

The Graduate School Application Process

Patricia Taylor-Cooke

University of Alabama at Birmingham

Drew C. Appleby

Indiana University-Purdue University

Indianapolis

Introduction

The following presentation was created from my own personal experience. The programs I applied to were clinical psychology programs. Therefore, the details I include and the experiences I share may be different from what you encounter depending on the type of program or the school to which you apply. This presentation is intended to give you insight based on what I learned throughout the process of applying to graduate school and attending interviews. Use it only as an example and not a guarantee of what will happen when you apply or attend interviews. Good luck in your search for a school and receiving offers from the graduate programs of your choice.

Patricia Taylor-Cooke

When do I start looking for schools?

- ⇒ No later than the beginning of the summer before you plan to apply
- ✓ Searching for graduate schools is an extremely time consuming task easily taking hours of your time.
- ✓ You will also need to visit each school on the internet to ensure they are what you are looking for in a school.

When do I start looking for schools?

⇒ Or as soon as you know:

- ✓ The type of program that interests you (i.e., clinical, experimental or psychobiological)
- ✓ That graduate school is for you and it is what you want to do for the next two to five years of your life (about 7 or 8 including internship and post-doc)

How do I choose schools?

- ⇒ Based on your interests
- ⇒ Whether there is a professor there who is doing research you would like to do
- ⇒ Since graduate school admission is so competitive you should choose about 10 schools to increase your chances
- ⇒ Based on geography – I would suggest doing this only if you are limited by family ties. Since acceptance is so competitive you will be taking a great risk by limiting yourself to a specific geographical area.

Why should I start looking so soon?

⇒ To Find Out Important Information:

✓ Required Classes

- ◆ Some schools require specific classes as a prerequisite (e.g., Abnormal Psychology, Tests and Measurement, etc.). You will want to make sure you have these classes, so you will not have to take undergraduate classes as a graduate student.

✓ Required Credits in Specific Areas

- ◆ Some schools require a specific number of credits in another area of study (e.g., at one time the University of Alabama at Birmingham required you to have 18 credits of life sciences – now they recommend it).

Why should I start looking so soon?

✓ GRE Cut-off Scores for Admittance

- ◆ Most schools have an arbitrary cut-off score to narrow down the number of applicants they will invite for interviews (i.e., 1200 combined verbal and quantitative). Sometimes a weakness in this area can be overcome by strengths in other areas (i.e., strong research experience).

✓ Other Tests Required

(i.e., GRE Subject Test or the Miller Analogies Test)

Why should I start looking so soon?

✓ Application Deadlines

- ◆ Most schools have deadlines in January and February; however, there are some schools that may have deadlines much earlier (i.e., University of Florida has their deadline set on December 1st). These deadlines are set and if you are late they may not look at your application at all.

✓ Selection Criteria

- ◆ Schools may list their selection criteria and what they will be looking for in an applicant. Therefore, if you start early and do not have what they want you may have enough time to change it.

Where do I look?

✓ APA's Graduate Study in Psychology

- ◆ Provides a list of 500 psychology programs with up-to-date information on degrees offered, deadlines, fees, admission requirements, selection criteria and importance, tuition, financial assistance and more.
- ◆ Book - \$24.95 from APA's Website
www.apa.org/books/4270087.html
- ◆ Online - \$19.95 for 3 month access at
www.apa.org/gradstudy/

Where do I look?

- ✓ APA's division for the field of psychology to which you are interested in applying.
 - ◆ Provides a more complete list of all schools that have a program of training in that field.
 - ◆ For a list of all divisions or to find a division by topic visit www.apa.org/about/division.html
- ✓ Talk to your professors.
 - ◆ They can make suggestions about different schools they know about and give advice on schools that you have found.

Getting the Applications

- ✓ Plan to get applications during the summer before you will apply.
 - ◆ You will need a great deal of time to go through the applications, fill them out, plan and write your essays and get feedback on them.
- ✓ Visit the schools online
 - ◆ Today most applications are online and can be downloaded. If they are not online then there will be phone numbers or addresses to contact about getting them mailed to you.

