

Section 4: Application Materials*

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 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: Still Interested in Graduate Study in Philosophy?*).

- (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.

*This section (particularly the advice on the 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. This website posts also good and bad examples of personal statements.