

# Applying to Graduate School in English

A guide for Berkeley undergraduates

Pursuing a PhD or MA in English is the right decision if you know that you want to commit yourself to studying and teaching literature. But it's a major investment:

- In the US, a PhD will take at least five and sometimes ten or more years to complete. If you want to teach at a four-year university—and, more and more often, at a community college—you will definitely need a PhD. But even if you have one, a job is not guaranteed. More than 50% of PhDs will not have a tenure-track job after completing their degree. Some go on to prestigious post-doctoral fellowships, which last for only a set number of years. More and more, our Placement advisors are focusing on alternative academic careers (“Alt-Ac”), in the arts, or Digital Humanities, or University Administration. For the big picture check out [www.mla.org/Resources/Career/Career-Resources](http://www.mla.org/Resources/Career/Career-Resources)
- An MA or the British MPhil and MSt (the one-year Master of Studies) can be a good next step for those who want to gain additional research experience in a new field. You commit much less time to this degree, and from there, with more confidence and a clearer idea of your own personal talents and desires, you can pivot into several different career paths, including high school, the Master of Fine Arts, or professional programs (Journalism, Law, MBA). The Masters is a good springboard into the PhD. However, it is often difficult to gain funding, and it is rarely a good idea to take on personal debt to pay for graduate tuition for an MA (or, for that matter, a PhD). When looking for Masters programs, be sure to check that they offer adequate financial support. (The same is true of PhD programs.)

If you've decided that graduate school in English is the right path for you, then here is what you will need to do. While the description below is geared mainly toward the PhD, most MA programs have a similar application process. So do most international programs, although their deadlines may be significantly different. Check the websites of the programs to which you intend to apply.

## Parts of the application

Nearly every application will require a standard set of components:

- 2–3 letters of recommendations. Again, check the requirements to be sure of the number. These should come from professors who know your academic work well.
- A personal statement (also called a “statement of purpose” or “research statement”). Unlike the application essays you wrote as an undergraduate, though, this statement isn't really “personal” in the sense of focusing on your private life. Instead, it outlines your experience as a scholar, and the ideas and texts you hope to engage with while in

graduate school and afterward.

- A writing sample. Different programs specify different lengths, but it will normally be between 15 and 25 pages. The sample should demonstrate your skills as a researcher and reader of literature.

Other components required by some institutions include:

- a CV (a fuller version of a résumé, focused primarily on your academic-oriented activities, but also including work experience).
- a diversity statement, describing what you would bring to the diversity of the wider university community.

Berkeley has recently abandoned the GRE and GRE Subject test, and other universities seem to be doing the same. IF a school that you are interested in requires either of these tests, then do both of these things: [1] register well in advance and prepare carefully, reading all their rubrics and prep materials, and [2] consult with Prof. Turner and/or Prof. Nolan, both of whom worked in the past on the GRE Subject exam and wrote many of their questions. Note also that this test costs a lot; the GRE website has instructions on how to apply for a waiver, which will involve consulting with Financial Aid officers at Berkeley.

### **Letters of recommendation**

For many students, this is the most stressful part of the application process. You should not, however, worry that you are burdening your professors with your request: most professors will be very happy to support the applications of students whose work they admire.

If you're thinking of applying to graduate school, you should spend time talking with professors in the fields you're most interested in, especially those who have given high grades to your coursework or are supervising your senior thesis. They will be able to advise you in a number of areas, including the best schools to apply to for your field of research, and what writing samples might represent you best. They will also be able to answer your questions about graduate school itself—what it was like, for instance, to spend many years working on a single book-length project.

In general, the best people to ask are those who know your work the best. A research seminar is a good setting for a professor to get to know you as a thinker; so too are office hours. At least one of your recommenders should work within your primary field of interest, broadly construed—that is, if (for example) you hope to write your dissertation on the novels of Toni Morrison, you should seek out a recommender who is a specialist in African-American literature and/or 20th-century American literature, but that recommender need not also be a specialist on Morrison. It is also not necessary that all your recommenders be within your field of interest; if you've worked well with a professor with a quite different specialty, that person might well be able to support your application.

Professors do sometimes decline requests for recommendations. The most common reasons are

not knowing your work well enough to say anything specific in its support, and too short a time-frame to write the letter. You should therefore make your requests for letters at least six weeks before your first deadline, so that your professors have time to prepare the letters. They will almost certainly ask for other supporting material (such as essays they wrote for your class, a CV, or a copy of your personal statement): ideally, you should have these more or less ready to send when you make your request. It's fine if your personal statement is still in draft form, however; if your recommenders have time, they will probably offer you feedback on the statement. This is helpful for both parties, since we like to make sure that our letters and the applicant's self-description chime together, that they represent the same person.

Many students opt to use the letter service provided by Berkeley's Career Center or by commercial providers like Interfolio. There are many advantages to these services: they will keep your letters on file, and send them as packages wherever you are applying, so that you can ensure that they arrive ontime. It is also simpler for your recommender to upload a single letter once, than to upload letters for every school to which you apply. A letter service may be a particularly good choice if you are planning to take time out before applying to graduate school, since this aspect of your application can be taken care of while your work is still fresh in your recommenders' mind. They do charge fees both to keep and send the letters, however, so you should take this into consideration.

