Graduate School Application Toolkit

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to reduce barriers to admission in graduate programs for psychology (with an emphasis on PhD programs) and to promote psychology for all. It's a (semi) comprehensive resource meant to explore each stage of the application journey, from exploring whether grad school is right for you to preparing and submitting applications. You don't need to read it all at once. Instead, feel free to navigate to the sections most relevant to you as questions or needs arise.

This toolkit was developed by faculty, graduate students, and staff in the Objectification of Women Lab (OWL) and Violence Intervention for Survivors of Trauma and Abuse (VISTA) labs at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). It was last updated in October 2025. Feel free to share widely.

Why Graduate School?

Pursuing a PhD in Psychology is a significant commitment, often taking 5–7 years of intensive research, coursework, and professional development. Depending on your goals, it may be a necessary step toward a career in academic research, teaching, or clinical practice.

That said, graduate school isn't the only way to engage in psychological research or build a meaningful career. While a graduate program might be the right choice for some, there are other opportunities worth exploring if you decide not to go down the graduate school path. Research positions could range from research assistant, lab technician, project coordinator/lab manager, and data management. Research employment opportunities, especially at the university level, can provide a wide range of professional experiences and development. A good place to start would be checking for employment opportunities at a university/lab/faculty of interest to you (e.g., https://employment.unl.edu/). If you are already volunteering in research lab, you can ask the research staff (e.g., project coordinators, graduate students) if they are aware of any opportunities. You can also send cold emails to other labs you are interested in working with.

Is Graduate School the Right Fit?

Before committing to the application process, it's worth taking time to reflect on whether graduate school aligns with your personal and professional goals. Consider your values, the kind of work you want to do, the lifestyle you're hoping to build, and the type of training you need to get there. PhD programs can be incredibly rewarding but also intense and demanding. It's important to be honest with yourself about what you want from your career, and whether a PhD is the best route to get there.

Overview of the Application Process

Applying to PhD programs is a multi-step process, includes identifying programs and mentors, preparing application materials (e.g., CV, personal statement, writing sample), requesting letters of recommendation, taking the GRE (if required), and completing

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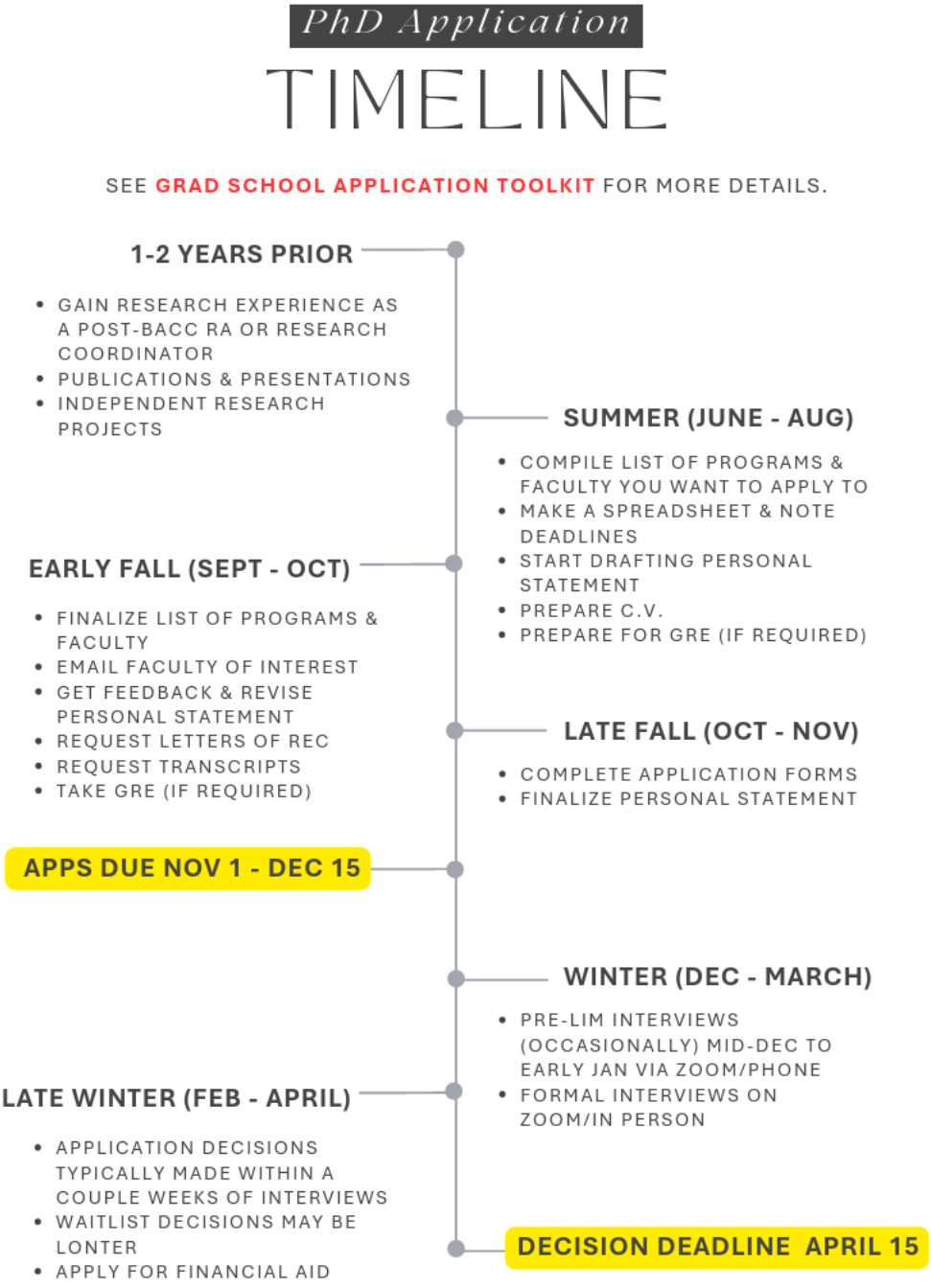
interviews. The process can be time-consuming and emotionally taxing, particularly given how competitive many programs are. Because of this competitiveness, many applicants go through multiple application cycles before being admitted. That's not a reflection of your worth or potential; rather, it's often about fit, timing, and the availability of funding and mentorship at individual programs. Being prepared for this possibility and having alternative plans in place can help reduce the stress of the process.

For an overview of the general timeline for applying to PhD programs, see the figure below.



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Types of programs

Areas of Psychology

Sub-Discipline	Information
Behavioral Neuroscience	Focus on applying biology to the study of behavior (physiology, genetics, development, etc.) in humans and other animals Trained to conduct research; most often work in academic settings, but also in the pharmaceutical industry or in medical imaging technology
Clinical Psychology	Focus on understanding, diagnosing, and treating psychological disorders (e.g., anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance use disorders) Trained to conduct research and provide clinical assessment and treatment
Cognitive Psychology	Focus on understanding mental processes (e.g., attention, memory, problem solving, language); how the mind take in, processes, and acts upon external information Trained to conduct research; most often work in academic settings, but also government agencies, corporate businesses, and private consulting
Community Psychology	Focus on understanding individuals within their social, cultural, economic, and political environments; emphasize prevention, empowerment, and social change to enhance community well-being Trained to work collaboratively with communities; often employed in academic, public health, nonprofit, and policy settings
Counseling Psychology	Focus on career issues, life transitions, and general wellbeing Trained to be professional practitioners of psychology, working in counseling settings
Developmental Psychology	Focus on understanding how humans grow and change over their lifespan (in terms of emotions, cognitions, behavior, etc.) Trained to conduct research; most often work in academic settings, but also government agencies, health care facilities, and schools
Feminist Psychology	Focus on synthesizing feminist, intersectional, and psychological theories and methods to address how systems of power, gender, sexuality, and identity shape individual and collective experiences Trained to conduct socially informed research using diverse methodologies; pursue academic and applied careers in settings such as universities, advocacy organizations, industry, and policy institutes Typically joint programs in psychology and women and gender studies (examples: Penn State, UMich)

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Forensic Psychology	Focus on applying psychological knowledge and methods to legal issues Trained to practice psychology within the criminal justice system and civil courts; typically work in correctional facilities, police departments, hospitals, legal consulting, or academic settings
Industrial/ Organizational Psychology	Focus on understanding human behavior in organizations and the workplace Trained to address issues related to recruitment, training, performance, workplace environment, and consumer behavior; most often work in organizational and workplace settings, but also independent consulting or in academic settings
School Psychology	Focus on assisting educators to implement effective learning environments; conduct research on effective teaching, behavior management, interventions Trained to evaluate children's school-related problems and needs and to intervene with children through individual counseling, support groups, and skills training
Social Psychology	Focus on understanding individual behavior in a social context; examine how group dynamics influence choices and actions and how social perceptions influence interactions with others Trained to conduct research; most often work in academic settings but also may work for government agencies, nonprofit organizations, hospitals, and private companies
Sports Psychology	Focus on understanding how psychological factors influence sport performance and practice Work in hospitals, gyms, clinics, physical rehabilitation centers, schools, private consulting

Source: "Types of Graduate Programs in Psychology" powerpoint from University of Houston

Degree Types

Master's Programs

MA or MS Area	Type of Work
Child and adolescent psychology	Family and child therapist
Clinical psychology	Psychological associate, clinical associate, substance abuse counselor, therapist (if licensed and with supervision)
Forensic psychology	Correctional counselor, police consultant, victim advocate, trial and jury consultant
Industrial-Organizational psychology	HR administrator, business consultant
School psychology	School psychologist

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Sports psychology	Rehabilitation counselor, performance enhancement specialist, instructional sports counselor

Source: Which Psychology Graduate Degree Type Is Right for You?

