



# APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL IN SOCIOLOGY

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# QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER BEFORE YOU BEGIN YOUR GRADUATE SCHOOL SEARCH

## **Why do you want to attend graduate school?**

It may seem like a simple question, but it's a good idea to consider your aspirations and where you want your graduate school degree to lead you. Graduate school is an investment of a lot of time and money,\* and before you decide that this is the direction you want take, reflect on your personal and career goals. Use these goals to begin your graduate school selection. For example, if you are interested in statistical analysis, find a program with a good job placement record in this field or if you are interested in a career in academia, aim realistically for the best program you can attend. Finding a program that is suitable for your goals will allow the time and money you invest to work for you.

## **What research focus interests you?**

Because research is a primary component of graduate school work and academic work in general, it's a good idea to know what research areas in sociology interest you. Along with articulating your career goals, use your research interests in sociology to help frame your program search. While you do not need to have a specific research question in mind, it will be beneficial to seek departments and faculty that match your research area. Examples of research areas include Gender, Globalization, Environmental Sociology, and Social Movements.

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\*It should be noted that many highly regarded Ph.D. programs will waive tuition and provide stipends in exchange for students to work as graduate teaching assistants. While this will cover many of the major costs associated with Ph.D. work, you should remember to budget for living expenses.

## FINDING SCHOOLS AND WHERE TO APPLY

Two good sources of information on graduate departments in sociology are the American Sociological Association's *Guide to Graduate Departments of Sociology* (available in UAH's Department of Sociology) and the websites of graduate departments. National rankings of graduate departments in sociology are compiled and published in *U.S. News & World Report*. 2015's list is available at the following website: <http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-graduate-schools/top-humanities-schools/sociology-rankings>.

Choosing which schools to apply to and then deciding which school is best for you will take some time and careful consideration. Talk with the sociology faculty regarding which graduate programs might be best for you personally and academically. Some issues to consider: (1) the size and location of the town, campus, and department; (2) departmental ranking and acceptance rate; (3) whether you wish to pursue an M.A. or Ph.D.; (4) areas in which a department specializes; and (5) how much funding is available for graduate students (including assistantships, tuition waivers, health insurance, and stipends).

Also, consider the characteristics of the areas in which each graduate department you consider is located. Think about whether or not you would be happy living in those areas. Also, consider the affordability of living in various areas.

While you do not want to apply to a school based upon the presence of an individual faculty member (he or she may change jobs, may not have time to work with you, or may not be a pleasant person to work with), you should be strategic and knowledgeable about a department's faculty. By reviewing research foci and conveying interest in the work of a department's faculty members, a potential student can utilize this information in a graduate school application's statement of intent. A department is more likely to accept a student who explicitly expresses interest in the work of their faculty over a student with a generic statement of interest.

A good rule to have while seeking potential graduate schools is to find a department with at least two faculty members that have similar research interests to your own. Many schools offer a wide range of areas in which students may focus, but it's a good idea to attend a program that has several faculty members working in your research area of interest.

If possible, visit the graduate school you might be interested in applying to and attend sociology conferences to meet professors and students that work in a particular department.

## APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

If you are planning to attend graduate school immediately after completing your bachelor's degree, you will need to begin preparing to apply no later than the summer before your senior year. This is because most graduate departments set application deadlines in the fall and deadlines for assistantships in early spring, and require that students begin their studies the following fall semester. Also, you will need to begin preparing to take the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) and do some research into various schools.

### SAMPLE TIMELINE

Application requirements vary from department to department. The best source of information on application requirements is through the websites of the individual departments you want to apply to. Applications are electronic and are also found on an individual department's website.

| TAKE GRE                    | APPLY     | GRADUATE    | BEGIN GRAD SCHOOL |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-------------|-------------------|
| Summer 2016<br>or Fall 2016 | Fall 2016 | Spring 2017 | Fall 2017         |

## GPA

Many of the most competitive graduate departments select applications with GPA's above 3.5. However, this does not mean that you will be eliminated from consideration if you have a lower GPA. Your transcript will also be examined. Students who began their academic career with low grades, but showed remarkable improvement as they worked toward their undergraduate degree will not necessarily be eliminated for consideration by a graduate department.

While a 4.0 GPA is an impressive achievement, it will not guarantee your acceptance to a competitive graduate program. A well-rounded application – one showing excellent letters of recommendation, a strong GPA and GRE score, and an academically proficient writing sample – will be looked upon more favorably than one that merely reports a high GPA.

