



What Every Student Should Know About Applying To Psychology Graduate Schools

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2005

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Criteria for Psychology Graduate School Admission

The primary criteria used by graduate admissions committees are your **grade point average (GPA), your scores earned on the Graduate Records Examination (GRE), and your letters of recommendation** – sometimes known as the “big three” (Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000). According to Cashin and Landrum (1991), many undergraduate students understand the importance of GPA but tend to *underestimate* the importance of GRE scores and letters of recommendation. Be sure to keep in mind that these three criteria are THE most important factors determining the success of your application.

In regards to GPA, most graduate programs place a minimum GPA cutoff of 3.0. Many programs have higher minimum cutoffs. If your GPA is lower than this, you need to take action to improve it or include an explanation of why the GPA is not an accurate representation of your potential as a graduate student. For example, if your GPA was low during your freshmen year due to adjustment to college but has improved significantly since then, point this out to the selection committee within your application materials. A low GPA that is not accompanied by an explanation will most likely be a detriment to your admission into the program. One suggestion for improving your GPA is to take selected courses over again since Metro enforces the “last grade stands” policy.

In many cases, the “big three” may not be sufficient in narrowing down the large pool of applicants to the small number of spots available in the program. Thus, selection committees turn to second-order criteria to determine which applicants will be admitted. Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, and Spiegel (1994) surveyed over 120 graduate faculty who served on selection committees and reported that the following variables were considered important second-order criteria (listed in order of importance placed on each):

- 1) Research experience, resulting in a publication credit in a scholarly journal
- 2) Degree to which the applicant’s skills and interests match those of the program
- 3) Research experience, resulting in a paper presented at a professional meeting
- 4) Degree of interest expressed by one or more of the members of the selection committee in working with particular applicants
- 5) Clarity and focus on applicant’s personal statement
- 6) Research assistant experience
- 7) Writing skills as revealed in personal statement

It should be noted that a number of other variables were considered important in the selection process. For an exhaustive list, see Keith-Spiegel et. al (1994). A few of these include:

- 1) Number of statistics/research methodology courses taken as an undergraduate
- 2) Honors or merit scholarships awarded to applicant by undergraduate institution
- 3) Relevant field/volunteer experience in placement relevant to the program (e.g., crisis hotline, community mental health center)
- 4) Teaching assistant experience
- 5) Psi Chi membership

These findings suggest that research experience could be the distinguishing factor in determining your admission into graduate school. It is interesting to note that clinical/counseling programs were just as likely to consider research experience as extremely important in the admissions criteria as were experimental and other Psychology programs (Keith-Spiegel et. al, 1994).

Curriculum Vita

Your curriculum vita (CV) is a critical component of your application. Curriculum vita literally means “academic life.” A CV presents a chronological record of your accomplishments, while a resume is a brief introduction to your skills, abilities, and employment history. In general, resumes are short (one or two pages), whereas vitae may be longer. Length of a vita is more important as a longer vita indicates that you have accomplished much in your field. However, you should not “pad” your vita just to make it look longer. Plous (1998) offered the following advice to follow when developing your CV:

- 1) Write in a clear and concise manner.
- 2) Summarize your professional qualifications.
- 3) Obtain copies of vitae from people who are at your stage or slightly ahead of you; although faculty members’ vitae might give you some organizational ideas, some sections will be inappropriate due to your entry level status in the discipline.
- 4) Create an inviting and easy-to-follow format.
- 5) Proofread your vita and have more than one other person proofread it for you (preferably professors). It needs to be completely error-free.
- 6) Avoid padding your vita because you feel you don’t have much to list. Do not list high school accomplishments unless you feel they are critical in demonstrating your potential as a graduate student.
- 7) Do not list irrelevant personal information, such as height, weight, marital status, or general health. List hobbies only if you think they make you look like a more well rounded individual.
- 8) Try not to list categories on your vita if you have only one accomplishment in that category (like the outlining rule, you need a B for every A). The exception to this rule would be if you have only one publication-it is so worthy of note, the category will draw the attention to this accomplishment. Remember, publication credit is the number one secondary selection criterion for graduate admissions committees.
- 9) List your awards, educational degrees, work experiences, etc., in reverse chronological order.
- 10) Use an easy to read font. *A reader will become frustrated with the more elaborate and harder to read fonts, and will likely deposit your application in the “hard to read” file beside their desk.*

