

## APPLICATION GUIDE TO GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PHILOSOPHY

### *Section 1: Preparing for Graduate Study in Philosophy*<sup>1</sup>

Graduate school in philosophy is the natural option for many undergraduate majors in philosophy. You should though aim for graduate school only if you have good reason to believe that you are a very promising student. Very few majors in any discipline go on to graduate work and a career as an academic. This applies also to philosophy. Graduate school is difficult, and academic jobs, especially good academic jobs, are scarce. As you begin to seriously think about the possibility of going on to graduate school in philosophy, be sure to talk to those philosophy professors who know you reasonably well in an academic setting to get a realistic sense of your chances at success in graduate school. To begin, here are some things you need to know about professional philosophy:

- You need a Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy); not just an M.A. (Master of Arts). An M.A. degree usually takes 2-3 years to complete and typically involves coursework, exams and sometimes the completion of a written thesis. A Ph.D. is a more advanced degree and typically takes 5-8 years to complete depending on the program. Expect to do 2-3 years in coursework, qualifying exams as well as complete a dissertation which is a book-length independent research project of an important issue in your field (see *Section 2: What to Expect in Graduate School*).

Students in some Ph.D. doctoral programs earn M.A. degrees along the way. Most of the best doctoral programs don't even offer a separate M.A. degree (though they may award a "terminal" M.A. to Ph.D. students who do not pass to PhD candidacy). There are some M.A. programs whose graduates go on to more elite Ph.D. programs. Such "feeder" M.A. programs are usually for students who were not undergraduate philosophy majors or did not attend institutions with a strong, mainstream philosophy major. However, there is no guarantee that an M.A. at one of these programs will lead to admission at an elite Ph.D. program.

- There are three main kinds of academic jobs in philosophy: (1) positions at research universities with graduate programs, (2) positions at liberal arts or state universities that do not have graduate programs, and (3) positions at community colleges. A Ph.D. is necessary for the first two sorts of academic jobs. An M.A. is required and a Ph.D. is preferred but not always required for the third sort. The main responsibilities of any academic are research, teaching, and service (departmental, university, and professional). The importance of these three kinds of duties varies depending on the sort of program one is in (research tends to dominate at research programs, teaching at liberal arts colleges etc.).

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<sup>1</sup>The first three sections of this document is a revised version of David Brink's "Graduate Study in Philosophy" @ <http://philosophy.ucsd.edu/faculty/dbrink/GraduateStudy.pdf>. Sections 2 and 3 are also indebted to "Philosophy Graduate School" @ <http://www.unl.edu/philosop/undergrad/undgrad.shtml> and <http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/philosophy/nav03.cfm?nav03=12383&nav02=12463&nav01=12320>.

- Be realistic about your chances of admission into graduate school: Top programs receive approximately 150-250 applications and admit between 5-15%. Anywhere from one quarter to one half of those who start Ph.D. programs fail to complete the degree. You should be certain of your commitment to completing the program before you decide to attend graduate school.
- There are many more Ph.D.'s than there are academic positions – especially if you are interested in a position in a research program, as there is enormous competition for these jobs. Most of the better students at top programs (top 25 programs roughly) eventually get tenure-track jobs of some kind, though not necessarily at research universities, and these tenure-track jobs often come only after one or two one-year jobs at different institutions. The job success rates at lower-ranked programs are lower.
- Be flexible. While the very best students from the very best programs often receive multiple job offers, many highly qualified Ph.D.s have more limited options. You must be flexible geographically and willing to move, for instance, taking one or more one-year jobs before finding a tenure-track position. Tenure is a professor's permanent job contract, granted after a probationary period of six or seven years. A faculty member in such a probationary position is said to be in a "tenure-track appointment."

### ***Section 2: What to Expect in Graduate School***

- 5-8 years for the Ph.D. with 2-3 years of coursework.
- Various distributional requirements (for example: the successful completion of a variety of courses in areas such as history of philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and logic).
- Ph.D. qualifying and/or candidacy comprehensive exams.
- Sometimes a requirement to show proficiency in a second language.
- Completion, submission and oral defense of a doctoral dissertation.
- Financial support. Don't go to graduate school in pursuit of the Ph.D. without some financial aid package — some combination of fellowship and teaching assistantship support. Terminal M.A. programs often offer little or no financial support, although this may vary. Be sure to check carefully what each department you're considering offers. In addition to the university specific research and teaching assistantships available to most students admitted into graduate programs, there are many portable fellowships and scholarships that are meant to support graduate study. Be certain to research these options and make a checklist of requirements, application procedures, and due dates for these awards.

