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HOW TO

GET INTO OCCUPATIONAL
THERAPY SCHOOL

AN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ADMISSIONS GUIDE

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Introduction

Occupational therapy is a challenging and rewarding career field that allows you to work with a wide variety of patients to build the skills they need to independently perform required daily activities and live productive, fulfilling lives. Becoming an occupational therapist requires multiple years of training, including an undergraduate degree and a master's or doctorate degree preceded by a competitive application process. This guide is intended to make you a competitive applicant, enhance your ability to get into an occupational therapy program, and ultimately begin the therapy career to which you aspire. We wish you the best of luck as you begin your application—although little luck is required for the process. Instead, careful planning, hard work, and determined perseverance can get you into the occupational therapy school of your dreams.





Pre-Application

Students who want to become occupational therapists need to demonstrate their value through knowledge and experience. Coursework and grades are extremely important, but admission committees seek more than academic proficiency. Candidates must prove that they have the potential to be successful future clinicians and team members. They must also show that they understand the profession and how OTs can be used in a wide variety of settings. Coursework, GPA, shadowing, volunteering, extra-curricular activities, work, and research all factor into an admission committee's decision. Preparing to apply to OT school is a process that will take years—so the earlier you start, the better.

PRE-REQUISITES

The [American Occupational Therapy Association](#) does not require students to have a specific major, so pre-occupational therapy students can choose any major they wish. However, students should make sure that they meet the requirements outlined by their prospective program. It is common for pre-OT students to major in psychology, biology, or exercise science because these majors include many of the necessary prerequisites for OT school. However, OT is a holistic field that values creativity and versatility. Students who have majored in non-health and non-science fields can be exceptional candidates and offer unique perspectives to the field of OT. Many older non-traditional students choose OT after pursuing a different career and have a broad variety of majors.

Pre-requisites vary based on the program, but the following courses are commonly required or suggested:

- 1 year of Anatomy & Physiology, preferably with animal or cadaver dissection
- 1 course in General Psychology
- 1 course in Abnormal Psychology
- 1 course in Developmental or Lifespan Psychology
- 1-2 courses in Statistics
- 1 course in Sociology or Anthropology
- 1 course in Medical Terminology

Other courses that may be required or recommended include:

- Biology, Chemistry, or Physics; course may not need to be specific to science majors
- Psychology courses focusing on specific age groups (infant, child, adolescent, elderly)
- Kinesiology
- Neuroscience
- Pathology
- Art

Students may also consider taking courses in special education, disability studies, public health, ethics, and cultural studies. Admission committees look favorably upon students who have taken the initiative to educate themselves on issues of patient care and social justice, and who are prepared to interact with a wide variety of patients from different backgrounds.

Some schools may have specific rules regarding prerequisite completion, such as not accepting prerequisites taken more than 5 years ago or allowing students to submit applications with certain prerequisites still in progress. Be sure to read the program's website to find out the details. If necessary, contact the program and ask questions.

Programs tend to consider prerequisites taken at a 2-year college to have just as much value as prerequisites taken at a 4-year college. Students should contact their prospective programs if they need to verify that a specific course meets the program's standards.

GPA

Many programs state a minimum required GPA in their admissions information. Even if the department does not have a minimum GPA requirement, students may need to

meet GPA requirements enforced by the graduate school. Check the program's webpage to make sure you have the most up-to-date information.

Most occupational therapy programs require a minimum cumulative and prerequisite GPA of 3.0 on a 4.0 scale. Some programs require students to achieve grades of "A" or "B" in prerequisites—meaning that if you got a "C" in Anatomy & Physiology, you would need to retake the course and get a better grade in order to be admitted into the program. Other programs state that they only consider the student's last 60 credits in calculating GPA, so grades in the student's early academic career would be omitted.

However, the occupational therapy program admissions process has become increasingly competitive, so simply meeting the minimum admission requirements will typically not be enough. Many schools offer an "Admitted Student Profile" to report previously admitted classes' average cumulative and prerequisite GPAs, average GRE scores, average number of volunteer hours, undergraduate majors, job experiences, and other factors deemed important by the program. It is common for the average cumulative and prerequisite GPAs to be well over 3.5.

Students who do not have GPAs above the minimum requirements should reach out to their prospective programs. They may be able to receive GPA waivers, write about the reasons behind lower grades in their personal statements, and highlight their strengths as a candidate in other areas of their applications.

SHADOWING

Shadowing occupational therapists in the field is an important part of your application and a requirement for some schools. Typically, schools that require shadowing will require 20 to 50 hours, though some programs require more. Whether or not your school has a stated shadowing requirement, it would be wise to exceed 20 hours—admissions committees look for proof that you know what occupational therapists do in the workplace, and shadowing is a great way to demonstrate this.

Shadowing can be a challenge. Your college pre-health advisor may be able to help you find contacts, but you should also be ready to find contacts on your own. Search the web for occupational therapists, hospitals, nursing homes, schools, and rehabilitation clinics near you. You may also consider searching for OTs in less traditional settings, such as:

- Mental health
- Hippotherapy (Horse Therapy)
- Worker rehabilitation

- Driver rehabilitation
- Low vision
- Burn care

When you call, be ready to explain that you’re a pre-occupational therapy student looking to shadow an OT for as many hours as possible. Some facilities will have waitlists for student shadows. It is very common for sites to only be able to offer a small number of shadowing hours as a one-time opportunity. Many facilities will not accept students, especially if OT sessions at the facility focus on activities such as bathing, dressing, and toileting. It is important to start shadowing early so that waitlists and rejections do not delay your ability to apply to OT programs. Students should plan to shadow different OTs over the course of several months or years, depending upon how many shadowing hours are required and the student’s ability to schedule shadowing around classes, work, volunteering, and family.

When shadowing, dress in business casual clothing, arrive on time, be attentive to what your supervisor says and does, and be mindful of your behavior—you want the patient to feel comfortable with you as an observer. Send a thank you email after shadowing. Some programs have shadowing forms that require your supervisor’s signature. Even if your program does not have such requirements, keep a record of where you shadowed, who you shadowed, their contact information, the dates and times you were at the site, the population you observed, and diagnoses you observed. This information will be helpful to have when you prepare your personal statement and prepare for interviews.

