

A Student's Perspective on Applying to Graduate School in (Clinical) Psychology: A Step-by-Step Guide

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This document is meant to serve as an informal step-by-step guide for applying to graduate school in psychology, with a particular focus on clinical psychology Ph.D. programs. I have written this guide in response to questions from students who have applied to graduate programs in recent years. These tips, thoughts, and guidelines reflect only my opinions, based on my personal experiences of applying to graduate school (in 2008-2009), conversations with others who have recently been through the process, and participating in two UNC admissions cycles as a graduate student. My own experiences are with applying to clinical psychology Ph.D. programs, and as such, this guide is especially geared to those interested in clinical psychology. I do not know how much of the advice in this guide will translate to non-clinical programs, but some of the information provided may be useful for students interested in applying to other types of programs. This document is meant to serve as a friendly reference guide, offering tips about the application process from the perspective of a graduate student. This guide is certainly *not* meant to replace more formal resources or advice from faculty members. Also, please note that admissions procedures and requirements may have changed since the drafting of this guide. I hope that this guide will help you to organize your time and materials during the application process, avoid some of the common pitfalls, and provide you with answers to some of the most frequently asked questions. Thank you to all the undergraduates and recent college graduates who shared their questions and thoughts about the application process with me. Special thanks to Mitch Prinstein, Casey Calhoun, Karen Guan, Caitlin Williams, and Natalie Kretsch for their help with this document!

First, some excellent resources to help you with the application process:

- *Mitch's Uncensored Advice for Applying to Graduate School in Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, written by Mitch Prinstein, Professor of Psychology and Director of Clinical Training at UNC – Chapel Hill (and my advisor)
 - Go to <http://www.unc.edu/~mjp1970/Mitch's%20Grad%20School%20Advice.pdf> or Google “Mitch’s guide to grad school” to find this document.
 - Thousands of grad student applicants, including myself, have benefited greatly from Mitch’s guide! The guide includes extremely helpful information and advice about the differences between child-oriented fields (e.g., psychology vs. psychiatry, counseling psychology vs. clinical psychology) and degrees (e.g., Ph.D. vs. Psy.D. vs. Master’s), the experiences and qualifications that will help you get into grad school (e.g., GPA, GRE, personal statement, research experience), career options for psychologists (e.g., research, teaching, clinical work), and many more topics. (In several sections of this document I will refer to Mitch’s guide.)
- *I Just Got an Interview for a Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program. What do I do?!*, written by Mitch Prinstein
 - <http://www.unc.edu/~mjp1970/I%20Just%20Got%20an%20Interview%20for%20a%20Clinical%20Psychology%20Doctoral%20Program.pdf>
 - This is Mitch’s second guide, from 2010, focusing on interviewing at clinical psychology Ph.D. programs. (In several sections of this document I will also refer to Mitch’s interviewing guide.)

- *Before You Apply to Graduate Programs in Psychology: Knowing When You're Ready and Gaining Post-Baccalaureate Experiences*, written by Casey Calhoun (graduate student at UNC)
 - <http://www.unc.edu/~mjp1970/BeforeYouApply.pdf>
 - This guide, written by one of Mitch Prinstein's graduate students, provides invaluable information and insights about the options available for obtaining "post-bacc" research experiences that will help you to explore, test, and refine your research interests as you prepare for graduate school. (In several sections of this document I will refer to Casey's guide.)
- Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology.
 - http://www.amazon.com/Insiders-Graduate-Programs-Counseling-Psychology/dp/1609189329/ref=dp_ob_title_bk
 - The link above will take you to the 2012/2013 edition of the book. I used an older version. It was very helpful but you should seek information from other sources as well.
- The American Psychological Association's comments on careers in psychology:
 - <http://www.apa.org/careers/resources/guides/careers.aspx>
- A permanent link to this document can be found here:
 - <http://www.unc.edu/~mjp1970/TipsForApplyingToGradSchool.pdf>

A Guide to the Steps of Applying to Graduate School in Psychology

Thoughts on how much time (if any) to take off between college and graduate school:

This is something I am frequently asked: Is it a good idea to take time off between college and grad school? Many current graduate students who took time off between college and graduate school report that the experience was extremely beneficial. Casey Calhoun's guide, *Before You Apply*, provides extensive information and insights about how best to maximize your time between college and graduate school. Below are some of the benefits I see to taking at least one year off (not necessarily in order of importance).

- Being a graduate student is a very different experience from being an undergraduate student, and for many people it can be difficult to make this transition with only a summer in between. Graduate school in psychology is not about studying well for tests and maintaining a high GPA. In grad school, you will be working with professors as colleagues. You will likely be responsible for organizing and running large projects. You will be expected to balance these duties with your coursework. You will be expected to actively participate in most of your classes, some of which may have only a handful of students. If you are entering a clinical or counseling Ph.D. program or a Psy.D. program, you will likely begin working as a therapist with real clients very early in your graduate training (possibly within the first year). I'm glad I had time in between college and grad school to learn to think of myself as a "real adult," not a student. It was also nice to have some time off simply to avoid "burn-out" – it's hard for me to imagine spending more than 20 years in school without a break! I have heard many people echo these thoughts.
- I think it would be challenging to apply to grad school while balancing college coursework and a senior honors thesis. It was much easier for me to apply while working a 40-hour-per-week job (spending my evenings studying for the GRE, writing personal statements, etc.), than it would have been to apply during my senior year of college. However, many people have successfully balanced their senior year work with their grad school applications.
- Many grad school advisors prefer to see that applicants have had a lot of research experience, and working in a psychology lab after college is an excellent way to gain this experience. (In my year in between college and grad school, I worked at an education nonprofit instead of a psychology lab, but I had three years of

active involvement in psychology labs as an undergrad.) Working in a lab after college may be necessary for admission to a top clinical psychology program if you received little research training as an undergrad.

- Additionally, working in a psychology lab or a related organization after college can help you refine your research interests, figure out what you want to study in grad school, and figure out which type of grad program might be best for you.
- Furthermore, obtaining post-bacc research experiences can allow you to further develop your scientific knowledge, which can increase your ability to eloquently discuss your research ideas during grad school interviews.
- Along those lines, I liked being able to discuss my completed honors thesis in my personal statements and interviews; if I had applied to grad school during my senior year of college, I wouldn't have been able to talk as comfortably about my research findings or about what I had learned from the research process.
- I was able to save up some money while working during my year off, and those savings are very helpful now that I'm in grad school!

All this said, for some people it makes more sense to go straight through from college to grad school. The following are some of the reasons to consider applying for graduate school during your senior year of college:

- Some people don't want to lose momentum: They're all fired up and ready to head to graduate school and they don't have an interest in taking time off in between.
- If you apply to grad school while still in college, you will be able to consult professors and graduate students in person as you decide which schools to apply to, work on your personal statements, and complete your applications.
- You will also be able to distribute materials for letters of recommendation in person, pick up transcripts in person, visit the Writing Center (if your college has one) for help with your personal statement, and have access to all the resources a college campus offers.
- It is easier to defer student loans if you remain a fulltime student without a break in between.
- Trying to find a psychology-related job for the year or two in between college and grad school may be difficult. (Casey's guide provides excellent information about how to pursue post-bacc job opportunities.)
- If you go straight through from college to graduate school, you will finish grad school earlier; if you graduate from college at age 22, you could in theory have your Ph.D. by age 26. This is very appealing to many people.

So, if the summer before your senior year of college, you (A) feel you are ready to apply to graduate school, (B) you know what type of graduate program(s) you want to apply to, (C) you know which schools and specific advisors (if applicable) you want to apply to, AND (D) you have a plan in place for how to study for and take the GRE (and psychology GRE, if applicable), whom to ask for letters of recommendation, and when/how you are going to write your personal statements and submit your applications ... then applying during the fall of your senior year may be a good choice for you. Otherwise, it might make more sense to spend your senior year focusing on your undergraduate research and your GPA. You can consider applying to post-bacc jobs that will allow you to gain additional research experience and refine your interests during your time between college and grad school. (See Casey's guide for more information.) If you're really organized, you can take the GRE and/or the Psychology GRE during your senior year, or at least start studying (I'll comment on this in detail later).

