

Dr. Wendi Benson's Guide to Getting into Graduate School in Psychology

Graduate schools get many applications from high quality students with GOOD GRADES. Graduate school success is about way more than getting good grades! As an undergraduate, you are expected to absorb knowledge and grades are the primary gauge of your success. The GPA is what determines who is on the *Dean's List* and is often a major qualifier for scholarship and Honor Society eligibility. To achieve a good grade in most undergraduate courses you read a textbook and go to lectures, and are then expected to retain and recite the information back to your Professor in the form of tests and homework assignments. In graduate school, your success is gauged by more than grades; in fact, grades are only a tiny part of the yearly evaluations students receive from the graduate school.

Graduate school requires you to go beyond absorbing and reciting current knowledge, to generating knowledge about a particular topic area in your field of study. Classes are more discussion (rather than lecture) based; you are expected to read and understand the material prior to class so you will be able to ask informed questions and contribute to the class discussion. As a graduate student, your performance will be mainly evaluated based on your research productivity (e.g., taking an active part in your mentor's research lab, contributing to the conceptualization and implementation of new projects that advance current knowledge, and timely completion of a thesis and dissertation). In addition to generating knowledge, graduate students typically have the opportunity to communicate knowledge through teaching. You work as a Teaching Assistant at first, then once you receive your M.S. or M.A. you have your own classroom.

Given that graduate students are expected to produce research and teach for the university, most PhD students receive a full tuition waiver and a living stipend throughout their 4+ years in the program (usually around \$1000-\$2000 per month with benefits). Graduate students are an investment for the graduate school both financially and reputation-wise (they want high quality research to come from their university). As such, graduate schools are very picky when it comes to graduate school admissions. Graduate schools are looking for driven, conscientious, and passionate students; good grades alone are not enough proof of such qualities.

Graduate schools have a whole host of factors that are used to determine rather or not they should invest in you and good grades are often used only to set admission cutoffs.

In addition to getting good grades, make a positive impression on your professors by preparing before class, being engaged during class, and asking informed questions. This positive impression can open up opportunities for you if your Professor needs Research Assistants (RAs), Tutors or Course Assistants (CAs).

Curriculum Vitae (CV)

The CV is like a résumé, it is a summary of your knowledge, skills, experiences, and other characteristics that make you a qualified applicant for a specific position. The major focus of a résumé is typically on your past training and work experiences, relevant or not, often in chronological order. The major foci of a CV are educational background (including GPA, honors etc.), description of relevant experience (e.g., CA/RA experience, counseling/clinical experience, internships, etc.), awards and scholarships (e.g., travel grants, tuition waivers, academic scholarships, excellence awards from conference presentations, etc.), specialized skills (e.g., mastery of *SPSS*, *Microsoft Excel*, and *Microsoft Word*), professional service (e.g., volunteer work and service-related activities through clubs you are part of), professional affiliations (e.g., Psi Chi, the Society for Human Resource Management), publications/posters/presentations of your research (with APA style reference), and professional references (i.e., recommenders). To avoid missing anything in your CV, make one now and gradually add to it as you continue to do great things.

Psi Chi

NSC has a chapter of Psi Chi, a national honor society of psychology students. Psi Chi members have the opportunity to apply for funding to present research, network with other Psi Chi members, get involved with service, and receive honors chords at graduation. Most competitive graduate school applicants are members of Psi Chi, so membership strengthens your CV. You must at least be in the second semester of your Sophomore year and have a GPA of 3.5 GPA to [apply](#).

Extra-Curricular Activities and Service

Join a student organization like the Nevada State Society of Psychology (NSSP) and run for office. Holding office in a school affiliated organization shows that you are responsible and other students believe in your abilities (they voted for you after all). Membership in student organizations also provides opportunities to perform service to the school and the community, which strengthens your CV. Students interested in clinical or counseling psychology should try to get volunteer hours at the local crisis or counseling center or get involved in some form of community counseling activities. The PSY 497 (Field Experience in Psychology) course is an excellent way to get such experience! Be sure to complete this class before applying to graduate school, so you can include your experiences on your application!

Teaching

Many Professors are always looking for outstanding and trustworthy students to recruit as Tutors and Course Assistants for upcoming semesters. Working as a Course Assistant or Tutor for the Academic Success Center gives you experience mentoring students and strengthens your CV. If you are interested in such teaching opportunities, be sure to impress your Professors and express interest in becoming a Tutor or Course Assistant.