### ***Section 3: Planning Your Application to Graduate School***

Normally you should apply in the fall for admission the subsequent fall. Start planning your application early. In fact, it's never too early to start working on your application.

For one thing, if you manage to plan way ahead, you may be in a better position to get strong letters of recommendation (see *Section 4: Application Materials*). You also need to think ahead to what your writing sample will be since as part of your application you will be required to submit a sample of your very best written work (see *Section 4: Application Materials*). It is best to start months and months in advance of the deadline dates for applications, which tend to range from 1<sup>st</sup> December to 15<sup>th</sup> January (see *Section 5: Graduate School Application Timeline*). Take the process very, very seriously, or it's a waste of your time and money.

Start by identifying the programs to which you want to apply. Your decisions about where to apply are very important. A useful resource is Brian Leiter's *Philosophical Gourmet Report* (PGR). The report can be found at <http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com>. The PGR provides rankings of programs and subspecialties and lots of information and advice about graduate study in philosophy. Think about the general strengths of the program and also the subspecialties of the program. It's important to study in a reasonably well-rounded program, both for those who don't yet know what subfields interest them most (you need to be exposed to different areas of philosophy at the graduate level to make an informed decision about where to specialize) and for those who do (specialists in any field need a decent background in other areas of philosophy). Pay special attention to programs that are strong in your specialty area (if you have one).

Be realistic about where you apply. Discuss what is realistic with your professors. Try to have a realistic assessment of the strength of your application and submit most of your applications to places where you have a realistic prospect of admission. There is no simple answer as to the question of how many applications you should make but do try to spread your applications over a range of schools. Apply to some places likely to accept you. On the other hand, do consider applying to one or a couple of places of exceptional interest to you even if you think your odds are not great. The number of applications is likely to be limited by your financial resources, since applications can cost quite a bit of money once all the fees and postage are added up.

You should visit each department's website to get a sense of the program and request or download their application materials for graduate school. You will be applying to a specific department and individual philosophy departments will have their own forms, requirements and deadlines. Make special note of faculty members in each department who conduct research and teach courses in the particular area of philosophy you are most interested. Here are some other things you may want to know about schools that seem interesting:

- What are their completion rates?
- What are average completion times for the degree?
- What is the placement record of the school like; do their graduates get good jobs?

- What kind of funding does the school offer? What proportion of students are funded, and to what level? Is the funding through scholarships or TA-ships? How many years of support do they guarantee?
- What is the quality of life like: what are housing costs like? What's the town or city like?
- Are there a number of people there you'd like to work with?

#### ***Section 4: Application Materials<sup>2</sup>***

A complete application for graduate school generally consists of seven components: GRE (Graduate Record Exam), letters of recommendation, writing sample, personal statement, academic transcripts, an application form, and an application fee. Don't send anything the application instructions don't ask for. Those applicants whose first language is not English may need to provide a TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), and also some schools require a Curriculum Vitae (CV) that describes your interests, goals, educational background, special skills, extra-curricular activities, honors or awards and so on. Applications missing any materials will automatically be rejected.

- (a) GRE. In some of the best graduate programs, often a first cut is made on the basis of objective measures, such as your GRE score. Study hard and take the GRE early enough so that if you don't do as well as you'd like, there's time to take them again.
- (b) Letters of recommendation. You are typically asked for three letters of recommendation. It's usually best if they are all from philosophy professors that know you well in an academic setting for an extended period of time and can provide some concrete and detailed assessment of your work. Do not ask someone to write a letter at the last minute. You should request them for a letter of recommendation in person at least one month prior to the earliest application's due date. It is very important that you allow ample time for your professors to write their letters. Writing *good* letters of recommendation takes a great deal of thought and time. Also, ask for a letter of recommendation in a way that gives the professor a way out if he or she doesn't think he or she can write supportively. Ask, for example, not just whether they'll write a letter, but whether they are willing to write a strong letter of support.