Some of the categories you might want to incorporate into your vita include:

- 1) Personal information (address, phone number)
2. Education (degrees earned, when and where)
- 3) Honors and awards (list each, who awarded, and date awarded)
- 4) Association memberships (relevant clubs and societies, student affiliate status)
- 5) Research interests (if applicable and appropriate)
- 6) Research and teaching experience (if applicable and appropriate)

- 7) Professional presentations (titles, organizations, in APA format if possible)
- 8) Publications (use APA format, be careful with “in press”, “under review”)
- 9) References (list names, titles, and addresses of three to four people whom you have asked)

Sample Curriculum Vita

LISA L. THOMAS

1234 Main Street
 Nampa, Idaho 83686
 (208) 555-1212
 notreallymyemail@hotmail.com
 Office (208) 555-1212
 Fax (208) 555-1212

EDUCATION

INSTITUTION	DEGREE	RECEIVED	MAJOR FIELD
Boise State University	B.S. GPA 3.8	May 2001	Psychology

CAREER ASPIRATIONS:

To join and excel in a high-quality graduate program in Industrial/Organizational Psychology so that I may pursue a career in academia, and conduct research based on sound theoretical principles and research design.

RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

December 2000 - Present Internship/Supervisor, Department of Education at St. Luke's Hospital. Duties include supervision of another intern, job analysis, writing job descriptions, conducting structured interviews, data collection, data entry, data analysis, and report preparation and presentation. Supervisor: Dr. Brenda Wood

November 2001 - Present Research Assistant, Project Title: *Campuses Selling Alcohol: Profit or Problem?* Department of Psychology, Boise State University. Duties include recruitment of participants outside of events (i.e., hockey games, concerts), administering breath analyzers, data collection, and data entry using SPSS. Supervisor: Dr. Rob Turrisi

May 2001 - Present Research Assistant, Project Title: *Early Intervention to Prevent Student Binge Drinking.* Department of Psychology, Boise State University. Duties include conducting in-home interviews with parents and teenagers, recruitment of participants through telephone sampling, data entry using SPSS. Supervisor: Dr. Rob Turrisi

December 2000 - Present Research Assistant, Project Title: *Mortality Salience and the Self-Serving Bias*.
 Department of Psychology, Boise State University.
 Duties include hypothesis construction, survey construction and implementation, literature review, data entry and analysis using SPSS, debriefing participants. Supervisor: Dr. Jamie Goldenberg

PRESENTATIONS

Thomas, L. & Goldenberg, J. (April 2001). *Mortality salience and self-esteem effects on the self-serving bias*.
 Poster presented at the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association Conference, Reno, NV.

Turrisi, R., Taki, R., Nelson, L., Thomas, L., Babcock-Howells, J., Dunnam, H., & Marin R. (Feb 2002). *Examination of the short-term efficacy of a parent-intervention to reduce college student drinking tendencies*. Poster submitted to the Undergraduate Research Conference, Boise State University.

Thomas, L., Cvencek, D., & Goldenberg, J. (April 2002). *Factors that affect comfort and discomfort with one's physical self*. Poster submitted to the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association Conference, Park City, Utah.

TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIPS

Fall, 2001	Social Psychology Supervisor: Dr. Social
Summer & Fall, 2000	General Psychology Supervisor: Dr. Freud
Spring, 2002	Industrial /Organizational Psychology Supervisor: Dr. Business

RELEVANT TRAINING

Software - SPSS, Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Office 2000, Windows 1998-2000.

Coursework - Research Methods, Advanced Statistics. Psychological Measurement, Social Psychology, Industrial/Organizational Psychology.

Other--Human Participants Protection Certification, National Institutes of Health.

