

## FREE ADVICE ON APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PSYCHOLOGY

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The advice I offer here grows out of my years of advising undergraduate psychology majors at Portland State University (PSU). Applying for graduate study requires so much time and energy that it's like picking up another part-time job. This document is written foremost for PSU undergraduates who are considering application to research training programs in psychology. Regardless of your goals, I hope there's something on this list you can use.

The PSU Department of Psychology is not responsible for this content. If there are aspects of my free advice that don't work for you, I welcome you to drop me a polite line at my "snail-mail" address. Meanwhile, if you use only one suggestion on this list, I would like to call your attention to suggestion number 10.

1. Clean up your undergraduate transcript(s). Complete incompletes, get everything waived that you plan to get waived, etc.
2. Plan your course work to do more than just meeting the requirements for the psychology major. Get some background in both the social science (developmental, I/O) and natural science (perception, physiological) sides of psychology. If a course in the History of Psychology is offered, consider it. Get strong statistics and methods training, including one or two 400-level methods courses. Read the prerequisites for these courses in our *Portland State University Bulletin* and plan accordingly.

Read the Psychology major requirements of your *PSU Bulletin* and use the handout on advising from the Department office. Organize your records to show you're making progress toward meeting requirements. Make your own spreadsheet or list of what the requirements are, how you filled them, when you filled them, etc. Make appointments with your Psychology advisor and meet with him or her regularly.

3. If you're applying to a clinical or counseling program, get practicum experience at a community agency. If you want to arrange practicum course credit, make an appointment with your advisor toward the end of the term before the term you'll volunteer. When you interview with the agency, it's perfectly appropriate to say you'll be needing a letter of recommendation for graduate school from an agency supervisor, and to ask whether that will be possible. If they're not receptive, you may prefer to work for a different agency.

4. Get research experience. If you're applying to any kind of Ph.D. program in psychology (clinical or not), research experience is very important. This is less the case for Psy.D., counseling, or M.S.W. programs.

Often students work on teams of research assistants (R.A.s) on large faculty projects. It's typical to put in a year of work as a volunteer, for credit or not for credit, at maybe 6-8 hours/week. As an undergraduate R.A. it's uncommon to get paid, which is extremely unfortunate.


Research experience gives your letter writers the opportunity to speak to your potential as a researcher, and that potential is key to your success in many graduate programs. So when you're working on a project, be competent, reliable, dedicated, and up on the content. Anticipate ways you can save time for your research supervisor. Show that you can work well both on your own and with other people.

How do you identify faculty on whose projects you can work? Use *PsychInfo* to identify local faculty conducting research. For example, you could use "Oregon" or "Portland" in the institution codes when you do your search. (You can access *PsychInfo* or the *Web of Science* through PSU's Millar Library – or, if you have a PSU Odin computer account you can access these databases at [www.lib.pdx.edu](http://www.lib.pdx.edu). For more on computer accounts, see [www.account.pdx.edu](http://www.account.pdx.edu) .)

Read the abstracts of articles published by people at PSU so you can see whose work interests you. Make office hour appointments with those people. Before your appointment leave a neatly typed note in each of their mailboxes: *Dear Professor Lastname, I have made an appointment to see you next week because I am seeking experience on a research project. . .* Attach your resume if you have a resume. When you come to the meeting, bring 2-4 names of other people (such as former professors) who can recommend your work. This is a lot to do for a volunteer job! But it's in your interest to convince the faculty you will save them more time than you'll cost them.

5. That last line bears repeating: When you work on a faculty member's projects, be sure that you *save them more time than you cost them*. This helps you to get a strong letter of reference later.
6. It's less common, but still a good idea, to get experience as an undergraduate teaching assistant. Identify a course you enjoyed and in which you received an "A" grade. Approach the faculty member in a way similar to the above. You might be able to help the faculty write test questions, screen videos, set up databases, or do literature searches. You can probably help the faculty quite a bit without necessarily lecturing in front of the classroom.

