# Applying to US-Based PhD Programs in Non-Clinical Psychology

Guide by
Kate Petrova

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION

Hi all! My name is Kate Petrova, and I recently accepted a position in a PhD program in Psychology at Stanford University. The long-awaited moment when I was finally able to sign my name on the offer letter came after 2 application cycles, 17 applications, 9 interviews, and countless hours of preparation. Drawing on my own experience applying to PhD programs in psychology, as well as on some of the most valuable advice I received over the years, I created this guide in hopes that it can help you navigate the application process.

If you've ever looked up any information about graduate school admissions online, then you are familiar with the bottomless pit of information that seems to grow deeper and deeper with each Google search. You may wonder, with *so* much information about the graduate school application process already out there, why did I bother to write this application guide? Over the years, I have found that much of the information and advice that you can find online is framed in a way that makes it useful for a wide range of applicants. Sometimes, that range is *too* wide. Though informative as a general starting point, this approach erases a lot of the nuance and masks critical variation in people's grad school application journeys. In the end, it wasn't an impersonal list of bullet points that helped me the most. It was the one-on-one conversations I had with people who had gone through the application process themselves that made all the difference.

Many of the people I talked to were different from me in every respect, from their research interests and educational backgrounds to their personalities and aspirations. I could not always relate to the stories they told me or directly apply the advice they gave me. But it was the ability to reflect on our differences – and the ways in which our journeys diverged because of those differences – that served as the single most valuable experience that helped me get to where I am today. So, instead of distilling my advice to just a handful of bullet points, flowcharts, and tables, I decided to document it in all its complexity in this guide.

My hope is that reading this will make you feel as if the two of us were sitting at a table inside a busy coffee shop. I won't have the answers to all of your questions, and some of the advice I give you may not work very well for you. But I hope that each of you reading this can take something valuable away from our "conversation".

Good luck!

# CHAPTER 1: FIRST STEPS (2 YESRS – 6 MONTHS BEFORE APPLICATIONS ARE DUE)

## Where do I start?

Applying to doctoral programs is a process that typically begins long before the first applications are due. Most programs in the United States begin accepting applications in September or October, with most deadlines falling on or around December 1st (though the exact dates can range from as early as November 15th to January 1st or later). By the time application portals open, you should compile a list of programs you want to apply to, contact people who can provide you with letters of recommendation, and take the GREs (if applicable).

There are many decisions you will need to make along the way, and it can feel quite overwhelming. The good news is that you don't have to make all of those decisions at once. In fact, getting a slow but *early* start may be the best strategy. If you are like me, you will find that applying to PhD programs involves a surprising amount of soul-searching and self-reflection, both of which require time. How much time depends on individual circumstances. While some people can probably launch straight into the application process just a few months before the deadline, others will benefit from spending anywhere between six months and several years figuring out if graduate school is right for them. Below is a list of questions (and suggestions for how and where to search for answers) that I began asking myself approximately 1.5 years prior to my first application cycle. I hope that thinking about these questions will help you get started on your graduate school journey. Make sure you revisit these questions regularly as you prepare to begin the application process and don't be afraid to discuss these questions with your mentors and peers.

**Question:** What scholarly questions interest me?

**Searching for answers:** To figure out what interests you, it is important to be honest with yourself and to pay attention to both what you find exciting as well as to what makes you feel bored. Are there any questions that have come up in one of your classes that you could not stop thinking about outside of the class? Have you read any exciting books or articles in your field lately? If you are currently working in a lab, are you genuinely interested in knowing the answers to the questions that you and/or others in the lab are focusing on? Interests and questions can also come from non-academic sources. Do you find yourself wondering about a phenomenon that you've encountered in your own life?

**Question:** What labs are out there that do research in the areas that interest me?

**Searching for answers:** Are there any psychology papers or books you've read that you really enjoyed? Look up the authors and see if they have active research programs in the areas that interest you. Is there a professor in your department whose research focuses on questions that are similar to the ones that interest you? Ask them if they know of anyone who is doing

work in your area of interest. At this stage, all you need is just a few leads. Find a few people/labs that seem relevant and begin to follow their work.

**Google Scholar allows you to "follow" people by sending you email notifications every time they publish a new paper. This can be a great first step for getting familiar with the newest work in your field!**

**Question:** What topics do I want to/need to learn more about?

**Searching for answers:** This one may seem a bit odd, but bear with me. Think about the last time you were searching for classes to take. Were there any classes that you skipped over without even pausing to consider the possibility of taking them, thinking to yourself "I *know* I am not interested in this"? Were there any guest speakers visiting your campus whose talks you skipped because the topic seemed boring? Are there any professors in your own department who you never really talked to simply because their work doesn't seem all that interesting? Jot down a few specific examples and see if you can spot any patterns. Does it seem like you are avoiding any specific sub-areas of psychology (e.g., developmental, social, cultural)? Or maybe there is a pattern in what level of analysis you tend to think of as uninteresting (e.g., neural, interpersonal)? Identify what those patterns are and try to learn more about the areas that you've been avoiding. Ideally, do so in a structured way (i.e., by taking a class). This suggestion may seem a bit like a waste of time, and you may be tempted to skip it. That's very understandable, but the reality is that you don't know what you don't know. No matter how well you think you know yourself and your interests, you can never know for sure that you don't like something/that something won't be useful if you've never even tried it. Taking classes outside of my comfort zone *and* my "interest zone" was one of the most rewarding experiences that helped me figure out what I wanted to study. Those classes opened my eyes to whole new ways of thinking, and the experience was anything but a waste of time!

**Question:** What kinds of skills do I want to gain and/or strengthen?

**Searching for answers:** Now that you have a general idea of the research questions that interest you, it's time to take a closer look at the methods that others in the field are using to address similar questions. Before I say more, I should caution that most people I sought advice from while applying to PhD programs tended to agree that proficiency in specific methods and tools is not something that can make or break your application. (Of course, just how much emphasis is placed on technical skills can vary dramatically across disciplines, programs, and even across labs in the same department, so take this advice with a grain of salt). Experience is important because it can help *you* get a clearer sense of your interests and goals. Methods-oriented skills can certainly give you a leg-up in the application process and help demonstrate that you understand what doing research in your area of interest entails, but spending most of your time learning new tools *at the expense of* figuring out what research questions interest you would likely do you more harm than good. Now that we've cleared that up, how should you go about learning relevant skills? First, think about what kinds of data can be used to address your questions of interest (e.g., surveys, behavioral, brain imaging etc.)? Look for opportunities that would allow you to work with similar types of data. Second, is there a particular set of

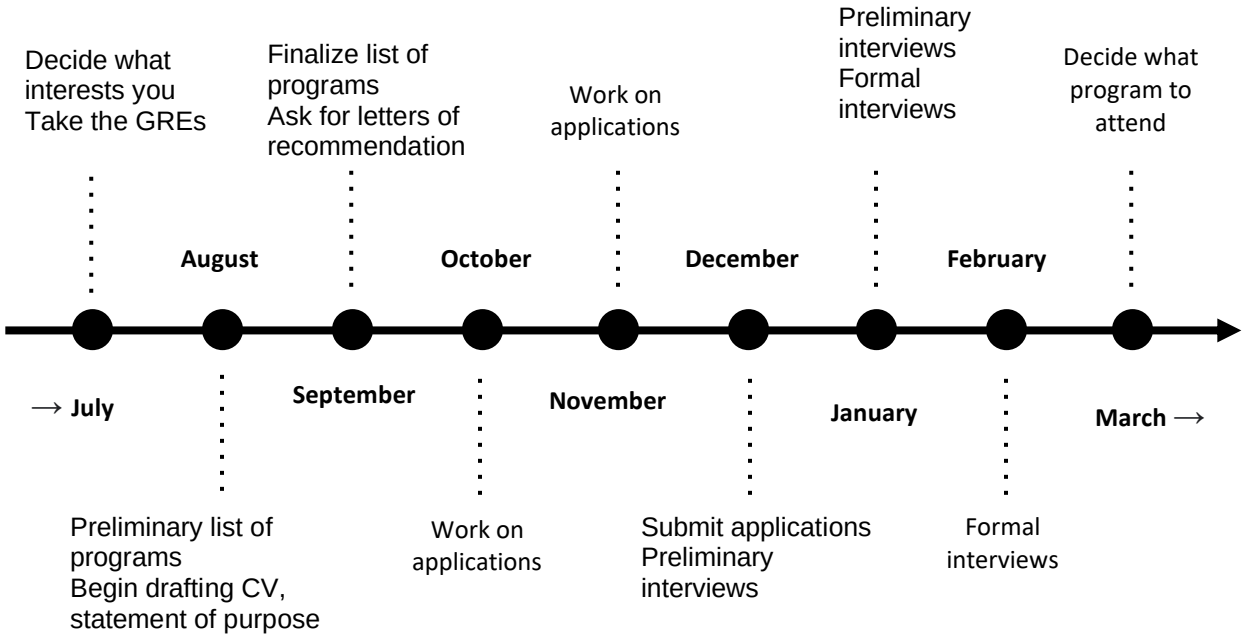
statistical techniques that are common in the field? Look for classes where you could practice applying these techniques. Bonus points if you can also learn the programming language/software that is commonly used in your field as part of your classes. Finally, are there more general skills, like working with children, building rapport with community participants, or doing animal research that you need to consider? Opportunities for learning these kinds of skills may be harder to come by, but it's certainly worth searching for relevant internships, classes, or work opportunities.

