to force your responses into what you think other people want to hear. Take the time to slow down and carefully consider these questions. It’s important to be honest with yourself, so that you develop an accurate self-assessment. You can adjust your responses into a positive light for your specific applications later.

## 1. ASK YOURSELF SOME PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

- Why do you want to go to grad school as opposed to other options?
- What are alternatives and their pros and cons? Make sure that you're motivated and committed to persisting through your decision. Superficial motivations (e.g., my significant other/friends are doing the same; I don't like the alternatives) probably won't sustain you when challenges arise.
- How will your different options impact the people around you?
- How did you make difficult decisions in the past? What was your decision-making process? What were some valuable and less valuable aspects of your past decision-making process?

## 2. ASSESS YOUR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

- Self-assessment tools can help you discover your strengths, so that you address them meaningfully in your conversations and applications. Tools such as StrengthsFinder and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator can be helpful, and your university might have centers that can provide workshops to understand and apply your results.
- Completing an Individual Development Plan (e.g., using the [myIDP](#) or [ChemIDP](#) websites for those in the STEM disciplines, or the [ImaginePhD](#) website for those in the humanities and social sciences) can help you assess your skills, values, and interests.
- Simply reflecting and journaling about your past experiences can help you determine past patterns of success and achievements. You can also work through [Stories of success to boost your self-awareness](#), an exercise designed to help you become more aware of your strengths, values, relationships, and structures that have helped you to succeed. We (the authors of this guide) have used it in workshops with positive outcomes from participants.

## 3. ASSESS YOUR QUALIFICATIONS FOR GRAD SCHOOL

Are you a standout or star candidate? Candidates with this profile typically have the following characteristics. **But don't automatically rule yourself out of admission into a top-tier program! The only way you'll know if you qualify is to apply.**

- 3.5 GPA or higher (same or higher in your major)

- GRE scores at the 90th percentile or higher for the Verbal and Quantitative Reasoning components
- Research experiences (such as with summer programs or during the academic year lasting at least 9 months) leading to presentations (oral or poster) at a conference or in a publication
- Relevant coursework, internships or jobs in your field
- Research methods and/or statistics courses, particularly for those in social or quantitative fields
- Strong letters of recommendation from professors who have supervised your research that provide in-depth personal stories about you as a researcher/scholar, comparing you to similar students who have gone on to succeed in graduate school
- Excellent writing skills, which are particularly important in the humanities, where writing samples are often required with your application

If you believe that you're not a standout candidate, here are some options.

- Apply to *more* graduate programs—both top-tier and second-tier programs—to increase your chances of getting admitted. All programs should have at least two faculty you'd be happy to work with.
- Do your best to have strong letters of recommendation, as these will become more important. Suggestions about your letters are offered further below.
- Have a recommender or two address how perceived weaknesses in your application (e.g., low grades in your first year or GRE scores) don't reflect your true promise. Also, be sure to address these unusual aspects in your personal statement.
- If you're able, take grad-level courses, get more research experience, participate in a post-baccalaureate program, or pursue a master's degree to transition into more competitive doctoral programs.
- *But don't automatically rule yourself out of admission into a top-tier program!*

#### 4. CONDUCT INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

Find grad students, postdocs, faculty, and professionals who seem to be doing what interests you, and ask them to chat with you briefly. Ask them about their work: general responsibilities, challenges, and benefits; what a typical day looks like; strengths and skills that have helped them to succeed; their career path and their motivations at critical decision points. See if you can envision yourself in a similar role and career path. (This [article](#) provides gives further advice on how to conduct an informational interview for grad students.)

## 5. SEEK COUNSEL FROM FACULTY AND CAREER COUNSELORS

Talk with faculty who know you to help you determine whether you have the essential qualifications to succeed in grad school (this will also help you when you need recommendation letters). Faculty can also suggest specific grad programs and universities to consider.

Your university probably also has academic advisors and career counselors who may be able to provide career self-assessments, mock interviews, and other resources.

### **Build your network of support—these folks will get you through!**

Work intentionally to build your support network to help you plan your future. Reach out to new people and deepen relationships with past acquaintances.

- Who are faculty who share your research interests?
- Who are more advanced students who can share with you how to succeed in this new terrain?
- Who are scholars across the country (grad students and faculty) you can work with or just talk with about your research and career?
- Who are friends outside of your field who will sustain you and remind you of the world outside of academia?

But before you reach out to people, think of what you want from them. Generic requests for someone to become your mentor or sponsor can be ineffective as people might feel overwhelmed or confused with such requests. If you can first identify your needs, this will help you specify your requests as you approach people.

To help you identify your needs, it might help to note that students often want to gain skills (e.g., in writing, presenting, self-awareness, career planning, etc.), support (e.g., motivational, emotional, social, etc.), and/or sponsorship (e.g., access to key people or opportunities, to have their work be amplified, etc.). Once you specify your needs in these areas, you can then work on identifying different people to help you work toward them.

## 6. SEEK RESEARCH EXPERIENCES AND INTERNSHIPS

Whether or not you attend grad school, these research experiences are vital in preparing you for a wide range of options, and they can also help you decide between grad or professional programs, master's or PhD programs, applying to grad school immediately or delaying for some time, etc. Many academic and preparatory programs will not only provide research experiences, but also valuable professional development workshops, community-building, and mentorship.