CONSIDERING YOUR PRACTICE SETTING

As a pre-OT student, it might be too early for you to pick a specialty or area of interest—but it’s never too early to learn about what your options are. Pre-OT students should explore as many areas of practice as possible with a variety of different populations, ask themselves if they already have preferences, and step outside of their comfort zones. Sometimes, we may change our minds. A student who likes the idea of a slower-paced setting should shadow in a slow setting like long-term acute care and in a fast-paced, traditional acute care setting in order to better compare the two. A student who wants to work with children but has little experience should shadow in different pediatric settings to determine what age range they would like to work with, as well as in a setting with older adults to confirm whether pediatrics is the student’s only setting of interest.

For students who are fairly certain they know what area or population interests them, it makes sense to pursue that interest further. For instance, pre-OT students who are already entertaining the idea of working as hand therapists should try to gain paid or volunteer outpatient clinic experience, since some hand therapy fieldwork placements prefer students with some experience. Students who want to work in an inpatient setting might consider becoming CNAs to improve upon their skills at transfers, ADL assistance, and working on a team in the hospital. Students who want to work with autism should consider obtaining a job as an ABA therapist.

VOLUNTEERING & EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Occupational therapy as a field recognizes that meaningful activities are important to a person’s overall health. With that in mind, admissions committees will want to see how you spend your time outside of class. Volunteering and extracurricular activities can shed light on who you are as a person and highlight facets of your knowledge and skill set. Many OT students take part in athletic activities, internships, student organizations on campus, or organizations within the community.

Any type of healthcare volunteering is a great addition to your application. Programs want to see that you’ve had experience with individuals who have disabilities. Hospitals frequently have volunteers in a variety of departments, including rehabilitation units. However, you may consider volunteering in other areas of the hospital in order to increase your overall understanding of patient care and the healthcare system. Hospitals will often require a minimum volunteer commitment like 100 hours. Schools may utilize volunteers for after school programs or tutoring. Students can also volunteer with the Special Olympics or other community organizations dedicated to serving those with disabilities. Additionally, students should consider volunteering in a hospice setting, as many OTs work with clients who are nearing the end of life.

However, it is perfectly fine to show admissions committees that you are a well-rounded individual with interests beyond healthcare! Almost any sort of volunteer role can strengthen your application if it shows a commitment to underserved populations, develops your leadership skills, keeps you involved in your community, or helps you learn new skills. OTs must be active self-educators and team members who are capable of developing and enacting new ideas, so take part in activities where you

can feel motivated, passionate, and involved. Consider volunteering at a homeless shelter or an environmental organization, or joining a club for public speaking, foreign language, or crafts.

It is better to have a few long-term extracurricular commitments than numerous short-term extracurricular commitments. Try to choose activities that you enjoy and will stick to for longer than six months.

WORK EXPERIENCE

Job experience can be a valuable part of a candidate’s application. While having a job in a healthcare-related or education-related field is not necessarily required, it is always a positive factor. Applicants with backgrounds in nursing or teaching will have an advantage. Some OT-relevant jobs that require minimal to no further training and may be part-time or full-time include:

- Rehabilitation aide
- In-home caregiver
- Certified nursing assistant
- Medical scribe
- Applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapist
- Babysitter

However, just about any job experience is worth mentioning, regardless of whether it is healthcare-related. Whether you’ve worked in a restaurant or in tech support, chances are your job involved some level of customer service, working on a team, finding solutions to problems, and being flexible when unexpected events arose.

RESEARCH

In general, occupational therapy is a clinical field. While research experience and literacy are a required part of OT education, different programs have different ways of meeting this requirement and research literacy is often emphasized over applied research skills. Therefore, pre-OT students do not necessarily need to have research experience.

For pre-OT students who are interested in research, having research experience can set you apart from other applicants depending on what program you apply to. Go to the program’s website and find out more about the research interests of the faculty and what labs are on campus. For OT students who think a PhD may be in their future, it may be best to attend a program that offers the option of completing a thesis.

Some majors readily offer research opportunities to their students, but students may need to do some digging to find out about different research projects. Contact different departments and labs on campus, check flyers on campus bulletin boards, and look for paid or volunteer positions advertised online at local colleges and hospitals.





QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Students should gain a realistic idea of what an occupational therapist does by the time of application. However, simply observing the job and learning about it is not the same as actually doing it. Prospective OT students should ask themselves the following questions:

Do I have adequate writing skills?

OT programs require many written assignments, and OT practice requires documentation of treatment. Excellent writing skills are not a requirement, but it is necessary for students and practitioners to be able to write coherently and keep track of what occurred during treatment sessions.

Can I be flexible and organized?

Students and practitioners must keep track of their necessary responsibilities while being able to adapt to last-minute changes.

Can I become comfortable working on a team?

OT school involves MANY group projects. This is to prepare students for working as a practitioner, where it is essential to collaborate with individuals from your department and across other disciplines. Slackers and micromanagers should be prepared to adjust their habits, and all students should strive to sharpen their communication skills.

Am I comfortable touching patients? Can I be comfortable assisting patients during intimate moments?

OTs often assist patients in bathing, toileting, personal hygiene, and dressing. They must be comfortable and professional around patients who are undressed. Though OT is responsible for skilled services, there are moments where an OT may still have to help an incontinent patient clean up after an accident. Students must be ready to encounter these situations.

Am I comfortable working with patients whose behavior is unpredictable?

OTs must be able to handle patients who are emotional and impulsive. The OT must be empathetic and aware of patient safety.

Can I put aside my personal biases? Am I willing to offer each patient the best possible care according to their needs and wishes?

Sometimes practitioners may not agree with patients, or even like them—but that should not impact the level of care the patient receives. Students must be willing to work with challenging patients and respect their autonomy.

SCHOOL ACCREDITATION STATUS

Occupational therapy programs are accredited by the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE). Students may apply to programs that have achieved “Accreditation” status, “Probationary Accreditation,” and “Candidacy” status. Developing programs may also be in “Applicant” status but cannot accept students yet.

