So you want to apply to grad school: A beginner's guide
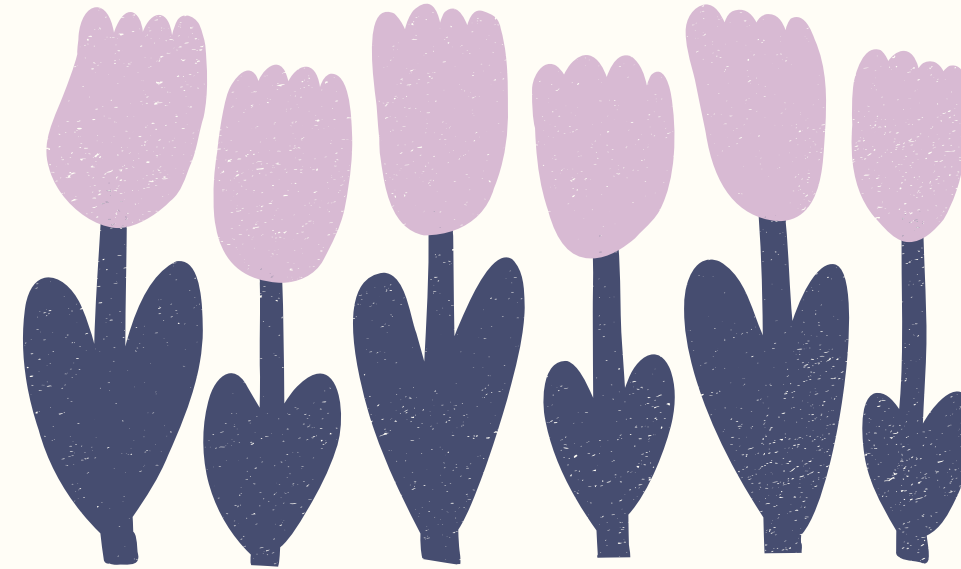
This is a general guide and does NOT replace the application guidelines provided by the department.
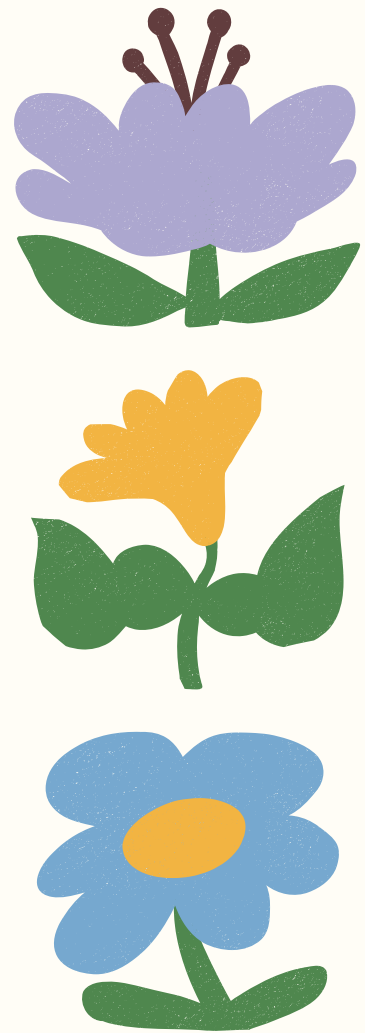
Two Tracks

Clinical Psychology:
Training programs to become a registered clinical psychologist

Psychological Science:
Research intensive program. Many career tracks.

Pathway 1: Clinical

The clinical program uses a Scientist-Practitioner model

The program is accredited by CPA (Canadian Psychological Association)

Program involvement leads toward registration as a clinical psychologist. From there, you can pursue clinical or academic work.

Programs are extremely competitive (typically <5% acceptance)

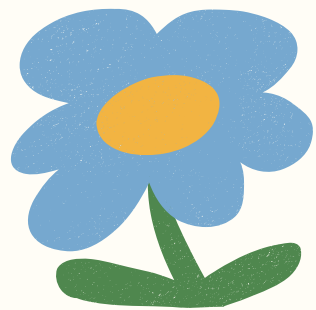# Pathway 2: Psyc Science
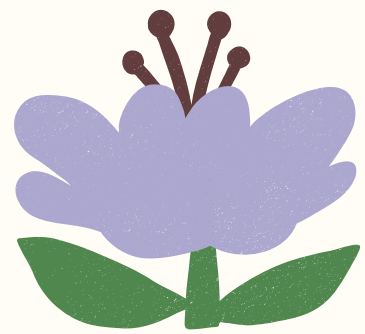
This is a research intensive program

Students train under a research domain (e.g., social, developmental, cognitive)

The primary goal is to develop high-level skills related to research, teaching, policy, and/or industry

Admissions are highly dependent on the match between the applicant and the supervisor. You will not be accepted to the program without a research supervisor.