A few final thoughts about when to apply:

- Some people who can't decide whether to apply now or in a year decide to apply to just a few schools; they submit applications to some of their top choice schools to see what will happen. This isn't necessarily a bad idea and it can teach you a great deal, but keep in mind that submitting even just a few applications will be time- and energy-consuming. Also, if you are accepted, it may be tempting to commit to the program rather than taking the time to further assess whether the program is a good fit for your interests and career goals.
- Unlike with college admissions, I have never heard of someone "deferring" an acceptance to a Ph.D. program; in most cases you are applying to work with a professor who wants to take a student right now, often for a specific project, so they are unlikely to be willing to let you wait a year to enroll (except, perhaps, due to special circumstances).
- If you're thinking of entering a Ph.D. or Psy.D. program, DO NOT go straight through from college to grad school "just to get it done." In the big scheme of your life, it probably won't matter if you get your doctoral degree at age 28 or age 30, and you will likely not be a happy grad student if you try to barrel through grad school for four to seven years with the goal of just *finishing*. Grad school can be a wonderful experience when you're ready for it. I personally am very happy in grad school. But it's definitely a lot of work and a big adjustment, and I'm grateful to have taken a year off in between college and grad school, so that I entered grad school ready and excited for what lay ahead of me.

Now that I've offered my thoughts on *when* to apply, the next obvious question is *how* to apply. I have broken the application process into 13 steps, and for each step, I offer a suggested timeline. After I provide you with an overview of the steps, I'll go through each of the steps in great detail.

Overview of Suggested Steps for Applying to Graduate School in Clinical Psychology		
	Action	My Suggested Timeline
Step 1	Decide on the types of programs you want to apply to	By August of the year you are applying
Step 2	Make your list of specific schools and advisors	Complete your final list by September
Step 3	A. Prepare for and take the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) B. Prepare for and take the Psychology Subject Test GRE	A. General GRE: Offered many days of the year. Take it as early as possible (ideally by the summer). B. Psychology GRE (if applicable): Offered in April, Oct., Nov. Take as early as possible (ideally in April).
Step 4	Develop an organizational system	September
Step 5	Possibly contact potential advisors	Sept., Oct., possibly early Nov.
Step 6	Ask people to write your letters of recommendation	Distribute materials by early October
Step 7	Order your transcripts	Check your college's Registrar's policy
Step 8	Write your personal statements	September, October, November
Step 9	Make sure to review and complete all program requirements; submit all materials	September, October, November, and December
Step 10	Interview offers come in	Generally January, February, early March
Step 11	Go to interviews	Generally late Jan., Feb., and March
Step 12	Hear from schools after interviews	Generally February, March, April
Step 13	Make your decision!	March or April

And now we will discuss each of these steps in detail:

Step 1: Decide on the types of programs you want to apply to

My suggested timeline: It's never too early to start! You should know this by August of the year you want to apply. If you don't know it by then, you may not be ready to commit to a specific type of grad school at this point.

If you know you want to go into a field related to mental health, the choices may seem endless: Psychiatry (med school/MD), social work (Master's in Social Work/MSW), or psychology? If psychology: Doctoral program or terminal Master's program (i.e., a Master's degree program that is not embedded within a Doctoral program)? If Doctoral program: Ph.D. or Psy.D.? If Ph.D: Clinical psychology, counseling psychology, school psychology, developmental psychology, social psychology, cognitive psychology, industrial organizational psychology, behavioral neuroscience, or something else? If Clinical psychology: Adult clinical, child clinical, or health track?

Mitch's guide to applying to grad school has a lot of fantastic information about the different types of programs, which will be very helpful as you think about which program is the best match for your interests and career goals. I will not offer a thorough review of all possible options here. Instead, I will offer some points to consider, which have come up in my discussions with people who have applied to grad school in psychology and other mental health fields over the past few years.

Some thoughts about how to choose the types of graduate programs to apply to:

- Pick the type of program that best fits your research/clinical interests and career goals.
- If you have any interest in a career that involves research and/or teaching, Ph.D. programs are generally a better bet than Psy.D. programs. Ph.D. programs generally offer stronger research training and are almost always fully funded (whereas you will usually have to pay your own way in a Psy.D. program).
- If you have any interest in research, you have a good enough GPA to get into a Ph.D. program, and the idea of five-plus years of grad school doesn't terrify you, I suggest you pursue Ph.D. programs rather than terminal Master's programs. A Ph.D. degree will give you far more career options than a Master's; you are far more likely to receive funding for Ph.D. programs; and in many Ph.D. programs, you get your Master's degree along the way.
- That said, students who are less interested in research and wish to pursue a more applied career may find programs in counseling to be a better fit. Such programs are generally housed in the School of Education and are generally referred to as "Counselor Education" programs. Though I have limited knowledge about such programs, a friend of mine is currently enrolled in a Clinical Mental Health Counseling program and is extremely happy with her training and career options. Each state has their own rules and licensure requirements (which you should explore further if interested), but generally speaking, graduates from these programs who obtain licensure often have psychotherapy privileges that are similar to those of psychologists (but licensed Master's-level counselors will likely earn less money per hour than licensed doctoral-level psychologists). Licensed counselors are commonly referred to as Licensed Mental Health Counselors (LMHCs) or Licensed Clinical Practitioners (LPCs), though these titles may differ by state.
- If you have any interest in clinical work (i.e., therapy or assessment), keep in mind that of the Ph.D. programs in psychology, only clinical psychology, counseling psychology, and school psychology will offer you thorough training in clinical work (the specific type of clinical training varies across these three types of programs). Developmental psychology programs may offer you experience in prevention-based research, but you cannot get licensure as a practicing clinician if you come from a developmental, social, cognitive, or experimental psychology Ph.D. program (among others). If you

want to pursue a Ph.D. and you picture yourself opening a private practice one day (or working with clients in any other capacity), then clinical, counseling, or school psychology Ph.D. programs are probably the best options for you. If you go to a research-only Ph.D. program and later decide you want to be a clinician, you will have to pay for and spend several additional years in a “respecialization” program. Ph.D. programs other than clinical, school, and counseling fall under this “research-only” category.

- If you are interested in research and/or clinical work with children and adolescents, you should consider a program that offers a “child track,” and/or training in working with child clients and families, and/or coursework emphasizing developmental models of psychopathology and health. Most clinical child psychology internship programs require you to have studied child psychology and worked with child clients in graduate school. (All clinical psychology Ph.D. students are required to complete a year-long internship in a clinical setting after completing their university-based work, prior to earning the Ph.D.)
- If you are interested in *both* clinical work and research, I strongly recommend the clinical psychology Ph.D. On the other hand, if you have *no* interest in being trained as a clinician, it may not be worth it to go through hundreds of hours of clinical training during graduate school plus an internship year; a research-only program may be a better match for you. Similarly, if you have absolutely no interest in conducting research, a program devoted solely to clinical training may be a better match for you.

This is a decision only you can make, but the best thing to do is talk to people! Set up a time to talk to a professor or a current graduate student. Read about the various options available. Mitch’s guide offers descriptions of many of the degree options you may be interested in. Casey’s guide offers advice about how to gain research and clinical experiences that may help you to test and refine your interests prior to applying to grad school.

Can I apply to more than one type of program?

Yes. You are definitely “allowed” to mix and match the types of programs you apply to.

Because admissions rates are extremely low for clinical psychology Ph.D. programs, it may be a good idea to also apply to other types of programs that are similar in training. For example, you may want to do this if a clinical psychology Ph.D. program is your first choice but your grades and scores are “borderline” according to the admissions stats posted on program websites, or if you are not sure your research background is strong enough. Many applicants who know they are interested in both clinical work and research apply to a combination of clinical psychology Ph.D. programs, terminal Master’s clinical psychology programs, counseling psychology Ph.D. programs, and Psy.D. programs.

Another reason to apply to a variety of programs might be that you have a specific research interest that fits into different types of programs. For example, a student who is interested in health risk behaviors among adolescents could consider programs in clinical psychology, pediatric psychology, developmental psychology, or public health.

