

How to Get into Graduate School in Research-oriented Psychology in North America

Tips from Steve Lindsay

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How Admissions Decisions are Made

Like undergrad applications, graduate school applications are initially screened to ensure that they are complete and that the applicant meets minimum standards, but after that they are passed on to academic departments and thence to individual faculty members identified as potential supervisors. It is crucial to appreciate that the primary decision maker will be an individual faculty member (with decisions sometimes vetted by a small committee of faculty members).¹

In a given year, a faculty member may or may not consider *any* applications. If the faculty member is "in the market" for one or more new students, s/he will be looking for real stand-outs--i.e., applicants who clearly have what it takes to succeed as graduate students. By accepting a student, a faculty member undertakes a substantial commitment in terms of time and resources; if the student does well, all benefit, but if the student does not do well the faculty member's career suffers (due to a major investment of time and resources that does not culminate in scholarly publications). Consequently, something less than 10% of applications to graduate studies in psychology are accepted.

It follows that applicants must compellingly communicate their strengths to potential supervisors. Developing and communicating your strengths in ways that are appropriate for graduate school requires an understanding of the skills and abilities that are important for success in graduate school. In a research science, graduate school is not like undergraduate school. Rather, graduate training emphasizes an apprenticeship system, in which student and supervisor work together on research projects. Graduate students do take courses as well, but courses are subservient to the aim of developing the skills and expertise required to conduct and publish original research.

At the end of your graduate training, few potential employers will care what courses you took or what marks you earned in them-- what they will care about is how successful you were in terms of publishing original scientific research in scholarly journals. Therefore the skills and abilities that matter to potential graduate supervisors are those involved in doing scientific research (e.g., critical thinking, mathematical and analytic skills, computer programming, knowledge of and passion for research, writing and communication skills, discipline, time management, creativity, etc.).

¹ This document has to do with research-oriented psychology programs in Canada, Mexico, and the US. Admissions procedures differ in other areas of psychology (e.g., clinical, educational, applied) and in other cultures.

What You Can do to Increase Your Chances of Being Admitted

The following are likely to increase your chances of getting into a good graduate program in research-oriented psychology.

- Majoring in psychology as an undergraduate and taking upper-level courses in the area of specialization in which you want to pursue graduate study are helpful, but not necessarily essential. An undergraduate background that includes solid training in mathematics, natural sciences, and logic is a major advantage (whether or not you are a psych major).
- Get good marks in your undergraduate courses, especially in your last two years. Potential supervisors will not have much information on which to base their decisions, so marks will play a substantial role.
- Get hands-on experience conducting scientific research under the tutelage of a skilled researcher (e.g., independent studies courses, an honours thesis, working as a volunteer or paid research assistant). There are three major benefits of such experience:
 - You will learn a lot and discover whether or not you love doing research (and if you don't, then you probably shouldn't apply for admission to a research-oriented psychology graduate program);
 - You will be able to tell potential graduate supervisors that you already have experience doing the kinds of things that you would be doing in grad school;
 - Whoever supervises you in these experiences will be able to write a detailed, well-grounded letter of recommendation on your behalf (and such letters carry substantial weight). (Note that one implication of this is that there is no sense seeking research experience unless you are really going to work hard at it and do well.)
- Apply for funding from appropriate agencies (e.g., for Canadian residents interested in scientific psychology, an NSERC PGS-A postgraduate studentship; for US residents, a National Science Foundation graduate research fellowship; depending on where you live, your interests, and your background, there may also be other potential sources of funding). Graduate study is a full-time commitment. Although some graduate students support themselves by working part-time as teaching assistants or as research assistants on projects with which they are not substantively involved, the more time a student spends on such work the less time s/he can devote to getting the real job done (i.e., conducting original research). Some potential supervisors provide some financial support for some students, but such funds are in very limited supply. Unless you are an absolute superstar on every other dimension, your chances of being admitted will increase dramatically if you have your own funding. Your undergraduate institution may have an office (e.g., graduate student financial aid office) that can help you identify potential sources of funding. Note that the deadlines for such grants are very early (e.g., the NSERC deadline is usually in September or early October of the senior year). Producing a strong funding application will take a substantial time investment, so start early. Get feedback on drafts of the proposal. For many applicants, funding is a make-it or break-it issue, so aggressively look for funding and make your funding applications as good as you can.
- Get involved in the intellectual community of psychological science. Connect with local, regional, national, and even international groups that promote scientific psychology. If your