## 7. SEARCH ONLINE FOR SPECIFIC UNIVERSITIES AND PROGRAMS

This is where to begin if the previous steps seem to confirm that you have the essential qualifications and sufficient motivation for grad school. Try to identify the programs that your peers (with similar interests and academic credentials) were admitted into and have succeeded in. Rankings of grad programs within your discipline might also help, but **don't get caught up too much in rankings. It's much more important to find a program with faculty doing work that aligns with your interests.** Organize each program's application requirements, deadlines, and specific faculty whose work interests you.

## 8. IF YOU'RE THINKING OF CHANGING DISCIPLINES BETWEEN YOUR UNDERGRAD PROGRAM TO YOUR GRAD PROGRAM

You might be considering changing fields for a number of reasons. Perhaps your undergraduate institution did not offer a specific field as a major and/or research opportunities in your desired field. Your interests might have also evolved as you discovered a particular field late in your undergraduate program, and it was extremely difficult to change majors.

If you are contemplating changing fields, plan your transition carefully. Talk with people (faculty, grad students, postdocs, and staff) in both your current field and new field, and ask if your transition would be feasible. Learn about the different expectations in graduate applications and programs for each field. For example, because engineering graduate programs often involve more coursework, the transition from a chemistry undergraduate program into a chemical engineering graduate program can be difficult. The feasibility of this transition depends on whether your coursework and research experiences provide sufficient preparation for the new program.

Furthermore, because many universities encourage interdisciplinary research projects, transitioning fields or departments within grad school is often simpler than trying to make a transition during the admissions process. You might consider staying within the field of your undergraduate program for grad school and then making the transition after you've been accepted and started grad school. You might also consider applying to more than one graduate program within the same university to see which admits you, if the university allows applying to more than one graduate program. Many universities (but not all) allow you to apply to only one graduate program at their institution.

## 9. IF YOU'RE IN THE BIOSCIENCES AND TRYING TO DECIDE BETWEEN PHD, MD, AND PHD-MD PROGRAMS

It might help to learn about a research study that interviewed and followed undergrads as they selected and pursued these different programs. This study identified different attributes among undergraduates that predicted persistence into PhD and MD/PhD training ("[Identifying Future Scientists: Predicting Persistence into Research Training](#)"). Reviewing this study might help you reflect on your own attributes and determine if they align with the predicted career trajectories as reported in this paper.

# Suggested Graduate School Prep Timeline

This suggested timeline is for students planning to attend graduate school immediately after earning a bachelor's degree, and can be easily adjusted for students planning a post-baccalaureate or gap-year experience or for master's students applying for doctoral programs.

## Freshman and Sophomore Years

### Summer between sophomore and junior years

- Do well in your coursework.
- Meet with academic advisors to plan your coursework and help you consider graduate programs.
- Develop relationships with faculty.
- Actively seek and participate in research and internship opportunities at your home institution during the academic year and during the summers.

- Apply for and participate in research and internship opportunities at your home institution or elsewhere.
- It's important to note that many application deadlines for summer programs are between December and February, so you'll need to plan early.

## Junior Year (or one year before application season)

### Summer between junior and senior years

- Participate in research at your home institution.
- Identify graduate programs and fellowships that are relevant for your plans. You'll likely need to create lists or spreadsheets with information on potential programs and institutions. Some sample spreadsheets are offered here and here.
- If possible, attend conferences in your discipline, especially if they include sessions for prospective graduate students or grad school fairs.
- If possible, start visiting institutions with graduate programs that interest you.
- For each grad program, see if the GRE or other standardized exams are required, recommended, or unnecessary.
- Take the GRE exams if needed.
- Look into extramural fellowships in your relevant fields.

- Apply for and participate in research and internship opportunities at your home institution or elsewhere.
- It's important to note that many application deadlines for summer programs are between December and February, so you'll need to plan early.
- Identify graduate programs and fellowships that are relevant for your plans.

## Senior Year (or in final year during application season)

- Continue to participate in research at your home institution.
- If possible, attend conferences in your discipline, especially if they include sessions for prospective graduate students or grad school fairs.

## August/September

- Actively seek and apply for application fee waivers.
- Contact faculty members to seek their advice and ask if they are willing to write you a strong recommendation letter.
- Identify graduate programs and fellowships that are relevant for your plans.
- Gather information about required application materials and deadlines.
- Work on personal and research statements.
- If your discipline requires you to reach out to prospective faculty for your graduate program, start reaching out to them.

## October/November/December (depending on the application deadlines)

- Complete and submit application materials.
- Ask your letter writers to submit their recommendation letters, providing all the forms, information, and deadlines.
- Order transcripts, if official transcripts are required. In many cases, unofficial transcripts are accepted in initial stages of the application process. Official transcripts will likely be required later to be officially admitted.
- If needed, confirm that all of your application materials were received.

## January/February/March of Senior Year

- If appropriate, look into visiting institutions on your own.
- Some programs typically include interviews (e.g., in bioscience fields) or recruitment trips for admitted students.
- Admissions offers with financial aid packages are often provided around this time.
- If you have been admitted into multiple programs, reach out to others to help you make your decision, and review the other section of this document with further suggestions on making your decision.