If you are applying to different types of programs because you are still unsure of what your interests and/or career goals are, you may want to wait a year before launching into the grad school application process. The process will be much more overwhelming if you begin it unsure of how much you are actually interested in attending the programs you are applying to. You should not apply until you have some sense of whether you are most interested in research or clinical work or both, until you have some idea of the research areas that interest you most, and until you are so excited about the programs you are applying to that you can’t *wait* for the spring to arrive so you can interview and choose a program!

How do I know whether my application will be strong enough to be admitted into a clinical psychology Ph.D. program?

Clinical psychology programs usually have acceptance rates between 1 and 10%. However, if you are a strong applicant, your chances of receiving an *interview* are much higher than 1-10%, and once you are offered an interview, your chances are significantly higher than 1-10% – most programs will offer interviews to approximately three to six applicants for every one admissions slot available (this is discussed in Mitch’s interviewing guide).

What does it take to gain admittance to a clinical psychology Ph.D. program? These programs are looking for strong GRE scores and GPA (which will be considered in the context of the quality of your undergraduate institution). Very importantly, they are looking for applicants with strong research backgrounds in psychology. If you did not major in psychology, you will almost surely need to gain research experience in a psychology lab before applying. If you wrote a psychology undergraduate honors thesis and/or were actively involved in a psychology lab as an undergraduate, this level of experience may be sufficient to gain admittance. Clinical experience is not required. Letters of recommendation are extremely important, and a letter with any negative comments or less-than-enthusiastic praise (“faint praise”) will seriously hurt an application. Personal statements are also very important. Finally, the research match between you and your potential advisor is carefully assessed.

In most cases, your potential advisor is the person who will ultimately decide whether or not to offer you an interview. If he/she is reading your personal statement, this most likely means that you made it through the first “hurdle” in which GRE scores and GPA are reviewed to assess basic qualifications for graduate school. My understanding is that most clinical psychology programs are looking for GRE scores of at least 1200 (on the old scoring scale) and GPAs of at least 3.5, but exceptions may be made if English isn’t your first language, if you went to an excellent college and your GPA is lower than 3.5 due to exceptionally difficult courses falling outside of psychology (e.g., pre-med courses), or if you have gained impressive research experience and have strong letters of recommendation from highly reputable researchers. Some programs’ websites provide “cutoffs” for scores and grades, but if you feel that your GPA or GRE scores are your only weakness, this shouldn’t prevent you from submitting an application. When a potential advisor is reading your personal statement, he/she is likely looking for (a) strong writing skills, (b) clear thinking and organization of your ideas, (c) an ability to clearly describe your background in psychology and how your research interests have developed, and (d) whether you will be a good fit for his/her lab. You are unlikely to be offered an interview if you aren’t able to clearly explain how your research background and interests have led you to apply to work in this specific lab. That point leads us to the next section, on how to choose specific schools and advisors.

Step 2: Make your list of specific schools and advisors

My suggested timeline: Work on your list during the summer preceding application season. You should ideally have a final list by September.

For many graduate programs in psychology, you will be working with a primary research advisor, becoming immersed in various projects in his/her lab. This is the case for virtually all clinical psychology Ph.D. programs. In most cases, the match between you and your advisor is even more important than the characteristics of the overall program. It is important that this person’s research excites you, because you will be working with him/her on that research for four to six years! Keep in mind that if you don’t have research experience in a potential advisor’s area of expertise prior to applying, you will need to be able to explain clearly in your personal statement how your interests have led you to apply to work with this person and why you think you are a good match for the lab.

Some thoughts about weighing program characteristics vs. advisor characteristics vs. location/quality-of-life factors:

As you look for grad schools, try to prioritize the research match between you and the professor(s) there and the quality of their research. Try to weight these research factors more heavily than the “name” of the school (often the best psychology programs are *not* at the schools you’d expect based on undergraduate reputation) or the appeal of the location. I can’t repeat this enough: You will be working closely with your advisor for several years. You want to work with someone whose research you love, someone who prioritizes his/her graduate students, and ideally someone you get along with – but you probably won’t get a sense of a potential advisor’s personality and mentoring style until you go for an interview.

You can learn a lot about a potential advisor through online searches. Here are some specific things to look for while deciding whether to apply to work with a psychology professor:

- How many publications does he/she have?
- Are the publications in good journals? (You can ask a grad student or professor for help in determining this.)
- Are the grad students in this person’s lab also authors on the publications?
- Is this person an assistant, associate, or full professor? (People differ in their opinions about whether it’s better to work with a young professor or a tenured professor. Assistant professors need to produce high-quality research and high-quality publications in order to make tenure, which will likely have benefits for their graduate students’ productivity and CVs. On the other hand, assistant professors are less likely to have job stability and connections in the field than tenured professors, and they may have less energy to focus on their graduate students’ careers, as compared to tenured professors who are no longer struggling to build their own careers and reputations. However, yet another factor to consider is that very senior faculty members may not be as actively involved in new research projects as professors earlier in their careers.)

When creating your school list, you should keep all of the above in mind, but I recommend that you place the greatest weight on the research match between you and your potential advisor, and on the general sense you get of the quality of the person’s research, their reputation, and (for newer professors) their potential. When considering the research match between you and a potential advisor, you can learn a great deal about their research interests by searching for their journal articles on PsycInfo or Google Scholar. However, it’s also important to try to determine what potential advisors are *currently* studying, because often several years will elapse between when someone conducts research and when a journal article with the results is published. The professor’s current research interests and projects may appear on their website, or you can email them to express your interest in their work and to ask what they are currently studying (later I will say more about whether to email potential advisors).

In addition to your specific advisor, the quality of the overall program is also extremely important. Important characteristics to consider in choosing a program are its reputation in the field (your undergraduate psychology advisor or another psychology faculty member is probably the best person to talk to about this; program rankings only provide a ballpark idea), the strength of the research training, and (if applicable) the strength of the clinical training. Additionally, when you interview at schools, it is important to pay attention to the culture of the program and the department – for example, whether the graduate students seem happy, whether faculty and students seem collaborative or competitive with each other, and overall whether you get a positive “vibe.”

Quality of life in grad school is important, and I personally recommend that you not apply to a school if thinking about living there makes you shudder. Some people may tell you to disregard location in making your decision, because the research match and quality of the program are far more important. I have mixed feelings about this. Although I feel you shouldn’t choose a program based *solely* on its location or other non-academic factors, I do think it’s important to consider your happiness outside of school as you weigh various factors. I personally

believe that life is too short to spend four to six years being miserable in graduate school. I also believe that for me, and for many people I know, having a high quality of life (as I do in Chapel Hill) leads to greater grad school productivity!

However, the *most* important thing for grad school, in my opinion, is to be at a good program with sound training, working with an advisor whose research interests match yours and with whom you have a good relationship. If you end up somewhere that doesn't meet these criteria, you are unlikely to have a good grad school experience. For me personally, having a good relationship with my advisor and feeling passionate about the research we are doing have been the most significant factors in why I am having such a positive experience in grad school.

So, how do you even begin looking for these schools?

To find specific schools and advisors, you can try the following search methods:

- You can ask psychology faculty members at your undergraduate college for the names of the best researchers in your field/areas of interest.
- You can do PsycInfo and Google Scholar searches for your areas of interest, then search for the article authors to see which universities they teach at and the types of programs they are affiliated with (e.g., clinical, developmental).
- Although rankings of graduate programs should be taken with a grain of salt, they can give you a ballpark idea of the top programs. You can use the U.S. News and World Report rankings as a jumping off point for finding programs you might want to consider. (Note that clinical psychology is listed under the Health programs category, while other psychology Ph.D. programs are listed under Psychology.) The ranking lists contain links to the schools' program websites, and you can follow these links to read about the programs and faculty members. On most program websites, you can see brief summaries of faculty members' research interests, and many websites include links to faculty members' own webpages.

If you are looking at clinical psychology Ph.D. programs, pay attention to the program statistics posted on their websites. All APA-accredited psychology doctoral programs (i.e., clinical, counseling, and school psychology only) are required to report statistics such as average GRE scores and GPAs, acceptance rates, and average time it takes students to get through the program. Be wary of programs that do not have a high completion rate; it may be a bad sign if many students are not finishing the program. Also, a less-understood but very informative statistic is the match rate – the percentage of students who were placed in one of their top-choice internship sites after completing their coursework and dissertation. Most top quality programs have average match rates (across five years) of at least 75%.

