

Establishing Questions

- Why do I want to go to grad school? [1]
- What field or discipline am I most interested in?
- Should I apply to do an MA or a PhD?
- To what kinds of programs or universities should I apply? [2]

Application: Basic Ingredients

- Statement of Purpose (SoP), aka Personal Statement (PS) [3]
- Writing Sample (WS)
- Letters of Recommendation (from two to three professors who know your work, and know you) [4]
- E-mails to prospective programs & advisors [7]
- (Money)
- (GRE)
- (TOEFL)

Application: Advanced Ingredients

- Coursework (transcript)
- Language Training [5]
- Life Experience & Breadth
- Long Term Plan [6]
- Choosing Program (hurray!)

[1] Why grad school?

Intellectual discovery and personal growth are integral parts of a BA. Grad school includes these experiences, but the emphasis is on research. You need to be motivated and dedicated to making an original contribution to a scholarly field of knowledge. Consider also the career path or paths toward which grad school leads—in particular, take a hard look at jobs figures for teachers.

[2] What kinds of programs/universities?

Consider fit and resources. Fit indicates the match between your research interests and those of the potential advisor (and department and program). Resources refer to the cost/benefit of a particular program: do you have to pay for it? Is it subsidized (e.g. through TA-ship)? Do they pay you? How (fellowships, TA work, etc.)? Applications are lottery tickets (though more expensive!)—so try to apply to at least three or four programs. Keep detailed information about application dates.

[3] SoP

Be prepared to work harder on this two page document than you have ever worked on a piece of writing. Seriously: less than ten rounds of revision and it won't get there. This is your chance to demonstrate your focus, your skills, and your suitability for the program. Separate paragraphs

on: undergraduate training, personal motivation, future research goals/interests, school-specific pitch, career goals. Some additional advice:

- *A good SoP should demonstrate that the applicant knows what original research entails (and ideally provide evidence that applicant is ready to do original research)*
- *SoP should also illustrate that you're an interesting person, i.e. can pose interesting research questions that are significant to a general field*
- *For both above: SHOW, DON'T TELL ["I am really interested in the history of Japan." vs "I'm interested in the Tokugawa period, particularly the ways in which print culture produced new ways of knowing."]*
- *Write in a straightforward way: 'readerly' vs 'writerly' prose—could any smart reader understand your interests and proposal for future work?*
- *Think about what you can do for the grad program—not what the grad program can do for you*
- *School-specific paragraph is extremely hard to write—"I would love to work with X Professor" does nothing!*
- *Get feedback from your professors and other instructors!*
- *Polish, polish, polish: I repeat, you'll need to work harder on this than on any of your previous papers. The prose and balance of the piece need to be at their very best. And no typos or grammatical errors—don't give admissions reviewers any excuse to disregard your work.*

[4] Letters of recommendation

Does your recommendation writer know your work in detail? Do you visit them during office hours? How did you perform in their class(es)? Keep in mind that professors are writing dozens of letters of recommendation every season. What do you think will make the difference between receiving a strong, detailed letter and a pro forma letter?

[5] Language training

If your field of interest lies outside of the English-speaking world, then language level is a key question. An undergraduate major or minor in a language may serve as a good foundation for further language study. But remember: grad school wants to know whether applicant can do original research (i.e. work in the original language) beginning on Day One. What kind of training do you need to read the documents you want to work on?

If English is not your first language, then you may need to demonstrate other things about your abilities. Namely, that you can read scholarship efficiently and responsibly, and that you can communicate well in English.

[6] Long term

With the death of the so-called American Dream, the mid-20s now presents a widely-overlooked period of identity crisis. On top of this are all the other crises arising today: social, economic, environmental. Research shows that in economic downturns the number of law school applications balloons. Overall, grad school or professionalization programs oftentimes present a

safe-looking alternative to the prospect of finding other work. But oftentimes the strongest candidates are those who have taken some time off after the BA to work in a related field. As a consequence, these persons are perceived as more mature and come with more “interest capital” (experience and perspectives that can be leveraged into insightful scholarly observation).

Grad school isn't for everyone—and it can be really painful to discover this if you're already part of a grad program! But, if you don't get in after a round of applications, if you're really committed to going: try to spend the year productively and then reapply again. It can take a few cycles (Prof. Detwyler applied three times and did a lot in between before he got into a PhD program).

[7] E-mails

It's always a good idea to send a short note to a prospective advisor at a program. The prospective advisor is the person you would likely be working most closely with. In some cases, you might see yourself working equally closely with two faculty, in which case you might as well e-mail both. The e-mail briefly introduces yourself, your work, and your future plans. It's pretty 'pro forma,' meaning it's done to a matter of form or genre. We get a lot of these e-mails and it's a pretty normal little exchange. Keep it short and direct—longer is not better! And don't put much pressure on the professor's response—they may read it and not have time to acknowledge receipt, but that doesn't mean your e-mail didn't 'work.' Remember the purpose of this is really to establish a line of contact and hopefully to have the professor remember your name when it comes time to review applications. So, again: keep it short and direct. Don't stress.

The applicant may want to mention connections between their own interests and the published work of the prospective advisor. This signals that you're familiar with the professor's work and are keen to learn more from them. But it's also a double-edged sword: don't flatter (e.g. 'I find your work so fascinating!'), don't generalize (e.g. 'Your knowledge of literature and language . . .'), remember to 'show, not tell,' and please—please!—make absolutely sure that you're e-mailing the right person. I regularly receive e-mails from prospective students who, in mentioning “my work,” make clear to me that they have no idea what I do. These are typically an automatic 'No,' simply because it tells me that this person is not a careful reader, and that they are likely spamming everyone in the Department with the same introductory e-mail.