

# Graduate Study in Psychology: Successfully Navigating the Application Process

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So you want to go to graduate school in psychology? Whether you're thinking of applying to graduate school or have already decided to apply, graduate school can be an immensely rewarding and challenging experience! In this guide I'll offer my advice on how to successfully navigate the graduate school application process. The intended audience is undergraduate students at Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA), but I imagine my advice will be useful to students who are generally interested in graduate school. I should mention that the views and opinions expressed here are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of other faculty members at SFA or elsewhere. My advice stems from my own experience, but it's always a good idea to seek other faculty members' opinions as well. Well, let's get on with it...

## PART 1: "SHOULD I GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL?"

On July 8, 2010, basketball star LeBron James announced he'd be signing with the Miami Heat as part of a 75-minute televised special on ESPN called *The Decision*. Although I doubt your decision to attend graduate school will be as heavily publicized (or scrutinized) as LeBron's was, it's still an important decision with major life implications. Take a minute to think about why you want to go to graduate school. Whatcha come up with?

### Good Reasons

- "I love psychology and want to learn more about..."
- "Going to graduate school will help me reach my professional goals (e.g., research, teaching, counseling)."
- "Graduate school will improve my career outlook."

### Bad, Awful, Terrible Reasons

- "I want three letters after my name: Ph.D."
- "I don't know what else to do with my life."
- "Going to graduate school is what I'm *supposed* to do next."
- "Other people (my parents, friends, barista) think I should go."

If you're genuinely interested in psychology and need a graduate degree to accomplish your career goals or improve your career outlook, then proceed. If, on the other hand, you

think it'd be sweeeeeet to call yourself "doctor," please re-think this. Getting a Ph.D. for this reason is a **P**retty **H**orrible **D**ecision. The bottom line is this: Graduate study in psychology is physically, psychologically, emotionally, and financially draining. Go for the right reasons.

## Undergraduate vs. Graduate Study: What's the Difference?

OK, so you're still on board with this whole graduate school thing. Let me briefly explain the main difference between undergraduate and graduate study. As an undergraduate, your primary goal is to pass—and by "pass" I mean "ace"—your classes. Simple, right? Would you be surprised to hear that grades largely don't matter in graduate school? Yes, you read that correctly: grades don't matter. In fact, a mentor once told me that if you're acing all your graduate courses, "you're doing it wrong." Why? Because the goal of graduate school is not to ace your classes; the goal is to become an independent scholar and expert in your chosen area of study.

Don't get me wrong: grades are still important, and you'll need to pass your classes in order to stay in your program. But you won't impress your mentor with straight A's. You'll impress your mentor (and others) by developing strong hypotheses, designing solid experiments, and publishing your results in top journals in the field. (Although the specifics will differ depending on the type of degree [master's vs. doctorate] and subfield of psychology, you're still being trained as an independent scholar.) At the graduate level, you move from being a consumer of knowledge to a *producer* of knowledge.

It's time to step up to the plate, wave goodbye to your undergraduate past, and swing for the fences. You're in the majors now.

## But I HATE Research and/or Statistics!

Every now and then I hear a student say something like, "I'm majoring in psychology because I hate science and math." Really? I mean, *really*? Psychology is a research-driven science that uses a specific branch of math (statistics) to analyze data and answer questions about human behavior. After all, without data, "it's just another opinion."

If you hate science and math, you'll probably hate graduate school in psychology and should probably re-think your decision to apply.

## Master's vs. Doctorate: Which Degree Should I Pursue?

Which degree—a master's degree or doctorate degree—is right for you? It depends on what you want to do and whether the degree will help you accomplish your career goals. If you want to be a counselor or market researcher and only need a master's degree to do this, then there's little need to get a doctorate. If, however, you want to work as a licensed clinical psychologist or a professor at a university, or in some other profession that requires

a doctorate degree, then you'll need a doctorate. Get the degree that will help you get to where you want to go.

You may have heard the term “terminal master’s degree” but have little idea what it means. A terminal master’s program typically involves two years of advanced study in a specific area of psychology, such as clinical or experimental psychology. In the second year, students usually complete a thesis (in research-based programs) or an internship or practicum (in clinical and counseling programs). There are also terminal master’s programs in general psychology—like SFA’s master’s program (a shameless pitch, I know)—in which students take advanced coursework in the major subfields of psychology. In either case, a terminal master’s program *terminates* after the two-year period, at which point you’ll either enter the workforce or continue on to a doctoral program at a different institution. This is most likely because the institution at which you’re enrolled doesn’t offer a doctorate degree in your desired subfield of psychology. Note that some doctoral programs will accept your thesis conducted elsewhere, but this isn’t always the case and depends on the institution.

Many master’s programs aim to help students become more competitive before applying to doctoral programs. Because master’s programs tend to have less competitive admissions requirements than doctoral programs, they can be a great stepping stone for students who want a doctorate degree but who aren’t competitive enough straight out of undergrad.

