

1 - Should You Apply?

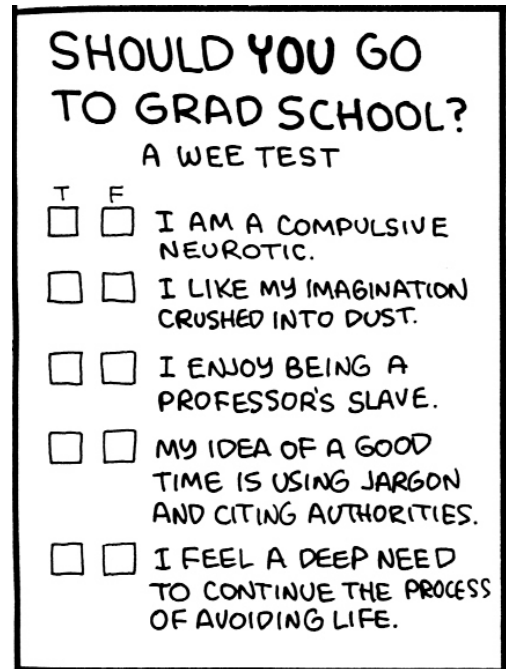
A graduate degree in psychology is a good choice for a few students but an awful choice for most. So read widely and think carefully before you apply. Here are several facts that surprise many people.

Most psych PhD programs give a full ride to every student.

Nearly all psychology doctoral programs provide every student with tuition and at least \$15,000 per year for at least four years.

You can start a PhD program before you obtain your master's.

Many students begin a PhD program with only a BA or BS and then receive a master's while in the doctoral program. Other students enroll in a *terminal* master's program, which concludes with an MA or MS, and they then decide whether to apply to a PhD program. Not many psych departments offer both a PhD and a terminal master's degree.



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Most psychology graduate programs do not require an undergraduate degree in psychology.

Many successful psychology graduate students did not major in psychology. However, psychology graduate programs typically prefer applicants with some formal knowledge of math, programming, or behavioral science.

Doctoral students take far fewer courses than college students do.

Most PhD programs require relatively few classes – often just 10 to 15 courses total. The focus is research.

Graduate programs do not have your best interests in mind.

A graduate program is a business, and businesses need customers. Faculty need grad students to perform grunt work, and some faculty prefer to teach small grad seminars rather than large classes of undergraduates. So, when faculty recruit grad students, they have a conflict of interest that often leads to unethical behavior. For instance, a doctoral program website might boast that some its graduate students found rewarding careers without mentioning that a third of its students don't graduate. Caveat emptor!

Earning a PhD in Psychology does not guarantee you a position as a tenured professor.

In most areas of psychology, the number of people with PhDs who are looking for a tenured faculty position is far greater than the number of openings. Many students devote 5-10 years to their training (grad school and maybe a postdoc), only to receive no job offers or perhaps an offer from a school in a location where they don't want to live. To be sure, an academic career has many perks, but the pursuit of a tenured faculty position is often a long, nomadic endeavor that ends in disappointment. You should ask yourself, "If I earn my PhD and then cannot find a job as an academic, will I regret going to grad school?"

2 - Where Should You Apply?

There are hundreds of programs to choose from. Here's some advice.

Programs to Avoid

I recommend that students avoid:

- For-profit schools, including Phoenix, Walden, and Argosy
- Psych PhD programs that don't provide tuition plus living expenses
- PsyD programs

Also, be wary of master's programs, especially ones with high tuition, unless your tuition is paid by someone else (such as your employer). Spending money on a psych graduate degree is often a bad investment.

Finding a Good Program

You might start with a list of top-ranked departments, though these rankings sometimes reflect reputation as much as quality. Also, the strength of a department is often less important than the strength of the specific program that interests you (e.g., neuropsychology), so look at rankings of programs. In addition, look for programs with high admissions standards. Finally, a program should have at least one faculty member who would be a good advisor for you.



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Finding a Good Advisor

For doctoral programs and some master's programs, each student works closely with a professor who serves as the student's advisor. Your advisor greatly affects your success and happiness in grad school. Be sure to apply only to programs with at least one faculty member who shares your research interests and who is willing to work with you. Ideally, you should apply to programs with more than one potential advisor because your first choice might retire, change jobs, or be awful. Here are two kinds of advisors to avoid:

The Student Repellant

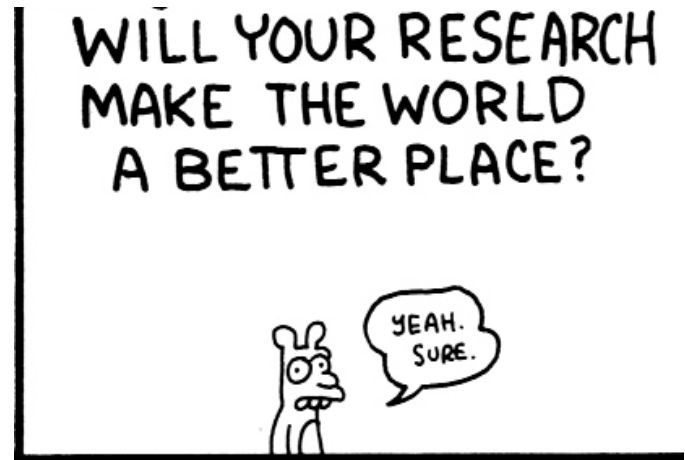
Some professors lose many of their grad students, either because the students change advisors or drop out. Of course, not every poor student outcome is the advisor's fault, and even the best advisors sometimes lose students. But you should avoid any professor who loses many of their students.