Social Work and Therapy Types	Details
Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW)	Need to earn a Masters in Social Work (MSW) before obtaining licensure First masters level license that allows you to work as a social worker in most states; can work in clinical settings as a therapist only under supervision of a LCSW/psychologist/psychiatrist
Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW)	Need a minimum of a Masters in Social Work (MSW) and 2 years of supervised field experience Can provide clinical services (e.g. therapy) to clients without supervision Potential roles: general counseling, crisis intervention, mental health therapy, substance abuse support; both mental health work and social services/supports; can work in schools, hospitals, elderly care, private practices, courtrooms
Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC)	Need a minimum of a MA (usually in counseling, school counseling, family and marriage counseling, etc.) and a certain number of hours of supervised clinical experience (differs by state, most states are 2 years, 3000 hours) Work with individuals experiencing mental health issues or troubles fitting in with society
Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)	Very similar to LMHC Need a minimum of a MA (usually in a psychology concentration) and a certain number of hours (3000 for most states) A little more broad: primarily mental health but can also encompass career counseling, rehabilitation counseling, and other forms of counseling that do not directly involve treatment of mental illness

Source: LMSW vs. LCSW, LMHC vs. LCSW, Decoding counselor alphabet soup

Doctoral Programs

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

- Can obtain a PhD in any area of psych (clinical, social, developmental, cognitive, behavioral neuro, I/O, etc.)
- Typically 5-7 years; typically receive funding
- Focus on research, teaching, and practice (for clinical psychologists only)

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Doctor of Psychology (PsyD)

- Designed for those interested only in practicing therapy
- Typically 4-6 years; typically don't receive funding
- Focus on practice, less focus on research than PhD

Medical Programs

Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse (PMHN)

- *Source: https://www.allnursingschools.com/specialties/psychiatric-nurse/
- A specialty area within nursing: focus on offering primary care for those in need of psychiatric services; can assess, diagnose, and treat mental health issues, including prescribing medications and administering psychotherapy
- Earn a MA or doctoral degree in psychiatric mental health nursing

Medical Doctor (MD)—Psychiatry

- Typically takes 8 years (4 years of medical school, 4 years of psychiatric residency)
- Role: can prescribe medications, so typically focus on medication management as a part of treatment for patients, although they can technically practice psychotherapy as well
    - More common for individuals to go to a psychiatrist for medications and a psychologist for psychotherapy

Master's vs. Doctoral Comparison (Clinically Oriented)

	LMSW	**LCSW**	**LMHC**	**LPC**	**PhD**	**PsyD**	**PMHN**	**MD**
Years of School	2 years of school (MSW) + licensing exam	2 years of school (MSW) + 2-3 years of supervised clinical experience	2-4 years of school + 2 years of supervised clinical work	2-4 years of school + 2 years of supervised clinical work	5-7 years of school	4-6 years of school	BA in nursing: 4 years (or 2-3 years to get RN if no nursing BA) + MSN (2 years) OR DNP (2-3 years) + 500 supervised hours	8 years of school (4 med, 4 residency)
Focus	Social work, mental health, counseling,	Assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of	Clinical support and treatment to individua	Mental health but more broadly other types of	Research, teaching, psychotherapy	Psychotherapy	Psychiatry/ Medication	Psychiatry/ Medication

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	social support	mental illness	ls in distress	counseli ng				
Typical Annual Cost	MSW: $13,800 (public), $36,300 (private)	MSW: $13,800 (public), $36,300 (private)	MA Counseli ng: $12,170 (public)	MA Counseli ng: $12,170 (public)	$0--tuition waiver plus stipend for teaching or research	$25,000-$60,000	MSN: $35,000-$70,000; DNP: $40,000-$70,000	$34,592 (public in state); $58,668 (public out state); >$50,000 (private)
Typical Debt After Grad	MSW: >$30,00 0	MSW: >$30,000	MA Counseli ng: $80,000	MA Counseli ng: $80,000	$50,000	$120,00 0	MSN: $47,321	>$250,000
Accepta nce Rate	MSW: 70%	MSW: 70%	MA Counseli ng: 57%	MA Counseli ng: 57%	Clinical: 12%	40%	MSN: 68.2%	Med School: 41%
Average Salary	$64,230	$72,809	$70,833	$70,077	$100,800	$103,49 4	$123,607	$266,474
Settings	Social work offices, governm ent, correcti onal facilities , rehabilit ation facilities , schools	Public agencies, private practice, mental health clinics, psychiatr ic facilities, rehabilita tion, hospitals , schools, crisis services	Health centers, schools, prisons, workplac es, private practice	Health centers, schools, prisons, workplac es, private practice	Universiti es, hospitals, mental health clinics, private practice, court systems, schools, business organizati ons	Private practice , schools, correcti onal facilities , mental health facilities , hospital s, commu nity centers, universit ies	Hospital s, mental health facilities, private practice, commun ity centers, schools, correctio nal facilities	General and psychiatric hospitals, clinics, private practice, university medical centers, communit y agencies, correction al facilities, governme nt agencies, military, rehabilitati on, emergency room

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Sources: *Social Work* • Typical costs of MSW programs • Job market and demand • Social work education statistics (CSWE) *Mental Health Counseling* • Time to become a counselor • Affordable online counseling degrees • APA graduate education survey data *PhD/PsyD in Psychology* • Clinical psychology salary outlook • Grad school debt for psychology students (APA)	• PsyD program features and acceptance rates *Psychiatric Nursing* • Educational path overview • Nursing school costs • Average nursing student debt • Graduate nursing program acceptance rates *Psychiatry (MD)* • Cost of medical school • Loan and debt considerations for psychiatrists • Medical school acceptance rates

Note: all numbers are general averages or medians for an overall summary, but there is a lot of variation across schools/programs and states; table was created in 2021

Other Considerations

- **Program structure**: consider whether you want to attend full-time or part-time—some programs are designed to accommodate working professionals, while others expect full-time commitment.
- **Funding and tuition**: Most PhD programs in psychology *should* offer full funding (tuition waiver + stipend); be cautious of PhD programs that do not. Ask whether funding is guaranteed for the full length of the program. Masters programs and medical school are more likely to be self-funded, though some offer assistantships or scholarships.
- **Fellowships and external support**: Some students bring their own funding (e.g., NSF GRFP); check whether programs accept external fellowships and how that affects internal funding packages.
- **Location**: Competitive programs (especially PhDs and medical programs) may require relocating across the country; you might have more geographic flexibility when applying to master's programs.
- **Licensure requirements**: If you're pursuing a career in therapy, counseling, or clinical practice, check what degree and supervised experience are required for licensure in your state or country.
- **Hidden costs**: Even funded programs may have hidden expenses like health insurance, fees, moving costs, or unpaid practicum hours. Ask programs what's covered and what isn't.
- **Reaching out to potential faculty mentors:**
    - Don't feel obligated to email potential mentors before applying. It's not expected, and many students are admitted without ever sending a message. Choosing not to email won't hurt your chances of acceptance.
    - If you do email, make sure you have a substantive reason. Don't ask about things that are already answered on the faculty or program website. That can give the impression you haven't done your homework.

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- Good reasons to email include asking whether the professor is taking a student that year or clarifying something about their research interests. Again, be sure to confirm that this information isn't on the website, or that what is posted appears to be outdated.
- If you and the potential mentor will both be attending the same conference, which you can often tell by looking at presentations listed on their vita, you could reach out to ask about connecting. Meeting briefly in person can be helpful and informative.
- Professors handle emails from applicants differently. Some are happy to reply, while others won't respond, either because they're too busy or simply don't make a practice of replying. If you don't hear back, take it as neutral rather than personal, and don't assume it reflects negatively on your application.