Programs strive for “Accreditation” status. This means that all accreditation requirements have been met by the program since the last evaluation. “Probationary Accreditation” status is rare. It indicates that a formerly accredited school has failed to meet accreditation standards, and that ACOTE has determined that students in the program risk inadequate education. Low NBCOT pass rates can be a reason for this status. Programs with “Probationary Accreditation” status must have a plan to meet standards and must inform applying students of their accreditation status. Naturally, it is a risk to attend a school under “Probationary Accreditation.”

“Candidacy” status means that the program has met the initial requirements for accreditation and is ready to admit their first cohort of students. However, the program must be fully accredited before students can take the NBCOT. Generally, if the program has made it to “Candidacy” status, they are capable of meeting the necessary requirements for accreditation—however, on the off-chance that the program does not become accredited, students will not be able to practice OT with their degrees. Students considering attending a school in “Candidacy” status should thoroughly research their prospective school. It is typically a good sign if the school has other long-established masters or doctoral health professions programs like medicine, physical therapy, or speech therapy.

Students can verify their school’s accreditation status here on the [AOTA website](#).

FOR THOSE INTERESTED IN ACADEMIA

Some students know they want to leave the door open for an academic career as instructors or researchers. Currently, a large portion of OT faculty members teach with only a master’s degree, but many programs prefer to hire new professors with PhDs or other doctoral degrees. Students who are interested in teaching or research should consider gearing their education toward obtaining a PhD.

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This career path can impact pre-OT students’ choice of program, as they want to accrue experiences that will help them get into a PhD program. The following are some things that students might consider include when choosing their OT master’s program:

Research: Is it a major emphasis with the program? What are the program’s main areas of research? Are there faculty members on staff who share your research interests?

Thesis option: Does the program allow you the option of doing a thesis project? (Some PhD programs require a thesis.)

Teaching or research assistantships: Are they readily available at the school? Are they available through the OT department?

Labs: What sort of research opportunities are available to OT students on campus?

Community outreach: Is your program involved in projects within the greater community? Is there opportunity for you to be involved with these kinds of efforts?

Surrounding location: Where is the program located? Are there opportunities for you to be involved in community efforts outside of the program?

There are a number of PhD programs that are common among OT professors, including the following:

- Rehabilitation Science
- Occupational Science
- Engineering
- Psychology
- Education
- Leadership

If you already know you are interested in one of these programs, look into their educational requirements. However, if you are unsure, take your time and explore. PhD programs may take 5-7 years to complete, though some programs allow transfer of credits from a master’s degree.

Students may decide they want to pursue an alternative doctoral degree to the PhD. While these degrees may not qualify a candidate for all faculty positions, they are commonly seen among professors:

OTD: Occupational Therapy Doctorate – 1 year beyond the master’s degree

EdD: Doctor of Education – 3-4 years beyond the master’s degree

The Graduate Record Exam (GRE) General Test

The GRE is a standardized exam that measures your ability to perform the kind of critical thinking needed for any rigorous graduate-level program. Most—but not all—OT programs require applicants to take the GRE general test to be considered for admission. There is no universal standard in terms of GRE scores accepted by all OT programs—each program will have its own requirements. Some programs have firm cutoff points, while others view GRE scores as one of many factors used in consideration an application. Some programs do not require the GRE at all. You should be able to find information on GRE requirements on each school’s website.

There are three sections to the exam: verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and an analytical writing sample. The verbal reasoning and quantitative reasoning sections are scored on a 130 to 170 score scale, while the analytical writing section is scored on a 0 to 6 scale, in 0.5 point increments. Each section is completed separately and contains the following types of questions:

Verbal Reasoning: Reading comprehension, text completion, sentence equivalence

Reading comprehension questions may be presented in multiple choice (selecting either only one, or one or more answer choices) or select-in-passage format.

Text completion questions are comprised of a 1-to-5 sentence passage containing up to three blank spaces to be filled in to best complete the text.

Sentence equivalents test your ability to analyze a single

sentence containing one blank space, requiring you to choose the best two options from six potential word choices.

The following are examples of typical GRE verbal reasoning scores for incoming students at several different OT programs:

University of Illinois at Chicago: Mean score of 157-158

Ithaca College: Mean score 152

Colorado State: Mean score 155

Quantitative reasoning: single-answer or multiple-answer multiple choice questions, numeric entry, and quantitative comparisons.

Multiple choice questions may allow you to choose either only one or one or more choices from an answer list. It is important to read carefully to determine which type of question you are reading.

Numeric entry questions are answered by inserting an integer or a decimal into one or more boxes.

Quantitative comparisons ask for an analytical comparison of two quantities to determine the correct statement describing the comparison.

The following are examples of typical GRE quantitative reasoning scores for incoming students at several different OT programs:

University of Illinois at Chicago: Mean score of 153-154

Ithaca College: Mean score 150

Colorado State: Mean score 150

Analytical Writing: This section of the test assesses how well you are able to clearly articulate complex ideas, support your arguments with relevant examples, critically analyze claims and evidence, and use correct elements of standard written English.

The analytical writing portion of the test will contain two distinct tasks: analyzing an issue and analyzing an argument. These sections will be completed and timed separately.

The following are examples of typical GRE analytical writing scores for incoming students at several different OT programs:

University of Illinois at Chicago: 4.5

Ithaca College: 4.0

Colorado State: 4.5

TEST PREPARATION RESOURCES

There are plenty of both online and paper-based resources to help you do your best on test day. Depending upon your individual learning style, you may choose one format exclusively, or a combination of methods. Many people find a combination of computer-based practice materials, online video tutorials, and paper flashcards (or flashcard phone apps) may provide a good variety of ways in which to practice the material.

*The following is not meant to be exhaustive list of all available resources or an endorsement of any particular resource but does provide a general overview of some frequently used options.

ETS: ETS is a private organization that develops and administers a number of higher education tests, including the GRE. Their site has a number of useful resources regarding the GRE, and will also be where you register for a testing date and site.