If you’re accepted into a doctoral program straight out of undergrad, you’ll complete your master’s degree *en route* (along the way) to your doctorate. In other words, you’ll be accepted as a doctoral student and will complete your master’s degree during the first few years of your program. Rather than leave the institution after finishing your master’s degree, as may be the case in a terminal master’s program, you’ll continue on to complete your dissertation in the same program.

## Essential Questions

When considering applying to graduate school, ask yourself

1. Why do I want to go to graduate school? Do I *need* a graduate degree to accomplish my career goals?
2. Am I mentally and financially prepared for graduate school?
3. Which degree will I pursue: M.A., M.S., Ph.D., etc.?
4. To which programs will I apply?

## PART 2: “WHICH PROGRAMS SHOULD I APPLY TO?”

Congratulations! You’ve decided to apply to graduate school and even know the degree you want to pursue. The next step is to do your homework. Compile a list of programs you

might be interested in applying to, and consider the features of your ideal graduate program. Although no graduate program is perfect, there are some important aspects to consider when researching potential programs.

## Program Prestige

Does the program have a good reputation? Is the faculty respected? What have students in the program gone on to do? The prestige of the program is important to consider; after all, you don't want a degree from "Podunk University."

On a similar note, make sure that the program is accredited. Some professional degree programs in clinical, counseling, and school psychology are not accredited, meaning that the program doesn't meet standards established by the APA's Commission on Accreditation. With non-accredited programs, there's less assurance that you'll receive a quality education because there's little oversight over the curriculum, facilities, etc. Moreover, getting a degree from a non-accredited program can limit your job prospects because many employers and state licensing boards require a degree from an accredited program. If in doubt, go the accredited route.

## Mentorship

As a terminal master's student, it's typical to take courses from several different faculty members with diverse research interests. In this sense, you might have more than one mentor.

It's a bit different in doctoral programs; as a doctoral student, you'll work closely with a faculty mentor whose expertise overlaps with your own research interests. In a way, you're being trained by this person to become an expert in one or two areas of research, much like an apprentice. In fact, when applying to doctoral programs, you're really applying to work with a specific faculty member who will serve as your advisor. This isn't to say that you *can't* collaborate with other faculty—and indeed you should—just that you'll be primarily known as your advisor's student.

Mentorship is arguably the most important consideration when selecting a graduate program. Working with an advisor who values student mentorship and will invest in your professional growth is crucial for your success. On the flipside, an advisor who doesn't value you or student mentorship (and may even see you as an obstacle to "better uses of time," whatever they may be) can cripple your likelihood of success.

Selecting a graduate program in which you'll receive quality mentorship can admittedly be tough because faculty members tend to put their best image forward when recruiting for their programs. When talking with prospective faculty, ask them about their perspective on student mentorship and the opportunities available to you as a student under their advisement. Will they treat you as a respected member of the research team, or will they look at you as a glorified lab rat? (Don't ask them *this* question, obviously, but

you get the point.) You can also ask current graduate students what it's like to work with the faculty advisor. Sometimes you can learn about their relationship with their advisor from their tone of voice, eye rolls, scoffs of disapproval, and other (implicit) mannerisms.

## Coursework

Look carefully at the program's curriculum. What courses are offered? Are the courses rigorous and relevant to your interests? Will they help you develop the necessary skills to succeed in your desired career? What opportunities are there for research, teaching, and field experience?

When considering several programs, it's important to compare each program's courses to see how they differ. Although most programs within the same subfield will offer similar courses (e.g., Research Design, Statistics), ask yourself: "What does program X offer that program Y doesn't?" These differences, though sometimes subtle, are telling and can help you rank among several programs.

## Location

Ah, the golden rule of real estate: Location, location, location! Hate snow? If so, don't apply north of the Mason-Dixon line. Hate hot, humid weather? You might want to strike those southern universities off your list. I know this seems obvious, but remember that you'll be spending anywhere from two to seven years (or more!) of your life at this place. That's a long time to be miserable.

Think about the school's proximity to the two F's: family and fun. Many SFA students are from Texas and will never consider leaving. (And why would they? Texas IS pretty awesome.) That's fine, but if you limit yourself geographically, you'll automatically cut down on the number of programs to which you can apply. Keeping family nearby has its benefits, of course, but it's not always possible. Similarly, if your favorite hobby is sunbathing on a beach with a bucket of beer (alliteration aside), can you really see yourself living in rural Kansas?

Sometimes students are so concerned with getting in somewhere, *anywhere*, that they're willing to make sacrifices they wouldn't otherwise make. Admirable, but give some thought to what it'd be like being a student in *that* program, in *that* city, in *that* part of the country. My academic travels have taken me to Pennsylvania, Illinois, Florida, Idaho, Texas, and London (England), so I can attest to the importance of location, location, location.

