

APPLYING TO PH.D. PROGRAMS

Admission to Ph.D. programs is extraordinarily competitive and the application process is demanding for applicants and faculty; you will not succeed if you do a rush job.

Admissions processes at PhD programs work through very specific sets of protocols in terms of subfields and specializations. They take the students they think will fit best with the faculty in their departments who do the work of advising dissertations, and they have a very limited number of spots. So much more than in undergrad or MA admissions, you need to know where you come from, where you belong, and where you are going intellectually.

To have any luck at succeeding in this process, you'll need to start with: 1. a clear sense of your place in a discipline, or at most in one core discipline and one interdisciplinary field, 2. a specific research question and project grounded in the relevant literatures and methodologies of the discipline to which you are applying, and 3. a list of eight to ten faculty members (mostly tenured and at PhD granting departments) whose research interests are most closely congruent with your own project.

It is not at all necessarily natural that you might have these things ready-to-hand, even after having spent a year or so in graduate school. One good way to start is to look at the work you're most proud of, and think about where it fits best in the range of disciplines and interdisciplinary "studies" fields. What scholars do you cite in the literature reviews of that work? Where are those scholars employed? Or, from another angle, you think you want to do a PhD in department x on subject y. Who in that department would best be qualified to advise your dissertation in that case? Look at the department websites to see, and read people's work. To succeed in PhD admissions and then later in PhD programs, you need to sustain an interest in what other scholars are doing. Use that interest to start articulating your sense of what you'd like to contribute and where.

Timeline

As the above should indicate, getting into a PhD program takes time and hard work in preparation. Ideally, you should begin this work at the start of your MA. You should consult with your professors about your plans for further graduate study at regular intervals. You should check in with yourself about whether the attendant sacrifices make sense for you, and you should check in with your professors about whether they think you have the requisite skills, preparation, and attitudes. Get second and third opinions from your advisors on these questions. There is an enormous amount of published writing, much of it online, regarding the experience of graduate school and the consequences of the academic "job market"; you should familiarize yourself with this enough to understand the choice you're making because your advisors may want to know that you understand before writing a letter for you.

Some students choose to do PhD applications while finishing an MA, others wait until they have graduated and apply in the following fall. Here is a generic calendar for applying to PhD programs:

Summer:

- Identify faculty members in Ph.D.-granting departments whose work makes it seem like they'd be good supervisors of your own.
- Draft your personal statement (see below).
- Take a GRE prep course and/or retake the GREs, if necessary.
- Set up an account with Interfolio, an online dossier service for managing your recommendation letters (optional).

September:

- Send your draft statement of purpose to the director for comment.
- Finalize your roster of faculty recommenders (also with the consult of the director, more on this below).
- Contact faculty members at the institutions you'll be applying to, introduce yourself, explain your work in brief, politely ask for any advice they might be willing to offer.

October:

- Send to each of your faculty recommenders:
 - 1) your statement of purpose
 - 2) your curriculum vitae
 - 3) the list of departments to which you are applying, application due dates
 - 4) the names of your other recommenders

November-December:

- Deliver your portions of the application by the university/department deadlines. A couple of things to remember here:
- Universities' online applications portals are varied, and can often present unanticipated difficulties. Be patient and persistent, follow up if you are unsure whether your materials have arrived. After all, you're paying to apply!
 - The deadlines are for your application; it's customary for recommendation letters to arrive after the deadline, so don't stress as much about this part. That said, if you're worried a recommender has forgotten you, follow up without being a pest!

February-April

Keep your recommenders informed of your admissions outcomes and decision-making processes. Often offers of admission can vary widely across schools (for instance in terms of the size of the stipend). Faculty can help you think through your options, and make suggestions about negotiating.

The Statement of Purpose

The statement should never exceed 3 pages. Despite the fact that this document plays a key role in determining your success in this process and thus how you spend the next 5-10 years, it is not genre which calls for purple prose or personal revelation. The language and syntax should be clear, economical, and instrumental. Every word should be aimed at the purpose of articulating what you intend to do in graduate school and how you have prepared yourself. Your busy readers want to know what your project will be if they admit you.

