

## Your First Year of Graduate School

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You got into graduate school! Hooray! Before embarking on a multiyear journey, it's worth a moment of self-congratulation for this extraordinary achievement. It's the culmination of everything you have accomplished since, well, kindergarten. It's also worth recognizing that you did the hard work needed to survey your interests, discover your passions, and determine what field most deserves your talent and energy throughout your professional life. It's fine if you don't know what you'll do with your degree yet – that will come once you have had more experience over the next few years. For now, be excited that you chose psychology – a field that has the potential to understand and improve people's lives through a focus on literally every thought, feeling, and behavior for literally every minute of every day for every human on the planet. No other discipline can say that, and soon you will be an emerging expert in this most exciting field.

But back to celebration for a moment longer. It is harder to get into graduate school in psychology than most other areas of graduate study, at least in the US. Data are not available for every subdiscipline, but for doctoral programs in clinical psychology, for instance, only 8 percent of applicants get into US programs, and during the pandemic that proportion got a lot smaller as the number of applications nearly doubled. That means that your admission to graduate school may have been harder than getting into med school, law school, or even veterinary school, which means that you have some unusually advanced skills and experience that will most likely be sufficient to ensure you will thrive over the next few years. While admission into these programs is a uniting factor for successful applicants, each student comes in with varying levels of experience, presentations, and publications. You may be tempted to compare yourself to others on these metrics during your first week of classes. Don't. Each applicant was selected for admission based on their potential to excel in our field, and most of those metrics reflect the generosity of mentors more than students' potential anyway. Be assured that if you were admitted, you deserve to be in graduate school as much as everyone else. (See Chapter 5 on Imposter Syndrome to help you understand why it's normal if you sometimes doubt yourself.)

What should you expect during your first year of graduate school and how can you be successful and happy for the next 12 months? That's what this chapter will touch upon below, with a focus on graduate coursework, some thoughts about your general demeanor and sources of support now that you are on the path to a graduate degree, and some discussion on getting started with research.

## 1. Graduate Coursework

For many first-year students, graduate coursework may present a confusing paradox. On the one hand, succeeding in courses is kind of in your wheelhouse. It was probably your ability to complete reading assignments, write essays, study for exams, and get good grades that led you to get into a remarkably competitive graduate program. Most programs also contribute to the illusion that coursework is what graduate school is all about; it is common for many first years to take about three courses in each semester of their first year, which leads many people to determine that although this is a lighter courseload than you had as an undergrad, these are graduate courses and thus perhaps more advanced, requiring you to dedicate even more effort on them for your first year. Indeed, these classes can be time-consuming – they will soak up whatever time you allot to them.

Therein lies the paradox, because in actuality, most professors would agree that your coursework actually represents a relatively less important aspect of your graduate training. Of course, it's not that coursework is unimportant, and you certainly should not ignore your assignments. It's just not your main focus. That's for two reasons. First, it is completely expected that you will pass these courses. The graduate school selection process usually is successful in admitting high-achieving, scholastically inclined, and perhaps even perfectionistic (more on this later) students, each of whom has a long history of getting good grades. Assuming you apply a reasonable amount of effort and bring your well-established intellect and thoughtful inquisitiveness into each class, you will do fine. I would not lose sleep over a graduate-level class midterm or final (except perhaps in statistics), because these classes are not expected to yield great variance in students' performance, and it is widely assumed you will do fine just by being the student you have become in the last 17 years of formal schooling.

But note that there is also a second reason why graduate coursework should not be your main focus: no one will ever see your grades. No internship, postdoctoral fellowship, or eventual job application in academia, practice, or industry will ever ask for your GPA or graduate transcript. (Note: If you apply for a training grant from the National Institutes of Health, they may ask, however.) No one lists a graduate GPA on their CV, and no one will care what grades you got. In fact, some graduate schools don't even assign formal grades of A, B, C, etc. but rather list Pass vs. High Pass. Now, again – a quick caveat. You should not aim to fail these classes. In fact, most graduate schools will put you on probation if you get a "Low Pass" grade and will expel you for a "Fail." But under the assumption that this chapter is being read by a student with a long history of academic success, a strong work ethic, and a small

dose of perfectionistic tendencies, it is safe to say that you do not need to worry about your grades.