HONORS/AWARDS

Psychology Departmental Scholarship Award, Boise State University, 2001-2002
 Member of Psi Chi (National Honor Society in Psychology)
 Outstanding Achievement in Undergraduate Research, College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs,
 Boise State University, Spring 2001 /2002.
 Dean's List, 1998-2002
 Golden Key National Honor Society
 Phi Kappa Phi, Honor Society

REFERENCES

Dr. Brenda Wood, Director of Education, St. Luke's Hospital, Boise, Idaho. Contact at (208) 381-7810 or woodb@lrmc.org

Dr. Rob Turrisi, Professor, Department of Psychology, Boise State University. Contact at (208) 426-1901 or rturrisi@boisestate.edu

Dr. Jamie Goldenberg, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Boise State University. Contact at (208) 426-1993 or jgolden@boisestate.edu

Dr. Anne Gordon, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Bowling Green State University. Contact at (419) 372-8161 or aka@bgnet.bgsu.edu

SAMPLE VITA TAKEN FROM:

Landrum, E.R., & Davis, S.F. (2003). *The Psychology Major: Career options and strategies for success* (2nd ed.).
Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle, N.J.

Personal Statement

A personal statement is a document written by you. It may also be referred to as a letter of intent or autobiographical statement. This part of your application serves two important purposes. One, it allows you to provide valuable background information about yourself. Secondly, it provides the selection committee with a sample of your writing. Thus, the personal statement is a critical component of your application materials and should not be taken lightly. According to Landrum et. al (1994), the personal statement has become an integral part of the admissions process. An outstanding personal statement may not get you accepted into a graduate program all on its own but a poorly written one may be the reason you do not get accepted (Walfish & Hess, 2001).

Most graduate programs will require a personal statement or letter of intent. The type of statement required will vary from school to school. The important thing to remember is that you should tailor this statement to be consistent with the specific requirements and interests of each program. Hence, the personal statement you submit will be different for each application. Keith-Spiegel and Wiederman (2000) stressed that you should not write a “single one-size-fits-all letter for all schools.”

Many applications will specify what needs to be included in the personal statement. Take special care to answer all questions thoroughly. Provide a concise (no more than 2 single-spaced pages unless otherwise stated), well-written document. Highlight your interests and career goals in a way that convinces the selection committee that you are a “perfect fit” for their program. Mention specific faculty members whom you would like to work with. Discuss the variety of psychology courses you have completed and any specific skills and/or training that may be of interest to the faculty of the program. If there is an obvious weakness in your application (e.g., mediocre GPA), concisely explain how the weakness is not an accurate representation of your potential as a graduate student.

Keith-Spiegel and Wiederman (2000) identified the following 13 themes that emerged from reviewing a number of graduate school applications and instructions for personal statements:

- 1) Career plans (What do you see yourself doing 5 years from now?)
- 2) General interest areas (What are your academic interests?)
- 3) Research experiences (What did you do as a research assistant?)
- 4) Academic objectives (Why are you interested in graduate study?)
- 5) Clinical or other field experience/practicum/internship
- 6) Academic background and achievements (Are your GRE scores and GPA representative of your ability?)
- 7) What do you see in us (Why did you choose us?)
- 8) Motivation (Why did you choose graduate study?)
- 9) Personal material (What do you think we should know about you?)
- 10) Autobiography (Tell us about your background)

- 11) Specific graduate faculty of interest (Whom would you like to work with in our graduate program?)
- 12) Anything else we should know?
- 13) Special skills (Languages known, mathematics, computer skills)

If you are applying to a Ph.D. program, emphasize your research experiences and interests. If you are applying to an applied program, discuss your career goals in private practice or working in applied settings and highlight any volunteer or internship experiences in applied settings that you have encountered.

What should NOT be included in the personal statement? According to Keith-Spiegel and Wiederman (2000), you should not include discussion of your own personal therapy experiences and problems that led to the counseling. Also, it is wise to leave out a detailed biography and discussion of any career goals that are not congruent with the program.

