



Reviewer Diligence and Responsibility in the Graduate Application Process



By JoAnn Canales

The graduate application process is born out of a necessity to make swift determinations, frankly, about complete strangers. Those involved in the process are well aware that these decisions are both an art and a science. While the evidence submitted in an application package may never give the full picture, being explicit about what evidence you expect to find in each component of the application and being aware of the benefits and limitations of each can help keep the process as equitable as possible in working to achieve your program enrollment goals. Following are some considerations worth revisiting and discussing in admissions committee meetings.

Undergraduate Transcript & Grade Point Average:

- **Purpose:** The undergraduate transcript and grade point average (GPA) are two inseparable data points that can serve as an indication of specialized experience and academic ability.
- **Benefits:** Transcripts can indicate several intangibles that are key to evaluating an applicant, including growth over time, pursuit of challenging coursework, passion for particular subject matter, well-roundedness and cross-discipline interests.
- **Drawbacks:** Comparing GPAs between applicants is a challenging exercise that can result in misleading conclusions. The exact meaning of GPA can differ from applicant to applicant, as it can be skewed by grade inflation and varying institutional rigor.
- **Mitigation:** While the measure is not standardized, when examined in context with the transcript, reviewers can still make valuable determinations. With the transcript and GPA, it's important to read between the lines and look for evidence that an applicant is seeking challenging coursework, while excelling or showing significant academic growth.

GRE® Scores:

- **Purpose:** The GRE® General Test is an assessment designed to evaluate the cognitive skills of an applicant. It seeks to measure whether applicants possess the verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking and analytical writing skills necessary for mastering graduate-level concepts and succeeding in graduate-level coursework.
- **Benefits:** The GRE test can serve as an objective, common benchmark to compare applicants who have widely varying backgrounds and experiences. Like most standardized tests, the GRE test is a “moment in time” assessment that gives all applicants an equal opportunity to exhibit their abilities independent of their transcript, GPA, country of origin, or the prestige of their undergraduate institution.
- **Drawbacks:** Since the scores are so easily compared across applications, reviewers can place too much weight on them, perhaps even using them to create cut-off scores. Additionally, individuals preparing for the GRE test have varying amounts of time and resources to invest, which can affect the scores they receive.
- **Mitigation:** Given these factors, it is critical that reviewers consider the scores for the measure(s) that are most relevant to their program requirements — versus using only the total score — to determine eligibility for admission. Readers may find this [correlations table](#) useful in deciding how much emphasis to place on the Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, and Analytical Writing components of the GRE test.

Personal Statement:

- **Purpose:** The personal statement is an opportunity for the applicant to showcase their passions, personality and potential in the program.
- **Benefits:** The personal statement serves to put a face to the more objective and quantitative credentials a candidate submits. The statement reminds reviewers that applicants are individuals with unique experiences, backgrounds and points of view that can enrich and contribute to the graduate program’s broader objectives of maintaining diversity of thought. It also helps reviewers learn more about the applicant’s intent and suitability for the program.
- **Drawbacks:** The personal statement is an especially subjective application component that can be perceived very differently depending on the reviewer’s background, preferences or values. Compounding this effect is that language used by the designers of the application can be open to interpretation. If the wording of the prompt isn’t highly explicit, applicants may accidentally misinterpret and not supply the expected information.
- **Mitigation:** To mitigate the potential for misinterpretation of the language used in the application directions, it is good practice to have several reviewers — including some students — read the application directions to ensure they are explicit and sufficient. To lessen the chance that bias will be a factor in decision making, consider having multiple reviewers read the personal statement to gather multiple perspectives. Although it’s impossible to completely avoid the effects of implicit bias, using a descriptive rubric delineating the specific criteria sought — i.e., passion, commitment, experience, reflections, writing mechanics, etc. — will help minimize the effects of implicit bias and enable reviewers to evaluate the personal statement more objectively.

Letters of Recommendation:

- **Purpose:** In the graduate application process, the letter of recommendation (LOR) is unique because it is the express third-party endorsement of a candidate's attributes, ability to succeed in graduate school and potential to contribute to the field.
- **Benefits:** Former professors', employers' and colleagues' endorsement of a candidate can not only provide authentic perceptions of a candidate's previous achievements and potential to succeed, but they can also help to provide concrete examples of the subjective traits described in the personal statement and other elements of the application.
- **Drawbacks:** Like the personal statement, LORs are highly subjective and tend to have positive bias, especially as applicants will actively seek professors or managers with whom they have a positive relationship. Professors and employers who receive many such requests may write them out of courtesy rather than passionate endorsement, or request that the student draft the letter for their signature. Reviewers tend to favor letters that come from people they know or from prestigious institutions, which introduces another form of bias into the process.
- **Mitigation:** It's important for reviewers to pay special attention to the language used and specific examples provided — and keep their own biases in check — while deciding how much weight to place on LORs. These biases can also be abated by either having specific dispositions to be addressed and requesting related examples as evidence or providing a standard form asking recommenders to rate the applicant on a set scale and then provide examples to support the ratings.

Résumés & Research Experience:

- **Purpose:** Résumés and research experience show reviewers how applicants have practically applied ideas and concepts learned in the classroom.
- **Benefits:** Undergraduate and postgraduate research helps show reviewers that applicants possess the skills and dispositions needed to conduct extensive research and make substantive contributions to their selected fields. Likewise, professional degree seekers' résumés and past work or internship experiences provide proof of practical skills that can be advanced in the classroom.
- **Drawbacks:** The ability of an applicant to perform extracurricular research or take unpaid or low-paying internships requires a certain level of privilege not afforded to all applicants. Factors such as financial resources, family obligations, urban-rural location, strength of social network, type of undergraduate institution attended (e.g., liberal arts college, community college, research university) and the availability of funding all deeply impact the opportunity applicants have to gather relevant experience.
- **Mitigation:** It's important for reviewers to understand the role of privilege and its impact on résumés. Some applicants may question whether their work experience is directly relevant to their graduate school pursuits and thus not fully provide pertinent information. As with the other application materials, it is important to be explicit and transparent regarding the information to be included in the résumé. For ease in reviewing the résumés, it is helpful to provide a consistent format for applicants to follow.

Despite the pressures of time and resource limitations, we owe each applicant dedicated attention to each component of the application process and a keen understanding of the nuances hidden within each application. It is essential to be mindful of the intended purpose, benefits and drawbacks of each element to make fair, consistent and goal-oriented admissions decisions. The more admissions applications processes can be holistic, explicit, transparent and consistent, the greater the opportunity to bring in a talented, well-rounded and diverse graduate class.

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