Start with saying what is your research question is. What is the intellectual problem you want to solve and why should anyone care? What evidence will you work through and how and where do you propose to get it? What will you have to learn in a doctoral program in order to carry out this research? How do you conceptually and methodologically situate your project in existing disciplinary literatures? Be very judicious in listing the work of other scholars. Remember that this is a research proposal statement and that you are writing for experts. The name of a significant author, theory, or text is sufficient. There should be no footnotes or bibliography in a personal statement. Be as specific as you can be without just making things up, seeming too narrow, or suggesting that you have nothing left to learn. Everyone knows that your project will clarify and change as you move through your doctoral course work.

Be cautious about mentioning additional research interests. These shouldn't take more than a line or two and must clearly come off as secondary to your main research trajectory.

Say how your previous studies have prepared you to pursue your questions in a doctoral program. Explain the main argument and organization of your M.A. thesis, what you think you accomplished, what loose ends were left, and how your doctoral research will build on it. Mention your M.A. supervisor and other faculty you took courses with where appropriate. Remember you are highlighting the things directly related to your continuing research, so do not be exhaustive. Your readers will have your transcript. Your other recommenders will go into detail about your work with them.

Briefly describe the relevant aspects of your undergraduate work, as well as any other training, life experience, or work history related to your academic vocation and research trajectory. If you have a gap year between your MA and when you plan to do PhD work, explain any relevant work you are doing and will do in the meantime (for instance, some archival work, or a conference presentation, writing a book review).

End by explaining why you think Ph.D. study in this particular department would give you the training you need. Name the two faculty you'd like to work with and why--two in case one is on leave or leaves (much more than that seems like you

have an inexact sense of your own priorities). What in their work has influenced you or led you to believe that your interests fit with theirs?

If you have discussed your application with those people, say so. Briefly mention extra-departmental resources helpful to your project (research centers, archives, etc.). It is usually not a good idea to mention prominent faculty members outside the department. Avoid vague compliments to the institution and fantasies about your future life as a university professor.

The Writing Sample

The writing sample should not exceed the requested size of each institution's application by more than 5 pages. It should always be in double-spaced pages and 12 pt. font. Tinkering with the font, spacing, or margins is a bad idea. However, if you want to include a portion of your master's thesis, you may cut sections from it, describing in bracketed bold type what you've cut where you've cut it. Here of course the spatial pressures are less than in the statement, and your writing can be more your own. However, your reader wants to see a clear, forceful argument solidly supported by evidence. Be sure that the first five pages of your sample make the shape of the project clear (its claims, evidence, and conclusions). Consult with the director and your advisors about what you'd like to submit for the sample.

Letters of Recommendation

The letters that best build your case for doctoral admission are those written by academics able to discuss your scholarship and research training in detail. Your M.A. thesis advisor's letter will receive the most attention. Also, you should be strategic about cultivating faculty advisors with appointments in the discipline where you plan to do PhD level work. As mentioned above, please talk to your recommenders about departments where and faculty supervisors with whom they think you might fit. Provide them with materials to help them write on your behalf. Some letter writers and some disciplines prefer letters tailored to each application for each department, others are comfortable with submitting a generic letter through a dossier service like Interfolio. Discuss this with your recommenders.

Contacting Targeted Faculty

If you are nearby a department to which you might apply, try to get an appointment with or attend a seminar given by a targeted faculty member. In early autumn send an e-mail to the targeted faculty member briefly identifying yourself and in a very few sentences describing your research agenda. Say that you are considering applying and wonder if the faculty member is still working on "x" or remains interested in "y". If you receive no response, this is still a worthwhile effort.

Follow up

Giving careful advice, writing letters of recommendation, and otherwise supporting your applications is laborious and time-consuming work. You can use our help to properly evaluate offers of admission. In general, and throughout, don't be flaky! This is hardly the moment to tune out on email.