



## **A 10 step guide for getting into your top choice of graduate school**

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According to a 2013 report issued by the [Council of Graduate Admissions](#), the number of applicants for grad school programs has increased by 2%, marking the eighth consecutive year of rising rates of applications. The good news is that the number of open slots has increased even further to 9%. However, the most competitive schools still only accept between 10 and 15% of applicants.

I recently graduated from Rutgers, *Magna Cum Laude*, with a major in Cell Biology and Neuroscience. I was involved in undergraduate research investigating neural pathways underlying new antidepressant treatments and am currently in South Africa researching the hormone profiles of baboons. My career goals involve research, writing, or a combination of the two, making graduate school the ideal path for my future success. During my time as an undergrad, I had the opportunity to work in the lab of [Dr. Smita Thakker-Varia](#), Associate Professor in the department of neuroscience and cell biology. As the director of Graduate Academic and Student Affairs at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, Dr. Thakker-Varia has extensive experience mentoring and advising students interested in graduate courses. I turned to her for council regarding my next academic move. To maximize the chances of getting into the grad school of my choice, Dr. Thakker-Varia recommended focusing on these ten steps during my college career:

1. Tackle varied and difficult coursework. Exploring a diverse range of classes will give you a more balanced education and will help you identify your strongest interests. Admission officers like to see that you've taken full advantage of the classes your school has to offer and that you enjoy a challenge.
2. Maintain a strong GPA. You need to prove that you're able to thrive in academically stressful situations.
3. Build relationships with professors. The connections that you make now will be the writers of your letters of recommendation in the future. Professors may even help you find a research position or keep you posted about other opportunities open to undergraduates. The years of experience cultivating and navigating their careers have made professors veterans of the graduate academic process and valuable resources for undergrads.
4. Gain research experience. Complementing learned classroom knowledge with hands-on lab work rounds out your education. Research gives you the responsibility of having an active role in furthering the knowledge in a specific field while teaching you various skills.
5. Explore graduate programs. <http://graduate-school.phds.org/> can help you research your options. Divide your target application list into safety, match, and reach schools, and apply to a couple of institutions from each category. Discuss specific programs with faculty members involved in courses or research in your field of interest.



6. Prepare for and take the Graduation Record Examinations (GREs). Beyond the general GREs, there are subject tests that particularly competitive grad school programs may require you to take. It's best to take your tests early when your knowledge is most fresh, and your scores will stay valid for up to five years.
7. Write a strong personal statement. This should reflect who you are, what you've accomplished, what you're interested in doing, and how the specific graduate school program you're applying for will help you reach your career goals. Your personal statement is also your opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge of the program you're applying for.
8. Lock down three letters of reference. These should be written by people who know you beyond your transcript. These writers should be research supervisors or former professors of classes in which you actively participated.
9. Apply early, but not necessarily for early decision (see #10). Application deadlines for most PhD programs fall between December and January, and Masters program applications are generally due between January and April. Starting the application process early will enable you to prepare the strongest letters, statements, and essays without piling on unnecessary stress.
10. Seek out financial aid. This is mainly for those applying to Masters programs; for most PhD programs, students receive stipends and reimbursements. Do not apply early decision to any program you are not 100% sure that you can afford, since this can lock you into a specific program without guaranteeing an adequate award package. The majority of financial aid will be need-based, not merit-based. Between need-based aid and scholarships, your out-of-pocket tuition price can drop dramatically, so don't let a high price-tag deter you from an otherwise good academic fit.

Seeing the utility of these simple yet invaluable tips, I wanted to share the advice with other undergraduates who are also looking ahead to grad school. Hopefully the steps will come in handy for your application process as they have so far in mine. Good luck!