## "How Many Programs Should I Apply To?"

In addition to deciding which programs to apply to, you'll likely find yourself wondering about the number of programs to apply to. This depends on many factors such as admission requirements, your competitiveness as an applicant, the number of application

fees you're willing to pay, etc. Honestly, there's no "right" number of programs to apply to. I've mentored students who apply to just a few programs (2-3) and others who apply to 20+ programs. In general, I recommend a three-tiered approach:

1. **Safety schools:** These are programs for which you can safely say, "I got this." You far exceed the program's admission requirements and might even view the program as a back-up option in case your other top choices don't work out. You should apply to at least a few safety schools.
2. **Mid-range schools:** These are programs for which you can say, "I think I got this." You meet or exceed the program's requirements and should stand a competitive chance of getting in. The majority of your applications should be to mid-range schools.
3. **Reach schools:** Reach programs are associated with thoughts such as, "I don't stand a snowball's chance in hell." You don't meet (or even far undershoot) the program's requirements, and you're probably throwing away money on an application fee that's better reserved for a mid-range school. But who knows, maybe you're just what Harvard is looking for this year. If you have the money, consider applying to a reach school. You never know.

In this section I tried to highlight some important aspects to consider when looking into potential programs. This list isn't exhaustive, and different issues will be important to different applicants. But here's the main take-home: The best programs to apply to are the ones that meet your needs and will help you get to where you want to go. Next we'll turn to application materials. Take a deep breath, buckle up, and hold on...

## Essential Questions

When identifying potential programs, ask yourself

1. Is this a reputable program with a strong curriculum that will help me accomplish my career goals?
2. What is the program's mentorship model? Is there at least one faculty mentor whose expertise overlaps with my own research interests?
3. Is the program in a (desirable) location that's suited to my preferred style of living?

## PART 3: "WHAT APPLICATION MATERIALS DO I NEED?"

Dare I ask, are you still there? I hope so! Admittedly, Part 3 is overwhelming, but bear with me. In this section I'll outline the major components of graduate school applications and provide some tips and tricks on how to prepare each part. Although programs vary in their specific requirements—and you need to be organized about which materials each program

you're considering requires—most graduate programs in psychology require the following six items:

1. GPA
2. Graduate Record Exam (GRE) Scores
3. Letters of Recommendation
4. Personal Statement / Statement of Interest
5. Curriculum Vita (CV)
6. Academic Transcripts

In what follows, I won't cover specific topics such as "how to register for the GRE" and "how to format a CV." There are plenty of resources online that you can find with a quick Google search. (I'll offer a few suggestions here and there.) Rather, I'll offer my reflections on each of these requirements and provide some advice on how to approach them.

## GPA

Most graduate programs will want to know your overall GPA; some may ask for your GPA in your psychology courses or your GPA from your last two years of study.

What's there to say about your GPA? Not much, as it turns out, because by the time you're considering applying to graduate school—likely in your junior or senior year—your GPA is largely set.

Is all hope lost? Well, you may still be able to influence your GPA by re-taking a few courses or trying *really* hard to ace your current courses. But remember, your GPA is one of many parts to your application. A strong, well-rounded application may be able to compensate for a slightly-beneath-the-program-cutoff GPA. If your GPA is significantly below a program's cutoff, however, and the rest of your application is lacking in some respects, then you may need to consider removing the program from your list. In this case, accept your GPA for what it is and focus on programs for which your GPA will be more competitive.

## Graduate Record Exam (GRE) Scores

The Graduate Record Exam. Few things terrify applicants like the letters G, R, and E. Contrary to popular opinion, the numerical translation of GRE is not "666." No matter what others may tell you, the GRE is not evil. It's an important part of your application that warrants understanding rather than vitriol.

Why do graduate programs require the GRE? Why can't your GPA be good enough? Why can't we all just get along? The reason graduate programs don't look solely at GPA is because GPA isn't a standardized measure. Is a GPA of 3.82 at Yale comparable to a 3.82 at "Podunk University?" Methinks not. The GRE is standardized, meaning that admissions officials are able to compare the relative performance of individual test-takers.

Love it or hate it, the GRE (and other standardized tests like the GMAT and LSAT) allow for a more direct and meaningful comparison between applicants than GPA.

For some top-tier programs, the GRE acts as a gatekeeper; your application is only reviewed if you exceed the GRE cutoff. (Cutoff scores help top programs that receive hundreds of applications separate the wheat from the chaff.) So what becomes of applications that fall below the GRE cutoff? They drift forever through application purgatory. Just kidding—more than likely, the university pockets your application fee and sends you a beautifully crafted rejection form letter. This is all the more reason to apply to a healthy number of mid-range and safety schools.

Now that you understand why the GRE is required, let's talk about the test itself. The GRE measures three types of reasoning: verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and analytical writing. If you haven't yet, bookmark the following website: [www.ets.org](http://www.ets.org). This site contains everything you need to know about the GRE: why it exists, what it covers, how it's scored, how much it costs (\$195, last time I checked), how to register for it and where to take it, etc. There are even preparation materials—some free, some for purchase—with sample questions to familiarize yourself with the test. As of this writing, you can take the GRE once every 21 days, up to five times within any continuous 12-month period. In other words, if you bomb it the first time, there's still hope.

