

So You Want to Go to Graduate School? Advice by Kira McCabe

This timeline is simply what I did to get into graduate school. It explains the logic behind my actions, as well as general advice through all phases of the process.

Sophomore Year: In the spring semester, I set up an internship over the summer. Additionally, I started looking at some graduate schools near the end of my sophomore year. This is easy to do and is a great cure for procrastination. Just go to a few websites when you are procrastinating and shock yourself with the disclosure data so you will go back to work. It was at this point that I had my wake-up call about how competitive programs can be in psychology.

****Hindsight is 20/20:** For those who are interested in going to graduate school straight from undergrad, consider taking the research methods & advanced experimental classes this year. This will allow you to take the results of your studies and present them at SEPA or even publish them in undergraduate journals. Research is key for admission, and getting the training early will help you tremendously.

Junior Year: I took the research sequence this year. I also began to purchase necessary books to prepare for the application year: GRE (general and subject) prep books and the Insider's Guide (highly recommended). I lined up another internship for the summer (different location so you can gain a different experience). Also, talk to faculty about doing research with them in the fall.

May:

- I started my internship
- I began studying for the General GRE. For those who have disability documentation, it takes longer to register for the GRE, so consider this. It takes a few weeks for your paper work to process, and then you have to call and make an appointment to take the test. Just be warned that if you need to take it again and if you have a disability, give yourself enough time this to occur with this longer registration.
- I began to make a large list of possible schools and researched their websites.

June:

- Continued internship, GRE preparation, and school research.
- I began adapting my general resume to a Curriculum Vitae (CV). This is something you can do now, at whatever year you are, just to have on hand and to edit. It is handy to have and will save you time later.
- I began writing my statement of purpose, which I recommend to start VERY early. Do not wait two weeks before your first application is due to do this. This is the critical component to your application, beyond GRE scores and GPA. It is the admissions committee's first impression of you.

It shows your interest, writing skills, personality, and so on. I spent months writing this to make it perfect. Work on this early!

- Joined livejournal groups of students applying to graduate school.

July & August:

- Took the General GRE. Despite 2 months of preparation, I did not do as well as I had hoped. I worked on the paperwork to take the test again in the fall. I took a break from studying because I was annoyed about my score, but I went back to it after a few weeks.
- Finished internship.
- Continued to research schools.

September:

- I approached professors about writing letters of recommendation. Even if you do not have a final list of schools yet, give them a copy of your CV and at least give them a heads up that you will be applying and need their help.
- Have professors read over your statement of purpose and CV. Seriously, this helped me a lot, particularly if you are in the dark on how to write your statement or are unsure of CV formatting.
- Began to study for GRE, try two. I purchased a book specifically to focus on the verbal section.
- Started contacting professors at programs I wanted to apply. This is extremely important. Some schools may say “don’t contact us”, but it is important for applicants to do this. You need to make sure that you are not wasting time, energy, and money on a school that does not match well. It is best to know if the professor you want to work with is taking students out of the application pool. I had one school that I loved, but the professor I wanted to work with left the school that fall. It is best to find out these things (particularly if a website hasn’t been updated in a while). Just send a simple e-mail asking about current lab projects and inquire about if they are taking students. That is all you need to do. I also attached my CV to these e-mails so they could get a sense of who I was as an applicant. However, this is optional.

October:

- I took the GRE again and my score improved over a 100 points total, which was a solid score for my applications.
- Narrowed down my final list of schools and made letter of recommendation packets. My packets included list of schools (with deadlines), directions for each school, letter of recommendation forms (required for some schools), my CV, copy of my transcript (I also highlighted the classes I had with that professor), stamps, and envelopes (if requested—I left them out unless the professor requested the materials). All my letters were mailed in, although more schools are now turning to online recommendations. Despite the format, give your letters

as much time as possible. **Hindsight is 20/20:** Give your letter writers fake deadlines that are actually a week or so before the real deadline. Professors get busy, too. My letter writers were not late, but let's say that a few were pushing their luck. Trick them into writing it early!

- Start making profiles for applications. Most applications are online now, so you can make a profile and begin to fill out the forms. Additionally, begin adapting your statement of purpose to each school. I had a section devoted to each school to explain why I wanted to go there and with whom I wished to work. This took up most of my time in late October and November.

