

What to Prepare and How to Prepare for Graduate School Applications in Psychology

Written by Hannah R. Thomas (thomasrhannah@gmail.com) & Claire Klein (clairecklein@gmail.com) while research assistants at the Center for Autism and the Developing Brain at Weill Cornell Medicine in May 2020.

Welcome! 😊

If you're reading this you are probably an undergraduate or a research assistant getting ready to apply for graduate school, yay! Wherever you are, know that you are not alone in feeling confused, stressed, and terrified about this process. We hope this document can help you navigate these exciting and daunting times! We wrote this after going through the application process for PhD programs in Clinical Psychology. Hannah joined Dr. Inge-Marie Eigsti's lab at UConn and Claire joined Dr. Laura Klinger's lab at UNC Chapel Hill.

● Introductory Emails

- As you are probably aware, in late summer/early fall you need to reach out to EVERY professor you are planning on applying to in order to:
 - Introduce yourself
 - Confirm if they are taking a student
 - Show them how great you are so they remember to keep an eye out for your application
 - *Occasionally* set up a preliminary zoom/skype meeting
 - Note on this: not all schools even allow for this! Don't stress out if a professor you're interested in hasn't reached out to meet over zoom.
- Wording these things is a little nerve-racking, so reading other people's is really helpful!
 - Also – it's best to choose 1 email to use for your applications. Most of us used our personal gmails – that also helps if you want to follow up with someone after you leave your current position
- Here are 2 examples:
 - **When you know if the professor is taking students:**

Dear Professor,

My name is Prospective Student, and I am currently a research assistant at _____ working with Dr. _____. I currently coordinate a longitudinal study investigating how factors such as error monitoring, cognition, and language might predict academic and social outcomes in children with ASD using behavioral assessments and a child-friendly EEG Go/Nogo task. More

recently, I joined a clinical team on a study examining the neurological correlates and behavioral similarities of ASD and ADHD under the supervision of Dr. _____.

Given my experience with this population and these issues, your work appeared to be a wonderful blend of both my experiences and personal research interests. I have a great desire to continue working with neuroimaging and behavioral methods to investigate the development of cognitive and language profiles within ASD and observe how these may contribute to long-term outcomes. Thus, I am very interested in your current project aiming to confirm early presentations of ASD in your longitudinal cohort.

I am excited to see that you plan on reviewing doctoral applicants for the upcoming year and would greatly appreciate the opportunity to be considered for your lab. I have attached my CV for your review. I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind Regards,
Prospective Student
(Source: Hannah Thomas)

- **If you're not sure if the professor is taking students:**

Dear Dr. _____,

My name is Prospective Student and I am interested in applying to _____ PhD program in the Psychological Sciences. I am interested in your work on language production, and I am applying to the program because I am especially interested in joining your laboratory as a team member. I am especially excited about the work you are doing on the psychological models of speech production and how they predict prosodic timing.

I think I'd make a great fit for the program! In addition to having taken courses in computer science, psychology, and linguistics, I have experience working as an undergraduate research assistant in Prof. Advisor's lab working on a project looking at individual differences in reading.

I'm writing to see if you'll be taking a graduate student this year. I've attached my CV for your consideration. Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Prospective Student
(Source: Duane Watson; @duane_g_watson)

- **CVs**

- The most helpful thing to prepare your CV is to look at examples of other peoples!
 - Other research assistants would be ideal because you probably have a lot of overlap in duties, etc.
 - Post-docs are amazing resources to find great ways to describe duties and maybe some fancier words
 - Professors – do not be intimidated by these, use them as inspiration for what you are working towards
- Have a lot of people look over your CVs generally in this order: peers (other RAs or undergrad students) post docs/interns to get a more polished review THEN your mentors/professors who will likely write your letters

- **Personal Statements**

- This task can be a little daunting, but have fun with it!
- Do not put too much pressure on your first draft and then just polish as you go
- Remember, you want it to be MOSTLY about your experiences, but it is great to have a personal narrative to tie things together and make you stand out!
- Follow the same steps of review/edits for CVs

- **Writing Samples**

- Very few schools ask for this, if you wrote a senior honors thesis or have a manuscript that you've written you can use that! Or, use a well written paper from a course during your undergrad!
- This shouldn't be something you stress out about.

