



The Most
Important Things
You Need to Know
about Becoming an
Occupational Therapy Practitioner

A Guide for Prospective Students

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The Most Important Things You Need to Know about Becoming an Occupational Therapy Practitioner: A guide for prospective students.

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Any questions regarding this e-book should be directed to its authors – Christie Kiley (mamaotblog@gmail.com) and Abby Brayton-Chung (abbypediatricot@gmail.com).

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT THIS BOOK

"Abby and Christie have done a great job at providing information and inspiration for anyone considering occupational therapy as a profession. Their e-book is a fun read and a valuable resource for prospective students."

- Susan Tucker, M.P.H., OTR/L, Assistant Professor, College of Allied Health, The University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center

"I've never seen such a helpful resource for prospective OT students. I haven't seen anything else out there as thorough yet interesting. I wish this had existed when I was thinking about going into OT!"

- Karen Dobyms, MOT, OTR/L, author of the blog [Miss Awesomeness](#)

"Christie and Abby share a practical and honest reflection on occupational therapy as a profession and what it means to be an occupational therapy professional. They share a realistic view of the "before, during, and after" of OT school and offer accurate expectations of a career in the field. This book would be an asset for any high school, college, or library as a guide for people of all ages who are considering OT as a career. I highly recommend it!"

- Katherine J. Collmer, M.Ed., OTR/L, owner of [Handwriting with Katherine](#)

"There are more than 180,000 occupational therapy practitioners in the United States and the demand for trained clinicians is expected to increase by 30% in the coming decades. Similarly, public interest in the profession and in educational programs has increased substantially. Christie and Abby provide answers to many of the most common questions that I see from prospective students. They provide an easy-to-read, real world, and friendly perspective on what it means and takes to be an occupational therapist. I highly recommend this e-book for all future occupational therapists as they begin their professional journey."

- Andrew Persch, PhD, OTR/L, Assistant Professor, Division of Occupational Therapy, The Ohio State University

"Meet OT in this chatty, informal yet highly informative conversation with two practitioners. Christie and Abby shine a mirror on Occupational Therapy so prospective or curious candidates may see themselves in it. Honest. Thoughtful. Real. This is a loving reflection of their passion for the profession, the many roads leading to it, as well as the many roads from which one can then journey. A terrific eye-opening career guide!"

- Beverly H. Moskowitz, DOT, OTR/L, FAOTA, CEO of [Real OT Solutions, Inc.](#)

"What a great 'book'! I put BOOK in quotes not because it was the first book where I wasn't holding fibrous pages, but because it's truly fun and unique. Christie and Abby answer all the questions I wish I had asked passionate occupational therapists 25 years ago while making one of the biggest decisions of my life. Reading this book is not studying; it felt like sitting down to coffee and energetic, lean-in conversation with two new mentors. They are caring and comprehensive yet concise, and although I have never met either author, their personalities shine through. If you're already buried in books or paralyzed by the big career decision, this short book will be an enjoyable and encouraging breath of fresh air that has the power to steer you in the right direction."

- Christine Jackson, OTR/L

"If you are considering a career in OT, it is a no-brainer to check out this quick read from Abby and Christie. No other resource gathers the logistics that you need to consider and offers such solid advice. I am grateful that this has been written!"

- Sarah Lyon, OTR/L, author of the blog [OT Potential](#)

"When I first began pursuing a career in occupational therapy, Abby and Christie's blogs were some of the most important resources I found in my often unfruitful hunt for information. This book reads just like their blogs – understandable, insightful, and informative – and is a fantastic resource for any person who is interested in pursuing a career as an OT or OTA, regardless of where they are in their journey. From deciding whether to study OT, to getting observation hours, to OT school, fieldwork, and the licensure process, it's all here! My only issue with this book is that it wasn't around when I decided to become an OT!"

- Lauren Jones, occupational therapy student, author of the blog [Gotta Be OT](#)

"This e-book is an essential and comprehensive resource for anyone considering a career in occupational therapy. A big thank you to the authors for taking the time to put together a substantial reference for therapists and OT programs alike to give to prospective students."

- Jen Tompkins, MA, OTR/L, school-based pediatric occupational therapist

"If you're interested in occupational therapy and would like to know more, this e-book is a great place to start. All your pressing questions about college and starting work are detailed by two of the field's excellent bloggers. This e-book provides a realistic look at occupational therapy practice and gives you a starting block for the best career you could imagine."

- Cheryl Morris, OTR/L, author of the blog [OT Notes](#)

NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

We love to help people. It's in our DNA. It's why we became occupational therapists.

Ever since we started our respective therapy blogs, we have received numerous emails from people who have discovered the field of occupational therapy and want to learn more.

They are ecstatic, or searching, or stressed out, or worried. And they want our help.

They want to know what it's like to be an OT. What a typical day is like. What the best and worst parts of the job are.

They want to know what prerequisites are required in order to apply to OT school. Whether they completed the right coursework. How much it will cost. Whether it's really worth it.

They want to know if it's too late for them to become an OT. Whether they should change their major. Whether their previous graduate degree was a total waste. This would be a huge career change for them. They want to start a family soon. Or they already have a family.

When people reach out to us, our hearts go out to them and we feel their excitement and stress with them! We want to help them, give them the tips and answers they need, and make sure we encourage them and point them in the right direction.

After we found ourselves answering the same types of questions via emails and blog posts, we thought, *Hey! Why don't we combine our powers to create a FREE resource to answer the variety of questions people have about the journey to becoming an OT practitioner?*

And so this e-book project was born.

If you are trying to decide if OT is the career path you should take, this e-book is for YOU!

Our goal is to answer your questions in a helpful, personable way without overwhelming you or stressing you out. Though there are times where we just have to list out the boring facts because – well – they're important, we have done our best to make this e-book feel like a helpful conversation with a friend rather than a dry read from a textbook.

We hope you find what you're looking for. Thanks for reading!

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PART 1: THE BASICS

WHAT IS OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY (OT)?

Occupational therapy is a holistic profession. It helps people of all ages achieve their goals of being able to participate in the things they want and/or need to be able to do on a daily basis, which we call "occupations." These occupation-based goals are met in a variety of ways, including using everyday activities in a therapeutic way. So occupation, then, can be both the intervention AND outcome of therapy.

Simply stated, an occupation is any meaningful or purposeful activity that occupies one's time. So depending on an individual's age and life stage, his or her primary occupations could vary greatly.

Examples of Occupations that Can Be Supported By Occupational Therapy

- A toddler who is recovering from a brain injury that affected the right side of his body uses both hands together to **play** with a favorite toy.
- A child with autism **participates in school and learning activities** in a general education classroom.
- A veteran with bilateral leg amputations **plays basketball** on a wheelchair basketball league.
- A young woman with schizophrenia **makes a weekly meal plan** and **buys groceries**.
- A man with a visual impairment **works in an office** using assistive technology.
- A woman with arthritis **tends to her flower garden** using adaptive strategies.
- An elderly man who is recovering from a hip replacement surgery learns how to **get dressed** using adaptive equipment and strategies.
- A mother with multiple sclerosis **cares for her newborn** using energy conservation techniques.

Client Age Range

Clients range from first day of life to last day of life.

Geographic Locations

Rural to urban, and everything in between.

Practice Areas

The [American Occupational Therapy Association](#) has divided occupational therapy practice areas into the following six categories:

- Children and Youth
- Mental Health
- Disability and Rehabilitation
- Healthy Living
- Aging
- Work-Related

Practice Settings

Within the above practice areas, you can find occupational therapy practitioners working in a variety of settings. Practice settings include, but are not limited to hospitals, rehab facilities, skilled nursing facilities, outpatient clinics, schools, home and community settings.

Primary Purpose of OT Support across Practice Areas

The primary, overarching purpose of any occupational therapy service is to improve a person's ability to participate in daily occupations. It doesn't matter if we are working with an infant, high school student, or grandparent. Improved occupational performance is *always* the end goal.