Research

If you want to be very strategic, look at faculty profiles of NSC professors to identify who is conducting research that interests you; contact them or take a class with them to establish rapport and ask them if they are looking for RA's. If you have no specific research interests, still get involved with research by asking Professors with whom you have a good relationship with if they need RA's. This is the best way to figure out if graduate school is right for you; participating in research is a "realistic job preview". Getting involved in ongoing research taking place at the college provides you with opportunities to develop research skills, work on projects, and present/publish research findings...all of which strengthen your CV! Plus you get course credit for working as a RA. The PSY 375 (Advanced Research Methods in Psychology) course requires you to conduct an empirical study and write a research manuscript. This research manuscript is an excellent piece of work to include with your application to graduate school. Your research manuscript will showcase your writing, research, and analytical skills and will set you apart from other applicants. Be sure to complete this class before applying to graduate school, so you can include your research manuscript with your application!

Letters of Recommendation

Most graduate schools require a minimum of three letters of recommendation as part of the application process. It is critical that you make a positive impression on Professors in the classroom and through teaching, research, and service. This is the only way that you will have strong letters of recommendation from faculty members who can attest to your scholastic aptitude, drive, and goodness of character. If you do not have 3 academic references, you can use a former boss or director whom you worked under. Just be sure that they have a lot of good things to say about your knowledge, skills, and abilities and that they have the ability to write a professional and convincing letter of recommendation for you.

Graduate Record Examination (GRE)

The GRE is the standard admissions test for most graduate schools. Most universities have a minimum cutoff for scores and applicants who do not meet that criteria are not considered. The GRE is challenging, but there are many resources available to help you get the highest score possible. Start studying and practicing early! You can take the GRE multiple times if you are not satisfied with your score (just be mindful that you must pay to take the test each time). Some universities only consider your highest score and some take the average of all scores, so take your first attempt seriously. Go to <http://www.ets.org/gre> for practice tests, prep materials, and registration details. Get the study guides at any bookstore!

Statement of Purpose (Personal Statement)

This is possibly the most difficult part of the graduate school application process. Each school asks for different information. In general, you will be required to write a 1-4 page letter to the university describing your research experience and interests, what your long-term goals are, why you want to attend the university (i.e., Are you a good fit?), and who you want to study with based on similarity of interests. It is important that you do your research on faculty members at the universities you apply to. Mention specific people you want to work with at the university and why you find their research interesting (see next section).

The statement of purpose is the only opportunity most of you will have to demonstrate your writing ability and convince the university's selection committee that you are a worthy investment. This document must be well written and free of any errors. Have many people review and critique your statements of purpose until they are perfect!

Find the Right Mentor

One of the most important things that must be conveyed to graduate programs in your statement of purpose is your passion for research, your specific research interests, and who you want to work with and why. This requires a bit of research on your part. Find programs that have a program you are interested in and look at the CV's for faculty members of that program. See what kinds of research faculty members are conducting and make sure it is relevant to your interest before wasting money, time, and effort on applying to a school that may not provide you with the opportunities you seek. If you find a faculty member who is doing research that is exciting to you (based on the publications listed on their vita), look up (on Psych Info) and read the abstracts for some of their published journal articles. Once you know a little bit about their work, contact them via email or telephone and tell them that you are interested in their research and ask if they are taking graduate students for the upcoming year. This keeps you from wasting your money, time, and effort on applying for a school with no openings and gives you a chance to interact with the person that you want to recruit you. Plus, if you have a specific faculty member mentioned in your personal statement, your application (if you meet the minimum requirements) will usually be forwarded directly to the faculty member you mentioned. By contacting faculty members directly you have a better chance of being recognized among the stack of applications.

Find the Right Graduate School

You must be a realist in your search for the right graduate school. Consider the strength of your application and look for schools with admissions requirements that you meet and with admissions ratios (# applicants/# accepted) that are reasonable. Also make sure that the university has adequate funding and a competitive living stipend that is guaranteed to students. Not all PhD programs are fully funded and very few M.S./M.A. and PsyD programs are. A great resource for all the above mentioned information is the [American Psychological Associations 2014 Graduate Study in Psychology](#) handbook (less than \$25 on amazon.com)

which includes:

- number of applications received and accepted by a program
- dates for applications and admission/types of information required for an application
- in-state and out-of-state tuition costs/availability of assistantships, stipends, and scholarships
- employment information of graduates
- GRE and GPA requirements
- and much more

Save Money to Apply

Graduate schools get hundreds of applications and usually accept less than 10 into each program each year. Given the odds of getting it, it behooves you to apply to multiple schools (at least 5). Each school requires an application fee, copies of your GRE scores, and transcripts which cost quite a bit of money. I spent about \$600 applying to 6 schools in 2008.

Start Now!

Most graduate school application deadlines are in mid-December and applications are typically only accepted once a year for the fall term. If you want to have an impressive vita (by getting involved in long-term research and teaching opportunities), study and take the GREs, and figure out where to apply before the deadline...you must START NOW!