## April 15

- Most universities participate in the CGS (Council of Graduate Schools) April 15 Resolution, which is an agreement among signatory graduate schools to provide applicants until April 15 to consider offers of admission that also include financial support.
- This means that students are under no obligation to respond to offers of financial support prior to April 15. Earlier deadlines for acceptance of such offers would violate the intent of this resolution.
- If you have made your final decision before April 15, many graduate programs would greatly appreciate hearing your response (to accept or decline an offer) so that they can make informed decisions regarding other applicants who are on waiting lists. Applicants on the waiting list would probably appreciate this also.
- If you change your mind and want to accept an offer from a different program, the CGS website includes an FAQ section that offers a process for this situation.
- After you have made your final decision, thank all of your friends and colleagues for their assistance and inform them of your final decision.
- If you declined admission from some institutions, remember to still thank them for their offers because you'll likely encounter the faculty and scholars again.

As you consider all possibilities, you might be thinking of postponing graduate school for a year or more. Or you might be thinking of returning to school after a break. There are several related paths that you might be considering.

- Apply for and participate in a postbaccalaureate program as a bridge between finishing your undergraduate degree and starting grad school (e.g., [Stanford Medicine Postbaccalaureate Experience in Research](#) and [Predoctoral Researchers Program at the Stanford Institute for Research in the Social Sciences](#)). These postbac programs can help you gain more research experience and gain admission into a more competitive graduate program.
- Take a gap year (or more) to earn more income in the “real world,” to shift to a new research area, to take additional courses, to take care of personal or family needs, or for other reasons.
- Apply for and get admitted into a graduate program, and then defer your admission for one year. (Many, but not all, graduate programs will allow admitted students to defer their admission for one year. This is something to request only after you’ve been admitted).

These are not uncommon paths, and so many students will be considering these possibilities. As you consider your options, it’ll be important to plan your time wisely and reflect on how graduate admissions committees and employers will perceive how you used your time.

If the time between finishing your undergraduate degree and applying for graduate programs is long (i.e., several years or more), graduate admissions committees might question your commitment to their graduate program. However, you might have legitimate reasons that will be acceptable to the admissions committee. For example, you might have wanted to gain more research experience in a new direction by working as a research assistant; you might have had to work to earn more income to help support your family; or you might have needed to take a break to take care of dependents.

As you consider your specific circumstances, it’s essential to consider how the admissions committees will perceive your decisions and for you to craft an acceptable explanation that relates to both your commitment and competence. To guide you in crafting your explanation, try consulting with the faculty who will write your recommendation letters.

You can draft a description and ask your faculty letter writers how they would respond. Your description should provide a story that explains the major decisions that you made and explains why their graduate program fits as the next step in your storyline.

If your storyline does not appear to have any clear directions, or if it appears that you tried some alternatives that didn't work out and grad school is a last resort, admissions committees will likely be skeptical of your commitment and focus.

The important messages are provided here for your consideration:

- If you're finishing your undergraduate degree now and planning to pursue a graduate degree after a break, wisely plan your break. Be deliberate and plan a timeline of activities so that you don't lose your focus.
- Carefully consider how you'll explain your story in your application and anticipate how graduate admissions committees will perceive your commitment and preparation. Your explanation should address the major forks along your path and convince the admissions committee that you'll remain committed and persist through the whole graduate program.



Photo by Misha Bruk



# Funding Graduate Studies

## **THE TYPES OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS USUALLY INCLUDE**

fellowships, research assistantships, or teaching assistantships. Expectations and eligibility requirements vary significantly, so pay close attention to these details as you look into these possibilities at each institution. Some graduate programs strongly encourage their students to seek external or internal (within your institution) funding. This will involve more time and effort on your part, but receiving one of these awards will be an honor that you can highlight in your CV.

Here are some resources and suggestions that may help as you consider funding your time in graduate school.

- Start looking early at funding sources and opportunities. For example, these websites from [Stanford](#), [UCLA](#), and [Columbia](#) provide lists and search engines. You'll also want to look specifically at each institution to which you're considering applying. Additionally, federal agencies, private foundations, corporations, and professional organizations may also offer fellowships for graduate study.
- Financial support for master's programs is usually limited compared to doctoral programs.
- Note that some funding sources have eligibility requirements related to citizenship or residency.

Because funding situations vary significantly at each institution and graduate program, search closely and keep track of these details. As was recommended earlier, creating a spreadsheet with all the details for each program and funding source is essential. Some sample spreadsheets are offered [here](#) and [here](#).



# Preparing Your Applications



Photo by Misha Bruk

### **APPLYING TO GRAD SCHOOL CAN TAKE QUITE A BIT OF TIME. IT INVOLVES ASSESSING**

yourself, writing personal statements, seeking recommendation letters, and trying to keep track of all the logistics and deadlines. All of this can feel overwhelming. But you can do this. The key strategies include starting early, maintaining your momentum, and organizing all of the logistics. With these strategies, you'll also be able to anticipate and tackle problems as they appear along the way.

The overall application for most graduate programs generally includes the following:

1. Personal statements
2. GPA and transcripts
3. Letters of recommendation
4. Biographical information from your essays or résumé/curriculum vitae that describes your academic, research, and professional experiences
5. GRE scores (check if the general and/or subject exams are required, recommended, optional, or not accepted)
6. Writing sample (for some programs in the humanities and social sciences)
7. Interview (for some graduate programs, often in the biosciences; can be virtual or in person)

In general, faculty and admissions committees use these components to determine if you are a suitable candidate for graduate school. In particular, they are trying to determine if you are a suitable candidate for their specific program.



