

## Recommendations for preparing for graduate school as a junior

\*\*There are many sources of advice for college students thinking about going to graduate school; I highly recommend seeking advice from as many sources as possible. Here is my advice:

- Focus on truly mastering the material covered in your classes and determining the best study strategies to help you do so. If you truly master the material in your classes and put in the effort needed to succeed, good grades typically follow. Remember learning takes concerted effort and succeeding in graduate school will take years of concerted, persistent effort; practice now.
  - The recommended GPA varies by type of graduate school you are pursuing, but the higher your GPA is, the better your chances of getting in are.
- If you are struggling to master the material in a class (or classes), seek assistance from the professor(s) and utilize resources available on campus (e.g., the writing center, the psychology department statistics tutors).
- If you think you want to pursue a Ph.D. in psychology and you have not already done so: Take psychology statistics, your core psychology courses, and the psychology lab as soon as possible. (Psychology is a science, make sure you want to do research as early as possible.)
- Pay attention to things you find fascinating (these may be areas that you want to pursue in graduate school).
- Explore the sections of the psychology department website related to graduate school and careers in psychology. Many students do not know all of the various types of potential careers and graduate schools and thus are pursuing a path toward a degree they ultimately do not want or may not need.
- If you feel confident in the type of graduate school you would like to pursue:
  - Explore the psychology labs looking for research assistants.
  - Once you find a lab (or more than one) that you'd like to work in, determine if you meet their requirements. If not, obtain those requirements as soon as possible. If you do, follow their directions for how to apply to the lab.
  - Continue reading scholarly articles or books related to that path. For instance, if you are interested in social psychology, read different types of articles in social psychology journals to begin to explore types of social psychology research you may want to conduct in graduate school.
  - Think about summer opportunities you may be able to pursue related to your ideal path (e.g., research assistantships, work opportunities, volunteer opportunities), and apply for those.
  - If you are pursuing a graduate degree in a field related to psychology, take courses in that area. (E.g., social work classes if interested in going to social work school, Pol 306 & 307 if interested in going to law school).
- Continue being involved in the campus and/or broader community through clubs, meaningful volunteer opportunities (volunteering once for 2 hours is not meaningful, volunteering at the same place for 2 hours per week for a year or more is), or part-time work. \*Be careful you do not engage in so many out-of-class activities that it negatively impacts your grades though.
- Continue getting to know your psychology professors and professors in other departments who teach topics related to your chosen career path. You will need at least 3 strong letters of recommendation

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to get into graduate school. In order to write a strong letter your letter writers will need to know you as a person, not just as a student who did well in their class.

- Begin to think about when you would like to apply to graduate school. The remainder of this advice is for students who plan to apply during their senior year of college. If you do not plan on applying during your senior year of college, this advice applies to the time period before you apply.
- During your free time junior year or during the summer before your senior year:
  - Explore potential programs that meet the requirements you have for your chosen graduate school. (I highly recommend only applying to programs that have been accredited by the relevant accrediting agency. For instance, a psychology program should be accredited by the American Psychological Association.)
    - I recommend keeping track of potential programs you are interested in, their requirements, why you like that program, and how to apply to that program in one location (e.g., an Excel spreadsheet, a document, a notebook) because this will help you when you go to actually apply in the fall or spring. You will need to apply to multiple programs and just like applying to undergraduate schools, you should not only apply to “reach” schools unless you are prepared to not get in. Many graduate programs are extremely selective and are thus extremely difficult to get into. The actual number of programs you should apply to will depend on the type of program you are pursuing, the strength of your resume and transcript, and strength of your letters of recommendation (increase the number if the programs are competitive and/or your materials will not be extremely strong).
  - Determine when you are going to take the GRE (and Psychology GRE if it will be required) or other entrance exam (e.g., LSAT or MCAT). Once you have set a date, determine your study schedule and follow your study schedule so that you can perform as well as possible on the exam. \*Taking the exam during the summer may be less stressful than taking it during the school year and will allow you time to re-take it if needed.
  - If you are pursuing a Ph.D. in psychology, you will need to:
    - Determine the type of research you would like to do. Be as specific as possible, stating you want to study “child psychology” is much too vague. Stating you want to study “prevention and early intervention programs for Autism Spectrum Disorder in infants and toddlers” is specific enough.
    - Once you have determined the specific type of research you would like to do, look for a research mentor in your chosen area of research, not just a program that you like. Most doctorate programs in psychology use a model where you work with a primary research mentor which means you will essentially apply to work in their lab (you do not apply to the overall program like you did for undergraduate programs). I recommend reading research articles in the area you are interested in and then looking up the programs where the authors of articles you find especially interesting are located. If the program looks interesting, read some more articles written by that professor. If you still are interested in working with that professor, e-mail them a respectful e-mail stating your interest and why you are interested in working with them and ask if they are going to be accepting students

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for the semester you will be applying for. (This will save you the time and money applying to work with someone if they will not be accepting new students because they are on sabbatical, are retiring, or aren't accepting new students for any other reason. This also will put your name in their mind if you do later apply as someone who was serious about working with them.)

- Begin to write your personal statement (or other type of written document needed for the type of program you will apply to).
- Begin to create a strong, professional looking Curriculum Vitae (or résumé).
- Think about who you will request 3 strong letters of recommendation from (you will need to request letters at least one month before you need the letters written).