

When do I have to start thinking about graduate school (and once I start thinking, then what)?

Applying to graduate school is a long process that begins years before you actually complete applications. The following is a suggested graduate school timeline.

Freshman Year

1. *Take your classes seriously.* Although it can be tempting to skip classes in order to visit the Midland Center for the Arts (or to sleep), don't! Psychology graduate programs are extremely competitive and your first year's grades really do count. Do not give up if you have a bad first year, though, because many admissions committees look more closely at grades from the last two years of college.
2. *Learn about your professors' research interests.* Research experience is a must for Ph.D. programs and many M.A./M.S. programs. Before making a commitment to do research for a faculty member, make sure you are interested in what they are doing. Professors may find it difficult to write good letters of recommendation for someone who appears bored by their work or who frequently switches teams.

Sophomore Year

1. *Start doing research with professors or graduate students.* Try to get experience in different aspects of research including research design, collecting data (i.e., "running subjects"), data entry, and data analysis.
2. *Join Psi Chi or other psychology organizations.* Participation in Psi Chi will expose you to information about graduate programs and careers in psychology.
3. *Begin thinking about what aspects of psychology interest you the most.* For example, if you enjoy learning about the lifespan development of humans, you should begin looking up programs in developmental psychology.
4. *Find a volunteer experience.* Examples of relevant volunteer experiences include working at a crisis hotline center, domestic violence shelter, daycare center, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and respite care.
5. *Start writing your curriculum vita (resume).* It will be difficult to remember all of the activities you have been involved with if you wait until your senior year to write a vita (resume). You should periodically update your vita to make sure it is kept current.

Junior Year

1. *Continue (or start) doing research and attend professional conferences in your area of interest.* For example, if you think you are interested in clinical psychology and

would like to learn more about cognitive behavioral therapy, you could go to the annual Association for Advancement of Behavior Therapy conference.

2. *Read the latest edition of the book, Graduate Study in Psychology and Allied Fields.* This book describes the programs, admissions requirements, and application deadlines for almost every graduate school in the U.S. and Canada. Your goal is to identify schools you might be interested in so that you can read about their programs on the internet. When using this book, make sure to compile a list of schools that represent varying degrees of competitiveness. That is, choose several schools that are a long shot for you (i.e., your credentials are lower than the average of their current students). Then make sure that your scores match the majority of the schools you select, but also look for “fall-back” schools (i.e., schools where you clearly surpass all of their requirements). Once you have a list, run it by a faculty member in your area of interest for feedback, revise the list, and consult each university’s web site to become acquainted with the graduate programs you selected.
3. *Start preparing for the Graduate Record Exam (GRE).* Preparation books are available at university bookstores and internet book dealers.

Summer between Junior and Senior Year

1. *Assemble catalogs and application materials.* Program information and applications are increasingly available on-line, but you may have to write or call for some materials. Be sure to request information about an application for financial aid if these are not sent with the application materials.
2. *Use the rest of the summer to review the information.* Among other things, look at the research interests of faculty members to see if there are some matches with yours. Reduce your list of prospective programs to about ten.
3. *Stop procrastinating and study for the GRE.* It is important to refresh your math skills; relying on information learned from your junior year (high school) calculus class is not likely to be very helpful.
4. *Begin preparing your autobiographical statements.* There are several reasons why almost all graduate programs require a writing assignment. First, this is a way for the admissions committee to assess your writing skills. The personal statement also lets faculty members know about you as a person, including what your interests are, why you want to earn a graduate degree in psychology, and how their school matches your interests and goals. Be honest about your background and what your interests are. If you say you are interested in child psychology, be prepared to work with a child psychologist if you are admitted into a program.
5. *By the end of August, you should find out dates/times for when the GRE is offered through a local testing center.*

6. *Start saving money for the application process.* You will have to pay for official transcripts, application fees, and travel to prospective sites (if necessary). Some programs may require a personal interview.

Senior Year

1. *Contact faculty members to write recommendations for you.* You should provide them with addressed, stamped envelopes so they can mail the letters to you (for “self-contained” application packets) or the schools. Give them ample time to write your letters (i.e., one or two weeks notice is usually not enough time).
2. *Continue working on your autobiographical statements.*
3. *Take the GRE as early as possible.* Doing so will allow you to re-take the GRE (should you want to) and still apply to graduate school for the following year.
4. *Ask a faculty member to review your autobiographical statement.* Start by asking a friend or family member to proofread your autobiographical statement. When you are sure there are no obvious errors, give your draft to a faculty member. Make revisions as necessary.
5. *Request that transcripts be sent to programs from all colleges attended.* It typically takes one to two weeks for transcripts to be mailed. You should be notified of your status (regular acceptance, provisional acceptance, on waiting list, application denied) by mid-April.
6. *If all of your applications are rejected, take time to consider all of your options.* You might (1) work for a year, study for the GREs, and resubmit graduate school applications; (2) enter a master’s program in General Psychology, re-take the GRE, and re-apply to doctoral programs; or (3) think about applying to programs in fields similar to psychology, such as social work (M.S.W.) or Marriage and Family Therapy. Before selecting one of these options, talk them over thoroughly with your faculty advisor.
7. *Be realistic during this process.* Ph.D. programs set minimum standards as a way to make the initial cut of students. If you are applying to a program that requires a minimum 3.5 GPA and you have a 3.0 GPA, save yourself the time and money and do not apply. But it is difficult to predict which programs will admit a student because admission depends on many factors, including the number of faculty members who have openings in their laboratories during any given year. Consequently, many students who are denied admission one year receive outstanding offers during a second round of applications.