You may be wondering – what is the best orientation to have in graduate coursework, then? It may be worth thinking of your coursework as a context to get exposure to a wide array of theories, findings, approaches, and techniques to expand your thinking in psychology. Probably for that reason, graduate professors are known to offer far more reading assignments each week than any human could possibly complete thoroughly, and each class session is dedicated toward group discussion about these readings to expand your mind and debate the concepts referenced therein. Your understanding of the facts is important, of course, but your ability to engage with the material – question it, apply it, discuss it – is often emphasized more, with graduate training focused on seeing “how you think,” and helping you to become a questioning, informed scholar rather than a regurgitator of facts. It’s good to speak up in graduate school and it’s great to challenge concepts you’ve read about, and point out their limitations. It is NOT great to have your computer opened to surf social media during class, even if you got away with that as an undergrad. Remember, your goal is not to know enough material to get an A; it is to discuss and think about the material in a thoughtful way. Perhaps for those reasons, your assignments will be essays and term papers, and rather than discussing your grades at faculty meetings, your professors will discuss how well you explained and questioned concepts in your written work and during class.

With the exception of your statistics classes in your first year, there is not a lot of studying, per se, in graduate coursework, and truth be told, not all students have completed all readings before all classes (i.e., splitting up readings and trading outlines among classmates is a common practice). But there is a lot of information to digest. In many training programs, graduate training is conceptualized as helping you to progress through three levels, which can be conceptualized as a pyramid perhaps. Those levels are based on the concept that in graduate school your training is meant to help you gain exposure, experience, and expertise. You start at the bottom – the widest level – gaining broad exposure to tons of concepts and ideas (thus, many classes with an abundance of readings). By your second year, you are already taking only two classes a semester (with perhaps zero to one class each semester in your latter years of graduate school), but delving further into your research, teaching, and/or practice where you can apply the information you have been exposed to and gain practical experience. As the pyramid shape implies, you won’t get to experience everything you had exposure to, and there will be some areas of psychology (or some ideas within your area) that were foundational but never lead to applied experiences. That’s ok, and there’s no reason to worry that you are ill-prepared or missing out. Your exposure is supporting your future experiences and will inform your work for decades to come. Similarly, your expertise will represent only a thin sliver of all you were exposed to, or all you experienced. For most students, this expertise comes from your work on your dissertation – the topic of which may be the one area you will feel an expert in when you graduate. This truly is the pinnacle of your graduate school journey and note that it is not based on a class; it

is informed by the material you were exposed to in your coursework, and emerged from your experience, but reflects a narrower focus and specific question for which you are one of very few in the world that can claim to be an expert.

In other words, you don't have to stress out over your coursework as a first-year graduate student, and you are not expected to dedicate excessive energy toward becoming an expert in each class, or on each assignment during your first year. Graduate school is hard enough, and this year should be dedicated toward the enormous adjustment it takes to become a new kind of student. Save some energy to focus on those areas of adjustment below, and trust your well-honed academic skills to be sufficient when it comes to graduate classes.

## **2. Time Management, Combating Perfectionism, and Getting Support**

If you are not hyper-focusing on graduate classes, then what are you doing during your first year of graduate school? Of course, your first year will include a start to your independent (yet, mentored) research career (more on that below), but it may be worth conceptualizing this year as an adjustment year, which includes a focus on skills that are not formally taught, but will be sorely needed for you to succeed in a career in psychology. It has been said that (ok, no it hasn't, but we are saying it now) that the greatest accomplishment in your first year of graduate school is to develop work habits that will guide you for decades to come.

Graduate school will ask more of you than anyone can achieve. This is not meant to inspire a challenge; this is a fact, and it is one that requires a substantial change in your approach to your graduate career, and perhaps your professional career for years after that. Put simply: you are intentionally being tempted to bite off more than you can chew so you can struggle a bit and learn a new way of chewing. During graduate school, you will learn that you cannot accept every opportunity, you will not do your best on every task, and you will experience critique and rejection. This is a good thing. If you did everything perfectly the day you got there, then you would get the PhD upon admission. You are supposed to fall on your face, get substantial revisions on most of your drafts, and have to redo your work, sometimes from scratch. In graduate school, you should have learning goals, not performance goals. If you strive to be perfect at everything in graduate school, then ironically you have failed in understanding the point of your education. Instead, strive to learn as much as you can in graduate school, and remember that we often learn the most after we stumble.