## 1. GATHER INFORMATION ON EACH OF THE GRADUATE PROGRAM'S REQUIREMENTS

- Get online applications started and create online accounts.
- Find out about application fees and look into application fee waivers and their deadlines.
- Many universities grant waivers for participants in grad school preparatory programs, for those in financial need, and for other eligibility requirements set by the university.
- As an example, here is Stanford's [application fee waiver info](#) and its [graduate admissions website](#).
- Check if there is a separate application for financial support.
- Mark deadlines and take them seriously!
- Find out about testing and course requirements for the programs.
- GRE General or Subject Test (check if required, recommended, optional, or not accepted)
- Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Test of Spoken English (TSE)

*You'll likely need to create a spreadsheet with all the logistics and details so that you can be organized and keep track of your timeline. Some sample spreadsheets are offered [here](#) and [here](#).*

## 2. TAKING THE GREs

- Check if graduate programs in your field require, recommend, or accept GRE exam scores for the general and subject tests. Recently programs have changed their policies regarding the GRE exam, so you'll need to check.
- If you will take the GRE, start preparing early (junior year of college or about 1 year in advance of applying for grad school).
- Take a practice exam to determine where you currently stand. Some free samples are available at [www.kaplan.com](http://www.kaplan.com) or [www.princetonreview.com](http://www.princetonreview.com). For an actual past exam, you can purchase the [ETS Official Guide to the GRE General Test](#). Other resources (some free) are available from the [ETS GRE website](#).

- Take a GRE preparatory course. Or get both the Kaplan and Princeton Review GRE prep books. Each comes with 3-4 practice computer GREs.
- Find out how far you are from the scores you need to be competitive.

**If you're scoring pretty well, prioritize:**

- Getting more familiar with the computer-based exam and its format.
- Learning the way the different question types work and the types of wrong answers associated with certain question types (Princeton Review, Kaplan, Manhattan Prep, and Magoosh books are very helpful here!)
- Getting comfortable using educated guessing when stumped.
- Increasing your focus and endurance.

**If you're further away from good scores, take more time to study and:**

- Focus on replacing your current problem-solving approaches with Princeton Review/Kaplan methods.
- Try not to worry so much about how you're doing while studying.
- Embrace your mistakes and errors: Learn from them so you don't make the same errors on the exam.
- Practice managing anxiety, tension, and attention for optimal performance.



Photo by Mishal Brink



# Writing Your Personal Statements

“**M**y research examines the interplay between U.S. domestic politics and foreign policy during the Cold War. As a native New Yorker, I saw firsthand how dramatically my city changed after 9/11, which prompted my early interest in U.S. policy at home and abroad. As an undergraduate at the City College of New York, I planned to study international relations with a focus on U.S. foreign affairs. I also quickly became involved in student activist groups that focused on raising awareness about a wide range of human rights issues, from the Syrian refugee crisis to asylum seekers from Central America.



The more I learned about the crises in the present, the more I realized that I needed a deeper understanding of the past to fully grasp them. I decided to pursue a PhD in history in order to gain a clearer understanding of human rights issues in the present and to empower young student-activists like myself. ”

— Vanessa Velez, PhD candidate in History

**YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT MUST DEMONSTRATE TO THE ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE THAT** you have considered graduate school and their specific program seriously. It’s your opportunity to summarize your academic and research experiences. You must also communicate how your experiences are relevant to preparing you for the graduate degree that you will be pursuing and explain why a given program is the right one for you.

**The personal statement is where you highlight your strengths.** Make your strengths absolutely clear to the reviewers, because they will often be reading many other statements. Your self-assessments and honest conversations with peers and advisors should have also revealed your strengths. But you must also address (not blame others for) weaknesses or unusual aspects of your application or academic background.

Your personal statement should focus on two main aspects: your **competence** and **commitment**.

**1.** Regarding your **competence**, identify your strengths that demonstrate you are able to succeed in the grad program and provide examples to support your claims. Start your statement by describing your strengths immediately. Because faculty will be reading many statements, it's important to start off with your strengths and not “bury your lede.” Consider traits of successful graduate students from your informational interviews, and identify which of these traits you have. These traits could involve research skills and experiences, expertise in working with techniques or instruments, familiarity with professional networks and resources in your field, etc.

- Check your responses from the exercises in the self-assessment section. You may wish to consult notes from your informational interviews. Write concise summaries and stories that demonstrate your strengths, e.g., how your strengths helped you to achieve certain goals or overcome obstacles.
- Summarize your research experience(s). What were the main project goals and the “big picture” questions? What was your role in this project? What did you accomplish? What did you learn, and how did you grow as a result of the experience(s)?

### **Addressing weaknesses or unusual aspects**

- Identify weaknesses or unusual aspects in your application—e.g., a significant drop in your GPA during a term; weak GRE scores; changes in your academic trajectory, etc. Don't ignore them, because ignoring them might be interpreted as blind spots for you. If you're unsure if a particular issue is significant enough to address, seek advice from faculty mentors.
- Explain how you'll improve and strengthen those areas or work around your weakness. Determine how you will address them in a positive light, e.g., by discussing how you overcame obstacles through persistence, what you learned from challenges, and how you grew from failures. Focusing on a [growth mindset](#) or [grit](#) and [this blog on weaknesses](#) might also help.
- Note that it's often better to refer to these unusual aspects later in the essay to first allow a positive impression to develop.
- Explain, rather than provide excuses—i.e., address the issue directly and don't blame others (even if you believe someone else is responsible). Draft it and get feedback from others to see if the explanation is working to deliver your desired impact on the reader.
- Provide supporting empirical evidence if possible. For example, “Adjusting to college was a major step for me, coming from a small high school and as a first-generation college student. My freshman GPA was not up to par with my typical achievements, as demonstrated by my improved GPA of 3.8 during my second and third years in college.”
- Be concise (don't dwell on the issues), but also be complete (don't lead to other potentially unanswered questions). For example, if a drop in grades during a term was due to a health issue, explain whether the health issue is recurring, managed now with medication, resolved, etc.

