

PREPARING FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

Graduate programs in psychology can be divided into either master's (MA, MS) or doctoral levels (PhD, PsyD, EdD). Master's level programs typically require two or three years to complete, enable graduates to move on in a variety of career settings, and can serve to further prepare students for doctoral study. Doctoral level programs typically require approximately four to six years of study, and they prepare students for careers in academic, applied, or other professional settings. Both types of degrees are considered vocationally beneficial and prestigious, but students should take note that there are certain professions (i.e. university professor) that tend to require or favor the Ph.D.

Applying to graduate schools:

YOU CAN AFFORD THIS - don't dismiss graduate school because of financial concerns

- Many graduate school programs pay YOU to attend!
- You may serve as a teaching or research or teaching assistant, receive a fellowship, etc.
- Get involved in research as soon as you think you might want to attend graduate school. Most programs look for this as part of your application and it is a great way to get to know faculty for recommendations!

Grades are obviously important - but NOT sufficient

- There will be hundreds of applicants out there with good grades
- You must have something in addition to good grades - research experience, high GRE scores, lots of extracurricular activities and service, etc.

Taking the GRE:

This score will be interpreted as a measure of your general intellectual abilities. It is similar to the SAT required for admission to college. You want to take this test seriously and try to do well. It costs \$150+ per test, so try to do well the first time. At competitive schools, this score is often used as a filter – you must achieve a certain minimum score to even be considered for admission.

It is NOT impossible to study for these exams

- Study a little every day for approximately 3 months. Mental and emotional discipline is an important factor in success. Those who study harder tend to do better on the exam. Cramming does not work for the GRE!
- Make this one of your highest priorities. It will be hard work, so remind yourself often that this level of commitment of time and energy is only temporary and will pay off with higher scores. It can also make the difference in getting a paid assistantship in graduate school.
- In particular, focus on the math sections - you can learn everything you need to know for the math part just by reviewing basic algebra and geometry from your math classes.

These tests can be taken more than once - it is wise to start taking them early

- Try to take them before the start of your senior year. Summer is a great opportunity to study! Once classes start, it is a lot harder to find time to study for the GRE.
- You'll be able to retake them if unhappy with your scores
- You'll be sure your scores are available for admission deadlines

General Test --

- Three components - math, verbal, and analytical writing
- The exam is administered on a computer at a test site. Register ONLY at the official gre.org site (yes, there are fake sites out there trying to take your money).
- Plan at least 4 hours to take the exam. Yes, this can be grueling and physically exhausting. That's why practice tests will be beneficial – you will build up the stamina needed.
- The ETS (Educational Testing Service), who administers the exam, provides practice tests when you register to take the GRE- take these tests! They will get you more comfortable with the computerized process and instructions in advance.
- Review books are also excellent (available at Amazon, Barnes & Noble, etc). Trusted sources include Barron's, Kaplan, and Princeton Review.
- Take a lot of practice tests
 - ✓ Some vocabulary words will be repeats (exactly from a practice test) or slight variations
 - ✓ Don't just memorize vocabulary words - learn roots and prefixes/suffixes so that you can easily figure out what unknown words mean
- Take a structured review class if you can afford it (\$1000+) – they typically raise scores
- Be sure you understand all of the instructions before you take the test
 - ✓ There are several "subdivisions" of problems within each section. It helps to know what to expect before you get there
 - ✓ Do not waste time reading instructions when you are taking the exam - know exactly what you need to do on each problem (this can be learned from a review book)
- Do not try to guess your score while taking the exam. Just focus on getting each answer correct
- There is a short break - take some soda, candy, or snacks
- Get plenty of sleep the week before. This is especially important the night before the exam.
- Contact the Career Development Center for review guides, test dates, etc
- The website www.ets.org has more information

Recommended Timeline:

Spring of your junior year –

- Figure out what branch/area of Psychology you want to study (not all programs are offered at all schools)
- Start looking at various graduate schools - ask the Psychology secretary for books that list programs, check the Internet, or go to the library
 - ✓ A good book for Clinical/Counseling Programs is "*The Insiders Guide to Graduate School in Clinical/Counseling Psychology*"
 - ✓ A good book for all programs is by the APA "*Graduate School in Psychology*" It provides lots of information on each school - the number and type of students accepted in each area, cost, financial aid, type of faculty, requirements, and how to contact them. They are available for only around \$30 and are great for comparing programs.
 - ✓ PsychGrad.org, the Psychology Graduate Applicant's Portal, provides many useful sources of information for the various tasks involved in applying to graduate school in psychology.
 - ✓ *Council of Applied Master's Programs in Psychology* is for students interested in master's-level applied psychology training programs.
- Ask any schools you are interested in to send you additional materials
- Narrow your choices to about 5 schools

- Begin studying and think about taking the GRE General Test for over the summer
- Get involved in research (you can do this for course credit PSY410) or field experience (PSY441/442/448). This will be valuable experience and become an important part of your application. You are showing initiative by getting out of classroom, where you can start to apply psychological concepts to the real world. Plus, it will help you “stand out from the crowd” of other applicants who did not take advantage of similar opportunities.

