

How to be Graduate Student in Social Psychology

In this document, we offer advice about how to be a graduate student in social psychology along with concrete information about the expectations and requirements of this program. Although we hope you will find this information helpful on its own, feel free to discuss career issues with the faculty at any time. If questions, doubts, or concerns arise, speak to your advisor, area head, or any other faculty member. We wish you an exciting, productive, and happy time in graduate school!

I. The big picture: What are you doing here?

You are here to become a researcher in social psychology. On your way out you'll pick up a Ph.D., but this piece of paper is of value only for what it certifies – that you are trained to do research in social psychology. Your time here will make a lot more sense if you think always about what you need to do to become an effective researcher and scholar, not about what you need to do to get your piece of paper. That said, the second half of this document lists the social area requirements and deadlines. Information about the graduate program more generally can be found in the department's Graduate Student Handbook. Keep in mind that we accept only about 5% of applicants to this program; you were selected because you are smart, interested, and capable of becoming a researcher in social psychology.

II. What will you do afterwards?

- *Academic research and teaching:* Our program, like almost all Ph.D. programs at top universities, is designed to prepare you to conduct independent scientific research. Because almost all research in social psychology is conducted at such universities, our goal is to prepare you to compete for, and get, a faculty appointment at a research university. At a research university, you are expected to spend a significant proportion of your time conducting research; such positions usually have teaching loads that assume an active research program. To succeed in this path you will need an outstanding record of research publications, outstanding letters of recommendation from faculty, and some teaching experience.
- *Teaching:* Some of you will find that you enjoy teaching more than research. You may want to stay in academe, yet not on the publication-based track. You can then use your Ph.D. to get a faculty position at a college or university that emphasizes teaching more than research. The teaching load is higher at such institutions, and they vary in their research expectations. You are probably expected to include undergraduates in the research that you do. To succeed in this path you will need an outstanding teaching record, outstanding letters of recommendation from faculty, and some research publications. Teaching positions are quite competitive; they go to people who are extremely qualified to teach, not people who are looking for a “fallback” if their research career does not pan out.

- *Non-academic research:* Some of you will want to continue doing research, but prefer to work in private industry or the government. You could seek a position with a marketing firm, government agency, or consulting firm. To succeed in this path you will need outstanding data analytic or statistical modeling skills, outstanding experience with different kinds of methodologies, outstanding letters of recommendation from faculty, and some publications.

There may be other reasons to pursue a Ph.D., but if by the end of your second year you do not think you want a career in teaching or research, you should consider taking your master's degree and moving to a situation more targeted to your goals.

III. A year-by-year plan.

First Year

You should take 4 or 5 content courses (i.e., courses that meet and assign a letter grade), including two stats courses and any courses taught by social area faculty. You are also required to participate in the weekly area Brownbag and the department-wide Seminar in Psychology Science, which offers an introduction to faculty in other areas.

You might also be a teaching assistant (TA). A TA position might be intimidating for some of you, but there are good resources here to help you meet your teaching goals. Read teaching sites (e.g., <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/members/teaching>), attend teaching seminars, talk to others about teaching, and ask the faculty member you are assisting for guidance.

Taking courses and teaching can take a lot of time, but remember that your top priority is to get your research going. Research requires a close collaboration with one or more faculty members, which you should begin as soon as you arrive. Research takes time; the sooner you begin thinking about the questions that you want to answer, the better. Research involves a lot of reading about the topics that interest you, as well as a lot of “nuts and bolts” work of planning studies, collecting data, and analyzing the results. It also involves many conversations with faculty members and other graduate students about the topics that interest you the most – seek out opportunities to talk about your work with others.

In your first year you will have a primary advisor, and you will attend lab meetings and contribute to the functioning of the lab. It is fine to be involved with another lab as well, as long as your research is up and running in your primary lab. Don't spread yourself too thin.

You should begin thinking about your place in the field. Join SPSP, APS, and any other relevant professional associations. Membership is relatively inexpensive for students. Joining their email lists will help keep you updated on what is going on the field. You should almost certainly go to SPSP's annual conference, and may want to consider APA or APS if they are nearby or affordable. Also consider other, more specialized conferences as well, and regional conferences such as the Society of Southeastern Social Psychologists (SSSP).

