



Radford
UNIVERSITY

Career and Talent
Development

Graduate School Prep Career Guide

Radford Career and Talent Development

Graduate School Prep & Application Timeline

Not everyone knows they want to go to graduate or professional school right away and that's okay. Some students plan early, while others realize their interest later in college or even after graduation. If your career journey is leading you towards graduate or professional school, careful planning can be an important pillar in your success. This timeline is meant to serve as a guide and can be adapted based on where you are in your journey.

If You Are Thinking About It but Are Not Sure Yet...

- Explore your interests through classes, internships, research, and conversations with a career coach in the Center for Career and Talent Development (CCTD) or another trusted mentor.
- Learn about what graduate or professional school actually involves (cost, time, career outcomes).
 - If you need help or guidance finding information or support visit a Career Coach at the CCTD.
- Attend graduate school information sessions or browse program websites to get a feel for what is out there.

Suggested Timeline (Can Be Adjusted Based on When You Decide).

- ***Year One (or as early as possible) – Exploration & Foundation***
 - Talk with a career coach or academic advisor about possible paths.
 - Join clubs or professional student organizations and explore majors and fields of interest.
 - Attend campus events to learn more about careers and graduate pathways.
 - Look for early research, volunteer, or leadership opportunities.
 - Keep your GPA in mind if grad school might be on the table later.
- ***Year Two – Gaining Experience & Clarity***
 - Seek out internships, job shadowing, research assistant, or volunteering experiences for the future.
 - Start building relationships with faculty mentors and potential recommendation writers.
 - Begin compiling a list of programs that may interest you by exploring potential graduate programs and tracking admission requirements.
- ***Year Three – Focused Preparation***
 - Decide if grad school is the right next step or if you want to gain experience first.
 - Begin studying for any required entrance exams (such as GRE, LSAT, MCAT, etc. [if applicable].)
 - Take full-length practice tests and schedule your exam in advance (leave time for retakes).
 - Research schools (and visit career fairs with graduate schools attending), talk with program faculty and current grad students, and prepare for the application process.
 - Research program formats: in-person vs. online, full-time vs. part-time, cohort size, etc.
- ***Year Four – Application Year***
 - Finalize your list of schools and application timelines/deadlines (rolling vs fixed dates).
 - Meet with your career coach and advisor often to finalize and perfect your application materials.
 - Write and revise personal statements, polish your CV or resume, take entrance exams, request recommendation letters (give 4-6 weeks' notice), and apply with plenty of time before deadlines!

Already Graduated? It Is Never Too Late.

If you have already graduated and are now considering graduate school here are some things to keep in mind.

- Many students take a gap year (or several) before applying. It is a great chance to save money, gain experience, and ensuring you know what you want your next steps to be.
- Use your time to gain relevant experience, network, and build a strong application.
- The Center for Career and Talent Development is happy to assist you, even after graduation. Schedule an appointment through Handshake, reach out by email at csc@radford.edu or by phone at 540-831-5373.

Writing a Personal Statement That Stands Out

A personal statement is a short essay commonly required as part of graduate school applications. *Some institutions may refer to it as a statement of purpose, goals statement, or objective statement*; but regardless of the title, its purpose remains the same. That purpose is to share the story of your academic and professional story, clarify your motivations for graduate study, and demonstrate your fit for a specific program.

Each institution may provide their own unique instructions, such as specific prompts, formatting requirements, word or character limits, or preferred font styles. So please be sure to carefully read ALL of the instructions for each individual institution/program to which you are applying. A strong personal statement goes beyond listing accomplishments. It reveals your voice, reflects your values and future goals, and communicates how they align with the program(s).

7 Tips for Writing a Personal Statement that Tells Your Story...

- **Tell your story with purpose and authenticity.**
 - Use vivid, concrete details to depict your journey. Share key moments, challenges, or experiences that shaped your interest in the field. Let the reader see your passion, curiosity, and commitment.
- **Be specific and narrow your focus.**
 - Avoid broad generalizations. Instead, highlight a few meaningful experiences or themes and explore them in depth. Provide specific examples and explain what you learned, how you grew, and how these moments shaped your goals.
- **Research and tailor your statement for each school/program.**
 - Find out what distinguishes your choice from other universities or programs and highlight what attracts you to that particular institution/program; such as faculty interests, curriculum, research opportunities, or institutional values, and then explain how it aligns with your personal aspirations.
- **Be original and avoid using clichés.**
 - Use your authentic voice rather than relying on overused phrases or vague statements. Instead, focus on what makes *your* story and perspective unique. Graduate committees want to understand *you*, not a version of what you think they want to hear.
- **Avoid repeating information (This is not your Resume/CV).**
 - Your personal statement should not restate what is already in your other application materials (like your CV). Instead, focus on connecting the dots, offer the reader context, reflection, and insight that may help them better understand you, your journey, and what motivates you.
- **Proofread and get feedback.**
 - Carefully review your personal statement for structure, clarity, grammar, and tone. Read it aloud and seek feedback from a Career Coach at the Center for Career and Talent Development or another trusted mentor. A fresh perspective can help catch errors you may have missed. A polished, well-edited personal statement demonstrates your attention to detail and professionalism.
- **Respect formatting and submission instructions.**
 - Read ALL directions thoroughly before submission. Ensure that your documents adhere to any state word or character limits, font or spacing guidelines, and file format requirements. Submitting an improperly formatted or even named document may reflect poorly on your application; even if you have strong content within the documents. When in doubt consult with a Radford Career Coach!