Kaplan: Offers GRE preparation materials (both computer- and paper-based), flash cards, online prep courses, videos, one-to-one tutoring, etc. While most materials and prep courses are cost-based, Kaplan does offer some free practice resources on their site.

Manhattan Prep: Offers both on-demand and complete GRE preparation courses, as well as practice tests, study guides, and other resources.

Princeton Review: Offers a variety of preparation materials and resources, including several free sample tests and sample online prep classes.

Magoosh: Study resources and customizable preparation plans. Also has an interactive practice app.

Barron’s: Study and review materials, including an interactive learning platform that customizes a course based upon student skill level and available preparation time.

YouTube channels: [Dominate the GRE](#), [PrepScholar GRE](#), and multiple other resources are available on YouTube, many at no cost.

Study Apps: A variety of downloadable apps (both free and paid) are readily available for download to your mobile device.

[Here are a few additional free study resources.](#)

SETTING A TIMELINE

Most GRE study resources recommend allocating at least 2 to 3 months for your GRE preparation. It is important not to underestimate the amount of preparation which may be needed, as much of the information on this test may be things you haven’t seen for quite some time. One of the best ways to get started is to take a full-length practice exam. There are a number of free [full-length practice exams offered online](#).

Don’t panic if your first practice test is a disaster. This is only your starting point, and you have lots of room for improvement before test day. The first practice test lets you know areas of strength and weakness, so you can tailor your study plan accordingly. Most people will naturally tend to be stronger on either the verbal or the quantitative sections. While it may be tempting to keep on studying the areas where you feel more confident, focusing more heavily upon those trickier problem areas will be the best use of whatever preparation time you’ve allotted for yourself.

The following is a basic sample of a two-month study plan. Depending upon your planned preparation timeframe and areas of personal strengths and weaknesses, your individual study plan may look either more or less similar to the example shown.

SAMPLE TWO-MONTH STUDY TIMELINE* (2hr/day, 6 days/week)

*except for full practice test days, end each study session with 20-30 minutes of vocabulary practice)

WEEK	DAY 1	DAY 2	DAY 3	DAY 4	DAY 5	DAY 6
1	LEARN TEST BASICS INCLUDING STRUCTURE, FORMAT, AND TYPES OF QUESTIONS	BASIC ARITHMETIC REVIEW/PRACTICE QUESTIONS	VOCABULARY PRACTICE	ALGEBRA REVIEW/ PRACTICE QUESTIONS	STUDY TEXT COMPLETION QUESTION FORMAT/ PRACTICE QUESTIONS	ESSAY WRITING TUTORIALS
2	ALGEBRA	READING COMPREHENSION	DATA ANALYSIS/ QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS	FULL PRACTICE TEST	REVIEW PRACTICE TEST RESULTS	VOCABULARY
3	ARITHMETIC/ ALGEBRA	VOCABULARY	GEOMETRY/ DATA ANALYSIS	GEOMETRY/ DATA ANALYSIS	ESSAY WRITING PRACTICE	FULL PRACTICE TEST
4	REVIEW PRACTICE TEST	ARITHMETIC/ ALGEBRA	VOCABULARY	GEOMETRY/DATA ANALYSIS	GEOMETRY/DATA ANALYSIS	ESSAY WRITING
5	PRACTICE QUESTIONS (VARIOUS CATEGORIES)	PRACTICE QUESTIONS (VARIOUS CATEGORIES)	PRACTICE QUESTIONS (VARIOUS CATEGORIES)	PRACTICE QUESTIONS (VARIOUS CATEGORIES)	ESSAY SECTIONS (REVIEW TOPICS LIST ON GRE WEBSITE)	FULL PRACTICE TEST
6	PRACTICE QUESTIONS (VARIOUS CATEGORIES)	PRACTICE QUESTIONS (VARIOUS CATEGORIES)	PRACTICE QUESTIONS (VARIOUS CATEGORIES)	PRACTICE QUESTIONS (VARIOUS CATEGORIES)	ESSAY SECTIONS (REVIEW TOPICS LIST ON GRE WEBSITE)	REVIEW/RE-DO ALL WRONG ANSWERS FROM PREVIOUS PRACTICE TESTS
7	PRACTICE QUESTIONS (VARIOUS CATEGORIES)	PRACTICE QUESTIONS (VARIOUS CATEGORIES)	PRACTICE QUESTIONS (VARIOUS CATEGORIES)	PRACTICE QUESTIONS (VARIOUS CATEGORIES)	ESSAY SECTIONS (REVIEW TOPICS LIST ON GRE WEBSITE)	FULL PRACTICE TEST
8	REVIEW LAST PRACTICE TEST	PRACTICE QUESTIONS (ALL CATEGORIES), REVIEW PREVIOUS PRACTICE QUESTIONS	PRACTICE QUESTIONS (ALL CATEGORIES), REVIEW PREVIOUS PRACTICE QUESTIONS	PRACTICE QUESTIONS (ALL CATEGORIES), REVIEW PREVIOUS PRACTICE QUESTIONS	VOCAB WORDS AND REVIEW ANY PROBLEMATIC TUTORIAL/TOPIC AREAS	VISIT TEST CENTER (IF POSSIBLE) TO GAUGE TRAVEL TIME. REVIEW ANY PROBLEMATIC TOPIC AREAS.

(Compiled based on: <http://omega.mygretutor.com/studyPlans/EightWeekWeek1.aspx>)

Keep in mind that this is only one example of a potential two months study plan. If you have less time to prepare, you may need to focus hard on your weak points only. If you have more time available, you can adjust your study plan accordingly and take a slower approach. There are multiple examples of study plans for the GRE available online.

REGISTERING FOR THE EXAM

Use the [ETS website](#) to locate a testing center nearest you, check for available openings, and register for a test date and time. In order to register for and take the GRE, you will need to register for an online account with ETS. The ETS site provides specific information and resources about test day protocols, ID requirements, how to seek any needed disability accommodations for test taking, how to reschedule or cancel a test, and sending score reports to specific schools. For information about specific test centers, visit the [Review2 website](#).

TEST DAY

Prior to the actual test day, be sure to carefully [review the instructions available on the ETS website](#) regarding what to bring and what to expect.