As you find programs and specific faculty members that interest you, I recommend that you keep track of the information in an Excel spreadsheet or Word document. As you refine your list, you can delete the schools that you no longer plan to apply to.

Step 3: Graduate Record Exam (GRE) and Psychology Subject Test GRE

Please note: The General GRE has changed significantly since I took the test in October 2008. I have absolutely no experience with the new format of the GRE, nor do I have knowledge about the new scoring system and how grad schools will adjust to the new system as they compare applicants. Please keep these points in mind as you read my advice about preparing for the GRE and reporting scores to schools; **I do not know how much of the following information will hold true under the new system.**

My suggested timeline for the general GRE: Take the GRE the summer before you apply, if at all possible (the earlier, the better, provided you have enough time to prepare before the test date). If you are not going to take a

prep course, start studying as soon as possible. If you are taking a class, sign up for one that will end shortly before you take the test.

My suggested timeline for the Psychology GRE (required for many clinical psychology Ph.D. programs and some other programs – check the websites of schools you’re interested in): Take the psychology GRE during the April before the fall when you will be applying, if at all possible. It is also offered in November, and in some places, October. How to study for it, and for how long, really depends on the person.

Some more thoughts on when to sign up for and take the general GRE and the Psychology GRE:

You can take the general GRE virtually any day of the year but you have to sign up months in advance in most cases (because spots fill up). The Psychology GRE, on the other hand, is only offered on a few specific days per year (in April and November at many testing sites, and also in October at some testing sites), and you should be sure to sign up as far in advance as possible to be sure to get a spot at a convenient test center. (One of my friends had to drive four hours in order to take the test. Try to avoid this!) If it is possible for you to take the Psychology GRE in April, it will save you some stress during the fall months when you’re working on other aspects of your grad school applications. If you have to take the Psychology GRE in October or November, I strongly recommend that you take the general GRE before the fall (i.e., no later than August). If you have to take both the general GRE and the Psychology GRE during the fall months when you are applying to grad school, the application process will be far more stressful. (For example, I took the general GRE in October and the Psychology GRE in November, and it was very challenging to study for both tests while simultaneously writing my personal statements!)

Additionally, taking the GRE early (i.e., prior to the fall when you will be applying) will allow you to do the following:

- Take the test again if you don’t do well (all your scores will be sent to the schools, not just your best scores, but many schools will only be interested in your best scores).
- Know what your scores are when creating your school list. All APA-accredited psychology Ph.D. programs are required to publish their students’ average scores and GPAs online, and this can help you assess where you stand relative to people who were accepted.
- Make sure your schools get your scores in time. (All the schools I applied to were understanding when something went wrong with the score delivery process, but it would definitely be better to have more time to address such problems.)

As for the Psychology GRE, if you can’t take it in April, don’t worry, just be sure to take the general GRE in the summer so you don’t have to deal with both tests in the fall (while writing your personal statements and preparing your applications). Note that if you take the Psychology GRE in November, the scores will not make it to programs in time for a December 1 deadline, but my understanding is that schools understand this and will accept the scores after the deadline; many applicants will be in the same boat as you. You may want to check with the schools you’re applying to in order to make sure they will accept your scores, and I recommend that you follow up with the schools at a later point to make sure they have received your scores.

Studying for the General GRE

The general GRE has significantly changed since I took the test in October 2008. Therefore, I will refrain from offering tips about studying the content, and I will instead focus on the process of preparing for and taking the test.

Some notes about whether to take a prep course:

If you feel good about studying on your own with a book, and you did well on the SAT in high school, you probably don’t need to take a class. But if you don’t understand the math concepts or tricks, make sure to get

someone to explain them to you well in advance of test day. I did not take a class and instead studied with Kaplan and Princeton Review books. I do not regret this, but I also believe I would have received a higher score if I had taken a class. Some of my friends have reported that they found the ETS software especially helpful. I have also heard good things about the Barron's guides. According to one friend, the Barron's practice tests were harder than the actual test, whereas the Princeton Review tests were easier. If you do not take a GRE prep course, I highly recommend that you study using multiple sources, and that you take several practice tests under test-like conditions (i.e., all in one sitting, in the specified time frame).

Pros of taking a GRE prep class:

- Taking a class ensures that you will be exposed to all key concepts and test-taking strategies.
- Taking a class ensures that you will have practice with full-length tests.
- Taking a class provides you with structure for your studying and helps ensure that you stick to your study plan.
- Taking a class may help you study in a more condensed time frame than studying on your own would.

Cons of taking a GRE prep class:

- It is very expensive.
- People of varying skill levels are placed together, so you may find yourself reviewing material you are already comfortable with and/or not spending as much time as you'd like on less familiar material.
- Some people prefer to study on their own over a more spread-out period of time.
- Being in a class will require you to commute to and attend the class on a regular basis, which on top of a job and/or school might be stressful or frustrating.

A third alternative, in addition to studying on your own or taking a class, is to hire a tutor. This is usually the most expensive option, but it may be a good option for you if there are a limited number of areas in which you would like extra help.

Additionally, I believe online courses are becoming more common.

Some notes about the process of actually taking the general GRE:

It can be beneficial to stop studying 1-2 days before the test, and to spend those days relaxing, eating well, and making sure you're on a sleep schedule that will allow you to be alert on test day! A good night's sleep the night before is very important.

Most testing sites are extremely strict about what you bring into the testing room. For example, in the middle of taking the GRE, I started to take off a light jacket I'd been wearing, and someone who was watching me on a TV screen came in to the room to interrupt me and tell me that because I had come in wearing the jacket, I had to leave it on. So wear clothes you are very, very comfortable in! Also, carefully review the test session's policy on snacks so you're prepared, and be sure to eat a good breakfast beforehand.

Later I will discuss the importance of bringing the correct information about where you'd like to send your scores.

Final notes about the general GRE: For most clinical psychology Ph.D. programs, your Verbal and Quantitative scores will be weighted far more heavily than your Writing score. Also, as previously stated, APA-accredited programs must post their students' mean and median GRE scores online. Visiting the websites of the programs you're interested in will give you a good sense of the GRE scores you should aim for. (If you are taking the GRE under the new scoring system, you can use the posted percentiles to determine the equivalent scores you should aim for.)

Studying for the Psychology GRE

This test is very different from the general GRE. The psychology GRE straightforwardly assesses your knowledge of the subfields of psychology.

There are fewer tricks you can learn for this test; you simply have to learn the material. If you are a psychology major, you likely will already have learned most of the relevant material but will need to re-familiarize yourself with it, and there may be areas of psychology you are not familiar with (e.g., social, developmental, cognitive, or biological). If you are *not* a psychology major, you will have to learn more new material. Also, if you are not a psychology major, your score on this test will be more important than for psychology majors; for non-psychology majors, the score demonstrates to admissions committees whether you have the appropriate background knowledge that psychology majors should have learned during college. For psychology majors, your score on this test will be less important than your score on the general GRE.

There is no prep course for this test that I know of. The best thing you can do is allow yourself ample time to learn the material. Note that the Princeton and Kaplan guides differ in the material they cover, how they cover it, and the depth in which they cover it. I recommend studying with both guides and also using an introductory psychology textbook. I did not have an intro psychology textbook but I found a used one on Amazon.com for \$2 and I found it very helpful in studying. Any recently published intro psychology text book should serve the purpose of providing you with the type of knowledge likely to be tested, whereas test prep guides will help you focus on the specific types of questions likely to be asked of you (in addition to general review of content).

When you sign up for the test, you will be sent a practice test by ETS. Before beginning your preparation for the exam, you should definitely take this test under test-like conditions (i.e., all in one sitting, in the specified time frame) to assess your areas of strength and weakness before test day.

It may be encouraging to note how many questions you can get wrong to still receive a score above 700. So, for example, if you have never taken a cognitive psychology class, you don't have to worry about teaching yourself the entire field of cognitive psychology for the psychology GRE. The test guides will give you more info about how to study depending on your strengths and weaknesses.

