Attending graduate school can be a difficult decision to make and a master’s degree or a doctoral program will require a substantial level of commitment and resources. You will want to evaluate your situation, your purpose for going to graduate school and your resources very carefully to make an informed choice.

Here are some personal, academic and professional factors you will want to consider:

- Program focus and areas of specialty
- Faculty. Research individual professors and how their area of specialty meet your interests.
- Length of the program
- Costs and available financial assistance
- Program's contributions to your field
- Reputation of program and faculty - internationally, nationally and locally
- Research facilities
- Opportunities for teaching, research or field experiences
- Professional opportunities after graduation
- You can apply for PhD without MA and you do not always have to pay for a PhD

Once you have explored a range of programs, create a list of your desired programs that are in alignment with your purpose for attending graduate school.

To increase the probability of being accepted to at least one program of your choice, you could organize this list with an application strategy in mind. For example, arrange them in descending order starting with the most desired and more selective ones down to those for which you know you would be a very competitive candidate and/or would be a less desirable option. Or consider applying to few schools in top, middle and lower range to cover all bases.

If possible, consider visiting the school you are applying for. This would be a great opportunity to meet with the professors you are most interested in being mentored by and discuss your interest in their research. It will also provide you with a chance to get to know the administrative staff processing the applications. Establishing some personal relationships even before your application is submitted will increase your chances to be a successful applicant.

Here are some online resources that can be helpful in your search:

- www.gradschools.com (you can search by subject, state, international etc.)
- www.peterson’s.com
- www.educationconnection.com
- www.eduers.com
TEST
Most graduate school programs request the results of specific standardized tests as part of your submission. To mention few: GRE, LSAT, GMAT, MCAT. Gather information on the required tests early enough to prepare well in advance.

APPLICATION
Each school will have their own set of criteria and procedures for their admissions and their decision process will be influenced by different factors. It would be a good idea to familiarize yourself with those so that you can develop a strategy to meet their requirements.

ADMISSIONS CRITERIA
Generally, admissions committees base their decisions on a combination of the following criteria: grade point average, standardized test scores, personal essays, previous work experience, research, and co-curricular activities.

APPLICATION MATERIALS
A typical graduate school application may request a written application including resume or CV, a written essay, transcripts, letters of recommendation and standardized test scores. Usually, you will also be asked to participate in a campus interview. You should attend equally to each of these elements with care and professionalism.

RESUME OR CV
Graduate school resumes or CV should highlight all your major academic and professional experiences and accomplishments, particularly those most relevant to your field of study. This means you should tailor your resume to your field of study and avoid too many irrelevant experiences. However, some programs may ask you to include your entire professional history. Include everything that shows how you thrive in an academic environment and everything you have contributed to it (clubs, capstone, class projects, research assistantship). There is no limit to the number of pages.

THE ESSAY(S)
As part of your application, most graduate schools give you an opportunity to elaborate on your background in a personal essay. The format can be very different: some programs will provide very little structure and let you free to choose the aspects of your background you wish to discuss while others will ask you to respond to some specific questions. However, just keep in mind, that the essay is your chance to show your understanding of the discipline, highlight your academic aims and contributions and your ideas for future applications in your career. When writing your essay try to keep in mind your readers and their perspective: the admissions committee and particularly the professors who you are most interested and excited to be mentored by.

There focus will be on:
- Why you are interested in graduate school and why in this particular program.
- How your interests correspond to the interests of their program and faculty.
- Assess your writing ability.

With that in mind, consider these questions before you begin writing:
- What is unique about your background? What are the experiences that have informed you and influenced your growth?
- Why are you interested in this field and how have you pursued your interest so far?
- What have you learned about the program that most interests you?
- What are your career goals?
- What personal characteristics and skills will support you in being successful in graduate school and in the professional world?
- What makes you stand out from the pack? What are the reasons for this school to be interested in you?

Your writing style will be as important as the content, try to be:
- Clear, concise and organized. Be sure to address specific questions that are asked.
- Positive. Highlighting positive qualities.
- Honest. Don’t inflate your achievements, but also don’t underestimate your potential.
- Personal. Essays are your chance to give a more personal picture of yourself, beyond test scores and grades. Share something meaningful to you.
LETTERS
When choosing who to ask to write a letter, consider who can comment specifically on your skills and abilities related to your chosen field:

- Request letters only from people who know you well enough to write strong letters of support and have more recent experience of your skills.
- Writers could include faculty, teaching assistants, past employers, or supervisors from volunteer and leadership experiences.
- Allow enough time for the letter to be written. Keep in mind that you may be one of many graduates requesting a letter from a particular faculty member.

It will be very important for the writers of your reference letters to understand the specific expectations that your programs have for these recommendations.

FINANCIAL AID
Investigating the financial options available will be very important and in some cases will shorten the list of schools to which you apply. Financial assistance ranges from loans to fellowships to scholarships. Some assistance is allocated based on need while other funding is awarded for merit or service to the institution. Knowing what is available from governmental or private sources will enable you to make use of every opportunity to receive financial support. Make sure to read eligibility requirements, application procedures, and deadlines. These are some great online resources for financial aid information:

- FastWeb: you can create a profile that can be matched against a database of scholarships.
- FinAid: a collection of information about student financial aid.
- E Student Loan: for loan comparisons and on-line applications
- Scholarships.com: a free scholarship search service, and financial aid resource.
- Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA): for information on the application needed for federal student financial aid.
- Free Scholarship Searches: several free scholarship search sites

TIMELINE
Below is a sample timeline to help you plan your application process. In general you will want to start the process one and a half to two years prior to enrollment.

Junior Year, Fall and Winter Semester
- Research schools and programs of interest
- Talk with faculty and other mentors about your goals and interests
- Meet with a Career Center counselor or advisor to discuss your plans
- Identify recommenders and request letters of reference
- Register and prepare for appropriate graduate admissions tests
- Attend graduate and professional school events on campus sponsored by The Career Center to speak directly with recruiters
- Research financial aid options, including deadlines

Junior Year, Summer Semester
- Take required admissions tests
- Request application materials, school catalogues and financial aid information from selected schools
- Continue making contact with potential reference letter writers
- Visit institutions of interest, if possible
- Begin drafting application essays

Senior Year, Fall Semester
- Take required admissions tests (if not already taken)
- Monitor progress of reference letter writers
- Begin drafting application, including further drafts of application essays
- Continue to apply for financial aid
- Attend graduate and professional school events on campus to help finalize your applications
- Request transcripts and letters of reference to be mailed
- Complete and mail applications
- Check to ensure that institutions have received all application materials, including transcripts and letters
- Make plans to visit select institutions

Senior Year, Winter Semester
- Visit prospective campuses if possible; interview if necessary
- Be prepared to consider multiple acceptances, and to evaluate your options based on personal and professional goals
- Once committed to program of your choice, notify other schools of your decision