

Applying to Graduate School in Psychology: A Personal Perspective on How to Get In Gracefully

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The process of applying to graduate school can be stressful for applicants. Presented here are some personal reflections on what helped one Ohio University student get organized to successfully apply to graduate programs in psychology.

The process of applying to graduate school can be overwhelming. However, applying to graduate school is something that you do for yourself—not to please others or because everyone else is doing it. Thus, graduate school applications are a very personal experience. This is your opportunity to find a program that meets your specific interests in psychology, and will give you the training to get you to the career path and position you desire. So it's not about finding the “most competitive” program, but finding a program that will “get you where you want to be” and an academic environment that will enable you to do your best work.

Yet, because graduate school applications are such a personal process, it can be hard to know where to start, or how to evaluate your success in the process. The types of programs that your peers in psychology are interested in are likely not the same programs that you are interested in—so it's hard to know that you are on the right path.

In this document, we've compiled several recommendations for how to navigate the process in a way that prioritizes your personal interests and professional goals. Through organization, following a timeline, trusting your instincts, and keeping your options open, we've learned that your stress can be reduced.

Recommendation #1: Follow a timeline.

Before you begin organizing materials, it is a good idea to review the different steps you'll be completing in the coming months. On the next page you'll find a month by month timeline of tasks to complete.

Recommendation #2: Break it down and get organized.

When starting to apply to graduate school it can feel very overwhelming. Staying organized in the graduate school application process can help minimize the inevitable stress.

It can be surprising how much information you acquire from the start of the application process.

You'll want to print out information from the web pages of a range of programs, to get an understanding of which program will best meet your needs.

Personal Reflection: How I got organized with binders, “tabs” and spreadsheets

One way to stay on top of all the information regarding different schools is to stay organized and a large binder works perfectly for this task. Buying a simple one inch binder and organizing it properly will give you a one stop location for all your graduate school information. In the beginning of the binder it helps to create a spreadsheet that neatly organizes the basic information of each school. The layout for spreadsheet could include: school name, final application deadline, area of specialty (i.e. clinical, counseling, etc), intended degree (i.e. M.S., Ph.D., Psy.D.), and faculty you would like to work with. On the final page of this packet is an template of a spreadsheet you can use.

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Organizing the binder with tabbed sections for each individual school allows a place for information regarding their programs, special application instructions, printed email communication with faculty and anything else pertinent. You might find that a tabbed section for GRE results and additional score reports is also helpful.

Binders can also showcase your organizational skills when it comes time to request letters of recommendation. Once your letter writers have agreed to write for you, you can impress them by giving a concise, neat, and helpful binder of the information they will need to write a letter for you.

A smaller binder with tabs works great for organizing the materials you'll want to give your letter writers. Tabbed sections could include descriptions of programs and schools, a copy of your Curriculum Vita, a copy of your school transcripts, a copy of your personal statement, additional forms needed for letter writers, a letter to the letter writer and finally preaddressed and stamped envelopes. This type of attention to detail and consideration for your letter writer (who may be writing many letters) could possibly shine through in their recommendations.

Recommendation #3: Trust your instincts.

Staying on top of deadlines and being organized will reduce your stress levels and keep the application process more manageable. However, not every part of this process is black and white. Learning to trust your intuition will allow you to narrow your list of schools and identify faculty you would like to do research with. Remember, this process is about finding a program that will give you the skills you need to meet your professional and career goals.

A personal perspective... Trust your gut:

Keeping your options open throughout the application process can help you find the best fit.

In the beginning of my school search I wasn't overly concerned with the finer details of each program and school. My plan was I would go where I was accepted and learn to like it. When the time came to visit schools that I was being interviewed at though, I realized those finer details actually did matter. For example, one school that looked amazing from the website was not everything I had hoped for in person. This program emphasized research heavily and had more limited teaching opportunities. Throughout the interview day I realized that this wasn't the school for me. On the other side though, I found an instant connection to the faculty and program of other schools. What I connected with wasn't the facts and pictures from their website, it was the atmosphere that I felt comfortable with. Learn to trust your gut in this process, you will find the most satisfaction when you have accepted admission to a school that looks good on paper and feels good in person.

Recommendation #4: Keep your options open.

The fear that you will not be accepted to any program is always in the back of many students' minds. You can control much of the application process by studying hard for the GRE, creating a solid personal statement, and requesting letters of recommendation from faculty you know will speak highly of you.

What you cannot control is if the schools feel that you are the right fit for them.

One way to increase your chance of acceptance is to keep your options open. Applying to different types of programs and also Ph.D as well as M.S and M.A. programs will give you a safety net if your first choice schools fall through. For example, don't lock yourself into just Ph.D. clinical programs, explore other types of programs as well. Building a backup plan into your application process will take stress off you during these months