Suggested Timeline

- **1 – 2 years before applying**: Gain research experience
  - It is increasingly common (particularly in clinical psychology) for people to become a post-bac research assistant or research coordinator prior to grad school, ideally in labs that align with their research interests for grad school
  - Look for opportunities to write/publish manuscripts (whether as a first author or collaborator), present research (posters or oral presentations), and conduct independent research projects
- **Summer (June – August):** Start preparing applications
  - Compile a list of programs and faculty to you want to apply to
    - Search the list of APA-Accredited Programs for schools in areas you would like to live in and look at their faculty
    - Read articles that interest you and research the authors
    - Use NIH Reporter or NSF Award Search to see who has recently gotten grants in your areas of interest, as they may be able to fund graduate students
    - Talk to faculty and graduate students you know
    - Check faculty's websites to see if they are accepting students for the next cycle. If their website doesn't provide this info or appears to be outdated, you can reach out to potential advisors with a short and direct e-mail. See above for more considerations on this.
  - Making a spreadsheet that includes:
    - Programs and faculty of interest
    - Deadlines and application requirements (e.g., personal statement guidelines, number of letter of recommendation (LORs), official/unofficial transcripts, GRE)
    - Application fees
    - Funding information (i.e., stipend, research/teaching assistantships, health insurance)
  - Begin drafting personal statements and other application essays/materials

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    - Prepare your C.V.
    - Research financial aid
    - Prepare for the GRE (if required)
- **Early Fall (September – October):** Prepare applications
    - Finalize list of programs you are applying to
    - Identify faculty members of interest
        - Consider emailing them to express your interest in applying, or to ask them questions about their research/whether they are open to accepting a student with your interests
    - Edit your personal statement and essays
        - Get feedback from professors, grad students, writing center, etc.
        - Ideally, get feedback from people in your field of interest (e.g., clinical, developmental, neuro, social)
    - **6-8 weeks prior to due date,** request letters of recommendation
    - Request your transcripts and send them to the programs you are applying to (fees may apply)
    - Register to take the GRE (if required) no later than October; take the GRE
- **Late Fall (October – November):** Refine applications
    - Complete application forms
    - Finalize personal statement and essays
    - Gather information for financial aid
- **Early Winter (November 1 – December 1)**: Applications Due
    - **Submit your applications**
    - Send all of your materials and verify LORs, transcripts, and other supporting documents were received by the programs you are applying to
- **Winter (mid-December – March):** Interviews
    - Faculty may request brief (15-30 min) preliminary interviews via Zoom/phone call in mid-December to early-January
    - Invitations for interviews may be held in person or on Zoom
    - Prepare for interviews by seeking advice from professors, grad students, and other resources for successful interview strategies
- **Late Winter (February – April):** Application Decisions
    - Admission decisions are typically made within a few weeks of an interview; if you are waitlisted, the decision may take longer
    - If applying for financial aid, submit a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in March
    - **April 1:** APA deadline for notification; you should expect decisions by this date
    - **April 15:** typical deadline for accepting an offer; if accepted to multiple programs, need to make a decision and notify all programs

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Research Experience

PhDs are research degrees, thus, getting research experience is essential not only for getting into graduate school, but also knowing if grad school is right for you! Getting both a breadth and depth of research experiences will be helpful for uncovering what research questions and approaches are most interesting to you, and for getting the skills needed for getting into and succeeding in graduate school.

Some of the information in this section is reproduced from the UNL Department of Psychology Undergraduate Research Resources.

Benefits of Research Involvement

- Gain skills in critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, use of technology, and communication just to name a few.
- Our students present dozens of papers and posters annually at scientific conferences, and we lead UNL's College of Arts and Sciences in honors theses submitted.
- Preparation for graduate school – conducting research as an undergraduate shows a potential graduate school you are capable of conducting research as a graduate student, balancing your coursework with the additional responsibilities of research, and understanding the importance of research within the field of psychology.
- Getting to know and work with a faculty member who might one day be willing to serve as a reference for graduate school or a job!
- Earn academic credit and fulfill the university's Experiential Learning requirement.

Types of Research Experiences

There are lots of ways to get involved in research at UNL and beyond. These include:

- General types of research experiences
    - Research labs
        - Perhaps you've taken a class with a professor you really liked, or you learned about a topic that intrigued you, or you are passionate about a certain topic for non-academic reasons. You might consider reaching out to professors who study topics you are interested in (see template below for how to do this). While it may seem daunting, most professors will be able to connect you to a research experience that suits your needs.
        - A list of research labs at UNL can be found here.
    - McNair Scholars
        - The goal of the McNair Scholars program is to increase the number of underrepresented students in doctoral programs by engaging in research and developing the skills needed to succeed at the doctoral level.

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        - Students from underrepresented groups in graduate education or first-generation students with financial need are eligible to participate (for all eligibility criteria, visit the McNair Scholars page).
        - Benefits include access to research opportunities, paid summer research experiences, opportunities to present at national conferences, access to McNair fellowships and more.
    - Honors thesis
        - Conducting an honors thesis is another way to get additional research experience. For more on the process in the Department of Psychology at UNL, visit the honors thesis website.
    - Research Experiences for Undergraduates (REUs)
        - REUs are research opportunities supported by the National Science Foundation. Each year, a variety of opportunities are available. Undergraduates can apply directly to REI sites to participate.
        - More information on what REUs are and how/where to apply can be found on the NSF REU website.
    - Post- baccalaureate programs and jobs
        - Post-baccalaureate programs: these programs are designed for students who have a bachelor's degree (in any discipline) and who are seeking additional preparation for psychology-oriented graduate programs and/or careers." (Source: https://www.apa.org/ed/precollege/psn/2020/03/post-baccalaureate-programs)
        - You can also seek out a job as a project coordinator, research assistant, or other research-oriented position. More information about these types of positions can be found above.
- UNL specific research experiences
    - Undergraduate Creative Activities and Research Experiences (UCARE)
        - The UCARE program pairs undergraduate students with faculty mentors to engage in a paid research experience.
        - Students who have completed their freshman year can participate with any full-time faculty member at UNL.
        - Undergraduate researchers may apply for a Summer Award (June 1-August 15) or an Academic Year Award (September-April). UCARE undergraduate researchers are responsible for finding a faculty advisor to guide and oversee their research project. For more information or to apply, visit the UCARE website.
        - Tip: Often students will start in a lab as a volunteer research assistant and then discuss a UCARE project with their faculty member once they have been involved in the lab.
    - First Year Research Experience (FYRE)
        - The FYRE program allows eligible first year students to use their federal work study financial aid award to be employed on a research project.

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        - FYRE students are matched with a faculty mentor to support a research or creative project, and will participate in other skill-building events and workshops throughout the year.
        - More information about eligibility criteria, placement, and timeline can be found on the FYRE website.
    - Check out the emails from the PSYC advisors for occasional advertisements about available opportunities.

Email templates for reaching out to faculty for research experience can be found in Appendix A.

Norms and Expectations

Undergraduate research assistants can help with any number of aspects of the research process, including helping with data collection (e.g., running participants), data management, data analysis, recruitment efforts, writing, and more.

The norms within and across research experience types vary widely.

- Some research labs will have lab meetings where personnel from across projects in the lab will gather to provide updates or discuss certain topics, while others will just have meetings for specific projects (e.g., if a faculty member has multiple large-scale grants).
- The amount of contact you will have with the faculty director of the research lab also varies widely. Some labs will be primarily run and managed by a project coordinator or a graduate student.
    - It could be helpful to ask about the norms for letters of recommendation in the lab in advance of when you might need to request them.
- The degree to which your role and expectations are made explicit may also vary. The best way to understand the lab's norms and expectations is to ask explicitly. Usually, you will ask the person you have the most contact with or who handles the day-to-day carrying out of the research (e.g., the project coordinator).

Publications and Presentations

One of the benefits of getting research experience is getting acquainted with how to communicate about the research and its findings. You can do this by working with members of the lab to present and publish research findings. Publications and presentations are great ways to demonstrate your experiences and skills on graduate school applications. If you are already writing a paper or presentation (e.g., thesis; At UNL, one of the opportunities to present is at Research Days), that would be a great start.

1) If you are interested in this, and you've been working in the lab, you could ask for a meeting or conversation with a graduate student, project coordinator, or faculty member.