On a positive note, many students interested in grad school in psychology have found the process of studying for and taking the psychology GRE to be fun; it's a chance to review and learn more about the field we've chosen to pursue. I personally enjoyed studying for this test and I didn't find the actual testing experience to be stressful.

Sending Test Score Reports

Please note: This section may seem excessively detailed and confusing, but if you can follow these guidelines, you may be able to save a lot of money! I care about this issue because I ended up spending hundreds of dollars to send my GRE scores to graduate programs. This information was accurate as of June 2011.

When you take the general GRE, you get 4 free score reports with it, meaning you can send your scores to 4 schools without having to pay the normal fee (\$23 per score report as of June 2011). Before going to take the GRE, you should choose 4 psychology programs that you are very likely to apply to, go to their websites, figure out *exactly* where you're supposed to send your scores (e.g., Psychology Department vs. Graduate School), and memorize that information so that you will be able to enter it into the computer on test day. Some psychology programs require you to send your scores to the university's Graduate School, and others require you to send your scores directly to the Psychology Department. So, although the ETS website suggests you bring the names of 4 schools to the testing center, you in fact need to know the specific location to send your scores *within* each school; otherwise, you may later have to resend your scores. For example, if Clinical Psychology Program X requires you to send your test scores to the Psychology Department, but you instead send the scores to the Graduate School (or vice-versa), you will later have to pay \$23 to resend the scores to the correct place. You should memorize the information about your 4 programs rather than bringing the written information to the test

center, because most test centers will not allow you to bring any paper into the testing room, which is where you will enter information about score recipients. (If ETS allows you to choose your score recipients online prior to test day, this will simplify the process; I had to choose my recipients at the test center on test day.)

But the process gets slightly more complicated (bear with me!). As previously mentioned, you get to send your scores to 4 schools for free when you take the general GRE, and you also get to send an additional 4 score reports for free when you take the psychology GRE. However, when you order a score report, it will only include scores from tests you've taken up to that point. When you later take another test, those new scores will not automatically be sent to score recipients you chose at previous test sessions. So, for example, if you take the general GRE before the psychology GRE, whichever schools you choose to send your general GRE scores to will not later be sent the psychology GRE scores (even if when you took the general GRE you selected the option to send subject test scores to those schools). You will later have to send the psychology GRE scores to those schools once you've taken the psychology GRE (or the general GRE, if you took the psychology GRE first).

Based on these facts, *if* you take the general GRE before the psychology GRE, and *if* you're applying to some programs that do not require the psychology GRE (but others that do), when you take the general GRE you should use your 4 free score reports for programs that do not require the psychology GRE. This is an efficient strategy because you can later use your 4 free psychology GRE score reports for schools that do require the psychology GRE; at that point, you can select the option to have your general GRE scores sent along with the psychology GRE scores, and since you will have already taken the general GRE, those 4 schools will receive both sets of scores.

As I said before, I know this section may seem confusing and convoluted, but I have included it in the hope that you will not end up spending as much money as I did to send scores!

Step 4: Develop an organizational system

My suggested timeline: September.

It is very important to develop an organizational system – ideally by September – for gathering, keeping track of, and ultimately submitting your materials to each school. Excel spreadsheets are a great tool; they allow you to create columns for various categories (e.g., program deadlines, application materials required) and to sort by those categories. It is also a good idea to create paper folders for each school's paper materials (if applicable), with a checklist of that program's requirements stapled to the inside cover of the folder. You should be able to find this information on the website of each program to which you're applying.

Step 5: Possibly contact potential advisors

My suggested timeline: September, October, and possibly early November

In his guide, Mitch discusses whether or not to contact the professors you plan to mention in your personal statement as potential mentors. Here are some of my thoughts on the topic:

Whether or not you contact specific professors during the application process will usually not make or break your application. If you do email professors, make sure your emails:

- are professional
- are not overly wordy
- contain no typos
- do not include questions that are answered on the program's website

- address the faculty member as “Doctor” if applicable (anyone with a doctoral degree should be addressed as “Dr.”) – so for example, you should write “Dear Dr. Prinstein” rather than “Dear Mr. Prinstein.”

Casey’s guide provides more detailed advice about professional communication.

I emailed professors if I had specific questions (for example, I emailed some professors to ask if they might be accepting students if it wasn’t clear on their website) or if I had a connection to the professor and wanted them to keep an eye out for my application (for example, I emailed two professors who had worked with one of my undergraduate advisors).

If you do email professors, try not to be offended or concerned if they don’t respond. Their email inboxes are full of emails that are higher on their list of priorities than potential graduate student applicants. If you email a professor to ask if he/she is taking students because the info isn’t on the website, and if he/she doesn’t respond and you need an answer, you can contact the program administrative assistant, or you can go ahead and apply. Some faculty members don’t know if they will accept students until later in the year; they may be waiting to hear about funding, or they may want to see the applicant pool before deciding whether or not they want to interview people.

If you email a professor, a good rule of thumb is to assume that he/she might talk about the email with his/her colleagues at some point during the process. Keep this in mind if you’re considering writing to more than one faculty member in the same department. Especially use caution in considering whether to write to two people whose research areas are very different: You don’t want to seem uncommitted to a specific research area by expressing interest in strikingly different topics (e.g., child ADHD and adult anxiety).

Finally, keep in mind when you write to and/or talk on the phone with program administrative assistants that they often play a *huge* role in the application process. In some programs, it is the administrative assistant who first reviews all applications and decides which ones will be passed on to faculty. If you are rude or condescending in your email or phone contact with an administrative assistant, the Director of Clinical Training will probably hear about it. (And by the way, the Director of Clinical Training, or DCT, is the faculty member who runs the clinical psychology Ph.D. program.)

Step 6: Ask people to write your letters of recommendation

My suggested timeline: Distribute materials by early October.

Most schools ask for three letters of recommendation. At least two letters should be from people with Ph.D.s in psychology. In some cases it may make sense to include four letters, but this creates more work for the faculty members reading your application (not to mention more work for you, as you manage your letter-writers during the application process).

Your letter-writers should know you well as a student. At least one of your letter writers should be able to comment on your research skills and experiences as well. For example, of my three letter-writers, one was my psychology honors thesis advisor, with whom I had worked closely for two years; one was a psychology professor from another college who was the co-PI (principal investigator) on the research project I had worked on for two years; and the third was a psychology professor who had taught me two psychology classes and for whom I had worked as a TA for two classes.

Letters of recommendation are extremely important, so choose your recommenders wisely. These letters are the tools potential mentors will use to decide whether you’d be a good person to have in the lab for four to six years; this is not trivial decision. A bad or even a lukewarm letter of recommendation can definitely ruin your chances of admission. Potential advisors will not be impressed by letters that offer “faint praise”; you want letters from

people who know you very well and who will be able to offer very detailed and enthusiastic comments and praise about your strengths as a student, research assistant, and lab member. Graduate school faculty members weigh these letters heavily as they decide whom to interview, and the letters may be reread after interviews, as professors make their final decisions about admission.

When and how you ask someone if they would be willing to write you a letter of recommendation should depend on your relationship with that person and what stage of your career you're at. If you are currently a college student and regularly see the person, it may make sense to ask them in person. In other cases, you will probably be asking via email. If you are asking someone you haven't spoken to in over a year, it may be necessary to remind them of who you are (e.g., "I was a student in your Abnormal Psychology class in Fall 2009"). But remember that the best letter-writer will know you very well and will be excited to write a letter of recommendation for you.

It's a good idea to send your letter-writers your full list of schools to which you're applying, as soon as you have a final list. Depending on your relationship with each letter-writer and how organized they seem, it may be a good idea to send reminders about upcoming deadlines as they approach (but don't send an annoying number of reminders!). It also may be helpful to give each of your letter-writers a copy of your Curriculum Vitae (CV) or résumé. If a letter-writer knows you solely through having taught you in a class, it might be a good idea to remind him/her of your performance in that specific class as well (e.g., your final grade in the course; your topic for a final project or paper).