## *Preparing for the GRE*

Speaking of hope, how can you best prepare for the GRE, assuming your goal is to, um, *not* bomb it? First things first: Know thy ~~enemy~~ test. Before registering for the GRE, you should 1) be absolutely sure that you need to take it and 2) be familiar with the content, structure, and scoring of the test. The GRE is a computer-delivered test; the analytical writing section will be first, followed by the verbal and quantitative reasoning sections in any order. The overall testing time, according to the good folks at ETS, is approximately 3 hours and 45 minutes.

Once you're familiar with the structure of the GRE, you need to hit the books—the practice books. There are dozens of practice books on the market, and most of them offer similar preparation strategies. Flip through a couple at a local bookstore (or SFA's bookstore) and pick up one or two that you like. Whatever you decide on, just find a book or two with a strong verbal and quantitative reasoning review. After that, start taking practice tests. You might be thinking, "Psht. I don't need no stinkin' practice." OK, but without knowing your baseline, how do you know where you need to improve? Practice, practice, and practice some more.

When taking practice tests, try to simulate the real testing environment. On test day, your personal belongings (even your cell phone) will be locked in a storage locker. The testing room will be eerily quiet and all you'll have in front of you is a computer screen, a pencil, and scratch paper. Practice in a similar testing environment. You won't be taking the GRE with your cell phone vibrating on your desk, your dog barking outside, and your

roommate's band performing their gig in the basement, so don't practice under these conditions. Use [www.ets.org](http://www.ets.org), practice books, and online resources to become well acquainted with the test. In case you're worried that a few practice books won't be enough, you might consider registering for an online prep course. Online prep courses are expensive though (\$500 or more). If you're self-disciplined enough to follow a study schedule and take practice tests—which is what most online prep courses do anyway—then it's probably not necessary.

Sure, practice tests are great and all, but what about specific study strategies for the verbal, quantitative, and analytical writing sections? Here's my advice:

1. **Verbal Reasoning:** Learn as many words as possible. The single best way I know how to increase your verbal score is to increase the size of your vocabulary. When I was preparing for the GRE, I studied word lists in practice books (as well as prefixes and suffixes) and made individual flashcards for over 1500 words. I memorized every single one of those words, and some of them appeared on the GRE. Yes, I know. I'm a nerd.
2. **Quantitative Reasoning:** Learn (or refresh your knowledge of) the basics. The GRE doesn't test your knowledge of advanced mathematical concepts; it tests your knowledge of simple concepts—arithmetic, algebra, geometry—in a difficult way. Refresh your knowledge of high school math (SparkNotes, anyone?) and don't be fooled by unnecessary information (i.e., fluff) designed to confuse you and misdirect your attention.
3. **Analytical Writing:** Make it good enough. You need to perform well on the writing section, but most graduate programs in psychology care primarily about your verbal and quantitative scores.

## Registering for the GRE

When it comes time to register for the GRE, sign up for a time in which you're likely to succeed. If you're a so-called morning person, select a testing time in the morning. If you don't crawl out of bed most days until noon, sign up for an afternoon session. Schedule the test during a low-stress time of the semester, *not* during midterms or final exams.

It's also important to consider when in the academic year to take it. Many doctorate programs have early application deadlines (i.e., early to mid-December); master's deadlines tend to be a bit later (i.e., February or March). Check your programs' deadlines and plan accordingly. Take the GRE at least a few months before your first deadline, which will give you enough time to retake it if you need. Because it can be difficult to balance GRE prep with courses and other responsibilities during the semester, some students opt to take it in July or August before the fall semester of their senior year. In any case, only register for the GRE once you're ready to take it.

## *Before the Test*

The week of the GRE, your mantra is “No major life changes.” If possible, keep your relationships intact, your stress levels down, and everything under control. Drive to the testing center the day before the test; identify at least two different routes to get there. Don’t schedule anything before the testing appointment. On test day, eat a light meal that won’t upset your tummy and drink sparingly. Keep your brain full and your bladder empty. Arrive to the testing center early. Wear layered clothing in case the testing room is too hot or too cold. For official test day policies and regulations, check out:

[https://www.ets.org/gre/revised\\_general/test\\_day/?WT.ac=grehome\\_gretestday\\_150213](https://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/test_day/?WT.ac=grehome_gretestday_150213).

When you sit down to take the GRE, you’ll be prompted to complete a tutorial on how to use a computer, mouse, and keyboard. Understandably, most test-takers consider this a waste of time, decline the tutorial, and hop right into the test. Big mistake. Don’t use this time to refresh your computer literacy skills; instead, use this time to create your own scratch paper. You can’t write on a computer screen, and using process of elimination (PoE) in your head is difficult. The testing center gives you several sheets of scratch paper. Before starting the test, write response sets on your scratch paper:

1. A      B      C      D      E
2. A      B      C      D      E
3. A      B      C      D      E
4. A      B      C      D      E
5. A      B      C      D      E
6. ...