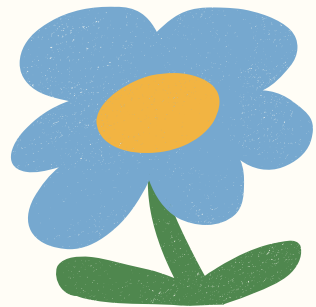# Unsure?
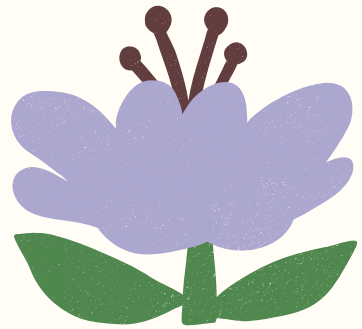
It can be difficult to decide what career you want, especially if you are still early in your training.

Do as much research as you can into psychology but also adjacent tracks, like counselling, social work, etc.

Check out this guide for some very very helpful advice: *Mitch's Uncensored Advice for Applying to Graduate School in Clinical Psychology*

How to become a strong applicant

1. Start Early.

(no, even earlier)

Regardless of which track you choose, you should start preparing and training early (ideally in your second year of undergraduate studies).

If you want to apply but haven't yet made yourself a competitive applicant, you are strongly encouraged to wait until the next application cycle.

2. Grades

You will need to have a very strong GPA, especially in upper-year psychology courses. It's ok to have some bad grades early on if you can demonstrate progression.

If you have some low grades in upper year courses, it may even be worth repeating these courses.

If there were extenuating circumstances that affected your studies, it might be worth noting that in a professional way.

3. Experience

Relevant research/clinical/applied experience is **essential**. Most supervisors expect significant lab/research training by the time you are applying to grad school. This is important because it shows you have some basic training. It also shows that you have had some exposure to psychology research and that you are confident that this is the track for you.

This looks like volunteering in at least one lab, completing directed studies, and completing your honours thesis.

3. Experience

You can demonstrate your experience through strong methods, statistics, and writing skills

Conference posters and publications are **major** assets. Seek out all opportunities to present research projects, but be sure to get approval from your lab/supervisor to do so.

4. Establish Fit

Supervisor-student fit is **central** to all admissions decisions. Whether you are applying to the clinical or psychological science program, you first need to establish fit with a potential supervisor.

Establishing fit between an applicant and a potential supervisor is **one of the most important factors in psychology graduate admissions in Canada**—often more important than GPA once minimum thresholds are met

Fit is about showing—through specific evidence—that you are prepared, motivated, and genuinely aligned with a particular supervisor's research and training environment

Types of Fit

Intellectual / Research Fit

Strong fit looks like:
1. Clear overlap between the applicant's interests and the supervisor's current research (last 3–5 years)
2. The applicant can explain why that supervisor's work matters to them
3. Proposed questions extend or complement the supervisor's program
4. How students establish this "on paper":
5. Cite specific papers or projects by the supervisor
6. Use similar constructs, populations, or methods
7. Avoid vague statements ("I am interested in mental health broadly")

Example
"I am particularly interested in your work on "___" among adolescents (e.g., Smith et al., 2023), and I hope to build on this by examining…"

Types of Fit

Methodological Fit

Supervisors look for students who can realistically engage in their lab's work. Strong methodological fit includes alignment in:
- Quantitative vs qualitative approaches
- Statistics (e.g., multilevel modeling, SEM, longitudinal methods)
- Populations (children, clinical samples, community samples)
- Data sources (lab-based, surveys, administrative data, interviews)

How students demonstrate methodological fit:
- Highlight relevant methods courses
- Describe hands-on experience (not just interest)
- Share a writing sample that uses similar methods

Types of Fit

Training & Skill Readiness

Fit also means that you are prepared for the lab's expectations. Supervisors assess:
- Research independence appropriate to the level (MA vs PhD)
- Writing ability
- Ability to manage long-term projects (e.g., thesis)

Practical signals of fit:
- Honours thesis or equivalent
- Evidence of sustained lab involvement
- A CV that clearly shows progression

How do you establish fit?

The best way to establish fit is to work in someone's lab, as a research assistant, honors student, directed studies student, or study/lab coordinator. This gives you direct training and connection with your potential graduate school supervisor.

If that isn't possible, you need to send your potential supervisor a **BRIEF** email.

The purpose of this email is to show:
1. You understand the supervisor's work
2. Your interests genuinely align with it
3. You have the preparation to contribute
4. You are a serious, professional applicant

The goal is **NOT** to secure admission–just to assess fit and availability.

How do you establish fit?

So what should you say in this email?

- A **short** paragraph articulating clear alignment with supervisor's work
- Ask if they are taking students in the upcoming cycle
- Attachments that support fit:
  - Academic CV
  - (Un)official transcripts
  - Writing sample relevant to the lab

The best time to send this email is September!

Okay but seriously what do I say?