**Pay attention to *how* you like to work. Do you like working with others? Do you prefer big work settings or small intimate ones? Do you enjoy making connections between patterns in the data and more abstract ideas? Knowing the answers to these kinds of questions will become important later on in your application journey.**

**Question:** Who can I ask to write letters of recommendation for me?

**Searching for answers:** While it may be too early to ask for letters of recommendation, it is a good idea to ask yourself if you have at least 3 professors who know you well enough to write strong letters of recommendation for you. What does "well enough" mean in this context? Somebody whose lab you've worked in and who knows you personally is a good person to add to the top of your list of potential letter-writers. If you worked on a supervised research project with a faculty member, or if you plan to write a senior thesis, the person supervising you should also be on your list. Finally, if you took a class or two with the same professor and feel like they got to know you through your writing, your class participation, or your conversations with them outside the classroom, you can likely go ahead and add them to the list of people you could ask for letters of recommendation. If you struggle to come up with 3 names, *now* is the time to begin cultivating relationships with potential letter-writers!

## Application timeline overview



# CHAPTER 2: APPLYING (6 MONTHS BEFORE APPLICATIONS ARE DUE)

## Making a plan

### Customizing the timeline

During the summer months before applications open, you should start building a detailed plan around key dates and deadlines. Every time you add a program to your list (more on this later in this chapter), note all relevant deadlines. Most programs have a deadline for all application materials on or around December 1st, but some may have separate deadlines for letters of recommendation, fee waiver applications, official transcripts/test scores, and other materials. Once you have a preliminary list of programs, see what the earliest deadline for letters of recommendation is across all of your programs. You should aim to formally ask all of your potential letter-writers if they would be willing to write letters of recommendation for you no later than 2 months before the first deadline. You will need to provide your letter-writers with a final (or close to final) list of programs you will be applying to around the time you ask them, so count up 2-3 months from the first letter deadline and set a goal of finalizing the list of programs by that date.

You also want to make it as easy as possible for your letter-writers to do a good job. In my experience, it is a good idea to provide your letter-writers with your CV and a draft of your statement of purpose (see the *Asking for letters of recommendation* section of Chapter 2 for additional details). So, you should also aim to have the first draft that can be shared with your recommenders no later than 2 months before the first letter deadline. It may take a while for you to write and revise your statement(s), and if you are working/taking classes, you probably won't have the opportunity to just take a few full days to write your statement(s) and be done with it. Depending on your writing habits and the number of unique statements you need to produce, you may find it useful to start working on your statements as early as 3-5 months before your first application deadline. Finally, as you will see later in this chapter, finalizing the list sometimes involves getting in touch with some of the prospective PhD advisors whose labs interest you. You should plan to contact them *at least* 2-3 weeks before your target date for finalizing the list of programs.

The more programs you apply to, the more deadlines and tasks you need to manage. Though this format may not work for everyone, I found it useful to organize information about each program and to document my progress in a spreadsheet (see example below) that had the following information:

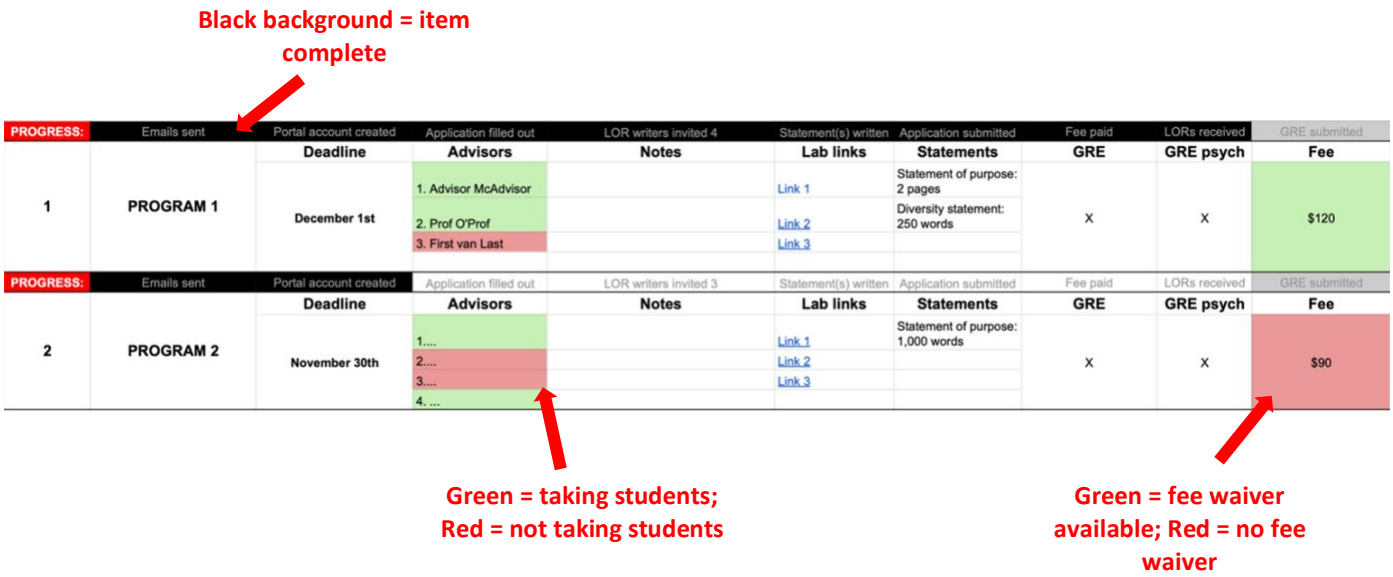
1. Name of the program
2. All relevant deadlines

3. Names of potential advisors in the order of preference (+ information on whether or not they will be taking new students this cycle; for more on this see *Having preliminary conversations with potential PhD advisors*)
4. Number, types, and lengths of required statements
5. GRE requirements
6. Application fee amount (+ waiver availability)
7. Links to the department and individual labs' websites
8. Other information/notes

The progress checklist for each program consisted of the following items:

1. Emails to potential advisors sent (if applicable)
2. Application portal account created
3. Letter-writers invited
4. Application filled out
5. Statement(s) written
6. Application submitted
7. Fee paid/waiver processed
8. Letters of recommendation received
9. GRE scores submitted (if applicable)
10. Official transcripts submitted (if applicable)

Below is what the resulting spreadsheet looks like:

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**Financial planning**

Applying to graduate programs is not cheap, so, in addition to organizing your time, you will also need to do some financial planning. The main costs associated with applying to PhD programs fall into 4 categories:

1. **Application fees**

   In 2020 and 2021 most application fees ranged from $80 to $120. A few programs charged fees as low as $25 while others ran up as high as $150. Application fees are non-refundable and must be paid in full by the application deadline. Some programs offer fee waivers, though eligibility criteria and the process for applying for such waivers vary widely across programs. Some schools just ask you to answer a few questions on the application form and grant the waiver automatically based on your answers while others require you to submit a separate fee waiver application *that may be due several weeks before the application deadline.*

   To get a realistic idea about how much your applications would cost, it is a good idea to look into fees and fee waivers early. Once you identify a list of programs you are interested in applying to (discussed in detail in the following sections), make sure to check out the frequently asked questions section on the program's website to see if you can find information about application fees and waivers. A lot of the programs post this information on their websites, but not all of them do. *If you can't find any information about fee waivers online, it does not automatically mean that there are no waivers!* Sometimes you will need to reach out to the program coordinator via email just to get the information.

   Keep in mind that most fee waivers are only available to US citizens or permanent residents. In fact, some programs charge higher fees for international students. That being said, sometimes it may still be worth reaching out to the graduate admissions office or the admissions coordinator in your program's department to inquire about fee waivers, even if you don't meet the eligibility criteria listed on the website.

2. **GRE testing (if applicable)**

   More and more programs are moving away from requiring applicants to submit GRE scores, and I can imagine that someone reading this in 1-3 years may end up skipping right over this section if the test becomes a thing of the past. If you will be taking the GRE, there are a few costs (current as of summer 2021) you should keep in mind:

   - General test fee: **$205** (if taking the test in the US; includes 4 free score reports)

- GRE subject test (psychology) fee: **$150** (worldwide)[1]
- Score reports (i.e., cost of sending your official scores to graduate programs): **$27 per report** (starting with your 5th report)
- Test preparation: **~$100** (**can range from $0 to $1,000+**). Some people decide to prepare using just the freely available online materials while others take GRE-prep classes that can end up costing several thousand dollars. Most people I know fall somewhere in-between, using a combination of free materials and one or two prep books/online resources that typically cost $30-$70 each.

Some people end up taking the GREs more than once. If you plan to do that, remember that you will need to pay test fees each time you register for a test. If there are no GRE test centers near where you live, remember to factor in travel costs to and from the testing center. Additional test fees may also apply. For a more detailed and up-to-date break-down, check the official GRE website: https://www.ets.org/gre/.

### 3. Interview costs

While application and GRE fees are the expenses that you will have to deal with early in the application process, interview costs won't come until January, February, or even March. Unlike fees, interview costs are unpredictable and can vary dramatically from one program to another. A particularly challenging part is that there is little you can do to estimate the total cost of attending interviews in advance: the final numbers will depend on how many programs will invite you for in-person visits[2], how far you will have to travel, and how much reimbursement will be available. The interview process itself is described in more detail in Chapter 3, but here are just a few basic facts about interview-related expenses.

First, it is important to know that full reimbursements are more of an exception than the norm. While there are some programs that cover all travel costs for everyone who is invited for in-person visits, the majority of programs only cover some of the expenses, or do it only for a small fraction of those invited for a visit. Second, if you will still be an enrolled college student during the interview semester, there may be funds available to you through your school. Make sure to ask around well in advance so that you have enough time to apply for funding/reimbursement if it is available. Finally, while some programs will house you with current graduate students for the duration of your visit (or even place you in a hotel), others may provide no such accommodations, which means you will have to make arrangements yourself.