Writing a Personal Statement with No Prompt

Make sure you pay attention to each school's instructions and follow them closely. However, if the institution does not provide any specific instructions or prompts, here are some of the things you want to include in your personal statement.

- **Why you want to go into your career field**
 - Reflect on the path that led you to this field. Share specific experiences that have brought you to this point in your life. Think about part-time jobs, internships, volunteer work, job shadowing, or personal challenges that shaped your interest and commitment. Focus on moments that confirmed this career was right for you.
- **Your short-term and long-term career goals**
 - Clearly describe where you see yourself immediately after completing the program, as well as your broader professional aspirations. Help the reader understand your direction and how this degree is a step towards your future.
- **Your motivations for continuing your education**
 - Explain what drives your decision to pursue an advanced degree. Whether you are seeking to deepen your expertise, pivot into a new field, or unlock career progress, connect your motivation to your personal or professional development.
- **Why you are interested in their program/school specifically**
 - Demonstrate that you have done your "homework." Highlight aspects of the program that resonate with you; such as faculty expertise, research opportunities, curriculum design, location, mission, or professional outcomes. Show how their values, resources, and learning environment align with your own goals.

If you are struggling to get started here are some questions you can answer that may help you find the story you want to tell... (You can always visit a career coach in the Center for Career and Talent Development for guidance and assistance at any stage of the application and document writing process.)

- What is unique about your life story or background that sets you apart from other applicants?
- Were there personal events or formative experiences that shaped your values, perspective, or career path?
- When and why did you become interested in this field? Was it a gradual interest or a defining moment?
- What have you done to explore and validate your interest in this field (i.e., classes, jobs, shadowing, internships, research, volunteer work, etc.)?
- What specific experiences (academic, extracurricular, or professional) during college have influenced your development or future goals?
- What are your short-term and long-term career goals, and how will this program help you achieve them?
- Why are you applying to this specific institution or program? What makes it a good fit for you?
- What knowledge, skills, or experiences will you bring to a graduate cohort that would enhance the learning environment? (What would you bring to the program?)
- What personal strengths or characteristics will help you succeed in graduate school and your chosen field?
- Any gaps, challenges or discrepancies in your academic or professional record that need clarification?
- How have mentors, conversations, or events influenced your decision to pursue this field/program?
- What are the top 2-3 reasons the admissions committee should choose you for this school/program?

The Radford University “Statement” Format

The personal statement is your opportunity to tell your story and show your fit for the program. This is your chance to show that you have strong writing, editing, grammar, and proofreading skills. Be sure to follow ALL instructions precisely if given (i.e., section titles, word limits, margins, font size, spacing, etc.) If you are not given any specific guidelines ensure that your personal statement is a minimum of one Full page and maximum of 2 pages. Additionally, size 11-12 pt. font, Times New Roman, Arial, or Calibri, Double or Single Spaced, and Normal 1 in. Margins.

Admissions Essay: [Program Name] at [Institution]

Opening Paragraph – Start Strong

Capture the reader’s attention with a memorable and unique introduction. Consider using a compelling story, question, or reflection that connects to your field. Finally, introduce your interest in the field/program and hint at the key themes your statement will explore.

Body Paragraphs – Tell What You Know

Use 3-5 body paragraphs to expand on your experiences, interests, and qualifications. Share answers to some of the questions shared on the previous page labeled “Writing a Personal Statement with No Prompt”. Some tips for the content in these paragraphs:

- Share relevant experiences (i.e., internships, research, coursework, leadership, volunteer work, etc.).
- Highlight the development of your skills, knowledge, & commitment to the field.
- Explain how you have explored or validated your interests (i.e., shadowing conferences, conversations with professionals, etc.).
- Make clear connections between what you have done and how it has prepared you for graduate study.
- Label the paragraphs; especially if they are answering a specific question.
- Organize by theme and flow, not necessarily in chronological order.

Closing Paragraph – End Strong

Reiterate your enthusiasm for the program. Summarize how your goals align with what the program offers. State why you are a great fit and how the program will help you reach your goals. Finally, end confidently and concisely.

Final Tips: Use clear, professional language (no slang or overly casual tone). Be specific and personal (avoid clichés and generic statements). Tailor each personal statement to the program/institution. Proofread multiple times and ask someone for feedback (Career Coach, Mentor, or Professor).