**2.** Regarding your **commitment**, explain your motivation for pursuing research and this graduate program and discipline. You might describe your passion for discovering the unknown and drive to tackle tough problems. If relevant, you could share stories where you encountered obstacles, persisted, and found novel solutions that weren't considered before.

- Descriptions of your commitment should explain why you're passionate about this particular academic field and provide demonstrations of your commitment with stories (e.g., working long hours to solve a problem, overcoming challenges in research, resilience in pursuing problems). Don't merely assert your commitment.
- You could also share your commitment to the academic discipline, such as how you served or led discipline-related activities and communities. If appropriate, you could describe how you were involved in mentoring future generations of students or doing outreach activities to broaden participation in your field.
- Additionally, identify several faculty members at the institution whose research aligns with your interests, explain why their research fascinates you, and share how you might benefit from working with them. You may also want to write about one or two things you have learned about the graduate program that make it a good fit for you.
- Explain why you are applying to graduate school, as opposed to seeking a professional degree or a job. Discuss your interest and motivation for grad school, along with your future career aspirations.



## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE: MORE SUBTLE ASPECTS

- On the page, you will want to sound confident (but not arrogant), enthusiastic (but not desperate), and curious to learn (but not naive). It will indeed be challenging to balance these aspects of your statement, so plan on working through multiple drafts and asking friends for feedback on your drafts.
- With later drafts, try developing an overall narrative theme. See if one emerges as you work.
- Plan to work through at least 10 drafts and expect your thinking and the essay to change substantially over time.
- Read drafts out loud to help you catch errors.
- Think very carefully about the use of generative AI (artificial intelligence) bots, as these may lead to statements that are not authentic to your own experiences.
- Expect the “you” that emerges in your essay to be incomplete, which is OK. You’re sharing a professional/scholarly slice of “you” that will continue to evolve.
- Generally, avoid humor (which can often be misinterpreted) and overly emotional appeals (which can sound melodramatic), such as references to wanting to be a scholar or scientist since you were 5 years old.



Photo by Christine Baker

“ I am definitely not your traditional graduate student. As a biracial (Native American and white), first-generation PhD student from a military family, I had very limited guidance on how best to pursue my education, especially when I decided that graduate school was a good idea. I ended up coming to this PhD in a very circuitous manner, stopping first to get a JD and, later, an MFA in Young Adult Literature.

With each degree, I took time to work and apply what I’d learned, as a lawyer and as an educator. Each time, I realized that I was circling around questions that I couldn’t let go of—not just because I found them to be fascinating, but because I did (and still do!) feel that my research could help to bridge a gap that desperately needs bridging. Because my work is quite interdisciplinary, I strongly feel that I wouldn’t have been able to pursue this line of research without the degrees and life experience I gained before coming to this program. ”

— Jamie Fine, PhD candidate in Modern Thought and Literature

## THE “PERSONAL” ASPECTS OF PERSONAL STATEMENTS

If the prompt or question provided by the graduate program invites you to write about personal aspects (e.g., your background, lived experiences, identities, community affiliations, etc.), you’ll want to carefully consider what aspects to share, along with how to frame these disclosures. Because these prompts vary significantly, you’ll need to pay close attention to the wording and respond directly to the specific prompt or question.

- If you share about these personal aspects, you may want to focus on particular qualities or attributes that helped you to achieve excellence and that are relevant for success in the graduate program. Some possible examples include developing a growth mindset, resilience, or novel perspectives from challenges that you faced through your lived experiences.
- You could also share about service or leadership in activities that broaden participation in your field and enhance the learning environments of emerging scholars (e.g., outreach, mentorship, teaching, community-building events, and/or professional development activities).
- If you have personal motivations for why you began pursuing your academic field (e.g., seeking equity and justice around social issues, desire to promote civil dialogue between polarized perspectives, etc.), you could share about these as well.

If your personal background, lived experiences, and/or identity or intersection of identities has affected your academic journey, shaped your research interests, and/or influenced your career goals, you may want to share these thoughts with the admissions committee. This will require some thought. Talking with close friends and advisers who have navigated similar paths may be helpful.

These essays can be difficult to start. Here are some tips as you work through your drafts:

- First jot down some preliminary thoughts or phrases over a period of time. Don’t worry about organizing the thoughts yet. Just get them down on the page.
- Talk to folks you’re close to about the essay and see what emerges, adding those ideas to the document.
- Look for themes and begin organizing the essay according to those themes.
- Make sure you are answering the questions you are asked to answer. Regularly go back to the specific prompt or instructions for the statement.
- Edit the essay for length.
- Get feedback from people you trust to ensure your writing conveys your thoughts effectively and genuinely.



# Requesting Recommendation Letters

## **AS YOU PROGRESSED THROUGH THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN THE EARLIER PARTS**

above, you should have had several significant conversations with faculty. These conversations will help you immensely as you seek several faculty to write recommendation letters on your behalf. That conversation will also help the faculty write meaningfully about your strengths. It's best to avoid situations where faculty will only be able to write superficial letters where they will simply report your letter grade from a course.

