How Admissions Decisions are Made

The process by which graduate-school admission decisions are made is qualitatively different from that used for undergraduate admissions. Graduate school applications are initially screened to ensure that they are complete and that the applicant meets minimum standards (as per undergraduate applications), but after that they are passed on to academic departments and thence to individual faculty members identified as potential supervisors. It is crucial to appreciate that the primary decision maker will be an individual faculty member (with decisions sometimes vetted by a small committee of faculty members). In a given year, a faculty member may or may not consider any applications (depending on how many graduate students he or she is currently supervising). If the faculty member is "in the market" for one or more new students, s/he will be looking for real stand-outs--i.e., applicants who clearly have what it takes to succeed as graduate students. By accepting a student, a faculty member undertakes a substantial commitment in terms of time and resources; if the student does well, all benefit, but if the student does not do well the faculty member's career suffers (due to a major investment of time and resources that does not culminate in scholarly publications). Consequently, applicants must do everything in their power to communicate their strengths to potential graduate supervisors.

Developing and communicating your strengths in ways that are appropriate for graduate school requires an understanding of the skills and abilities that are important for success in graduate school. In a research science, graduate school is not like undergraduate school. Rather, graduate training emphasizes an apprenticeship system, in which student and supervisor work together on research projects. Graduate students do take courses as well, but courses are subservient to the aim of developing the skills and expertise required to conduct and publish original research. At the end of your graduate training, few potential employers will care very much what courses you took or what marks you earned in them--what they will care about is how successful you were in terms of publishing original scientific research in scholarly journals. Therefore the skills and abilities that matter to potential
graduate supervisors are those that are involved in doing scientific research (e.g., critical thinking skills, mathematical and analytic skills, computer skills, knowledge of and passion for psychological theory and research, writing and communication skills, discipline, creativity, etc.).

What You Can do to Increase Your Chances of Being Admitted

The following are likely to increase your chances of getting into a good graduate program in research-oriented psychology.

- Majoring in psychology as an undergraduate and taking upper-level courses in the area of specialization in which you want to pursue graduate study is definitely a plus, but not necessarily essential. An undergraduate background that includes solid training in mathematics, natural sciences, and logic is a major advantage (whether or not you are a psych major).
- Get good marks in your undergraduate courses, especially in your last two years. Potential supervisors will not have very much information on which to base their decisions, so marks will play a substantial role.
- Do whatever you can to gain hands-on experience conducting scientific research under the tutorship of a skilled researcher (e.g., independent studies courses, an honours thesis, working as a research assistant). There are three major benefits:
  - You will learn a lot, and discover whether or not you really are passionate about doing research (and if you aren't, then you probably shouldn't apply for admission to a research-oriented psychology graduate program);
  - You will be able to communicate in your application to potential graduate supervisors that you already have experience doing the kinds of things that you would be doing in grad school;
  - Whoever supervises you in these experiences will be able to write a detailed, well-grounded letter of recommendation on your behalf (and such letters carry substantial weight). (Note that one implication of this is that there is no sense seeking research experience unless you are really going to work hard at it and do well.)
- Apply for funding from appropriate agencies (e.g., for Canadian residents interested in scientific psychology, an NSERC PGS-A postgraduate studentship; for US residents, a National Science Foundation graduate research fellowship; depending on where you live, your interests, and your background, there may also be other potential sources of funding). Graduate study is a full-time commitment. Although some graduate students support themselves by working as teaching assistants or as research assistants on projects with which they are not substantively involved, the more time a student spends on such work the less time s/he can devote to getting the real job done (i.e., conducting original research). Some potential supervisors provide some financial support for some students, but such funds tend to be in very limited supply. Unless you are an absolute superstar on every other dimension, your chances of being admitted will increase dramatically if you have your own funding. Your undergraduate institution may well have an office (e.g., graduate student financial aid office) that can help you identify potential sources of funding. Note that the deadlines for such grants are very early (e.g., the NSERC deadline is usually in September or early October of the senior year). Producing a strong application will take a substantial time investment, so start early. Get feedback on drafts of the proposal. For many applicants, funding is a make-it or break-it issue, so aggressively look for funding sources and make your applications as good as you can.
• Prepare carefully for the GRE, including the subject exam in psychology, by studying and taking practice tests (UVic does not require the Psych subject test, but many schools do, and doing it and doing well can help). For the subject exam in psychology, reviewing a good introductory psychology text book (e.g., Zimbardo) can be very helpful. Applicants with mediocre GREs are less likely to be accepted.

• Target your applications to individual faculty members rather than to universities. To succeed as a research-oriented psychologist (i.e., get a job after you earn your degree), you must succeed in your graduate work, and succeeding in your graduate work means publishing original research while you are a graduate student. Going to a gloriously famous university will not be profitable unless you mesh with your supervisor in ways that enable you to conduct and publish new research. What matters most is that (a) the potential supervisor him/herself is a successful researcher (i.e., publishes frequently in good journals and is frequently cited by other researchers) and (b) that your interests and style are compatible with those of the potential supervisor. This means that before you apply you need to do some serious thinking and research to determine with which faculty members you would most like to work. If you have no idea what kinds of research topics excite you (and hence no idea about how to check out who is doing what research on those topics), then you probably should not be applying for graduate school in research-oriented psychology.