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   a. Sample language: "Hi [Name], I was wondering if you might have a few minutes sometime soon to chat about ways I can become more involved in the lab's writing projects. I'd love to hear your advice."
2) When you meet, express a strong interest and commitment, including that you realize that doing a presentation or co-authoring a paper requires real work above and beyond what you're already doing.
   a. Sample language: "I've really enjoyed being involved with the lab, and I'd love to take a bigger role if there are any writing projects or papers where I could contribute meaningfully. I'd be excited to put in the work needed to earn co-authorship, and I'm open to helping with tasks like literature reviews, data analysis, or drafting sections — whatever would be most helpful. I know that writing a paper requires substantial contributions, and I'd love any guidance you have on how I could work toward that.
3) If you are working on thesis or a specific project, and have any ideas about specific presentations or papers, mention that.
   a. Sample language: "I have been working on a thesis, or I have been helping analyze data, if there's a way to help write up that project, or related project, I would be interested."

Getting the Most Out of Your Research Experience

- Independent work
  - Doing some work outside of your responsibility in the project can add more to your research experience. This type of work can include working on posters/presentations/papers using data from the project you are working on or any data within the lab (e.g., secondary analysis). This can be in the form of thesis, UCARE (UNL Specific). If you are thinking of applying to graduate school, independent research work can make you a more competitive applicant.
  - You can approach a research staff (e.g., project coordinator or graduate student) to express your interest in doing independent research work and share your research interests. They can help connect you with the faculty or another research personnel (e.g., a different graduate student) who can assist you throughout this process.
- Professionalism
  - Communication is key: Working in research requires the ability to communicate effectively with a variety of research staff (e.g., study directors, faculties, project coordinators, graduate students, lab technicians, fellow undergraduate research assistants). Most grant funded projects rely heavily on undergraduate research assistants to help with data collection and other project related tasks so being able to communicate effectively contributes to the project's success.
    - Effective ways of communicating with research staff include providing timely updates, asking clarifying questions, actively participating in

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training and meetings, promptly responding to messages, and reporting issues with accuracy and detail.
    - Time management is essential: Demonstrating effective time management in research involves attending all required trainings and meetings, being punctual for participant sessions, and consistently meeting deadlines for project-related tasks. It is also important to be honest about your limits, set clear boundaries, and communicate early if you are feeling overwhelmed or need to adjust the deadlines.
- Contributes to getting a good letter of rec
    - What you worked on in the lab, posters/presentations/papers, anything notable about your contributions or experience in the lab (e.g., frequently covering other's shifts, getting additional responsibilities)
        - Being an active member of the lab: Seeking out opportunities to learn and go beyond the bare minimum show your dedication and eagerness to contribute (e.g., getting involved in posters/presentations/papers, frequently covering other's shifts, taking on additional responsibilities)
        - Demonstrating your ability to manage your workload effectively by setting boundaries and communicating early when needed also shows professionalism.
        - Effective Communication: Sharing updates on progress, actively listening to feedback, and promptly responding to inquiries are all key components of successful teamwork.
        - Maintaining strong professional relationships in the field of psychology and research is essential, not only for collaboration and knowledge but also for long-term career growth. These professional circles often overlap - colleagues today may be co-authors, reviewers, or hiring committee members tomorrow. Even after a letter of recommendation is written, it's important to honor your commitment to the project and/or lab and the faculty and staff involved in these projects. These sustained relationships reflect professionalism and respect, and can lead to future opportunities, support, and shared success.

Clinical Experience

- If you are interested in a clinical psychology PhD program, having some clinical experience going into grad school can be useful (although not necessary). Clinical experience can inform the extent to which you might be interested in clinical work, what types of populations you may be interested in working with, or what research questions within clinical psychology you may be interested in pursuing.
- However, even clinical PhD programs will prioritize research experience above clinical work during the application process, so it is commonly recommended to seek out research opportunities prior to applying.

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- Other types of clinically-oriented doctoral programs (e.g., counseling psychology PhD, PsyD programs, school psychology PhD programs), likely vary in how they view the relevance of clinical experience prior to applying. It is recommended that you seek out the norms for the different programs you may be interested in.
- Examples of clinical experiences that may be useful/desirable on a CV:
    - **Volunteering/working for crisis lines (text or phone):** There are both national and local mental health crisis lines that provide a range of mental health support services (e.g., suicide prevention, domestic violence). Often involvement does not require a clinical degree (although would provide relevant training).
    - **Behavioral health technician or psychiatric aid:** Working in a residential or inpatient facility.
    - **Support staff:** working in a private practice or a community mental health center.

Application Components

Letters of Recommendation

Choosing Letter Writers

There is a norm when applying to grad school that letters from people with PhDs in your or a related area are valued more than letters from people without this degree. Many graduate students and staff members who you have worked with contribute to letters but they will likely need to ultimately come from a faculty member.

- Who?
    - Faculty members who know you well or whose graduate students know you well—especially tenure-track or tenured professors.
    - Faculty whose lab you work even though are supervised by a project manager or graduate student – given norms around asking those with a PhD in your area to write a letter these individuals may write one with input from your more direct supervisors
    - Faculty who supervised your thesis or an independent research project.
    - Research mentors (including postdocs and staff members) you've worked closely with in a lab setting.
    - Supervisors from clinical or volunteer settings with direct relevance for the kind of program you are applying for can be helpful in addition to academic writers.
    - Faculty you are applying to work with in graduate school. If these individuals speak best to your experience, they can still write you a letter though some students may opt to find a fourth letter writer in case or provide an additional optional letter to this program.
- Ideal letter writers are people who can:
    - Can speak to your academic potential and specific research skills

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    - Know you well enough to write a personalized, detailed and enthusiastic letter
    - Understand what PhD programs are looking for. It is especially useful if at least one of your writers is from the area of psychology you are applying to (e.g., someone in social psychology if you are applying to social psych programs) though not explicitly required.
- Establishing Relationships Early
    - The best letters come from people who have gotten to know you so it is best to try and build professional relationships with people in your department early. We suggest:
        - Get involved in research labs early, ideally by sophomore or junior year. However, if you join later, that's okay too! Just be sure to take as active a role as possible.
        - Attend office hours to engage beyond coursework.
        - Show initiative in lab responsibilities (ask questions, suggest ideas).
        - Stay in touch after a course or lab ends (updates, thank-you's).
        - Build relationships over time, not just for a letter.

Tips for Requesting Letters

- When to ask:
    - Ask early! Ideally you have an initial conversation/email roughly 2-3 months before the deadline, but 6-8 weeks before the deadline is generally acceptable. If you contact people closer to the deadline or wait until the last minute (1-2 weeks ahead of time), they may not be able to write for you.
    - Give more notice if writer is likely to be busy or writing other letters.
- How to ask:
    - Ask in person or via a personalized email (see the template in Appendix A as starting point)
    - Ask if they'd feel comfortable writing a strong letter in your support.
    - Mention why you're asking them specifically. What is it about them or your relationship that made you think they'd be a good fit to write you a letter?
- Providing Writers with Necessary Background
    - The best letters are written when the writer has plenty of information about your strengths, skills and experience relevant to the program. We suggest providing writers with the following as soon as possible.
    - CV
    - Draft of your statements (e.g., personal, research, diversity)
    - List of schools and deadlines. Make this as clear as possible.
    - Summary of the work you've done with the writer that highlights some of the experiences that translate to grad school.
    - Optional but recommended: Description of why you are interested in or are a good fit for each program. Help them make a case for you!
    - Tailor each letter request and information you provide to the writer's experience with you:

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        - Research mentors are best positioned to speak to: research design, data analysis, writing, critical thinking
        - Professors: academic strengths, intellectual engagement
        - Clinical supervisors or other relevant supervisors: interpersonal skills, professionalism
- Reminding Faculty About Letters of Rec Submissions
    - Faculty are busy and likely writing several letters so do not take it personally if they are slow to get these done or need reminding. We all could use a little help right? Here are some tips for reminders.
    - Some letter writers will ask you for specific reminders so follow that if they ask. If they do not ask, ask them how they would prefer to be reminded. Help them, help you. If they do not ask for reminders, we still suggest reminding them 1–2 weeks before the deadline, and 2–3 days before the due date, if the letter hasn't yet been submitted.
    - Be sure to be polite and gracious when giving these reminders. See Appendix A for email templates.

Personal Statement or Statement of Purpose

Structure and Content

The overarching goal to consider when writing your personal statement is creating a cohesive narrative about your academic journey. By this, we mean that you can see clear connections between what you are saying first sparked your interest in the work you hope to do (both for research and/or clinical work) and how this has progressed over time to bring you to applying to work with the specific mentor of interest within a specific program. For example, one might start with a describing a class, story, or life experience and how that led them to seek out an initial research position, which then highlighted the importance of some other topic or approach for which you sought out experience with. Creating these clear connections between your interests, experiences, and future goals will highlight your ability to approach graduate school and successfully seek out relevant training to meet your career goals. Be honest, and authentic, but it also ok to tell the story through the lens of your current understanding, connecting earlier experiences to present goals (even if it wasn't perfectly linear and you had some false starts or unexpected detours).