Completing Applications

- ✓ Begin completing applications in the summer or early fall. They take an enormous amount of time. You DO NOT want to rush through them.
 - ◆ Type (not hand write – it looks more professional) all information that will not change before the deadline
 - ◆ Send all GRE scores in early Fall
 - ◆ Follow instructions completely! If you do not, the schools may take this as a sign of your work in general and not consider your application.

GRE Scores

- ✓ Take the GRE General Test the summer before you apply and the Subject Test the spring before you apply.
 - ◆ Send your scores in early Fall
 - ◆ Check with the schools at least 6 weeks before the deadlines to confirm they have received them. Since it can take up to 6 weeks for ETS to get them to the schools, you will need enough time before the deadline to have them resent.
 - ◆ It is very important to check with schools. I had one school receive a misprint that was blank. This situation resulted in my application not being considered.

Essays

- ✓ You will most likely have to write a separate essay for each school.
 - ◆ Each application packet may contain specific directions on what they want in your essay. (e.g., School X says to write an essay whereas school Y has very specific questions they want you to answer.) Furthermore, some schools may want your essay single-spaced and others may want it double-spaced. Again you must follow their instructions carefully or risk them throwing out your application or lowering you ranking for not following directions.

Essays

- ✓ Schools may ask for different types of essays.
 - ◆ General Essays in which you answer questions about your background, plans for the future, why you want to attend that school etc.
 - ◆ Research essays in which the school asks you to explain your specific research interests, questions you have thought about, why you are interested in these questions and what articles you have read that sparked your interest.

Essays

- ✓ This is your one chance to sell yourself.
 - ◆ Take your time with the essays because this may be the one chance you have to convince them they want you as a graduate student. Many schools will already have the students ranked (in the order of their choice of students) before you even get called for an interview.
- ✓ Ask a professor to read your essays and give you feedback.
 - ◆ Your professors have been through this process and may sit on a graduate student selection committee, so they are the perfect people to critique your essays.


Letters of Recommendation

- ✓ You will need at least three **STRONG** letters of recommendation
 - ◆ These people should be professors who know more about you than just how you did in their class.
 - ◆ Good people to ask are someone who you worked with on research or worked with as a teaching assistant.
 - ◆ See Dr. Appleby's handout on how to receive strong letters of recommendation. (*insert link to handout?*)

Letters of Recommendation

- ✓ Provide a packet to each professor containing:
 - ◆ Envelopes typed with addresses for each school
 - ◆ Each schools required forms and fill out all information possible (i.e., names, addresses etc.)
 - ◆ Instructions on what they need to do for each school (i.e., seal and sign flap, return to me/mail to school, specific questions the school would like answered about you etc.)
 - ◆ Deadlines - specify the date you need them returned to you or mailed to the school, not the school's deadline for applications (*this is extremely important*)

Sending Applications

- ✓ Mail Applications to Arrive at Least 3 Weeks Early
 - ◆ If you have more awards, research or relevant work experience than can be explained in your essay it is a good idea to send a CV (curriculum vitae). Click the button to see an example. 
 - ◆ Triple check packet to make sure all required items are included before mailing. You don't want to worry about missing one item that could result in your application not being considered.
 - ◆ Call and confirm receipt of your application at least 1 week before deadline to make sure all items needed are there. Whenever calling schools make sure you are courteous to the graduate school secretary!

Interview Selection Criteria

- ✓ Schools have different selection criteria and may weight them differently. The following are some of these criteria. They are not in any specific order.
 - ◆ GRE Scores – Each school has an arbitrary cut-off score to eliminate candidates and these are usually weighted highly if not highest
 - ◆ Letters of recommendation – Strong letters of recommendation from professionals in the field who can compare you to other students and current graduate students are weighted highly.
 - ◆ Fit – Choose schools that match your goals and research interests. If your interests or goals do not match the school you will be decreasing your chances of getting accepted.

Interview Selection Criteria

- ◆ Essays – Your essay is your chance to sell yourself by showing the schools that you have seriously considered your choices by researching each school, explaining your specific goals, why you have chosen that school and summarizing your background. May be weighted heavily.
- ◆ Research experience – Most applicants will have some type of research experience. By obtaining a strong foundation in research you will increase your chances of getting into the school of your choice. Research experience may also make up for another area in which you have a weakness.

Do I Need to Attend the Interview?