Before going to meet with your professor(s) to request letters, prepare a complete package of materials in case they agree to write a letter on your behalf. If they agree, present them with this complete packet of information and forms. The package should include: a copy of your CV; an unofficial copy of your transcripts to date; a note reminding them specifically of the courses you have taken with them, the grades you received and a copy of graded material(s) from those courses; your

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<sup>2</sup> This section (particularly the advice on how to write a personal statement) is taken from "Applying to graduate schools in the US" @ [http://www.gla.ac.uk/philosophy/Undergraduate%20Resources/Honours/Postgrad\\_Applications/PGAppsUS.htm](http://www.gla.ac.uk/philosophy/Undergraduate%20Resources/Honours/Postgrad_Applications/PGAppsUS.htm). This website posts also good and bad examples of personal statements.

statements of purpose; the writing sample you are submitting along with your applications; and a list of schools/programs you are applying to with application due dates. Many programs use electronic applications; however, if a program you are applying to requires a paper application, you should also include the recommendation forms for each program and an addressed and stamped envelope.

Some schools require you to fill in a recommendation form giving the details of your referee, together with the option of waiving your right to see your academic recommendation later on, should you be admitted. Always sign the waiver. Academic recommendations are supposed to be confidential. Schools often have forms that they ask recommenders to fill out. Usually, faculty will write a letter of recommendation for you and then attach a copy of that to the forms. All of these materials should be neatly assembled. This information allows your recommenders to be specific and this makes letters of recommendation more convincing. Here's a useful checklist for pursuing letters of recommendation:

- Always ask (at least one month in advance of the due date) if the person is willing to write a letter before listing them on an application.
  - Provide the professor with all of the relevant information including:
    - Copy of CV
    - Copy of academic transcript
    - List of courses you have taken with them, the grades you received and preferably graded material(s) from those courses
    - Writing sample
    - Statement(s) of purpose
    - List of schools/programs, applications and deadlines
    - Pre-addressed and postage stamped envelopes for the schools to which you have applied
  - After you hear from the schools, be sure to tell your professors where you were accepted and your choice.
  - Thank your letter writers.
- (c) Writing sample. The writing sample is the most important component of your application as it demonstrates whether you have the capacity for actually doing philosophy. Final decisions will be made on the basis of the writing sample. Work

hard on it. Don't just use an unrevised short essay that received an A in some upper-division course. A course-specific essay that is good enough to receive an A is not likely to win you admission into a good graduate program. Instead, you must develop a substantial research paper that shows your best ability. This requires working on your submission until it is the absolute best you can accomplish. The writing needs to be uniformly good, so that quality can come across if even if the paper is skimmed. The writing needs to be analytical and tightly argued. It needs to be up-to-date, citing, and using current work. What readers are looking for in general is not an original contribution to philosophy, but the clear exposition of complicated and serious philosophical ideas and texts and in reference to authors they are familiar with. They want to see that you can write effectively and articulate rigorous, sustained philosophical thinking. Page limits for writing samples differ from department to department. In general, the writing sample should be in the 15-25 page range. In our majors' curriculum, taking the Honors track/option is the best way to prepare your writing sample (see Section 6).

- (d) A personal statement or statement of purpose. This will be part of each application. It need not be profound, but it should be thoughtful and well written demonstrating maturity, commitment to philosophy and seriousness about research. The statement of purpose should be approximately between one and two pages long, although different programs may have different requirements. Write about what you have been up to philosophically and why, and what you would like to do in graduate school. Let them know that you are hard working, serious and enthusiastic about philosophy. But do not do this by saying, "I am hard working, serious and enthusiastic about philosophy." Instead, make this the message between the lines of your personal statement.

You should only write sentences with substantive content. A straightforward and informative personal statement that steers clear of platitudes speaks volumes about your commitment and academic personality. Everyone wants to convey that they are enthusiastic, committed and able. You should be the one that stands out of the crowd by conveying these things without actually saying them. Graduate schools sometimes want you to answer certain set questions in your personal statement. Be sure to answer these fully but succinctly. But all admissions committees want to read about the following things:

- Why do you want to do graduate study? What are your academic interests?
- Why is the department in question a good department for you? Why are you a good candidate for that particular department?
- Are there any particular people in the department that you are interested in working with? If so, don't be afraid to name them. This shows that you have thoroughly researched the faculty interests and thought about your suitability for that particular department. (But do not flatter anybody, either the institution or any individual person.)
- How does studying in this department fit in with your long-term plans? How is it a continuation of what you have learned as an undergraduate?