### **Personal statement**

This is a brief document (usually, about two single-spaced pages) describing the goals you have for graduate study, your qualifications for that study, and (often) why you are applying to particular programs. It is surprisingly time-consuming and agonizing to write, but many prospective students find it an excellent way to make clear to themselves—as well as others—what they want to do in graduate school and why.

Because the statement is intended to characterize you as an individual, it will vary considerably from person to person. Its tone should be reasonably formal—it is, after all, directed toward your future teachers and mentors—but it should also give a sense of your own voice, as a thinker and writer. When you're writing it, then, don't strain for language you wouldn't normally use: your own voice will always be more convincing.

But while there is no fixed template for the statement, there are some basic components. You should include:

- 1) An introductory paragraph. You may use this to sum up your research goals and experience, or you might prefer to start with an encounter with a text that particularly intrigued you and sparked your interest in further study. The aim is to characterize your *intellectual* commitments, not your emotional ones; don't begin, then, with the family member who taught you to read or the high school teacher who made you fall in love with literature. Your passion for the work will be made clear in the way you describe the questions that intrigue you most; show it, don't tell it.
- 2) Most people then go on to describe their relevant research experience, such as their

senior honors thesis, or a 190 essay. If your research involved archival work, travel to relevant sites, translation from other languages, etc., this is the place to show what you have already done and learned—what qualifies you for graduate study.

- 3) Then you should go on to discuss what you *want* to learn—the field that you hope may become the topic of your dissertation. Some people have very specific topics in mind, but most do not: this is fine, given that your interests will most likely change as you learn more. (We often reject applicants whose research interests are too narrow and rigid, in fact.) What you ought to do here is give your readers a sense of the *kinds* of questions that intrigue you, and what you want to learn more about. If there are particular methods that you want to pursue—theoretical approaches, for instance, or technical skills like codicology—you should describe these too.
- 4) Many students include a paragraph (which may or may not be the last one) tailoring their statements to particular departments. If there are faculty members you are particularly interested in working with and whose work you already know, you can mention them here; or if the university has important resources in a particular area, such as the archive of a poet you want to study, then you can mention that too. It's best, however, to include only what is concrete, specific and genuinely important to you: never simply list faculty members from their websites, or refer vaguely to the excellence of the department ... this can sound extremely insincere.

The personal statement is a challenging document, so you should expect to go through a few drafts. Ideally, you should ask for feedback from at least one faculty member in your field (starting by asking your recommenders). But your friends and colleagues can also provide useful feedback: they are most likely to know if your statement actually represents you well and captures your interests and your voice.

### **The writing sample**

The piece you choose should be the one that best shows the full range of your scholarly accomplishments. Ideally, then, it should be one in which you

- develop a full and convincing argument;
- close-read one or more passages; and
- engage with current criticism.

The writing sample should show you at your most brilliant, but it should also demonstrate that you can enter into a conversation with other scholars. This is why essays written for research seminars (such as 190s) can be particularly good choices. When making your final choice, it's a good idea to talk over your piece with the professor who read and graded it—you can and should make any corrections or revisions that would improve the piece. Excerpts from longer works—such as senior theses—can also work well, but the excerpt should be freestanding and have a complete argumentative arc in itself. You may also opt to expand a shorter paper into a writing sample: again, you want to be sure that your final piece reads as a complete, unified work.

Students often wonder whether their writing sample must be about the particular topic they intend to work on. This is not always necessary. If you're hoping to study John Ashbery, for instance, it's entirely fine for your writing sample to be about a Wallace Stevens poem. It's even fine for it to be about something further afield—Browning, say—especially if the sample well exemplifies the approaches you tend to take as a reader. The more distant your writing sample is from your proposed subject and method, however, the less able your readers will be to see your abilities in your primary field of interest. So, if you plan to focus on Chaucer as a graduate student, a writing sample on Faulkner will not make it easy to understand how you work as a reader of Middle English poetry. You also don't want to leave your readers wondering why you want to work in your planned field, if you haven't written anything about it.

## The CV

Though not all institutions require you to include a CV, you'll need one eventually, so it's worth putting one together. As an undergraduate applying for grad school in English, your CV should include:

- your contact details
- your BA: your (planned) year of graduation, and years in junior college (if any); plus your GPA, GPA in the major, and honors (if any)
- the title of your honors thesis, if you wrote one
- grants or awards you've won
- any significant work experience
- relevant skills, especially languages (which might include programming languages)
- if you wish—this is not required—you might include significant extracurricular commitments
- you may also include published work (e.g. journalism, fiction, or poetry). However, you will not be expected to have published academic work prior to entering graduate school

## Diversity statement

This statement takes different forms. However, in the UC system, this statement is used to understand how individuals would contribute to the overall diversity of the university, and particularly to helping it support historically under-represented groups. This might be through applicants' personal experience of being a scholar from a particular race, ethnicity, and/or socioeconomic status, through the perspective gained during their research, or through their work with people different from themselves. More broadly, though, this statement is also helpful for understanding you as an individual, and for showing how particular personal circumstances have affected your academic career: if, for example, you took a year off as an undergraduate due to illness, you might mention that here (although you should not feel obligated to do so). In this statement, you can describe how your (and, perhaps, your family's) history have shaped your views on literature and on the world at large: however, you should not feel that you must disclose anything that you would not choose to discuss with the

admissions committee.