What to include/Demonstrating fit

Within this, it should be clear to the reader what your research interests are and how those overlap with the work being done by the PI/mentor you are applying to work with. You should also discuss the program broadly and how their approach to training matches your career goals, values, and/or motivations. Different subdisciplines have varying degrees of focus. For example, when applying to clinical programs it would be important to acknowledge whether the program takes a clinical science or scientist-practitioner approach as this signals you understand the research vs clinical focus and load in that program. It might be helpful to discuss how a clinical science program matches one's

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goals to become an independent investigator or how a scientist-practitioner approach matches one's values for practice and research to inform one another. As another example, a core element of many social psychology is theory development, so highlighting the social psychology theories you've used in your research or are interested in understanding better, may be important. Read department and program websites carefully, as they provide useful information about disciplinary values. Demonstrating fit is done best by showing and telling, such that you are describing your experiences thus far and how they have set you up well to work with that mentor on their current projects. See Appendix B for an example of a personal statement.

Dos and Don'ts

- Do personalize each statement for the program you are applying to. One of the first steps of this can be exploring recent work done by the mentor you're applying to work with. Feel free to make references to this work and, most importantly, how it connects with your research interests. There may be other program specific requirements for your statement of purpose, so be sure to make note of that when exploring potential programs.
- Do get feedback from others about your personal statement. Ask your friends to read through it, get feedback from the University's writing center. The more eyes you can get on it, the better. If you're volunteering in a research lab, ask the graduate students and your PI to look it over. This feedback is often most helpful as graduate students have experience with applying to graduate school and PIs regularly review applications.
- Don't fake your interest in a program. If the mentor you are applying to is doing work outside of your research interests, don't apply to work with them just because you like the school or feel like it's "your best shot" at getting into graduate school. Graduate school is a huge commitment, and you want to be sure that you're doing something that you're passionate about.
- Don't include irrelevant details in your personal statement that don't contribute to a larger story. Talk about your relevant experiences. For example, talking about your own mental health or your passion for social justice *could* be a part of your personal statement if it contributes heavily to the reasons why you want to go to graduate school. But you should avoid getting into too much detail and get feedback from others about how your statement comes across.
- Don't use vague language. Give specific examples to back up the things you're saying. Don't just say that you're "passionate about research", explain why and what you believe you can add to your field of interest. Clear examples and concrete descriptions will go a lot farther than abstract statements.

Note on Plagiarism

We expect that this will be a rapidly moving target given updates in technology. A rule of thumb is to always use your own words and never directly copy from someone else or from a resource such as AI. You can take inspiration from these resources but always make it

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your own words. It can also be helpful to remain up to date with each program's AI policies specifically, so make sure to check these for any programs you are applying to.

CV/Resume

Formatting and content

- Header – include full name, contact information, website (with professional information)
- Education (reverse chronological order) – degree (B.A., B.S. in Psychology), institution, graduate date (or expected date), GPA, relevant coursework
- Honors and awards – scholarships, dean's list, research grants, honor societies, etc.
- Research experience (including labs, thesis completion, independent study work) – lab name and supervisor, dates involved, project title or focus, your role (e.g., literature review, running participants, coding, data analysis)
- Skills/tools used (e.g., learned behavioral coding paradigm, used Sona)
- Publications and Presentations – peer-reviewed publications (if any), manuscripts in preparation/under review, conference presentations (poster or talk; list of authors in correct order)
- Clinical/applied experience (if relevant) – job or volunteer title, organization, responsibilities (e.g., facilitating group sessions, answering phones)
- Teaching or mentorship experience – position (e.g., teaching assistant, peer mentor), course or program name, responsibilities (e.g., grading, holding office hours, exam reviewer)
- Professional skills or certifications – statistical software (e.g., SPSS, R), survey platforms (Qualtrics, MTurk)
- Leadership and service – relevant campus involvement, clubs, or service roles (if included be sure to focus on ones that are relevant to psychology, demonstrate your leadership, demonstrate your clinical or activism skills)

Do's and Don'ts

- Tailor your CV/resume for graduate school applications; this will not be the same CV/resume that you use for other purposes (e.g., applying for jobs)
- Don't assume that positions or awards are self-explanatory. If you had a research assistant or job position, provide enough detail about your roles and responsibilities, so that someone can easily understand what you did in this role. If you received an award, describe specifically what the award is recognizing
- Don't include information that is not pertinent to graduate school on your CV. You might have been in the sailing club, but unless it is demonstrating something connected to psychology, your leadership, or some other skills relevant to grad school, you should omit it
- Be sure to include any posters, presentations, or manuscripts on which you were an author, including co-authorships

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Standardized Tests

The GRE is the most commonly used standardized test in the admissions process for graduate school, if schools require them. Many programs are now GRE-optional, so you can choose whether to take it.

The GRE General Test

- The test consists of three sections: verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and analytical writing.
    - Verbal reasoning: measures your ability to draw conclusions, identify assumptions, understand multiple levels of meaning, understand text structure, identify main themes, and know meanings of individual words.
    - Quantitative reasoning: measures your ability to understand and interpret quantitative information, solve mathematical models, and apply concepts related to arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and data analysis.
    - Analytical writing: a non-multiple choice, free response section in which you are responding to a topic.
- The GRE website provides a pdf of potential topics.
- The fee for taking the GRE is $220. You may be eligible for fee reductions and can fill out an application for one.
- In total, the test takes about 2 hours.
    - Analytical writing section: 30 minutes.
    - Verbal reasoning: 12 minutes section, 15-minute section.
    - Quantitative reasoning: 12 minutes, 15-minute section
    - These sections may be presented in any order, and the second section of each group (verbal and quantitative) is adaptive based on how well you did in the first one.
- You are able to take the GRE up to five times in a year.

Testing Options

- Testing Center
    - To find a testing center near you, click here.
    - If you choose to test in the testing center, it's important to be prepared for the supplies you'll need to bring. When you register for your test, make sure you enter your name exactly as it appears on your ID. You have to bring a physical ID with you to the testing center that has your signature on it. Driver's licenses, passports, state IDs, national IDs, and military IDs all serve as appropriate forms of identification. You'll want to arrive 30 minutes before your scheduled test time to check-in. Once you've finished your test, your scores should be available in 5 to 8 days. Both the Verbal Reasoning and Quantitative Reasoning scores range from 130 to 170. Analytical writing is scored from 0 to 6. For some general statistics on average GRE scores, click here.
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- At Home
    - You can also take the test at home if…
        - you've installed the ETS Secure Browser on your computer
        - don't use dual screens
        - have a licensed operating system
        - have a Chrome browser
        - use an internal or external speaker other than headphones
        - have a working microphone
        - have a working camera.

In addition to the general GRE, there are also subject specific GREs, so you might also consider taking the Psychology GRE. The total testing time for the Psychology test is 2 hours where you will answer 144 multiple choice questions that cover broad psychological knowledge. There are individual areas, 30 questions are biological, 29 questions are cognitive, 19 questions are social, 18 questions are developmental, 23 questions are clinical, and 25 questions are measurement/methodology. Subject tests are only offered 2 weeks per month in September, October, and April, so plan accordingly. The fee for the Psychology Subject Test is $150.

Because prepping for the GRE is a time-intensive process, it's worth considering whether or not taking it will boost your application. For applicants with lower GPAs, it could be a helpful way to supplement your academic transcript. Maybe you're really great at standardized tests and so taking this would be a nice way to boost your application. For others, the time spent preparing for the GRE might seem better used by working on an independent research project or gaining clinical experience. Also, it's a good idea to look at potential programs of interest and see what their policies are regarding the GRE. While most schools are now test-optional, it is still required at some schools. Further, some schools will not review your GRE score even if you've taken it. Be aware of how the programs you're interested in handle the GRE.

If you do choose to take the GRE, you will need to prepare for it. It's important to set aside around 6 months to properly prepare. If you need to reduce the timeline, it can be done, but 6 months gives you adequate time to take breaks and not cram. Make a schedule before you even start preparing and set goals along the way. Reward yourself after you make it through particular sections and find ways to incorporate prepping into your everyday routine.

Study resources and tips

There are really great free resources available for preparing to take the GRE. The GRE official website offers free practice tests. If you search "GRE prep" in the app store on your phone, you'll find free flashcard apps that can be incredibly useful for daily practice. Additionally, there are many prep books available at varying prices. Kaplan has a prep book for $40, the Princeton Review has one for $30, and Manhattan Prep has one for $90.