No matter how or when you are asking someone to write you a letter of recommendation, remember that they are doing you a big favor. It is very possible to annoy or anger someone through the manner in which you ask them to write a letter for you – and this in turn can have a negative impact on the letter they write you! Your goal should be to make your letter-writers' job as smooth and easy as possible. Make sure to ask exactly how they would like you to send them the materials. Many professors are willing to submit recommendation materials online (and many programs now highly encourage this or even require it), but some professors prefer to submit hardcopies of the materials (i.e., printing the letters and sending them through the mail). From your perspective, it will be much easier and simpler if your letter-writers submit their materials online, but you should respect their preferences, unless you are applying to a program that *requires* that materials to be submitted online.

Whether your letter-writers are submitting materials online or are mailing them, you must carefully follow each school's instructions for these materials. Some schools require a generic letter, whereas others have supplemental forms that they require the letter-writers to fill out.

If your letter-writers are submitting the materials online, you typically will enter their information into an application website system, and the letter-writer will then receive an email from the program, with instructions on how to submit materials. Ask your letter-writers if they have preferences for when they'll receive these emails: Some people want to receive this info as early as possible, others prefer to receive the emails close to the deadline as a reminder, and some don't have a preference. Again, you want to make this job as easy as possible for your letter-writers.

This next paragraph is only relevant if your letter-writers are submitting their materials offline (i.e., through snail mail). It may sound confusing, but I am including this level of detail because many applicants are confused by this part of the process. Some programs will require the letter-writers to send the required materials directly to the school (e.g., the Psychology Department or Graduate School), while other programs will want the applicant to submit the letter him/herself along with other paper materials. If you are submitting the letters yourself, this means your letter-writers will be returning the letters to you in sealed, business-sized envelopes, with their signatures across the seal. If you are able to see your letter-writers in person, this is easy – they can simply hand you the sealed envelopes. If you no longer live near your letter-writers, you will need them to mail these letters back to you. In this case, you can either have them return all materials to you at once in one large envelope, with each individual sealed envelope placed within that one large envelope (in which case you should

be sure to put your own address on a large envelope with plenty of postage attached to it). Alternatively, you can have them mail each individual letter back to you, which will demonstrate to schools that this letter went through the mail and that you did not tamper with it. Some programs require this. If your letter-writers will be returning the letters in sealed envelopes to you, do not make the mistake that many applicants have made: **Be sure you write the name of each university on a specific envelope, so that you will later know which envelope goes to which school.** This is especially crucial when schools have unique supplemental forms they require. On the other hand, if a program requires your letter-writers to send the materials directly to that program, you will need to give your letter-writers pre-addressed, pre-stamped envelopes for each school, with the school's address on it. Be sure to check whether the program wants these letters to be sent directly to the Psychology Department or to the Graduate School. Whether your letter-writers are mailing materials directly to schools, back to you in one large envelope, or back to you in individual envelopes, **be sure to include stamps on each envelope they will have to mail.** You do not want to make your letter-writers pay to mail materials on your behalf.

A final note: When the whole application process is over, it is nice to email your letter-writers and let them know where you have decided to attend grad school (or if you'll be doing something else in the coming year). A thank-you card and perhaps a gift may also be appreciated, depending on your relationship with the person.

Step 7: Order your transcripts

Timeline: Check your college's Registrar's policy.

Some programs will require transcripts to be sent directly to them from your undergraduate college, while others want you to include your transcript along with any other paper materials you may be submitting. You will need to plan far in advance how many transcripts to have delivered to your house (or for you to pick up in person at your college's Registrar, if you are still in college or live near your college), and arrange for others to be sent directly to specific programs (make sure you know whether to send them to the Graduate School or the Psychology Department for each school). Check your college's Registrar's website to see how long it will take for your transcripts to be delivered, and be sure to order them in time. Don't underestimate how long this will take, especially during busy times of year (e.g., toward the end of the semester). Also, if you will be applying during your senior year of college, you should check with the programs you're applying to, to see if you will need to submit an additional transcript once your fall semester grades are finalized (this did not apply to me, and I'm not sure how it works).

Step 8: Write your personal statements.

My suggested timeline: September, October, November.

In his guide, Mitch offers a lot of good advice about how to write a personal statement.

In my opinion, the basic goal of your personal statement is to convince your potential future advisor to offer you an interview. As you work on this personal statement, remember that this person will be reading this essay along with many others, and you want your essay stand out. You don't want to stand out by being overly dramatic or flashy; you want to stand out by impressing the professor with (1) your passion for clinical psychology and their specific research area, (2) your ability to clearly articulate how you arrived at this interest, (3) your ability to explain why you are an excellent candidate for a doctoral program in clinical psychology, and (4) more specifically, your discussion of why you would be a fantastic member of this particular professor's lab. To do this, it's important to create for the reader a clear picture of how your interests developed. Many people make the mistake in these essays of talking about their general interest in psychology, then their coursework, then their lab work, then their specific research interests, in discrete paragraphs with no clear "arc" showing how all these experiences are linked.

Some applicants end up applying to work with professors whose research interests are completely different from those the applicant has studied in the past. For example, perhaps you are interested in studying ADHD in grad

school, but as an undergrad you studied substance use. If this is the case, your job in the personal statement is to clearly explain why you would nevertheless be a good match for this lab. The person reading your personal statement may be reading essays from dozens of other applicants who have worked for two or more years in an ADHD lab, so you need to convince this professor that there are other excellent reasons to offer you an interview! Think about the aspects of your training that have prepared you for research in ADHD and that have more broadly prepared you for success as a graduate student. Put yourself in the shoes of the potential future advisor reading dozens of essays, and then critically read your own essay from the perspective of this specific professor, asking yourself: *Would I want to offer this applicant an interview?* It is crucial to have other people read your essay as well.

If you are applying to work with professors at different universities who all share a specific research interest (e.g., eating disorders), you will likely be able to write one personal statement and then tailor the essay (especially the first and last paragraphs) to fit that specific school and advisor. For example, perhaps you are applying to work with a professor at School A who studies genetic influences on the development of eating disorders, and you are also applying to work with a professor at School B who studies treatments for eating disorders. Both these essays will include information about your background in psychology, how your interest in eating disorders research developed, and what you hope to study in graduate school. However, while in your essay for School A you might discuss your interest in genetics and any background you may have in genetics research or coursework, your essay for School B might instead discuss your interest and training in treatment outcome research.

In almost all cases, it is wise to name the specific professor with whom you are most interested in working. It is a good idea to state your interest in working with a particular professor in the last or second-to-last paragraph of your essay. This statement should be accompanied by a discussion of why you want to work with this professor, what you specifically hope to study with this person in graduate school, and how your background and interests make you a great match for this person's lab. Some professors will do a search for applications that contain their name and then read those personal statements. It can also be a good idea to name a second professor whose research interests you, but if that person studies something completely different from the first person you mentioned, this will suggest that you have not focused your research interests. For example, if you say you are interested in the research of a professor who studies adult anxiety disorders, and at the end of the essay you state that you are also interested in the work of a professor who studies childhood externalizing disorders, these two professors might question your commitment to their specific areas of research. You want to convince the person reading your essay that he/she is the best match for your research interests and that you are the applicant who can offer the best contributions to his/her lab.

Here are some other tips and rules of thumb for writing the personal statement:

- Personal statements should generally cover the topics of how you became interested in psychology (this can be brief), how you narrowed your interests in psychology, your current ideas for research related to your interests, and why you feel that the program/mentor is a good fit for your interests.
- Describe what you have *learned* from working in a psychology laboratory, not merely what you *did* as a research assistant. For example, do not simply state that you “entered data for a study of depression”; describe the main aims of the study and what interested you most.
- It's called a “personal statement,” but “personal” does *not* mean you should disclose sensitive or inappropriately personal information (e.g., your own diagnoses).
- Ask others who have been successful in the grad school application process if they would mind giving you a copy of their personal statements. It can be very helpful to read other people's personal statements to get a sense of different structures and styles. When I was applying, I read three other people's essays

before beginning my own, and while in graduate school I have given many UNC undergraduates copies of the personal statement I submitted with my UNC application.