Landrum and Davis (2003) stated that there is no “uniform procedure” to follow when developing a personal statement. Be sure to address the questions and standards posed in the application materials. Plan to develop many drafts of your personal statement. After drafting a version, have one of your professors review it and provide feedback. Osborne (1996) proposed that the following questions are helpful when revising your document:

- 1) Do the personal details I have included in the statement seem relevant to my ability to be a successful graduate student? (If no, then edit or delete those details).
- 2) Do the personal details I reveal demonstrate characteristics of myself that reflect maturity, adaptability, and motivation?
- 3) Do the personal details convey a convincing portrayal of my abilities to succeed in this school's graduate program?

SAMPLE PERSONAL STATEMENT

Barthalomew Kinidski
#2 Nowheresville
Lost in space, NY 07865

The career goals I have set forth for myself are the focal point of my concerns for the time being. Obviously, I intend to finish my undergraduate psychology degree. Then I plan to pursue a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology. My ultimate goals are to find a position with a team of professionals providing mental health care to the public. I would like to specialize my practice in the treatment of post-partem depression in women. I believe with this focus that I will be able to secure a job in which I can learn from and contribute greatly to a team of professional clinicians. I believe that your program at the University of Knowitall is the best program for me to use to achieve these goals. Between your focus on graduates obtaining a well-rounded education in clinical technique and the fact that your faculty members, Dr. Smith and Dr. Jones, focus specifically on post partem depression, I believe that I will receive the best training at your institution.

My personal goals are to balance my life between family and career. I believe that with training in Clinical Psychology that I will be able to secure a position that will allow me to provide a comfortable home for my family while allowing me flexibility to meet both my career and family needs. Mostly, I am hopeful that I will contribute to the happiness and success of others through my practice and through my parenting.

My academic achievements are clearly sufficient for admittance into your graduate school. Throughout my career at Metropolitan State College of Denver, I have been able to sustain a G.P.A. above 3.5 and I have made the Dean's List twice. I am a member of both Psi Chi and Golden Key National Honor Societies. I have received the Colorado Scholars scholarship award and I have secured a well-rounded undergraduate education that has prepared me for graduate school. Some of my favorite courses have included Sensation and Perception and Introduction to Clinical Psychology. The ideas and discussion points presented in the Clinical Psychology course are largely responsible for formulating my goals for my professional career.

Along with the achievements I have noted above, I have also worked as a crisis counselor for a safe house for teens. At this job, I am the first person with whom troubled teens are put in contact. I am responsible for taking historical information on the teens and for finding out what their immediate needs are with regard to the functions of the safe house. This work has greatly prepared me for a career in Clinical Psychology by exposing me to various people with various problems and how to use an individualized approach to helping them.

Research experience is another important criterion for graduate school. I am extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with one of my professors, Dr. Johnson, as a research assistant on a project that investigated seasonal variations in depression scores in a normal population. My responsibilities in this position included creating a questionnaire to gather demographic data, administering the depression inventory and questionnaire to subjects, analyzing the data and contributing to the final preparation of a manuscript communicating the results of the study. From this research I have learned how susceptible even the normal population is to mood changes. I have also gained critical experience in creating and implementing research studies. I presented my research findings at the annual Metropolitan State College of Denver Psychology Department Undergraduate Research Conference.

When describing myself the first word that comes to mind is perseverance. No matter what hurdles I encounter I find a way to get the job done. I love to accomplish things that people tell me are not possible. I remember a high school basketball coach telling me that I was too short and not good enough to play high school basketball, let alone college basketball, after my Sophomore year of high school. Those comments were highly motivating to me, and I used them to positively push me towards my athletic goals. I ended up playing a year of college basketball at the highest level. That story is a microcosm of what I am about. If you knock me down I will get up. If you tell me I can not do it, I will not only do it, but I will do it with a smile. I have attained eventual success at nearly everything I have attempted to do. Many times I have run into heavy adversity initially, but in the end I stay focused and find a way to be successful. I believe that your program, combined with my appetite to succeed, can eventually help me reach both my personal and professional goals. I feel I am a prime candidate for graduate school as I possess the skills and characteristics needed to succeed.