### **1. CHOOSE YOUR RECOMMENDERS THOUGHTFULLY.**

As you ask for a reference letter, **specifically ask if the recommender will write a strong letter on your behalf.** Although this will likely be an awkward question to ask directly, it's much better to find out in advance if they would submit a lukewarm letter. It is not uncommon for admissions committees to receive lukewarm, superficial, or even negative letters, which will significantly hurt your chances for getting admitted.

Remember also that you should be doing the groundwork of meeting with faculty in advance (as recommended by the earlier exercises) to receive advice and guidance on preparing for graduate programs and to help faculty better understand your experiences and interests. These earlier conversations will help you gauge whether this person is excited about your potential. If this person doesn't seem excited about your potential and doesn't understand you, you might not want to ask this direct question, and you can avoid this awkward situation. But if they seem excited for you, it's probably a safe bet to ask for a strong letter.

Moreover, if the potential letter writer indicates some hesitation to write a strong letter and mentions concerns, this can help you to become more aware of issues that you'll need to address in your personal statements.

The letters of recommendation should support your claim that you have considered graduate school seriously. The letters must identify your strengths that will exemplify how you will become a successful graduate student. Letters that simply confirm grades received in courses are of little value to an admissions committee, since they will have your transcripts. Your letters of support should add new dimensions rather than be redundant.

## 2. WHO SHOULD WRITE YOUR LETTERS?

Ideally, you should select research mentors and faculty who can speak to your abilities to be a successful graduate student. Some ideal options are:

- Faculty who mentored you in research (most important reference)
- Employer or supervisor during an internship or job in a field related to your discipline (it's much better if the employer has a graduate degree in your field)
- Postdoctoral research mentor (if they worked closely with you in your research; in this case, it's also ideal if your postdoc and faculty member co-write and co-sign the letter).
- Faculty instructor (who can comment on more than simply your grade)
- Academic adviser

Letters from these individuals **are not recommended** for your graduate application:

- Family or friends
- Religious advisers
- Graduate students who have not completed their graduate degrees (unless this is co-signed by a faculty adviser)
- Employer or supervisor in an unrelated field or discipline
- Faculty member in an unrelated academic discipline who can only report your final grade

Identify 5 or more faculty members whom you might ask to write a recommendation letter for you. Many programs require 3 references, but you'll probably need to identify more references and use them for different programs and universities depending on the faculty members' experiences and backgrounds. Admissions committees also value receiving reference letters from faculty who are very familiar with their university or graduate program, from having attended that university's graduate program or from having been a faculty member at that institution. So it'll help if you look into the past connections of your potential letter writers.

“ Imposter syndrome and frequent rejections in academia (from conferences, publications, etc.) pose a challenge, but learning that these are very common and coming up with strategies helped me navigate my journey. One change that made a difference was shifting my mindset from ‘I don’t have what it takes; I’m a fraud; I’m only here as a diversity candidate’ to ‘I don’t know everything yet but that’s okay because I’m here to learn; faculty see promise in me and I’ve already grown so much; my diverse experiences and perspectives give me a whole new creative angle.’



Graduate school pushes you to your limits in many ways, but the amount of intellectual and mental freedom we are given—nobody tells us what to think about!—is incredible and something not to be taken for granted. ”

— Hannah Kim, PhD candidate in Philosophy



Photo by Harrison Truong

For each request for a recommendation letter, make it as easy as possible for the faculty to complete your request. If you make it difficult or leave out essential details, you may annoy them and cause them to be less than excited to write a strong letter on your behalf. Remember that you may be asking them to submit multiple letters for different programs, so this will consume significant time and energy from them. For each request:

- 1. Provide the name of the university** and type of program to which you’re applying, along with clear instructions on how to submit the letter, deadline (remember to give them extra time if this is your first request to them), and if you’ll be asking for additional letters in the near future. You may want to check their calendar if they’ll be unavailable for a significant time period before the deadlines, which often occur around the end of the fall term, which is a busy time for most faculty.
- 2. Provide a short summary of strengths** and research experiences, along with your CV and personal statement, to refresh their memory of your background, strengths, and motivations for that particular program.
- 3. Provide an email reminder** about 10 days before it’s due. If you haven’t heard from them, consider one more gentle reminder a few days before the deadline.
- 4. Provide an update to your letter writers** after you receive invitations to interview or admissions offers, and when you make your final decision. They will likely appreciate hearing back from you.



# Interviewing and Talking with Prospective Faculty



Photo by Misha Bruk

**THE GRADUATE APPLICATION PROCESS VARIES BROADLY AND DEPENDS ON YOUR specific academic program.**

The variations might include:

- Admission decision based only on an online application
- Admission decision based on online application and interviewing with faculty
  - In the cases where you are admitted to work with a specific faculty member, you should contact faculty directly
- Admission decision based on online application and interview trip
  - A short list of applicants are invited for an on-campus interview trip
- Admission decision based on online application and recruiting trip
  - Applicants are admitted first, and then invited for an on-campus recruiting trip

Because of the range of possible application processes, it's critical to learn about each program's requirements. For some graduate programs, you will need to directly contact faculty because a specific professor will decide whether to admit you as their own graduate student. In these circumstances, make sure to contact the faculty directly. (When contacting faculty for the first time, see the side box below for suggestions.)