- Have as many people as possible – especially grad students and faculty members familiar with the application process – read drafts of your personal statement and offer you feedback.
- Give these people drafts *early*, by October or early November if possible, so that you will have plenty of time to make revisions. Most first drafts of personal statements need a tremendous amount of work, and the feedback can be overwhelming if you're receiving it two weeks before the application deadline. Ideally, you will have people read multiple drafts of an essay. But be gracious and appreciative when you ask for this – and be sure to send a thank you email after each draft!
- If you are still in college, your college's Writing Center can be an excellent resource as you write and revise your personal statement.
- Make sure your essay is free of typos, and check to make sure you didn't forget to remove another university's or professor's name from the essay.
- If you have used the "track changes" feature while revising your document in Microsoft Word, make sure to "accept all changes" before you submit your essays; essays look very unprofessional when they show tracked changes from previous drafts!

One final tip (this was an idea of an undergrad in our lab): Far in advance of when you start your essay, you can begin a Microsoft Word document or a handwritten list on which you jot down any ideas for your personal statement as you think of them.

Step 9: Make sure to review and complete all program requirements; submit all materials.

My suggested timeline: September, October, November, and December.

Many psychology programs have deadlines in December and January (many as early as December 1). Be sure to check your programs' deadlines far in advance, and be sure to have this information recorded wherever you are keeping track of your application materials (e.g., in an Excel spreadsheet). As stated in Step 4, it is important to have an organizational system in place by September.

Be sure to allow yourself ample time to complete all application materials and submit them so that they will arrive before each program's deadline. Keep in mind that in addition to dealing with the GRE, the psychology GRE, your personal statement, your letters of recommendation, and your transcript, you will still need to fill out many online application forms for each school. These "extras" can take many hours per school, and if you're applying to 10-20 schools, we're talking about a very significant chunk of time. This process is manageable if you are well organized and begin everything far in advance, but if you leave anything until the last minute, the process will be very stressful.

Many schools require supplemental essays in addition to your personal statement (e.g., essays describing how you will help to increase the program's diversity), so be sure to plan ahead for these. As with the personal statement, it is important that these essays are professionally written, typo-free, and reviewed by as many people as possible prior to being submitted.

Some schools require a Curriculum Vitae (CV). I suggest consulting with graduate students, faculty members, online resources, and any resources your college may offer (e.g., Career Center) while creating a CV. As with all aspects of the application process, be sure to ask other people to review your CV before you submit it; typos in your CV will reflect poorly on you.

You can consider submitting extra materials if you feel they will strengthen your application (e.g., an example of your undergraduate research work; a CV if it is not required). However, the risk of submitting anything not specifically requested is that you may annoy the administrative assistant and/or your potential advisor. If you are interested in submitting extra materials, it would be a good idea to discuss your thoughts with a faculty member familiar with the application process.

It is extremely important not to save things for the last minute.

For the online part of the application in which you will enter basic information and upload essays: Do not underestimate the time it will take to fill out each online application form. They may ask you questions you did not expect. Each form may take you several hours. I recommend beginning to fill them out in October or early November if possible.

As for paper materials, submit all your materials as far in advance of the deadline as possible. Keep in mind that if you are sending paper materials to a school, you will need to allow ample time for these materials to go through the mail, factoring in Sundays and holidays.

A couple weeks after you submit your materials, it is a good idea to check with the program to make sure your materials have arrived; depending on the program, this may involve direct contact with the psychology department, or you may need to contact the graduate school.

Step 10: Interview offers come in.

Timeline: Generally January, February, and early March

Waiting to receive interview offers from schools can be a very stressful, anxious time for applicants. My advice is to try to avoid obsessively refreshing your email inbox and checking your cell phone during “interview season.” Interview offers are generally made in January or February and may come by email or phone. The best thing you can do to minimize your stress is to keep yourself active and busy with other things so that you don’t feel like you are constantly waiting.

It is advisable not to answer your cell phone (or whatever phone you put on your application) if a number you don’t recognize calls during the months of December to April. It’s better to let the call go to voicemail, so that if it’s an interview offer, you will have the chance to go to a location where you are alone, with no distracting noises and with good cell phone reception, ready to have a professional conversation with your potential future advisor (after you’ve had a chance to remind yourself of his/her research). I have heard embarrassing stories about applicants answering phone calls from potential advisors while out at bars. I will admit that I once answered the phone thinking it was my uncle calling me, but it was in fact the Director of Clinical Training at a program I had applied to. It’s much better to be able to call back when you’re ready, especially because you’ll want to wrap your mind around exactly which program has called you, the name of the professor you applied to work with, and his/her specific area of research. Just make sure your voicemail recording is professional, as this will be the first time your potential future advisor hears your voice. Also, be aware that the person who calls may be your potential future advisor, or it may be someone else in the department, such as the Director of Clinical Training in the case I just described. In some cases you may not have any contact with your potential future advisor until the interview day itself. In other cases, you may talk to your potential future advisor extensively on the phone prior to the interview. That brings me to my next point.

It is becoming increasingly common for professors to have phone interviews with their top applicants prior to offering invitations for in-person interviews. I imagine this will become much more common in future years. Sometimes professors who want to conduct phone interviews will email their applicants in advance to schedule a phone date. However, other professors may call you unexpectedly to have a spontaneous phone interview.

Because of this, it is especially important to let calls go to voicemail during interview months, so that you can return phone calls from potential future advisors during a time when you are ready to potentially have a phone interview. (But be sure to call back the same day they call you, if at all possible!)

When you are offered an interview, it will most likely be for a full day or several days in January, February, or March; most schools have an official interview day or weekend, when all interviewees are invited to visit. In most cases, this visit will involve staying at the house of a graduate student and attending social events in addition to being interviewed. Be aware that many schools will schedule their interview day or weekend at the same time as other schools. If you are offered multiple interview offers, you will likely run into scheduling conflicts. This is “a good problem to have,” but it is a tricky situation nonetheless. See Mitch’s interviewing guide for advice on how to handle this dilemma.

When I was offered interviews on conflicting days, I politely asked to reschedule my interviews at some of the schools. In most cases, schools will be understanding if you respectfully tell them you would like to interview but will be unable to attend the official interview day(s); schools understand that many applicants will receive conflicting interview offers. Another option to consider is to cancel (rather than reschedule) one or more of your interviews. As I received offers of admission (post-interviewing) at my top-choice schools, I decided to cancel my interviews at some of the remaining schools. This is a personal choice; I know several people who attended all the interviews to which they were invited, even when they were quite sure they wouldn’t end up choosing those schools, reasoning that they might end up preferring a school they didn’t expect to love. That makes a lot of sense. I personally felt excited enough about the schools I had received offers from, that it didn’t seem right to take another applicant’s interview spot at a school I was less excited about. Plus I didn’t want to spend time and money traveling unnecessarily! Each time I canceled an interview, the school responded very graciously. You will have to decide for yourself how to handle interview conflicts, if they arise.

People often ask in February, “Is it a good sign or a bad sign that I haven’t heard anything from School X?” It is hard to say. Sometimes schools will reject a big group of people early in the process, and if you haven’t heard from a school, it may mean you are still a candidate. However, some schools will not send any updates to the applicants who do not receive interviews; these applicants may receive a rejection letter in April but may have been eliminated from consideration far earlier in the process. As I said before, the best thing you can do during “interview season” is to try to keep yourself busy so you don’t further stress yourself out as you wait for news.

If you do not get any interviews, try to remember that this is an extremely competitive and often arbitrary process. You may have been applying to work with a professor who ultimately did not interview any students. You may have come close to being offered an interview, but in the end the professor could only interview five students out of 80 applications and you were his/her 6th choice. Or, your application may have had significant problems that you can improve before applying again. If you lacked research experience, it is highly advisable to try to get a job in a psychology laboratory before applying again. If your GRE score was lower than the average scores of programs to which you applied, you should work on improving it – perhaps you should sign up for a class. If you were applying to grad schools straight out of college, you might do better in the process once you’ve had some “real world” work experience. If you weren’t a psychology major in college, you might consider taking post-bacc classes in psychology. Have a trusted psychology professor read your personal statement and look at your CV and brainstorm what might have been the problem with your application. But most importantly, be kind to yourself. Remember that you were applying to programs with acceptance rates lower than medical school, law school, and business school.

Step 11: Go to interviews.

Timeline: Generally late January, February, and March.