These challenges will not just come from your formal graduate training. Moving to a new city or state, as is often required, is strenuous on its own. For some, going to graduate school often necessitates leaving behind friends, family, and loved ones. For others, graduate school occurs during the same life stage when we are living truly independently for the first time (i.e., not in a dorm), when we form stable, enduring romantic relationships, or fully realize sexual and gender identities. We are managing a budget to live on (often coming from a small stipend), and beginning to accrue substantial student loan debts. It is the time when we have to keep an

apartment, develop a life outside of school that is not created for us by campus life administrators, and develop hobbies that help us find respite. These are the years when parents or grandparents may experience severe illnesses, our siblings may begin to have children, we may be exposed to significant life events, societal stressors, or face new forms of discrimination. It is also a life period when research suggests we may be susceptible to the onset of some types of psychological symptoms. It is a time psychological research refers to as emerging adulthood and all of this is layered on top of a rigorous, demanding, multiyear course of study.

Before we discuss the ways to handle the new work- and lifestyles that graduate school demands, the importance of keeping up with your physical and mental health cannot be overstated. Many graduate students seek psychological treatment to focus on emotional wellness. Your program (or more advanced students) might have recommendations for providers in your area. You will be much better positioned to deal with the demands of graduate school if you make a conscious effort to take care of your body with exercise, regular and healthy meals, and adequate sleep. It sounds simple, but with the potentially consuming nature of your new responsibilities, it's easier than you might expect to neglect these areas. It will take time to find balance, but you will be better off for it.

You have a lot to adjust to, and one piece of this is the experience of setting your own schedule, determining when and how you best work on graduate school tasks, and developing self-directed initiatives to take on many responsibilities, often without the structure of externally imposed deadlines. It's important to note that you are the one managing your own work; that is, you likely won't have a structured list of tasks laid out for you by somebody else. You also are responsible for setting your own agenda and holding yourself to it. That's a new experience for most people, which means that you are not expected to know how to do it on the first day of graduate school. In a given day during your first month of graduate school, you may have class readings to complete, lab meetings to attend, research ideas you would like to explore, perhaps grading or research responsibilities to finish to earn your stipend, as well as the need to start determining the topic of your master's thesis, and the daunting notion that there have been about four million articles published in APA's PsychInfo database, a few hundred of which you will eventually need to read, comprehend, and critique.

That list may make you feel overwhelmed just by reading it, but you can handle it! You may run into trouble, however, if you attempt to do it all at once, if you expect to do it all perfectly, or if you can't get started. Let's discuss each of those issues one at a time.

## **2.1 Time Management**

No one takes a course in time management skills. We all kind of test out new ways to impose structure, deadlines, motivators, and reminders into our chaotic lives and we find our flow when we discover which techniques work best for our own workstyle. As a first-year graduate student, you have a system or habit that got you

into graduate school . . . but it may or may not work for you now. Your first year is a time for experimentation, and you should expect that it may take that entire time (or longer) until you have figured out what works for you. Some people use project management software to set deadlines and compile notes they need to keep tasks moving forward. Some have elaborate systems of post-it notes stuck to their computer monitor. Others set daily, weekly, or monthly goals, with reinforcements (hello, frozen yogurt!) for completing tasks along the way. Ask around. Talk with your mentor. Try a system or two to see what works for you. Some graduate students set up writing blocks, and drive to a nearby coffee shop to work so they don't get distracted. Others prefer to stay up late at night when emails slow down to get some focused time. Some like to plan to draft a paragraph a day and others like to binge-write until an entire paper draft is completed. Just as you are not expected to know how to grade papers, write manuscripts, or run new types of statistical analyses yet, you are not expected to know the best approach to use to accomplish these tasks. It may be a good idea to let your mentor know that you are experimenting so they can support your approach and maybe even offer tips. It will also be a good way to communicate that you are adjusting well to the new demands of graduate school and learning about your workstyle. As your workload increases in later years, you may need to adapt or altogether change your system. But this "meta-understanding" of how you work, and what works for you, is a process that helps you be productive and learn about yourself in a way that will let you understand your strengths, challenges, and when you need to ask for help.