Use your scratch paper for PoE rather than mentally keeping track of your thought process (e.g., “Is it A? B? Wait, didn’t I already eliminate A? Is it C? Damnit, I can’t remember! I’m sad and want to go home.”).

## *After the Test*

After you’ve finished the GRE, you’ll have the option to send your score reports to up to four institutions for free. That is, the good folks at ETS will send free score reports to four programs of your choice, so choose wisely because additional score reports cost \$27 per recipient. Most graduate programs in psychology require your GRE scores, so four free reports is better than none.

I guess at this point some congratulations are in order. You survived the GRE. Nicely done! If your score is high enough that you don’t need to retake it, celebrate—eat some cake, take a vacation, or buy yourself something special. If you do need to retake it, well, may the force be with you.

## GRE Subject Test

Most graduate programs in psychology require your GRE scores, but some programs will also want your GRE Psychology Subject Test scores. You should only take the GRE Psychology Subject Test if a program requires it. More information can be found here: <https://www.ets.org/gre/subject/about/content/psychology>.

## Letters of Recommendation

If your GPA and GRE scores are what get you in the door, your letters of recommendation determine how you're welcomed once you're inside. Typically you'll need three to four letters of recommendation; these letters should come from individuals who know you well and who can speak to your relevant skills and abilities. For example, you might ask your professor, research mentor, or internship supervisor to write you a letter. Don't ask your mother, father, or neighbor; know you as they may, they're not appropriate letter writers in this case.

Ideally, you want to identify people who can write you a *strong* letter of recommendation. In other words, don't ask a professor from whom you've taken only one class (that you barely passed) and who struggles to remember your name. I tend to write letters only for students who I've had in class and who have worked in my research lab. This way, I can observe the student's diverse set of skills across a variety of contexts. If I don't know you well and you barely stand out in class, I can't say much about you beyond, "She took my class and earned a B." Obviously that's not a strong endorsement.

This brings me to my next point: Stand out among the rest! The best students—the ones for whom I'm excited to write a letter of recommendation—are the ones who beat down my door (figuratively speaking) with research ideas, questions, and the like. Get to know your professors; volunteer in their research labs. This may come as a surprise, but professors think a lot about their students and form impressions of them—both good and bad. I'll remember you if you try hard in class and show a genuine interest in psychology. I'll also remember you if you sleep or text in class, blow off appointments, and address me as "Hey, you." A few semesters back a student told me that he didn't need to try hard in my class because "C's get degrees." Demonstrating a remarkable lack of self-insight, he later asked me for a letter of recommendation. You can imagine my response.

When asking for a letter, try to give your letter writers at least 4-6 week's notice. Don't spring the question on them the night before it's due. Be clear and organized about the submission instructions. Most graduate programs use an online submission portal, but some programs still require letters to be mailed. If the latter, provide your letter writers with postage paid envelopes and address information. When filling out your application, you'll be asked to waive your right to view your letter of recommendation. This means that you won't be able to read what your letter writer wrote about you. Most people—myself included—will not write a letter for you unless you waive your right of access.

Give your letter writers as much information as possible to help them write a strong letter. This might include a spreadsheet containing the names of the schools to which you're applying, the type of program (e.g., psychology, counseling, social work), the degree you're seeking (e.g., M.A., Ph.D., Psy.D.), deadlines, whether there are additional evaluation forms to fill out, and so on. You might also include a copy of your personal statement, CV, and unofficial transcripts (see below). In short, give your letter writers anything that will help them write the strongest letter possible. And finally, don't forget to thank your letter writers after they've submitted your letters! A small gift or a hand-written thank you note is appropriate.

## Personal Statement / Statement of Interest

The personal statement (or statement of interest, statement of goals, etc.) is your chance to sell yourself to the program. That said, the personal statement isn't only about you; it's also about them and what you'll contribute to their program. For this reason, the personal statement can be tricky to write. You need to play yourself up without sounding arrogant, highlight your experiences without showboating, and talk about how wonderful their program is without kissing @\$\$. Easy, right?

Fortunately, programs usually specify what they want you to address in your statement, and yes, you should address everything in their instructions. You won't have a lot of space—usually 1-2 pages—so you need to make every word count. Although the structure of your statement will depend on the program's instructions, the general format might look something like this:

1. Discuss why you're interested in your subfield of psychology
2. Discuss your relevant experiences and skills
3. Discuss why you're interested in their program, which advisor(s) you want to work with, and how their program will help you reach your career goals

As for a few important "do's":

1. Do follow instructions and keep it to the required page limit.
2. Do explicitly state why you're a good *match* for their program.
3. Do tailor each statement to the individual program to which you're applying
4. Do remember that graduate committees are forming an impression of you and assessing your potential as a student in their program. Sell yourself; if you don't, no one else will.
5. Do ask your professors and peers to edit and improve your statement. It's common for statements to go through several drafts. Spell check and proofread.