- **Other random bits of wisdom for applications...**

- The best resource you have is each other!!!
 - If you have coworkers or friends going through this process this will be your life line
 - Read over each others emails, CVs, personal statements, EVERYTHING
 - Talk out your interests with each other so you can have help identifying your own goals
 - Keep each other accountable for reaching deadlines, etc.
 - CELEBRATE/RELAX with each other, there are so many milestones throughout the whole cycle, if you find any reason to celebrate, DO IT
- Talk to your mentors/letter writers as the process unfolds
 - Make sure you ask them to be your letter writer
 - Send them your mentor names when you have a 'preliminary' final program list to get their insight
 - ASK THEM if they have any other names in mind that may be a good fit for you

- Send them your CV when it just about perfect (e.g., after coworkers and maybe post-doc has looked over it)
 - Same for your personal statement!
- Keep them updated on your personal timeline so they know you're on top of things; but also give them the school deadlines in a very clear format so they don't have to think about it!
- And most importantly, THANK THEM!!!
- o Plan ahead financially
 - Applications and interviews are EXPENSIVE
 - You can expect to spend *at least* \$1,000 on applications and tests scores alone
 - Each application is \$50-\$150
 - Sending an official GRE to a school is \$35
 - Official transcripts from your school will cost \$5-\$25 (depends on your school)
 - This gets even worse if you're land some interviews, which is a great problem!
 - Budget for all of the above, and then remember to save money for flights. Schools are not afraid to invite you to an interview 2 weeks before the date when flights are pretty expensive.
 - The last thing you want is to be stressed about affording your apps, etc., so keep that in mind as it approaches!

Timeline

- Spring before you apply – Take the psych GRE if you haven't already (it's offered in April) and the real GRE if you haven't already. TRY NOT TO NEED TO DO THIS IN THE FALL!
- Summer before you apply – start looking over past materials, make a list of professors you're interested in applying to, work on your CV, most importantly do things that will contribute to your CV (conference submissions, manuscripts, extra clinical experiences, etc.)
- August – Reach out to letter writers (let them know you're applying if you haven't talked in a while!) and also get their insight on your list, start drafting your intro emails
 - o Emails take a lot of research because you need to have a good idea of why you're a good fit. You'll also pull from this research when you're writing your statements and preparing for interviews, so keeping it in one place will help you
 - o When you're internet stalking PIs, here are a few resources:
 - [NIH Reporter](#): Use this to look at current/past grants – this has the most recent information you'll probably be able to find and PIs are always impressed when you've looked at this.
 - **Conference Abstract Book**: If you're not a member you can ask someone for this. It's a PDF and you can search their name, this will also show you what their current graduate students may be working on. Remember,

conference submissions are sometimes lower hanging fruit or secondary analyses of past papers, but sometimes there are indications of new paths they might be going down or pilot studies

- Go to conferences!: Try to attend panels where potential advisors are presenting and then take good notes! Especially when they talk about the importance of their findings or why things matter for the field, this will tell you a lot about them as a person and how you may be compatible
- Program Websites and Handbooks – most schools post their handbooks online, you should look at this before interviews (it's less important for the statement but the program's mission statement may still be helpful). It will help you with the "why this program" question that you'll get.
- End of August – finalize your intro emails, finalize your CV, start checking websites for updates
 - This website will send you notifications when websites are updated – it saved me a lot of stress of having to look at them everyday! <https://visualping.io/>
 - You don't have to wait for the website to be updated to email professors! You'll see in the emails that we didn't always know if they were taking a student or not
 - As you're checking websites, start making a note of **deadlines**. The earliest will probably be Nov. 15th, but this is a good time to make sure you're organized before everything starts
- Beginning of September – send emails (yay!)
- September – once emails are sent, it's time to work on your personal statements!
 - Most of us split our statements up into different "themes." For example, I (Claire) had one statement that was more focused on dissemination, one that was more focused on my clinical experiences, etc. Whereas Hannah had one more neuroscience focused and one more behaviorally focused
 - During this month you may also be having phone calls/zoom meetings with professors. Treat this as an interview! This is when they decide if they want to bring you to interview in person. You can expect it to be about 20-30 minutes and they'll usually ask you to share a little about yourself and why you're interested in their lab – you should know a lot about what they're doing and be able to articulate why you would be a good fit. You should also have at least 3-5 questions ready (you'll only ask a few, but they'll likely answer some while you talk).
 - Don't forget to send thank yous after these :)
- November – submit applications!
- Mid to end December into January and sometimes February – start hearing back from schools for interviews
 - Many schools will post their interview dates online. Keeping track of these will help you choose between interview dates when there are two weekends. Even if you haven't heard from one school yet, if you MIGHT overlap with another, try to get the other weekend so that you don't have to choose (not going to an

interview may come off as you being more interested in another program ie not interested in them)

- January/February/March - Interview!
 - Go look at the interview tips document!