## 2.2 Combating Perfectionism

As you work through this process of managing your time, you are also collecting data informally on how much time it takes for you to complete tasks. This is a very important piece of your first year of graduate school because it will provide the information you need to help combat perfectionism. As noted above, you simply can't do all that is asked of you, and you can't do it all at your best. Reread the prior sentence a few times until it really sinks in, please, because this may be the hardest lesson you learn. You have been positively reinforced for doing your best since the day you were born. But you can't do your best at every task now that you have reached this level of training. The plain truth is that you're going to have to half-ass a few things on your list, knowing that *your* half-ass is probably still an A-level of quality in the grand scheme of things.

Imagine you carve out a day to write an abstract for a poster presentation submission. Could you spend an entire 8 hours working on this task? Sure! Could you spend 3 days on this task? Absolutely. Will there ever be a point when you will look at your draft and say, "This is perfection! Beyond reproach! Every word is gold!" Nope. The fact is that at some point your work has exceeded the bar necessary for the task (i.e., in the case of an abstract for a poster submission, note that over 75 percent are usually accepted at most national conferences) and extra time you

spend on it is either unnecessary, or it is suffering from diminishing returns. In other words, you are improving the work less and less with each passing hour.

The same goes for planning a class lecture, grading papers, reading for class, and so on. Some of these are tasks you want to apply your full perfectionistic tendencies toward. But you can't do so for all of them and one of the best things you can learn during your first year is an understanding of how long it takes you to do a good (maybe even great), but not *perfect* job on each kind of task. If it takes you about 5 hours to write a poster abstract, schedule 5.5 hours to get it done. Even if you have all day, don't let yourself obsess over it. Finish and move on. By the end of your first year, you might start learning more about your rhythm and you will have amassed a few cognitive-behavioral "exposure" exercises demonstrating to you that when you turned in your "good" or merely "great" work, the world did not collapse. This may sound easy, but after a lifetime of praise (including at the start of this chapter) for doing excellent work, it may feel quite uncomfortable for some to go to sleep knowing that you did not complete the days' tasks as completely and perfectly as you are used to. But getting used to that feeling is in some ways what graduate school requires.

Some students feel fine about "good enough" work on lower priority tasks, but get particularly anxious when they must share their work, for fear that it (or they) may be evaluated negatively. This means that perfectionism kicks in when work will be seen by an instructor, a clinical supervisor, or perhaps especially by a mentor. While all teachers, supervisors, and mentors are different, it is probably safe to say that they will be most impressed by growth, rather than perfection right out of the gate. In other words, it is "safe" to show your mentor work that does not represent your best, especially if you communicate where you think improvement is needed, what you are learning and struggling with, and request support as you strive to improve. Mentors prefer to review imperfect work and help students learn new skills than to see students paralyzed or delayed by unnecessary self-imposed expectations. In fact, the discussions about the struggles to make progress or the areas of growth that are needed are often the most rewarding aspects of mentoring for many who chose this as a profession.

An especially productive conversation during one's first year of graduate school is to talk explicitly about the concepts articulated in this chapter, so you can get candid input from your advisor about their own tips for surviving their first year of graduate school. How did they learn to balance multiple tasks? What do they feel is worth your highest (and next highest, and so on) priority, and what do they feel will offer the most benefit to your education? How long do they spend completing specific tasks, and where do they feel that moderate effort is sufficient to get the job done and turn to higher priority activities? You may learn a lot about your mentor's workstyle from a conversation like this, and your mentor may appreciate that you are thinking so deeply about the processes required for successful graduate life.

Conversations like these with your mentor will aid one of the most important parts of your first year – you and your mentor getting to know each other and how you work together. This is the start of a years-long, and hopefully lifelong, working

relationship. Many first-year students may initially regard their professors as unapproachable experts and often feel funny about calling them by their first name (as is customary in graduate school). Yet unlike an undergraduate professor, your mentor is there to support you through the entire experience of graduate school, which includes not only the struggles with perfectionism and time management discussed above, but also someone to help you find resources and make your life easier when inevitable stressors emerge. Mentors hopefully will not be pushy, or pry into your personal life, of course, but they may share some information about their own lives in an effort to model natural struggles in academia, and to demonstrate coping skills. Talking with other graduate students is a great way to learn about a mentor's workstyle and mentoring style, and like all relationships, an open channel of communication will allow you to be more efficient, productive, and satisfied with your mentor. This also includes an honest conversation about the boundaries that allow you to feel most comfortable in this relationship.