[1] Only a few programs that I applied to required the GRE subject test in psychology. Depending on the final list of programs you will be submitting applications to, you may not need to take the subject test at all. Keep in mind that, unlike the general test, the subject test is only offered 3 times a year.

[2] Some programs allowed applicants to interview remotely even before the pandemic, and it is possible the practice will become more wide-spread in the coming years.

**4. Transcript fees**

Depending on where you are going to/went to college, you may also have to pay a fee each time you send a copy of your official transcript to a graduate program. Luckily, in my experience, most programs do not require official transcripts with the initial application. So, even if the college(s) you attend(ed) charges transcript fees, you may only need to pay them for the programs that invite you to formal interviews. Make sure you check each program's requirements to get a more accurate estimate. If your college(s) does not charge transcript fees, keep in mind that you may be required to pay any outstanding charges on your student account (e.g., tuition, housing, etc.) before your transcript requests can be processed.

## Finding the right programs

By now, you have a general idea of the kinds of questions that interest you as well as the names of 2-3 people in the field who study these questions. Now it is time to find the right programs. In this section, I will review two questions: (1) how many programs to apply to and (2) how to find programs that are right for you.

Before we turn to strategies for answering these questions, there is something very important I would like you to consider. Applying to graduate programs is very different than applying to colleges. When applying to doctoral programs, you are usually applying to work in a specific lab, to be supervised primarily by one professor.[3] Because of this, identifying the right programs to apply to is best thought of as a two-step process. First, you need to find the *labs* where you could see yourself spending the next 5 (or more) years of your life. Then, you need to make sure that the graduate *programs* those labs are a part of fit with your personal and professional goals. In both cases, making the right decision all comes down to *fit*.

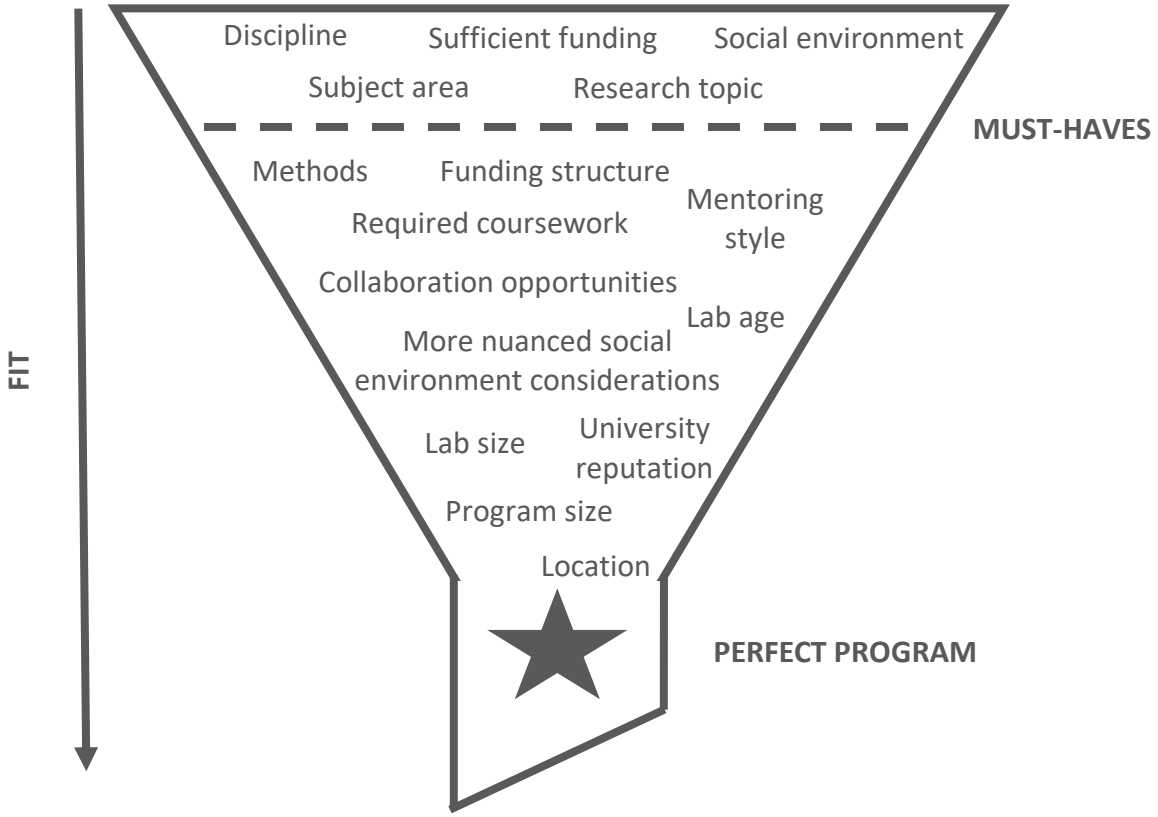
Fit is simultaneously one of the most important (if not the most important) factors in graduate admissions and the most elusive criterion that can be very difficult to evaluate. In writing this guide, I spent a lot of time thinking about what "fit" really means and trying to figure out what formula *I* used to assess it. The conclusion I came to after two application cycles and weeks of working on this document is the same one I had at the very beginning of my application journey: there is no formula (at least for me). If it's a good fit, you can *feel* it in your gut. So, my #1 advice is to trust your gut.

Even though I don't have a formula, I do have a way of thinking about fit that you may find helpful. From research questions and financial support to mentoring style, lab size, and

[3] Some psychology programs still require (or at least allow) incoming graduate students to do rotations in different labs before deciding which lab to join, but this practice appears to be growing increasingly rare. In this guide, I only focus on the process of applying to and interviewing at graduate programs that typically admit students directly into individual faculty members' labs.

geographical location, there is a potentially infinite number of variables that contribute to fit. You cannot measure all of those variables objectively, but you can organize them in a way that could make the task of finding the right programs easier. Personally, I like to think of fit as a funnel-shaped structure. At the top of the funnel are all your "must-have" factors – conditions that *must* be met for you to even consider a program/lab in the first place. As the funnel gets narrower, you get closer and closer to your "dream" program/lab that checks off every conceivable box on your list (and that may not exist outside of your imagination!). If a program/lab fulfils criteria at the bottom of the funnel but not at the top, it is *not* a good fit. For example, a lab that provides a strong fit to your personality, that is located at a university that is in your top 3 in terms of geographical location, but that does research on zebrafish vision when your intended focus is language development in children, is clearly not a good fit. On the other hand, a lab that focuses on exactly the kinds of questions you want to study, provides sufficient funding for all 5 years (more on funding in Chapter 4), but is located in the department that does not offer a class you were hoping to take, may very well be a good fit. Of course, your real-life attempts to assess fit will rarely be as clear-cut as these somewhat exaggerated examples. For example, you may find yourself weighing a program that providers a slightly better match in terms of research topic but doesn't use one of the methods you were hoping to master against a lab that is the exact opposite of that. Or, you may find yourself wondering if the lack of undergraduate teaching opportunities in an otherwise excellent program really is the deal-breaker you believed it to be. Of course, visualizing the issue of fit in this way will not automatically answer these questions for you, but figuring out where in the funnel different factors are located can make the task much easier.

**THE FIT FUNNEL**



**How many programs should I apply to?**

The short answer is, it depends! If you ask current graduate students how many programs they applied to, you may find that their answers range from as few as 4 or 5 (or even fewer) to as many as 20 programs in the same application cycle. There are several questions you need to consider that will help you decide on the optimal number. First, it is worth asking yourself if getting accepted somewhere – anywhere – in this cycle is your primary goal. As you already know, graduate admissions is extremely competitive, with many programs recruiting only between 5 and 15 students (from a pool of 100 – 1,000+ applicants!) every year. The odds of getting in are low, so, on the one hand, the more programs you apply to (assuming, of course, that they all fit your interests and goals equally well), the better your chances of getting accepted. On the other hand, applying to *too many* programs may negatively affect the quality of your applications, which means that more ≠ better. To approximate your optimal number, you may want to take a moment to think about your needs in *this* application cycle. For example, do you think you would benefit from spending another year or two working in the field (e.g., as a research assistant or a lab manager)? If so, you may decide to split your time between applying to jobs and just a few of your top-choice graduate programs. On the other hand, if your top priority is doing everything in your power to maximize your chances of getting into a PhD program *this year*, then applying to a wider range of programs may be the right decision for you. You will likely benefit from discussing your priorities with your mentors and academic advisors, your family, your peers, and other important people in your life, but in the end, this is the decision that only you can make.

The optimal number is also determined, in part, by the kinds of programs you are applying to. It is no secret that some programs are much harder to get into than others, which is why "X" may be the right number if you are

applying to a wide range of programs, but way too low if you are only applying to the most selective programs in the country. Unlike in undergraduate admissions, most (non-clinical) graduate programs do not make admissions statistics publicly available, which is why it may be hard to gauge just how selective any one program actually is. The number of applicants as well as the number of available graduate student spots may also vary substantially from one application cycle to the next, even within the same program. Your professors, peers who have recently applied to graduate programs, and current graduate students may be able to advise you about specific programs.