And some "don'ts":

1. Don't be yourself. Be the most professional version of yourself possible.

2. Don't mention personal psychological or family problems, even if they sparked your interest in psychology.
3. Don't say, "I want to help people." You don't want to help people (even if you do). Even if you're applying to clinical programs, you want to use research to understand and treat mental disorders or psychological problems.

For aspiring clinical psychologists who disagree with me on this last point, check out the following article:

Brown, R. M. (2004). Self-composed: Rhetoric in psychology personal statements. *Written Communication, 21*, 242-260.

## Curriculum Vita

Your curriculum vita, or CV for short, is your academic resume. Whereas a resume for a job emphasizes relevant work experience, your CV should emphasize your relevant academic experience. Typical entries include your educational background, research experience, honors and awards (e.g., Dean's list), and memberships in professional associations (e.g., Psi Chi). Click here (<https://www.socialpsychology.org/vitatemplate.htm>) and here (<http://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2003/09/cv.aspx>) for templates and advice on structuring your CV, or search Google for other examples.

When formatting your CV, don't be cutesy. Avoid **color** and *tough-to-read fonts*. Make sure it's free of typos, errors grammatical, and pun.ctua,tion mistakes. (See what I did there?) In all seriousness, it should be clear, organized, and professional. As with your personal statement, ask your professors and peers to edit and improve your vita. Graduate committees form an impression of you based on the content and structure of your CV. As Lord (2004) succinctly put it, *you are your vita*.

## Academic Transcripts

Your transcript is your academic record of the courses you've taken and the grades you've received in those courses. Some graduate programs want unofficial transcripts, others want official transcripts. In either case, leave enough time for your transcripts to arrive before the application deadline. SFA students can order their transcripts here:

<http://www.sfasu.edu/registrar/129.asp>

## Essential Questions

Before applying to graduate programs, ask yourself

1. What materials does the program require?
2. Do I need to take the GRE? What about the GRE Psychology Subject Test?

3. Have I requested letters of recommendation from at least three individuals who know me well and who can write me a strong letter?
4. Have I solicited feedback on my personal statement, CV, and any other relevant materials?
5. Do I need to request unofficial or official transcripts?

## PART 4: "I'M READY TO APPLY—NOW WHAT?"

At this point, you've identified the programs to which you want to apply and have corralled the necessary materials. Now it's time to apply!

In most cases, students apply in the fall/spring of their senior year for admission the following fall semester. Doctoral programs tend to have application deadlines in late November or early to mid-December, whereas master's deadlines tend to be in January, February, March, or later. Some programs admit students on a rolling basis. Regardless of the specific deadlines, you need to be organized. Arrange all of your application information for each program into a single Excel spreadsheet. For example, you might include the following information on a single line for each program:

School	Program	Degree	Apply	Deadline	Fee	GRE Req.	My GRE
University of [X]	Counseling	M.A.	Online	12/31	\$50	V 150 Q 150 A 3.0	V 162 Q 151 A 3.5

GPA Req.	My GPA	Statement?	CV?	Letters of Rec?	Transcripts	Transcripts Sent to:
3.0	3.2	Required	Required	3	Official	[Insert address]

Different graduate programs may want different materials submitted to different places (i.e., the Psychology Department, the Graduate School) through different means (i.e., online vs. snail mail). It's enough to make your head spin, so be as organized as possible and allot enough time for this process. Applying to graduate school can seem like a full-time job; there are a lot of moving parts, and it takes time to complete the application for each program.

When compiling your Excel sheet, remember the three-tiered approach I mentioned earlier (i.e., safety schools, mid-range schools, and reach schools) to determine where your application is likely to be competitive. It's a good idea to e-mail the faculty member with whom you want to work to confirm that he or she is accepting students for the upcoming year. This not only shows that you're serious about applying, but the faculty member may remember your e-mail favorably when your application crosses his or her desk.

Finally, remember that applying to graduate school isn't cheap. Each application requires an application fee (usually between \$50 and \$75), and you may need to add in copying fees and postage charges for mailed applications. Taking the GRE, sending score reports, and sending transcripts all cost money. If you're selected for an interview, you may need to pay out of pocket to attend the interview or buy a suit or something professional to wear. It adds up quickly, so budget accordingly.

## The Interview

Once you submit your applications, the waiting game begins. For many applicants, waiting patiently is the hardest part. You may feel compelled to repeatedly check your e-mail or mailbox for an acceptance letter or check the status of your application in the university's online submission portal. (If only checking incessantly increased your chances!) What you're really hoping for at this stage is an invitation for a phone interview, a video interview (e.g., Skype), or an in-person interview.