Role of Evaluation

Occupational therapists assess an individual's current levels of functioning by evaluating their strengths, limitations, and potential for progress as it relates to that particular OT practice setting. We then set measurable short-term and long-term goals to help the

individual work toward improved skills and occupational performance. Evaluations may be conducted to assess physical, cognitive, psychosocial, motivation/interest, developmental, sensory, and/or environmental factors. Occupational therapists utilize a wide variety of approaches to evaluation (both formal and informal), and new assessment tools/methods are being created all the time in order to improve our ability to gather assessment information that will be accurate and useful in creating a treatment plan for the client.

Role of Clinical Observation

In addition to using formal evaluation tools, occupational therapy professionals are also trained to informally assess a client's performance using "clinical observation" skills. This means the therapist is continually observing the client's performance of certain skills, taking note of factors that may be impacting their ability to perform those skills (such as muscle weakness, limited range of motion, level of noise in the room, challenges processing sensory information, difficulty sequencing multiple steps, etc.), and making a plan for how to help the client overcome those factors in order to be more successful (whether through improving the client's skills, modifying the environment, providing adaptive tools/strategies, etc.). Clinical observation often occurs "in the moment" while working with a client and is an important part of the ongoing occupational therapy evaluation and treatment process.

Types of OT Interventions across Practice Areas

Occupational therapy practitioners are able to utilize several types of interventions in order to help improve a person's occupational performance. According to the 2014 [*Occupational Therapy Practice Framework, 3rd Edition*](#), there are five main types of occupational therapy intervention you'll notice across practice settings:

- **Occupations and Activities:** Meaningful activities that involve either specific occupations (such as being able to shower while using adaptive equipment after surviving a stroke) or therapeutic activities that support the performance of those specific occupations (such as practicing how to get into and out of the bathtub using adaptive equipment).
- **Preparatory Methods and Tasks:** Kind of like "warm-up" activities to prep a client for engagement in an occupation or therapeutic activity and/or to support their progress on their goals (such as doing hand strengthening exercises with therapy putty).
- **Education and Training:** Training and educating clients, family members, caregivers, teachers, and/or other individuals who work with or care for the client.

- **Advocacy:** Supporting clients' needs on a personal and legislative level, plus helping clients learn to advocate for themselves in order to get their needs met.
- **Group Interventions:** Facilitating groups as part of occupational therapy treatment, as well as to help people find support based on their needs and experiences.

Variety of Approaches to Intervention across Practice Settings

Occupational therapy practitioners use a variety of strategies in order to help individuals make progress on their goals and improve their occupational performance, such as these five strategies inspired by the 2014 edition of the [Occupational Therapy Practice Framework](#):

- **Health Promotion:** Proactively providing education and enrichment opportunities to better equip people for the roles and activities they participate in across the lifespan (e.g., facilitating an infant-parent play and development class)
- **Remediation or Restoration of Skills:** Therapeutically treating/addressing physical and psychosocial factors needed for participation in daily activities (strength, range of motion, social skills, cognitive skills, visual skills, sensory processing skills, developmental skills, emotional control/coping skills, etc.)
- **Maintenance of Skills:** Helping clients preserve their current levels of function through treatment and/or adaptations so they can continue to participate in their desired occupations (such as with helping clients with arthritis or vision challenges)
- **Adaptation, Modification, Accommodation:** Making changes to materials (tools, clothing, etc.), the environment (bathroom, bedroom, kitchen, classroom, workspace, etc.), and the way the task is performed (alternate positioning, extended time, alternate schedule, different equipment, etc.) to promote improved participation in daily activities
- **Prevention:** Preventing injury or disability that could occur during daily activities/responsibilities that would impede occupational performance, such as with addressing issues related to ergonomics; preventing complications related to health conditions (diabetes, heart disease, pressure ulcers, arthritis, depression, etc.); preventing relapse into habits/lifestyle choices the individual wants to avoid (smoking, obesity, stress, etc.)

As you can see, occupational therapy practitioners help a wide range of people while utilizing a variety of interventions, strategies, and skills!

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PART 2: OUR STORIES

HOW ABBY DISCOVERED OT

When I was in my senior year of high school and deciding on a college to attend, I didn't have a clear idea of what educational major or career I wanted to pursue. If you find yourself in this position right now, don't worry! That's completely normal and you are not alone! By reading this e-book, you're already taking the right steps to learn more about potential careers. I had a desire to pursue a career that would allow me to "help people" but as you probably know, that doesn't really narrow it down much!

I started out my freshman year of college as a biology major, thinking that would allow me to transition into any healthcare-related field (hint: it does!). Meanwhile, throughout my senior year of high school and my freshman year of college, I did a TON of job shadowing (we'll talk about the importance of this later!). I visited a rehab department in a hospital, an outpatient clinic with a focus on sports injuries, a pediatric therapy clinic, and I observed a school physical therapist. When I started job shadowing, I had never even heard of occupational therapy!

It was when I saw an OT in action in a hospital setting that I first fell in love with occupational therapy. I *loved* that the occupational therapists were focusing on real life skills, like getting dressed, cooking, and living independently. Occupational therapy really clicked for me while observing an occupational therapist teaching a gentleman who was recovering from a stroke how to get dressed. I thought to myself, "That's what I would want to be learning if I was in his position, recovering from a stroke. I would want to get back to my regular, everyday life."

And so I began my journey of becoming an OT.

Throughout all of my observations of OTs in action, I was intrigued by the way occupational therapists focused on the tasks that were important to the individual and how these tasks (or "occupations" as I learned) could have a huge impact on the individual's life. I loved the way the "little things" could make such a large impact, and to this day, those "little things" are still my favorite thing about being an occupational therapist.

HOW CHRISTIE DISCOVERED OT

Ever since I was about 12 years old, I wanted to be a pediatrician. I liked school, was good at science and math, loved working with kids, and wanted to help people. What better career choice than to become a doctor that helps kids, right? Pediatrician sounded perfect to me. I was a gymnast at the time, and one of my friend's moms was a pediatrician. I observed her at work one day when I was a senior in high school and realized it was not as glamorous as I had built it up to be – fevers, runny noses, rashes, and screaming newborns. Hmmm . . .

During my first year of college, I began my collegiate gymnastics career and started taking pre-med classes. Partway through my freshman year, however, I realized the pre-med path was not exactly the best fit for me. I wanted to follow a path that incorporated science and clinical knowledge, but also utilized and relied on people skills and personal relationships, while also allowing me to PLAY and have fun with kids. I needed to switch gears.

At the end of my freshman year, I took an Intro to Psychology course and was hooked. The brain? Science? Emotions? Personality? Decisions? Disorders? Research? YES! I was in.

Then during the beginning of my sophomore year, I took an Education course all about the factors that influence student success in college. Learning styles. Personal factors. Family beliefs. Environmental influences. Developmental stages. It was a complex, multi-faceted topic. Pre-med courses had not been up my alley. But this? THIS I could do.

Throughout college, I continued to explore career options that would capitalize on my love for teaching and learning, working with kids, and helping others. I looked into nearly a dozen professions, but none seemed like a "right fit" to me. And I didn't want to settle.

I graduated college with a major in Psychology, a minor in Education, and a part-time job coaching gymnastics. Coaching wasn't a long-term solution, but it allowed me to use my now-17 years of gymnastics experience to pay the bills and develop my professional skills.

A few months after graduating, I attended an annual gymnastics coaching conference. One of my co-workers convinced me to attend a session about how gymnastics can help kids with special needs. The speaker talked about what happens in the brain when kids have trouble learning, and how gymnastics can actually target some of those things in the brain.

WHAT? REALLY?!

She talked about the sensory systems and how they influence a child's ability to focus and learn. She introduced me to the "vestibular system", something I can't ever recall having learned about as a Psych major or a gymnast (even though our sense of balance and

movement is kind of a big deal in gymnastics!). She talked about the importance of core strength for good writing skills. She mentioned in passing that sometimes kids with learning disabilities work with occupational therapists, who know all about these concepts and use many of the same types of movements in therapy that we coaches use in gymnastics.

I knew right then that occupational therapy was something I HAD to learn more about. As soon as the session was over, I introduced myself to the speaker and asked how I could learn more about OT. She suggested I find a pediatric clinic in my area to observe/volunteer.

So I did. And I discovered that pediatric OT was EXACTLY what I had been looking for!

To read my in-depth account of my winding, exciting journey into OT, please visit my "[How I Became an OT](#)" page on my blog!