**One advice I received was to assume that, as you move through the admissions process, your chances of moving into the next round will be cut in half at every stage. So, if you apply to 12 programs, expect to get interview invitations from 6 and get offers of admission from 3. Of course, this is an arbitrary rule (in fact, there is nothing that warrants calling it a "rule" at all), and the real numbers will depend on *a lot* of factors, many of which are outside your control. In my case, the break-down was closer to 1/4 during my first application cycle and 3/4 when I applied the second time around. Still, I found it useful to ask myself if the numbers I got after applying the "1/2 rule" were the numbers I felt comfortable with.**

**How to find programs?**

Hopefully at this point you have a pretty good idea of the kinds of questions you would like to study as a graduate student. This probably means that you have been following the work of one, two, three, or more researchers in your field for some time. If that is the case, then looking into those researchers' labs is a good place to start. You may also decide to look at these researchers' collaborators. Look up their papers on topics that interest you and see if any of the co-authors have labs of their own. If a professor whose work you're interested in has led a lab for a few years, they may have trained graduate students and postdoctoral fellows who now have labs of their own, too. Many of the labs' websites have lists of alumni on them, so names of former graduate students and/or postdocs should not be hard to find.

Mapping professional networks of one or two researchers whose work you enjoy is an excellent starting point for finding suitable programs. Another great way to find out who is doing research in your area of interest is by looking it up on the websites of professional societies. Many areas of psychology have at least one professional society that brings people together for conferences, webinars, and other events throughout the year. For example, if you are interested in affective science, you should check out the materials on the website of the Society for Affective Science. If you are interested in social psychology, then the Society for Personality and Social Psychology is the one for you. Once you've identified a relevant society, you may start by looking up people who spoke at the most recent conferences or society meetings, or by looking at the names listed in the upcoming-events calendar.

Using a combination of these approaches, you will almost certainly end up with more labs/potential advisors than the target number of programs you were hoping to apply to (and if you haven't thought about what your target number should be, check out the previous section of this chapter). Now is the time to narrow down your list by learning more about individual programs and labs. The very first thing you should be aware of is that some of the narrowing-down will be done for you: it is highly likely that *some of the labs on your list will not be accepting new graduate students during your application cycle*. You can read more about what this means and how to find out which labs have grad student openings in the following section: *Having initial conversations with potential PhD advisors*. Aside from this restriction, the decision of which programs to apply to rests entirely in your hands.

As I mentioned at the very beginning of this section, finding the right programs is a two-step process. You should consider the degree of fit with individual labs before moving on to assess the more global fit with the programs. I recommend that you approach the task of narrowing down your list by following the same order: lab first, program second. The reason for this is that applying to a top program that does not have a lab (or several labs) that matches your interests is highly unlikely to result in an offer of admission no matter how good your grades are and how much research experience you have. Simply put, having a better reputation does not automatically make a university a better option for *you*.

Instead of eliminating individual labs/programs from your list at this stage, I recommend that you start by simply *ranking* them. This way, you can continue revising your list until you have all the information you need to make the final decisions. When it comes to assessing fit with individual labs, there are two factors that I found especially useful to consider at this stage in the application process: (1) research fit and (2) personal fit. Even though all of the labs on your list do research in your general area of interest, there is likely a lot of variation in the questions they study and the methods they use. You may already have a fairly clear understanding of which labs' questions and approaches you find more appealing. For example, you may be drawn to a biological lens on a particular set of questions in social psychology. If lab A applies neuroimaging approaches to studying those questions while lab B places more emphasis on behavioral aspects, you may decide to put lab A above lab B. If you are unsure about how different labs approach the same (or similar) questions, you may find it helpful to read a few of the recent papers from each lab. One thing to keep in mind is that published papers may not be an accurate representation of the lab's main focus *moving forward*. To make sure that your understanding of any given lab's research is up-to-date, check the lab's website to read about current lab members' ongoing projects. You may also search for preprints (https://psyarxiv.com) from the lab. And, if after doing all of this you are still unsure about the lab's current research focus and/or future directions, don't hesitate to reach out to current lab members and ask them directly!

As you look through different labs' websites, it is important that you also begin to pay attention to the overall atmosphere in each lab. Atmosphere, mentoring style, and lab-wide practices and norms all contribute to what I call personal (or social) fit. When I sought advice from my mentors and peers, I was surprised by the range of opinions different people had about the importance of personal fit in graduate admissions. Some people I sought advice from insisted that working with people whose company I genuinely enjoy is the single *most important* consideration, whereas others insisted that I should be willing to work anywhere and with anyone as long as my research interests align with theirs. Personally, I am a firm believer that having a strong relationship with your PhD advisor and your lab-mates is the foundation of a successful PhD journey. I will even go as far as to say that personal fit is more important than an exact *initial* research fit. Your interests will grow and evolve over the course of your graduate studies, and surrounding yourself with people who are genuinely invested in your success and well-being is the best way to ensure that you can pursue your interests no matter where they take you. Being genuinely invested in your lab-mates' success can also open the door to invaluable opportunities for learning and collaboration and help you build life-long connections.

Unlike research fit, personal fit is much more challenging to assess until you spend some time talking to your potential advisor and other lab members face-to-face. Nevertheless, there are a few key sources of information that you may find useful even at this stage. For instance, you can check if the lab has something like a lab manual posted on their website. Lab manuals often cover things like expectations and norms (e.g., are students expected to be physically present in the lab during certain times? How often do students meet with their advisor, and

what is the process for having a meeting set up?), traditions (e.g., weekly or monthly lab lunches), and values/guiding principles. Reading through the lab manual is an excellent way to get a glimpse into the lab's atmosphere. Another way to learn more is to talk to current and former students from the labs you are considering. Look around you: did someone in your current lab/department graduate from one of the programs on your list? If so, see if you can chat with them about their experiences.

One very important thing that you should keep in mind is that whatever impressions you form after reading the manuals and talking to former and/or current graduate students, *you are likely not seeing the full picture*. I would caution you against using your assessments of personal fit as a reason to eliminate labs from your list at this stage in the process. More likely than not, your impressions will change after you meet with more lab members and visit the lab in-person. I will talk more about assessing personal fit during preliminary and formal interviews in Chapter 3.

Once you have a preliminary ranking of individual labs, it's time to move on to evaluating graduate programs as a whole. Even if a lab is a great fit, it doesn't necessarily mean that you can (or should) do your PhD in that lab. For example, it is possible for an interdisciplinary lab doing research on the neural mechanisms of vision to only accept graduate students through the neuroscience graduate program but not through the psychology program. Depending on the program requirements and your long-term goals, which program you apply through can matter *a lot*, so make sure to consider the pros and cons carefully. Even if a lab can accept graduate students through your program of interest, the program itself may not be a good fit for you. For example, if you are an international student, some programs may not be able to provide you with adequate financial support. If you are interested in developing specific technical skills (e.g., brain imaging) as part of your graduate studies, but the program does not provide opportunities for you to gain those skills, it may not be a good fit for you.[4] You should also consider how your research interests fit with those of the department as a whole. Many departments strive to recruit graduate students who can draw connections to the work of multiple labs in the department which is why it would be wise to ensure that the programs you are considering can provide you with a stimulating intellectual environment even outside of your main lab.

It is also okay to have geographical or personal restrictions on where you are willing to move for graduate school. If possible, try not restrict yourself too much, but know that there is nothing wrong with deciding not to apply to an otherwise stellar program or two because you are not willing to/it is not feasible for you to spend the next 5+ years of your life living there. There are also more subtle, subjective factors – like socially fitting into the wider community of graduate students in the program – that can similarly influence your decision of where to pursue your PhD. However, just like personal fit with individual labs, such program-wide social

[4] If you think that may be the case, you should talk to professors and graduate students in the program before crossing the program off your list for good. There may be opportunities that you simply don't know about!

factors can be very difficult to assess from a distance (and, in my experience, any distanced impressions you form before the official interview day will likely change after you get to know the program and the people in it a little better). I will explore "social fit" and related considerations in Chapter 3.

## Having preliminary conversations with potential PhD advisors

As I mentioned in the last section, it is very likely that some of the labs on your list will not be accepting new graduate students in your application cycle. All departments/programs structure their graduate admissions in different ways. For example, some may have relatively simple schedules where some professors accept graduate students during odd-numbered years and others during even-numbered years. Usually departments have more complicated priority systems that determine who gets a graduate student spot(s) in any given application year. And, if graduate students are funded by individual faculty members' grants (as opposed to departmental or school-wide funds), the decision of whether or not to search for a new student(s) in any given year may be more or less up to the lab director. You won't know which system a department relies on just by reading about the department/program/lab online (and, with the exception of the funding structure which I will talk more about in Chapter 4, this is not something that should have any bearing on your decision-making process).

It is a good idea to find out if a professor whose lab you are interested in plans to admit a new graduate student in the upcoming application cycle. Some departments/programs post a list of professors who will have a grad student opening in their lab on their websites. This information is usually updated sometime between August and early October. Some labs may also announce if they are looking for new graduate students on their websites. If no such information is available, you may decide to write to your prospective PhD advisor to inquire about their plans for the upcoming academic year.

There is a lot of variation in professors' preferences regarding the initial contact with potential applicants. Some prefer not to have *any* contact with applicants until they are invited to formal interviews; others like to have lengthy email exchanges, phone-, or video-calls with potential applicants several weeks or even months before applications are due (more on what to expect from these calls in Chapter 3). Sometimes you will find these preferences (along with information about upcoming openings in the lab and answers to other frequently asked questions) posted on the professor's/the lab's website, so make sure you check carefully before reaching out. If you can't find any information online, or if you have additional questions, you may want to write to the professor asking them if they plan to admit a graduate student in the upcoming admissions cycle. Below is the email format I used to reach out to potential advisors.

