

Graduate Student Application Guide

Centre for Developing Minds, Trent University

I'm excited that you're considering applying to graduate school with me! I've outlined several important answers below to help guide the application process. While I would love to have time to provide individual feedback or hold meetings to discuss this, I unfortunately cannot. Instead, I hope this information is useful in your application journey!

Information that can help you decide whether to apply

General info about Carolyn's mentorship style

Before you get too much into the details of applying, you should figure out if you even want to work with me! Here is a quick overview of my approach to mentoring graduate students.

- I view theses as collaborative projects between you and me. That means that your project will be something we co-create. Often, this will look like you sharing your interests and me proposing ideas I've had that are related, and then we narrow down on one to build together.
- I aim to have a supportive mentorship style, but also one that encourages you to grow. This often means presenting constructive feedback or pushing you to think or act in new ways. I always strive to make sure that you feel emotionally safe to do this: to know that I believe in you and that I am pushing you because I know it will help you grow. I do not believe in a 'survival of the fittest' approach to mentoring.
- When you ask for advice, I prefer to provide you with as many perspectives as I can, then leave decisions up to you. Occasionally, I might have a strong opinion on what is best, and will share those with you.
- I will expect us to have weekly meetings to check in about the project and to talk about papers and ideas.
- We likely won't have a lot of solid 'deadlines,' but I will expect you to keep on top of your work throughout the project and not leave it until the end. It will be your responsibility to keep the project moving forward.
- I will give you feedback, but you will need to give me enough time to provide it. Typically, I need one week to provide feedback, and then you'll want to budget

some time to make changes before a final deadline. I typically have multiple rounds of feedback for major writing pieces.

- I expect graduate students to be leaders in the lab. This means that you should be present regularly and willing to help mentor junior members in the lab. It may also mean that you take on administrative responsibilities like aiding in recruitment.
- I believe that graduate students should conduct at least some of their own testing, and a majority of it when they are first starting out. It is incredibly valuable to see your study in real time and to be able to pilot test and pivot quickly rather than wait for reports from research assistants. This will involve visiting community sites with the research team.

General overview of Carolyn's research

My research spans a lot of social and cognitive development. My main focus is on children's confidence (how they tell correct from incorrect) and collaboration (how they work with others), but I also have interests in social reasoning, theory of mind, teaching, effort and persistence, decision-making, learning, and many other topics. The best way to know what I'm interested in is to read my papers.

My research focuses on experimental and behavioural approaches. I do not do neurological work (any imaging or physiology), qualitative studies, and I do only very limited computational work. These approaches are not out of the question, but they would require that we find a collaborator with that expertise to support you.

I generally work with children (ages 3-12). There might be opportunities to study infants/toddlers or adolescents, but that would be much more student-driven. I also only work with typically-developing populations. Clinical work is challenging and nuanced, and any projects with clinical populations would need to have a collaborator (ideally a local one) with the relevant expertise.

Is there financial support for graduate students?

Yes, though it's not a lot. Trent has a basic funding package that includes 120-hour TAs in the Fall and Winter terms, plus some scholarships. You are then expected to pay tuition (which is a large chunk of this funding package), so the amount you have to live on is not a lot.

Many students in our program secure their own additional funding. The best way to do this is through scholarships, especially CGS-M and OGS. The next best way is to take on additional work through the university – marking and proctoring exams are the most common.

Part of my personal mentoring philosophy is that I want to provide some financial stability so that you can focus on your studies. My goal is to cover your tuition costs and provide a stipend that brings your base funding up to CGS-M levels. This is of course dependent on the funding I can secure, which is not always known when you are admitted to the program. I generally do not admit students if I am not sure that I can financially support them (at least to cover tuition).

Once in the lab, I will also provide some funding each year for you to attend conferences, and provide access to computers. Exactly how this works may depend on our general funding that fluctuates from year to year.

For more info on scholarships, bursaries, and tuition, see these sites:

<https://www.trentu.ca/graduatestudies/financial-matters/graduate-scholarships-and-awards>

<https://www.trentu.ca/graduatestudies/financial-matters/graduate-bursaries>

<https://www.trentu.ca/graduatestudies/financial-matters/student-account-and-tuition>

I don't have Canadian citizenship or permanent residency. What does this mean for me?