department has a psychology “course union” or club or a chapter of Psi Chi (the honours society for psychology students), join it and participate in its events (note, by the way, that Psi Chi gives out many small grants to undergraduates, which look great on a grad-school application). Check out the Open Science Framework (OSF, <https://osf.io/>) and the Society for the Improvement of Psychological Science (SIPS, <http://improvingpsych.org/>) for information and resources on leading-edge efforts to improve transparency and replicability in psychological science. Be on the look-out for psychology conferences that you might be able to attend.

- Prepare a resume with great care, seeking guidance and feedback. See, for example, www.psychologytoday.com/blog/career-transitions/201110/writing-effective-cvs-and-resumes
- Prepare for and schedule the GRE, <https://www.ets.org/gre>, including the subject exam in psychology, by studying and taking practice tests (UVic does not require the Psych subject test, but some schools do, and doing well on it can help even if it is not required). Applicants with GREs below the 50th percentile on any dimension are unlikely to be accepted. Take at least one practice test. For the subject exam in psychology, reviewing a good introductory psychology text can be very helpful. I doubt it is worthwhile investing major resources in trying to improve your GREs; that is, you will gain by practicing and reviewing a little, but returns on additional investment will diminish quickly.
- Target your applications to individual faculty members rather than to universities. To succeed as a research-oriented psychologist (i.e., get a job after you earn your degree), you must succeed in your graduate work, and succeeding in your graduate work means publishing original research while you are a graduate student. Going to a gloriously famous university will not be profitable unless you mesh with your supervisor in ways that enable you to conduct and publish research. What matters most is that (a) the potential supervisor is a successful researcher (i.e., publishes frequently in good journals and is frequently cited by other researchers) and (b) that your interests and style are compatible with those of the potential supervisor. This means that before you apply you need to do some serious thinking and research to determine with which faculty members you would most like to work. If you have no idea what kinds of research topics excite you (and hence no idea about how to check out who is doing research on those topics), then you probably should not be applying for graduate school in research-oriented psychology.
- Views vary on this, but I think it is OK for students to email prospective supervisors and express interest in their work and ask if they plan to accept any students for the coming year. If you do this, take pains to be professional – “Hey, Steve. R U gonna take a student next year?” might do you more harm than good. Better would be something like “Dear Prof. Lindsay: I’m working on an honours thesis at UBC under the supervision of Prof. Peter Graf, and planning to apply for graduate schools for next year. I have read several of your articles with great interest (especially your editorial on replicability). Do you plan to admit any students to your lab for next year? Thanks in advance for taking time to reply—I’m very excited about pursuing a career as a research psychologist.” If the person responds affirmatively, then you could follow up with a brief note thanking them for the reply and a sentence or two about your research interests and your hope that they will consider our application.

- Apply broadly. You cannot assume that the faculty member with whom you would most like to work will admit any student the year you apply, let alone that they will admit you. Do not apply to a university that you wouldn't attend even if it were your only choice, but if you want to go to graduate school then it would be unwise to apply to only one or two schools.
- Prepare your application carefully, particularly with regard to written statements of your research interests etc. Tailor applications to the potential supervisor(s) at each school. Have others proof read your applications. Writing skills are crucial for success in graduate school, so if your application indicates that you are a poor writer your chances of being admitted plummet. Bear in mind that completing an application for grad school takes a substantial amount of time.

Getting Letters of Recommendation

Graduate school applications include letters of recommendation (typically 3 of them, usually written by university professors). These letters play a significant role in admissions decisions. If possible, lay the ground work for such letters a year or more in advance of when you will need them, by getting to know several of your professors. If the people who write for you know nothing about you except what marks you received in their courses, they will be unable to strengthen your application. At minimum, be an active participant in your courses and occasionally go to your profs' office hours to discuss course material. Better yet, do independent studies courses (sometimes called "directed studies" courses) and an honours thesis, and/or volunteer to work in faculty laboratories. Note that you don't necessarily have to have specific ideas about the content of an independent studies course or thesis project when you approach a Prof to discuss the possibility of doing one. It certainly can't hurt to come prepared with ideas regarding the general topic area you want to explore (and, of course, that topic area should be one that is of interest to the faculty member--check out your Department's web site to find out who does what), but what matters more is that you present yourself as a bright, skilled, conscientious person who wants to do a project with that faculty member. He or she can then help you find a suitable project.