> *Dear Dr. [Last name],*
>
> *My name is [First name + Last name], and I am writing to you because I am considering applying to the Ph.D. program in [discipline] at [University*

*name] this fall.* ***I wanted to know if you plan to recruit a graduate student to start in [year]?***

*Broadly, I am interested in studying [research interest 1]. I am additionally interested in questions concerning [research interest 2]. I have attached my CV in case you would like to know more about me.*

*Thank you very much for your time!*

*Kind regards,*

*[Name]*

Keeping it short, asking just one question, but still including a sentence or two outlining your key interests and attaching your CV allows you to be respectful of your prospective advisors' time while still providing them with sufficient information to follow up *if* they wanted (and had the time!) to do so. I usually sent one brief follow-up email if I didn't hear back within two or three weeks. Importantly, you should be prepared to never hear back from at least a few of the people you email. If that happens, *do not take it personally* – some professors receive dozens of emails just like yours in a single application cycle. Most of the time, any questions that you desperately need answered can be directed to the program administrator, the lab manager, or other members of the department/the lab.

## Putting together a CV (academic resume)

A CV is an academic resume that has information about your research and teaching experience, relevant accomplishments, conference presentations, publications, and more. There are important differences between a regular resume and an academic one. Unlike a resume, a CV does not have to fit on one page. You also don't need to include information about your experiences and qualifications that are not directly relevant to your academic career and field of study. For example, most people won't put their restaurant jobs on their CVs but will highlight the time they volunteered in a research lab even if it was just for a month or so. There are also some unspoken norms for formatting your CV that differ from those for formatting your resume.

The best way to figure out what to include on you CV and how to format it is by looking at a few examples. You can find most US-based academics' CVs just by searching their name, university affiliation, and the word "CV" in Google. Make sure you look at CVs of people from different career stages. It is common to see senior individuals, like professors or even post-docs, to simply *list* their academic appointments/other experiences and awards. However, more junior individuals, like graduate students, post-bacs (this includes full-time research assistants, research fellows, and lab managers), or undergraduate students may benefit from adding a few concise bullet-points describing each experience and/or award (e.g., you may want to list your key responsibilities or include key information about prizes or fellowships). Finally, remember that people who are farther along in their careers will naturally have much

longer CVs. However, having a *long* CV should not be your goal. Having an *informative* CV is what's really important.

Below is a list of sections that appear on most – if not all – academic CVs:

- Name and contact information (including mailing address and email)
- Education (including names of academic institutions, degrees awarded, dates attended, and, if applicable, honors received)
- Research experience (including names of the labs/internship sites and job titles [e.g., research assistant])
- Honors, fellowships, and awards
- Publications (including preprints, papers that are currently under review and, occasionally, manuscripts in preparation)
- Conference presentations and invited academic talks
- Relevant teaching experience
- Professional service (e.g., advising undergraduate students in your department, serving as a reviewer for academic journals and/or conferences, etc.)
- Professional society memberships (e.g., Association for Psychological Science, Society for Affective Science)
- Relevant skills and software (e.g., brain imaging, specific statistical techniques, programming languages)

Once you have your CV set up, have your professor(s) and/or more senior lab members look over it to see if they have any feedback. You should also make sure to update your CV regularly (once a month works well for me) so that you don't accidentally omit something. Many people also include the month and year when their CV was last updated on the first page or in the CV header.

## Writing statements of purpose/research statements

Aside from the interviews, this part is my favorite! Writing statements of purpose (SOPs) may seem like an intimidating and time-consuming process, but it offers a great opportunity for self-exploration. Instead of treating it as just another box to check off on your application, think about your SOP as something that will benefit *you*. Do that, and you will come out the other end with a better understanding of yourself, your interests, and your long-term goals. It may be hard to know where to start, so below I explore the 3 steps that I used to structure my writing process.

### 1. Knowing the basics

Like any genre, academic statements of purpose have their own norms. The very first thing you need to figure out is how long your SOPs need to be. Most programs have information about the statements they require on their websites (I have found it helpful to add this information as a separate column in my spreadsheet; see the *Making a plan* section of

Chapter 2 for details). Most programs will want just one statement of purpose, about 1,000 words long, but there is a lot of variation. Some programs will ask for separate personal and research statements, and some may require supplemental diversity statements or essays addressing topics in your area of psychology. Most websites will also have guidelines for what questions need to be addressed in your statement(s), but, for now, your goal is just to note the number and types of required statements for each program as well as the length requirements for each. Though it is critical to write a unique statement for *each* program (more on this later), there will be some overlap in the information you include. Noting how many and what statements are required for each program early on will help you get a more realistic idea of just how much tailoring you will have to do *in addition to* the basic tailoring you will already be doing for each program. For example, if all of your programs require just one two-page statement of purpose, you will likely be able to keep a similar format across programs. However, if some of your programs require two single-page statements, you will need to make sure that each one of the single-page statement makes sense *as a standalone piece* (in other words, don't simply cut the two-page statement you wrote for another program in half and call it a day).

**Always stick to the recommended length, even if it is phrased as a suggestion rather than a strict cut-off!**

Now that you have a general understanding of the kinds of statements you will need to write, it is time to figure out what information to include. If you go through different programs' guidelines, you will find a lot of overlap in the kinds of questions they want you to address. Most programs will ask you to talk about four things:

- Your research interests,
- Past experiences that have prepared you to conduct research at the graduate level,
- Your long-term professional goals, and
- The reasons why you think the program will be a good fit for your goals

The vast majority of programs will expect you to address these and other questions in narrative format (instead of writing shorter responses to separate questions), so you will need to figure out how to structure your statement(s). In my experience, there is no better way of doing this than by reading statements written by other people. Though there are a lot of example statements you can find online, it is best to read statements written by people you know and/or people who have interests and academic backgrounds similar to your own. If you don't know anyone who fits this description personally, talk to your letter-writers and see if they can put you in touch with students they've advised in the past.

After reading a few statements, you will need to find the format that works best for *you*. Don't simply use a statement that you liked as a template. Instead, take the time to write a unique statement *that only you can write.*

## 2. Writing a statement that only *you* can write

Describing your interests, giving the reader a glimpse into all the amazing things you've done in the past, and talking about your hopes for the future all in just a page or two is not an easy task. Before you begin outlining your statements and crafting the perfect opening paragraphs, you may find it useful to put together a list of "facts". The good news is that a lot of these facts already appear on your CV. There are just a few things you will want to tweak. First, list (in chronological order) all the relevant experiences you've had (e.g., labs you've worked in, specific research projects you've contributed to, etc.) Then, for each experience you listed, add 2-3 bullet points summarizing examples of specific things you did/responsibilities you had (and if you don't already have examples like this on your CV, you may want to think about adding some). Finally, add another level and write out a few uplifts and challenges associated with each activity/responsibility. In the end you should have something that looks like this:

- *Worked in XYZ lab for one summer*
    - *Helped with literature review*
        - *Challenge: interpreting statistical results in papers*
        - *Uplift: learned to write concise summaries of articles*
    - *Cleaned data*
        - *Challenge: learning a new piece of software*
        - *Uplift: developed a connection with the rest of the team*

You may also want to add a few experiences that are not listed on your CV, like taking a class or writing a paper on a topic that is relevant to your research interests.

This list of bullet points will serve as the "skeleton" of the story you want to tell in your statement.[5] In order to turn it from a dry list of facts into something resembling an actual story, you will need to make a few more additions. Specifically, you may want to go through each level-1 bullet point and reflect on how you got there. For example, what motivated you to volunteer in a lab? Why this lab? You should also spend some time focusing on each level-2 and level-3 points: *why* was the experience you listed an uplift? What is it about you, your interests, or your life as a whole that makes experiences like this uplifting? Then, take the time to think about what you learned and how you grew as a result of each challenge. After you spend some time reflecting on the past, you should try to connect each experience on your list to your future goals. Did your experience analyzing data or writing a paper make you realize that you wanted to learn more about a specific question or an area of study? Did your experiences make you look at a question or a problem from an unexpected angle? Did

[5] Though don't feel like every single one of these bullet points needs to make it into your statements! Remember, your goal is to present a compelling *story* and explain *why* you did the things that you did and *how those things connect to your future goals* – not to provide the people reading your statements with another list of all the amazing things you've done (this is what your CV is for).

your experience working in a lab or serving as a teaching assistant make you motivated to pursue a particular career?

Hopefully, after you do this exercise, your list of bullet points will grow into a *narrative* about your interests; how they came to be, and where you hope they'll take you in the future. The one final thing you need to do in order to turn this narrative into the first draft of a statement of purpose is to tailor it to a specific program.

### 3. Tailoring statements to individual programs

Writing SOPs is easily one of the most time-consuming parts of the application process because you have to write a unique statement for each program. You may have heard this already, but there is no overstating the importance of tailoring your statements to individual programs. There is both explicit and more subtle tailoring that needs to be done. Explicit tailoring is relatively straightforward: you need to include information like the name of the university you are applying to, list specific labs you are interested in, and mention the names of the professors you are hoping to work with in your statements. Explicit tailoring also involves writing about the kinds of questions you hope to study as a graduate student in each program. At this point in the writing process, you should have a draft of a narrative that captures your interests in *general* terms. Now you need to provide *concrete examples* of how you might go about pursuing these interests as a graduate student in each program.

It is possible that you already have some very detailed ideas about the studies you may want to work on in some of the labs on your list. If that is the case, you may feel tempted to take the ideas you developed with lab A in mind and simply reuse them in a statement for lab B. Though this may work occasionally, it is unlikely that you will be able to do that for most programs on your list. Research topics, methodological approaches, populations of interest, and theoretical orientations of individual labs and the programs/departments as a whole are just some of the factors you should take into consideration when deciding what examples to include. That being said, remember that your goal is to provide the readers with an *accurate* overview of your interests and goals. In other words, you should *never* fill your SOPs with questions and study ideas that you do not find interesting and that you do not actually want to pursue.