Thank you for the opportunity to apply to your institution. I look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully,

Bartholomew Kinidski

Graduate Record Examination

The GRE is an exam you will need to take prior to the application process. It is considered a uniform measure (across schools) of your potential as a graduate student as opposed to your GPA which can be considered biased toward the undergraduate institution you attended. Being considered one of the “big three,” GRE scores are of utmost importance in the selection process.

The GRE consists of three sections: verbal, quantitative, and analytic. The verbal section tests such abilities as vocabulary, reading comprehension, synthesis of information, and logical reasoning. You will be asked to engage in solving analogies, antonyms, sentence completion, and reading comprehension. The assessment involves 30 questions to be completed in a 30 minute time limit.

The quantitative section assesses your mathematical ability. It consists of 28 questions to be completed in 45 minutes. You should study 9th and 10th grade math principles such as algebra, advanced algebra, and geometry in order to prepare for this section.

The analytic writing section is a fairly new addition to the GRE. It tests your ability to assess argumentation, use logic, and organize your thoughts in written format. You are asked to complete 2 essays in this section. The first essay requires that you pick a perspective on an issue (i.e., nature vs. nurture) and develop a written explanation of your side of the issue within a 45 minute time limit. The second essay involves having you analyze an argument and critique/defend it in a 30 minute time limit. The 2 essays are graded on a score of 0-6 by 2 graduate students. Your score is the average of the 2 essay grades. If there is a difference of 2 or more points between the graders, an additional grader will assess the writing and will be included in the averaging of the scores. No spell or grammar checks are available, although spelling and grammatical errors are technically not supposed to be included as criteria of the grading.

It is important to note that the GRE is a computer-adapted test (CAT). That is, the test adjusts to whether or not you are answering the items correctly. If you answer a question incorrectly, the subsequent question will represent a less difficult question. Subsequently, as the level of difficulty declines, so does your score. It is extremely important to answer the first questions correctly in order to earn a high score.

The range of scores for the verbal and quantitative sections individually is 200-800. Graduate programs will vary on the minimum GRE scores needed to qualify for their program. Some schools may require at least a 450 on both the verbal and quantitative sections. Very competitive programs will require higher scores. Other schools may just look at the total score (verbal and quantitative score combined).

You should plan to take the GRE **one year** before applying to graduate schools. It is administered via a computer and can be taken at authorized testing

locations. Currently, the cost is \$115.00. After completing the exam, you will be asked to indicate which schools you would like to receive the scores. If you feel that you did not perform well on the exam, you do have the option of not having the scores reported. However, if you choose this option you will not be provided with feedback on your performance. If you retake the GRE after having the first set of scores sent to schools, the schools will receive both scores; some schools average the two together. If you take the exam more than 3 times (which is not common), only the top 3 scores will be reported.

Some graduate programs also require that you take the subject GRE. This is a paper-and-pencil exam that consists of 200 questions from various sub-areas of psychology. The time limit is 3 hours. Prepare for this exam by reviewing 2 current, high level introductory psychology textbooks. It is important to obtain the application requirements from the programs you are interested in so that you can determine if you need to take this exam.

One word of caution about taking the GRE: *BE WELL PREPARED!* There are various preparatory courses (some online) and study guides available to help you with this process. Some study guides that seem to have a good reputation are the Kaplan Study Guide, GRE for Dummies, and the Princeton Review. Our Psychology department has study guides available for you to borrow. Please see the graduate school coordinator for information on these.

For more information on the GRE, consult their website (www.gre.org) or contact them at the Educational Testing Service, PO Box 6000, Princeton, NJ 08551-6000.

Recommendation Letters

Recommendation letters are considered one of the “big three” factors considered extremely important in the admissions process. Although your GPA and GRE scores are directly under your control, letters of recommendation are directly influenced by the writers themselves. Thus, it is imperative that you ask individuals who know you well to write these letters. Ideally, your letters will include information about your professional development, skills, abilities, and potential to succeed in graduate school. In addition, your letters of recommendation can be very important especially if there is a weakness in your application (e.g., mediocre GRE scores or GPA).