When you approach a Prof to ask for a letter of recommendation or to talk about doing an independent studies course or a thesis, come prepared with information that will make the Prof's decision easier. In the case of letters of recommendation, such information will also enable the Prof to comment on your skills and abilities on numerous dimensions; the more detailed and concrete information you provide, the more detailed and concrete (and hence convincing) the Prof can make the letter. A copy of each of the following can be very helpful:

- Your transcript (doesn't need to be an official copy), with psych courses highlighted.
- A separate, typed list of the courses you have taken with that prof, with information about your work (e.g., topics of any papers you wrote) and marks in those courses.
- Your resume (which should focus on your skills and experiences relevant to psych—see above).
- A sample of your written work (e.g., a paper you've written for a past course).
- An example of the "personal statement" you've written for your application. Have someone else proof read this before you give it to the profs who are going to write letters for you.
- Your GRE scores (if you have not yet taken the GRE, send the scores once you have them).
- A separate typed sheet with the names of the programs and universities to which you plan to apply, indicating for each the due date for the letter and whether the letter is to be sent directly to the university or returned to you for inclusion with your other application materials.

- For grad school applicants, if the program for which you applying is still using paper (happily now rare), an envelope for each application, appropriately addressed (with the rating form described above either in the envelope or paper-clipped to it). Typed addresses look more professional than written ones (you can print the addresses on regular paper, cut them out, and use a glue stick). If multiple envelopes are to be addressed and returned to you (for inclusion with your other application materials) be sure to somehow mark the outside of each such envelope (e.g., with a post-it note) so that you'll know which university that envelope is for. It is typically best not to put postage on the envelopes, but polite to offer to provide postage.
- Most graduate schools provide a form (paper or online) with various rating scales to be completed by the people who provide recommendations for you. Such forms almost always include sections that the applicant is to fill out before giving the form to the referee-make sure you've filled out those sections neatly and completely. If you are applying to schools that do not use such a form, note which schools don't use a form on the list of places to which you are applying.

What If It's Too Late?

Suppose you are reading all of this sage advice well into your final undergraduate year--too late to do an honours thesis, ace the GREs, and apply for a graduate scholarship for next year. What should you do? Well, you know, I carried lumber and killed fish for two years between undergrad school and grad school. But, crucially, partway through that period I spend a few months doing research with my former undergrad supervisor. So seek out an opportunity to work in a successful researcher's lab the year after you graduate. If necessary, do it for free, as a part-time volunteer (while supporting yourself with whatever part-time paying job you can find). During that year, gain lots of hands-on research experience, cultivate the admiration and appreciation of your supervisor, write a bang-up application for postgraduate funding, blow the doors off the GRE, and read the latest research publications of the potential supervisors with whom you would like to work. You will then be in a much stronger position to apply. And if none of this avails, keep in mind that graduate students in research-oriented psychology work incredibly hard for years, at subsistence pay, and then face a very uncertain job market. Maybe you lucked out!

What Other Web Resources are Available?

If you are considering applying for admission to a clinical psychology program, see the amazing document at <http://mitch.web.unc.edu/files/2017/02/MitchGradSchoolAdvice.pdf>. For more general information, Dr. Margaret A. Lloyd's Careers in Psychology site <http://www.psywww.com/careers/> includes a wealth of information—some of it is dated and some of it is regional, but a lot of the advice is rock solid and helpful. The parent PsychWeb site was updated in May of 2017 and is a goldmine of a resource-useful in all sorts of ways. I've already mentioned above the Society for Improvement of Psychological Science and the Open Science Framework. The American Psychological Association has useful information at <http://www.apa.org/education/grad/applying.aspx>. And you know Google--grab the wheel and drive forward. And good luck!