Developing strong writing and speaking skills are the most pivotal things you will do in graduate school. Buy—or find a PDF of—the APA publication manual, and use it. If writing well is not one of your skills, seek help from the UF writing center. The best way to get better at writing is to write. Also attend seminars and workshops. Develop an ear for simple, clear, direct writing. Consider consulting social psychology professor Paul Silvia's excellent books—*How to Write a Lot* and *Write It Up*. Start building your library. Some people find it useful to have a filing system for articles. Taking notes on the things you read can be important, and some find it useful to organize them. Keep track of what's going on in the department. If someone is speaking on a topic of interest, even if tangential, go. Being a psychologist is much more than being an expert in your specific area of research; it requires familiarity in the breadth of social psychology and the ability to connect your specific research interests with ideas and theories from other disciplines. Meet with visiting faculty to start making professional contacts in the field and to get used to talking with others about your own and their research.

Two big things happen at the end of your first year. One is that you will propose your master's thesis (or you will ask a supervisory committee to approve the transfer to UF of your master's thesis from another university; you will also complete the transfer of your block master's thesis credits). The second is that you will give a talk at the Social Area Brownbag (near the end of the spring semester) about one of the research projects you have been involved in during your first year. This talk is the first big public event to show the area what you have done so far in graduate school.

Four final pieces of advice for your first year (and those that follow):

1. Be ethical. Acquaint yourself immediately with the APA Ethical Standards of Psychologists. Learn the requirements of our Institutional Review Board. Consider scientific best practices. We are an area that values open science. This includes encouraging preregistration of studies and hypotheses, making our methods transparent, and when possible, sharing data and materials (e.g., see <https://cos.io>).
2. Be professional. For example: Use professional language and titles when contacting faculty and colleagues that you do not know, use proper spelling and grammar in email communication, always be on time, do not use your computer or phone during Brownbag or classes, and dress appropriately for academic functions. Complete your work and other requirements well in advance of when they are due. Even if you luck out and are able to meet a requirement at the last minute, it may not make a good impression. Remember that you will eventually ask faculty members to write you letters of recommendation. You want them to be enthusiastic about your sense of responsibility, organizational skills, dedication, and professionalism.
3. Learn to give and accept feedback. Be tough on one other, and demand quality work. Ask hard questions. But, be kind. Keep in mind that "critique" and "criticism" are not the same, and that the best suggestions go beyond simply pointing out flaws in others' work. Similarly, seek feedback whenever possible. Ask others to read your papers, to talk over your ideas, to watch you teach. Don't be defensive if you do not

agree with what others have to say about your work. Learn to listen and to incorporate their advice and suggestions. Learning to make your work stronger by considering others' constructive criticisms is a cornerstone of success in academia.

4. Be engaged and approach-oriented. Show up for area and departmental events, even the informal ones. Help out with prospective visits and other area activities. Attend as many lab meetings as you can. Go to talks. Organize informal discussion and reading groups among the graduate students. Seek out all of the opportunities the University of Florida has for graduate students. Apply for awards, such as the SPSP travel award, and trainings, such as the Summer Institute in Social and Personality Psychology (SISSP). There are lots of opportunities if you look for them.

Second Year

Your coursework will continue, as will your teaching. By now you know how things work around here, and you've gone through all of the parts of the research process with your first-year project(s), so this year should be even more focused on research. You'll conduct the research that you proposed for your master's thesis, but should be doing other work too.

Second year is a good time to expand your research interests and to think about the questions that you want to answer. Use your second year to explore collaborations with other faculty or other students. You can also explore research going on in other areas of the department. Do not confine your reading to your courses. Keep taking every possible opportunity to talk with others about your work and theirs. You should present your research at one conference (at least) this year.

