GRADUATE EDUCATION GLOSSARY

Is your head spinning from all the abbreviations people have been throwing at you today? Not to worry, we’ve made this cheat sheet to help you decipher all the “grad talk” you’re hearing!

Advisor, faculty
The faculty member appointed to mentor and guide a student through the completion of a graduate degree. You’ll have an advisor appointed to you, but remember ANYONE can serve as a mentor or advisor—build a network of people that can guide, mentor, and support you, regardless of their department or research.

Assistantship (RA/TA/GA)
Get paid to work and go to school! Some departments will offer these jobs that typically come with a tuition waiver and a small stipend in exchange for part-time work (usually 18-25 hours a week). The jobs can range from research to administrative duties, which is where the RA/TA/GA comes in. RA= Research Assistant, TA=Teaching Assistant, GA= Graduate Assistant. These are hidden gems in graduate programs; apply early and be prepared for some heavy competition.

Comprehensive exam
An exam administered by the student’s academic major program to discover whether the student’s knowledge of the subject areas of study are sufficient to advance to the dissertation writing stage. May be written and/or oral.

CV (Curriculum Vitae)
A longer version of your resume that includes things like publications and teaching positions, and other accomplishments that may not fit on your one page resume.

Defense
Of the dark arts? Nope, it’s the final examination part of a graduate student’s thesis/dissertation, and the usually the last thing standing between obtaining your Master’s or Ph.D. You may have to do anything from give a lecture on your dissertation topic to actually defending your work and findings in front of a committee of people who know what they’re talking about!

Director of Graduate Study/Graduate Advisor
The faculty member in a department who you want to talk to if you’re a potential applicant, since they tend to sit on admissions committees and know the nitty gritty about the application process. They answer questions about the program, and advise grad students on logistics and requirements once they’re enrolled.

Dissertation
Similar to a thesis, usually longer in length and in the time it takes to write—they can take anywhere from one to three years to complete—the goal is to show your advisors and department that you know what you’re talking about and how to research it, and ideally, will contribute something new to your field.
Fellowship
Fellowships are essentially scholarships or grants that are awarded to doctoral students in grad schools. Awards vary but could include enough money to cover the cost of everything, including tuition, housing, and food. Sometimes, they have strings attached, such as working on a very specific type of research, or publishing a set amount of articles in a specific field.

GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test)
The standardized test required for admission to a graduate business school aka the SAT II for business school.

GRE (Graduate Record Examination)
Standardized exam usually required for admission to grad schools aka the SAT for grad school.

LSAT (Law School Admission Test)
Standardized test required for admission to law school.

MCAT (Medical College Admissions Test)
The exam needed to get into medical school.

Orals
Basically, comprehensive final exams (that are presented verbally) for graduate school, which are common for doctoral degrees and sometimes required for master's-level programs and usually graded by a small committee of professors.

Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy)
This is an advanced degree, beyond the master's level, which requires further courses, as well as several years of original research culminating in a thesis/dissertation.

Practicum
Fancy word for a short grad school internship that you’ll get credit for. It’s your chance to get hands-on experience in your field of study. Usually unpaid, occasionally paid (if you’re lucky).

Professional Graduate Education
This is a graduate education that emphasizes learning the skills and knowledge necessary to practice a profession, such as attending med school or studying social work.

Thesis
A written work containing the results of research on a specific topic prepared by a candidate for a bachelor's or master's degree; a work of research culminating the master's degree. The thesis is based on an individual research conducted by you and supervised by your advisor.