Trent does not (yet) have great support for international students. Tuition rates are much higher than for domestic students and there are occasionally fee reduction waivers, but these have been reduced in recent years. This means that if admitted, the base stipend does not cover even your tuition fees.

Options for scholarships are possible, but limited, from Canadian sources. There is always a small percentage of CGS-M/D and OGS set aside for international students, but it is far more competitive than the domestic competition. Taking on additional work is also somewhat harder with visa restrictions.

This means that your funding needs to come largely from me. The grants I can secure are typically not enough to cover this, especially with other students in the lab. That doesn't mean you can't apply! It just means that I need to be a lot more selective about international students and there would be a higher pressure on you to find funding (from your home country, hopefully).

How should I learn about the lab/department/university?

Before you apply, your best tool here is the good old Google search. Read through our website and articles to understand the kind of work I do. Dig into Trent's website to learn more about the Psych department, grad program, and school more generally. Check out reddit forums for Trent and Peterborough to get a sense of what life is like here.

Once you receive an invitation to interview, you can also meet with people to learn more. I will connect you with people who have worked with me to help you understand what that is like. You can also reach out to our department graduate assistant. If you have other specific people you'd like to learn from, I'm happy to try and connect you as well. It might be tempting to have these meetings before applying (after all, applications cost money!), but this is a major investment of both your time and others' time.

Information that can help you prepare an application

How does the graduate admissions process work at Trent?

Admissions are coordinated through OUAC (Ontario Universities' Application Centre). You will need to upload all requested documents and arrange for your letter writers to submit references. Deadlines are typically in the Winter term.

Here's what happens behind the scenes once you apply. When you submit files there, they are sent to a central portal here where we can review them. In the Psychology department, our graduate administrative staff review all applications for our base criteria (grades overall and specifically in Psych, research experience, and evidence of interest overlap with a supervisor are the biggest ones initially). Applications that meet these criteria are then reviewed by a committee before names of eligible students are passed to faculty members to review. Faculty then review the applications, hold interviews if they so choose, and communicate back to the committee about their selections. Selected students receive offer letters about 2-3 weeks after that. This whole process starts after the application deadline, and can take 3-4 weeks even for faculty to be notified about their applicants.

Here's what that means for you. If you have a low average, no research experience, or do not clearly demonstrate an interest in a faculty member's research, your application might never get seen by that faculty member. That means that you need to directly address these in your application (in your statement or through reference letters). For instance, you could discuss how your grades were initially low, but you learned better time management strategies in later years. Please be honest here – we can often see through lies and it is important for us to get an accurate read of who you are. You could also reach out to me to let me know to look for your application, in case it doesn't get sent to me through this process.

This set of procedures also means that things may take some time. Many schools have much earlier deadlines and may even have sent out offers before we even see your application. If you are waiting to hear from us before you accept another offer, please email me. If you're in the opposite position, where you want to apply after the deadline, you will need to contact our department's graduate assistant to make sure that you have

not missed our deadlines. Also note that it's generally not a good look to be late on an important application like this – that tells us that you aren't managing deadlines well (and that is VERY important in graduate school).

Another thing this means is that we don't have an 'interview weekend' like many schools do. We don't have funds to bring you here to tour campus and meet people before making a decision. If this is financially feasible for you to do, I would strongly recommend it, but unfortunately we can't fund this for you.

What do you look for in a strong applicant?

We are looking for evidence that you have the skills and interests to be successful in graduate school. This evidence comes from prior academic experience (grades, awards), prior research experience (practica, theses, RA positions), and any other experience you have relevant to the work you want to do (e.g., working in a clinic if you want to pursue a clinical program, neuro skills if you want to do neuro work). Interests are most clearly conveyed through the courses and research you have done previously, plus the ideas you present in your proposal. Your references letters back up what you present – they provide more context around your experience and discuss your preparedness.