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Application Process

Applying

- Keeping track of your applications
    - Many applicants find it useful to organize and track their various applications through an Excel spreadsheet or Word document. Here are some typical pieces of information to manage your applications and progress, although this can be personalized depending on what you find to be most helpful:
        - University name
        - Program type (e.g., clinical, social)
        - Department
        - Location
        - Faculty member(s)
        - Lab name(s)
        - Brief description of lab/faculty's research area
        - Personal statement status (e.g., started, editing, completed)
        - Supplemental materials (e.g., writing sample, diversity statement)
        - Number of letters of recommendation required
        - GRE requirements
        - Application cost
        - Application deadline
        - Overall application status (e.g., in progress, submitted)
- Application fees
    - Most application fees range from $40 to $100 depending on the school.
- Financial waivers for application fee
    - Most schools will have the option to request a fee waiver. Unfortunately, the process of completing one can vary by school. Some schools may include the fee waiver directly in the application portal and some schools will require you to contact the program to request a waiver form. If you are interested in covering the costs of applications, make sure to review each program's website well in advance so that you can learn how to complete a fee waiver for each school.
    - It is important to remember that these fee waiver requests will often be due *before* the application deadline. So, if you would like to request a waiver, be sure to do so with enough time before the final application deadline.
    - Many schools will also grant an application fee waiver for participating in certain programs or service. These include but are not limited to:
        - United States Military Personnel
        - Pell Grant Recipients
        - McNair Scholars
        - PPIA (Public Policy & International Affairs Program)
        - Teach For America
        - AmeriCorps

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        - Institute for the Recruitment of Teachers
        - Leadership Alliance
        - Lewis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation
        - Peace Corps
        - Big Ten Academic Alliance
    - If you have participated in the listed programs or additional ones, it will be required that you upload documentation to confirm your participation in the program.
    - Different schools may accept waivers for participation in different programs, so view the program website to see if you may qualify. If you are unsure, it is always appropriate to reach out to the program administration to ask if you might qualify for one.
- Some schools may also provide waivers for earning an undergraduate or graduate degree from a Minority Serving Institution (MSI). Again, this can depend on the school, so be sure to view the website or reach out to see if attending a MSI would qualify you for a waiver.
- You can also request a fee waiver on the basis of financial need. However, this will require you to upload documentation to support your request. Schools may request documentation such as:
    - Bank statement
    - Pay stub
    - W2
    - Federal income tax return
- Ultimately, there is the opportunity to have application fees covered. If you are interested in doing so, be sure to research each school's policies in advance through their website, reach out to the department's administrative assistant for clarity if needed after searching the website, and obtain all necessary documents needed to submit the waiver application. Don't forget to do this in advance so your overall application is not delayed!
- How many schools to apply to
    - 8-12 schools is often the suggested number of schools to apply to.
    - 2-6 schools would be on the lower end and 13-15 would be on the higher end.
    - As discussed earlier, it is really important to apply to programs and mentors that fit extremely well with your research interests and future career goals. So, if you are applying to beyond 12 schools, make sure that each additional school is truly a good fit.
    - Applying to 10 or more programs will take a lot of time and effort. While possible, it is very important that you start drafting personal statements and CVs well in advance, because personalizing these materials for each school can take more time than you might anticipate.
    - Without application fee waivers, the cost of applications can really add up, so again, make sure you are selecting programs that seem like a strong fit.

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- Recognizing this potential financial burden, if you focus your efforts on finding a program and mentor that fits very well with your interests and goals, applying to 8-10 schools is ideal and sufficient.

Interviews

Research Fit and Preparation

- Prior to interviewing, it is important to have a good sense for your "research fit" with the faculty advisor and lab you are interviewing with.
- Research fit means more than just being interested in a professor's research area. It involves:
  - How your research interests align with the lab's current and future projects
  - Your methodological experience and skills that complement the lab's needs
  - Your career goals and how they align with the training opportunities available
  - Your working style and how it meshes with the lab's culture

Preparing for Research Discussions

- Review your potential mentor's recent publications and ongoing projects
  - Tip: NIH RePORTER and NSF Award is a search tool that may help you find information about past and ongoing research grants; GoogleScholar can be helpful for recent publications.
- Be prepared to discuss your experiences as if your interviewer hasn't read your full application (some will have, some won't)
- Consider creating a "cheat sheet" for each program including:
  - Program details (model, accreditation status, aims, practicum opportunities)
  - PI's current work and research focus
  - Why you are interested in that research mentor/lab/program/university specifically
  - Notes on relevant articles you've read
  - Questions for different interview participants (PI, faculty, students)

Interview Day Expectations and Tips

- Structure and Format
  - You'll meet with multiple faculty members and graduate students throughout the day
    - Each interview is a fresh first impression—reset your energy and enthusiasm with each interviewer
  - Depending on the program, graduate students may play a significant role in the evaluation process and lab decision-making. You may not know in advance the extent to which graduate students play a role in the evaluation process.

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        - Interviews with graduate students may feel more informal, but still present your best self
- Professional Presentation
    - Dress code is typically business casual to business professional (e.g., blazers, nice sweaters)
    - For virtual interviews:
        - Choose a quiet, well-lit space
        - Test your technology in advance
        - Avoid looking at your phone or having other screens pulled up on your computer during interviewing – interviewers can often tell (even virtually) when you are not giving your full attention!
    - Express your interest—it's okay (and encouraged) to tell the program or mentor that you're very interested in joining if that feels genuine
- Group Interactions
    - It is common for you to be in different group situations (either a group interview or more informal Q&A sessions with other applicants. During those interactions, it can be important to:
        - Be mindful of sharing speaking time during group discussions
        - Participate actively but try not to dominate conversations
        - It can reflect positively if you are able to show interest in other applicants' experiences

Assessment Criteria

- Faculty and students may evaluate you on:
    - Research experience and potential
    - Fit with lab culture and mentorship style
    - (if clinical) Clinical interests and professional goals
    - Communication and interpersonal skills
    - Critical thinking and intellectual curiosity

Potential Topics to Discuss

- With Faculty
    - Current and upcoming research projects
    - Mentorship style
    - Clinical training opportunities
    - Funding and teaching opportunities
    - The program's values surrounding diversity and inclusion
- With Graduate Students
    - Lab culture and work-life balance
    - Faculty's mentorship style
    - Living in the area
    - Day-to-day lab operations
    - Conflict resolution in the lab

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  - Whether or not students can meet their training and career goals throughout the program
  - What made them decide to join the program and/or train with their specific mentor

Examples of the Types of Interview Questions You Could Be Asked

Research Experience and Interests

- Tell me about your most significant research experience
- What was your role in [specific research project mentioned in application]?
- How do you handle research setbacks or null findings?
- What are your long-term research goals?
- Which of our current lab projects interests you most and why?
- What research questions are you hoping to explore in graduate school?

For Clinical: Clinical Interests and Experience

- Why did you choose clinical psychology over other fields (e.g., counseling, social work)?
- What populations are you most interested in working with?
- What theoretical orientations (e.g., CBT, developmental, systems) interest you and why?
- What do you see as your clinical strengths and areas for growth?

Program-Specific Questions

- Why our program specifically?
- How does our training model align with your goals?
- What questions do you have about our training opportunities?

Tips for Answering Questions

- One question that is often asked is “Tell me about yourself.” This can be answered in many different ways, but the idea here is to concisely review some of your academic and professional accomplishments and a view towards your future in grad school and beyond. While you may include some small personal details, that is not what most interviewers will be looking for
- Use specific examples from your experiences
- Connect your answers to the program's goals and values
- Be honest about your areas for growth while demonstrating self-awareness
- Show enthusiasm and genuine interest
- It's okay to take a moment to gather your thoughts
- If you don't understand a question, ask for clarification
- If you don’t know an answer, don’t make one up. You can be honest and say something like “I’m not familiar with the literature, but my guess is that ___.”
- Be prepared to expand on anything mentioned in your application
- Frame challenges as learning opportunities

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- When talking about your interests, it can be helpful to provide a bit of background. Briefly sharing some information about *how* and *why* you developed your interests can help us understand your passions, motivations, and curiosity
- Emphasize *what you learned* from your experiences

Additional Tips

- Prepare more questions than you think you'll need
- Be ready to discuss what you're looking for in a mentor
- Show flexibility in working with different mentorship styles to the extent that feels genuine to you
- Take notes during breaks to help remember key information
- Stay hydrated and try to maintain energy throughout the day
- Send thank-you notes to both faculty and graduate student interviewers after the interview – this can help reinforce your interest in joining the program or lab
    - A thank you can be a simple two to three sentence email
- Follow up with any additional questions
- Maintain professional communication throughout the process
- Remember: Interviews are bi-directional selection processes. The programs that you interview with are also wanting to recruit you. There are rarely "right" answers to questions asked during interviews. Interviewers are interested in your thought process, self-awareness, and fit with the program. Be authentic while maintaining professionalism.