### **2.3 Addressing Procrastination**

How long was it from the moment you were accepted to graduate school until the moment you first thought: "Holy crap, I have to write a whole dissertation!?" Or did that moment happen just now when reading the preceding sentence? Most students realize the graduate school is a big deal and in addition to the dissertation, there are several important hurdles that each may feel like a big deal (i.e., your master's, your first presentation in front of the faculty, your qualifying exams, your first patient) – so much so, that it may be hard to get started. This happens to many smart and accomplished people, and it does not reflect weakness or disorganization; it is a sign of respect that you have for the heft of the task before you and your desire to do well. If that pause before working is helpful and allows you to organize your thoughts before working, then all is okay. But if it starts to interfere with the ability to work at all, then it has officially become procrastination.

A note on procrastination and coursework: it can be tempting to use graduate coursework as a way of procrastinating or avoiding one's own research. This may be a deceptive form of procrastination, as you are still working on something you need to do, but prioritizing coursework before research can be a way of avoiding the more difficult (and, arguably, more important) task of working on one's own research. Further, students may take comfort in coursework because grades provide semesterly feedback, and validation for students' efforts, something that may be sparse in other aspects of graduate school. While coursework may feel more manageable, straightforward, or familiar, setting aside protected research time is critical. For instance, some students may find it helpful to dedicate specific days to coursework and others to research, or to set time limits on course assignments.

There should be no "all-nighters" in graduate school, or other last-minute strategies to complete your work, because this is not sustainable for your career. As noted above, this is a time to develop habits that will last you a lifetime. You may have never completed tasks like those assigned to you in graduate school; thus, you



won't necessarily know how much time you need to complete each one. Large tasks can be easily chunked into smaller bits, colloquial drafts can be polished later, and voice memos in your phone can be transcribed later to help you turn what you may find easy to talk about into written prose later, without the experience of a blank screen staring at you judgmentally (note: writing "private drafts" to express what you are really thinking before you start writing the version you will turn in also is a remarkably effective strategy to get started when one is "over-thinking" their work). Procrastination also can be driven by exhaustion or burnout; taking regular breaks is critical. Stepping away from work is important not only for one's mental health, but also for productivity and for idea generation. Students who have never procrastinated before may find strategies like these helpful when they encounter their first "block" or resistance to working in graduate school. If this happens to you, take it as a good sign. Your strategies in secondary school and in college should not work for you here. This is graduate school and it is not the same type of "school" at all. It should feel different; you should be challenged in new ways; your drafts should have so many track changes from your mentor that the page looks like it is bleeding; and you should feel like you could easily become overwhelmed with opportunities and projects to complete. That's how we grow in graduate school.

### **3. Getting Support**

Graduate school is not quite like medical or law school, and is very different from a full-time job that one may get in the business world, or at a local commercial establishment. It may be hard to find support because it often takes so long to explain to people what exactly your life is like now. Your fellow graduate student peers may be an outstanding resource for you as you begin.

Graduate school represents a period of unprecedented change and growth for many of us, and having others to commiserate and empathize may be a social necessity. If you have entered your program with other first-year students, this cohort represents a group of individuals who will most likely have similar interests, ambitions, and prior experiences. As discussed earlier, first-year graduate students are thrust into a brand new social environment, often without the comfort of their close friends nearby. Luckily, most others in your class also likely have recently vacant social lives, providing a mutually beneficial opportunity for friendship. These individuals can uniquely relate to the trials and tribulations that may arise during the first year of graduate school. Additionally, growing close with your fellow graduate students may confer unique academic opportunities. Having a small group of individuals to share ideas related to coursework or research is enormously beneficial. Fellow first years also can provide expertise in their specific niches, and thus are valuable resources for fresh perspectives and collaboration across a variety of diverse topics. Indeed, brainstorming creative ways to intertwine your own research interests with those of your peers can lead to exciting projects which may intersect multiple subfields of psychology. But of course, beware – these interactions with your peers are also fertile ground for social comparisons, particularly if your friend

asks you if you're planning on applying for some fancy grant you've never heard of, or mentions they are pulling together a symposium for a conference while you're working on your first poster. Try to turn these moments of intimidation or insecurity into inspiration. Everyone learns and reaches milestones at different rates and it will be all the more sweet when you can motivate and celebrate each other. Anecdotally, it is more common than not that the student you were in awe of as a first year will tell you years later that it was you that seemed intimidating to them.