Testing centers have very specific protocols for verifying your identity, so be prepared for photo or voice identification, fingerprinting, signature comparisons, videotaping, and/or other forms of identification. It is your responsibility to review the policies of your specific testing site and prepare accordingly, as failure to comply with testing rules could potentially result in forfeiting the right to take the exam.

Be advised that many personal items such as phones, water bottles, watches, and jewelry are not allowed into the testing room. Test monitors may request to inspect jackets, eyeglasses, and pockets for any evidence of cheating. For example, if you wear a hooded shirt on test day, a monitor may turn it inside out to ensure there are no prohibited items concealed inside. Many testing centers have lockers available for storing personal items during the exam, but double-check whether this is the case with the testing center where your exam is scheduled.

Each test section is timed, and time will not be paused if you have to leave the room for any reason (such as to use the restroom). If you have to leave during the test, raise your hand and wait for a test proctor to walk over. You may be required to sign in and out of the testing room each time you leave and re-enter. Personal paper and/or calculators may not be brought into the testing area. You will have access to an on-screen calculator during the quantitative test sections and scratch paper

will be provided for you by testing staff. Scratch paper may not be removed from the testing room and will be collected from you prior to your departure from the testing area.

The GRE has one-minute breaks between each test section, as well as one optional ten-minute break between the third and fourth sections. You must remain on the test site premises during breaks—a proctor should be able to inform you of premises boundaries, as well as the location of a restroom and/or water fountain.

REPORTING YOUR SCORES

At the conclusion of your exam, you will have the option to either report or cancel your scores. If you choose to report your scores, you will be able to see your unofficial scores on the quantitative and verbal sections immediately. You may select specific schools to receive your scores on test day, but also have the option to wait and report scores at a later time.

If you are not satisfied with your scores, don’t despair. You may re-take the GRE every 21 days, up to five times within one twelve-month period.

RESOURCES

- https://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/prepare/
- <https://www.manhattanprep.com/gre/resources/>
- <https://www.kaptest.com/gre>
- <https://barronstestprep.com/gre/>
- <https://crunchprep.com/gre/2014/free-gre-practice-tests>
- <https://gre.economist.com/gre-advice/gre-study-strategies/general-study-advice/free-gre-prep-resources-short-list>
- <https://www.qsleap.com/gre/resources/7-free-gre-resources-available-online-you-should-know-about>
- https://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/register/
- <http://aptaapps.apta.org/ptcas/gre.aspx>
- <https://gre.economist.com/gre-advice/gre-overview/retaking-gre/when-retake-gre>



The Application

Due to the fact that applying to health professional programs is so competitive, many health professions (including occupational therapy) use a centralized application service. This is incredibly beneficial to the applicant, because you are able to create one profile/application and send it to multiple schools at once.

This section will only cover how the application process is handled by OTCAS. For an example of an application process that does not use OTCAS, please view the Pacific University OT program's webpage.

The [Occupational Therapy Central Application Service](#) (OTCAS) opens in July and has multiple sections and subsections, which include the following:

- Personal Information (contact info, race, citizenship)
- Academic History (high schools and colleges attended, transcripts, standardized tests)
- Supporting Information (evaluations, observation hours, experiences, etc.)
- Program Materials (this is where OT programs list their specific criteria)

Starting the process as early as possible is crucial for two reasons. First, it can be time consuming to complete every section listed above, because many sections require other people (supervisors, advisors, professors, etc) to complete information about you. Second, some OT schools admit students on a rolling admissions schedule, meaning that they interview students as applications are received and fill spots until their class is full.

Be vigilant and keep track of important dates. Every program is different. Applications are typically accepted approximately one year prior to admissions. There are a select few programs that start in January, but most start in summer or fall—therefore, most schools will have application deadlines in the fall and hold interviews in the winter. Make sure you meet the deadlines of each individual school—this information can be found on the school's website and/or OTCAS.

As a tentative timeline, plan to complete all the portions of OTCAS in July and August, then apply and complete all supplemental application materials in September and October. Anything after this is getting close to the deadlines set by most OT programs. In general, the sooner you complete your application, the better. Even if you aren't applying to a program that has rolling admissions, getting your applications sent off early allows you to avoid the stress of deadlines.

Be vigilant and keep track. Every program is different and there are a select few programs that start January, although most start in Summer or Fall.

GRE

Most programs will require you to take the GRE and report your GRE score via OTCAS. You will self-report your scores on the application, but you must also send the programs an official score report from ETS to complete your application. To submit your official scores, visit the [ETS website](#). Four score reports are included in your testing fee, and you may send additional score reports for \$27 per recipient. Most OT programs have a specific OTCAS GRE code that is different from the institution's regular GRE code. [Check this](#) list to see if the programs you are applying to have an OTCAS GRE code. If not, you will need to check with the institution to see how they prefer to receive your scores.

EVALUATIONS, REFERENCES, OR LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Evaluations, references, or letters of recommendation affirm your decision to enter the field of occupational

therapy. OTCAS requires you to have a minimum of three evaluations completed, but you are allowed up to five. Some schools require that at least one evaluation be from an OT, while other schools do not have this requirement. Other evaluations can be completed by an OTA, boss, professor, or any professional reference.

To obtain an evaluation with an OT, spend time shadowing or volunteering with an OT. After you have spent a significant amount of time with them, you ask them if they would be willing to evaluate you and write a letter of recommendation.

You should only ask if you are positive the OT will give you a good review. Asking them to write about you when you are not confident they will have positive affirmations can hurt your application. To ensure a strong evaluation, remain proactive and engaged during your observation hours. Feel free to ask questions—however it is also important to be respectful of the OT's time. After all, they are on the job and doing you a favor!

Once the OT agrees, log in to your OTCAS profile, and in the evaluation section you will see a section to upload your evaluator's information and email address. That's all you do! On their end, they get a few multiple-choice questions and a textbox where they can express how much they enjoyed their time with you and touch on the skills you have that will help you through OT school and as clinician. The entire process is confidential, so you won't be able to see what they write, but you will be able to see if/when they complete the process.

