

Graduate School

Winning Strategies for Getting In
With or Without Excellent Grades

Chapter 1

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Published by:

Proto Press Publications



236 Beech Road

F][U X, Quebec

Canada J0P 1D0

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Cover Design by Bleu Quest

Canadian Cataloguing In Publication Data

Mumby, David Gerald, 1962-

Graduate school: winning strategies for getting
in with or without excellent grades

Includes index.

ISBN 0-9682173-4-6

1. Universities and colleges—Canada—Graduate
work—Admission. 2. Universities and colleges—United
States—Graduate work—Admission. I. Title.

LB2371M85

378.1'6'0971

C97-900512-4

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Disclaimer

This book is designed to provide information concerning the subject matter covered. Its purpose is not to reprint all of the information that is otherwise available to the author and/or publisher, but rather to complement, clarify, and supplement the material in other texts. For more information, see the many references listed in the *Resources* section near the back of this book.

The book deals with topics on which opinions may vary. It offers advice that reflects the opinions of the author, and it should not be expected that all other individuals within the academic community will agree, entirely and unconditionally, with all of the ideas that are expressed. The author shall have neither liability nor responsibility to any person who fails to get into graduate school after reading this book.

Chapter 1

How to Use this Book

Many students have serious misconceptions about what graduate school involves and about what it takes to be accepted into a graduate program. Every year, countless students apply to graduate school but fail to get in because they make fatal mistakes during the application process. This happens frequently, even to students with excellent grades. In most cases, they are unaware that they are doing anything wrong, and they make these mistakes because they are more or less in the dark about how the process of selecting applicants really works. Most of their mistakes could easily be avoided, if only they had a better idea of what they should be doing.

Meanwhile, many of the same misconceptions prevent thousands of other qualified students from giving much thought to graduate or professional school. Many of these students mistakenly believe that they don't have a realistic chance of getting in, and often, it is because they think that their grades are not good enough. But the truth is that most of them *do* have a good chance. They are simply unaware of the many ways that one can overcome mediocre grades and still get into graduate school.

This book explains what applicants to graduate or professional schools should be doing, what they shouldn't be doing, and why.

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Most readers of this book are presumed to be undergraduate college or university students who are either currently planning to apply to graduate or professional school, or who have not yet made that decision but eventually will. There is an excellent chance that you will be accepted and eventually obtain an advanced degree, such as a master's, a doctorate, or a professional degree. When the day eventually comes that you find yourself enjoying a comfortable lifestyle and a fine career, I hope that you will think back on this book as having helped you get there.

This book is aimed at two kinds of students: *The first kind of student has average to above-average grades — grades that are respectable, but that would not be considered excellent or outstanding.* For students of most disciplines, I am speaking, generally, of grade-point-averages (GPAs) in the B-minus to B-plus range. Most of these students would not be accepted into graduate school unless they did some things to overcome the shortcomings in their grades. One way to deal with a mediocre GPA is to study harder and more effectively. But, the purpose of this book is not to help with that. Instead, it explains how students with average to above-average grades can improve their chances of getting into graduate school *despite* their grades.

The second kind of student that this book is meant for has very good or excellent grades. For students of most disciplines this would mean a GPA of A-minus or better. Many such students mistakenly think that good grades are all that is needed to get into graduate school. It is sad and unfortunate, although not uncommon, for students to work hard to achieve excellent grades only to make errors of judgment later on when applying to graduate school and fail to get in altogether. Many of them have assumed for a long time that they would eventually go to graduate school and earn an advanced degree. What a bitter disappointment it is when they are rejected by every program they apply to, and they begin to realize that the career they have longed for and worked so hard for might just be an impossible dream.

The cruelest irony is that many A-plus students are rejected for admission into graduate programs while other students are accepted into the same programs with grades that are more like Bs!

You don't think you can get into graduate school with Bs? In fact, thousands of students across North America do it every year. I did. My undergraduate GPA was somewhere around a B when

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I applied to graduate school. I was accepted into a program, eventually earned my master's and doctoral degrees, and now enjoy a successful and rewarding career. This sort of thing happens often, and there is probably no reason why it can't happen to you, if you are willing to take the necessary steps. This book will show you how.

There are a variety of grading scales used in North American colleges (e.g., A - F letter grades, percentage scale, 0.0 - 4.0 scale, and more). The letter-grade scale is used throughout this book for the sake of simplicity.

This book dispels some common myths about what is required for successful application to graduate school, particularly those myths concerning the necessity of exceptionally high grades. It examines how the process of selecting graduate-school applicants really works (in most cases), and what important factors exist beyond grades that determine the success or failure of an application. It outlines strategies that students can begin to use immediately to improve their chances of getting into graduate school and earning an advanced degree. Much of the information and advice in this book is aimed primarily at undergraduates, but most of it will also be useful to students who are currently in master's programs and who expect to eventually apply to a doctoral program.