You should also start thinking seriously about how to get publications before you graduate. The publication process takes a long time, and you will need publications before you graduate if you want to get an academic job. Your master's thesis might be appropriate for publication, but also think about what other lines of research might lead to a neat package of studies that you can submit. Ask your advisor(s) if there are any opportunities for you to be a co-author on a book chapter or to help out with their research. Think about writing or collaborating on a theory or review paper. Collaborate with other graduate students. Talk to your advisor about the possibility of serving as a reviewer on a manuscript; in addition to demonstrating your service to the field, it is a good way to learn about other relevant research.

Third Year

You'll complete your qualifying exam at the beginning of your third year and are likely to finish your coursework. But even after you finish your courses, you'll probably want to audit at least one per semester. Third year is a good time to look at courses outside of the department.

By now your research ideas should be coming into focus, you should be developing a line of inquiry that you are truly passionate about, and that you are going to make your own. You might have side projects and other lines of work, but you should have one line of research that stands out as truly *yours*. This line will almost certainly become your dissertation work, which you will propose at the end of this year.

Think about how to get grant funding for your work, even if you are financially supported. In addition to public funds, and funds from the university, there are hundreds of private foundations that fund all kinds of research. Check with www.socialpsychology.org for opportunities. Having your own money will help you to think big, and it will look great on your CV.

Make sure you are meeting other social psychologists. Attend conferences. Take advantage of social opportunities for graduate students. The benefits of doing so cannot be overstated – you will find out what others are working on, get feedback about your own work, meet potential reviewers and editors, and learn important information through “informal” channels. In addition to the importance of having professional contacts, the research process is slow enough that if you are finding out about research from the current issue of journals, you may already be “behind.”

Fourth and Fifth Years

By now you have passed your qualifying examination, proposed your dissertation, and become a doctoral candidate. You are making the transition from being a student learning about a field to an expert contributing to that field. During your fourth and fifth years you will conduct the research that you proposed for your dissertation, but should conduct other research too.

In terms of professional development, these years are crucial. You will probably be applying for academic jobs and/or postdoctoral positions in the fall, well before you finish your dissertation. To get such positions you will need an impressive CV and an impressive set of academic skills and professional contacts. Continue getting to know leading social psychologists at other universities. When these psychologists are considering hundreds of applications, it will help if they remember seeing you give a talk, or remember a great conversation with you at a conference or when they gave a talk at UF.

IV. Some final words of encouragement.

When you look ahead at all the things you’ll have to learn, and do, in just four or five years, it can be quite daunting. The chances are that you’ll have some moments of serious self-doubt. But have patience. Keep reading. Keep running studies. Keep getting yourself socialized in social psychology. Put yourself in situations that will help you succeed. Again, most importantly, keep running studies. You will be astounded at how much you will learn in five years. When the time comes for you to go out on the job market, you really will be a social psychologist, able to teach and to conduct independent research.

One of the most important suggestions we can give you for staying sane (and maybe even happy) in grad school is to always keep this in mind that none of us got into this line of work for the money. We do this because we are fascinated by human social nature and because we love being part of a community of researchers trying to figure it out. And we have this racket going: all of us, including you, are getting paid to do something that we truly love.

UF Social Area Requirements

I. Program Overview and Timetable

The program is designed so that it is possible to finish in four years. Most students stay for a fifth year to build their vita and be in a more competitive position in the job market.

Keep in mind that summers present problems for finishing work. Faculty go on vacation, and many are on nine-month contracts and do not keep regular work hours. We thus require students to schedule committee meetings and the completion of important deadlines during the fall and spring semesters.

Also, most projects take longer than you expect them to take. Again, do not plan your work so that you anticipate finishing or meeting with your committee immediately prior to a deadline. Leave time to respond to last-minute feedback.

First Year

- *Immediately:* Start establishing Florida residency (U.S. citizens and permanent residents).
- *March or April:* Present your first-year work at Brownbag.
- *March:* Choose a master's thesis committee. For this committee, you need an advisor from the social area, a second social area faculty member, and one faculty member from outside of the social area (who may be inside or outside of the department).
- *May:* Propose your master's thesis. Note that you must give your proposal to your thesis committee at least two weeks prior to the scheduled proposal defense. Alternatively, form a supervisory committee—with the same composition as a master's thesis committee—to evaluate your thesis from another university for transfer (see Appendix A for a sample letter to this committee that your advisor will send on your behalf). You will also need to have your block transfer credits approved following the process outlined in the Psychology Department Graduate Student Handbook.

