

Campus Academic Resource Program

Graduate School Applications in the Humanities and the Social Sciences

This handout will:

- Present methods for deciding to go to graduate school.
- Offer evaluation strategies for selecting schools to apply to.
- Describe email etiquette for contacting potential faculty advisors and mentors.
- Break down the application process into essential components.
- Explain CV formats and components.
- Provide examples of and strategies for writing admissions essays.
- Offer a timeline to structure the application process.

Deciding if Graduate School is Right for You

Before you start applying, reflect on what you hope to gain from graduate school. What does graduate school offer you that work experience will not? Graduate school can be just as expensive and emotionally taxing as it can be rewarding. Do not jump into the decision without some research into what type of career you can expect to obtain, what requirements that career demands, and what a graduate program will consist of. Depending on your goals, you may improve your prospects by seeking workplace experience rather than more education.

Reasons to Attend Graduate School

- You are passionate about your subject, and you want professional training as a researcher.
- You have multiple career options in mind which will utilize the skills you develop in graduate school.
 - Tenure-track professorships are highly competitive, so research other jobs that value and utilize your training.

Reasons Not to Attend Graduate School

- You do not feel ready for a real job.
 - Graduate degrees are not a substitute for experience in the job market.
- You wish to delay paying off your loans.
 - Deferment processes can be time-consuming and you might take on more loans in graduate school.

Exploring Potential Graduate Programs

This may seem self-evident, but considering the amount of time and money you are considering investing in a graduate school, a great deal of research should be completed prior to applying so that you know whether or not you will enjoy yourself and will be able to study material that interests you. While one graduate school may meet your basic needs, another may provide you with more opportunities (jobs, internships, or experiences working with a well-known member of your field) in the long term.

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Program Quality

- What is the program's reputation?
 - Your graduate program's reputation is directly tied to your job prospects in academia. Most academic jobs are biased towards elite university brands.
- How does the program fit your career goals?
 - Does the program have the necessary credential program for your ideal job? What positions are alumni currently holding?
- Will you have the opportunity to research, publish, and present at conferences?
 - Research current students' CVs online or contact departmental graduate student associations to learn more about current students' accomplishments.

Faculty Fit

- Who are the faculty?
 - How active are they in their respective field?
 - If professors are preparing to retire, they may not be available to work with you for the duration of your graduate education.
 - What are some of their recent publications?
 - Are your interests aligned with the recent those of the faculty?

Financial Costs

- How much financial aid is available? What are the conditions attached for eligibility?
- What is the average amount of debt for recent graduates of the program? How much are you willing to accrue for your degree?
- Is housing/commuting affordable?
- Will it be possible to work while going to school?
 - Many schools expect a full-time commitment to their program.

Writing to Potential Faculty Advisors/Mentors

Contacting potential advisors is a key step in the application process. While university websites and graduate studies departments are helpful, they do not necessarily show current developments within individual departments. You want to show potential faculty advisors that you are interested in their program and research. These emails can be the start of an academic relationship in your field.

By emailing professors, you may find out that one or more of the faculty members you wanted to work with will be retiring or changing jobs. You also might find out that the department has lost funding and does not plan on accepting students in a given field of study. Without establishing these contacts, you could well be applying to a program that has no intention of accepting your application.

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Breaking Down the Application Process

Letters of Recommendation

- Choose your recommenders wisely. Ideally, they should be someone who knows your interests and strengths well. Meet with them fairly regularly so that they get to know you.
- Steps to take when asking for letters of recommendation:
 - Ask for the letter in person. Showing respect towards the person writing your letter of recommendation is common courtesy.
 - Bring an academic resume or a CV for your recommenders' reference. Even if you are familiar with your recommenders, they may not have a deep understanding of your personal accomplishments or remember the work you did for their class.
 - Ask the professor if he/she needs any other materials. Some professors may ask you for a paper you wrote for their class or for both an academic and professional resume. Some may even ask for your personal statement. These supplemental materials can help recommenders write well-rounded letters.

Curriculum Vitae

- The CV is an academic resume which details your education, academic achievements and honors, and relevant professional experience.

Admissions Essay(s)

- Personal Statement—these tell the committee about why you are motivated for graduate study and give them a sense of who you are and where you come from.
- Statement of Purpose/Research Statement—these tell the committee concrete information on your research agenda, research experience, and professional goals.

Writing Sample

- Select a paper you are especially proud of, devote as much time as possible to perfecting it by bringing more depth and scale to its evidence or analysis. Choose a paper relevant to your field.
 - Papers you may think about using as a writing sample (varying according to major):
 - seminar papers
 - chapter(s) of your thesis
 - original works of fiction

Activity 2—Curriculum Vitae Brainstorming

Fill in each of the below headings with relevant information from your past experiences and we will review each other's ideas as a group to determine which information is most and least relevant, and which points in the CV would likely be the weakest without further work. Some of these headings may not be worth including in your final CV, or may be combined with another appropriate section.