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PART 3: BIG DECISIONS

5 THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN DECIDING ON A CAREER IN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

1. Occupational Therapy Practitioners are Diverse

Every occupational therapy practitioner brings their own unique experience, skill set, and personality to the table. The field of occupational therapy is not interested in creating cookie cutter professionals. Conversely, the OT profession *thrives* on practitioner diversity because we serve a diverse population. In fact, did you know that our national association, the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), has put together a “Centennial Vision” that describes what we want the OT profession to be known for when it turns 100 years old in 2017? In that vision, it states that we want a diverse workforce. Take a look at [the Centennial Vision](#) for yourself:

"We envision that occupational therapy is a powerful, widely recognized, science-driven, and evidence-based profession with a globally connected and diverse workforce meeting society's occupational needs."

Therapist diversity is not only valued in our field, it's actually part of the vision of what we want our profession to be known for. That's pretty awesome. So don't be discouraged if you feel like you “don't belong” in occupational therapy because you didn't major in a hard science or have never been inside a rehab facility. It doesn't matter. YOUR unique life experience will just allow the profession to be that much more diverse.

2. Observation Opportunities are Vital

If you are considering whether or not to pursue the OT path, here is our biggest recommendation: learn more about the field of OT by OBSERVING IT IN ACTION. In our opinion, occupational therapy is WAY cooler in person, and you observe things in sessions that you just can't capture on a website or in a pamphlet. We highly recommend that, if possible, you try to observe OT sessions in more than one type of practice setting (e.g., pediatrics, hand therapy, skilled nursing or rehab setting, etc.). The more exposure you have to different aspects of this career, the better.

Observing occupational therapy in action is important not only because it helps you visualize what OT is all about but also because, with each passing year, it is becoming more and more competitive to get into occupational therapy programs. Students who have completed observation and/or volunteer hours will stand out in the pool of applicants. Admissions teams want to know that applicants have a realistic and accurate understanding

of the role occupational therapy practitioners play in different settings, and what it is that therapists actually do on a day-to-day basis.

If you are someone who has been observing therapy but is frustrated by how long it is taking to get through the application process and into OT/OTA school, we encourage you to look at it this way: once you are an OT or OTA student, there will only be a few opportunities to observe therapists in action. As a student, the majority of your fieldwork learning experiences will occur by *doing* rather than by *observing*. This means you'll be in the middle of the action, as opposed to simply observing. And then, once you're a therapist, you'll be the one in charge of therapy. (Scary, huh?)

You are in a truly unique period of pre-OT life right now, where you have an almost unlimited opportunity to learn through observation. Though we know it might feel like a waste because you're not "doing" anything, it is a HUGE privilege, one that you will have limited access to once you begin your OT education.

I (Christie) speak from experience in that I observed, volunteered, and worked at a pediatric therapy clinic for two years before I entered OT school (which you can read more about [here on my Mama OT blog](#)). During my pre-OT time in that clinic, both the occupational therapist and physical therapist expressed to me they wished they could be a part of the groups I was running because they were so fun, but they were so booked with "real life" clients that it just wasn't realistic for their schedules. There's no way I could have done that as either a graduate student or a "real" therapist, and it was THE most amazing learning experience, for which I am extremely grateful.

So, all that being said, we encourage you to take advantage of this pre-therapist time in your life to be able to observe, volunteer, or be involved in whatever aspects of occupational therapy you find interesting so you can boost your application and make the best use of your available time and opportunities!

3. Do You Have the Appropriate Personality, Communication, and Interpersonal Skills?

Like we said earlier, occupational therapy practitioners are NOT expected to be cookie cutter copies of each other. This applies to personality and communication styles, too. However, therapists DO need to be able to demonstrate the ability to be friendly, empathetic, culturally appropriate, non-judgmental, professional, knowledgeable, ethical, and assertive . . . all at the appropriate times, of course.

Occupational therapy practitioners are typically expected to possess strong written, verbal, and nonverbal communication skills, as well as strong interpersonal skills. It's often

important for therapists to be able to possess a balance of being able to think quickly in-the-moment, while also being able to reflect and think critically about situations involving clients and team members.

4. What is Your Physical, Mental, and Emotional Capacity?

We've mentioned already that occupational therapy is a field that values diversity, both in the clients we serve as well as in the therapists who serve them. The field of occupational therapy is designed to support individuals in their ability to participate in meaningful aspects of their lives, regardless of physical, mental, or emotional capacity. Because of that, the OT profession does not discriminate against individuals who want to become occupational therapy practitioners, regardless of physical, mental, or emotional challenges (diagnosed or not).

Occupational therapy is the profession of, "I can," not, "You shouldn't." See what we mean by watching [this short video that always manages to inspire](#). When we receive emails from individuals sharing with us that they have a disability, and asking whether it's possible for them to pursue a career in OT, our response is always one of encouragement. Having a disability should not be a reason to avoid a career in occupational therapy!

In light of this, it is important that *all* who are considering a career in OT be reflective and honest with themselves when it comes to their strengths and capabilities as well as their weaknesses and limitations, whether they have a diagnosed disability or not. This will help you better understand what accommodations, supports, or improvements may be needed in order to help you succeed as an occupational therapy practitioner. Do you struggle with chronic back or joint pain? Do you fatigue easily? Do you faint at the sight of blood? Do you struggle with stress-induced illness? Do you use a wheelchair or other assistive devices for mobility or communication? Are you taking medication that may impact your ability to maintain a stable mood or level of attention throughout the day? Do you snap when people disagree with you or tell you what to do? These are all factors to reflect on as you consider and learn more about a career in occupational therapy.

Every occupational therapy setting is different, which means each setting will carry different physical, mental, and emotional demands. When working in a hospital or skilled nursing setting, you will likely find that you will be on your feet for most of the day and will need to be able to lift and/or physically assist patients in a variety of ways. Conversely, in a setting like hand rehabilitation, you may find that you are able to sit for more of the day and do not need to be able to lift patients like you do in a hospital setting. When working in pediatric settings such as in the home, clinic, or school setting, you will likely find that you need to be able to sit or lay on the floor and complete physical activities such as crawling, kneeling, walking, chasing, jumping, holding, and/or physically assisting children during therapeutic

activities. And still other occupational therapy practice settings require the ability to navigate outdoor environments, from urban communities to therapeutic ranch settings. Because of the variation in physical demands based on practice setting, it's important for you to know and be honest with yourself about what your physical strengths, capabilities, and limitations are when considering a career in occupational therapy and deciding what type of practice area you'd like to pursue.

Though the mental and emotional demands of different practice settings can vary pretty widely based on practice area, we really think your perception of how challenging a setting might be will depend heavily on your personality and experience. For example, some occupational therapy settings tend to be fast-paced (such as certain types of hospital-based or school-based jobs), while other settings may feel like they have a relatively slower pace (such as in-home early intervention). While we don't know that we would say any particular setting is especially "predictable", some settings are more unpredictable than others (such as inpatient mental health). You may find these different types of settings stressful and exhausting or exciting and exhilarating, depending on your preference for pace and level of predictability. Similarly, some practice settings may require you to develop multi-year relationships with clients or families (such as in pediatrics or community-based mental health), while others may only put you in contact with patients for a few days or weeks (such as some medical settings). Again, either of these types of settings may be mentally and emotionally draining or fulfilling, depending on your personality and experience.

In reality, no one setting is usually *always* stressful or *always* fulfilling. There is often a combination of stressful, draining times and exciting, fulfilling times while working as an occupational therapy practitioner.

5. What Does Your Gut Say?

While we can't really tell you whether occupational therapy will be the perfect fit for YOU (since, well, we likely don't know you personally), we CAN encourage you to follow your gut. Follow your passion. Yes, it is important to make plans and be mindful of the future and your finances. But YOU know yourself best. If you've learned about occupational therapy, observed it in action, reflected on your experiences up to this point, thought about your physical, mental, and emotional capacity as it relates to work environments, and can look back and see that all signs have been pointing to the field of occupational therapy, then run with it!

Or if you look at where you are now and realize it's not the path or profession you want to be on for the rest of your life, then don't force yourself to go through with it.

Continue to observe and investigate alternative paths to see if occupational therapy is what you really want to do, based on what you know of yourself and your background, experiences, and passions.

