

# PREPARING FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

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## **GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL FROM DAY #1?**

### **WHAT KIND OF COMPETITION WILL I FACE GETTING INTO GRADUATE SCHOOL?**

There will be lots of high quality competition. Approximately 12% of applicants eventually become graduate students. Typically, 1 out of 9 applicants are accepted to experimental programs, and only 1 out of 45 applicants are accepted to clinical programs.

You have to have a very good undergraduate record to get in to a graduate program. Here are some guidelines.

### **GRADES**

Grades, and especially grades in upper-division courses and courses required for admission, do make a difference.

This is why freshmen and sophomores should not be taking our upper division core course. They often get grades of C when they take the courses early and get an A when they wait.

### **STATISTICS AND EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY**

An A in statistics and experimental psychology helps; a C in those courses hurts.

### **PROFESSIONAL/TECHNICAL CONCENTRATION**

Admissions committees at major research universities prefer students with a strong mathematics and natural sciences background; the belief is that these students are more 'scientific' and will be better researchers in psychology. NOTE: The Ph.D. in Psychology is ALWAYS a research degree -- no matter what your specialty.

In addition, a substantial amount of research in all areas of psychology involves advanced mathematics (through calculus) and involves the biological substrates of behavior. Admissions committees may prefer Bs in math and science courses over As in some other courses.

This is why RIT's Professional/Technical Concentration benefits you and why you should choose it carefully.

### **RESEARCH**

Research experience helps and often is the crucial factor in deciding if you are admitted.

You should try to obtain research experience in your area of interest. REMEMBER, doctoral programs are research oriented. They seek students who have become involved in research activity and who are "turned-on" by research endeavors. Research activity with a faculty member should also generate a meaningful letter of recommendation.

Do not think you are exempt from research if you are planning to go into a Counseling Program. Counseling programs tend to weight research heavier in admission, in many cases, than the more academic programs.

### **ELECTIVE COURSES**

Of course take courses that interest you. However, Graduate Schools will look favorably on the following courses (and these courses are very helpful if you are going to take the GREs). History and Systems, Perception, and Motivation.

## **WHAT DEGREE PROGRAM SHOULD YOU APPLY FOR WHEN APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL?**

A Doctorate degree (PhD) is required for the independent practice of psychology and for college and university teaching jobs. A Master's degree (MA, MS, MEd, MSW) can be suitable training for many industrial positions and for clinical or counseling positions in settings in which you are supervised by a psychologist with a PhD, or a psychiatrist (MD).

Psychology departments' at most major universities only admit students who intend to get the Doctorate; may or may not; offer a Master's degree in route to the PhD.

It typically takes at least four years to get a PhD. PhDs in clinical or counseling psychology will require an extra year of internship. The minimum time is three years; some students take up to eight years.

Some universities only have Master's programs that typically take two years to complete. While admission to a Master's program is much less competitive than admission to a PhD program, career opportunities are more limited.

You can get a Master's at one institution and then apply for admission to a PhD program at another; however, graduate course work does not usually transfer between universities so earning a Master's before going to a PhD program will add to the time required for the PhD.

Usually you would choose this route only if you are denied admission to PhD programs at first, and need to prove competence in graduate coursework to apply later.

## WHAT SHOULD YOU SPECIALIZE IN WHEN GOING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL?

At the graduate level, you must decide on an area of specialization within psychology (e.g., clinical, counseling, social, biopsychology, industrial, cognitive, etc.) to list on your application to be reviewed by the faculty in that area.

Therefore, you should be clear in your mind what kind of psychologist you want to be BEFORE you even think about graduate school.

You should begin thinking about your area of specialization no later than the middle of your sophomore year. It is expected that many of you will be doing a COOP at the end of your sophomore year. A well chosen CO-OP may make the difference between acceptance and non-acceptance at the graduate school of your choice.

## WHAT ARE THE TYPICAL AREAS OF SPECIALIZATION IN PSYCHOLOGY

**CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY:** Clinical psychologists assess and treat people with psychological problems. They may act as therapists for people experiencing normal psychological crises (e.g., grief) or for individuals suffering from chronic psychiatric disorders. Some clinical psychologists are generalists who work with a wide variety of populations, while others work with specific groups like children, the elderly, or those with specific disorders (e.g., schizophrenia). They are trained in universities or professional schools of psychology. They may be found working in academic settings, hospitals, community health centers, or private practice.

**COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY:** Counseling psychologists do many of the same things that clinical psychologists do. However, counseling psychologists tend to focus more on persons with adjustment problems rather than on persons suffering from severe psychological disorders. They may be trained in Psychology Departments or in Schools of Education. Counseling psychologists are employed in academic settings, community mental health centers, and private practice.

**EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY: DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY:** Developmental psychologists study how we develop intellectually, socially, and emotionally over the lifespan. Some focus on just one period of life (e.g., childhood or adolescence). Developmental psychologists usually do research and teach in academic settings, but many act as consultants to day care centers, schools, or social service agencies.

**CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY:** Educational psychologists are concerned with the study of human learning. They attempt to understand the basic aspects of learning and then develop materials and strategies for enhancing the learning process. For example, an educational psychologist might study reading and then develop a new technique for teaching reading. They are typically trained in Schools of Education and employed in academic settings.

**EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY:** This area includes a diverse group of psychologists who do research in the most basic areas of psychology (e.g., learning, memory, cognition, perception, motivation, and language). Their research may be conducted with animals instead of humans. Most of these psychologists work in academic settings.

**FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY:** Forensic psychologists are involved in analyzing crime evidence and aiding law enforcement agencies in criminal investigations.

**HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY:** Health psychologists are concerned with psychology's contributions to the promotion and maintenance of good health and the prevention and treatment of illness. They may design and conduct programs to help individuals stop smoking, lose weight, manage

stress, and stay physically fit. They are employed in hospitals, medical schools, rehabilitation centers, public health agencies, academic settings, and private practice.

**HUMAN FACTORS PSYCHOLOGY:** Human Factors researchers study the human/machine interface. They may help make appliances such as cameras user-friendly, or they may do studies of safety-related issues in the design of machinery, airplane controls and instrument layouts, or they may do basic research on human perceptual and motor abilities as they relate to the operation of machines, computers, and other mechanical devices.

**INDUSTRIAL/ORGANIZATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY:** Industrial/organizational psychologists are primarily concerned with the relationships between people and their work environments. They may develop new ways to increase productivity or be involved in personnel selection. They are employed in business, government agencies, and academic settings.

**PHYSIOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY:** Physiological psychologists study the physiological correlates of behavior. They study both very basic processes (e.g., how brain cells function) and more readily observable phenomena (e.g., behavioral changes as a function of drug use or the biological/genetic roots of psychiatric disorders). Most are employed in academic settings.

**SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY:** School psychologists are involved in enhancing the development of children in educational settings. They assess children's psycho educational abilities and recommend actions to facilitate student learning. They are typically trained in Schools of Education and work in public school systems. They often act as consultants to parents, teachers, and administrators to optimize the learning environments of specific students.

**SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY:** Social psychologists study how our beliefs, feelings, and behaviors are affected by other persons. Some topics of interest to social psychologists are attitude formation and change, aggression, prejudice, and interpersonal attraction. Most social psychologists work in academic settings, but some work in federal agencies and businesses doing applied research.

## **MORE ABOUT THE TWO MOST POPULAR SPECIALIZATIONS -- CLINICAL AND COUNSELING**

Many undergraduate students are interested in becoming practitioners of psychology and apply to doctoral programs in clinical and/or counseling psychology. Therefore, admission to these specialization areas is very competitive, and clinical programs tend to be more competitive than counseling programs. Highly competitive programs receive approximately 350 applications to the clinical program, admit approximately 10 students, and hope that 6-7 will matriculate.

The APA investigates and accredits programs in the areas of clinical, counseling, and school psychology, but not programs in the other areas of specialization. In these areas, you should try to get admitted to programs approved by the APA; it will affect your internship setting and enhance your employment possibilities.

## **WHAT IF YOU WANT CLINICAL/COUNSELING BUT DON'T HAVE A GOOD ENOUGH ACADEMIC RECORD?**

Here are some masters programs you might consider: special education, school counseling, career counseling, vocational rehabilitation, criminology, and social work. The MSW (Masters of Social Work) degree may be especially appealing. With the MSW and some years of supervised experience you can become licensed to practice psychology as a psychotherapist.