Of course, I cannot guarantee that you will get into graduate school just by reading this book. But I can guarantee you this: **If you understand the advice in this book, and use good judgment in how you apply it to your own situation, you will greatly improve your chances of being accepted into graduate school.** In the end, *you* will be the one who determines whether you succeed — but I know some ways that you can help yourself.

Most of the ideas and suggestions in this book apply to the vast majority of programs, departments, faculties, and schools in the United States and Canada. But it is vitally important to realize that not all of the information, opinions, and suggestions will apply in all instances. There are substantial differences among graduate programs, even within a particular field. Not surprising-

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ly, the differences *across* fields are even greater. Some of the ideas that we discuss may be irrelevant to students in certain disciplines. You will need to be flexible and adapt your specific actions to situations as they arise.

There are some special issues that are relevant to certain groups of students, but that are not dealt with in this book. For instance, someone who earned an undergraduate degree years ago and who now wants to go to graduate school after having been in the work force for several years will probably encounter situations that are not discussed in this book. Neither does this book discuss some of the issues that face members of visible minority groups, or international students, or students with disabilities. Increasingly, students are entering graduate programs in areas different from those in which they concentrated as undergraduates. Students who do this may occasionally encounter unique situations that are not considered in this book.

Although there are significant differences between graduate and professional schools, this book deals mainly with features that are common to both kinds of advanced-degree program. The terms "graduate school," "graduate program," and "graduate studies," are generally favored throughout this book for stylistic reasons only. Accordingly, readers who are interested in professional school should assume that much of the information and advice contained herein applies equally to their objectives.

This book is not intended to be the sole resource for any student who is applying to graduate or professional school. Rather, its purpose is to acquaint students in most disciplines with the kinds of things they should know and expect to encounter when applying to almost any advanced-degree program. For the most part, therefore, this book is concerned with *commonalities* that exist across most graduate programs, in most fields. There are a few good books and other publications that offer more specific information and advice to students in certain fields but, unfortunately, the list is not long. Aside from professional programs in business, law, and medicine, not many fields are covered. Begin your search for the answers you

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need by reading this book, and follow up later with a trip to the library or a visit to a career counsellor to find out whether there are other advisement books aimed specifically at students in your field of study. Several are listed in the *Resources* section at the back of this book.

How the Book is Organized

This book has three main sections: The first section, **Truths & Myths About Graduate School**, explains why some of the widely held ideas that students have about graduate school are inaccurate. This section explains why graduate school can be a more attractive option than many people realize; I hope it will motivate students to seriously consider it. Chapter 2 gives hope to students who feel unqualified to gain entry into a graduate program because their grades are less than outstanding. Meanwhile, this chapter should also instill a little bit of healthy caution into students who believe that their outstanding grades will virtually guarantee that they get into graduate school.

You need to understand what graduate study in your discipline is all about before you can plan an effective strategy for getting into the right graduate program and for having success once you are there. Chapter 3 covers some of the things that you need to know before you can plan a successful application. For instance, in order to devise a successful plan, you need to understand the process by which applicants are selected in most programs. **Most of the mistakes that students make when applying to graduate school stem from not understanding how or why the successful applicants are selected, or why the unsuccessful ones are rejected.** Chapter 3 describes some of the common selection processes. This chapter also describes the basic components of most graduate school applications and the roles that each of them play in leading to the success or failure of an applicant.

Your success will also depend on choosing a graduate program that is suited to your specific goals, and in those disciplines where graduate studies are done under the supervision of a faculty

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member, on the selection of an appropriate supervisor. Chapter 4 offers suggestions on how to make these important decisions.

The second section, **How To Prepare an Application That Will Beat the Competition**, will get you started on improving your chances of getting into a graduate program. Chapter 5 clarifies the nature of the competition involved in applying to graduate school. This understanding will enable you to prepare a general strategy for gaining an advantage over other applicants. Chapters 6 and 7 explain what admissions committees and faculty members are really looking for when they assess the various components of your application. These two chapters are full of suggestions to help you enhance each component of your application, making it stand out and above the rest of the crowd.

The third section, **Going Beyond the Requirements**, is all about taking *extra* steps that will greatly improve your chances of being accepted into a graduate program. Most of the ideas and strategies outlined in chapters 8 and 9 never even occur to most students, but those who do use them are almost always successful.