Mitch’s 2010 guide to interviews in clinical psychology provides a ton of great info about the process: <http://www.unc.edu/~mjp1970/1%20Just%20Got%20an%20Interview%20for%20a%20Clinical%20Psychology%20Doctoral%20Program.pdf>

As Mitch writes in the introduction to the guide: “At most universities, about 3-6 applicants are invited for an interview for every one admissions slot available. Suddenly, the odds are looking pretty good for you! The 200-600 applications received by most doctoral level clinical psychology graduate programs have been narrowed to just a few dozen, and for the lab you are most interested in, just a small handful of folks will be coming for an interview.”

Let’s imagine there are six people, including you, who are interviewing with Professor X. Your odds of ultimately being offered admission may be dramatically higher than 1/6 if you are the best match for Professor X’s lab or if the five other applicants have poor social skills. On the other hand, your odds may be dramatically lower than 1/6 if Professor X decides to accept someone from “inside the lab” (e.g., someone who has already worked in the lab as a research assistant) or if Professor X decides to accept someone who has worked with a trusted colleague at another university (e.g., Professor X’s own grad school advisor).

I sent Mitch my thoughts about the interview process as he was writing the guide, so I will refrain from repeating these points. A few quick points to highlight:

- Dress professionally for your interviews. If you aren’t sure if a particular outfit is professional enough, ask someone familiar with the application process. In my experience, most male applicants wear a black or gray suit, and most women wear a black or gray skirt or pants suit.
- Keep in mind that everyone you meet during your interview will weigh in on the decision about who is ultimately accepted. At many schools, graduate students and administrative assistants play a significant role in admissions decisions.
- Along these lines, try to be gracious with everyone you meet, and if you are staying with a grad student host, remember that he/she is making a big sacrifice of time and energy by hosting you – and act accordingly! For example, if your flight home leaves the airport at 6 a.m., I recommend taking a cab and *not* asking your host to drive you to the airport.

Step 12: Hear from schools after interviews.

Timeline: February, March, and in some cases April.

After you have interviewed at a school, you may hear a decision from your potential future advisor within a couple days, or you may not hear anything for weeks. If you don’t hear anything for a while, it may mean that the faculty member and/or the department has not made a final decision, or it may mean that the slot you’re applying for has been offered to someone else who is now weighing their decision. In most cases, if you are not the faculty member’s first-choice candidate, he/she will give you an update about this, but you might not hear anything until they have a sense of whether the first-choice will say yes. If you *are* the first-choice applicant, the professor may be able to offer you a spot soon after the interview, but in most cases professors will need to consult with their departments before making an offer.

If you’re not the first-choice applicant at your first-choice school, you may then enter a waiting game. Let’s say you interviewed at three schools, and of those, School A is your first choice. Imagine you are told that your potential future advisor at that school, Advisor A, has offered his/her slot to someone else, but that if that person says no, you will be offered the slot next. You will then have to wait for the person “ahead of you in line” to decide whether they will be saying yes to Advisor A. If they say yes, you’re out of luck and will not be offered admission. But it is likely that that applicant will need time to decide whether or not to say yes to Advisor A’s offer of admission, while they hear from other programs, during which time they may be in the same position as you: Imagine that your first-choice school, School A, is *their* second-choice school, and they are a “runner-up” for their top choice school, School B, and are waiting to learn whether Advisor B’s first-choice applicant will say yes or no. As you can imagine, the process can become long and drawn-out. This partly explains why professors need to carefully think about which applicants would be most likely to say yes if offered admission.

If you are not a professor's first-choice applicant after the interviews have been completed, try not to take it personally. Decisions can be very arbitrary or based on factors that you have no control over or that have nothing to do with you. For example, a professor may end up accepting someone who has worked as an RA in his/her lab or who has worked closely with a trusted colleague. Many excellent candidates do not gain admission to any clinical psychology Ph.D. programs on their first round of applications. That said, if you interview at several places and end up not receiving any offers of admission, it is a good idea to honestly assess whether there may have been things in the interview process that you could have done differently, so that you can maximize your chances of admission if you apply again.

If you are offered admission by a program, congratulations! If it is your first-choice program, accept the offer and start getting ready for grad school! If it is not your first-choice program and you are waiting to hear from programs higher on your list, you should politely inform this program that you will need time to make your decision. At that point, it is appropriate to contact a potential future advisor you are waiting to hear from to inquire about the status of your application at that school. It is also appropriate to express to your first-choice school that they are your first choice and that you have received an offer from another school. It is important to use the utmost tact during every part of this process. Remember that you may end up somewhere you didn't expect to end up, and you don't want to have offended anyone in the process.

All applicants must inform their schools of their decisions no later than April 15. It is in very poor form to hold onto several offers of admission for an extended period of time. If one applicant holds onto several offers at once, it can cause a wide-spread "log jam" in the system, through the chain reactions described above.

Step 13: Make your decision!

Timeline: March or April.

If you are in this position, congratulations! If you have more than one choice for grad school, I suggest you weigh all the factors I discussed in the section about making your initial list. Get input from as many people as possible who know the programs and advisors, within and outside of those programs. You will also now have significantly more information from your interview. It's extremely important to trust your gut: How did you feel while talking to your potential advisor? Do the grad students seem happy? Can you picture yourself going to school here? Can you picture yourself doing this research every day for many years? Talk to as many people as you can about their experiences in this program and working with this specific advisor. Remember to treat all these conversations with tact – although the power scale has now tipped in your favor and schools will be courting you rather than the other way around, you definitely do not want to start off grad school on the wrong foot with anyone!

It is also appropriate to arrange a time to talk to your potential future advisor on the phone (or you can email him/her), to ask any questions you might have. For example, you may have questions about funding: Will you be on an RA (research assistantship) through the advisor's grants, or will you be funded through a TA (teaching assistantship)? Will there be summer funding for you?

Remember that if you choose to accept an offer of admission, you will be a student at this school and a member of this specific lab for many years. It is possible but not common for grad students to transfer. So if you find yourself with serious doubts about the school(s)/advisor(s) to which you were accepted, remember that it's OK to choose not to say yes to anyone on this go-around. You can always apply to grad school again next year, and if you received an offer already this year, you will likely do as well or better in the process your second time around. That said, as you've probably gathered from this guide, the grad school application process is stressful, so it's ideal to do your homework before applying, and to only apply to schools and advisors that are likely to be a good match for you.

Some take-home points from this guide:

- Before embarking on the application process, make sure that you are prepared and excited for the programs you're interested in. Otherwise, you may not have the necessary motivation to make it through the application process, much less several years of graduate school!
- Develop an organizational system early.
- Break the process into steps and try to avoid tackling many steps at once.
- Take the general GRE and the Psychology GRE as early as possible. (This will help you to reach the goal above; taking the GRE tests early will allow you to focus on other application components during the fall months.)
- Prioritize the research match between you and potential advisors when making your initial grad school list and also when making your final decision.
- If possible, consult with psychology graduate students and faculty members at every step of the process.
- Allow ample time to meet each deadline.
- Ask many people to read and comment on your personal statement.
- Make your letter-writers' job as easy as possible for them.
- For each program, be sure to check whether you should send materials to the Psychology Department or the Graduate School.
- Be gracious with and express your gratitude to everyone who helps you throughout the process: your letter-writers; the people who advise you at various stages of the process; and the faculty members, graduate students, and administrative assistants at the programs to which you apply.

Final thoughts:

The process of applying to graduate school is stressful, but if clinical psychology (or whatever field you choose) is the right field for you, the process will be worth it. Having completed more than two years of the UNC Ph.D. program in clinical psychology, I can say without hesitation that I cannot imagine being in a better field. My days include an exciting mix of research work (including data collection and analysis, manuscript preparation, and lively discussions), clinical work (including child therapy and assessment, adult therapy, and family therapy), coursework, advising undergraduates, attending conferences, and various professional development activities. In short, I am getting paid to study what I love and I am being trained in a variety of areas that will lead to a broad range of career choices after graduate school. Clinical psychology Ph.D. programs are not for everyone; even if someone has the qualifications to gain admission to a program, that person will not necessarily be happy in graduate school. But I can tell you that I am happy, and I wish you the best of luck as you figure out your own path and as you take the steps to make it happen. And for those of you who choose to apply to graduate school, I hope this guide is helpful!