#### 4. Starting Your Research

You talked about research in your graduate school applications, you discussed it in your interviews, you have tried to explain it to your family and friends a zillion times (“No, it is not just searching for things on Google”) and now you are here, and everyone says you are supposed to get started doing research.

*Umm . . . do what, exactly? How do I start doing this, and why does everyone talk to me like I understand what 'research' is already?*

If you are a first-year student who has had this thought, know that you are not alone. Many first-year students have had experience assisting graduate students or faculty with their own work, but many have never been an “independent” or principal investigator on their own. So you may feel ready to “run subjects,” supervise undergrads, or search PsychInfo, but you may not feel like you are clear on the steps needed to start your own research program. This makes the first year of graduate school potentially challenging and anxiety-provoking.

Let's start at the very beginning. As a first-year student, “doing research” could mean a million (well, ok, actually about a dozen) different things, including reading articles on topics that interest you, learning about available data sets in your advisor's lab, reading the study protocol from recent studies done by your peers and advisors, reading the human subjects or grant applications that support your lab's work, watching videos of prior subject “runs,” running some simple descriptive statistics (e.g., means, correlations) on available data sets, watching conference presentations online, or just sitting around and thinking of hypotheses that could be interesting to test. As a first-year graduate student, all of this “counts” as research, and it is probably useful to establish a foundation of knowledge about prior work in the field, extant resources, and a self-assessment of what excited you the most. Particularly essential – ask tons of questions of your peers and mentor about their recent research: what did they study, why, how did they think about prior work in the field, how is their work unique, where do they think the field is going, what were their initial ideas and what pitfalls did they experience, what have they recently discussed in the lab, what other investigators do they follow, and so on, and so on. You find yourself now in an exceptionally rich intellectual environment, surrounded by faculty and students. Use the people around you as resources. In addition to learning from their answers to these questions, you can and should explore collaboration possibilities, ask for help,

ask them if they have access to the software you need, bounce ideas off each other, share skills, or just enjoy their friendship and social support. If the first year of graduate school is meant to develop your ability to “think” like a researcher, then these conversations will be enormously helpful to achieve that goal. Don’t worry about bothering people, because enjoying these types of discussions is likely a large part of why they are in academia to begin with.

Based on your lab, and how data are collected, analyzed, and prepared for presentation/publication, you may have an opportunity (or requirement) to begin coming up with your own research questions. See the sections above in this chapter about the best way to get started with this task, without becoming plagued by time management challenges, paralyzing perfectionism, or procrastination. It is helpful to develop a system for keeping track of ideas, whether in a notebook, spreadsheet, or other format. You may also consider saving relevant research articles or identifying and following researchers whose publications interest you. In fact, if you feel comfortable thinking of research ideas early in your first year, or by the beginning of your second year, you may want to even consider applying for a graduate fellowship. This is briefly discussed below. Lastly, the research idea phase can seem daunting, undefined, and limitless; it may be that starting a project (e.g., a fellowship application, publication) even before you have finalized your research focus is necessary in order to move forward. Often research ideas are developed in the writing process, and beginning a project can help when the brainstorming phase begins to feel stagnant.

Once you begin writing, you may notice an interesting quandary: most scientific writing in our field has an authoritative and didactic tone, often using statements that seem to capture an entire field or trend with decades of knowledge behind it (e.g., “For a scientific discipline focusing on the study of behavior, it is ironic that so few investigators have examined the behaviors that best predict scientific productivity”). Yet, first-year students almost never have the experience to encapsulate an entire body of literature with statements such as these, making it hard to write in the manner that academic scholarship may require.