November/December:

- Took the psychology GRE. Due to a fiasco with the second attempt of the general GRE, I had to reschedule my appointment. This cut into my preparation for the psychology GRE, which was frustrating. I had two weeks (in the midst of midterms no less) to review material—some I had in classes and other classes (i.e. history and systems) that I had not had. I had a decent score, but more time to study would have been better. The test is offered 3 times a year: November, December, and April. You can decide when you will have time to prepare and take it. It is not required for all programs, but it might be good to take due to the “Ogle-what?” phenomenon. It really depends what kind of programs to which you are applying.
- Request transcripts and GRE score reports. Oglethorpe is cheap as far as transcripts go (\$3 per transcripts), which is better than most schools. GRE reports cost \$15 each, but you get 4 freebies on the test day for the general and 4 if you register for the Psych GRE. The last time I took the GRE, I had my schools picked out already and sent the score reports to those schools. They did not include my Psych GRE scores, but my early schools did not require them and I did not see a point in re-ordering them. Just make sure you send the reports to schools you pretty sure you want to go.
- Complete applications. The post office is unpredictable during the holiday season, so mail things early and get notification receipts if you can (note: those receipts usually are correct, although it is not always scanned or processed correctly online. I was spazing because one application had the status of “left notice” well after the deadline, and it was actually there all along). Also, if for some reason you accidentally forget to include something in your application materials, go ahead and mail it off as soon as you realize. Generally, admissions offices are forgiving. As long as the bulk of your materials are postmarked or there by the deadline, you will be okay (but do not push your luck).
- The waiting game begins!! I actually had an interview invite in early December, which is rare for many programs. However, the rest of the month was spent waiting...and waiting...and waiting. Make sure you make a contact cheat sheet, which lists all your schools, the professors for

whom you want to work, the type of program, and phone numbers. You never know when an interview call will come, and you do not want to be caught off guard!

January

- I went to my first interview at the end of January, which was a stressful experience. It was an all-day interview, which included faculty and student interviews. Before this, I did a mock interview, which was extremely helpful. I made a blunder during this interview, which I realized and corrected before the real deal. You should be ready to answer some standard questions, such as your past research or why you want to go to that school. Additionally, come to the interview prepared to ask questions—tons of them. You will be asked to ask questions at every opportunity, and you need to stay sharp and on the ball. At the end of the day, if you have already asked a question once and you are out of questions—ask it again. You may get a different answer that may surprise you. The main thing you need to show is that you are a good fit with the program. Getting to the interview means you are qualified to go there. Getting accepted means that you are an excellent match.
- Continue to wait!

February-April:

- Received two more interview offers. One interview at the end of February lasted only for a half-day, which made things extremely hectic with scheduling. The other interview lasted over two days, which allowed me to know the campus really well. These interviews included faculty and student interviews, as well as group interviews (another applicant and me interviewed by a faculty member). Just beware that travel costs can empty your bank account fast.
- You will start hearing news around February. Generally, most interviews are in February. Be realistic and expect rejection letters. Even if you are a stellar candidate, the volume of people applying makes it difficult to beat the odds, no matter how good your credentials are. Additionally, wait lists are not the end of the world. You still have a shot, which was the only way I got in. Even though I had three interviews, I had two post-interview rejections and a wait list. As I said before, it is a matter of matching with the program.
- Always have a backup plan in your mind in case you do not get in. It is not fun to think about, but you need to have options available to you.
- The Graduate School Decision Day is April 15. If you are on a wait list as I was, it will be hard to hold out for this long. Trust me, it is not a fun game. However, I was accepted April 10—days before the deadline. You will have to hold out until the end.

CV and Purpose Statement Basics

There is no standardized way to write your CV and Statement. However, there are common elements that you should include.

For your CV, structure categories with the important stuff first. Take as many pages as you need to include everything. Here are the categories I used for my CV, which you can adapt to your own experience:

- Contact information
- Educational Background
- Honors & Awards
- Research Experience
- Internships
- Presentations
- Work Experience
- Volunteer Work (include volunteer organizations)
- University Activities (Fresh Focus mentoring, Student Government, University Committees, etc.)
- University Publications (Stormy Petrel and Tower stuff)
- Additional Interests (Other clubs, such as Chess Club)

Statements of Purpose should present you and your interests in a clear and concise manner. When citing past experience, do not just repeat your CV. Go beyond that. For example, explain what specific things you did in the research group. What did you learn from this experience? Things you should consider:

- Why did you decide to major in psychology and why do you want to go to graduate school? Yes, this is a hard question, but it is an important one.
- Why should you get in? What experiences have prepared you for graduate work? Explain research experience and internship experiences.
- What do you want to do with your graduate degree? What career goals do you have? (Tip: If you are going into clinical psych or a related field, avoid, "I want to help people". For clinical psych especially, you should emphasize the scientist-practitioner model—both research & therapy).
- What are your research/clinical interests?
- What faculty members do you want to work with?
- How does your past influence who you are and your decision to apply? After all, personal statements are *personal*. You should include a little bit about your background, but not the whole traumatic story of how your cat died when you were nine. Make it relevant; additionally, it could be included in the answer of why you want to go to graduate school.
- Why do you want to go to this school? Give solid reasons of why you are a good match with the program you are applying.
- Look at each school's site about what they want in personal statements. Some schools want financial aid information, while others have word limits. Just double check to make sure.

With this stressful process, you have to have to laugh about a few things. Here is a sarcastic bit I found. *Taken from the Geocities site on the Websites page

Seven Sins of Applying To Graduate School

These tips are one of a kind! Where else can you get expert advice on how *not* to get in?

1. Give your professors only three weeks notice about writing your letters of recommendation for you. That way you can make sure that they are annoyed and angry with you while they write them.
2. Don't do any background research to find out what the program you are applying to really focuses on. That way you can make sure that you are completely wasting the committee's time by applying to a program that isn't even what you think it is. (If you think nobody is dumb enough to do that, think again: hundreds of students apply to social psychology programs each year thinking that they are going to become "social relations counselors" after they graduate.)
3. Don't find out what the average GPA and GRE scores are for the program you're applying to. That way you'll be sure to either be way out of your league or way overqualified for the programs you're applying to.
4. Ask your friends and family members whether a graduate program is a high-quality program or not instead of looking at what the American Psychological Association or the National Research Council says about it. That way you can be sure to get really useless advice rather than seeing some real data on the quality of the program.
5. If you're applying to a graduate program where you will do research with an advisor or mentor, make sure you avoid looking up there publications. That way you won't have any idea of how well established your advisor is in the field, what kind of work he or she does, or whether you are even interested in doing that kind of research.
6. Don't bother looking at the cost of the graduate program, the cost of living in the area that the program is located in, or the financial aid opportunities that will be available to you. That way you might get lucky enough to be in debt the rest of your life.
7. Don't let anyone who is smarter than you read over your statement of purpose/application essay before you send it. That way you can ensure that the faculty members on the admissions committee have someone to laugh at (or cry at, or wince at) during their committee meetings.

Pardon the cynical tone, folks, but I hope you've learned something positive!

Sources that May Help

Websites:

<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~mooreks/graduatehelp.html>: This site was created by a psychology student that endured the process. It is quite helpful, with help in all areas of the process (undergraduate prep, application timeline, GRE, personal statements, letters of recommendation, and son on).

<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Flats/5353/classes/graduatestudy.html>
Another helpful site like the one above with some additional stuff. This is where the Seven Deadly Sins thing came from.

<http://www.studystack.com/category-12> Contains a list of flashcards for various subjects. Scroll down the list to find GRE vocabulary flash cards and word root cards. Can be helpful if you can handle computerized flashcards.

<http://number2.com/> Decent GRE prep site to supplement your prep book.

<http://applycorner.com/graduateschool/index.php> A site for all types of graduate applicants. It allows you to keep track of your applications, find out who has heard back and when the heard back. It is a useful networking site.

<http://forums.studentdoctor.net/forumdisplay.php?f=57> If you go through this process and use any of these sites, use this one. This is an online forum geared for clinical and counseling PhD. and PsyD. applicants, but it may prove useful for other applicants as well. This is a better networking site than applycorner.com, and I highly recommend it.

There are some livejournal communities that may prove helpful (especially if you check the memories or back logs of advice from past applicants):

applingtograd: <http://community.livejournal.com/applyingtograd/profile>

who_got_in: http://community.livejournal.com/who_got_in/profile

psych_students: http://community.livejournal.com/psych_students/profile

Helpful Books for Grad School:

- Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology (Editions updated annually) by Michael A. Sayette, Tracy J. Mayne, and John C. Norcross.
- Getting in: A Step-By-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology by American Psychological Association (APA)
- Graduate Study in Psychology 2007 (also updated annually) by APA
- Kaplan or Barton's GRE prep books.
- Words for Smart Test Takers—great book to improve your verbal score.