In order for faculty to be able to address all of these areas, they need to know you well. In addition to being a good “book” student and one who is motivated and interested in class, it is recommended that you interact with professors in other ways. For instance, serving as a professor’s research assistant or teaching assistant or getting involved in Research Club and/or Psi Chi will provide opportunities for you to interact personally with faculty and for them to recognize your skills and talents. Many students who are applying to graduate school will have recommendation letters indicating that they are “A” students; however, a more personal letter describing your specific qualities is a letter that will stand out among others.

In general, most applications will require you to solicit 2 to 3 letters of recommendation. According to Keith-Spiegel and Wiederman (2000), the best sources for letters are 1) a faculty mentor who has worked closely with you and has supervised a considerable amount of your work, 2) a professor who has significant publication reputation in the area of specialization that you are applying, 3) an employer on a job that is related to your professional goals, and 4) the department chair. It is suggested that you only approach these types of individuals for letters if they can write a personal letter for you. For example, if you have never talked with the department chair during your undergraduate career, it would be wise to ask a different faculty member who knows you to write a letter in support of your application.

Recommendation letter “etiquette” is an element you do not want to overlook. Once you have identified who you will ask to write letters for you, approach them as early as possible (preferably 1 to 2 months prior to the deadline) and ask if they would be willing to write you a *strong* letter. If they agree, provide them with an organized folder of pertinent information about you (a copy of your vita, a copy of your transcript, a list of classes you have taken with them, a list of other activities they supervised), a list of the programs you are applying to, all paperwork that the programs require, and addressed, stamped envelopes if you would like for the letter writer to mail the letters. Programs will allow you to waive the right to read the letters of recommendation. It is highly recommended that you waive this right. Lastly, once the letters have been sent, it is polite to send a thank you note acknowledging the efforts of the letter writer.

Strategies for a Successful Application

Buskist (2001) developed a “top 7” list of essentials in preparing a successful graduate school application. The tips include:

- 1) Be organized
- 2) Develop competencies as an undergraduate
- 3) Settle on a specialty area
- 4) Involve yourself in undergraduate research
- 5) Do homework/research on potential graduate schools
- 6) Identify potential major professors whom you would like to work with in the programs you are applying to
- 7) Write an outstanding personal statement or letter of intent

It is imperative that you spend a significant amount of time researching various graduate programs. Obtain information from websites, phone calls, and school catalogs. Assess your chances of being admitted to the various programs. Apply to a range of programs; that is, apply to a few highly competitive programs, a few middle of the road, and a few that you feel you have a reasonable chance of being admitted into.

Making contact with faculty from the programs you are interested in is also critical. Identify professors who specialize in areas you are most interested in. Familiarize yourself with their publications; read anything you can get your hands on that they have published. Contact them directly and discuss their research and whether or not they will be taking new graduate students during the selection year you are applying. Within your application materials, mention these specific faculty members as individuals you feel are a “good fit” with your interests and career goals.

Most programs will require the following application materials:

- 1) Personal statement or letter of intent
- 2) Letters of recommendation
- 3) GRE scores forwarded directly from the Educational Testing Service (ETS)
- 4) Curriculum vita
- 5) Official transcript to verify GPA and courses taken
- 6) Personal interview (in some cases)
- 7) Application fee

As you prepare for applying, research potential programs early (summer of your junior year). Request application materials and financial aid information from the schools. Type everything that you will submit. Diehl and Sullivan (2005) suggested that applicants send more than the required number of letters of recommendation, submit a vita even if it is not requested, and send copies of impressive term papers, research projects, or copies of other written work that illustrate your writing ability and other strengths. Submit everything BEFORE the due date and follow up to be sure your materials were received.

References/Recommended Reading

- American Psychological Association. (2005). A guide to getting in to graduate school. Retrieved October 11, 2005 at <http://www.apa.org/ed/getin/html>.
- Buskist, W. (2002, Spring). Seven tips for preparing a successful application to graduate school in psychology. *Eye on Psi Chi*, 5(3), 32-34.
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