Keep in mind that many programs strive to recruit graduate students who can draw connections to the works of multiple labs in the department, so try to make such connections explicit throughout your statement. For example, you can explain how specific questions you are describing tie to individual faculty members' previous work. Similarly, when proposing an approach for addressing a particular question, you can talk about the resources you plan to use in order to equip yourself with the necessary technical expertise (e.g., taking a specific class or collaborating with another lab in the department).

**Tailoring your statements of purpose to individual programs is a tricky balancing act. On the one hand, you need to demonstrate that you have a core set of interests and ideas, and that you are serious about pursuing them. On the other hand, you also don't want to create the impression that your interests are too rigid. Make sure you acknowledge the possibility that your interests will grow and evolve as you move through graduate school and try to express some openness to pursuing other lines of work.**

In addition to tailoring your SOPs by emphasizing research fit, you should also consider briefly talking about personal fit with individual labs and/or departments in your statements. If you know a thing or two about the lab's/the department's priorities and values and how they align with yours, mention it in your SOP. For example, if having the opportunity to collaborate with several labs in the department is important to you, and if current graduate students and/or faculty members in the program told you that the department places a strong emphasis on fostering a collaborative atmosphere, make sure to mention this in your statement. You should also emphasize some of your strengths that will help you thrive as a graduate student in the program.

Finally, once you are finished with explicit tailoring, go back and re-read the core sections of your SOP that describe your general interests and past experiences. Occasionally, you will want to tweak some of the main narrative to better fit individual programs. For example, you may want to de-emphasize some aspects of the same experience and underscore others to make your fit with the program more obvious. For instance, imagine that you spent a few semesters working in a lab that uses EEG to study emotion regulation in adolescents. In addition to gaining valuable EEG skills, you learned how to recruit participants, conduct statistical analyses, write scientific papers, and work as part of a team. The experience as a whole served as one of the main factors contributing to your decision to pursue a PhD in affective science and study adolescent emotion regulation. There is no question that you should talk about this experience in your SOPs. However, you may choose to emphasize different (equally valuable) aspects of the experience in different statements. Focusing on your technical expertise in EEG may be advantageous if you want to continue doing EEG research as a graduate student *and* if the lab you are tailoring the statement to has EEG capabilities. However, if that is not the case, you may want to emphasize other aspects of your experience – like learning about the literature on emotion regulation or preparing a manuscript for publication – to avoid creating the impression that your main goal is to continue mastering EEG skills in graduate school. Don't simply "stuff" your statement with every impressive thing you did in your academic career. Make sure that every example you include contributes to the overall story you are trying to tell. Whatever you do, make sure you don't get too carried away and that the resulting narrative still accurately represents who you are, what you've done in the past, and what you want to do in the future.

My final piece of advice for crafting a compelling statement of purpose is to start the process early, leaving yourself with plenty of time to set each statement aside and revise it later. Good luck!

**There are two types of people you should ask for feedback on your statements of purpose: (1) your academic mentor(s) who are familiar with the field and the graduate school application process and (2) people who know *you* well. It is great if these two categories overlap, but if they don't, asking someone close to you to read your statement(s) *even if they don't know much about your field or grad school in general* can be invaluable in helping you ensure that the way you present yourself in your statements is true to who you are as a person.**

## Asking for letters of recommendation

Approximately 2-3 months before the first application deadline, you should have a final (or close to final) list of programs. Once you have that list, go through each program's application instructions and note how many letters of recommendation are required and when they are due. Most programs will ask for 3 letters[6] and have the same deadline for the application and the letters of recommendation, though some may require the letters to be submitted 7-10 days before the main deadline. With the names of the programs and the deadlines at hand, you are now ready to formally ask the people you've identified as potential letter-writers if they would be able to provide you with letters of recommendation. Make the initial request brief, including the number of programs, the earliest deadline, and the reasons why *you* think the person you are asking is well-positioned to provide you with a strong letter. Once they've agreed to write a letter for you, go ahead and provide them with (1) a full list of programs and deadlines, (2) your CV, and (3) a draft of your personal statement. You should also ask your letter-writers if there is any other information they want you to provide. For example, some professors ask all students who ask them for letters of recommendation to fill out a brief form so that they can have all the key information in one place. You can also offer to arrange a brief meeting to talk about your research interests, your goals, and the programs you will be applying to.

Most programs will ask you to invite letter-writers through their application portal. Make sure to do that promptly and keep in touch with your recommenders to make sure they received the invitations. Most application portals will let you see the status of each one of your invited letters (e.g., invitation sent; invitation accepted; letter started on [date], letter submitted on [date]). Make sure you check the status of your letters a few weeks before the deadline(s). Some portals send deadline reminders directly to your letter-writers. However, if you see that there's been no activity on the portal, don't hesitate to send a polite reminder email to your professor(s). You and your letter-writers should do your best to make sure the programs receive your letters by the specified deadline, but don't worry too much if unforeseen circumstances prevent one of your letter-writers from getting their letter in on time. If this

[6] Some programs may allow you to submit 4, 5, or even 6 letters, but more is not necessarily better. You should only ask for more than 3 letter if there really are more than 3 people who know you equally well and who could recommend you with equal enthusiasm. If you are uncertain about whether or not you should invite more than 3 letter-writers, ask yourself if you think that submitting 4 (or 5, or 6) letters but *having only 3* ***randomly selected ones*** *read by the admissions committee* could hurt your chances of getting in. If you have any hesitation, and if your answer to this question is anything other than an empathic "no", it is probably safest to just stick to 3 letters.

happens, you should notify the program(s) right away and explain the delay. Mishaps like this happen, and most programs will not disqualify your application because of a late letter.

Finally, remember to thank your letter-writers and to keep them posted on your progress! If you get invited to an interview or get admitted to a program, let the people who provided you with letters of recommendation know. They are all invested in your success and would enjoy hearing the good news!

## Submitting applications

Nothing compares to the sense of relief that comes with submitting your last application. You may think that logging into application portals, clicking a few buttons, and uploading a few files is not something that requires its own section in this guide. The only thing I wanted to emphasize here is just how unexpectedly time-consuming the process of submitting your applications can be. Writing out the same information, like your name, address, and date of birth on 5, 10, or even 20 different forms and making sure that your files are uploaded correctly is already time-consuming enough. But keep in mind that some application portals may ask you to list each and every one of your undergraduate classes, their catalog numbers, and the grades you received one-by-one, even though this information already appears on your transcript. Other portals may ask you to write brief answers (250-500 characters) to supplemental questions. It is a good idea to log into each account well in advance of the deadline and take a look around. This will help ensure that there are no unwelcome surprises just hours before your application is due. Aside from that, my only advice is just to proof-read everything carefully, double check the attachments, and *celebrate* once you finally hit “submit”!

# CHAPTER 3: CONGRATULATIONS! YOU GOT AN INTERVIEW (2-8+ WEEKS AFTER SUBMITTING)

## Understanding the interview process

Congratulations on submitting your applications and making it to the next round! In this chapter, I will focus on tips for navigating the interview process. Before I begin, I should say that only *one* of the formal interview days I attended took place in-person. Most of the virtual interviews I attended in 2021 were structured in a way that was meant to be maximally similar to a typical in-person interview weekend, but the experience of coming to campus in-person and being truly immersed in a program for one or two days can't be fully re-created in a virtual environment. It is still unclear if virtual interviews are here to stay, which is why I will try to focus mostly on tips that apply to both in-person and virtual interviews.

In-person or virtual, grad school interviews are a two-tiered process that usually consists of informal meetings with potential advisors (also known as preliminary interviews or first-round interviews) and formal interviews (also known as second-round interviews). Not all programs/labs have preliminary interviews, but the practice is becoming increasingly widespread. Preliminary interviews usually take place between mid-December and mid-January (though some professors you contact via email may request a brief meeting as early as September or October). Most programs host formal (on-campus or virtual) interviews sometime between late January and early March. Being invited to attend the formal interview weekend does not guarantee that you will be offered admission. Some programs invite several (usually 2 or 3) applicants per lab while others invite just one prospective student per professor and decide which lab gets priority after the interview day. Your chances of getting admitted after the interview depend on a variety of factors most of which are outside of your control. Regardless, simply being invited is a *huge* accomplishment that you should be very proud of! Some programs invite only about 1% to 10% of all applicants for formal interviews. If you're invited, it means that they already think that you would make a terrific graduate student in their department. The interview day is all about assessing personal fit and giving *you* the opportunity to learn more about the program.

## Preliminary interviews

Approximately 2-4 weeks after the applications are submitted, many professors will begin contacting prospective students to schedule informal meetings, also known as preliminary or first-round interviews. The decision of whether or not to conduct preliminary interviews is usually up to the individual professors, so don't worry too much if it's been a few weeks and you still haven't heard anything. It is possible to receive an invitation to the formal interview weekend without having a preliminary interview first. If one or more of the professors whose labs you mentioned on your applications contacted you to schedule an

informal meeting – congratulations! It usually means that your application stood out and that you are now on the shortlist for the formal interviews. Most professors will email you asking to schedule a 20-60-minute video (or phone) call. Most will also tell you what to expect during the meeting, but if they don't, the best way to know what to prepare for is to politely ask if there are any questions in particular they would like to cover during the meeting.