TRANSITIONING FROM A DIFFERENT EDUCATIONAL PATH PRIOR TO GRADUATING COLLEGE

We don't believe any previous undergraduate major or educational training was a "mistake" when it comes to preparing for a career in occupational therapy. Your past experiences shape and mold you in order to help you become a unique and powerful occupational therapist, so please don't be discouraged!

If you feel like you are too far into your education to change your mind, change your major, change your path, change your plans, change *everything* . . . STOP. Take a breath. Now take another one. And another one.

Listen.

You are not the first student to have changed their mind or discovered what they *really* want to do late in their college experience. You are not alone. And you will survive!

First, try to reflect on what it was about your previous experiences and educational path that made you realize this isn't the road you want to take anymore. Is it a personality thing? A financial thing? A life flexibility thing? A personal values thing? A family planning thing? A *something-happened-in-my-life-that-changed-my-perspective-on-everything* thing? Take some time to really hash this out and get to the bottom of it.

Then, think about why you feel occupational therapy is the new path you want to pursue. Have you really looked into it? Is this a fleeting whim? Do you have a personal mission statement and OT just seems to fit with it?

Next, start writing things down. Your reflections about your previous path. Your feelings about moving forward with occupational therapy. Your fears and excitement about making a change. Your personal mission statement (and if you don't have one, now would be a good time to start thinking about one!). If you're not one to write things down, then talk it through with someone you trust. And if you're not one to write things down or talk through things like this with people, then process through it with yourself during your best "thinking times" of day (you know, while walking, running, biking, swimming, cooking, showering, crafting, or simply lying down in a quiet room). Once you've done that, *guess what?* You have just started creating bullet points of what might someday be part of your application/essay for OT/OTA school. Check that off the list!

Finally, once you feel you've processed through this enough to be comfortable taking the next step forward, it would probably be a good idea to schedule a meeting with an academic/career counselor at your school. He or she can then help guide you as it relates to the logistics of changing or adding a major or minor (if necessary), finding out specific prerequisites for various OT schools, adding in or changing classes to fulfill OT prerequisites (again, only if necessary), and generally pointing you in the right direction.

Yes, changing your mind late in your education might make things more difficult. It might frustrate you. It might frustrate or even disappoint some family or friends. It could extend your undergraduate experience and mean you have to deal with all the realities that come with that (finances, housing, later graduation date, etc.). But if you have gone through the previously mentioned steps to process through and plan for the change . . . if you are confident this is the direction you need to go . . . if you feel called to pursue a career in occupational therapy . . . don't you think the current challenges that come with change will be worth it in the long run?

TRANSITIONING FROM ANOTHER CAREER OR PROFESSION

It is not uncommon for people to transition to a career in occupational therapy later in life as a second (or even third!) career. If you are considering this yourself, rest assured that you are not alone! Any prior work experience will help shape you as an occupational therapy practitioner, so don't worry if you feel your previous work experience is not relevant to the field of occupational therapy. With that said, making the transition from another career to occupational therapy is a BIG decision and one that should not be done without careful consideration of what is best for you and (if applicable) your family.

If you are considering a career change from another profession, we recommend you go back and read [the previous section](#). Much of the guidance offered about reflecting on *why* you want to pursue a career in OT will apply to those considering a career change as well.

Here are some additional recommendations for potential career changers:

- **Visit occupational therapy programs.** Ask if they offer any guidance or special programs specifically for students who are currently working and would like to transition on a full-time basis into their OT program. Meet with an admissions counselor, as well as students if you can, to get an idea of the demands on your time, finances, and personal life that their program will place on you and your family.
- **Decide whether moving is an option for you.** For some non-traditional students, the option of moving is a realistic one, while for others it would be a hardship. If you

are willing and able to move, research the potential housing options at the schools you are considering. Some colleges and universities even provide assistance with locating housing.

- **Evaluate your current financial responsibilities.** Do you have car payments or monthly credit card bills that will continue to need to be paid while you are in school? Think about how you will pay your ongoing bills while you are in school. You might even want to start a savings account to use to pay your bills while you are in OT school *before* you decide to transition out of your job and into OT school.
- **Research medical coverage options.** If your current job is your source for medical insurance, research the steps you will need to take to ensure that you have medical coverage while you are in OT school. Some colleges and universities offer student medical insurance plans, so this may be worth checking out if you are unsure of how you will obtain medical insurance while you are a student.
- **Assess your physical health.** As we have noted, nearly every practice area of OT requires some amount of safe lifting, crawling, bending, stooping, reaching, and carrying equipment and supplies in order to be an effective occupational therapy practitioner. Are you capable of performing these job requirements? Take a realistic look at your physical health and assess if you will be able to (or want to) perform the demands of a job in OT.
- **Last, but not least, consider the debt!** OT school is definitely worth it, but as a transitioning student, it is important to consider how much it will cost to pursue your dream of becoming an occupational therapy practitioner. Cost is not only the amount you will pay for your education, but also the money you *are not* making due to lost work time. If you take on student loans or other debt to pursue an OT education, be sure to consider how long it will take you to pay it back.

If after considering all of these points, you find that you would like to move forward in pursuing a career in occupational therapy, then be sure to read on for even more information about a career in OT!

HOW DO I KNOW IF OT IS A “RIGHT FIT” FOR ME?

For those who are trying to decide whether occupational therapy is a “right fit” for them, it’s worth considering the following pieces of advice:

- [Observe occupational therapy in action](#), if at all possible.

- Meet or talk with a real life occupational therapy practitioner.
- Use your observations of OT in action, your conversations with real-life therapists, and the information you have read in resources like this e-book to help you reflect on questions such as the following:
 - Am I still excited about occupational therapy after seeing it in action? If so, why? If not, why not?
 - What *specifically* has drawn me to this field?
 - Do I feel “called” to pursue occupational therapy as a career? (AOTA recently asked practitioners [whether they felt OT was a “job” or a “calling”](#); an overwhelming majority said they felt it was a calling)
 - Do I possess the [physical, mental, and emotional capacity](#) to be able to meet the demands of the job?
 - Do I need to explore other practice areas within occupational therapy before moving forward in my decision to pursue or not pursue it as a career? If so, what other practice area(s)?

If after considering these questions you are still feeling good about your decision to move toward a career in occupational therapy then, well, HOORAY! Check “Right Fit” off your list and continue moving forward!

If for some reason you are still unsure about whether occupational therapy is the right career for you, well, keep reading! We’ll talk more about what it’s like to be an OT in [the next section](#), so don’t close the door to this path just yet.

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PART 4: WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE AN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PRACTITIONER?

A TYPICAL DAY

Nearly any occupational therapy practitioner will tell you there is no such thing as a “typical” day in OT land. That’s one thing we love about this job – it keeps you on your toes! Regardless of what practice setting you work in, most occupational therapists tend to complete some combination of completing evaluations, writing up reports, directly working with clients, communicating with and educating other professionals/team members, and communicating with significant others (such as family members, if applicable).

Since both of us work in pediatrics, we thought we’d share some examples of the different types of events that may take place during a work day in the clinic-based, school-based, and in-home early intervention settings:

In the Clinic

A typical work day may run from 8am-5pm with a lunch break from 12-1pm. However, some clinics may not have a designated lunch hour or they may be open earlier, later, or even on weekends, in order to accommodate families’ busy schedules. A day in the clinic often consists of a blend of running 50-minute therapy sessions with kids (including time spent talking with their parents), writing session notes, completing evaluations and writing up those reports, creating home therapy programs, emailing with families, communicating and collaborating with other therapists who may be working with the same child, and staying up-to-date on writing progress reports for each client (written every 3-6 months, depending on the funding source). The pediatric clinic setting tends to be a moderately-paced environment that alternates between exciting bursts of activity (which can include both laughing with a child as well as being pinched, scratched, or vomited on) and less exciting paperwork/admin time.