Education

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Honors and Awards

Publications

Major Research Projects

Presentations/ Conference Papers

Employment History/ Professional Experience

Academic Service

Activity 3—Admissions Essays

The following are types of essays graduate programs may ask to write as part of the admission process. Depending on the school, they may ask for one or the other or a combination of both types in one admissions essay. Generally, the research agenda and fit with faculty members is the most important component.

Statement of Purpose/ Research Statement

- These essays are essentially academic biographies and statements of your research agenda.
- Avoid regurgitating information available in your transcripts or CV.
 - Focus on what cannot be illustrated through other application materials.
- “Fit,” or compatibility, with the program is most important in these essays so tailor them to each program you apply to.

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Admissions Essays: Personal Statement

- These are prompt-based essays that may ask you to discuss how your background influences your interests and goals.
 - Common prompts:
 - How will your presence advance diversity at the university?
 - How do your personal experiences demonstrate that you have the right character for graduate school?
- Avoid betraying too much emotion in these essays; no one will let you into their program out of sympathy or pity.

We have included two statements of purpose below. Assess their strengths and weaknesses in the space provided beneath each essay.

Essay 1

Even as a child, I longed to be a historian and always got the best marks in those classes and I also loved watching World War II movies. That's why I majored in history as an undergraduate and now I'm applying to SF State's Phd Program. I especially like US history so I've decided SF State because there's lots of US historians. As you can see in my transcripts, I got good grades in college history classes and even did a minor in politics.

Please pick me to be your PHD candidate!

Essay 2 (sample statement of purpose from successful applicant to UC Berkeley)

"Luscious fare is the jewel of inordinate desires," cautions the author of *The Gentlewoman's Companion* (1673), one of many early modern conduct books I surveyed this past year for an honors thesis entitled "'Chaste, Silent, and Hungry': [this is] a summary of my senior thesis, which earned me the 2003 Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Research at the University of California, Davis. This first venture into serious historical scholarship has affirmed my passion for early modern culture and history; and it has given me the confidence to assert and contest my opinions regarding the status of women in early modern Europe and the current state of early modern historiography. Continuing along these avenues of research in graduate school, I would like to use my thesis as the basis for a future dissertation [...]"

I [...] also stress that that at the heart of my specific research concentration lies a more general interest in early modern European history, cultural and women's history to be more exact.

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Below, we have provided a list of tasks to complete throughout the process. Ideally, we recommend you begin the long-term steps a year or more before your application deadlines, the medium term steps four to six months before the deadlines, and the short term steps in the final 1-2 months prior to deadlines.

Application Steps—Long-Term

- Cultivate relationships in your department.
- Seek out research experience in and out of your classes.
- Take language classes and research seminars.

Application Steps—Medium-Term

- Prepare for the GRE, and take the exam early enough so that you have time to re-take if necessary.
- Begin your personal statement, and decide which project to expand/improve for your writing sample.
- Research programs and deadlines.
- Ask for letters of recommendation.
- Finalize the list of programs you will apply to.
- Email potential advisors and grad students at programs you are interested in.

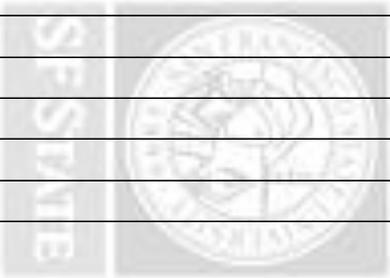
Application Steps—Short-Term

- Revise and perfect all written materials in the application.
- Request transcripts.
- Pay the application fees.
- Remind your recommenders and provide them with a folder with the list of schools you apply to along with your application materials (admissions essays, writing sample, unofficial transcripts, etc.).

Activity 4: Create a Timeline for Yourself

Depending on deadlines for the programs you are applying to, there are likely 2-3 months left between now and your application deadlines. In the space below, put together a schedule for all the work you still need to complete.

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Creating an Applications Budget

Applying to grad school is expensive. Once you know which schools you are applying to, use the below chart to determine the cost of getting through your applications season. Research application fee waivers and see if you qualify. You can send your GRE scores to up to four schools for free. Each subsequent school will cost \$27. Sending official transcripts from SF State costs \$8 each, although some schools allow you to scan them instead, which will cut down the cost somewhat. You also need to send your transcripts from every institution of higher education you have attended.

Application fees vary widely by program.

University	GRE scores	Transcripts (SFSU)	Transcripts (pt. 2)	App Fees
	Free	8		
	27	8		
	27	8		
	27	8		
Totals→	81	72		

Total_____

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