Evaluating Offers and Making Decisions

Overview

First of all – congratulations on receiving an offer (or more than one)!! This is a HUGE accomplishment!! The application process is long and demanding, so take a moment to rest, practice self-care, and celebrate this win – it's a big one and you've earned it! The section below offers some advice on the final step in the application process – making your decision. When people think and talk about how hard the graduate school application process is, they often focus on completing the actual applications and the interviewing process. Although those stages are all difficult, what's less discussed is how tough it can be to actually choose once offers are on the table.

Whether you're deciding between multiple programs or evaluating a single offer and whether to go to graduate school (this year or at all), the decision-making process can be incredibly stressful and emotional. You're choosing not only where you'll train, but also where you'll live and the people you'll work closely with for the next 4+ years. Remember to be gentle with yourself and practice self-care. Give yourself time to reflect, ask questions, and take care of your mental health during this phase. You don't have to rush – it's okay for this to feel big, because it *is* big.

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Etiquette

There are a couple things to consider when you're holding offers and making decisions. The general guidance below is adapted from the Council of University Directors of Clinical Psychology (CUDCP). You can find more detailed information on their website: https://cudcp.org/Prospective-PhD-Students

Key Dates & Deadlines

Most initial offers are extended by April 1. Although it's possible to receive an offer after this date, especially if you're on a waitlist, this is less common. The official deadline to make *your decision* is April 15. Accept your offer as soon as you feel ready, but don't rush to make a decision before then if you don't feel ready. *No program or mentor is allowed to pressure you into an early commitment in any way*.

Holding Offers Responsibly

The applicant pool for clinical psychology PhD programs is small, and many programs rely on waitlists. For this reason, it's recommended that you hold no more than 2 offers at a time. Along the same lines, if you receive a second offer but know that you strongly prefer your first, release the second offer as soon as possible so that it can go to the next person on the waitlist. That said, if you're waiting on information that is necessary to inform your decision, such as funding details, an in-person visit, or specific questions, it's okay to temporarily hold more than two offers while you make an informed decision.

After You Decide

Once you formally accept an offer of admission and sign the paperwork, be sure to inform all other programs – both those that made you offers and anywhere you're still under consideration. Thank the programs/mentors for their time and consideration; keeping these connections positive can be helpful for your professional network in the future.

Things to Consider

At this stage in the game, you probably have a good idea of what matters most to you in a program and mentor. In many cases, the programs you're comparing will be fairly similar in overall quality, just with different strengths and trade-offs. For example, two programs might have great mentors and research fit, but one might be in a location you prefer, while the other has a slightly better stipend or offers more exciting clinical or training opportunities. In these cases, there's often no clear "right" or "wrong" choice, it's about what you value most and what you choose to prioritize.

Academic Fit & Training

- Advisor
    - Research fit
        - How well aligned are your research interests with your potential advisor's? Will they support the kind of research and career path you want to pursue?

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    - Funding
        - Does the advisor have active funding, and how secure is it? Advisors with grants may be able to offer research assistantships (RA positions) instead of teaching assistantships (TAs) and may provide additional funds for conferences or training. This varies across programs and advisors, so make sure to ask!
    - Career stage
        - It's important to consider the career stage of your advisor. There are pros/cons to any career stage, so it's not to say that one is better than the other, it just influences the type of grad school experience you may have.
        - Early-career mentors may offer less stability (due to grant funding cycles or pre-tenure moves), but they are often highly motivated to publish and may give you more leadership roles in the lab.
        - Later-career mentors typically offer more stability, funding security, and professional connections but may have less day-to-day availability due to broader responsibilities (e.g., journal editor, department chair).
    - Mentorship philosophy
        - Is their mentorship style a good match for you? Do you prefer close guidance and hands-on support, or more independence?
    - Vibes
        - Do you genuinely like interacting with them? You'll be working closely for several years, so interpersonal compatibility matters a lot.
- Program
    - Theoretical orientation: Is the program behaviorally-oriented, psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, etc.? Is it a clinical science model, scientist-practitioner model, etc.?
    - Make sure it's APA or PCSAS accredited!
    - Does the program offer the research, clinical, teaching, and specializing training experiences you're seeking?
    - Coursework: what is the workload like? How difficult are the classes? How heavy or flexible is the curriculum?
    - Milestones: what milestones are required (e.g., comprehensive exams, master's thesis)? How practical and publication-friendly are they? For instance, lots of programs have shifted towards milestones that feel more applicable and useful, such as having you prepare a masters thesis in the style of a regular manuscript, instead of writing a lengthier document and then having to cut it down later for publication.
    - Time to completion: How long do students typically take to finish?

Program Culture

- Faculty: do students speak positively about faculty support? Are key faculty staying long-term or is there a lot of turnover?

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- Students: do the students seem collaborative and supportive of each other? Do they seem happy?
- Culture: do faculty and students collaborate with each other professionally and seem to get along interpersonally?

Professional Outcomes

- Internship match rate
- Career paths of graduates: where do alumni end up – academia, clinical work, policy, etc.? Does this align with your goals?

Funding & Cost of Living

- Funding: is tuition covered? Are you getting a stipend? For how many years? Are there other awards/fellowships/opportunities for funding that the department or school offers, such as additional funds for traveling to conferences?
- Assistantships: how does this work at your program? What TA/RA responsibilities will you have and are they manageable? Is there any unpaid labor your mentor or program will require you to do and if so how much?
- Cost of living: does the stipend actually cover living expenses in that area? Will it be feasible to live alone or will you need to have roommates and are you okay with that?
- Other fees: some programs can have hefty student fees that you wouldn't necessarily know about until you're there and it's time to pay them! Ask current graduate students about all the fees they need to pay.
- Insurance: what is insurance coverage like and how much does it cost?

Location & Personal Fit

- City/town: can you see yourself living here for 4+ years?
- Support systems: are the program and/or location affirming of the identities you hold? What would you support system/network look like if you were here?
- Lifestyle fit: climate, culture, safety, transportation, hobbies

Decision-Making Strategies

Here's a non-exhaustive list of things that may be helpful to do when trying to decide:

- Reflect on your values and what you most want to prioritize in making your decision
    - Is having a supportive mentor more important to you than location? Is funding more important than research fit? There are no right or wrong answers to these questions; it all depends on what is most important or necessary for you.
    - If you're deciding whether to accept an offer or try again for a better fitting program/mentor next cycle or whether to go to grad school at all, also consider the things that are most important to you and whether this program or graduate school will help you achieve them.
- Create rankings

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    - If you're a more numbers/data driven person, you could come up with a rating scale (e.g., 1-10) for the metrics that matter most to you (e.g., location, mentor, funding) and see how your programs compare on individual metrics as well as a "total score."
- Talk to people
    - Even after interviews are over, it is acceptable and even encouraged to scheduled additional times to talk to faculty members and students. Ask any questions you still need the answers to and try to get a sense of what it would really be like to be a student at that school or living in that area.
    - Talk to friends, partners, family members, and trusted others to help you make this decision too! This isn't just an academic/career decision, it's a life decision too. It can be helpful to talk through your options with people outside of the field and with people who don't have a stake in your or your decision.
- Visit
    - If possible, visit the school(s) you have offers at to see if being in the physical location helps with the decision-making process. If this isn't possible, you can always try to find a virtual tour, look on street view maps, or do things like looking at apartments/places to rent.

Lastly, you got this! You've been thinking about and planning for this for a long time. Even though making a decision can feel stressful and overwhelming, you are likely well-positioned to make a highly informed decision about which program and mentor will best suit your needs and future goals. Congratulations again on making it to the end of this process!

What to do if you did not receive any offers

- First off, don't panic! PhD programs are incredibly competitive, and you are not alone.
- Given that you apply to work with specific mentors who may only have funding available to admit one student a year or may take years off from recruiting, applicants who are a great fit for the lab may still have to go through the application/interview process more than once!
- Faculty may make an initial offer to another applicant, but don't lose all hope, this applicant may not accept the offer and once departments determine where funding is available additional offers might be made. Getting the second or third offer is still an offer and does not take away from your fit in the lab!
- If you interview with a program and do not receive an offer, it can be beneficial to reach out asking for feedback. Faculty may not respond, but if they do, it can provide useful information that may inform your future application efforts.
- If you plan to apply again at the next application cycle, it is important to take a critical look at your application and see if there are areas that you might want to

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improve or gain more experience in, such as getting involved in other research projects, posters, or publications.