Second Year

- *April:* Defend master's thesis.
- *May:* Form a dissertation committee. For this committee, you need an advisor from the social area, a second social area faculty member, one faculty member from the

psychology department but outside of the social area, and one faculty member from outside of the department.

- *May*: Submit a qualifying exam reading list to the social area faculty.

Third Year

- *August*: Complete your qualifying exam.
- *April*: Propose your dissertation.

Fourth and Fifth Years

During these years, you will conduct your dissertation research. Be aware that the Department of Psychology has a policy of guaranteed funding for four years, assuming satisfactory progress in the program. Students can apply for a fifth year of funding.

II. Coursework

Use Appendix B to chart your progress and make sure you are on track for degree completion. This is YOUR responsibility. Note that, even if you transfer a block of 30 master's credits from another university, you must still fulfill these requirements. The Department Graduate Student Handbook (which supersedes this document in authority) has more information about substituting courses.

2020 Update: The psychology department is in the process of changing the graduate course regulations – keep an eye out for this as it's likely there will be changes during this academic year. Area and department heads will keep you posted.

III. Master's Thesis

The master's thesis is designed to show evidence of research competence. Although the master's thesis does not have to be as original or imposing as the dissertation, you should try to select a topic that is important, interesting, and likely to lead to a publication.

Proposal structure. The first step is to write a thesis proposal and have it approved by your committee. The proposal consists of three major sections. The first section is an introduction in which you will review the relevant research literature, present your ideas, and articulate your hypotheses. The next section is a method section that describes exactly how you plan to test your hypotheses. The final section is an anticipated results section in which you describe exactly what analyses you will use to test your hypotheses. These sections should be comparable to those in a journal article, though written in future tense instead of present or past. A reference list must accompany your proposal.

Discussing ideas and going over drafts. Before writing the proposal, discuss your ideas with the chair of your committee (and perhaps other committee members). Once you agree on the topic with the thesis chair, write the proposal and have the chair of your committee

read and comment on it. Students are normally surprised by the number of drafts required for theses and publications, so you should plan accordingly. Expect that your first draft, and perhaps several more, will require revision after you receive feedback from your chair. As such, leave plenty of time for editing and revisions.

Forming the thesis committee and defending the proposal. Begin thinking about your master's thesis committee early in your first year. The master's thesis committee will consist of three members. The chair and one other member must be from the social psychology area. The third member may be from inside or outside of the department. Once you and your chair decide that the proposal is ready to go to the full committee, work with your committee members to schedule a time for the thesis defense. Distribute your thesis proposal to the committee at least two weeks before the proposal defense, and reserve a room for a one-hour block of time. At the proposal defense, you should present a very short (≈ 10 -minute) overview of the proposed research, and be prepared to answer questions and respond to suggestions.

The proposal meeting can significantly improve the research. First, beneficial new ideas often emerge when people discuss, in detail, the nature and implementation of their ideas. Second, it ensures that the project you will be doing is acceptable to all of the members of your committee. You do not want to be in the position of presenting a finished project to your committee only to discover that one or more members take issue with the underlying ideas, design, or implementation of the project.

Theses sometimes report data that have been collected previously (e.g., as part of a larger project conducted by your supervisor). When this is the case, your proposal should indicate that the data were already collected. If the proposal is well done and the prior data are appropriate for the proposal, the committee often will allow you to analyze and report the prior data. However, this is not guaranteed. In fact, the committee may require new, different data. Moreover, you may want to propose a follow-up study that has not yet been conducted. This latter process normally yields high-quality theses because you already identified a phenomenon to follow up. Thus, the risk of lack interesting findings is reduced.

Completing and defending the thesis. You will finish collecting data and writing your thesis during your second year in the program. You should again plan to exchange a number of drafts with your thesis chair. When you and your chair decide that the thesis is ready to go to the full committee, send your thesis to your committee electronically at least two weeks before the proposal defense date. You should reserve a room for two-hour block of time. At the thesis defense you should prepare a very short (≈ 10 -minute) presentation of your research, and be prepared to answer questions. Your committee will convene before and after your defense and you will be asked to leave the room at those times.