It will be important in your decision-making process to determine if you envision working closely with that faculty member and if you have complementary working and communication styles. The faculty member will also want to assess your experiences and how you work by communicating with you. Thus you will want to sharpen your interview skills as you communicate with faculty.

## Contacting Faculty for the First Time

In some disciplines (such as ecology), the graduate program expects you to reach out to faculty during the admissions process, as you will be entering into the graduate program matched with a research adviser. But the process of matching a grad student with their research adviser varies significantly, so ask around and seek to understand the expectations of the discipline and graduate programs.

Subject: Ecology PhD Program at [University X]<sup>1</sup>

Dear Professor [First and Last Name],<sup>2</sup>

I am currently a senior at [Your Home Institution] and would greatly appreciate an opportunity to briefly speak with you about your research and the Ecology PhD program at [University X].<sup>3</sup>

I am looking into PhD programs in Ecology, and my research adviser, [Professor First and Last Name], spoke highly about your research and graduate program. I am particularly fascinated by [describe your research interests], as I have conducted similar research [describe your research experiences], and won an oral presentation award at [describe any awards or publications]. These are further described in my [consider attaching a pdf of your CV or link to your LinkedIn profile].<sup>4</sup>

I read your recent paper [describe their recent research] and would greatly appreciate speaking with you on the phone (~15 min) to learn more about future directions of your research, particularly on [describe possible future directions of their work] and to see if you're planning on accepting new graduate students this upcoming cycle. I am generally available on [insert dates and times when you're generally available] and would be grateful for an opportunity to connect with you.<sup>5</sup>

[Your First and Last Name]<sup>6</sup>

[Home Institution]

[email address]

[mobile phone number]

- 1 • Use a brief subject line.
  - Avoid vague subjects (e.g., “question” or “request”).
- 2 • Address them by their full name and professional title.
  - Don't use “Hi” or “Hey” or other informal greetings.
- 3 • In the very first sentence, quickly summarize who you are and why you're contacting them.
  - If a person known to the professor suggested that you reach out to them, include that info also.
- 4 • Explain why you're contacting them specifically.
  - Describe your highlights briefly.
  - Attach CV and/or link to LinkedIn profile.
- 5 • State your request and be specific.
  - Make it easy for them to say yes to your request; provide ample times when you're available.
- 6 • Include your full name, email, and phone.

Some graduate programs will invite you to conduct a phone interview or invite you to the university for a campus visit (common in the biosciences). The interview is your opportunity to more thoroughly demonstrate that you have what it takes to be in the graduate program. You will want to show your understanding and enthusiasm for the research that you have done. Some suggestions to prepare for the interview are provided below.

### 1. Before the interview

- For campus visits, it's OK to ask what is expected of you and how to prepare (e.g., if your travel expenses will be covered, how to dress, if you should bring your CV, etc.).
- Learn about the faculty and people you will be meeting or communicating with. Read about the research interests of the faculty, including abstracts or papers. Prepare at least 1-2 specific research questions for each interview.
- Review the research that you conducted. If it was published or presented at a conference, reread the paper, abstract, or poster. Prepare a brief (1-2 minutes) oral summary of your past work. What was the research question? How did you address it? What did you specifically complete and achieve? What are some possible questions that faculty might ask?
- Prepare detailed questions you have of the program you are considering. Generic questions (e.g., tell me about your program) indicate that you didn't read the basics on their website, and so won't leave a positive impression. Determine what's important for you (specific research facilities, professional development activities, student groups, opportunities for collaborations, etc.) and research them online.
- Determine and list the questions you have about the program, university, and location of where you are visiting. What are you hoping to see and learn?
- Conduct a mock interview with a friend or an advisor at your career center.
  - Ask a peer or friend (e.g. a current grad student or postdoc who is familiar with grad school interviews) to help you sharpen your interview skills.
  - Come prepared to the mock interview in professional attire and with your materials (CV, papers, etc.).
  - If possible, video record your mock interview. Although many cringe at watching themselves, the video can be incredibly helpful in revealing blind spots.
  - If your interview will be conducted via Skype or another video platform, some helpful tips are provided in this [YouTube video](#).
  - After the mock interview, ask your peer for honest and critical feedback. Listen actively without being defensive and allow your peer to speak openly, which will help you improve.

## 2. During the interview

- For campus visits, dress appropriately (usually business casual, but be comfortable); be on time; organize your papers (e.g., résumés/CVs, slides or images, questions).
- Even for phone/Skype interviews, dressing professionally will help you to mentally prepare for the interview.
- Speak enthusiastically about your work. Highlight your research accomplishments and/or professional growth. If asked to speak about a weakness, phrase your answer in a forward-looking manner to demonstrate learning and growth, and awareness of your weaknesses.
- You'll want to sound positive and enthusiastic. But avoid excessive enthusiasm, which could be interpreted as naiveté or desperation. This is a tough balance to achieve, so practice with others.
- Listen actively to your faculty interviewers as they talk about their research.
- Ask questions, using your prepared lists. Take notes to remember comments and suggestions.

## 3. After the interview

- Summarize your perceptions of the program, university, and environment. Make a table listing the pros and cons. List the people whom you met on your visit, and write a brief comment for each person to help you remember your interactions. Is it a good fit for you?
- Email your interviewers and thank them for their time. Follow up if you promised to provide any materials. Even if you determine that you don't wish to work with that faculty member, this isn't the time to burn bridges, and you might bump into them in the future.
- Reflect on your interview performance and make adjustments to strengthen your next interview.