TRANSCRIPTS

OTCAS requires that you submit an official transcript from every school where you have attended at least one class. Transcripts must be mailed directly from the school's registrar's office or can be sent electronically via Credentials Solutions, Parchment, or National Student Clearinghouse if your school uses one of those services.

In addition, you must manually enter all the information included on the transcript. Uploading your transcripts accurately is one of the most important pieces of your application. This not only demonstrates your academic performance, but it also certifies your attendance in various schools and paints a picture of your academic career.

It's tedious, but you'll have to enter every single class you took, along with the grade you received. Even if you didn't do as well as you liked, or withdrew from a class, you must enter everything accurately. They will have your official transcripts to compare to, so entering everything to match the official report is essential. If filling in all of the courses and grades seems like too much work, OTCAS offers a service that will complete it for you for a fee.

Since there are now third parties involved, anticipate delays. Be sure and get this step done as soon as possible to avoid any hiccups in your application process. You would hate to miss a deadline for a school or a spot with rolling admissions because the transcripts didn't get uploaded in time.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Your personal statement is an opportunity to share what makes you an excellent choice as a candidate. It is important to share what makes you unique while also tailoring your statement to what the program is looking for. If you've worked on a research project and are applying to a program that is very active in research, it can only help to describe the positive impact the project has had on your development as a future OT. However, for a program that does not emphasize research, it may be wise to emphasize other human-focused aspects of the research process (such as teamwork or interacting with clients) that could translate well into clinical skills. Here are some other things to consider when writing your personal statement (most of which are adapted from the article [Kisses of Death in the Graduate School Application Process](#)):

- While it should be true that you “want to help people,” writing it in your personal statement is somewhat cliché. Instead, describe what you’ve observed in your experiences, what about these experiences drew you to OT, and the actions you’ve taken in your pursuit of helping others.
- Though many people are inspired to pursue health professions due to personal experience, it is important to present this in the most professional light possible. If you have a disability or have been a caretaker for a family member with a disability, you could discuss some of the factors involved in advocacy and independent living, and how your experiences will help you understand your future clients’ needs. However, use caution if you decide to discuss personal details—your statement should not be a tell-all biographical document, but rather an advertisement for you as a future OT. Do your best to leave out any information that would call into question your professionalism, social boundaries, personal judgment, ethics, and academic capabilities. Consult an advisor if you are genuinely unsure of whether or not to include something in your statement.
- It’s okay to not have your entire career mapped out yet, but feel free to discuss your goals, the kind of practitioner you want to become, and what you hope to learn from OT school.

- Proofread! Use your resources around you when preparing and polishing your essay. Read your edits out loud and have a friend look over them. Share them with a trusted professor or advisor. Proper spelling and grammar are absolutely necessary. Seek help at the campus writing center if this is a weak point for you.

SUPPLEMENTAL APPLICATIONS

You'll see quickly on OTCAS that every school has its own set of requirements. In addition, many schools have supplemental applications (and supplemental fees). This often means submitting additional information about yourself or possibly even an additional essay. OTCAS makes this information available when you add the schools and programs to your profile. For example, if you apply to a school with a religious affiliation, you may be asked to write about OT and religion, or if you apply to a school in a rural area, you may have to write about delivering healthcare to underserved populations.

While information in OTCAS is presented clearly, what is less clear are the programs that do not use the OTCAS system. There are a number of programs that do not participate in OTCAS for a variety of reasons. Currently, there is no complete resource of the schools who do not use OTCAS. Be sure to remain active on the [SDN forum](#). If you have any specific program questions, you can generally find the answers there or if you pose the question, it is likely there is someone who has the answer.

You can also check out [New Grad Occupational Therapy](#) for more pre-OT and grad school content.

SCHOOL PROFILES

When considering attending an OT program, students should know their prospective program’s pass rates for the National Board Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT). The NBCOT tests an individual’s knowledge of different areas of OT practice, clinical reasoning skills, ethics, and professional standards. Passing the NBCOT is required for occupational therapists to practice. High pass rates indicate that the program teaches its students how to learn the material that will be tested.

Pass rates per school can be found on the [NBCOT website here](#) and most are listed in the profiles below.

The following list contains only ODT (doctorate-level) programs. For a complete list of all the currently accredited and developing programs, including master’s programs, visit the AOTA website.

Arkansas State University

- Affiliated with over 500 health facilities
- Collaboration between the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, and the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences
- 30 students maximum
- Combines the strengths of a research-intensive main campus and the state’s premier health education school

Belmont University

- 100% pass rate for NBCOT in 2017
- Over 800 fieldwork sites
- Admits 36-40 students annually
- 2015-2017 graduation rate of 100%
- 13 learning labs, including: human cadavers, programmable mannequins, Motion Analysis, Multi-Media Debriefing
- More than 150 students participate in mission trips annually

Creighton University

- 100% pass rate for NBCOT in 2017
- Connection to 400+ fieldwork sites
- Distance education tracks offered in Anchorage, AK and Denver, CO
- Curriculum has three primary themes: occupation, professional practice, and professional identity
- Optional three-week clinical experience in the Dominican Republic with the ILAC program
- China Honors Immersion Program (CHIP)
- The Professional Directed Practice Experience
- 86 students in 2017
- 94.5% graduation rate in 2017
- 100% six months post-graduation employment rate in 2017

Duquesne University

- 6-year OTD program
- 30 freshmen accepted
- 3-year OTD program for those with a bachelor’s and when space allows

- 100% NBCOT pass rate
- 95% employment rate within 6 months of NBCOT passing
- Study abroad opportunities in the first 2.5 years
- Cadaver anatomy classes with dissection
- Program development and grant-writing training
- Top tier rankings in Princeton Review and Forbes

Gannon University - Florida Campus

- 31 students enrolled in June 2017
- Requires submission of student research to academic journals for publication
- Offers a Post-Professional OTD for those with a master's degree. It is a two-year, part-time online program

Huntington University

- 56 students accepted annually
- 100% student retention level
- 100% NBCOT pass rate
- Involved in global outreach missions including Wheels for the World, Joni and Friends, and SonRise
- Acceptance rate into the program is about 45%