If you want to conduct research on teaching someday, consider using the methods described in item 4, above, to identify faculty who conduct research on teaching.

7. Graduate school itself is qualitatively different from undergraduate school. Talk to two or three current graduate students in your field of interest to learn what their experiences are like. Consider joining the local chapter of Psi Chi, the national honor society in Psychology, as a way to enhance your anticipatory socialization and to learn more about what psychologists do.
8. To what graduate programs should you apply? See books published by the American Psychological Association (APA) on graduate programs. Check the APA website, [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org), and the American Psychological Society's website, [www.psychologicalscience.org](http://www.psychologicalscience.org).
9. You want a maximal fit of interests between your graduate program and you. What research topics excite you? Use *PsychInfo* and the *Web of Science* to search literature on those topics. Find out the institutions at which those authors teach. Then find out what else those authors write and what else gets published by other faculty from the same institutions.
10.  The most common mistake people make when they apply to graduate schools is approaching their recommenders for letters on very short notice. I encourage you to request your letters at least two months before your earliest due date. The two-month period doesn't include summertime or the gaps between academic terms. For example, if you have a due date of January 1 and finals week ends December 7, put it on your calendar that you need to make your request by October 7. Approach recommenders later if you choose to be a risk taker, but realize that letters written on short notice could end up reflecting the fact they were written on short notice. So this is not just a matter of convenience for the recommenders--it's actually in your own interest to demonstrate that you can handle long-range planning.

Tell the professor when the nearest due date is and how many applications you plan to submit. You might say, "I would value your honest assessment. Before I ask you for a letter, in your professional judgment do you feel you can write me a strong letter?" It would be inappropriate to request a copy of the letter, so don't. But you can certainly ask whether the professor can write a strong letter.

If the answer is no, show your professionalism and thank your professor for his or her candor. If the answer is yes, get your recommendation forms all organized, envelopes typed, etc. Give the professor a draft of your personal statement and an unofficial copy of your complete transcript (for example, downloaded from your PSU record on the Internet). You might also submit a list of organizations and offices you've held on or off campus for your professor to consult in writing your letter. Make it easy for the

faculty member to comply with your request.

Waiting for letters can be a challenge. But as you'll find out if you go to grad school, faculty are very busy people. So if a deadline passes and a letter is late, you might find yourself feeling frustrated. Handle this by leaving polite reminder messages for the faculty, starting out "I know you're very busy. . ." Do this every 10 days after the deadline, until your letter is sent.

11. Prepare for the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) by taking practice tests. Get your GRE and any other standardized tests behind you by September or October. Some people choose to delay taking the GRE, but this doesn't allow them to re-take the test if they dislike their score the first time. Delaying the GRE sometimes results in a person needing to re-apply for graduate school in a later year.
12. Work on your personal statement. Get editorial help from the PSU Writing Center and see whether the Career Planning office can help too. Sometimes faculty members will give their on-the-spot impressions of a draft during office hours. At PSU, most Psychology faculty hold office hours every week.

In your statement discuss your research, teaching, and/or practicum experiences. Tell what interests you about the particular graduate program to which you are sending it. Mention any overlap between your interests and those of two or three specific program faculty. Say something about the research you want to do and what you hope you'll accomplish with your graduate degree. Of course this is looking into the future, and admissions committees realize this.

13. Why do you want to go to graduate school? It's helpful to know your own intentions.
14. When you've heard back from the graduate programs, regardless of the results, hand write follow-up notes to your recommenders expressing your general professional optimism. Thank them, let them know the outcome, and tell them your plans for the foreseeable future.
15. This one's hard to remember. . . but wherever you find yourself a couple of years after you finish your graduate degree, it's good follow-up to drop a postcard to your former faculty member. Let them know your current address and what you're doing.

*This is a lot to do. If you decide to apply to graduate programs, enjoy the process.*