This is one reason why it is so common for even fantastic writers to go through many, many drafts when they begin writing scientific presentations and publications in graduate school. Each draft leads the writer back to the literature to learn more, which helps inform both changes in the content and writing style of the next draft, and so on. Nevertheless, first-year students can rely on two tips to help them accelerate the development of their scientific writing acumen. First, a terrific and recent review paper (especially in a high-impact journal) is worth its weight in gold. If done correctly, a paper that has well summarized the extant literature and listed areas of repetition vs. gaps has given you most of what you need to begin writing in an authoritative voice. Beware of the literature review that is not very high in quality, or in a highly respected outlet. Of course, you also need to do exhaustive searches of the literature yourself. But a great literature review can help you feel more confident that your conclusions are supported by other experts who may have been in the field for longer than you, and you can probably find many terrific papers to read by searching for the papers in this literature review first.

A second tip will send you back to your mentor's office, and that's a good thing. Mentors often have thought deeply about the field and the topic you are writing about, so it is great to simply interview them for their perceptions of the "current state of the literature." Assuming that your mentor will likely be an author on whatever you are writing in your first year, it is acceptable to include their own perspective in your writing, and even to use their words in your writing (i.e., after all, they are an author too). Some labs may offer you an informal chance to hear your mentor's perspective on the literature as you discuss recent, relevant papers. If not, then asking your mentor to talk about their opinions, their impressions of other scholars' work, and why they think your research will make an important contribution is a great way to get started. Mentors think of this as a "scaffolding" approach, to borrow a term from the parenting literature in developmental science. The mentor will give you as much structure as you need to help you stand on your own, and will slowly remove that structure or tangible support to keep you working just beyond your current skill level. Data suggest that is the way that you will keep growing, but never feel like you will fall flat on your face. Let's acknowledge, however, that this approach has two potentially negative consequences: (1) you may rarely feel fully competent while in graduate school; and (2) you may feel frustrated that your mentor is constantly raising the bar of expectations as the years progress. If this seems true for you, it is always ok to ask your mentor if you are progressing well "based on your current level of training," to help you gain your footing and know that although you are still growing, you are on track.

#### **4.1 NSF Graduate Research Fellowship**

The National Science Foundation (NSF) offers research fellowships to hundreds of young scholars, including those involved in the study of psychological science. These fellowships require only a few pages of essays (i.e., one is similar to a personal statement, the other is a research proposal). Applicants can apply either (a) before attending graduate school; and/or (b) in the first or second years of graduate school. Applicants may apply once per eligibility window; in other words, a student may apply before graduate school and, if unsuccessful, may apply once more in the first two years of graduate school. Applicants who receive an honorable mention are not eligible to reapply, and additional eligibility criteria exclude students with a master's or other professional degree (see the NSF GRFP website for more information on eligibility).

NSF applicants are evaluated differently based on how many years of experience they have at the time of applying. Applications are reviewed by 2–3 scholars with relevant areas of experience broadly (i.e., within all of developmental or cognitive psychology, for instance). An honorable mention is a prestigious honor that can be proudly listed on one's CV. Fellowship winners get three years of funding (that need not be consecutive) with a stipend significantly higher than most graduate assistantships and access to other potential resources of ancillary experiences afforded to fellowship winners. More information is available at [www.nsfgrfp.org/](http://www.nsfgrfp.org/).

Many students in psychology apply for the NSF graduate research fellowship, and it is quite competitive. So is the NIH National Research Service Award (F31 grant) that is available to graduate students when they are planning dissertation-level research. Because the preparation of the application for the NSF has become very common among students in research-oriented doctoral programs, a few tips are offered here.

First, as noted above, applicants are evaluated based on their level of training, and those with above average accomplishments are naturally likely to stand out from their peers. Often, this is evaluated by the number of presentations at national conferences or publications in high-impact peer-reviewed journals. Applicants applying as an undergraduate or post-baccalaureate typically have zero publications; thus, authorship on two may gain favorable notice. This would seem less unusual for a research-oriented student applying at the start of their second year. Applicants with impressive academic pedigrees (i.e., from top-ranked undergraduate institutions, those with very high GPAs) tend to receive more favorable scores in the NSF grant review process (a database of all recipients is available on the NSF website), although an emphasis on diversity and first-generation students in recent years may have helped reviewers move toward more inclusive academic indicators that more equitably reflect achievement across all promising young scholars.