Indiana Wesleyan University

- Classes are taught in the new \$42.8 million dollar Ott Hall of Sciences and Nursing
- Accepts 30 students annually
- “B” or higher required in each course to graduate
- 96% NBCOT pass rate (awaiting 1 student’s results)

Kettering College

- 20 students admitted into the 2018 class
- Accepts up to 28 students annually
- Curriculum design is based on the biological and psychological Human Developmental Model
- The three domains of Bloom’s taxonomy (knowledge, skills, and attitude) are applied throughout the curriculum
- Students meet at midterm each semester to discuss goals and outcomes with their advisers
- 85% NBCOT pass rate (awaiting 3 student results)

Mary Baldwin University, Murphy Deming College of Health Sciences

- 100% pass rate for NBCOT in 2017
- Class maximum of 35 students
- 97% graduation rate in 2017
- The Wilson Workforce and Rehabilitation Center, Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind, Western State Hospital, and Augusta Health are renowned facilities in the area
- College includes four large classrooms, six seminar rooms, nine clinical labs, three simulation suites, and two research areas

MGH Institute of Health Professions

- First accredited program in New England to offer an entry-level Doctor of Occupational Therapy degree
- 1:1 faculty/student ratio
- Affiliate of Partners HealthCare, New England’s largest health provider
- Promotes active learning in small groups
- MPACT Practice Center brings together students from multiple majors to deliver free care to the community
- Use of an Occupational Therapy Functional Living Lab
- 100% graduation rate for 2017
- 100% pass rate for the 2017 NBCOT
- 34 students in the 2017 program
- Approximately 20% of each entering OTD class receives IHP scholarships

Northern Arizona University

- Only non-profit and public graduate program in the Southwest U.S.
- Member of the Community Health Mentor Program
- Professional Student Exchange Program of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education: grants students from Alaska, Hawaii, Montana, Wyoming, and Nevada a “support fee” to help with costs
- Enrolls 45 students each fall
- 95% graduation rate in 2017
- 100% NBCOT pass rate in 2017

Nova Southeastern University

- A distance/face-to-face blended program with online and on-campus requirements
- Publishes its own electronic scholarly journal
- 95% pass rate for NBCOT in 2017

Ohio State University

- One of the world’s leading medical centers
- Dual degree program that allows students to combine masters and doctoral degrees
- 100% pass rate for NBCOT in 2017
- 44 students in 2017, with a 100% graduation rate
- Federally designated traumatic brain injury model system
- Christopher Reeve Neurorecovery Network Site
- Affiliated with major textbook authors and award recipients from the National Institutes of Health
- Neurologic OT Fellowship granted by the American Occupational Therapy Association

Pacific University

- 100% pass rate for NBCOT in 2017
- Two years are delivered on campus while Year 3 is completed as a distance-based course
- A graduate certificate in gerontology is offered
- 40 students accepted annually
- Post-Professional OTD program for those with a Masters

Thomas Jefferson University-Center City, Philadelphia Campus

- Ranked as the #6 program in the country by U.S. News and World Report
- 20 students entered in 2017
- Projects in Jefferson Elder Care, the Measurement and Outcomes Laboratory, and the Autism Laboratory
- Two annual job fairs and an online job board
- Opportunity to volunteer at special needs camps

Touro University Nevada

- A private institution with one rate for tuition
- School of nearly 1,400 students
- There are no standardized tests required to apply for the program
- Does not have on-campus housing

University of Indianapolis

- Use of a traditional classroom approach, with a combination of lectures and hands-on labs
- 52 students in the 2018 program
- 98% graduation rate

University of the Sciences

- Acceptance rate is about 65%
- 100% pass rate for NBCOT in 2017
- Program of about 30 students
- Graduation rate of 100%
- Offers two specializations: Community-based practice and Leadership
- Ranked #7 out of 10 for best salaries earned after graduation in the country by the 2017 College Scorecard

University of South Dakota

- 100% pass rate for NBCOT in 2017
- Post-professional clinical OTD offered online
- Eligible to secure a spot a year in advance through their Occupational Therapy Scholar Program
- More than 175 fieldwork sites
- Pi Theta Epsilon professional honor society

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

- 100% pass rate for NBCOT in 2018
- Public university in an urban setting
- Primarily a commuter campus

The University of Toledo

- 100% NBCOT pass rate in 2017
- Ranked among the top 25% of occupational therapy programs by U.S. News and World Report
- 3 classes of 20 students are accepted
- Offers a dual degree of Occupational Therapy Doctorate and Doctor of Philosophy, with majors in health education or exercise science

Washington University

- 550+ applicants for about 95 spots
- 100% pass rate for NBCOT in 2017
- 100% graduation rate
- Connection to 500+ fieldwork sites
- Ranked as the number one occupational therapy program in the nation by U.S. News and World Report
- Students choose from concentrations in productive aging, work and industry, social participation and the environment, children and youth, neurorehabilitation, and rehabilitation science

Interviews

Occupational therapy school interviews typically take place several months before decisions are made and are usually conducted by academic fieldwork coordinators or other experienced faculty. Oftentimes, students from the current cohort of students will participate in the interview process. “Round-robin”-style and panel-style interviews are common. Interviews will generally take place in the department followed by a small tour of lab spaces and classrooms. If the department is small, this will sometimes include a short meet and greet with some faculty. During the interview, there will be a review of requirements where the faculty will discuss your prerequisites and ensure your GPA meets the requirements.

PREPARATION

Interviews can be difficult for many candidates. You can be brilliant, talented, and completely qualified to be an OT student, but still struggle to confidently “sell yourself” in an interview. The following are some suggestions for overcoming this part of the application process:

- Study different types of interview questions. Some

samples are provided below in this document. Use a search engine to find more examples.