- ✓ I highly recommend attending all interviews.
- ✓ Some people will tell you a phone interview is all you need and you will get all of the information you will need to make a decision.
- ✓ This is your future and the next 4 to 5 years of your life, so make sure you can make an informed decision. The next few slides cover my reasons for attending interviews.

Do I Need to Attend the Interview?

- ♦ **Difference between how they look on paper vs. reality** – A school may look like it matches your goals and what you want perfectly on paper, but come up short once you go there. For instance, school X looked perfect for me when I researched it. They said they followed the scientist-practitioner model and had a lot of research opportunities. Once I got there I learned that they were planning to switch to the scientist-practitioner model soon, but the current focus was on clinical application. In addition, there was only one funded professor at the school and students were funded strictly through teaching assistantships. This school did not match my goals at all. I wouldn't have known this if I had not visited the school.

Do I need to Attend the Interview?

- ♦ **Determining fit** – Schools want students who fit their program; you will want the program to fit your goals professionally and personally. You will be there for quite a few years!
- ♦ **Meeting the faculty** – These are the people you will work with for the next 4 to 5 years and who will be in charge of helping you build your future. If you clash with the faculty members or you don't think they have the style you are looking for then you may want to reconsider that choice.

Do I need to Attend the Interview?

- ♦ **Meeting the students** – You will meet current students and other interviewees. This will be your peer group for quite some time. Although, this may not weigh heavily in your decision to attend a school, you can use this as a second order criteria if you are choosing between two comparable offers.
 - ♦ Create a list of questions that are important to you about the program (i.e., are you able to live here on the current funding level, is it difficult to get into X's lab, what is the worst part of the program, etc.). Make sure you ask the students these questions when they are in a position allowing them the freedom to answer. You may also want to ask several students the same questions. Each person may have different experiences and answer them differently.

Do I Need to Attend the Interview?

- ♦ **Mentorship** – Different schools approach mentorship in different ways. Some schools accept you to the program under a specific mentor whereas others accept you and then you will find a mentor after beginning the program. You may have a preference for one. Attending the interview is an excellent way to meet many of the faculty members to help you decide if you want to accept an offer to a program where you will have to find your own mentor. In addition, some schools have more mentor guidance. If you feel you need a mentor who will provide more guidance, you may want to consider a program that accepts you under a specific mentor. Current students are also an excellent source for finding out how that schools mentorship works.

Do I Need to Attend the Interview?

- ♦ **More on Mentorship** – The different types of mentorship can have an effect on your future career trajectory. There are positives and negatives for both types.
 - ♦ Finding your own mentor – Positive - This type of mentorship may be excellent if you are not sure what population, research, etc. in which you would like to establish experience. Negative – If you know the area or population you want to work with, then you may not be able to work it out once you are there. They may already have students established in their lab and be unable to take on another student.
 - ♦ Accepted under a mentor – Positive – If you are accepted under a mentor in your chosen/preferred area, then you know you will get the experience you want or need. Negative – If you find that you clash with this mentor, they don't provide the experience you need, or you change your area of interest, you may find it difficult to either spend the rest of graduate school in that lab or change to another lab.

Do I Need to Attend the Interview?

- ♦ **General School Information** - By attending the interview you will have more of an opportunity to find out how things work on campus and in the program. In addition, other interviewees may ask questions you haven't thought about, but will provide you with important information to help you in making a decision.
- ♦ **Seeing the Campus and City** - Although, this should not weigh heavily in your decision to accept an offer, you can use this as a second order criteria when making a decision between two comparable schools. The campus or city may not be a place you want to spend the next 4 to 5 years of your life. If you go there and hate it this can make your life miserable. Also, you may want to check out the cost of living there with current students. Their current funding level may not provide you with enough funds to pay living expenses.

What are the interviews like?

- ♦ **Orientation to the Program** - Most schools will start off the day with a breakfast and orientation. This time will be spent telling you about the program, their expectations, goals and much more. They will usually use this time to answer any questions you have about the program. You will usually receive a schedule for the day during this time. It will give a list of everyone you will interview with and any other activities they have planned.
- ♦ **Interviews with Students** - Most schools will arrange some one-on-one interviews for you with current students. This is a great time to get a student's perspective on that school.

