

Tips for Applying to Graduate School in Psychology

Preparing your application materials

Letters of recommendation

- Plan ahead. Letter writers are busy, and they often have many letters to write, so you want to make sure you give them plenty of time to write your reference. Streamline the process by preparing pre-addressed, stamped envelopes.
- Many programs now use online recommendation forms. Typically you (the student) must first register with the online application system, which will then send your letter writers a link to the online recommendation form. Just like with paper applications, plan early.
- Unless you strongly object, waive your right to see your letters of recommendation. This will assure that your letter writers will write confidential letters. Admissions committees give such letters more credence under the assumption that writers will be more candid when the student cannot read the letter.
- If the application asks for 3 letters of recommendation (a fairly standard number), don't send more unless you have a compelling reason to do so, such as if that fourth letter speaks to a unique experience of relevance to your application profile that is not mentioned in any of your other letters. Graduate programs typically receive many applications and don't want to do too much extra reading.

The application form

- Type application forms if possible, but neat handwriting is probably okay, too. Many applications now use online forms and/or fill-able forms.
- Don't forget to sign your application forms!

Your personal statement

- Try to tailor your personal statement for each program. It is fine to use the same (or a similar) personal statement for all your applications, but have at least a paragraph in there (the final paragraph, for instance) that discusses why you'd like to go to each particular program. Many graduate programs are based on a mentor model where you have one primary advisor right from the beginning. If you already know which particular faculty members you'd like to work with at a given school, this paragraph would be a good place to mention them. If you do this, it's a good idea to mention more than one faculty person. Otherwise, it may make you appear inflexible—or, if the faculty person you mention happens not to be taking graduate students that year (a fact that is generally not publicized upfront – see below), this may negatively impact your application.
- Before you apply, try to find out whether the faculty you are interested in working with are accepting students into their labs/groups that year. Some graduate programs will be very forthcoming with this information; others will not. If you are a good fit for Dr. X's research program but s/he happens not to be accepting students that year, then your chances of being admitted into the program might be that much lower. You'd probably want to know this before you apply, if at all possible.
- If you use a template for your personal statement(s), don't forget to change the name of the university for each application. I do know of people who forgot to do this who were still admitted to graduate school, but it's an embarrassing mistake that you'd really rather avoid.
- If you are applying to more than one kind of program (e.g., neuroscience and experimental, social and clinical, Ph.D. and Psy.D.), be prepared to write different personal statements for each type. As you probably know, different types of programs look for different types of experiences, so you

may need to highlight certain aspects of your background/training for some applications and not others. Generally speaking, the more specific and personalized you can make your application materials, the better.

- Have many people read over your application materials, but don't go overboard. Everyone will likely have different feedback, and you may reach a point of diminishing returns where it becomes time-consuming and/or unnecessary to incorporate all the comments you receive.

Other materials

- Always include a curriculum vitae as part of your application. If you do not currently have one, create one. (You can consult career services for ideas and/or samples.)
- Supplemental materials (besides the cv). Again, be careful about sending too many extra items that are not specifically requested. Examples of commonly included items are as follows: papers, posters, or publications (if any); literature from internships and/or other fieldwork experiences. Consult with lots of people about this, though—some people will tell you not to send any extraneous material. Remember, you want to make it *easier* for graduate programs to evaluate your application. Unless explicitly directed otherwise (e.g., if your application will be handled entirely online), send hard copies, not electronic versions.

The interview process

- Some graduate programs will request an on-campus interview as part of the application process. Interviews typically take place in February and March, although the timeline does vary quite a bit. Even if graduate programs say the interview is optional, strongly consider going. Not only is this an additional opportunity for them to evaluate you and see how wonderful you are, but it is also a chance for *you* to check *them* out and decide whether this is a place you can see yourself spending the next few years. However, if expense is an issue, don't break the bank to attend an optional interview. You can always arrange for a phone interview instead.
- If you do attend an interview, make sure you talk to current graduate students in the program. They are your best resource for information about what your life will be like once you have matriculated. Definitely ask for specific information about the graduate training, but also remember to ask additional questions such as the following: Can you really live on the stipend in this part of the country? For how many years will the program guarantee funding? Do graduate students in your program socialize much? Is the atmosphere very competitive? And so on.

Once you are admitted....

- If you have the fortune of receiving more than one offer of acceptance, do not hold more than two offers at a time. I'm not sure if the APA has a rule/guideline about this specifically, but it is at the very least professionally discourteous to hold more than two offers at any time (and even holding two offers for an extended period is highly discouraged). Gather whatever information you need, but try to make your decision as quickly as possible, and certainly turn down programs right away if you have no intention of accepting their offer. The sooner you decide, the more likely it is that someone else will happily accept your slot.
- Most graduate programs (especially doctoral programs) do not allow you to defer matriculation. So, if you are not sure whether you want to go to grad school next year, don't apply this year.