The preliminary interviews I attended were structured similarly. Most professors asked me to briefly describe my past and ongoing research projects and to talk about the kinds of questions I was hoping to study in graduate school. While some preferred to focus on the big picture, others were eager to dive right in and start fleshing out the details of specific studies I could run if I joined their lab. Make sure you are prepared to talk about your research interests and ideas at the broad, conceptual level as well as in a way that is more detailed. Remember to re-read the personal statement(s) you wrote and do not worry about repeating the things you wrote during your preliminary and formal interviews. At this stage, you may find it useful to make even stronger connections between the questions you wrote about in your statement and the lab's work. For example, can some of the questions that you want to study be addressed using existing datasets from the lab or by building directly on some of the lab's previous studies? Or, can some of your interests be explored in collaboration with other members of the lab who are working on similar questions? Needless to say, to be able to answer these questions, you need to be familiar with your prospective advisor's work. *This doesn't mean you have to read every single paper they've ever published*, but you may want to brush up on some of the papers you've read in the past as well as to read a few of their most recent publications before the meeting.

After asking me about my past and future research, most professors I met with made sure to leave enough time for me to ask any questions about the lab, the program, or anything else I wanted to know about. This part of the meeting can take anywhere between one-fifth and one-half of your total meeting time, and it's an excellent opportunity to begin assessing personal fit with the lab and the program (see *Finding the right programs* section of Chapter 2 to read more about personal fit). What questions you ask depends on what factors *you* think are important in deciding if this lab/program is right for you. Below are some of the factors that were important *to me* along with examples of specific questions. Keep in mind that I did not usually have the time to ask all of these questions at preliminary interviews.

- Making sure my needs align with my prospective advisor's mentoring style and expectations:
    - *How often do you usually meet with your graduate students?*
    - *What does a typical meeting with your graduate students look like?*
    - *In your opinion, what makes a successful graduate student, both in general and in your lab in particular?*
- Being in an environment that supports collaboration:
    - *Is it common for graduate students in your lab to work on projects together or with members of other labs?*

    - *Can graduate students attend other labs' meetings?*
- Having the flexibility to design my own studies/collect my own data:
    - *Do graduate students in your lab typically work on existing grants or design their own projects and collect their own data?*
- Being in an environment that places a strong emphasis on undergraduate teaching and mentoring:
    - (Assuming this information is not on the program's website) *How much do graduate students in the program teach? Are there opportunities for graduate students to design and teach their own classes?*
    - *Do graduate students in your lab get to mentor undergraduate research assistants?*
    - *What is it like to teach undergraduate students at* [University]*? What do you like most about teaching undergraduate students at* [University]*?*
- Being in a warm and supportive environment:
    - *How would you describe the overall atmosphere in your lab?*
    - *Are there any fun lab traditions you can tell me about?*
    - *Do the lab members spend time together outside of the lab?*

At the end of the interview, your prospective advisor will typically tell you what to expect in the coming weeks. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the admissions process varies dramatically across programs. In some cases, individual professors have full control over who they invite to formal interviews. If that is the case, they may even invite you to attend the formal interview weekend at the end of your meeting. However, don't feel discouraged if that does not happen. More often than not, professors need to secure the approval of the department, the area, or the admissions committee before extending formal interview invitations, and, in some cases, these decisions are not up to individual professors at all. Depending on when your preliminary interview takes place, it may take anywhere between a few days and a month (or more!) for you to find out if you are one of the applicants invited for formal interviews.

## Formal interviews

Before doing any substantive preparation, you should take some time to think about the overall structure of a typical interview day and do some general planning. If it is an in-person visit, be ready to be on your feet – both literally and figuratively – for *very* long periods of time. You may not receive your detailed interview schedule until the interview day, so be prepared to be flexible. The one in-person interview I attended back in 2020 had a schedule that started around 7am and continued without any real breaks until close to 1am (the day ended with an informal dinner that was followed by a party). The virtual interviews I attended in 2021 were not quite as grueling, but many of them still involved being on Zoom for 6 to 10 hours a day. Even though I'm a fairly social person, and even though I generally felt energized by and excited about meeting so many great people during my interviews, I still found it challenging to be "on" for such long periods of time. So, if there are any tricks you have up your sleeve for staying

equally focused at 8am and 8pm with a full day of meetings and other activities in-between, now is the time to start perfecting those tricks. You are going to need them.

As far as the actual preparation goes, the most valuable piece of advice I received was also the one that did not fully make sense to me until after one or two interviews: *be yourself and don't over-prepare.* As I said earlier in this chapter, being invited to a formal interview is an incredible accomplishment: it means that the people in the program already think you would make a terrific graduate student. The goal of the interview day is *not* (at least in my experience) to weed out applicants by asking them trick questions, but simply to asses fit in a way that is can be difficult to do from a distance. In fact, by the time the interview day rolls around, a lot of (though definitely not all!) professors/committees will already know who their top choice applicants are. Sometimes you will even be interviewing alongside candidates who already received an offer of admission from the program prior to the formal interview day. An interview is the opportunity *for you* to get to know the department and make connections with people who will soon become your colleagues (even if you don't end up attending a program, you will most likely encounter the people you meet later on in your academic career). You will certainly want to put your best foot forward and make a good impression, but don't let it get in the way of your being your true self and having fun during the visits. What you really need to do is to "get a feel" for what it would be like to be a student in the lab/program on the day-to-day basis. In order to do that, you really need to be in the moment and be yourself. Over-preparing and spending the entire day focusing on what impression you are making would almost certainly get in the way of that, and it would similarly prevent the faculty/students in the department from getting a realistic feel for what it would be like to have you as their colleague.

How the interview day is structured depends on the program. Some programs will have you meet one-on-one (or, occasionally, in groups of 2-3 applicants) with every single member of the department/your area as well as with some graduate students and post-docs. Other departments will just have you interview with 1-3 faculty members in addition to your primary prospective advisor. Regardless of how the rest of the interview day is structured, the vast majority of programs will also have some panels, information sessions, research talks, and informal events where you can hang out with current students and/or faculty members in a more casual setting.

In my experience, most of the one-on-one meetings last between 15 and 40 minutes. Only a few of my meetings involved the interviewer asking me detailed questions about my past research and/or future research plans for the whole duration of the meeting. Most of the meetings started with casual banter and naturally drifted toward subjects like the overlap in our research interests, recent developments in the field, my overall impressions from the interview day, or something that had nothing to do with graduate school at all (one of my one-on-one conversations with a senior person in the field was all about our favorite food, and I still got admitted to that program).[7] Most faculty members will have just one or two questions to

[7] I should also add that I did not have any negative or otherwise uncomfortable interactions during any of my interviews. However, at least one person whom I sought advice from while preparing for interviews did. If you feel

ask you. Some ask all applicants the same question(s) (e.g., "Why this program?"); others may ask you a specific question about something they read in your personal statement and/or your CV. One of the most common questions I got was to describe something that happened while I was working on one of my previous and/or ongoing research projects that I was particularly excited about, and to explain why it made me feel excited. Another common question was the exact opposite of the one I just described: to talk about a challenge I faced while working on one of my projects and to explain how I handled it. My only advice for tackling these questions is to make sure that you can talk about your research succinctly. When you are excited about your work, it is natural to want to get too deep into the weeds and all too easy to get side-tracked. So, practice curbing your enthusiasm just enough that you can pause for air, let your interviewer respond, and have it be a *conversation* rather than an impromptu research talk!

Almost all of the people you meet will also ask you if you have any questions for them. As you probably already know, it is generally not recommended to say that you do not have any questions, no matter how well you did you homework and how much you already know about the program, the department, or even the person you are talking to. You should always have one or two questions ready to go. That being said, my advice is to only ask questions that you really want to know the answer to. In other words, unless you are genuinely interested in your interviewer's opinion or perspective on something, don't just ask them to recite information you already know just for the sake of asking something. For example, you probably shouldn't ask them to tell you about the course requirements in the department – something you can easily learn about by reading the program's website or attending one of the information sessions – but you can ask them what *they* think about the required coursework, or if there is anything they would like to change, *as long as you are actually interested in hearing their answer*. Another thing to keep in mind is that there is nothing wrong with asking several people the same question. Just because you have meetings with 12 different people doesn't mean you need to have 24 non-overlapping questions. Though it's probably not a good idea to have just one question that you ask in every single one of your meetings, repeating the same question a few times is not a bad thing. Different people will almost certainly have different perspectives on the same issue, and learning about different faculty members' and students' opinions on the same topic is a great way to learn about the program/the department. Finally, though you may find it helpful to "do your homework" (I usually read 2-3 of each faculty member's best-known papers and 2-3 of their most recent papers), don't try to impress your interviewers with detailed questions about something from the method section of the paper they wrote 10 years ago (unless you are genuinely so curious about the answer that it's been keeping you awake at night).

In case you find it helpful, I compiled a list of questions I often asked during my interviews in Chapter 5. My main advice to you is to just go with the flow, be in the moment, and see what questions *naturally* come up during your meetings. The most exciting part of the

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any "bumpy moments" or have a negative interaction with a specific interviewer, do not despair. Take a deep breath and try your best not to let one negative interaction sour the rest of your interview day.

graduate school application process is the opportunity to meet with so many amazing people as part of your interviews. Don't waste this opportunity reading questions off a script!