In the Schools

The work day depends on what time schools are in session. This can vary from district to district and won’t always be the same for every therapist, and may not even be the same from day to day. A typical school work day might run from about 8:30-4:30 or 5, depending on the day or week. However, some therapists start their day earlier or end their day later, depending on a variety of factors. There is a TON of variety in the school setting. It can range from completing 30-minute sessions with 1-2 or more students at a time, to leading therapy/intervention groups in classes, to consulting and meeting with teachers and school

staff, to completing evaluations and observations of students and writing up the reports, to meeting or communication time between OT assistants and OTs, to preparing for and attending Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. Other components that have to be factored into the work day include writing session notes, prepping materials, writing and responding to emails, having impromptu conversations with teachers or therapists who grab you when they see you passing by and, yes, even finding time to eat and go to the bathroom at some point during the day!

In the Home

Early intervention occupational therapy (birth to age three) is typically completed in the natural environment, which is usually the child's home or daycare setting. The nature of home-based therapy is very mobile, which means there can be very little face-to-face interaction with other therapists or professionals. The work day can vary by day, depending upon the availability of families. A typical work day often starts between 8:00 and 9:00 and runs to 4:30 or 5:30. Home-based early intervention does not have the same fast pace or variability that school and clinic settings can have. We have both worked in all three settings and find therapy in the home to be slower paced than schools or clinic. Home-based early intervention typically consists of one-hour sessions, which involves directly working with the child, educating the caregivers, and updating goals, when needed. Depending on the day and how close the families live to one another, a typical day can consist of seeing 4 to 6 children, with 10-30 minutes of driving between each home or daycare setting. Administrative tasks such as paperwork, phone calls, and scheduling are often done during unexpected cancellations (which can happen frequently, especially during cold and flu season!). Yes, this means at times you may be sitting in your car doing paperwork or making phone calls, rather than sitting at a desk!

To learn about other occupational therapy practice settings, check out the ["Day in the Life" series](#) on Abby's blog, OT Café.

WHAT ARE THE BEST AND WORST PARTS OF WORKING IN OT?

The perception of the "best and worst" of occupational therapy varies from practitioner to practitioner, so we'd like to share each of our perspectives. Ask any therapist this question and you'll get a different answer, but we'd guess that you'd see some similarities among practitioners, such as best = seeing progress, worst = paperwork.

Christie's Answer

Best parts of the job? Seeing progress, no matter how big or small. Sometimes the tiniest baby steps of progress are truly the most exciting. Like the first time a child puts on her sock

all by herself. Or the first time a parent has an “AHA!” moment as it relates to his or her child’s sensory needs. Or the first time parents share with you that they were actually able to take their child to the grocery store or the park or a birthday party without experiencing a meltdown. Or the first time a teacher witnesses a student being able to cut with scissors or sit for and participate in all of circle time instead of running around the room. Hooray! Progress happens in both the children we work with as well as in the parents and teachers who support them. It really is the best part! You can read about more of my favorite things about being an occupational therapist in my blog post [The 5 Best Things about Being an Occupational Therapist](#).

Worst parts of the job? Paperwork. And working with challenging grown-ups. I became an OT to work and play with kids, right? Sometimes, as an occupational therapy practitioner, you have to navigate tense situations when other professionals or parents disagree with you and/or your team's perspective on the child's abilities and what types of therapies or supports they should or shouldn't receive. Other times there may be disagreement between the child’s therapy providers as to the best way to approach skills (this sometimes occurs between occupational and behavioral therapy providers or nursing staff, for example). And still other times there may be challenges when working with the parents, either because they don’t or can’t follow through with therapy suggestions at home, or because they are so involved in their child’s therapy life that you feel you’ve lost any influence over the child’s therapy program (which is where that professional assertiveness needs to kick in). No amount of OT classes can prepare you for that, which is why having life experience, good interpersonal communication skills, and the ability to take other people’s perspectives can be so helpful in this job.

Abby’s Answer

Best parts of the job? Seeing growth and progress in the children and families I work with. Seeing a child’s face light up when they discover they can do something new or hearing a parent exclaim with joy when they see their child do that new thing. Those are the moments that I just LOVE. I once had a parent come into a therapy session and tell me with tears in her eyes that after implementing the sensory strategies I recommended, her son was able to sit through dinner the night before. It was the first time they were all able to sit together as a family at the table for dinner! Remember when I shared how I discovered occupational therapy at the beginning of this book and I said I was drawn to those little things that make a huge difference? That continues to be what I love about occupational therapy! I just LOVE being able to help families problem solve ways to make their life easier.

Worst parts of the job? The emotional demands. The biggest challenge of the job for me is not letting the work overwhelm me emotionally. Some therapists have an easier time with this than others, and it is something that OT school did not prepare me for at all! When

considering a career in occupational therapy, it is really important to [assess your own personality traits](#) and how they will fit in with your career as an occupational therapy practitioner. I am a very sensitive, empathetic, and compassionate person. These all sound like great traits, right? While they are and I believe they contribute to my ability to be an effective occupational therapist, these traits also contribute to me being overly sensitive at times to the difficulties the children and families I work with are going through. I find this to be especially true in the early intervention setting. I think the nature of the job – going into people’s homes on a weekly basis for months (or even years!) and at a very emotional time for families – brings you very close to what the family is going through. Those early days of discovering their child has a delay and starting therapies can be an emotionally intense time for families, and I have to be careful not to take on those emotions myself. Occupational therapy is not overly emotionally challenging at *all* times, I just find that it can be *some* of the time.

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PART 5: HOW DO I BECOME AN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PRACTITIONER?

DECIDING BETWEEN BECOMING AN OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST (OT) AND OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY ASSISTANT (OTA)

Definitions

An OT is an occupational therapist. An OT works independently and can do all aspects of occupational therapy treatment, including completing evaluations, writing reports, writing goals, treatment planning, implementing treatment, discharging clients, and supervising OTAs and OT/OTA students.

An OTA is an occupational therapy assistant. An OTA must work under the supervision of an occupational therapist and can do many aspects of occupational therapy treatment, including implementing treatment, contributing to the evaluation process by completing delegated assessments after competency has been demonstrated, and supervising OTA students.

Both occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants can serve as leaders for the profession of occupational therapy in state, national, and international OT associations.

Educational Requirements to Become an OT

To become an OT, you must obtain either a master's degree or an entry level doctorate in occupational therapy from an accredited college or university. Currently, a doctorate is not required for entry into the profession, but it may be in the future. Some educational programs offer a combined bachelor's/master's degree program in occupational therapy, which allows for faster completion of the educational requirements if you do not yet have an undergraduate degree. The change to an entry level doctoral degree for point of entry by 2025 [is currently under consideration by the American Occupational Therapy Association](#).

How Long Will it Take to Become an OT?

Entry level OT degree programs vary in length. The length of the program will ultimately depend on your chosen school's requirements, but here is a general guideline for how long you can expect a degree program to take (based on full-time student status):

- Master's program: 2-3 years
- Doctoral program (OTD): 2-4 years
- Combined bachelor's/master's program: 5-6 years

Educational Requirements to Become an OTA

To become an OTA, you must obtain an associate's degree from an accredited college. An associate's degree in occupational therapy is the only point of entry for occupational therapy assistants.

How Long Will it Take to Become an OTA?

An associate's degree in occupational therapy typically takes two years to complete (assuming full time student status).

What do "OTR" and "COTA" mean?

OTR and COTA are registered trademarks of the [National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy \(NBCOT\)](#).

- An OTR is a registered occupational therapist.
- A COTA is a certified occupational therapy assistant.

Upon completion of an OT or OTA degree program, you must take and pass the [national NBCOT exam](#) to certify your degree prior to gaining employment. Depending on the state that you practice in, you may be required to maintain your NBCOT certification throughout your career.