• Apply broadly. You cannot assume that the faculty member with whom you would most like to work will admit any student the year you apply (let alone that you will be among his/her top choices). There’s no sense applying to a university that you definitely would not attend even if it were your only choice, but if you really want to go to graduate school it would be unwise to apply to only one or two schools.

• Prepare your application carefully, particularly with regard to written statements of your research interests etc. Tailor applications to the potential supervisor(s) at each school. Have other people proof read your applications. Writing skills are crucial for success in graduate school, so if your application indicates that you are a poor writer your chances of being admitted plummet. Bear in mind that completing an application for grad school takes a substantial amount of time.

**Getting Letters of Recommendation**

Graduate school applications include letters of recommendation (typically 3 of them, usually written by university professors). These letters play a significant role in admissions decisions.

If possible, lay the ground work for such letters a year or more in advance of when you will need them, by getting to know several of your professors. If the people who write for you know nothing about you except what marks you received in their courses, they will be unable to add much that isn't already communicated in your transcript. At minimum, be an active participant in your courses and occasionally go to your profs’ office hours to discuss course material. Better yet, do independent studies courses (sometimes called "directed studies" courses) and an honours thesis, and/or volunteer to work in faculty laboratories.

Note that you don't necessarily have to have specific ideas about the content of an independent studies course or thesis project when you first approach a prof to discuss the possibility of doing one. It certainly can't hurt to come prepared with ideas regarding the general topic area you want to explore (and, of course, that topic area should be one that is of interest to the faculty member-check out your Department’s web site to find out who does what), but what matters more is that you present yourself as a bright, conscientious
person who wants to do a project with that faculty member. He or she can then help you find a suitable focus for that project.

When you approach a prof to ask for a letter of recommendation or to talk about doing an independent studies course or a thesis, come prepared with information that will make the prof's decision easier. In the case of letters of recommendation, such information will also enable the prof to comment on your skills and abilities on numerous dimensions; the more detailed and concrete information you provide, the more detailed and concrete (and hence convincing) the prof can make the letter. A copy of each of the following can be very helpful:

a. Your transcript (doesn't need to be an official copy), with psych courses highlighted.
b. A separate, typed list of the courses you have taken with that prof, with information about your work (e.g., topics of any papers you wrote) and marks in those courses.
c. Your resume (which should focus on your skills and experiences relevant to psych).
d. A sample of your written work (e.g., a paper you've written for a past course).
e. For grad school applicants, an example of the "personal statement" you've written for your application. Have someone else proof read this before you give it to the profs who are going to write letters for you.
f. For grad school applicants, if you know your GRE scores then include a photocopy of the GRE slip with your scores (or if you have not yet received the printed slip then simply type them on a separate sheet). (The same goes for other standardized tests relevant to grad-school abilities.)
g. For grad school applicants, a separate typed sheet with the names of the programs and universities to which you plan to apply, indicating for each the due date for the letter and whether the letter is to be sent directly to the university or returned to you for inclusion with your other application materials.
h. For grad school applicants, an envelope for each application, appropriately addressed (with the rating form described above either in the envelope or paper-clipped to it). Typed addresses look more professional than written ones (you can print the addresses on regular paper, cut them out, and use a glue stick). If multiple envelopes are to be addressed and returned to you (for inclusion with your other application materials) be sure to somehow mark the outside of each such envelope (e.g., with a post-it note) so that you'll know which university that envelope is for. It is typically best not to put postage on the envelopes, but polite to offer to provide postage.
i. Most graduate schools provide a form with various rating scales to be completed by the people who provide recommendations for you. Such forms almost always include sections that the applicant is to fill out before giving the form to the referee-make sure you've filled out those sections neatly and completely. If you are applying to schools that do not use such a form, note which schools don't use a form on the list of places to which you are applying (g. above).

What If It's Too Late?

Suppose you are reading all of this sage advice well into your final undergraduate year--too late to do an honours thesis, ace the GREs, and apply for an NSERC scholarship. What should you do? Seek out an opportunity to work in a successful researcher's lab the year after you graduate. If necessary, do it for free, as a part-time volunteer (while supporting yourself with whatever paying job you can find). During that year, gain lots of hands-on research experience, cultivate the admiration and appreciation of your supervisor, write a bang-up application for postgraduate funding, blow the doors off the GRE, and read the
latest research publications of the potential supervisors with whom you would like to work. You will then be in a much stronger position to apply.

And if none of this avails, keep in mind that graduate students in research-oriented psychology work incredibly hard for years, at subsistence pay, and then face a very uncertain job market. Maybe you lucked out!

What Other Web Resources are Available?

Dr. Margaret A. Lloyd's absolutely superb Careers in Psychology site includes a wealth of information about applying for graduate school.

Dr. Curt Burgess hosts another excellent site, the PsychGrad.Org, which includes very helpful information for potential applicants (as well as for those already in grad school).

The PsychWeb site is a goldmine of a resource-useful in all sorts of ways; particularly handy is its extensive list of homepages of Psych Depts.

Hugh Foley of Skidmore College has a very nice site, with some quite useful additional links not repeated here.

Excellent sites similar (but not identical) to this one are offered by Rider University, and Hanover College's Mega-list of Careers-in-Psychology Sites.