

Dr. Novak's Advice on Applying to Grad School
(note: everyone has different opinions about this stuff – this is my 2 cents)

Should you even bother?

Deciding whether you should go to grad school, what type, and where to apply – is probably the hardest part. As the proverb says, there are many paths to the top of the mountain. However, if you want to get to the top of the mountain, you've got to choose a path.

- **Don't spend time and money on a degree you aren't passionate about**

Going to grad school right after college might impress people and make your parents feel relieved, but it is an expensive mistake if you don't actually want to work in the field that is most likely to hire you when you are done

- **Don't spend time and money on a degree that is more advanced than what you need to get the job you actually want. The diploma that hangs on your wall is less important than how satisfied you are with the job you will be doing every day. It is AWESOME to have "Dr." in front of your name, but not if you're miserable.**

If you get a M.S. or M.A. in Psychology instead of a Ph.D., it is likely that you will find a job in which you work for someone with a Ph.D. (e.g., you will have a supervisor). Depending on what you actually want to do with your time, that might be a wonderful thing. With a Masters in Counseling, you can find a job working in, say, a community center counseling teens, a hospital, or a rehab facility. A Ph.D. will probably be in charge, which means more pay, more responsibility, more paperwork, and often more headaches.

- **Find people who ALREADY HAVE the jobs you think you might want and talk to them. Ask them if you can have 30 minutes of their time to talk about what they do.**

What is a typical week like? What do they like / dislike most? What has surprised them about the job? What advice do they have for a student interested in this field (e.g., which degree would they recommend? Are there certain training programs that are especially valued? How do they see the field changing in 5-10 years? etc.). Most of us LOVE to talk about what we do and share our advice. It makes us feel like we know things.

- **Consider taking time off instead of committing to or settling for a program that you aren't excited about.**

You need enough motivation to sustain yourself through 2, 3, 4, 5, or more years of a difficult training program. One or two years off may help you decide what you really want and may help you get into programs that are better matches for you. Also, many programs desire more mature applicants because their priorities are different.

- **Once you know that you want to apply, you need to figure out where to apply.**

Start by searching through guidebooks (APA publishes "**Graduate Study in Psychology**" every year or so, and certain divisions put out their own information) and the internet. Try to keep an open mind and search as far and wide as possible at first. Seek advice from professors and people in the field. They can steer you toward good programs and away from less good ones. Schools' reputations for grad programs are completely separate from their reputations for undergrad programs, athletics, etc. For example, UConn, Rutgers, and Stony Brook are all big state schools, but they have EXCELLENT Psych Departments with phenomenal grad programs. Columbia and NYU have many amazing programs as well, but don't apply to them if they don't have a good program for YOUR specialty. You will probably apply to schools that your friends and family haven't heard of. Programs range from being hugely expensive to PAYING YOU A STIPEND TO BE THERE. Look for the best deal that will also help you get the career you want (not the one that makes your grandma brag the most).

- **Create a list of the schools you'll apply to.**

Conventional wisdom says to choose a few "reaches" a few that could work out (but might not), and a few "safety schools." Applications get very expensive, so you might want to rethink this strategy. I think it helps to figure out what your worst-case scenario is. You might get into schools you're really happy with, but what if you don't? Would you rather be at a school that you think is worse than others (the safety), or take a year off to get more experience and improve your application for the next year? Thinking about this might change your decision to apply to safety schools. There's nothing wrong with taking a year or two off to get more experience, and it could make you more competitive for the schools you want to go to. Schools won't remember that they rejected you.

Cumulative GPA & Major GPA + GRE / Psych GRE / LSAT / MCAT

How much GPA & test scores matter depends on the type of program you are applying to. They mainly serve to help you get your foot in the door. The harsh reality is that many competitive programs (ALL clinical psych programs) use GPA's and test scores to weed people out. They have hundreds of applications for maybe a dozen spots (often fewer), and an easy/lazy way to speed up the process is to LITERALLY THROW AWAY applications that don't meet a certain threshold (< 3.0 or 3.3 GPA, ~1100 or 1200 GRE quant + verbal). Masters programs and less competitive programs may have less stringent policies, and could be a stepping stone to a Ph.D. program eventually. Research-based psych Ph.D. programs (e.g., social psych, cognitive psych, etc.) tend to look more at the entire package.

