

Applying to Graduate School

Applying to graduate programs takes patience and organization. Most schools have deadlines between January and March for the following Fall Semester, but make sure you know the individual school(s)' requirements. Since requirements will vary, you can use the checklist provided on the last page to give you a timetable to plan for deadlines. Know what tests you're required to take and the testing dates. Recommendation letters, transcripts, application fees and essays are often required and have to be planned for in advance so that deadlines don't "sneak up on you".

Transcripts

Admissions committees require official transcripts to be sent from all colleges attended. An official transcript is one that possesses an official college seal and is sent directly to the admissions office without going through the applicant's hands. Some programs may want a complete packet sent and request that official transcripts be included by you. In this case, a transcript will be sealed in an envelope that you can include with your materials. To request a transcript to be sent, you must request it in writing and sign for it at the Registrar's office. At Radford University, transcripts are sent free of charge. To play it safe, request transcripts at least four weeks before they are due.

Letters of Recommendation

A letter of recommendation is a statement which attests to the applicant's potential for success in the graduate program and beyond. Most schools require two or three letters. For academic degrees, faculty members are the best references, though work supervisors or employers can also offer good insights.

Recommendation forms are usually provided with the application and include a space for you to choose to waive or retain your rights to the recommendation. Many people believe that a letter carries more validity if you waive that right. If you choose to waive your right when asking someone to write a recommendation, make sure you will be written a good one! Give that person ample time to write a good, detailed letter and if you feel it's necessary, you can provide them with your transcript, a copy of your application essay or a copy of a recent research paper.

If a recommendation form is not provided in the application materials, the individual writing the reference will use his or her own letterhead. Give the person a self-addressed stamped-envelope (SASE) to expedite the process and insure convenience.

Finally, it is a good practice to write a thank-you note to each person writing a reference. They have done a favor for you and you want to demonstrate courtesy. Also, you may need to ask for their help again in the future.

The Application Essay

Some schools will require one or more essays or "statements of purpose" to get an impression of the applicant and their writing style. Essay topics vary, but generally, what is looked for is: motivation and commitment to a field of study

- career expectations
- writing ability

- areas of interest
- research and/or work experience
- educational background
- immediate and long-term goals
- reasons for going into graduate study in specific field and institution
- personal uniqueness/maturity

Keep the essays positive! Few things look worse than trying to explain the negative points of an essay to an admissions officer. They don't want to hear explanations.

Lastly, the presentation is very important. Type your essays and double-check the spelling and grammar. The essay is representative of you so it has to be neat and error-free.

Interviews, Portfolios, and Auditions

An interview may be required by some programs. Prepare for it just as you would a job interview. Some controversial questions could be asked to throw you a curve ball, so anticipate what might be asked. (Ask appropriate RU faculty for advice.) Plan for what you want the interviewer to know about yourself and present the information when the opportunity is given. Remember that the interviewer is more interested in "how" you think than "what" you think.

Programs requiring visual creativity such as Art, Architecture, Journalism or Graphic Design may require a portfolio. A portfolio should showcase your skills and talents. You may be asked to present your portfolio to a reviewer. Mailing the portfolio or leaving it with an employer is done at your own risk. The employer is not insured against its loss, so it is a good idea to label all of the pieces with your name and address in case they are misplaced.

Auditions would be required for Music, Theater or Dance majors. For a performance major, the audition is the most important element of the graduate application. A live performance will usually be scheduled though sometimes a tape will be sufficient. The performance will be reviewed by a committee of professionals who will evaluate you according to their prescribed standards.