

Considering a Doctoral Degree in Psychology or Neuroscience?

The first thing that you should know is that **a PhD degree is focused on research**. Clinical and Counseling Psychology PhD programs are not an exception. If you are applying to Clinical or Counseling Psychology PhD programs, you will also learn to conduct psychotherapy or psychological assessments, but research is a key component of the training program. The second thing to know is that there are several different fields of study to consider based on your interests (e.g., Clinical – including Forensic – Psychology, Cognitive or Behavioral Neuroscience, Industrial Psychology, Social Psychology, Quantitative Psychology). While Cognitive and Behavioral Neuroscience are often housed in the Psychology Department, this is not universally true – there may also be options in Biology Departments or standalone Neuroscience PhD Programs at some institutions.

Are you interested in clinical work, but not research? If so, there are options other than a PhD to consider that require less time in school. Students interested in the helping professions (e.g., psychotherapy), but not research, have several other options, including the PsyD, which focuses primarily on practical preparation rather than scientific research, and a number of different master's degrees. Please consult our [website](#) for additional information. We especially recommend reading "[Uncensored Advice for Applying to Graduate School in Clinical Psychology](#)."

How do I prepare to apply to PhD Programs? If you are interested in applying to a research-based PhD Program in Psychology (e.g., Clinical Psychology, Behavioral or Cognitive Neuroscience, Industrial Psychology, Sport Psychology), start here.

- 1. Research Experience is Imperative!** Research experience is an absolute must if you are hoping to be a competitive applicant for PhD programs.
 - **Find a Lab and Get Involved:** There are several active, faculty-directed labs in the Department of Psychology. Many [faculty](#) maintain lab websites where they describe current projects and post links to publications. Determine what most interests you by exploring these sites and then get involved. See "[How to Find a Position as a Research Assistant](#)" for more information about how to join a lab. Don't see a good fit? Opportunities may be available in faculty-directed labs housed in other departments (e.g., social work, biology, kinesiology). Additional information about special programs and research opportunities can be found here: [Office of Undergraduate Research](#), [McNair Scholars Program](#)
 - **Start Early:** Competitive applicants have several years of research experience. Sometimes, applicants are co-authors on published scientific (peer-reviewed) papers before applying to graduate school. Presentations and publications are how science is disseminated and shared, and a big part of the doctoral training experience and a career as a faculty member.
 - **Ask for Advice:** Speak with your faculty mentor to determine whether a research-focused, graduate-level training environment is the right choice for you. It can also be incredibly helpful to talk with current graduate students (e.g., in the lab that you've joined, your TAs) about their experiences (e.g., the application process, program requirements, future plans).
 - **Go the Extra Mile:** Some successful applicants take 2-3 years after completing their undergraduate degree to work full-time in a research lab. This kind of experience can help you determine whether you love research, will provide you with opportunities to use cutting edge tools and techniques to address novel scientific questions, and permit you to learn more about your field of interest. Ultimately, this kind of experience will make you a more competitive applicant. Find opportunities here: [PsychResearchList](#), your faculty mentor, Twitter, professional societies.

2. **Earn Good Grades!** Applicants are expected to have a strong academic record.
 - Some programs may list a GPA cutoff, or the average GPA of successful applicants, but in general you should aim for outstanding academic performance (e.g., 3.3-3.5 → maybe, with mitigating circumstances; above 3.5 → best chance of success). If you have a grade that is less than stellar, outstanding research experience and a good explanation may help.
 - If your undergraduate grades are not as strong as you would like them to be, you may consider completing a post-baccalaureate program or taking additional coursework to demonstrate your potential to succeed with graduate coursework.
 - While an undergraduate or master's degree in psychology is not required for many doctoral programs, it is important to demonstrate your familiarity with psychology. To this end, some programs may want to see transcripts of coursework in psychology or a related discipline to ensure that you have received foundational education in this area.

3. **Cultivate Relationships with Faculty Who Can Provide Letters of Recommendation.** Typically, you will need three letters of recommendation. These letters should be written by faculty who know you well and can provide specific examples of your strengths and potential for success in graduate school. If they have not had opportunities to interact with you personally, a course instructor from a large enrollment class will struggle to write an effective letter, even if you've earned an outstanding grade in the course. To cultivate this kind of relationship with a faculty member you might visit their office hours and ask for advice (even if you are doing well in the class), request one-on-one mentorship meetings, work as a research assistant in their lab, or complete a field placement with them. If you are requesting a letter from an instructor who does not know you well, and they agree to write it, then you might request a meeting to speak about your interests and experiences so that they can write a more informed letter on your behalf. Importantly, if you know that your goal is to apply to a graduate program in the future, you should make attempts to maintain some level of communication with your instructors and faculty mentors even after graduation and keep them informed about your career plans as they relate to graduate school. One of your letters could be from a work or field placement supervisor, if the work you are doing is related to psychology.

4. **GRE Scores:** Some programs/universities require the [Graduate Record Examination](#) (GRE), and some don't. Research the programs you are planning to apply to and see if it's required. If the GRE is required for a program to which you intend to apply, you should plan to spend several months studying for the test and to take it well in advance of the application deadline (typically, applications are due in November and December). There are lots of ways that you can prepare to take the GRE, which could include reviewing a study prep book and working through sample exam questions, joining a GRE study group with other individuals who are going to take the exam, and enrolling in a prep course. If you perform poorly on your first attempt, you may want to try again – make sure to plan ahead so that this is a possibility.

How do I determine where to apply? When you apply to graduate school, most often, you are applying to work in a specific faculty-directed lab. This person will serve as your primary research mentor. You should choose your potential mentors because they do research that strongly interests you and that you would like to get more deeply involved in during graduate school. The work that you do – e.g., the experiments that you conduct as a graduate student – will be designed/developed in consultation with your research mentor. It is imperative that you are interested in the work that is being done in your mentor's lab. So, as an applicant, one of your primary goals should be to find potential faculty advisors who can train you in the specific area you wish to conduct research in. You might ask yourself - Is this the kind of work that I am really invested in? When you identify a faculty member with whom you would like to work (e.g., after looking at their lab website and reading recent publications), check out the application requirements at their institution (e.g., when is the deadline, for clinical programs – whether it is accredited, and whether there is a GPA requirement).

Finally, if you're able to do so, apply broadly. PhD programs are competitive. Even if you've done everything we've suggested, admission is not guaranteed. You should identify several programs that you'd like to apply to. Generally, you don't want to limit yourself geographically (e.g., I'm only going to apply to schools in Wisconsin). You want to identify a set of potential mentors/programs that best fit your interests, so flexibility is important. While there is no set number of programs that one is required to apply to, you may consider a ballpark of 10 – 15 programs to increase your chances of being offered an interview and eventually a position in a graduate program.

Applicants who majored in Psychology and/or Neuroscience for their bachelor's degree at UWM can apply to UWM doctoral programs in psychology. In general, admissions are quite competitive. For example, the clinical psychology PhD program at UWM typically receives over 270 applications each year to fill an incoming class of 5-6 students. Thus, having an undergraduate degree from UWM does not guarantee you admission to our doctoral programs.