The Secret Retiree

Some professors shut down their research program and pretend they haven't. They might write chapters or collaborate with other researchers, but they don't have their own program of research. Some have a good reason for this (perhaps they're a dean or chair), but most are simply collecting full-time pay for part-time work. So, look for faculty who regularly publish peer-reviewed journal articles based on research done in their lab, which means that their CV should list peer-reviewed journal articles on which the first author is either the professor or a student/postdoc in the professor's lab. A professor who hasn't published at least a half dozen such papers in the last decade probably has a dead lab, and that's a horrible place for a graduate student.

3 - How Should You Apply?

Admission to graduate programs depends mostly on GRE scores and GPA, and partly on research experience, recommendation letters, and your personal statement. Some graduate programs are highly selective, and some admit nearly anyone. Here is some information:



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GPA

- Some graduate programs set a minimum GPA – usually somewhere between 3.2 and 3.5.
- Some programs rely on your overall GPA, and others use your GPA during the last 2 years of college.
- Small differences in GPAs rarely matter because GPAs of, say, 3.6 and 3.8 are not reliably different.
- A high GPA does not (nor should not) guarantee admission to a good program because
 - 1) Many students have high GPAs because of grade inflation.
 - 2) GPA is a poor measure of academic proficiency because the difficulty of a college course depends on the college admissions standards and the student's choice of courses (e.g., algebra vs. calculus).

GRE

- GRE scores predict academic success, and good programs do not accept students with low GREs.
- Grad programs sometimes forgive a low verbal GRE score if the applicant is a non-native English speaker.
- The General GRE has 3 sections:
 - Verbal (multiple choice): Reading comprehension, text completion, sentence equivalence
 - Quantitative (multiple choice and numeric entry): arithmetic, basic algebra, geometry, data analysis
 - Analytical Writing (two 30-min essays): 1) analyze an issue, and 2) analyze an argument.
- Info and sample questions are available at www.ets.org/gre.
- I suggest that students practice until their practice scores reach asymptote.
- Very few grad programs require the Psychology GRE. I recommend that students not take the Psych GRE unless it is required by a program they genuinely wish to attend.

Personal Statement

- The term "personal statement" is a misnomer. Don't write about your personal life.
- Don't list interests or experiences unrelated to research: "I started my own lawn mowing company."
- Don't flatter potential mentors: "I want to work with Dr. Jones because I think his research is ingenious."
- Avoid hyperbole: "My goal is to figure out how the brain works."
- Avoid melodrama: "When my sister was diagnosed with dyslexia, I vowed that I would find a cure."

Research Experience

- Your chance of admission might increase slightly if you work as a research assistant, with or without pay.
- Working in a lab also gives you a chance to learn whether you like research, which is unlike classwork.

Letters of Recommendation

Good letters can slightly boost your chances, but one bad letter can doom you.

How It Works

- Most graduate programs require three letters of recommendation.
- Most programs require that letter writers submit their letters through a website.
- Some programs also ask letter writers to rate the applicant on various skills and traits.
- Applicants are given the option to waive their right to later read their letters. You should waive this right.

Whom to Ask

A letter writer should have firsthand evidence of your success and potential as a student or researcher.

Good choices:

- A grad student or professor with whom you conducted research
- A grad student or professor who taught a small class or lab section in which you excelled
- An employer, if your job required skills related to research (writing, data analysis, programming)

Bad choices:

- An instructor who gave you a course grade of A minus or below
- An instructor who gave you a course grade of A but doesn't know you (e.g., the class was large)
- Your high school teacher
- A friend or relative

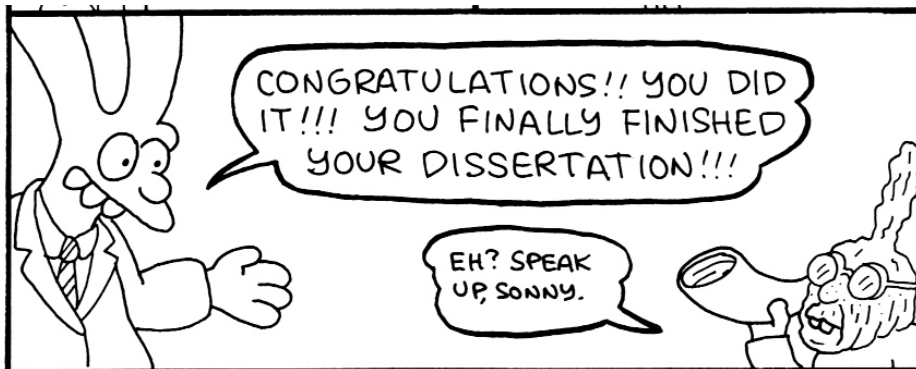
Requesting a Letter

Most professors are happy to write letters for serious, qualified students who ask nicely. Some tips:

- Request the letter by writing a polite, informative email.
- Describe how you know him or her ("I was a student in your fall 2021 Monday evening Stats course").
- Attach electronic copies of your CV, unofficial transcript, and unofficial GRE score report.
- Make the request at least one month before the letter is due.

The Decision Process

- Many programs first eliminate applicants with a low GPA or low GRE.
- Applicants who survive the first cut are usually rated by some or all faculty in the program.
- Strong applicants are often rejected if their interests do not align with the interests of any faculty.
- Some programs invite their top applicants for a visit before deciding whom to admit.
- Admitted applicants typically have until April 15 to decide. Don't let anyone rush you.



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