Perhaps most important is that applicants show a lifelong commitment to science, and a strong capacity to develop rigorous and unique scientific questions. The two required essays for the NSF Graduate Research Fellowship, a personal statement and a research proposal statement, offer opportunities for applicants to demonstrate each.

Using one's personal statement from graduate school admission for the NSF application is not always advisable, whereas using one's NSF personal statement in a graduate school application can work well. That's because unlike the typical graduate school statement that begins discussing undergraduate coursework and research experiences and a specific set of refined research questions to match a specific research lab, the successful NSF personal statement essay is far grander. The narrative often starts earlier, with a discussion of a love for science that may have begun very early, a discussion of extracurricular and volunteer activities that demonstrate a penchant for science, and/or a drive to change a major societal issue or injustice through investigation and dissemination of psychological science. NSF reviewers may prefer an applicant who thinks big and has been unusually committed to a cause or an opportunity for change since relatively early in life. Successful applicants weren't only president of their local Psi Chi chapter, or recognized a variable missing from prior work on a topic; they are more likely to have developed a new student association in high school to address societal issues (e.g., world hunger, disparate access to education, discrimination, etc.), founded or led efforts for a charity, or worked across disciplines to develop innovative new directions for science. Don't worry – a Nobel prize is not a requirement for the NSF fellowship, but a more typical essay about loving psychology after Psych 101 class, or

participating in a lab before you graduated, may not always cut it. While the personal essay should primarily tell a personal narrative, it is wise to draw connections between your prior experiences and the specific research interests or aims articulated in your research proposal essay. For example, if your proposal focuses on mechanisms of emotion regulation, a strong personal statement would include discussion of prior experiences through which an interest in emotion, emotion regulation, or related constructs developed.

NSF reviewers also would like to see the potential for rigorous and innovative scientific questions within the research proposal statement, the second essay of the application. This is a peculiar essay to write because the successful applicant is not necessarily expected to actually conduct the research proposed in the application (i.e., funds are not provided to conduct a large-scale study, and as many applicants don't know where they will go to graduate school, it is unknown whether subject populations or necessary resources will be available to conduct the proposed research). Yet the application requests a specific research proposal that might represent the best possible study (not a fantasy study, but an actual, potentially feasible one) that could be done assuming reasonable research resources. Further, the research proposal should avoid an explicitly clinical focus. This is a particular challenge for clinical psychology graduate students, whose research interests, prior research experiences, and graduate coursework largely center around psychopathology and related topics in clinical psychology. However, an NSF application should adopt a more "basic science" approach and avoid focusing on clinical outcomes. This does not mean you need to write a research proposal statement that deviates radically from your research interests; instead, the NSF application may require recasting your interests into a different, though related, research question. It may be helpful to think of constructs that are relevant to clinical psychology (e.g., emotion, development) but that do not necessarily involve psychopathological outcomes. Keep in mind that you will need to select a subdiscipline within psychology under which to submit your research proposal statement (e.g., social, cognitive, developmental, affective, etc.), and that this category can help guide the angle you take in your research proposal.

NSF reviewers have plenty of experience reviewing grants, so you can expect lots of specific comments on small details in the proposed research that could substantially lower one's score. Most students work on these essays with their mentors, naturally. Mentors don't write the application, of course, but the process of discussing the proposed research is a learning experience in itself, with applicants finding the balance between their interests and real-world limitations. As with all applications for funding, it is always best to read as many successful and unsuccessful applications as possible when beginning, and to have as many readers of drafts as possible before submitting. The deadline for the NSF fellowship is typically in late October, so this can make for an active jump start to graduate school for those who apply in their first year.

## 5. Summary

Getting into graduate school is a huge achievement, and the start to an educational pathway that is quite different from the many years of schooling preceding matriculation. You are not expected to know what you are doing when you arrive, and your first year is likely best spent adjusting to a new university, with new colleagues, peers, mentors, and expectations. The first year of graduate school is a great time to establish habits that you can benefit from for decades to come, including the recognition that our field will ask more of you than any human could ever deliver. So it's essential that you learn how to pace yourself, set expectations that are reasonable, and find ways to be kind to yourself. You will never be less busy from this point forward, but in this year, you can learn to be someone who will keep work stimulating, find ways to be productive, yet also recognize that life is more than your career in psychology.