## GRE

Your score on the GRE will be one of the most important components of your graduate application, so be sure to give yourself enough time to prepare for this exam. While you may be able to find classes which are designed to help prepare students for the GRE, these classes are often very expensive and you can prepare yourself very well by using one of the many study guides available for the GRE. These guides can be purchased in most bookstores and offer test-taking strategies and provide exercises to prepare you for each portion of the exam.

It is best to take the GRE before the fall semester begins since you will be occupied with your studies and submitting graduate school applications in the fall semester of your senior year. It is also wise to take the GRE as early as possible so that you will have time to retake the exam if your original scores are lower than you feel they could be. The cost for the GRE exam is currently \$195 (October 2015). Students who are eligible for financial aid may also be eligible for a fee waiver. To see if you qualify, visit UAH's Financial Aid Department.

For information on the GRE and to schedule your exam, visit <https://www.ets.org/gre>.

## LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Most graduate departments require that applicants have three letters of recommendation submitted with their application. These letters must be from university faculty members. You should request letters of recommendation from instructors who have taught you in class (more than one if possible) and who can attest to the quality of your work and your attitude toward your studies.

Make sure you provide faculty at least a month prior to the application's deadline to write your letter. Inform faculty of the application deadline, website address (if it is an online form) or a stamped and addressed envelope with the appropriate materials. Also, give instructors a list of courses you have taken with them, the semesters you attended the classes, assignments or topics that interested you in the class, career goals, a list of relevant extracurricular activities, an updated resume, and any other information you think will contribute to a solid letter of recommendation. The more a faculty member knows about you, the better your letter of recommendation will be.

## WRITING SAMPLE

Most graduate departments require that you include a sample of your written work with your application. The length of the sample requested will vary by department; some schools will ask for a paper that is 10-15 pages in length, while others might ask for a paper up to 25 pages. Pay attention to the specific requirements regarding co-authors and faculty-aided assignments. These submissions may require an additional letter from the co-author detailing his or hers contribution to the paper along with your role in the project.

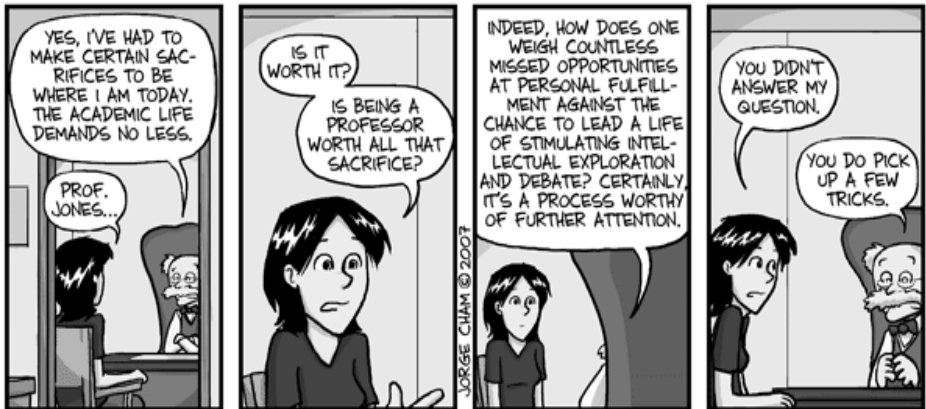
Writing samples can be papers or assignments that were written in an undergraduate class, so keep your application's writing sample in mind when completing larger assignments like projects and research papers in your coursework. While it is preferred that this paper be sociological, it is not absolutely necessary. Graduate departments in sociology often welcome students who have earned degrees in other areas of study, even those who have never taken a course in sociology. It is ideal that the paper you submit as part of your application is free of grammatical and spelling errors.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- FAQ sections in a sociology department's website
- Your UAH faculty
- Spalter-Roth and Vooren's "Idealist vs. Careerist: Graduate School Choices for Sociology Majors" (2009)
- Fabio Rojas's "Grad Skool Rulz: What You Need to Know about Academia from Admissions to Tenure" (2011)

## CHECKLIST

- Ask yourself: Why do I want to go to graduate school?  
What research focus interests me?
- Identify where you want to apply.
- Complete your application the summer before your senior year.
- Study for and take the GRE the summer before your senior year.
- Ask your faculty members for letters of recommendation at least one month in advance of the deadline.
- Have fun!





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