

HOW TO APPLY TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

By Linda J. Hayes and Steven C. Hayes

Admission into graduate programs in psychology can be quite competitive. High quality programs are, of course, more competitive than lower quality programs; in general doctoral programs are more difficult to get in than master's programs. Usually applied programs more difficult to get in than basic programs.

The primary determinant of success in applying for graduate school is the quality of your background and abilities. But these qualities are not assessed magically. They are evaluated on the basis of a limited number of kinds of information. The purpose of this article is to review those kinds of information for the purpose of understanding the process.

Assembling a Competitive Application

Graduate Record Exam and Other Admission Tests

Most graduate admissions committees require the GRE, and a few still require the MAT. These scores will often be interpreted as a measure of the student's general intellectual ability and likelihood of success in graduate school. Thus, it is wise to obtain the best scores you possibly can.

Some believe that it is impossible to study for these exams, but it is not true. For example, if you haven't taken a mathematics course in some time, review of this material can be quite helpful. If you are unsure how to take tests of this type,

examination of one of the many books on the market about the GREs may help. Students have been known to pull up their scores greatly through careful preparation.

The GREs can be taken more than once, so it is wise to take the test earlier rather than later. That way if you do not do well due to illness or lack of preparation, you can try again.

There is another reason to take the test early: to be sure that your scores are available by the admission deadline. Incomplete applications are not usually considered, and when they are, the fact that they are incomplete reflects poorly on the candidate. If you can, take the GREs in October. If you take the December test you could be cutting it close. If you have to take the December test, follow up with the graduate schools right before their deadline and make sure they have received it.

This rule on timeliness applies to all parts of the application. If the candidate couldn't manage to get their admission materials together on time, will they be late with class assignments as well? Are they generally disorganized? Are they careless?

Grades

Your grades reflect your standing among your peers. Obviously, grades are important and no good student needs to be reminded of that. AS it applies to admission into graduate school, what students sometimes do need to be told is that it is wrong to assume that good grades are enough.

There are too many students with good grades out there interested in graduate training. You will need other qualifications to distinguish yourself.

Letter of Intent/Statement of Interest/Autobiographical Statement

Most applications ask for a statement of interest. This is sometimes called an “autobiographical statement.” The request for an autobiographical statement is often misunderstood by student applicants. Students who take the request literally harm their application by appearing to be unsophisticated and naïve. It is sadly not uncommon to see such statements begin with “I was born in a small town in the midwest....”

What is being requested is: 1) statement of your interests in psychology and how you came to have those interests, and 2) what your goals and ambitions in the field of psychology are, and 3) how the program to which you are applying can help you to achieve those goals.

With respect to your interests and how you came to have those interests, some words of advice: While it may seem to you that the reason you are interested in psychology is that you want to help people, this reason has become a terrible cliché and should be avoided. The problem is that it adds little information. Can you imagine anyone saying that they want to get into a field in order to hurt people? Particularly in applied fields, of course, helping people is an obvious motivation, but it would be better to be specific. Perhaps there is some particular kind of human problem that evokes your desire to be helpful — maybe you are particularly interested in helping emotionally disturbed children, or possibly the aged, or the disabled. In addition, this will allow you to couple your emotional motivation with the serious intellectual interests you may have.

Secondly, in describing your interests in psychology and how you came to have them, try to focus on particular educational and occupational experiences you have had that could account for your interests, rather than personal experiences. For example, it is probably unwise to say that you are interested in the neural basis of depression because you want to find out why your father became depressed and had to be admitted to a mental hospital. Such personal experiences are difficult to put into a short written statement without either trivializing them or needlessly confining your intellectual interests to emotional motivation. It helps to think of your audience. Who will read this

statement? It will be read by academic psychologists who have dedicated their career to scholarly endeavors. Scholars rightly distrust too much personal motivation entering into science because it can lead to a distortion of the scientific process. They are looking for the kind of motivation they themselves either have or wish they would have — an intrinsic and serious interest in the substance of the issues dealt with. Try to share experiences that reflect on that part of your reasons for seeking graduate level training. If you cannot find such reasons, perhaps now is a good time to think about whether a career in sciences is for you.

As for your goals and ambitions, you should try to be as specific as possible. When candidates are asked: why do you want to go to graduate school or what are you interested in doing in this program? A common reply is “I just want to learn — I want to study a bit of everything — and then I’ll decide on my career.” This can be taken to mean that you don’t know how you want to go to graduate school and that you have no idea what you are interested in studying. You should try to be more specific, while at the same time showing an openness to learning new things. Too much specification suggests that you do not plan to benefit from what you may learn in graduate school about the discipline and various career choices. Position yourself between these poles. You can, for example, state your current interests in the field. You will not be held to these interests. It is assumed that your interest will be shaped in graduate school. On the other hand, keep in mind that ill-defined goals suggest that you haven’t thought much about the future. It can suggest that you don’t care much about the future, or that you aren’t very ambitious.

It is wise to apply to schools that have faculty with interests that fit with your own. Do your homework. Go to the library and look up the publications of the faculty. Decide whether this kind of work is what you want to do.

Many schools admit students into specific labs. That is, each faculty member will admit x number of students. In this case, the goodness of fit between your interests and

your mentor-to-be is crucial. You should know that person's research program. If it fits what you want, say so, but do so after you have carefully researched the matter or you will inevitably appear unsophisticated or even manipulative.

Other things that may go in your statement of interests are research, applied and professional experiences and relevant skills such as computing skills.

Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are extremely important. They can help you and they can hurt you. The most helpful letters come from teachers who have had considerable contact with you, especially in non-classroom settings such as research labs. A letter from a teacher who says he or she can't remember who you are exactly but you got an A so you must be quite bright is not helpful. After all, information about coursework per se is available on your transcript — the letter adds nothing and may in fact subtract something; it suggests that you haven't had sufficient contact with your teachers to have secured a more informative recommendation. What does this mean to committees? Maybe it means that you are an extremely timid person, the kind who disappears into the background, does well on tests but says nothing in class, for example.

The best kind of letter is from someone who has been involved with you professionally — who has supervised research on your part, who has co-authored a paper with you, who has served as an adviser to you in your role as an officer in Psi Chi, and so on. However, if you want to have a really fine letter of recommendation, you have to have done some really fine things, such as conducting quality research or making presentations to professional meetings. You have to have been involved in the discipline of psychology than that if you expect to get a really good letter of recommendation.

A letter from an employer can be useful if the job was in the field of psychology, and the letter comments on your accomplishments of specific duties, your aptitude for this type of work and so on. Otherwise, such letters are usually not helpful. Also, don't include letters from public officials or professionals with whom your contacts have not been of a professional sort. What the mayor has to say about you is of no interest to admissions committees. It may even do you a disservice. It suggests that you believe that you ought to be looked upon more favorably because you have some contact with important public officials. This will probably be offensive to most academics. Likewise, don't get your priest or rabbi or minister, your family doctor or other individuals of that kind to write a letter in your behalf. Last but not least, don't ask your personal therapist to send a letter.

Include a Vita

It is a good idea to include a carefully assembled vita even if some of the material is redundant with the application itself. A vita is something you should begin now, if you haven't already done so. If you do not know how to construct one, you can write to authors of this article for a copy of an article on that topic.

Presenting Your Materials Appropriately

All of your communications should be typed. Don't send anything handwritten. You should be certain that your letters are grammatically correct and that they contain no misspelled words and no colloquialisms. Have someone else read your letters if necessary.

If you visit the program (see below) look presentable. Parties sometimes happen on interviews. Don't drink too much. Don't flirt too much with members of the opposite sex. Don't talk much about unrelated leisure time activities. Don't gossip. Don't follow up on remarks made from one office to the next (e.g., "that can't be right. Dr. So-and-so

said you never did research.”) Don’t assume you are not evaluated just because the setting is informal. For example, do not assume that your interactions with students at the program are “off the record.” They probably are not.

FINDING THE RIGHT PROGRAM

Putting together a competitive application through careful preparation is one thing. Applying to the right program is something else. In the “one down” situation most undergraduate students feel they are in, it is easy to get into an “anybody take me, I will go” type of attitude. Such an attitude, if taken to the extreme, is dangerous. You have to be happy with your education. It has to fit with your values, abilities, and interests. It is wise to make sure you are applying to the right program.

Try to be clear with yourself about what you’re looking for. What sort of career do you want to have? In what area of psychology? What graduate programs offer training in this area? What theoretical orientation do you have? Are you a behaviorist? Are you a cognitivist? Which programs have such an orientation? Whose work have you found most agreeable? Where does this person work?

Once you are clear, examine programs that fit in terms of sub-disciplinary area. The APA book on graduate training in psychology is a good place to start. Write for the catalogs of as many programs as seem in the ballpark. Ask your professors about possible programs. If you have come across researchers in your area of interest who interest you, get the materials from their programs. Don’t write to faculty members asking for a catalog and admission materials. Write to the department.

As you narrow down the list you may find particular people who stand out. Should you contact them directly? If you have a specific interest in their work, it is fine to do so, but only after you have done your homework. It is reasonable to request reprints of articles. It is reasonable to comment on how much you enjoyed or gained

from reading something this person has written, although don't overdo it. It is also reasonable to ask an intelligent question arising from something this person has said or written. This is especially good if you know what you are talking about. It is not wise to make a point of telling someone just exactly what you think is wrong with their theory, their method, etc. on the grounds that they will then be convinced of your superior intelligence. Most academics are pleased to have others interested in their work. Be respectful.

If you want to explore the possibility of working with them, say so. You might ask if they are accepting students into their lab (sometimes the answer is no due to upcoming leaves or other reasons). If you know you are very serious and your qualifications are reasonable, you might ask if it is possible to visit. Not all academics will grant such visits because they can be time consuming, but it will not offend to inquire. Some programs (especially applied programs) have a policy of inviting applicants for interviews as a part of their admissions procedures. If they wish to interview you, you will be invited. In this case, if you are not invited, you will not be welcome to visit.

If you begin to center on some programs, do not forget that other students can be a valuable source of information. Sometimes it is easier to talk informally to a student in the program you are interested in and get a clearer view of what it is like.

When you have your list, put together your application carefully. How many programs should you apply to? It is not uncommon for applied students interested in Ph.D. training to apply to 10-12, including one or two "fall backs" (e.g., MA programs). Basic students usually would apply to smaller numbers.

What do you do if after all of this, no one admits you? If you are committed to further training it makes sense to try again. Examine the reasons why you were not competitive. Was it a bad letter? Poor GREs? Lack of experience? Did you apply to

too few programs? Try to correct these problems. If you are graduating, try to see if you can get a psychology related job. You may be able to take a few graduate courses at your local University on a non-degree basis just to keep your hand in and to show your commitment and ability. It is not unusual to find well-known psychologists who did not get in their first time around.

Good luck.

Single copies of this article are available from Linda J. or Stevens C. Hayes,
Department of Psychology, University of Nevada, Reno, NV 89557-0062