- Have examples of answers ready in your mind if you need to. Think of how situations you’ve experienced could apply to multiple questions. You don’t have to be completely spontaneous in your interview!
- Do mock interviews with friends, family, or academic resources.
- Research your school. Look for information such as the school’s values, the program’s strengths, and what sort of projects the program is involved in. When possible, connect your answers to information about the school to emphasize that you would be a good fit.
- For individuals who experience lots of anxiety or panic during high-pressure situations, don’t be afraid to consult a mental health provider—the interview process does not have to stand in the way of you achieving your dream of becoming an OT! Alternatively, you may decide to seek out programs that do not require an interview as part of their admissions process.

- If you apply to out-of-state schools, be prepared for the financial cost of traveling for interviews. Some schools may allow you to do an interview via webcam if you cannot travel.

INTERVIEW ATTIRE

Dress nicely and comfortably for the interview. During my own interview process, I was shocked by how casually and eccentrically some candidates dressed, while others (like myself) opted for neutral-colored conservative blazers. My advice: Look polished, but don’t put too much pressure on yourself. Black, white, gray, and tan are safe choices, but don’t be afraid to wear some color or classy prints. Collared dress shirts, nice blouses, dress slacks, knee-length pencil skirts, flats, oxfords, and heels up to 3 inches in height are all safe bets. Blazers for any gender seemed to be optional. Ties and jewelry should be simple, though I did see some larger colorful necklaces. You can probably leave in multiple ear piercings, but I would hesitate to leave in a nose ring. Tattoos are becoming more socially acceptable in the health professions, but it’s safest to just cover them for the interview. Florida State University has a nice, simple guide for interview attire for gender conforming and non-binary interview attire. Religious and cultural clothing is acceptable—use the SDN Forums or do a web search to find discussion on this topic. If you get super fidgety and uncomfortable in dress clothing, practice wearing it prior to the interview, and seek out soft materials and comfortable shoes.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

How do you define “occupational therapy” and what we do?

Interviewers will want to know that you have an understanding of the profession. OTs work with many patients and coworkers who do not know what OTs do! It will often be your job to explain this on the job, so think of a succinct and informative way of conveying the value of OT to people who may have never heard of it before.

What are your current career goals?

Despite being early in your career, it always helps to have even a vague sense of where you would like your career to go. Is there a certain area of occupational therapy that initially prompted you to apply to the program? By verbalizing these goals and ambitions to the faculty you are interviewing with, you may also be setting yourself up for potential opportunities in the future. This also helps the faculty get to know you and what you expect to gain from a program.

Why do you want to be an occupational therapist?

Similarly, this helps the faculty gain a better idea of your intentions for the program. The standard answer is usually “I like helping people,” which is relevant to the field. However, giving a bit more detail will show your motivation to succeed in the program and make the most of your learning experience. What is it about OT that you feel would make it the best path for you, specifically, to be able to help people?

What relevant volunteer experience do you have?

Volunteer experience, especially in the realm of healthcare, looks fantastic to faculty members. It shows you are willing to work as part of a team, you care about making a difference, and you are interested in advocating for certain fields. Additionally, being in a healthcare setting before having concrete healthcare experience can only assist with your coursework. For example, volunteering in the medical records department of a hospital will expose you to medical terminology, electronic health records, and HIPAA policies, all of which are highly relevant to your future work as a therapist.

Have you completed observation hours? If so, what settings have you observed?

Observation hours are typically required for entrance to an occupational therapy program. By elaborating on your observation experience, it can identify how much exposure you have had to the real-time, daily tasks of a working therapist. It can shed some light on how much documentation is required, just how rigorous productivity standards are, whether any research comes up in certain settings, and more. This makes you even more prepared to enter fieldwork settings when the time comes, being that you won’t be so new to the clinic setting. Work on being able to express what you have learned from your time observing.

Provide an example where you have not agreed with a coworker, classmate, or supervisor. Tell me how you dealt with the situation.

This standard question is asked in most job interviews, as a way to glean personality traits and qualities in working under pressure and with peers and is known as a “behavioral interview question.” Students are typically used to collaborating for group projects, so it shows how such skills will carry over into the therapy world when the time comes.



What do you feel are the most important qualities an occupational therapist should possess?

Everyone has a different interpretation of what an occupational therapist does, especially if you are not a therapist yet. Certain skills such as determination, ingenuity, innovation, and collaboration go a long way in any therapy setting. There is no right or wrong answer to this question, but it gives you an opportunity to share how qualities you possess make you a strong candidate for a future OT.

What interests you the most about our occupational therapy program?

It is important to do research on each program before applying or having an interview. Understanding what makes the program unique and interesting to you will allow you to show the interviewers why you would be a good fit at their school.

How do you maintain a healthy school-leisure balance? How would this carry over into your career as an occupational therapist?

During most academic programs, faculty will consistently stress the importance of maintaining a healthy balance between all life activities. It’s important to begin practicing as a student, because it is impossible to emphasize balance to patients without first and foremost practicing it yourself. By gaining a sense of what type of balance you currently have, the faculty can get an idea of whether you will succeed in their program or may struggle with personal self-care.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

After the interview, you will want to follow up on any items the faculty mentioned as needing further attention. This will not only show you are proactive in getting all requirements completed in a timely fashion, but it will also help move the review process along as much as possible.

If you receive a rejection, ask for feedback. Some areas contributing to a rejection may be more apparent than others. For example, if your GPA did not meet the minimum requirement, that is likely why you received a rejection. However, if the cause is not obvious, contact the faculty to learn their areas of concern, as receiving some suggestions for improvement can assist you in your future application or other endeavors.

If you receive an acceptance, congratulations! Take the time to reward yourself, but also keep working hard to start your program strong. After being accepted, keep the goals and strengths you identified during your interview in the back of your mind to remind yourself why you chose to enter the program. By making sure you remain aware of your goals and modify them as necessary, you can keep yourself on the path toward career satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment.

Writer Biographies

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Monica Roe, DPT, MFA, is a physical therapist and freelance writer who currently consults for a number of off-road bush communities on Alaska’s Seward Peninsula. She has provided pro bono services in Ecuador’s Amazon region, as well as in the Toledo District of Belize. In Belize, she served as rehabilitation director and on-site program developer for a community-based rehabilitation outreach. When not writing or traveling, Monica and her husband own and operate Old Swamp Apiary (with the help of their hardworking honeybees).



