

1 - Should You Apply?

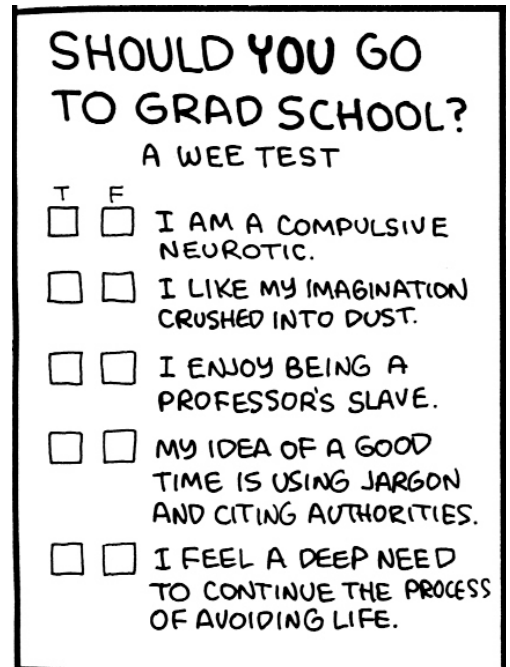
A graduate degree in psychology is a good choice for some students but an awful choice for most. So read widely and think carefully before you apply. Here are several facts that surprise many people.

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

Nearly all psychology doctoral programs provide all of their students 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 after a few years in the program. Other students first complete a *terminal* master's program, which concludes with an MA or MS, and 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 psychology graduate students did not major in psychology, although most psychology doctoral programs expect applicants to have some knowledge of statistics and research.

A doctoral program is not like college.

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

Graduate programs do not necessarily have your interests in mind.

A graduate program is a business, and a business needs customers. A program needs enough students to justify offering classes, and faculty need grad students to perform the grunt work in their labs. This means that faculty who recruit grad students do so with a conflict of interest, and their behavior is often unethical. For instance, a program might boast on its webpage that some of its graduates have great careers yet fail to mention 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 7-10 years to their training (grad school and maybe a postdoc) and then receive no job offers or perhaps one or two offers in places where they would rather not 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. So 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 such as 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 your money on a graduate degree is often a bad investment.

Finding a Good Program

You might start with a list of top-ranked departments, but keep in mind that such rankings reflect reputation as well as quality. Also, the strength of a department is less important than the strength of the specific program that interests you (e.g., cognitive psychology). Strong programs enroll at least 2 or 3 students each year and have high graduation rates, though few departments make these data available. Most importantly, be sure that the program has a faculty member who would be a good advisor for you.

Finding a Good Advisor

In doctoral programs (and in some master's programs), each student works closely with a professor who serves as your 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, a program has 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 faculty lose many of their graduate students, either because the students change advisors or drop out. Of course, not every bad outcome is the fault of the advisor, and even great advisors sometimes lose students. But if a professor is repeatedly losing students that he or she recruited, avoid that professor.

The Secret Retiree

Some professors shut down their research program and pretend they haven't. They might write chapters or collaborate with other faculty, 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.



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3 - How Should You Apply?

Admission to most 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. Naturally, programs that provide full rides are often competitive. Here is some information:



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GPA

- Some graduate programs set a minimum GPA – usually somewhere between 3.0 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 a GPA of, say, 3.8 is not reliably better than a 3.6.
- A high GPA does not guarantee admission to a competitive program because
 - 1) Many students have high GPAs because of grade inflation.
 - 2) GPA is a poor measure, partly because course difficulty varies (e.g., college algebra vs. calculus).

GRE

- 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.
- More info and sample questions are available at www.ets.org/gre.
- I suggest you practice until your practice scores reach asymptote.
- Some grad programs forgive a low verbal GRE score if the applicant is a non-native English speaker.
- Hardly any graduate programs require the Psych GRE. I strongly suggest you skip it unless it is definitely required by a program that truly interests you.

Personal Statement

- Don't write about anything personal. The term "personal statement" is a misnomer.
- Focus on academic and professional experiences that are related to research.
- Include information that is specific to the program to which you're applying.
- Don't flatter potential mentors: "I want to work with Dr. Jones because I think his research is ingenious."
- Avoid listing highly specific research interests: "I want to study children's working memory."
- Avoid hyperbole: "My goal is to figure out how the brain works."
- Avoid melodrama: "When my little sister was diagnosed with dyslexia, I vowed that I would find a cure."

Research Experience

- You might slightly boost your chances if you work as a research assistant, with or without pay.
- Working in a lab also gives you a chance to learn more about research, which is unlike classwork.

Letters of Recommendation

Good letters can slightly boost your chances, but a 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 an online website.
- Some programs ask letter writers to also 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 (maybe 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, or visit during office hours
- Describe how you know him or her ("I was a student in your fall 2018 Monday evening Stats course").
- Provide a soft or hard copy 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

- In many programs, students with a low GPA or low GRE are first eliminated from the pool of applicants.
- Applicants who survive the first cut are usually rated by some or all faculty in the program
- Strong applicants are often rejected because 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 will receive a written offer, though they often first receive an informal offer.
- Admitted applicants typically have until April 15 to respond. Don't let anyone rush you.



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