Here's what I look for, specifically. I want to see that you have a strong interest in my specific areas of research, and that you have research experience. This is a 2-6 year program, and it is important that your research interests closely align with what I can support, and that you actually like research! This is best demonstrated by discussing an article or two of mine that you have read, and an idea you have for expanding on it. I will be looking for originality and critical thinking in your idea, as well as a clear match to the methods and populations I work with. (If you want to study populations I don't work with, or use methods I have not used, you will also need to demonstrate to me how you have the knowledge/skills/experience to do that work already). I also want to see evidence that you really love this topic and would be happy to commit to it for several years! Think of this as your 'audition:' you're showing me that you can think deeply about a topic that is also of interest to me. This is another place where honesty is important: if you present an idea because you think *I* will like it, but *you* don't like it, you might get stuck running that study and end up less than happy in a few years.

I don't place an extremely high value on past grades, but it does raise some questions if you are applying for a research degree in social-cognitive development and you either haven't taken many relevant courses, or you did not do well in those courses. You may want to directly address this or have your reference letter writers comment on it. This is also essential if your average is below our criteria, as I have to provide a justification for why I think you would succeed in graduate school despite not meeting criteria.

There are also several skills that are not required, but are definitely an asset. A big one is experience with children. Ideally, I like for incoming graduate students to have worked in a developmental research lab prior to joining, but this is not always possible. It would benefit you to have some prior experience with children, and to mention that (even just briefly). Another one is programming/coding knowledge. We use R for analyses (or JASP for a less coding-heavy alternative), and PsychoPy builder for experiments. Neither requires you to be a coding whiz, but having some basic coding knowledge, and being willing to learn, will greatly benefit you. If your coding skills exceed that – even better!

Should I email you before applying?

If your only purpose of emailing is to learn whether I am accepting students or not, you can find this information on the Trent Psych faculty page (we have to update this over the summer, so it will be accurate if you are looking in the fall).

However, that's not the real value of sending these emails. Their true purpose is to introduce yourself so that I know to look for your application later. I keep a list of people who have emailed me and who I think are a good fit to look for their applications in the system, in case they are filtered by the admissions team.

Please know that I get dozens of emails like this each year, and I do not have time to meet with you prior to submitting an application (as much as I would love to). I will also not be able to review your application materials prior to applying. I will typically respond to you either saying that I look forward to your application, or I will tell you if I have any hesitations based on what you have told me (most commonly research interest fit and funding availability if you are an international applicant – more on that later).

A lot of the emails I receive are AI-generated, and these ones generally aren't useful for me. Telling me that you are interested in [insert direct quote from my website] without any other information is not going to help me understand you and why I should be excited for your application. A better approach is to tell me what your research interests are, what your research background is, and how all of that connects to my lab. The best emails show a clear understanding of what I study and a clear fit to your own interests. But, at the same time, even a 'bad' email does not keep me from considering your application just like everyone else's.

A few quick etiquette notes. 1) It's polite to use my formal title in the first email contact you have. I'm not a big stickler for this, but many other professors are. 2) Please send this email from your university account, not a personal account. Gmail messages almost always get sent to Junk. 3) Emails typically need to have an 'ask.' Many people will advise you to ask if I am accepting students, or if I have time to chat. I would much prefer it if your 'ask' is simply to introduce yourself and to offer to answer questions I

have. You could also ask if I am aware of any available application fee waivers, should this be relevant for you.

Is there anything else I should do before I apply?

Yes! You should apply for CGS-M and OGS! CGS-M is due December 1st, and OGS is due early February. Both of these happen before we even see your application.

You should work with a mentor to craft these. Your goal is to present a research proposal that showcases your research aptitude and alignment with your future graduate program. At the same time, this project is not binding – it's merely a demonstration of how you think and communicate.

I will not be able to provide feedback on these applications, but I could tell you if a broad topic would be a good fit.

CGS-M:

<https://nserc-crsng.canada.ca/en/funding-opportunity/canada-graduate-research-scholarship-masters-program>

OGS:

<https://www.trentu.ca/graduatestudies/financial-matters/graduate-scholarships-and-awards/ogs>

How do I write a good plan of study?