Fall of your senior year –

- Create your own timeline on a calendar and put it somewhere that you will see every day!!!
You don't want to miss a deadline!
- Applications take MUCH more time than you think (2-5 hours on each one)
 - ✓ Make sure to read all directions carefully and spell check your answers before you submit the application (most schools have applications online).
 - ✓ Begin working on them as soon as you get them - there will, however, be some parts that you can't complete right away (mark incomplete areas for later follow-up).
- Write your **personal statement** as soon as possible (by October)
 - ✓ Make sure several people proofread your essay before you submit it. Get feedback on several drafts to improve it.
 - ✓ DO NOT write an “autobiography” of your life – a personal statement is actually not that *personal*. It's more of a professional goals statement. They want to know your goals in life, why you're interested in this field, and how their program will help you achieve your goals, etc.
 - Focus on educational and occupational experiences - not personal ones. For example, reviewers don't want to see that personal tragedies, issues, or emotions are driving all of your goals and decisions. Avoid the temptation to think of your personal struggles as if they were professional training. They might be relevant, but they are not credentials.
 - If you must include a mention of your personal struggles, do it vaguely. Share fewer details about a traumatic experience and more about your coping skills after the adversity. Let them know when the going gets tough; you don't quit.
 - ✓ Avoid clichés - “I want to help people” (who doesn't?)
 - ✓ Make it flexible so that little has to be changed from application to application.
 - ✓ Suggested, but NOT required format:
 - 1st paragraph - opening statement of goals and objectives
 - 2nd - experiences in the area you are interested in (research, relevant classes, internships). These are an important part of your background information.
 - 3rd - other pertinent experiences (leadership, GPA, special awards). Give specific details about skills you have acquired and how those skills align with your future interests.
 - 4th - why you chose this area
 - 5th - why you chose this school (be specific by listing classes or professors you are interested in working with)
 - 6th - closing statement (one sentence or two)
- By November
 - ✓ Take (or re-take) the GRE General Test
 - ✓ Ask people to write letters of recommendation for you. Allow 4-6 weeks for this.
 - These are extremely important- make sure the writer has had considerable contact with you, especially outside of the classroom (i.e. research)
 - If possible, ask faculty in Psychology instead of work supervisors, family, etc.

- Be organized! A professor will be much more likely to write a good recommendation for you if you give them a timeline and all materials they need (make a folder or packet for each professor you are asking for a recommendation from)
 - Include: a copy of GRE scores, a copy of your transcript, a current resume (highlighting any activities/research you have done with them), a copy of your personal statement (even if it is a rough draft), and your contact information
 - Include envelopes with addresses and stamps if a paper copy is required.
 - READ THE INSTRUCTIONS! Some recommendations need to be submitted online, some are submitted through the mail.
 - Make sure to be in continuous contact with those writing recommendations for you. Remember they are busy and it is your job to make sure all materials arrive at schools on time
- By Winter Break
 - ✓ All your final application materials should be ready!!!
 - ✓ If you are requesting any financial support (TA, RA, fellowship), your deadline may be about a month before the one usually printed on the application.
 - ✓ Send any additional materials you can - research papers, lists of activities, honors, etc.
 - ✓ Don't forget those application fees - anywhere from \$50-\$100

Spring of your senior year --

- Sit back, relax (if possible), and wait to hear from them!
- Some may invite you for an interview (this is more typical of Ph.D. Programs)
 - ✓ Go no matter what other plans you may have
 - ✓ Ask them to pay for as much as possible
 - ✓ While you are there:
 - Don't drink at parties. Don't flirt with anyone. Don't discuss personal hobbies/interests at length
 - You are being evaluated at ALL times - even if it appears to be informal!
- Even if you are not invited for an interview, visit and tour the school. Ask to speak with professors or sit in on classes. Get as much information as you need to make the best decision.
- You may have some phone interviews - keep your materials ready and easily accessible (just in case) for quick reference.
- You typically have until April 15 to respond to a school that has given you an offer.
- Many other people refuse offers around that time
 - ✓ For that reason, you may hear from some schools in late April if you were on their waiting list.
- Make sure to notify schools that you WILL NOT be attending so they can notify their wait list.
- Write "thank you" letters to those who wrote recommendations for you. Let them know your decision and thank them for their effort and help
- After graduation, be sure to send your final transcript (stating that you earned your Bachelor's degree) to the school you will be attending.

Additional Resources

Preparing and Applying for Graduate School in Psychology: free online video program from the APA
<https://www.apa.org/education/grad/application-video-series>

The Gentle Guide for Applying to Graduate Schools from the Chronicle of Higher Education
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Gentle-Guide-for-Applying/239768>

Kisses of Death in the Graduate School Application Process: Teaching of Psychology
https://psychology.unl.edu/psichi/Graduate_School_Application_Kisses_of_Death.pdf

BEST WISHES!

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