Further, ask yourself these questions:

- Is your academic record unusual in some way? For example, have you transferred to another university in the middle of your degree? If so, tell them why. If you transferred for personal reasons, do say what these reasons were, but do not go on at length about them. Make a point of presenting the transfer in a positive light with regard to your academic career.
  - Be sure to mention any special academic achievements, for example, awards and prizes in philosophy.
  - ‘Personalize’ your statement for each graduate school. The personal statement is a communication between you and a particular graduate school. The admissions committee wants to feel like you are talking to them. If you have done your research on the departments you are applying to, you should be able to judge the changes you should make to your personal statement when applying to different schools. Schools will use your personal statement to get some idea of the type of philosophy you want to do, and so whether that will fit in well with their program.
  - Whatever you write, do not repeat information available elsewhere in your application. The personal statement is where you are free to present those aspects of you that are relevant to the application, but that didn’t have a slot reserved for them in the application form.
- (e) Academic transcripts. Your Grade Point Average (GPA) matters. Get plenty of copies of your transcripts. Be certain of the procedure at Portland State University for requesting transcripts, how much time you must allow for them to be mailed, and how much it will cost for each copy to be mailed directly to the program.
- (f) Application form. You might also have to fill out additional forms required by the graduate school.
- (g) Application fee. Most graduate programs charge an application fee of between \$25 and \$100.

### ***Section 5: Graduate School Application Timeline***

#### Freshman-Sophomore year

- Strong GPA
- Identify interests and faculty with similar interests
- Participate in relevant on-campus extracurricular activities and organizations (e.g., Philosophy Club) and continue it throughout your undergraduate career.

#### Fall of Junior Year

- Identify possible recommenders from faculty
- Begin a research project for purposes of writing sample

#### Winter and Spring of Junior Year

- Build your CV by getting involved in undergraduate philosophy conferences. Having a paper accepted at a conference not only looks good on your CV but is also a good chance to practice your presentation skills plus you get to meet your peers. And/or, you might submit a paper or book review for publication in an undergraduate journal.
- Start taking GRE practice tests (Choose a test date and organize a study schedule)
- Begin researching schools, request materials and confer with faculty who will write letters of recommendation for you.

#### Summer after Junior Year

- Finish up most of the application process: make a definitive list of schools to which you are going to apply and make a checklist of due dates, required materials, etc., for each application and draft and revise a personal statement and a writing sample.
- Research financial aid
- Get in touch with potential recommenders and provide recommenders with application materials

#### Fall of Senior Year

- Finish up writing sample and statements of purpose
- Take the GRE (by the time you take the GRE, you must have decided where you will apply so you can have the scores sent directly)
- Thank recommenders
- Gather and send complete application materials out in November-January

#### Winter and Spring of Senior Year

- If successful, evaluate offers. Between February-April expect to receive official letters from all the schools applied to whether or not you are admitted. Upon receiving offers, you should consult your faculty advisors. There are many factors to consider (e.g., types and amount of funding being offered) in making this important decision.
- April 15<sup>th</sup>: This is the official deadline recognized by nearly all of the school you would want to attend. You must make a commitment to a school by that date. Notify the program whose offer you accept and also notify the others that you have accepted an offer elsewhere. Don't forget to notify the Philosophy Department here at Portland State University of your success.

### ***Section 6: Still Interested in Graduate Study in Philosophy?***

Take PHL 485, Honors Seminar. In the Honors Seminar, students will be expected to produce substantial written material on a specific research topic, to be shared and critiqued with their peers. This course and the Department's whole Honors Option or "track" of which PHL 485 is a part is designed particularly for students considering graduate work in philosophy. However, you must apply to the honors track and its admission requirements include: an accepted honors application available at Department office; at least Junior standing; completion of at least 20 credits of philosophy (including

at least one 400-level course); minimum GPA of 3.5 in philosophy courses; writing sample. To receive honors in philosophy you must complete at least 60 credits in philosophy and have a minimum GPA of 3.5 in all philosophy courses at graduation, and complete the Honors Seminar (PHL 485) and Honors Thesis (PHL 403; this is an independent study you sign up for with a professor who is an expert in your area of interest) with receipt of A- or above in both courses.