What are the interviews like?

- ♦ **Interviews with Faculty Members** - You will usually get personal interviews with at least 3 faculty members. This is a perfect chance to get their view on the program, find out more about their research and ask any other questions you have about the program.
- ♦ **8 - 11 Hours** - Each interview day will usually last about 8 to 11 hours. These are long days, so make sure you get plenty of sleep and are fully prepared for each one. Use all of this time wisely to gather as much information as you can.
- ♦ **Interviewee and Grad Student Party** - Most schools host a party the night before interviews for current students and interviewees. This is a great time to meet students outside the department and get some honest answers to any questions you have. This also allows you to get to know your possible future peer group better.

What types of questions will be asked?

- ♦ **Questions they ask** – They may ask several types of questions. Some may concern your background experience (i.e., Tell me about your research experience.), you personally (i.e., Tell me about you.), or specific questions to understand how you think (i.e., You have 15 minutes. I am giving you \$40,000. What research project would you do, how would you design it and why would you choose that project?).
- ♦ **Be Prepared to do the Asking!** – Very few professors asked me questions. They usually said, “You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t qualified, so I have no questions for you. What questions do you have for me?” If you are not prepared to do the asking then this could be detrimental to an offer you may receive.

Other Interview Information

- ♦ **Most of the Time Their Decision is Already Made** – Most schools will already have the interviewees rank ordered by who they will be making offers to by the time you get to the interview. Don't be discouraged by this. They use the interviews to see if there is a reason to change this order. You may be able to impress them and move up the order or someone may fall short of their expectations. This is why your application is so important!
- ♦ **Don't be Discouraged by One professor's attitude!** – There was usually one professor at each school who made me feel I was last choice or that I did not measure up to the expectations. This one person may not feel this way or may actually think you are the best candidate. Everyone has their quirks, so don't let that get to you.

Other Interview Information

- ♦ **Cost of Living** – While you are there find out the cost of living. Areas are different throughout the country and the cost of living may be important to your decision. Ask current students, not professors since they are not living on a student budget. Also, pick up some apartment guides to take home with you. This will be very helpful if you accept an offer at that school and need to start looking for a place to live.
- ♦ **Get along with Everyone** – Faculty members may be watching you to see how you interact with other students. If you are condescending to others or they feel like you don't like the students this could affect their choice especially if they are having a difficult time deciding between two candidates.

Other Interview Information

- ♦ **Don't Get Caught up in Other Interviewee's Complaints** – Just because someone else is unhappy with the way things are going it doesn't have to affect you. Negativity breeds negativity. Stay away from anyone who wants to pull you into their unhappiness. When I attended the interview at the school whose offer I accepted, there was one interviewee who tried to pull everyone into her disillusionment with the school. This person decided after she got there that they did not have what she wanted. She began pulling everyone aside and would put the school down, talk about the professors and try to get you to join her negativity. The faculty members may notice this and change their minds about you if you get caught up in it, so stay away from these situations.

The Expenses

- ✓ Applying to graduate school and attending interviews is very expensive. Make sure you plan ahead and save for this period of time! Below are some of the expenses I incurred.
 - ◆ Transcripts - At IUPUI they cost \$7.00 each and most schools want two. I think I spent \$140.00 just sending out transcripts.
 - ◆ GRE Scores - When you take the test make sure you take a list of schools with you. You can send 4 free of charge and then it costs \$13.00 for each additional report. It cost me over \$69.00 to send out my scores because I forgot to take my list of schools and was not prepared to send them at that time.

The Expenses

- ♦ **Application Fees** – Application fees vary. They are about \$25.00 and up. Some departments will also have application fees. I think my total cost was over \$300.00!
- ♦ **Interviews** – Attending interviews is very expensive! Depending on how you travel the cost can become overwhelming. I drove to all of my interviews because they were all within a 1,000 mile radius and I did not have the money to fly. Although, I did drive to each one, the average cost was still around \$150.00 for each interview I attended. Plan ahead and save money!

Good Luck!

The application and interview process is long and stressful. I hope my experiences may help you go through your own with less stress and confusion. This is an extremely important time in your life and it takes a lot of planning. Don't get caught at the last minute trying to work things out. Good luck in your future as a graduate student!