

Gaining Admission: Tips and Strategies for Competitive Graduate School Applications

December 11, 2003

Applying to graduate school can be an arduous process. However, much can be done to decrease application stress and increase the likelihood of being accepted by competitive programs. Ideally, many of these activities (e.g., developing relationships with faculty, maintaining a competitive GPA, becoming involved in research projects) should be initiated early in the undergraduate career. The applicant must determine an area of psychology to specialize in, as well as specific research interests within that area. It is important to develop a professional relationship with a faculty member who will act as a mentor during the undergraduate years and aid the application process.

There are many resources (see References and Resources below) available to help determine which aspects of the application are emphasized by specific programs. Although there are some universal principles to the graduate application process, substantial variability exists from program to program. Carefully review and follow the specific instructions and requirements of each program.

Many schools emphasize GRE scores, particularly the verbal and quantitative sections of the general test, and some require the psychology subject test. Many institutions emphasize GPA from the last two years of undergraduate study or from psychology courses. Most programs require at least three letters of recommendation. Students should seek letter writers who have known them in multiple contexts (e.g., research projects, advisory committees, departmental organizations). Finally, experience demonstrating involvement in independent research (e.g., honors thesis, conference presentations, journal publications) can work favorably for the applicant.

The application also consists of written components. For example, the applicant's vita "showcases" research and applied experiences, awards and honors, and involvement in additional scholastic endeavors. Similarly, applicants should write personal statements outlining:

1. why they chose to pursue graduate education in psychology;
2. their goals;
3. experiences they have to supplement those goals; and,
4. their reasons for applying.

Most schools require not only a departmental application, but also a separate graduate school application. Certain applications may require an essay or writing sample. Written components should ideally be typed.

Students may jeopardize their chances of gaining admission by restricting the number of schools to which they apply. We recommend that students apply to three levels of programs, including: a few "top tier" schools, where selection is highly competitive, several "middle tier" schools that may yield a higher admittance rate, and a few "safe schools."

A final important aspect is the student's overall "fit" with the program. There is considerable variability across programs, and certain students may not match well with certain programs. "Fit" involves compatibility with the overall philosophy and orientation of the program, as well as being matched with a specific faculty member in terms of research interests, work ethics, and personality. Selecting schools based on these factors will increase the likelihood of gaining admittance.

It is important to avoid the "pitfalls" of the application process, namely, procrastination. Planning and acting ahead is a vital determinant of a successful graduate application package. One method of preparation is to create a detailed outline of short- and long-term goals. Ideally, this timeline is established early in the student's training, beginning with general, "big picture" objectives (e.g., formulating a list of potential schools of interest) and later becoming a more detailed, month-by-month list of tasks that need to be completed (e.g., taking the GRE, requesting transcripts). Secondly, it is costly to pay for each school's application fee, send GRE scores, and travel to interviews, so financial preparation is highly advised. It is extremely important to pay particular attention to whether the appropriate materials were included for the appropriate school, whether all forms were filled out entirely, and whether GRE scores and transcripts were received. Mail complete application packages at least two weeks before their due dates and to follow up with schools on the status of each application.

At this point an applicant may receive notification of the program's decision – either acceptance, rejection, or waiting list placement – or an invitation to interview. In the latter case, the student should be prepared for a variety of interview settings. For instance, the student may be interviewed by faculty members and/or graduate students, in one-on-one and/or group settings. Applicants should anticipate the types of questions they may be asked, prepare a list of questions to ask their interviewers, become informed about the program, and conduct mock interviews with faculty or friends. The interview serves the dual purpose of allowing both parties to assess whether an applicant is a good fit for the program.

Applying to graduate level programs in psychology can be daunting. However, the tips outlined in this article, and those available in the References and Resources section, should help guide the applicant through this process.

Author's Note: We would like to thank Mary Ellen Fromuth, PhD, Middle Tennessee State University, for mentoring them through the application process.

[References and Resources](#)

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