Generally, you can help offset a lower GPA with a higher Major GPA and clear demonstration of an upward trend. The lower your GPA, the higher your test scores need to be and vice versa. Ideally, you'll have BOTH a high GPA AND high test scores. You will be compared against students who have put a huge amount of effort into these elements at insanely competitive colleges. If your application is lacking in one of these areas, consider broadening your search, taking time off, or asking your letter writers for help explaining your situation.

You only have so much time left to improve your GPA, but you can study like crazy to improve your GRE scores. If you have lots of extra money, you might benefit from a prep course, but if you don't, buy a couple of books, create a schedule for studying, and follow through. I made 1,000 flashcards to study vocabulary, and it definitely helped. You can study math the same way. I love www.freerice.com. You can take the regular GRE any time, so set a deadline for yourself and do your very best. Try to avoid having to take it twice, but if you have to, you can.

The Psych GRE is bizarre, and you will be asked questions based on fields of psychology that you have never studied. Going back to your Intro to Psych materials (or getting some from a professor) might help. It doesn't count much, but you MUST take it if it's required for your potential schools. The deadline to register is in SEPTEMBER. That is your ONLY chance to take it before applications are due.

Statement of Purpose (SOP's)

Your SOP is not just a list of your relevant accomplishments, experiences, and interests – it's your main chance to introduce yourself to the faculty you'd like to work with. The goal is to present your strongest qualifications, but do so in a way that makes the reader want to get to know you. If you have overcome a hardship, this might be the place to explain it, particularly if it has some relevance to your goals. The major exception to this is talking about your own mental health – don't do it. Family members' mental illness is also dangerous territory, but less so. Making it from the applicant pool of hundreds onto the "short list" requires that you catch the readers' attention and make them want to root for you. Showcasing your strengths and developing your interests WHILE telling an interesting narrative is incredibly difficult. Look at lots of good examples and ask professors and others for help constructing and editing your SOP. This is also where you spell out why YOU are a perfect fit for THIS program and vice versa. Though your basic statement may stay the same, there should be parts that are tailored to each program specifically.

Letters of Recommendation (LOR's)

You probably can't please all of your professors all of the time. If you need LOR's for grad school, internships, scholarships, etc., you should be very strategic about which professors you will work the hardest to impress. If you can, take 2 classes with the same prof so that they get to know you better. In order for recommenders to have great stuff to say about you, you have to give them great material to work with. In addition to good work in class, meet with your professor to tell them about your goals. Also, tell your profs what you like about their class. 1) it's flattering and 2) they can use that in your letter

When you are ready to ask for letters, say something like "I really enjoyed your ___ class. I'm starting to put together my applications for ___... Would you be able to give me a positive letter of recommendation?" Classy, honest people will tell you yes or no, and that's a relief because YOU DON'T WANT WEAK LETTERS. I sometimes ask students "You don't have another professor who knows you and your work better than I do?" and that's me trying to give a hint that I can't write the strongest letter for someone. My letters range from good but bland to friggin' amazing based on how much I can say about the student. If you take a class or 2 with a prof, then work with them outside of class (independent study, lab work, etc.), that will help you get an amazing letter. BUT, don't bite off more than you can chew. Disappointing profs (flaking out, being rude, etc.) will make it impossible to get good letters.