## GRE's

Almost every graduate program in psychology will require you to take the GRE general (aptitude) test. The programs will want the test scores by their admission deadline and it takes the Educational Testing Service close to two months to report your scores. Therefore, you should take the GRE no later than the early October administration, about a year before you hope to begin your graduate work. Ideally, you should take the GRE general test in early June after your junior year.

If you do this, you will have your scores when you are considering programs. You will also be able to re-take the test the following October if you did not perform as well as you thought you could.

Remember that you need to apply for the GRE some six weeks before the administration. The GRE general test has three sections--verbal, quantitative, and analytic. Graduate programs in psychology do not usually mention the analytic section in their program descriptions: do not, however, view it as unimportant, for some use it to discern between applicants with similar scores on the verbal and quantitative sections.

You should prepare for the GRE general test before taking it. Preparation for the quantitative section is especially important and will result in the greatest improvement in the least amount of time. It is relatively easy to relearn that high school algebra and geometry that you have not used and forgotten. It is harder to improve on a highly practiced skill like reading comprehension. The General Test can be written in either the paper-based or new computer-adaptive formats. **Paper-Based:** The paper-based General GRE can only be written on three days of the year worldwide; see test dates for more info. The paper-based general test takes longer to write and the score reports longer to reach your grad schools, than the computer-based test.

**Computer-Based:** The computer-based General GRE can be written at worldwide testing centers almost year-round. It is a computer-adaptive test, meaning that only questions at your difficulty level are presented to you depending on your patterns on previous questions; this makes it much faster than the paper-based GRE. In addition, you are presented with your scores immediately following the test and given the option of sending them to your grad schools (if they're good), or deleting them (if they suck); however, after deleting your scores, you cannot re-write the GRE for another 60 days. So make sure to give it plenty of thought before deleting.

Some schools also require the GRE subject test in psychology. The best preparation for this test is a good, solid Introductory Psychology text, e.g., the text by Gleitman. Another advantage of taking the general test in early June is that you can take the subject test in October and avoid having to take both tests on the same day.

## GRE PSYCHOLOGY SUBJECT TEST

The Psychology Subject test has about 220 questions drawn from courses most commonly offered at the undergraduate level, in three categories:

1. Experimental or natural science oriented (about 40% of the questions), including learning, language, memory, thinking, perception, ethnology, comparative, sensation, and physiological psychology.
2. Social or social science oriented (about 43% of the questions), including clinical and abnormal, developmental, personality, and social psychology.
3. General (about 17% of the questions), including the history of psychology, applied psychology, measurement, research designs, and statistics.

The test's total score includes the questions in all three categories. The test has two subscores: an experimental psychology sub score consisting of category (1) questions only, and a social psychology sub score consisting of category (2) questions only.

## **INFORMATION RESOURCES**

For Psychology programs, see a current copy of Graduate Study in Psychology and Associated Fields, a book published by the American Psychological Association (APA). You can order it from: Order Department, American Psychological Association, P.O. Box 2710, Hyattsville MD 20784. (Write them for an order form and then send the form and the money--around \$20.)

## **ADMISSION DEADLINES**

The admission deadline for most major universities is February 1 for admission for the following fall. (Most PhD programs only admit students in the fall.) Some programs have earlier deadlines; carefully read the information you get from the programs. Deadlines for Master's programs are usually somewhat later.

## APPLICATIONS

You need to apply to several schools. The APA suggests targeting at least 10 programs, including a few at the Master's level, to ensure admission to one. It is expensive, but it may save you from having to wait another year for the next round of admissions. The number will depend on your qualifications, the specific schools to which you apply, and your area of specialization. Applicants to clinical and counseling programs, because they are the most popular areas, should apply to more schools.

It is not an easy task to fill out the application forms correctly and have all your material sent to the appropriate places. Different schools have different procedures. Typically, material is sent to two different places--the graduate school admissions office and the department itself. The graduate school admission office essentially certifies that you are qualified to be admitted--that you meet the minimum requirements for the institution - while the department itself makes the admission decision. The graduate school usually requires the graduate school admissions form, official transcripts, official GRE reports, and an application fee. The department usually requires a departmental application form, an application for financial assistance, a personal statement, letters of recommendation, transcripts, and a GRE score report. Departments will often accept photocopies of transcripts and the GRE score report. (The reason for sending transcripts and the GRE report to both places is that the department can then start processing your application without having to wait for the official material to filter down from the graduate school admissions office.) If you can get all this stuff to the right places, you deserve to be admitted.

### FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Even if you are highly qualified for admission, you will find that the financial support from different schools will vary. Most major universities support their new students by a combination of teaching assistantships (TAs), research assistantships (RAs), and fellowships. Support varies from school to school and even from area to area within a department. Fellowships, TAs, and RAs provide about \$9,000 for nine months and some tuition reduction. (You won't get rich while you are a graduate student.) If you do not need financial assistance, you should state that in your personal statement; it may make a difference in the admission decision. Regional universities and universities with only MA programs generally provide less financial assistance. Even if you receive assistance, and especially if you do not, you should contact the institution's financial aid office for information about graduate student loans.

### PERSONAL STATEMENT

Your personal statement is very important: it is your only chance to "speak" directly to the selection committee. It is also very difficult to write. Read the information you receive from the programs and, if a program interests you, meld your interests to the orientation of the program. (This task is facilitated by word-processors.) It is reasonable to mention the names of specific faculty and their research in your statement as examples of the people you would like to work with and the research you would like to do. But, unless your interests are very specific, use the names and research areas as examples; the specific faculty member whom you mention may have left the department or be working in a different research area or have too many students. Be honest. Do not say that you are committed to conducting research in clinical psychology if you are, in fact, committed to the practice of clinical psychology: you would not be a happy

graduate student if you are admitted. If there are obvious weak spots in your record, address them in your statement. (If they are familiar enough with your background, have one of your recommenders discuss it in their letter.) Do not be a "single-issue" advocate and avoid stressing a narrow research interest. For clinical or counseling programs avoid expressing interest based on your personal life experiences (e.g., avoid "I want to work with and study children of alcoholics because my parents were alcoholics."). There are three problems with this type of statement: the stated interests are too narrow (graduate training in any area is broad); the program may not have expertise in your specific interest area; and your interest in and motivation for graduate training in psychology should stem from broader and more general concerns than specific personal experiences.

Your personal statement and entire application should indicate that you are definitely interested in graduate work in psychology and that you have some idea what graduate work in psychology involves. You can acquire information about graduate study in psychology by talking with your professors or current graduate students. How can you show your motivation? Get research experience. Do more than is necessary in courses or research projects; this does not go unnoticed in letters of recommendation. Join organizations such as Psi Chi and become a student affiliate of APA. Attend departmental colloquia. Enroll in the honors program. Tell the selection committee what turns you on about psychology.

## LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

All programs require letters of recommendation; most require three. Letters from psychology faculty members are most desirable, but don't hesitate to ask faculty members in other disciplines for a letter if they know you and if you think they have a good impression of your academic or research abilities. Most students need to plan ahead to be able to ask three faculty members to write letters for them. Take some smaller classes, honors courses, or lab courses in which you have an opportunity to become known by a faculty member. A faculty member in a lecture course can usually write little more than that you were in the top XX percent of the class; a faculty member in a smaller course, especially one with a substantial writing or research component, can say more. You can, if you want, submit additional letters from work supervisors or people with whom you have worked in an academic setting, if you think they can address your motivation and ability to do advanced academic work. However, do not substitute those letters for letters from faculty members. Letters from work supervisors or people outside your university are given much less weight by admissions committees.

It is acceptable to ask a faculty member to write a letter to each of the 10 or so programs to which you are applying: most will write one letter and photocopy it to attach to the recommendation forms supplied by each school. You should, however, make the recommender's task as easy as possible. You should supply a list of the schools and programs that you are applying to and their admission deadlines; the recommendation forms with the top sections correctly filled out and the right of access to the letter waived; and stamped envelopes addressed to the schools with the sender's return address on them. Your recommenders will want some or all of the following information from you to write a knowledgeable letter: a copy of your statement; your various GPAs (overall, upper-division, and psychology); psychology courses taken; other areas of concentration besides psychology (minor or other set of courses); GRE scores (if known); relevant research and work experience; and any papers written for the course(s) taken from them.