Tips for Deciding Between OT and OTA

So now that you know the difference between OT and OTA, how do you decide which career path is right for you? Here are a few things to take into consideration when deciding between OT and OTA:

- **Cost of education:** It is important to reflect on your own personal financial situation before deciding which educational path to choose. An associate's degree will cost significantly less than a master's degree and will also take much less time to complete. *Questions to ask yourself: How much time and money do I have to commit to this career path?*
- **Educational level:** For some people, their level of education is very important. For others, it is less important. Some people love school, and other people don't. *Questions to ask yourself: Is it important to me to have a master's degree? Would I be satisfied with an associate's degree? Do I want to commit to a master's program?*

- **Pay:** While OTs do have a higher salary than OTAs, the amount of money an OT or OTA makes can vary significantly by geographic location and practice area. *Questions to ask yourself: How much money do I expect/need to make? What are the average salaries for OTs and OTAs where I live or plan to live?*
- **Job responsibilities:** OTs typically have more job responsibilities than OTAs in terms of supervision requirements, completion of evaluations, and documentation. For some people, more responsibilities = more stress, while for others more responsibilities = more satisfaction. It's important to figure out which group you fall into. *Questions to ask yourself: How do I handle stress? Do I want to complete evaluations? Do I want additional job responsibilities? Will I get bored with limited job responsibilities?*
- **Job demands:** Along with the difference in job responsibilities, there can also be a difference in job demands. Since OTAs do not typically complete evaluations or complete as much paperwork, the OTA's job can be more physically demanding, as they often spend more time treating clients than OTs do. *Questions to ask yourself: Can I physically keep up with the demands of the job? How do I feel about doing lots of paperwork? Do I want more hands-on treatment time?*
- **Opportunities for growth:** There are certainly opportunities for career growth for both OTAs and OTs, but those opportunities may come more easily to OTs due to the supervisory role that comes with being an OT. *Questions to ask yourself: What are my long-term career goals? Where do I see myself in 5, 10, or 20 years?*

DO I NEED WORK EXPERIENCE RELATED TO OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY PRIOR TO ATTENDING OT/OTA SCHOOL?

No. Though many occupational therapy education programs require clinical observation or volunteer hours in the field of occupational therapy prior to admittance to school, paid work experience is not required. However, if you have the opportunity to gain OT-related experience prior to starting school *and* you can get paid for it, that's great!

If you are looking for paid work experience related to occupational therapy prior to pursuing a degree in OT, here are some ideas:

- **Babysit or nanny a child with a disability.** This is a great way to get hands-on experience with a child with a disability and to learn what it's like to work with a family who has a child with special needs.

- **Work as an aide or receptionist in a therapy clinic or hospital.** Some hospitals and clinics hire rehab aides to assist with transporting patients, cleaning equipment, and ordering supplies. Even working in an office or receptionist-type position in a therapy clinic will probably get you the opportunity to see some therapists in action, as well as give you an understanding of what an OT's workload looks like day-to-day.
- **Work at a school as an instructional aide.** Instructional aides work in classrooms that contain a child or children with special needs. They either assist the teacher or work with a single child, individually. This is another way to get some great hands-on experience, as well as first-hand experience with classroom dynamics.
- **Work in a research lab.** If you are currently pursuing an undergraduate degree at a university that has an occupational therapy program, check out the occupational therapy department to see if there are any potential employment opportunities in a research lab. While these jobs may be reserved for graduate students, it doesn't hurt to research your options and learn more about the OT program at the same time!

COMPLETING YOUR EDUCATIONAL PREREQUISITES

When applying to a master's program in occupational therapy to become an OT, many, but not all programs require completion of a bachelor's degree prior to admission. In addition, any educational prerequisites for your desired program, will need to be completed prior to entering the program.

People often email us excited about the fact that they have discovered the field of occupational therapy, but concerned that their undergraduate major wasn't the "right" one to prepare them for a career in occupational therapy. Majors have ranged from psychology to math to art history to anthropology to business to nursing and more. We have even received emails from people who already have a graduate degree in a different field, and they are desperately trying to determine whether they need to make not only a career change, but a life change.

You want to know what we typically say when we receive those emails?

It doesn't really matter what your undergraduate major is before going to OT school!!

There is no "required major" for applying to a graduate program in OT. There is such an amazing diversity of individuals who come into occupational therapy, so as long as you complete the prerequisites specified by the graduate program(s) to which you are applying, you will be fine.

That being said, it can be a little tricky because not every school has the same prerequisite requirements. Some require more courses *before* entering their program, while others require fewer classes beforehand because they include additional coursework *as part of* their master's program.

Though educational requirements for admission into occupational therapy programs vary by school, there are typically some common requirements for admission to OT graduate programs. These may include an undergraduate GPA of 3.0 or higher, completion of prerequisite courses prior to admission, submission of GRE scores (though some programs do not require GRE scores), completed [OTCAS application](#) (an online centralized application website utilized by many, but not all, OT programs), letters of recommendation, transcripts, volunteer or observation hours, and a written application essay.

Common prerequisites might include courses such as Human Anatomy & Physiology, Human Development, Introduction to Psychology and/or Sociology, Statistics, Introduction to Physics, Introduction to Biology, Introduction to Chemistry, Medical Terminology, Kinesiology, and Neuroscience. Don't be scared off by this list! Not every school will require *all* of these courses for admission. This just gives you an idea of the types of courses that may be required for admission to a graduate program in OT. Some schools require more prerequisites than others. Some allow you to apply and accept a place in their program while you are still in the process of finishing up your prerequisites. And some programs have you complete foundational courses as part of your OT education (such as Kinesiology, Neuroscience, etc.), rather than having to complete them *prior* to beginning OT school.

Because each OT graduate program may have slightly different requirements when it comes to completing prerequisite courses, just make sure you check the requirements for the particular OT program(s) you are interested in applying to. Don't be afraid to reach out to the admissions advisor if you are confused or have questions about any of the admission requirements as well.

TIPS FOR CHOOSING THE BEST OT/OTA SCHOOL FOR YOU

To become an occupational therapy practitioner, you must attend an accredited occupational therapy school to be eligible to sit for the NBCOT exam. Accredited just means that the school meets the educational standards put in place by AOTA's Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education (ACOTE). There are currently 326 occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant educational programs in the United States and its territories! You can find a list of all of the accredited schools by visiting [AOTA's website](#).

A few things to keep in mind when choosing the best school for you

First of all, you need to **find a school that is the right fit for you**. What might be the best fit for your friend or neighbor or cousin, won't necessarily be the right fit for you. There are a lot of schools to choose from and every individual has different needs and requirements. Here are some questions to ask yourself when looking for an occupational therapy program that is the best match for you:

- Do you want to (or need to) stay close to home?
- What are the admissions requirements?
- What are the [prerequisites](#)?
- What is the cost of the program?
- What makes the program unique?
- What are the requirements for graduation? (e.g. completion of a Master's thesis or project)

If at all possible, **visit the programs you are interested in attending and meet with an admissions counselor**. Often you will get an intuitive feel about whether a program is the right fit for you just by visiting. Be sure to check out the strengths of the programs in which you are interested. Maybe an OT program has a student-run clinic or a research center that matches your interests. Some schools offer specialty certifications, combined bachelor's/master's programs, or specific fieldwork requirements, just to give a few examples of things that may set a school apart. These are all worth looking into when checking out a potential occupational therapy program.

Last, but not least, **you need to consider expenses**. Private schools are much more expensive than public schools, and out of state tuition can be very high for non-residents. Be sure to take your own financial situation into consideration when choosing an OT school, and it is always worth looking into the financial aid that each school offers to see if you might qualify for any assistance.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN OT/OTA SCHOOL

Expect to treat your OT/OTA education like a full time job. During OT school, it is not unusual to spend an entire day on campus for lectures, labs, guest speakers, etc., and then spend your evenings working on homework, reports, and group projects.

Speaking of group projects, OT/OTA school involves participation in *a lot* of group projects! These will vary from research projects to presentations to hands-on clinical skills. Group work will solidify your ability to collaborate and work effectively as a member of team, which are crucial skills to becoming a successful occupational therapy practitioner.

OT/OTA school also involves giving lots of presentations. Terrified of public speaking? Don't worry! OTs tend to be a kind and compassionate group, so your classmates most likely will be, too. These experiences will help you hone your communication skills, which, as we've mentioned before, are so critical to success as an occupational therapy practitioner. Throughout your OT career you will be communicating with clients, family member, and colleagues. Depending on your work setting, you may be called to speak in front of groups, whether it is in an IEP meeting, during an in-service, or during medical rounds. It's best to get comfortable with speaking in front of groups during OT/OTA school while you're still learning and practicing.

Of course, there is also the hands-on learning! You will begin learning the practical skills of how to be an OT/OTA in your classes, but it is during your fieldwork where you will really solidify these skills. We'll talk more about fieldwork coming up in the [next section](#).