To help you plot and execute an effective strategy, an idealized *plan and timetable* is outlined in chapter 10. Keep in mind that not all aspects of this plan will be appropriate for applying to all programs. Moreover, many of the steps that are suggested are best to take at a certain point in time before applying to graduate school. Remember, this is just an *idealized* plan. Not all of the steps are applicable to all types of programs, and depending on how much time you have before you graduate, there will be compromises and improvisations that you will need to make in accordance with your own situation.

Where the Advice Comes From

The information, opinions, and advice in this book came from four main sources: One was my own observations and experiences as a faculty member, a graduate supervisor, and as a member of graduate admissions committees (the nature and the role of admissions committees are described in Chapter 3). Many of the opinions in this book reflect the way that I personally evaluate graduate-school applicants — the positive and negative indicators that I look for. It should be noted that my method is not unique; most of my colleagues generally

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means. Copyright © 1997, 2004 Dave G. Mumby approach the task of evaluating applicants the same way I do.

The second main source of opinion and advice was from interviews that I conducted with Graduate Program Directors in various departments and faculties, and from informal discussions with faculty members in various departments at other universities. These people are experts, and they offered dozens of tips on how students can improve their chances of getting into graduate school. The findings of these interviews, surveys, and frank discussions are reflected in the advice given throughout this book.

The third main source of information for this book was other advisement books that deal with specific aspects of applying to graduate school, or applying to graduate school in particular fields.

Some of the advice also comes from my own experiences and observations as a student. I have been through the process of applying to graduate school and getting in, despite having a mediocre undergraduate GPA. And I have seen dozens of other students do the same thing. It amazes me how pervasive are the common misconceptions and misunderstandings that most students have concerning graduate studies and how to get into graduate school. Most of the students that I meet on campus today have the same mistaken ideas about graduate school that I shared with my peers many years ago.

Get Started Now!

Something that I hate having to do as part of my job is denying certain students entrance into our graduate programs. Many wishful applicants are rejected each year. I often consider that many of these rejected students are probably well-suited for graduate school but may never find out because their applications were unable to convince me that they truly have what it takes. I feel sorry for these students, but there is nothing I can do about their inability to sell themselves.

Occasionally, one comes across applicants who do an exceptional job of demonstrating that they possess attributes necessary for success in graduate school and in a related career afterwards. Those are the applicants who are accepted. You should be one of those applicants, and there is no reason why you can't be if you are willing to

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make appropriate use of the information and advice in this book.

Whether you are in your freshman or senior year, the time to begin planning for your graduate-school application is now. Don't wait until you are in your final semester of your senior year to begin taking the steps outlined in this book. Some of the recommended steps take a good deal of time to implement. The longer you wait, the more difficult it will be to improve your chances of getting into graduate school. Conversely, the sooner you begin, the easier it will be. But don't panic if you discover that you do not have enough time to take advantage of all of the strategies described in this book. There are a great many things that you can do "at the last minute" to improve your chances.

If you have weak grades and no notable and relevant accomplishments, then you might decide after reading this book that you don't have a realistic chance of getting into graduate school this year no matter what you do. Consider it a blessing that you figured this out before you wasted your time and money, and experienced much anguish. If you are serious about getting into graduate school, then you have plenty of time to take advantage of the advice in this book and prepare for application next year.

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TYPES OF PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS

Graduate training in fields other than the humanities and sciences is generally designed for particular occupations. Although there is no clear agreement on how to demarcate areas of professional study, the following nineteen disciplines are the dominant ones: architecture, business, dentistry, education, engineering, forestry, journalism, law, library science, medicine, nursing, optometry, pharmacy, physical therapy, public health, social work, theology, and veterinary medicine.

I. Truths & Myths About Graduate School

Each year, thousands of students with excellent grades apply to graduate school or professional school and fail to get in. Contrary to what you might expect, it is *not* because they are beaten out by other applicants with *even better* grades. They fail to get in because they make mistakes in the application process. These mistakes often stem from common misconceptions about graduate school.

Meanwhile, many students doubt they will ever have a master's or doctoral degree because they think that their grades are not good enough to get into graduate school or professional school. Many of them are wrong. In fact, most have a good chance of getting into a graduate program and earning an advanced degree — if they take the right steps. The problem is they don't know the actual criteria used to select who gets in.

The next few chapters will set the record straight on what graduate study is all about, and what it takes to get into graduate or professional school and to earn an advanced degree

Why More Students Should Consider Graduate School 11

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Life is full of choices, and some of the choices we make will have profound affects on our futures. One such choice could be graduate or professional school. Is it the best way for you to get from where you are to where you want to be? To know the answer, you must first understand what graduate school is. As you learn more about graduate school, you will probably be pleasantly surprised to discover that it has more rewards than you had previously imagined!