After narrowing its list of applicants to a small handful, the graduate committee interviews their top candidates. Although some master's programs accept applicants outright without conducting interviews, many master's and almost all doctorate programs request at least a phone interview. An interview request is good news because it means that a program is seriously interested in learning more about you. The interview is your chance to seal the deal.

If you're contacted for an interview, keep a few things in mind. Don't answer phone calls from unknown numbers; let the caller leave a message (and set up a professional-sounding voice mail) and call back soon thereafter when you're ready. Don't return phone calls in the food court at the mall; find a quiet location with good reception. Respond to e-mails with proper grammar and spelling. If you're doing a video interview, dress the same as you would in an in-person interview. If invited for an in-person interview, make every effort to go. This shows that you're serious about the program and lets you meet the faculty and explore the campus. Declining an in-person interview is equivalent to saying, "Sorry, but I'm no longer interested in your program."

Regardless of the type of interview, you need to know your stuff. In particular, you should know the program's curriculum inside and out—this information is usually listed on the department's website. You should also be familiar with faculty members' research interests, which may be listed on their individual lab websites. Be prepared to talk about yourself and your professional interests. Prepare a list of questions about the curriculum, research or clinical opportunities, etc. to show your genuine interest in their program. And above all, leave a good impression. When the interview is over, you want the committee members to look at each other, nod their heads in agreement, and say, "Wow, we need him/her in our program."

## The Decision, Revisited

If you receive an offer, it can be tempting to quickly accept the offer in order to be done with this entire process. However, think carefully about your decision. In addition to the issues I discussed in Part 2, consider the amount of time it'll take to complete the program, the cost of tuition, the cost of living, and whether financial aid is available. Most doctoral programs and some master's programs offer stipends. A stipend helps cover the cost of living while in graduate school. It likely won't be enough to head to Vegas each weekend, but it should cover your basic living expenses so you can focus on your courses, research, and other responsibilities. If your program includes a stipend, how much is it, and is it guaranteed beyond the first year? Can you get a part-time job? Some programs mandate that their students can't hold outside employment lest it interfere with the time demands of graduate work. Curricular details are important, but don't forget to ask about the practical details as well.

In general, don't turn down an offer until you receive at least one other offer. Some programs try to force your hand with an "exploding" offer that requires a yes or no decision by a certain date (i.e., within two weeks), after which the offer is retracted. If this happens, and you have other offers on the table, weigh the pros and cons of the different programs against the decision timeline. You might consider asking the program for more time to make your decision.

And at long last, once you decide to accept an offer, do it in writing.

## Putting It All Together

There's no definitive timeline for each step of the application process, and different faculty members have different perspectives about what to do when. Here's a general timeframe heading into your senior year if you're applying to doctoral programs with deadlines in early to mid-December:

- May-July
  - Identify potential programs to apply to
  - Organize admissions requirements for each program
- June-September
  - Study for the GRE
- September
  - Take the GRE
  - Contact potential letter writers and ask if they'll write letters for you
- October
  - Retake the GRE if necessary
  - Write and solicit feedback on your personal statement
  - Create and solicit feedback on your CV
  - Request your transcripts

- November
  - Retake the GRE if necessary
  - Finalize your application materials and submit them before the deadline
  - Confirm that your letter writers sent your letters
- December
  - Confirm that your application was received
- January-February
  - Interview
- February-April
  - Accept and decline offers

If you're applying to master's programs with deadlines in January, February, or March, shift the timeline back accordingly. As you can tell, I'm a fan of starting early and leaving plenty of time for each part of the application. Remember, too, that you'll be working on this during your fall semester while taking courses and meeting your normal responsibilities. It's crucial to be organized and self-disciplined in finding time to work on these materials; you can't throw graduate school applications together at the last minute.

### **"I Got Accepted—Now What?"**

Making it through the graduate school application process is an accomplishment in and of itself, but if you make it through *and* get accepted, it's time to celebrate! Kudos—you should be proud! As for next steps, e-mail current graduate students and introduce yourself. E-mail your faculty advisor and ask whether there are any research papers he or she recommends you read before you arrive. If possible, move to your new town or try to take classes and start research in the summer, which may help ease the transition.

Once the exhaustion of the application process wears off and you've sufficiently celebrated with friends and family, get ready. The hard work is ahead.

### **"I Didn't Get Accepted—Now What?"**

Let's face it—rejection sucks. But rejection letters from graduate programs can *really* sting because of the amount of time and effort you devoted to applying to a program. Many rejection letters also include canned lines such as, "This year we received an unusually large number of applications from highly qualified applicants, but due to limited space, it's impossible for us to accept them all," which add insult to injury. It's natural to feel upset and disappointed.

If you don't get accepted, try not to get disheartened or to take it personally. Reassess your plan. Consider taking a year off and applying again next cycle. Use this time to strengthen your application—improve your GRE scores, volunteer as a research assistant, gain relevant clinical experience, etc.