As far as assessing the fit goes, you can also learn *a lot* outside of your one-on-one meetings. Information sessions and informal events provide an excellent opportunity to really experience what it's like to be a part of the department/the lab. Look at how students in the department interact with each other and with faculty members. Are they enjoying themselves? Do they seem at ease? This may be harder to gauge in virtual interviews, but you should have many opportunities to observe informal interactions among different members of the department during in-person visits. If you get the chance to see students in the department present their work, pay attention to the kinds of questions their mentors and peers ask. Do people seem genuinely interested in each other's research? Are most of the questions friendly and constructive or do people in the department tend to be more critical? Finally, ask yourself if the graduate students in the program seem genuinely happy. Of course, people differ, and the fact that current students seem happy does not guarantee that you will thrive in the same environment. Nevertheless, graduate students who express genuine enthusiasm when answering questions about their program and who don't seem just a little too eager to go home instead of spending time with their peers and prospective students is generally a good sign.

After the interview day, don't forget to send brief thank-you emails to your graduate student host(s), your prospective advisor(s), and the faculty members you met with during your visit. And of course, take the time to celebrate yet another milestone on your application journey!

# CHAPTER 4: CONGRATULATIONS! YOU GOT IN (1-8+ WEEKS AFTER INTERVIEW)

## What to expect after the interviews

First of all, congratulations on being done with the interview season! I hope you enjoyed the process as much as I did. Most programs you interviewed at probably gave you some idea about how long it would take them to make their final decisions. As you know, there are usually 3 possible outcomes: you can get accepted right away, you can get "waitlisted", or you can get rejected. In my experience, accepted candidates typically begin to hear back within one or two weeks after the formal interview date. However, the amount of time it takes to hear back if you are not in the first batch of accepted applicants can range *a lot*. Some programs do not formally notify waitlisted candidates that they have been waitlisted. If that is the case, you may have to wait until some of the applicants who have been offered admission make their decisions to accept or turn down their offers. Most programs in the US allow applicants until April 15$^{th}$ to make their final decisions, so waitlisted candidates may not even know their fate until after that date. In general, if it has been more than two or three weeks since the interview day and you still haven't heard anything, it is OK to follow up with the program coordinator or the professor you interviewed with to see if they can provide you with more information.

If you are one of the people who have been offered admission, congratulations! And if you have been accepted to more than one program, you have some decisions to make.

## Deciding where to go

As exciting as it is to be in a position to decide between several graduate programs, the decision-making process itself can still be pretty nerve-wracking. How should you approach making this important decision? As you can probably guess, once again, it all comes down to fit. The good news is that, by now, you've had many opportunities to evaluate your fit with different programs and labs. It is even possible that you have found your perfect program; the one at the very bottom of your fit funnel. If that is the case, congratulations! Go ahead and accept your offer. If you are not ready to do that just yet, or if you are torn between two or more programs, there are some things you can do to make the decision-making process a little easier. You certainly don't want to rush into this important decision, so take a deep breath and take as much time as you need to make sure you have all the information.

There are several things you can do to assess fit more fully at this stage. First, you can have more meetings with your prospective advisors and future lab-mates to ask them any remaining questions you have. You can also ask your prospective advisors if you can attend a few lab meetings to get a more realistic idea of what it's like to be a part of each lab (of course, this may have to be done virtually). Another thing you should do is to keep your mentors, family, friends, and other important people in your life in the loop. Let them know what you're

thinking. Let them know what dilemmas you're struggling with. People who know you well will be able to offer valuable advice even if they don't know as much about graduate school as you do. Your mentors who are familiar with the field may also provide you with information about individual departments and help answer any lingering questions you have. In the end, this is a decision that only you can make, but consulting with people who care deeply about you and who want you to succeed can make the decision-making process much easier.

Now is also the time to think more concretely about funding considerations. Shortly after you receive your formal offer of admission, you should receive a financial offer that specifies how much funding you're guaranteed by each program. In addition to the total amount of funding, there are other important details you should pay attention to. For example you need to consider what sources your funding package is coming from. Most graduate programs use three types of funding: fellowships, teaching assistantships, and research assistantships. Your package may consist of just one of those types of funding or some combination of all three. Your obligations as a recipient of each type of funding will depend on the program (and, if applicable, on the conditions specified by the funding source), so make sure you talk to your prospective advisor, current graduate students, as well as the program coordinator about your package. You should also think about the differences between departmental/program-based funding and lab-based grant funding. Sometimes (though certainly not always), students who are funded through faculty grants may have more restrictions on the kinds of studies they can work on (especially early on in their graduate school journeys before they can secure any grants of their own). Grant-funded stipends may also make it more challenging to move to a different lab within your department in case your research interests change or things don't work out with the advisor you were originally admitted to work with.

You should also talk to graduate students in the program to see if they are satisfied with the amount of financial support they receive. Based on what the current students tell you about the cost of living and other expenses in the area, take the time to estimate your budget while taking into account your personal circumstances. Finally, keep in mind that some programs have supplemental funding you can apply for, like conference funding, dissertation awards, and other merit- and service-based funding opportunities, all of which you should take into consideration when comparing your offers.

**Some programs only pay graduate students during the academic year or have different pay rates and schedules during the summer months, so make sure you ask current students about the payment schedule!**

As far as the timeline goes, you are, of course, allowed to take all the time you need up until April 15th to make your decisions. However, if you have been offered admission to a program that you already know you won't be attending, it is always a good idea to let them know as soon as you can. This will allow them to begin reaching out to wait-listed applicants

sooner rather than later. For me, saying “no” turned out to be one of the most challenging parts of the application process that I did not see coming. I really connected with some of the people I met during the interviews and fell in love with some of the programs. (If I could clone myself and attend several programs, I probably would). Writing the emails turning down the offers of admission was hard, but it helped to remind myself that every time I delivered bad news to a program, a talented wait-listed applicant received potentially life-changing news. Luckily, every single person I contacted to turn down the offer was understanding and many were genuinely happy to hear that I had found a program that I was excited to attend.

Once the decision is made and the offer is signed, take a deep breath and take a moment to reflect on how far you’ve come. Applying to graduate schools can be both exhilarating and incredibly stressful, and you did it with flying colors. Share the good news with your letter-writers and all the important people in your life. I am so excited for you to begin this new chapter in your life!

## PARTING THOUGHTS

If you got in – congratulations! If you received rejections, don’t feel discouraged and try not to take them personally. I know you’ve heard this before, but the process of applying to graduate school in psychology is *incredibly* competitive. Many people (including myself) go through two, three, or even more application cycles before finally getting into a graduate program they can attend. Many others go through one or more application cycles and ultimately decide to move forward with finding other career paths. Whatever your journey looks like, know that you are not alone. I wish you the best of luck, and I really hope that you found this guide helpful!

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# CHAPTER 5: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## Questions to ask during interviews

### Questions for faculty members

- What are some of the best things about [University]/the department? What sets it apart?
- What do you enjoy the most about teaching at [University]?
- How would you describe the overall atmosphere in the department?
- In your opinion, what makes a successful graduate student? [8]
- What kinds of careers do graduate students pursue when they graduate from the program?
- How do you see the department changing in the next 5 or 10 years?
- Would you say graduate students have a voice in the department/the program?
- (Assuming this information is not available on the program's website) What are the major milestones (e.g., first-year project, master's thesis, qualifying exams, etc.) students go through before beginning their dissertation? How is the dissertation process structured?

### Questions for graduate students

- Why did you choose this program?
- Is there anything you wish you knew or had done differently when you were applying to graduate programs?
- What surprised you the most about graduate school, good or bad?
- How would you describe the overall atmosphere in the department/in your lab?
- Would you say graduate students have a voice in the department/the program?
- What is the course load like? Do you feel like it's a good balance between classes, research, and teaching?
- Are you satisfied with the amount of financial support you receive from the program?
- Where do most graduate students live?
- Did your interests change over time, and if so, was your advisor/the program supportive of that?
- Do you work on your advisor's grants or design your own studies and collect your own data?
- What is the best thing about working with your advisor? What are the main challenges?
- What general advice do you have about choosing the program?

[8] Keep in mind that this is one of the most common questions professors get during interviews!

For lab-specific questions to ask your prospective advisor, see the *Preliminary interviews* section of Chapter 3.

## Online resources

**Some resources I found helpful:**

- Harvard PTO-Tip: https://psychology.fas.harvard.edu/pro-tip
- Stanford Social Neuroscience Lab Summer 2020 Professional Development Series: https://www.ssnl.stanford.edu/resources
- The Ohio State University Advice from Graduate Students: https://psychologymajor.osu.edu/careers/preparing-graduate-school/advice-graduate-students

**General (not specific to individual departments) psychology PhD admissions information sessions and prep programs:**

- Harvard PPREP: https://psychology.fas.harvard.edu/pprep
- Stanford Paths to PhD: https://psychology.stanford.edu/diversity/paths-phd

**Other application guides:**

- *How Applying to Graduate School Works* by the Sokol-Hessner Lab https://www.sokolhessnerlab.com/howapplyingworks
- *So, you're applying for a PhD in Psychology... Loosely organized tips from one subjective source* by Jamil Zaki https://www.dropbox.com/s/jq8rzfsgrcxmhlg/zaki_gradApp_guide.pdf?dl=0

**Applying to clinical programs:**

- *Mitch's Uncensored Advice for Applying to Graduate School in Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology,* written by Mitch Prinstein: https://mitch.web.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4922/2017/02/MitchGradSchoolAdvice.pdf
- *Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology, 2012/2013* by John C. Norcross: https://www.amazon.com/Insiders-Graduate-Programs-Counseling-%20Psychology/dp/1609189329/ref=dp_ob_title_bk
- *A Student's Perspective on Applying to Graduate School in (Clinical) Psychology: A Step-by-Step Guide* by Sophie Choukas-Bradley: https://mitch.web.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4922/2013/10/TipsForApplyingToGradSchool.pdf