If you are graduating and applying in the future TALK TO YOUR PROFESSORS BEFORE YOU LEAVE. Tell them you're planning to apply for ___ next year, and you want to know if it's ok to contact the recommender next year to ask for a LOR. This gives them a heads-up, and they may try har

Ask for letters 6-8 weeks before the deadlines begin. Make life easy for your recommenders. Set up meetings to tell them what you're up to, and then give each person a folder with:

- 1) ONE big list of the programs you're applying to (Type of program / Name of program, Department, and Street address) INCLUDING THE DEADLINES.
Ex: MS in Sport Psychology, Department of Kinesiology, Whatever University, 555 Main St, City, State, Zip, DUE Dec 15
- 2) Your current resume (this shows your GPA, accomplishments, skills, volunteer work, etc)
- 3) A brief version of your statement to remind your recommenders what kind of program you're trying to get into and WHY
- 4) Pre-printed, pre-stamped envelopes if the rec needs to be mailed separately, or a post it note on the envelope reminding the recommender that you will pick up the letter as soon as it is ready
- 5) Don't forget to include any additional forms the recommender needs to complete. If you are supposed to sign it or complete information on the form, don't forget to do it. If you can't be bothered to read through all the instructions on these applications, perhaps grad school isn't where you want to / need to be.

Be persistent and remind the recommenders about the deadlines every 2 weeks or so until they are turned in.

Does that suck? Yes. But this is YOUR priority, not your recommenders'.

Who should you ask?

Best:	Toss-up:	Toss-up:	Possible asset:
Relevant professor who knows your most relevant work very well and is impressed with you	Professor who knows about a different (but still important) aspect of your work	A supervisor who knows about an applied aspect of your work (the more prestigious, the better)	Someone who knows your work well AND is connected to the place you're applying to

Miscellaneous

Be polite to EVERYONE you interact with at the schools you apply to. Secretaries may put a note in your file indicating what a rude person you are if you treat them badly. If you visit a school, even the grad students will judge you and report back to the faculty members. They will also look at your Facebook profile to dig up dirt. For real.

Everyone has biases about who they'd like to accept, but it's not what you think. It's completely idiosyncratic. Many profs want to recruit talented minority students because they are underrepresented in our field. Gender researchers may recruit male applicants because they are rare. You never know. If you are applying to a mentor-based program, you can test the water by sending your potential mentors a succinct, well-written introduction email. You can inquire about whether they are planning to accept any students this year. It helps make your interest clear, and it could keep you from wasting your time.

If you have gone through a difficult situation, and it is relevant to your interests, you might bring it up in your SOP. If it's more personal or not relevant to your career path, another option is to ask one of your recommenders to help you explain the situation. For example, maybe your grades really dropped during Fall 07, in part because that is the semester your mom died. If your mom died from cancer, and the experience has inspired you to become a cancer researcher, it might be a good idea to describe this in your SOP (this makes it less important to mention your grades because the admissions committee will figure it out).

Try to fall in love with people who have very flexible, portable jobs. ☺ Try not to let your significant other restrict your options. The person you're dating right now may not, in fact, be "the one." When people start a new chapter in their lives (new job, new school, etc.), it can be very stressful, even for the best relationships. Just saying...

Try not to let other people's expectations define your career choices. Even more important than that, try not to let your career choices define your life and happiness. If you're lucky, life is long, and you'll have lots of time to try different paths.

What can you do with a year or two away from school? It'd be nice to get a lower-level paying job in the field you hope to enter (some labs are big enough to hire full-time Research Assistants). Those jobs are rare, though. All you really need to do is add new experiences to show that you are motivated and maintaining interest in developing relevant skills. A great compromise is to have a "normal" job that helps you pay the bills, but do volunteer work (in a research lab, in a community center, a shelter, a camp for kids with disabilities, etc.) that will add valuable experience to your future applications. You could also apply for Teach for America, Americorps, the Peace Corps, or look for other ways to do interesting new things. You are the only one who will know whether you're choosing a year off or it is your back up plan.

And Finally...

Once you get into a grad program, be sure to contact your recommenders to thank them again and let them know your plans. It helps us to know that our students are getting acceptances, and we may direct other students to you for questions in the future.

Succeeding in grad school is a different ball game. It's like a job, and you need to take it very seriously to do well. Your professors care about you, but they're not your friends and you do need to impress them (without sucking up too much). Every program is different, so it's hard to give advice. However, keep in mind that for as hard as it is to get accepted to grad school, **GETTING IN IS THE EASY PART**. Staying in the program, making the most out of every opportunity, and developing professional relationships will help you do the next hardest thing... **GETTING A JOB!**

Good luck! Let me know if you have questions...