“**M**y advice to the next generation of scholars is to never be afraid to ask for help. At times it may seem like brilliance is a singular, herculean effort, but a lot of great ideas have been shaped and molded from the minds of many. Whether it’s your advisors or peers, we’re all here to help. Never be afraid to acknowledge that you don’t fully understand something—collaboration is encouraged and celebrated. ”

— Bryen Irving, PhD candidate in Physics





# How Your Application Is Reviewed

**THE PROCESS OF REVIEWING APPLICATIONS VARIES SIGNIFICANTLY FROM UNIVERSITY TO university, and from program to program.**

- Some large programs will receive hundreds of applications, which might be reviewed initially by a committee that will “triage” the applications and make an initial cut. In smaller programs, all applications might be reviewed by all members of the admissions committee.
- The admissions committee will include faculty and might also include staff and/or graduate students.
- You as the applicant will likely not receive an update on the process. You might be notified if a part of your application is missing, but you can’t count on this. You’ll need to make sure that all parts have been submitted by the deadlines.
- If you are offered admission, the financial package might come together or separately.

If you are offered admission, note that almost all universities follow the CGS (Council of Graduate Schools) [resolution deadline](#) of April 15. This means that you are under no obligation to respond to offers prior to April 15, and graduate programs should not pressure you to respond before April 15. However, they might request you to give a response earlier if you have already made your decision, so that they can make decisions and notify other applicants on their wait list. (Further information about this deadline is provided in the link.)

If you are notified of being placed on a wait list for a highly desired graduate program, it’ll be important to stay in communication with the graduate program and to be responsive to their communications. Most (but not all) programs will provide their final decision by the April 15 deadline. As grad programs might be making final decisions right up to and occasionally after April 15, stay in close communication with key contacts at the graduate programs.

If you have made your final decision whether to accept or decline an admissions offer well before April 15, please be considerate of those on the wait list by notifying the graduate program of your decision.



# Making Your Final Decision

**AT THE INITIAL STAGES OF YOUR APPLICATION PROCESS, IT MAY SEEM DIFFICULT TO PLAN** ahead and consider how you will make your final decision of which graduate program to attend. But thinking about your decision-making process will help you throughout the whole application process, because you will be more committed and focused. This commitment and focus will help sharpen your questions and priorities. But be prepared that your priorities, values, and goals can change during this process.

- 1. Go back to the self-assessment exercises and reflect on your answers and responses.** Have any of your answers or decisions changed? Have you learned anything new about yourself and about grad school? Have there been any surprises?
- 2. If you are admitted into your preferred programs,** it will help to go back and consider some of your basic questions. Attending grad school is often challenging for most students, and most graduate programs will be more challenging than undergraduate programs. This isn't a light decision to make quickly, and strengthening your commitment will help you to persist when obstacles arise. Be aware of confirmation biases, or focusing on information that confirms your beliefs and ignoring other information that might provide a more balanced view. Here are some questions to consider:
  - What are some potential pitfalls as you consider starting grad school? How will you address them? Who might help you? What are some possible resources?
  - What are some possible challenges for each graduate program that you're considering? How will you address them? Who might help you?
  - What are you looking forward to? Remembering the positive aspects often helps through depressing periods.

If you get admitted and if new priorities have popped up (e.g., taking care of family, marriage, children, other professional opportunities, etc.), it might help to note that many (not all) graduate programs allow you to defer admission for one year.

**3. If you did not get admitted into your preferred programs**, consider your options. Can you find further research, professional, or academic experiences that can help strengthen your application for next year? Can you obtain other training or education, e.g., certificate, master's degree, postbaccalaureate program, internship? Consider your alternatives for other career directions.

During your whole application process, you probably increased and deepened your network. Reach out to some of your new connections to seek their counsel and advice. Reaching out to them can build your network and even prepare you for your next steps. Identify specific people whom you want to contact.

As you complete your decision-making and application process for graduate school, remember to go back and personally thank your many friends, mentors, and contacts who helped you through the process. This important exercise will help to increase your gratitude and strengthen your network for future opportunities. These relationships will likely continue as you advance in your scholarly field, and so it'll be important to maintain your network.

We hope that these resources, suggestions, and tools are valuable as you plan your academic career and approach forks along your path. We realize that the path can often be unclear and challenging. However, these challenges can help you learn more about yourself, deepen relationships with helpful friends, and prepare you for your next steps. We hope that this guide has shed some light along your path and wish you the best for your future.

# Additional Resources

**Source:** This guide was adapted from original resources created by Minnetta Gardinier (Associate Dean for Recruitment & Professional Development; Associate Professor of Pharmacology, University of Iowa) and Sacha Patera (Associate Director of the Interdisciplinary Biological Sciences Program, Northwestern University) for workshops at the SACNAS and ABRCMS conferences. This has been adapted by Steve Lee and Joseph Brown at Stanford University.

- The University of California’s [website for prospective graduate students](#).
- The Leadership Alliance’s [Tips for Applying to Graduate School](#)
- Big Ten Academic Alliance’s [Gateway to Graduate Education website](#)
- Council of Graduate Schools’ [“Making a Grad School Plan: From Application to Orientation”](#) (If your institution is a member of CGS, someone at your institution should be able to access the PDF for free.)
- Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC)’s [Tools for PhD Applicants](#)



Photo by Angela Drury



Photo by Harrison Truong

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