

Before you apply: How to be a Competitive Candidate

Making yourself a strong candidate for graduate school requires starting early. A consistent record of academic success, effort, and interest bolsters your chances to stand out to application committees.

Of note, the following may make it more difficult for you to enter into a graduate program:

- Low grade point average (generally below 3.0)
- Weak GRE scores (generally below 1000)
- No research or clinical experience
- Uncertain career goals
- Late application
- Poor letters of recommendation due to few connections with faculty
- Inadequate coursework in psychology

If your application status is not where you'd like it to be, there are options you can consider (i.e., Should I consider securing a master's degree first?) that will make you a stronger candidate when it comes time to apply. Deferring application in order to re-take courses, work in a research laboratory, or gain field experience in clinical settings can also help to bolster your application if your current resume does not make you competitive for the program's you'd like to attend.

Graduate School Selection Criteria—Objective Criteria

- Grade point average
 - Average for Ph.D. programs 3.5
- GRE Verbal and Quantitative scores (Psych less important)
 - Average quantitative score: 550-600
 - Average Verbal Score 540-580
 - Psychology Subject Test Average: 540-600

Graduate School Selection Criteria—Non-objective Criteria

- **Faculty mentoring**
 - How? –Start early!
 - Express interest in their research
 - Ask to become involved in their research
 - Ask for advice about graduate school
 - Why?
 - Provide guidance throughout application process
 - Write letters of recommendation
- **Clinical experiences**
 - Paid work or volunteer in a human service agency
 - Insist on receiving some supervision
 - Link clinical experience to your research interests
 - Where?
 - Crisis hotline
 - Center for homeless or troubled adolescents
 - Schools for emotionally disturbed children
 - Group homes for the developmentally disabled
 - Summer camps for the disabled
 - Community mental health centers
 - College peer counseling programs
 - Women’s resource centers
 - Substance abuse prevention programs
- **Research Experience**
 - Volunteer to work with a faculty member on one of his/her research projects
 - Engage in research as an independent study for academic credit
 - Volunteer or work in research outside of your university (hospital, medical center, etc)
 - Complete an honors thesis or undergraduate research project
 - Complete a formal master’s thesis
 - Publish your findings or present your findings at a conference
- **Extracurricular activities**
 - Join departmental student organizations (Psychology club, Psi Chi)
 - Join the American Psychological Association (APA) or the American Psychological Society (APS)
 - Volunteer work and community service, based on interests
 - Attend regional or national psychology conferences

Source:

Sayette, M.A., Mayne, T. J., & Norcross, J. C. (2004).
Insider’s Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology.
New York: Guilford Press