Additional Resources and Considerations

Other websites and tools

https://www.apa.org/education-career/grad/applying

“Insider's Guide to Graduate Programs in Clinical and Counseling Psychology” Helpful Book when you are thinking about applying to graduate programs in clinical and counseling psychology. This is updated every year and includes all accredited programs and details for each one! Access it here.

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Appendix A

Template emails

Research Interest

The template below is a rough guide for how you might email a faculty member about opportunities to get involved in their lab. You should check their lab website first to see if there are alternative ways they prefer you reach out.

Subject: Inquiry About Research Opportunities in Your Lab

Dear Dr. [Last Name],

My name is [Your Full Name], and I am a [year in school] undergraduate student majoring in Psychology [plus anything else] at UNL. I've been exploring ways to get more involved in research, and I came across your work on [briefly mention a topic or paper, e.g., "emotion regulation and decision-making"], which I found [why you are interested].

I am reaching out to ask whether there might be any opportunities to get involved in your lab [you might also mention when you'd be available to work in their lab; e.g., this semester through fall next year]. I am eager to [why do you want to get involved; e.g., gain research experience, develop skills, and contribute to ongoing projects].

If your lab is currently accepting undergraduate research assistants, I would be grateful for the opportunity to learn more about how I might get involved. I'd also be happy to provide my resume, transcript, or any other information you might need.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Warm regards [or however you like to sign off your emails],
[Your Full Name]

Letter of Recommendation Emails

Initial Request

Subject: Request for Letter of Recommendation for [type of program] Applications

Dear [Writers Name],

I hope you're doing well. I'm reaching out to ask if you would feel comfortable writing me a strong letter of recommendation for my upcoming applications to [type of program] programs this upcoming [state application cycle you'll be applying for].

I've really valued my experience [state experience with the writer such as working in your lab / taking your class on BLANK etc.], while working closely with [project coordinator and/or graduate students]. I have [state what you've learned, gained, or enjoyed about the experience]. I believe your perspective on my [research skills, academic strengths, etc.] would be valuable to programs evaluating my fit.

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If this is something you are open to taking on, I would be happy to provide my CV, draft of my personal statement, a list of schools I'm applying to, and any other materials that would be helpful.

Thank you for considering this—I truly appreciate your support.

Best,

[Your Full Name]

Reminders

Subject: Friendly Reminder – Letter of Recommendation for [School Name]

Hi [Professor's Name],

I hope you're well! I just wanted to send a quick reminder that my recommendation for [University Name] is due on [Date]. Please let me know if you need anything else from me.

I really appreciate your time and support.

Best,

[Your Name]

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Appendix B

Example Personal Statement

My interests in the field of psychology have been molded through many experiences throughout my education. Initially, a women's and gender studies course sparked my interest in becoming a clinical psychologist. This class explored several gendered topics, including sexual assault. Although this course introduced me to the problem of sexual assault from a societal perspective, as a psychology major I wanted to expand my knowledge and address the issue through research. When presented with the opportunity to explore this issue by assisting with a dissertation on sexual assault disclosure, I volunteered instantly. Since that pivotal moment, I have maintained continuous involvement in research related to sexual violence across several projects in the Trauma, Violence, & Abuse (TVA) Lab directed by Dr. David DiLillo. These formative research experiences solidified my dedication to obtaining a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology in order to contribute to this important research area throughout my career.

Seeking to understand the implications of sexual assault research, I have worked on various projects within the lab. Two of the projects have given me the opportunity to examine bystander intervention as a means of preventing sexual assault. One of these projects was a NIH funded dissertation being done by a graduate student in the lab. It was a two-phase study evaluating the impact of online bystander training and acute alcohol intoxication on men's bystander behaviors when given an opportunity to prevent sexual aggression in the lab. Through this project, I learned NIAAA procedures for safe alcohol administration through direct observation of the primary investigator and by assisting with the detoxing process. I also learned about ethical considerations for research involving deception, worked with live confederates, and learned initial risk assessment skills.

After working with confederates in a simulated sexual risk situation I began assisting on a study assessing bystander intervention using virtual reality. On that study, I guide participants through a virtual house party that contains various sexual risk scenarios. Participants' responses to those scenarios serve as a measure of bystander behavior. I also work on a specific team on this project focused on coding participants' verbal responses to the sexual risk situations. Through this experience, I have learned the importance of not only the content of responses, but also how the tone can impact the success of intervention attempts. I have also been able to see the impact that can be made through collaboration between the fields of clinical and social psychology. Dr. DiLillo's clinical perspective and Dr. Sarah Gervais' social lens each provide unique contributions to this project. These experiences with intervention research piqued my interest in finding ways we can improve outcomes for survivors.

As a research assistant aiding with a dissertation within the TVA Lab, I began by delving into the literature particularly focused on sexual assault disclosure research in order to understand the development and usage of the Social Reactions Questionnaire (SRQ) created by Dr. Sarah Ullman. I was then responsible for coding participants' responses to a hypothetical sexual assault disclosure. Given the ways that reactions from

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friends and family can impact survivors post-assault adjustment, I was intrigued by the concept of quantifying the amount of support, aid, control, blame, or level of distraction each participant offered.

Building on this knowledge of how informal responses from friends and family impact processing the event, I wanted to understand the implications of more formal treatment. Thus, I am currently assisting with a study evaluating the efficacy of written versus spoken exposure techniques on PTSD symptoms experiences by students who have experienced various traumatic events. Following participants through several exposure sessions allows me to not only understand the study protocol, but to see improvements in negative affect associated with the trauma. Importantly, this study helped foster my interests in evaluating and disseminating evidence-based treatments for trauma survivors.

Through assisting on these various projects, I developed and cultivated an interest in pursuing an independent research project. Thus, I am in the midst of completing an undergraduate honors thesis with the advising of Dr. DiLillo. My project investigates perceived benefits and barriers to bystander intervention and builds upon the qualitative skills I developed in my role as a research assistant. Because no coding scheme currently exists that fits the needs of my project, I have devised my own system based on a thorough review of the literature regarding potential benefits and barriers to bystander intervention. This project will allow me to further develop skills in data analysis and manuscript preparation, both of which will facilitate my success in graduate school.

These experiences, in combination with my exposure to advanced statistical courses, helped me begin to generate questions and hypotheses about bystander intervention and related topics. In collaboration with other team members, I have pursued these ideas by co-authoring posters at various local and national conferences. Most recently, I presented at the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies on the network relationship between the symptoms of emotion dysregulation and PTSD.

My interests in trauma research and, more specifically, improving treatment for sexual assault survivors also led me to seek out an internship with a clinical psychologist at Williamsburg Behavioral Psychology Clinic. At this clinic, I work directly with clients who have experienced a number of different traumas. I was able to take on many different responsibilities, including assisting with the computer administration and scoring of a number of clinical assessments (e.g., BASC-3, MMPI-2, MACI, SASSI), administrative work (i.e., contacting and scheduling clients, working with insurance agencies), as well as assisting with exposure treatment. These experiences allowed me to observe the day-to-day activities of a practicing clinician. Perhaps what I found most intriguing was assisting with drafting the historical component of clinical report writing. In this role, I learned the process of collecting intake and collateral information, identifying the client's unique evaluation and treatment goals, and considering how assessment and intervention can be tailored to best meet the client's needs.

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Importantly, these research and clinical experiences throughout my undergraduate career have solidified my research interests. Broadly, I am interested in issues related to sexual assault prevention, sexual revictimization, and traumatic stress. I am particularly interested in how gender provides a lens through which to understand these topics. Given my research interests, I feel I would fit well under the mentorship of Dr. David DiLillo. His research focused on bystander intervention as a means of sexual assault prevention along with examining the impacts of sexual victimization and risk factors to development of PTSD all align well with my personal interests. Considering these overlaps in interest, I wish to continue to work on projects in the lab aimed at targeting barriers to bystander intervention as well as implementing my own focus on more inclusive measures of social reactions to disclosure. Dr. DiLillo's extensive experience would assist my future goal of developing my own program of research.

Finally, the scientist-practitioner training model at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln will allow me to find a strong balance between research and clinical practice. This allows for the best possible integration of the two vital aspects of being a clinical psychologist. The program also has a strong emphasis on advisor-student interaction which I find ideal for creating cohesion amongst those in the lab. As such, I am excited about the prospect of contributing to a program that fits my aims of acquiring advanced research skills as well as being able to provide empirically based treatment.

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