### **Timeline: the long view**

This timeline should not (in most cases) be interpreted as a series of deadlines, but rather a set of suggestions that will make your path toward graduate study smoother and less stressful.

#### **As early as you can:**

- Take a range of interesting courses that push you to develop your research skills.
- Read a lot of the kind of literature you like best.
- Learn a relevant language or languages.
  - All graduate programs will require you to demonstrate reading knowledge of at least one foreign language. While this is not an entrance requirement—you *can* start learning a language in grad school—the sooner you begin your language studies, the more you'll be able to get out of them.
  - The languages you focus on will vary depending on your primary field of interest. If you're interested in Latinx literature, for instance, you should take advanced courses in Spanish literature as soon as you can, while if you want to study Middle English literature, you should start working toward a strong reading knowledge of Latin and (probably) Old French.

#### **Two or more years before you would like to begin your studies:**

- Begin talking with professors about what graduate study involves, and which programs might be right for you.
- Take at least one research-intensive course, such as a 190 or other seminar.

#### **The spring of your third year:**

(While you may not intend to apply to graduate school immediately after graduating, you should think about pursuing these research opportunities during your final year at Berkeley.)

- Think about developing a proposal for one of Berkeley's summer research programs, such as SURF (Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowships, sponsored by the professor you work with best) or the Haas Scholars program.
- If you're eligible, consider applying for the McNair Scholars Program, which helps students from historically underrepresented groups prepare for graduate school.
- Consider developing a proposal for the honors thesis seminar.

### **The summer before you intend to apply:**

- If required by a university you are interested in, register for the GRE, and prepare for the exams.
- Work on a preliminary list of programs to which you want to apply, and familiarize yourself with their requirements. Also look at the application fees, and plan accordingly. Some schools will waive fees for eligible students, so you should learn about that process as soon as you can.

### **The fall of the year before you hope to begin the program:**

As you can see, this is the real crunch time. The application process is, effectively, another entire course:

- Finalize your list of prospective schools, and make a list of requirements and deadlines.
- If relevant, take the GRE, and have the scores sent to the schools you'll apply to.
- Request letters of recommendation as early as possible (and at least six weeks before your programs' deadlines). Send them your list of schools, and any other materials they need.
- Write and revise your supporting materials (statements and CV).
- Choose and polish your writing sample.
- Actually apply!

...and that's it. If you're admitted, you'll find out in spring (usually, early February). If so, you should visit your prospective schools on their visit weekends if at all possible: fit (academic and personal) is an important consideration in your final decision. So are financial concerns, though: and if you have significant factors that will weigh in your decision (children, for instance), you should let the schools you're considering know.

### **A Final Note**

As mentioned at the start, deciding to pursue a PhD in the Humanities is a significant choice. Completing a PhD is a lengthy process—most likely six years or more. And there are no assurances that you will win a full-time, tenure-track position at a college or university at the conclusion of your doctoral studies. The competition for tenure-track positions is fierce and there are many more well-qualified PhDs than there are positions available. Even the very best candidates might spend several years on the job market before landing a permanent job, and many PhDs spend several years in postdoctoral positions or in contingent teaching positions (that is, as adjuncts), while continuing to apply for full-time jobs. It is worth thinking very carefully about

pursuing a graduate degree in the Humanities, considering all of the relevant factors when making your decision about whether to apply (including financial ones). You should learn as much as you can about what it's like to be a graduate student in the Humanities and about the realities of an academic career: speak with your professors, chat with graduate students (perhaps current or former GSIs), visit the career center, read what others have had to say, look out for the English Department forum (when announced, probably in early November). There are numerous articles containing perspectives on and advice about graduate school in the humanities—here are a few recommended by faculty in previous years:

Karen Kelsky, ["Humanities Graduate School: Go? Don't Go? What's a Would-Be Ph.D. To Do?"](#)(2011)

Daniel Schwartz, ["Does it Make Sense to Pursue a Humanities Doctorate? The Pros and Cons of Graduate Education in the Humanities"](#) (2015)

Jordan Weissmann, ["Why Haven't Humanities Ph.D. Programs Collapsed? 21 Answers From Readers"](#) (2013)

["Should You Go to Grad. School in the Humanities? A Professor's Perspective"](#) (2016)

Of course, these several articles don't tell the whole story, and there is plenty to argue with in each of them. But each is written by someone who has had substantial experience as an academic in the humanities, and together they offer a useful range of opinions and perspectives that will help to inform your own decision-making process.