First off, if you have a research mentor (graduate student, professor, postdoc), you ABSOLUTELY should be working with them to craft this.

If not, or if you're looking for my advice specifically, here is a quick guide:

1. **Your document is an argumentative essay** about why you (and your research interests) would be a good fit for this program.
2. **Start with the easy stuff.** Talk about the things you've done. Labs you've worked in, projects you've completed. Make us know that you actually *understood* the project, and weren't just a minion.
3. **Then, write your opener and closer.** Talk about how you love research, why, what interests you, what would make you a good student. Be specific about any aspects of this graduate program that are relevant.
4. **Show off your thinking.** Take one or two papers from each professor you want to work. Write one or two paragraphs on something you think needs to be looked at. Is there a problem with the study or the interpretation? Is there a future direction that you think is particularly interesting? Try to think big picture, not

nitty-gritty. Relate it back to a big theoretical question. You really want to show off that you can think critically about things that will make a splash in the academic world.

5. **Finally, edit.** Shorten it to fit the word/page limit. Make it sound better. Have people read it and give their comments. **Have those same people read it again after you make changes (most writing takes more than one round of edits).**

What should I include in my CV?

Everything that is relevant to your graduate education. This means certain jobs and volunteer positions you've held might be relevant, but not all of them.

- Your school history starting with undergrad degrees
 - Include the names of thesis supervisors and thesis titles, if you have any
 - Include any awards like Dean's list, summa cum laude, Psi Chi, etc.
 - If in progress, say "Expected" and the year you expect to finish
- Awards that you've won
 - If there was money awarded, include the amount
- Publications
 - Use APA
 - If you have a paper that isn't published yet, write the status somewhere in the listing
 - If you have a project that will turn into a paper one day, say it is a paper in preparation
 - Include conference presentations
- Research Experience
 - RA positions, directed studies, honours projects, etc.
 - Include PI name
- Professional Memberships
 - If you went to a conference and became a member (not a bad idea because it usually saves money on conference fees!), list this
- Service

- Served as a student rep on a committee? Lead a writing workshop? List these too
- Teaching
 - If you've been a TA before, include this

What about references?

You should provide 2 academic references who can speak to your ability to do research. References can also comment on aspects of your application that you are worried about.

The best references come from professors that you have directly worked with on a research project. The more responsibilities you had (designing, executing, analyzing, reporting), the stronger the letter.

Many students ask employers to be references. This is not a good idea, unless your job is research-based or using specific skills that demonstrate your capability to do the research you want to do. Many students also ask professors whose class they did well in to be a reference. This is also not a good idea (we already have your transcript!), unless you went to a lot of office hours, were highly active in class, and completed a major project in that class that demonstrates research skills. A letter that only says '[student] was in my class and earned [mark]' is not doing you any favours and should be avoided. Ideally, the people you ask to write letters for you will tell you this when you ask (that they won't be able to write you a strong letter).

At the same time, many students do not have multiple professors with whom they've conducted research. At this stage in your career, we get that. I look specifically for you to have one stellar letter – someone who knows you very well in a research context. Your other letter also needs to be positive and detailed about your research aptitudes, but I don't necessarily expect it to come from someone who has supervised you on a research project.

Resources by other people that can help you

- *A Field Guide To Graduate School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum* by Jessica McCrory Calarco
<https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691201092/a-field-guide-to-grad-school>
- Advice for applying to Psych PhDs: <http://www.katenuss.com/advice/>
<https://psychology.fas.harvard.edu/faq/how-can-i-maximize-my-chances-being-admitted>

- Advice about PhDs:
<http://www.cns.nyu.edu/events/growingupinscience/What%20I%20wish%20I%20had%20known%20about%20doing%20a%20PhD%20-%20Q%20and%20A.pdf>
- Advice for emailing professors:
<https://lucklab.ucdavis.edu/blog/2018/9/17/emailing-faculty>
- Advice for writing statements of interest:
<https://x.com/RomanFeiman/status/1585700225280528385>