A graduate degree in occupational therapy, just like any graduate degree, is a big undertaking. Many graduate programs require the completion of some sort of capstone project or thesis prior to graduation. Whether this is a project or thesis will vary by school, so it's a good idea to find out before you select a program so you know what to expect! Some programs allow you to take a comprehensive exam at the end of the degree program instead of completing a project or thesis so, again, it's good to find out these details before committing to a program.

FIELDWORK

As a part of your occupational therapy education, you will be required to complete fieldwork. This is where the education gets real! Fieldwork is the hands-on portion of your education and where you will really get an idea of what your future as an occupational therapy practitioner will be like. You can think of it like the student teaching or med school rotations equivalency of OT school.

There are Two Types of Fieldwork

- **Level I Fieldwork:** There is no minimum number of hours required for Level I Fieldwork. Rather, each occupational therapy program sets the number of hours

required for Level I Fieldwork. It usually ranges from 40-80 hours, and is completed prior to Level II Fieldwork. Learn more about Level I Fieldwork on [AOTA's website](#).

- **Level II Fieldwork:** This consists of a minimum of 24 full-time weeks for occupational therapy students and a minimum of 16 full-time weeks for occupational therapy assistant students. Level II Fieldwork is typically completed in two, 12-week rotations for occupational therapy students and in two, 8-week rotations for occupational therapy assistant students. Learn more about Level II Fieldwork on [AOTA's website](#).

What's the Difference between Level I and Level II Fieldwork?

The purpose of Level I Fieldwork is to expose you to the occupational therapy process in a variety of settings through observation and guided participation in very select aspects of treatment. The purpose *is not* for you to work independently. Level I Fieldwork may take place in a variety of ways, including one day a week for a semester, one day every other week for a semester, or every day for a full week.

Level II Fieldwork is *much* more hands-on and comprehensive. Level II Fieldwork is where you really learn how to be an OT or OTA. The goal is for you to be working independently by the end of your placement! By the time you finish your Level II Fieldwork placements, you should be demonstrating the skills of a competent, entry-level OT or OTA. In other words, the goal is to be ready to start your first job! Not only will you get a ton of hands-on experience, but this is where you will really hone your clinical reasoning skills and learn to apply all of the theory you learned during your academic program. Ideally, you will complete your Level II Fieldwork in two very different practice settings, in order to solidify your knowledge across the lifespan (e.g. pediatrics and adult rehab or mental health and physical disabilities). It is truly an exciting time!

One Big Thing to Keep in Mind

One big thing to keep in mind when considering attending OT or OTA school is that you *will not* get paid for your fieldwork (you will pay tuition just like you're attending school) and due to the time commitment of completing Level II Fieldwork, you most likely *will not* be able to work while completing your Level II Fieldwork. Be sure to plan your finances accordingly. Level II Fieldwork is like a full-time job, and then you often go home and spend your evenings and weekends researching, treatment planning, and looking things up! It sounds intense, and honestly, that's because it can be, but you will learn so much during this time! You will walk into your first day feeling like you don't know what you're doing (don't worry, that feeling is completely normal) and you will walk out on your last day feeling like

you're ready to be an OT or OTA. That's a pretty substantial change in such a short amount of time!

To learn more about fieldwork, [visit the fieldwork section of the AOTA website.](#)

LICENSURE

When becoming an OT or OTA, there is one final step after finishing your educational requirements before you can officially become an OT practitioner, and that is obtaining a license to practice! Most states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico require occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants to have a license to practice in each respective state or territory. This is what gives an OT or OTA the "L" at the end of their credentials (OTR/L or COTA/L). If you think you may be moving around during your time as therapist, it's important to keep in mind that a different license is typically required to practice in each state or territory. The licensure process varies slightly by state, but does tend to be similar.

The basic steps for obtaining a license are: 1) graduate from an accredited OT or OTA program, including completion of all fieldwork requirements, 2) pass the NBCOT exam, and 3) apply for a state license and pay a fee. To locate the licensing agency in your state, please refer to [this list from the AOTA website.](#)

Some states allow practitioners to practice on a temporary license, while waiting to take or receive the results of the certification exam. You will need to refer to the regulations in your state to find out if you are eligible to practice on a temporary license.

Continuing Education Requirements for Licensure

After you obtain your state license, you will then need to maintain your license in order to continue practicing as an occupational therapist or occupational therapy assistant. The requirements to maintain your license vary by state, but typically include completion of continuing education coursework. This ensures you are staying up-to-date on current practice, as well as advancing your clinical skills. To pursue a career in occupational therapy, you must be dedicated to lifelong learning!

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PART 6: THE NITTY GRITTY DETAILS

CAN I TAKE TIME OFF BEFORE OR AFTER OT/OTA SCHOOL?

Taking a traditional path into the field of occupational therapy is in *no way* a requirement. Many people don't directly pursue OT education, so don't worry if your path feels a bit non-traditional. We truly believe that any life experience you have prior to becoming an occupational therapy practitioner will only make you a better practitioner.

Here are a few examples of questions we've received from readers about time off before or after OT/OTA school:

- **I want to teach English in a foreign country for a year before I go to OT/OTA school. Or for a year after I graduate from OT/OTA school. Is this a good idea?** If this fits in with your current life situation, dreams, and aspirations, then go for it! The experience you will gain from living and working in a foreign country will only make you more sensitive to cultural differences of your clients when you become an occupational therapy practitioner. Plus, experiences like this become much more difficult to do once you are deep into your career.
- **Can I wait until my kids are in school before going back to school myself?** Absolutely. There is no right or wrong time to start OT school. If that is what works best for your family, then go for it! You will learn so much about child development from your own children, as well as the caregiver-child dynamic, which will be invaluable as an occupational therapy practitioner.
- **I want to work for a while to save up money before going to OT school. Will this put me at a disadvantage because I'll be an "older" OT student?** OT students come in all ages and life stages, so don't worry about being an "older" student. Attending OT school is a big financial decision, and saving some money prior to attending school can be a good financial decision for some. If you fall into this category, then go for it! Any work experience is valuable work experience. As an occupational therapy practitioner, you don't just need clinical skills, but you also need all of the basic work skills, including time management skills, dressing professionally, communication skills, and interacting with others.

Whatever path you take to becoming an occupational therapy practitioner, don't worry! Whether you intentionally or unintentionally took time off before OT/OTA school, it really doesn't matter. What matters is that you are able to reflect on the experiences you had during that time and appreciate them for what they were. They are experiences that shape who you are today and the occupational therapy practitioner you will become.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO BALANCE FAMILY LIFE WITH A CAREER IN OT?

The short answer?

Most likely.

The longer answer?

It depends on a variety of factors, such as the following:

- What type of setting and schedule you work with (e.g., elementary school schedule vs. neonatal intensive care unit schedule vs. medical outpatient clinic schedule).
- What type of company/boss you work for.
- What your definition of “balance” is (e.g., being able to take your kids to school in the morning, being home for dinner every night, only working 3-4 days a week, not having to take work home at night or over the weekend, etc.).
- How good you are with maintaining work/life boundaries.
- How capable you are of managing work-related stress, what your coping mechanisms are, and whether you carry stressful emotions from work to home or from home to work.
- How supportive your significant other or friends are of you and your career.

We’re not trying to say that life as an occupational therapy practitioner is necessarily stressful or emotional. But it *is* a specialized career that requires dedication and, oftentimes, an investment of emotion and energy.

Now that I (Christie) have been a mom and OT for a few years, I have had to learn how to establish priorities and boundaries for the sake of myself and my family, and stick to them as much as possible. For example, I rarely check work email outside of work hours, unless there is a special circumstance. If I’m going to be out of town or on vacation for a few days, I set an automatic email reply so I’m less tempted to check my email. I typically don’t take on extra work unless absolutely necessary. And I try my best not to bring paperwork home (though there are those crazy times of year where you just can’t avoid it).

I'm kind of a people pleaser, so sometimes it can be really hard for me to maintain those boundaries because I don't want to let anyone down. But sometimes it feels like I have to respectfully stand my ground in order to protect those family boundaries.

I share all of this simply to give you a real-life perspective of what it's like for just ONE out of tens of thousands of OT practitioners out there who juggle the balance between family life and career on a daily basis, and to let you know that it *is* possible!