IV. Qualifying Exam

Qualifying exams occur prior to the start of classes at the beginning of the third year. You are required to pass qualifying exams before you are officially admitted as a Ph.D. candidate. Students who come in with a master's degree should try to take the qualifying

exam at the end of their first year; however, if this is not possible, completing the examination at the end of the second year is acceptable.

The social psychology faculty members will schedule, construct, administer, and grade the qualifying exam and your doctoral dissertation committee will approve the grade determined by the social area faculty (i.e., the qualifying exam committee). You should assemble a qualifying exam reading list, drawn from your coursework, before May 15th prior to your August exam date. The faculty will then evaluate the list and make changes if necessary.

The qualifying exam consists of roughly nine items, all drawn from research methods and the core areas of social psychology. The qualifying exam questions are the same for all students taking the exam at a particular time. You will complete 4-5 questions in the morning, break for lunch, then complete 4-5 questions in the afternoon. You may use the journal articles from your reading list (i.e., an “open book” exam) but no other outside sources. The faculty committee is charged with grading all exams and advising the dissertation committee about their evaluation of your performance on the standardized written portion.

There are three possible outcomes of qualifying exams. Students who *Pass* their qualifying exam do not need to defend their responses orally, and the dissertation proposal committee meeting with consist only of describing dissertation plans. If you perform exceptionally well on the qualifying exam, the dissertation committee may award you “pass with distinction.” Students who are judged to have *Marginal Performance*, will be required to defend their responses orally to their dissertation committee. In this case, an oral defense meeting will be scheduled immediately after the exams are graded. Depending on the outcome of the exam, the student may be required to do remedial work such as take additional coursework or write a paper, or may be required to retake part of the exam. If the social psychology faculty members feel that a student should *Fail* the qualifying examination, a re-exam may be requested but the dissertation committee must recommend it. Thus, re-examination is not guaranteed. Passing the qualifying examination is a requirement to remain a graduate student in the program.

V. Dissertation Research

The dissertation is your opportunity to show that you can make significant contributions to the research literature and that you are, in fact, a social psychologist.

Your dissertation committee consists of at least four members. Your chair and one other member should be from the social area. A third member should be outside of the area but within the department, and the fourth member should be from outside the department. It is typical that your dissertation committee is the same as your master’s thesis committee, with one additional member. You may opt to have additional committee members if you feel it benefits your dissertation. The process of proposing the dissertation research, defending the proposal, conducting the dissertation research, and defending the dissertation is identical to the process for the master’s thesis.

VI. Annual Evaluation and Vita

The social area faculty evaluate all graduate students at the end of each academic year. The purposes of these evaluations are to commend outstanding work, to provide constructive feedback, to ensure that faculty are cognizant of the characteristics and performance of our students, to deal with problems, and to make recommendations about assistantship positions for the following year. To aid the faculty in their evaluation, we ask all students to update their vita annually. Preparing your vita at the end of each year will also give you a clearer picture of how you are performing.

APPENDIX A
SAMPLE LETTER FROM ADVISOR TO COMMITTEE ABOUT TRANSFERING A MASTER'S
THESIS FROM ANOTHER UNIVERSITY

Date: November 15, 2019

To: Committee Member 1, Committee Member 2, Committee Member 3

From: Advisor X

Re: Student X

Thank you all so much for agreeing to serve on Student X's master's thesis committee.

Student X is a first-year social student who has a master's degree from X University. She seeks to waive our master's thesis requirement by having her prior thesis substitute for that required at the University of Florida. Your role is to evaluate whether X's thesis (attached) meets the University of Florida's criteria for an acceptable master's thesis. Unless the committee has concerns, there is no oral defense of the thesis. Her thesis is titled "XXXXX".

If you agree with my assessment that this thesis meets the UF criteria, I'll have her get in touch with you again with relevant paperwork to sign. If possible, please let me know within two weeks.