Here you go:

1. Clear, Professional Opening (1 sentence)
   - Who you are
   - Your current program/institution
   - What you are applying for (MA/PhD; year)

Example:
"I am a fourth-year Honours psychology student at the University of Alberta planning to apply to MA programs for Fall 2026."

Okay but seriously what do I say?

2. Specific Connection to the Supervisor's Work (2–3 sentences)
- Name specific topics, populations, or papers
- Reference recent work (last 3–5 years)
- Avoid broad or generic language

Example:
"I am particularly interested in your work on photosynthesis occuring in coniferous trees in the Okanagan, especially your recent paper examining the role of non-native fungus (citation)."

Okay but seriously what do I say?

3. Articulate Alignment (1–2 sentences)
Explain how your interests or experience align—not just that they do. You can show alignment through:
- Research questions
- Methods
- Populations
- Theoretical frameworks

Example:
"My honours thesis similarly examines symbiotic cross-pollenation using forestry and ecological models, and I am eager to extend this work by working with spruce and pine trees in the Okanagan."

Okay but seriously what do I say?

4. Brief Evidence of Preparation (1–2 sentences)
Show readiness without listing your whole CV.

Good signals:
- Honours thesis
- Lab experience
- Relevant methods and statistics training/exposure

Example:
"I have two years of lab experience involving longitudinal survey design and multilevel modeling, and I have attached my CV and an unofficial transcript for context."

Okay but seriously what do I say?

5. Polite, Low-Pressure Ask (1 sentence)

Avoid asking for meetings or supervision directly.

Best options:
- Ask if they are accepting students
- Ask if your interests seem like a good fit

Example:
"I would appreciate knowing whether you plan to accept a graduate student in the upcoming cycle and whether my interests appear to align with your current/upcoming research program."

How to <u>NOT</u> establish fit?

What to avoid:

- Generic mass emails - this shows that you have not researched the potential supervisor, which makes it impossible to demonstrate fit.

- Asking questions answered on the website (this shows a lack of research skills!)

- Overstating interests that don't match the lab. Remember, your goal is to find potential supervisors whose research interests significantly overlap with your own. Research supervisors typically will not take on students whose research goals cannot fit into the lab's program of research.

Example Timeline

- Summer: narrow research interests, identify potential supervisors
- Early Fall: contact supervisors; request references
- Nov–Dec: application deadlines (most programs)
- Jan–Feb: interviews (especially clinical programs)

Final Advice

- Fit matters more than prestige in Canadian programs
- Start preparing in your second year of undergraduate so you can get a lot of good lab experience/training
- Rejection is common—even for strong candidates
- Seek mentorship, feedback, and plan for multiple cycles. It is VERY common for people to need to apply more than once.

Resources

1. Canadian Psychology–Specific Resources
- Canadian Psychological Association (CPA)
  - Accreditation standards for clinical psychology programs
  - Information on licensure pathways in Canada
  - Why it matters: Helps students distinguish accredited vs non-accredited programs.
- Canadian Council of University Psychology Departments (CCUPD)
  - Directory of Canadian psychology departments
  - Why it matters: One of the most complete listings of Canadian programs.
- Provincial Regulatory Bodies
  - (e.g., College of Psychologists of Ontario, BC College of Psychologists)
  - Registration requirements and training pathways
  - Why it matters: Essential for students considering clinical practice.

2. Program & Supervisor Research Tools
- University Department Websites
  - Faculty research interests
  - Lab pages and recent publications
  - Tip: Look at recent publications (last 3–5 years) to assess fit.
- Google Scholar
  - Search supervisors' names to see current research focus and productivity
  - Tip: Sort by "since 2022" to identify active research programs.
  - Tip: Useful for refining statements of intent.

3. Application & Advising Guides
- American Psychological Association (APA)
  - Graduate school application guides
  - Advice on statements, CVs, and interviews
  - Note: US-focused but still highly relevant for research programs.
- Mitch's Uncensored Advice for Applying to Graduate School (McGill)
  - Widely circulated faculty-written guide
  - Why it's valuable: Honest, practical advice from a Canadian context.

4. Statements, CVs, and Writing Support
- University Writing Centres
  - Statement of intent feedback
  - Academic writing support
  - Best practice: Use early, not right before deadlines.
- Sample CVs from Psychology Departments
  - Often posted on departmental advising pages
  - Tip: Look specifically for academic CVs, not resumes.
- Successful Statement Examples (Departmental or Lab Sites)
  - Sometimes shared by supervisors or graduate student associations
  - Use carefully: Model structure and tone, not content.

5. Peer & Mentorship Resources
- Graduate Student Associations
  - Program-specific insights on workload, supervision, and culture
  - Tip: Current students are often the best source of candid information.
- Faculty Mentors
  - Honours supervisors or course instructors in small upper-year seminars
  - Advice: Ask for feedback on fit, not just competitiveness.

Good Luck!