Don't give up, at least not immediately. Persistence can pay off. But as time passes, reassess whether graduate school is still a desired and feasible goal. Be realistic. Only a small percentage of applicants go on to graduate school, and there's absolutely no shame in not getting in—hey, you gave it your best shot.

## Essential Questions

When applying to graduate programs, ask yourself

1. Have I organized each program's requirements into an Excel sheet, Word file, etc.?
2. How much will each application cost?
3. Does the program offer a stipend or some other type of financial assistance?
4. Am I on track to submit everything by the program's deadline?
5. Do I have a back-up plan in case I don't get in?

## PART 5: "HOW CAN I BE SUCCESSFUL?"

The graduate school application process is a bit of a cruel reality, because much of what makes an applicant successful may be determined long before an applicant ever decides he or she wants to apply. Many psychology students don't figure out what their interests are until their sophomore or junior year. Students may not truly understand the importance of research experience until a research design course later in the curriculum, leaving little time to build "research cred" in a faculty member's lab. Early performance mistakes can cost an applicant's GPA later on. I can't help but feel sorry for the student who tells me in the fall semester of her senior year that she's interested in graduate school but has a 2.7 GPA, no research experience, and doesn't know what the GRE is.

There are numerous books and online resources available on how to be a successful applicant. I'll share some recommendations below. But first I want to talk about the type of student who succeeds in graduate school. There's no doubt that (most) graduate students are intelligent and talented. But I've seen brilliant graduate students fail miserably, and there are usually two factors at play. The first is just that—the ability to fail. Graduate school is rife with failure; you might underperform in your classes, say something stupid to your advisor, get results that fail to support your hypothesis, and, when you do get publishable results, get a nasty rejection letter from a reviewer (usually Reviewer #2 😊). Successful graduate students know how to fail. They have grit, don't internalize negative feedback, and see failure as an opportunity to learn. You will fail many times in graduate school. If you don't handle failure well, don't go to graduate school.

The second feature is the ability to stay motivated. As I mentioned in Part 1, the main difference between undergraduate and graduate study is becoming an independent scholar in your chosen area of psychology. No one's going to hold your hand in graduate school and check on you to make sure that you're doing what you need to be doing. It's

up to you. Should you work on that research project or enjoy an 8-hour Netflix bender? Every decision you make (or don't make) will affect your chances at success. I'm not saying you need to work every hour of the day—carving out time for friends, family, and hobbies is essential. But successful graduate students are independent, self-motivated, and take responsibility for their decisions. When you get to graduate school, expect nothing and earn everything.

How, then, can you be successful when applying to graduate school? Show the graduate committee through your application, interview, and correspondence that you're intelligent, serious, enthusiastic, mature, motivated, coachable, responsible, and organized. Click here (<http://psych.iupui.edu/Users/dappleby/Undergrad/character.htm>) and here (<http://www.cc.gatech.edu/~ellendo/characteristics.pdf>) for other characteristics that graduate committees will be looking for when reviewing your application.

## Resources

There is no shortage of books and online resources available, but here are a few recommendations to get you started:

### *Papers and Chapters*

Appleby, D. C., & Appleby, K. M. (2006). Kisses of death in the graduate school application process. *Teaching of Psychology, 33*, 19-24.

Lord, C. G. (2004). A guide to PhD graduate school: How they keep score in the big leagues. In J. M. Darley, M. P. Zanna, & H. L. Roediger, III (Eds.), *The compleat academic: A career guide* (2nd ed., pp. 3-15). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Rajecki, D. W., & Borden, V. M. H. (2011). Psychology degrees: Employment, wage, and career trajectory consequences. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 6*, 321-335.

### *Web Resources*

<http://www.apa.org/education/grad/applying.aspx>

<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/psychology/dept/resources/getin3.html>

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/48/>

<http://www.sfasu.edu/sfapsych/235.asp>

## Essential Questions

When presenting yourself to graduate programs, ask yourself

1. Do I possess, and have I demonstrated the qualities that the program is looking for in a graduate student?

## PART 6: PARTING WORDS

I have a confession—I wrote this guide for selfish reasons. Although I love talking about graduate school with my students, it takes a lot of time to go over the same spiel with every student, and I thought, “There has to be a better way.” So, ta-da: All my advice, all in one place. This guide isn’t exhaustive and probably duplicates much of what’s already out there. But to the extent that some of this has been helpful, I want to reiterate that graduate school can be an immensely rewarding experience. I hope my insights help you navigate and survive the application process.

Fortune favors the prepared. Good luck!

## About the Author

Dr. Kyle Conlon is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. When he’s not tormenting his students with corny jokes or researching topics related to social cognition and motivation, he can be found playing video games, riding roller coasters, playing guitar and piano, and traveling the globe with his beloved wife and colleague, Lauren. Please visit [www.kyleconlon.com](http://www.kyleconlon.com) to learn more about Dr. Conlon’s research or to apply to his lab!