Kind regards,
Kate

**APPENDIX B
SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY PROGRAM OF STUDY
COURSEWORK WORKSHEET**

Note that this worksheet is subject to change as department requirements change

I. Foundation Requirement Pro-Seminars: The department requires students to demonstrate general knowledge of psychology by completing one of two options. Please choose one

_____ **Option A:** The student must complete 9 graduate student credit hours within the Department of Psychology from at least 3 different doctoral training areas, all of which must be from courses outside of the student’s area of doctoral specialization, and the student must be the instructor of record in at least one assigned undergraduate course in psychology.

_____ **Option B:** The student must take 9 graduate student credit hours from courses outside of the student’s area of doctoral specialization (within or outside the department of psychology), and the student must be the instructor of record for General Psychology (PSY 2012). **Note:** Any course taken outside the department to meet the Option B requirement can also count under distribution requirement.

Option A/B Courses	Semester & Year	Hours	Grade
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

II. Seminar Participation: All students must participate in a weekly area colloquium speaker series. First year students must sign up for three credits and also participate in the discussion portion of the course.

III. Area Seminars: Research Methods, Survey of Social Psychology, and 3 additional SOP courses. These cannot also count toward any other section below.

Course	Semester & Year	Hours	Grade
Survey of Social Psychology	_____	_____	_____
Advanced Research Methods	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

IV. Statistics & Research Methods: Minimum 4 courses. Two of these courses satisfy the department’s statistical sequence requirement. The remaining two represent requirements unique to the social area. These can count toward the distribution requirement (see below) but no other requirement below.

Course	Semester & Year	Hours	Grade
_____	_____	___	___
_____	_____	___	___
_____	_____	___	___
_____	_____	___	___

V. Master’s Hours: Minimum 6 hours. You must earn a minimum of 30 hours for the awarding of a Master’s degree, of which no more than 8 master’s research credits can be transferred from another institution. At least 3 hours of PSY 6971 (master’s research) must be taken in the semester that the degree is awarded.

Course	Sem. & Year	Hours	Grade	Course	Sem. & Year	Hours	Grade
SOP 6971	_____	___	___	SOP 6971	_____	___	___
SOP 6971	_____	___	___	SOP 6971	_____	___	___

VI. Dissertation Hours: Minimum 12 hours. You must earn a minimum of 90 hours beyond the bachelor’s degree for the doctoral degree. You can transfer no more than 30 hours of a master’s degree from another institution. You must take at least 3 hours of PSY 7980 (doctoral research) in the semester that the degree is awarded.

Course	Sem. & Year	Hours	Grade	Course	Sem. & Year	Hours	Grade
PSY 7980	_____	___	___	PSY 7980	_____	___	___
PSY 7980	_____	___	___	PSY 7980	_____	___	___
PSY 7980	_____	___	___	PSY 7980	_____	___	___
PSY 7980	_____	___	___	PSY 7980	_____	___	___

VII. Distribution Requirement: Minimum 12 hours. Students must take at least 12 hours that serve either as a minor or are approved by the student’s committee as acceptable for meeting the distribution requirement. These courses cannot have an SOP prefix. The two statistics/ research method courses taken beyond the department required statistics sequence can count in this category. Also, any course outside the department completed as part of option B can count in the category.

Course	Semester & Year	Hours	Grade
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

VIII. Elective Hours. This category represents any course you took that does not fulfill another requirement.

Course	Semester & Year	Hours	Grade
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

Final Note: You can transfer a maximum of 30 hours from another institution toward the doctoral degree. If you are transferring courses, please make clear which courses are transferred.

Important Events	Date Completed
Read Ethics Code; Pass IRB Ethics Course	
Form Supervisory/Master’s Thesis Committee (May of 1 st year)	
Transfer Master’s Thesis and Credits (if applicable; May of 1 st year)	
Master’s Defense (May of 2 nd year)	
Qualifying Exam (August that begins 3 rd year)	
Teach Introductory Psychology	
Dissertation Proposal (May of 3 rd year)	
Dissertation Defense (May of 5 th year)	