CAN MEN MAKE IT IN A FEMALE-DOMINATED PROFESSION?

Occupational therapy is definitely a profession that is currently dominated by women, but that doesn't mean you should shy away from a career in OT if you are male. Men bring a valuable perspective to the field, and in some cases, a client may prefer a male therapist over a female therapist. And remember that part of [AOTA's Centennial Vision](#) is to have a more diverse population. For the field of occupational therapy, increasing diversity includes increasing the number of men in the profession.

For more information about men in the field of OT, visit the [brOT Movement website](#), a site dedicated to increasing the diversity in the field of occupational therapy.

WHAT IF I HAVE A MEDICAL CONDITION OR DISABILITY?

As mentioned earlier in this e-book, the occupational therapy profession specializes in supporting individuals in their ability to participate in the roles that are important to them regardless of (dis)ability, including the occupation of "student." If you have a diagnosed condition or disability, don't let that discourage you from considering a career in OT. There are actually certain legal protections in place to support your ability to participate in your OT education, both in your classes as well as during fieldwork. Though we are not equipped to provide you with legal advice (and, thus, the following information should not be interpreted as or replace legal advice), we want to make sure you are informed of some basic concepts related to this topic.

A few things to make sure you are aware of and consider:

- Academic programs are required to ensure individuals with disabilities have equal opportunity, including what's known as "reasonable accommodations" and equal access. This is based on Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and is meant to prevent discrimination against "qualified" individuals with disabilities in programs and activities that receive federal funds.

- Section 504 accommodations relate to both the academic program as well as the fieldwork portion of your OT education (since clinical fieldwork is a component of the academic program). These are meant to support individuals in their ability to complete the essential requirements of their academic and fieldwork programs, if necessary.
- You are not required to disclose your condition or disability to your educational program. Some students choose not to disclose their condition or disability to their school. However, Section 504 accommodations and supports cannot be implemented unless the student discloses the condition/disability to the academic program. They can't support your legal rights if they don't know you need to access them, right? This is true for both your coursework as well as for your fieldwork.
- If you do choose to disclose, there is a process involved in order to formally grant accommodations. This is typically handled by the school's office for students with disabilities.
- Once disclosed, information regarding a student's disability (and certain other types of personal information) cannot be disclosed to others (including fieldwork sites) by the academic institution unless a disclosure agreement is signed by the student. This is due to the [Family Education Rights and Privacy Act](#), known as FERPA.
- Pregnancy and injury (e.g., sprain, strain, fracture, etc.) do not qualify as "disabilities" under Section 504 because they are considered temporary conditions. If you become pregnant or injured during your time as an OT/OTA student, be sure to check in with the appropriate support staff in order to determine what (if any) additional supports you may require or be eligible for. I (Christie) was pregnant during my last semester of OT school, which also happened to be the second half of my Level II Pediatric Fieldwork. During my experience, my academic and fieldwork supervisors were all very interested in making sure I (and my baby) stayed safe and healthy during that time. OTs are pretty awesome like that. However, every educational program and fieldwork site is different in their ability to support and accommodate for temporary conditions such as pregnancy or injury.
- If you have *any* questions related to the topic of students with medical conditions or disabilities, be sure to reach out to the academic counselors at your undergraduate institution, or to the admissions team at the program(s) you are interested in pursuing.

WHAT'S THE PAY LIKE IN OT?

Occupational Therapists: According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), the median annual wage for occupational therapists as of May 2012 was \$75,400. The lowest 10% reportedly earned \$50,500 and the top 10% were reported to earn more than \$107,070. Some occupational therapists are paid an annual salary, while others are paid hourly.

Occupational Therapy Assistants: The reported median annual wage for occupational therapy assistants as of May 2012 was \$53,240 per year.

CAN I WORK PART-TIME?

It depends on the setting. The [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) reported one in four occupational therapists worked part-time in 2012. Some sites may allow therapists to work part-time, while others may not. And some sites may *allow* part-time work, however, they just don't happen to have any part-time positions available at that time (or vice versa with full-time positions).

It's important to be aware that different sites may have different definitions of "part-time" and "full-time." Some settings may require 40 hours per week to qualify as full-time, while others may require a significantly lower number in order to qualify for full-time benefits. So "part-time" in one setting could technically be considered "full-time" in another.

It's also important to know that many medical settings offer per diem work, which allows therapists to basically "pick up a shift" here and there. Some therapists take per diem shifts in addition to their full time jobs. Others may choose to use per diem work as their primary source of income. Per diem work tends to be higher paying than full-time or part-time work because facilities are eagerly looking to fill vacant spots at the last minute. You may have more flexibility with scheduling when taking per diem shifts, however, the hours and cases on which you work can be more unpredictable. So you just need to make sure that type of work environment is a good fit for your personality and skill set.

CAN I BE A TRAVELING THERAPIST?

Yep! Adventurous occupational therapy practitioners can choose to be traveling therapists if they want. This means they accept short-term assignments (such as a few months at a time) typically arranged by a contract agency, and they can hop all around the country from assignment to assignment. Traveling OT positions are typically available to occupational therapists, but are not always available to occupational therapy assistants. It's good to check with various traveling OT agencies to make sure. A 2014 article in *OT Practice* magazine

featured stories and discussion of the adventures and challenges of life as a traveling OT, which you can [read here](#).

HOW'S THE OT JOB MARKET?

The job market looks good!

Occupational therapy is consistently in the top rankings for best, most recession-proof jobs in the U.S. It is also included year after year in the list of professions whose employment is expected to grow faster than the average for all occupations, as projected by the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). And, in a 2014 article published on [Forbes.com](#), occupational therapy was listed as one of the top 20 jobs least likely to be taken over by robots. So we've got that going for us!

The area of practice and geographical location you decide to work in *can* have some impact on job availability but, overall, companies and people are almost always looking for occupational therapists and occupational therapy assistants.

It's a great time to be an occupational therapy practitioner!

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APPENDIX A: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

CHOOSING AND PLANNING YOUR CAREER IN OT

Why I Chose Occupational Therapy: Current students share what attracted them to the profession:

<https://www.aota.org/-/media/Corporate/Files/EducationCareers/StuRecruit/Intro/Why%20I%20Chose%20OT.pdf>

AOTA FAQ on OT Education and Career Planning:

<http://www.aota.org/Education-Careers/Considering-OT-Career/FAQs/Planning.aspx>

Video Clips of Why Others Have Chosen a Career in Occupational Therapy:

<http://www.aota.org/Education-Careers/Considering-OT-Career/CareerStories.aspx>

AOTA Resources for Beginning Your OT Career:

<http://www.aota.org/Education-Careers/Considering-OT-Career/Resources.aspx>

LOGISTICS OF THE JOB

AOTA Resource on Workforce Trends in Occupational Therapy:

<http://www.aota.org/-/media/Corporate/Files/EducationCareers/Prospective/Workforce-trends-in-OT.PDF>

AOTA Summary of the Job Outlook for Occupational Therapy:

<http://www.aota.org/Education-Careers/Considering-OT-Career/JobOutlook.aspx>

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Outlook for Occupational Therapists:

<http://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/occupational-therapists.htm#tab-5>

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Outlook for Occupational Therapy Assistants and Aides:

<http://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/occupational-therapy-assistants-and-aides.htm>

National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy:

<http://www.nbcot.org/>

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Christie Kiley, MA, OTR/L is a mama and a licensed pediatric occupational therapist with experience working in early intervention, clinic-based, and school-based settings.

Christie is author of the blog [Mama OT](#), where she shares information, insights, and kid-friendly activities from an OT perspective. Her goal with her blog is encourage, educate, and empower those who care for children.

Stop by Christie's blog, say hello, and check out all her other fun resources!

Blog:

<http://MamaOT.com>

E-books:

<http://MamaOT.com/ebooks>

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Abby Brayton-Chung, MS, OTR/L is a licensed pediatric occupational therapist with experience working in early intervention, clinic-based, and public and private school-based settings. Abby has a true passion for helping young children and their families through feeding therapy.

Abby is the author of the blog, [OT Café](#), where she reflects on her practice as an occupational therapist and encourages a conversation about occupational therapy.

You can find Abby on several social media outlets, so stop by and join the conversation!

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