

English Ph.D. Application Workshop

Timeline for Application Process

Assuming you will be applying this fall in order to enter a program in Fall 2000...

May

- Decide which professors you would like to have as your reference-letter writers; check in with them to find out whether they'll be on campus in the fall and ask if they will write letters for you.
- Call ETS (609-771-7670) to find out when the fall Literature in English exam will be and when the fall testing bulletin will be available. Once you get it, register for your Lit. in English exam and General Test ASAP.

(The GRE General Test is now computer-based only; be sure to take it in time to have your scores reach the schools you apply to. Check with ETS for more info.)
- Do some preliminary research; talk to professors in your area of specialty to get their recommendations on schools. Also look at The Real Guide to Grad School (more info on the Guide later in this packet).

June

- Time for serious program research! Look at The Gourman Report, U.S. News and World Report's annual guide, and the Peterson's Guide (see info later in this packet on what/where these are) and make a list of schools that interest you. Call them to have applications and program information sent to you.
- Choose a 15- to 20-page paper to serve as your writing sample; revise as needed.
- Start studying for GREs.

July

- Continue researching programs and calling schools in order to receive application information.
- Start writing Statement of Purpose.
- Start calling the schools you know you're interested in to request e-mail addresses of English Ph.D. students in your area of specialty. Begin contacting the students.
- Continue studying for GREs.

August

- Continue writing/revising Statement of Purpose. Have a completed draft ready by the end of this month (except for the closing paragraphs tailored to individual schools, which you'll add later).
- Continue calling schools for e-mail addresses and contacting students.
- Continue studying for GREs.

September

- Bring in your Statement of Purpose for feedback from professors (three different people if possible). Revise.
- Continue e-mailing students at the programs you're interested in.
- Start filling out application forms of any schools you're certain you want to apply to (remember, you'll need to get a typewriter from somewhere). Try to complete one form each weekend.
- Continue studying for GREs.
- Start making a list of the schools you're seriously considering.
- Start researching books/articles written by professors in your area of specialty who teach at the schools that interest you. To find these materials, consult both the MLA electronic database and (if available) the professors' Web pages.
- Bring in your writing sample for any desired feedback from professors.

October

- Continue revising your Statement of Purpose.
- Continue e-mailing students at programs.
- Take GREs?? (if the Literature in English exam is offered in October; it may be November instead)
- Continue researching professors' books/articles.
- Start writing individual closing paragraphs for your Statement of Purpose featuring the reasons why you want to go to each school.
- Continue filling out application forms.
- Finish revising your writing sample.

--END OF OCTOBER: Make final decisions on which schools you're applying to. Make a chart listing each school's deadline.

Order transcripts from all colleges attended. (Check with each school first to see what its policy is on transcripts, as some will allow you to mail them in yourself with your application as long as they're official and in sealed envelopes.)

Prepare information packets for reference-letter writers.

November

--BEGINNING OF NOVEMBER: Give reference-letter packets to the professors recommending you. You should allow your writers five weeks or so to prepare the letters and forms; they are time-consuming!

Have your GRE scores sent to all schools you're applying to.

--Continue filling out application forms.

--Continue revising Statement of Purpose and writing the individual closing paragraphs for each school.

--Call the financial aid offices of the schools you're applying to to find out if they require you to fill out any forms in addition to the FAFSA (some do, some don't).

--Finish researching professors' books/articles.

BEGINNING OF December

--Finish revising your Statement of Purpose.

--Collect materials from your reference-letter writers (most schools will allow you to send in the letters yourself as long as the letter-writers have sealed each letter and signed across the back of the envelope, but check with each school to be sure).

--Assemble and mail out those applications! Most are due between December 15 and January 15. Photocopy each one before you send it out. Get a certificate of mailing from the Post Office for each.

--Jump for joy; you're done!

FAQs

1. How many schools should I apply to?

Between 5 and 10 is usually best. If you apply to fewer than 5, you seriously limit your options; if you apply to more than 10, you seriously damage your bank account!

2. How much does it cost to apply?

Application fees vary from about \$30-65, but when you add in the cost of ordering GRE scores and transcripts and paying for postage, the average cost per application can run close to \$75.

3. What parts of the application are most important?

Your writing sample and Statement of Purpose count most. Reference letters would probably come third.

4. In all likelihood, what percentage of the schools I apply to will accept me?

Between 20-40%. (Of course, this depends on the schools, too, but if you're like most people, you'll go for a mix: a few schools in the Top 10, some in the Top 20, some in the Top 50, and a few that aren't ranked in the Top 50 but are well spoken of and strong in your area of specialty. Be sure to include at least one school you feel you have an excellent chance of getting into so that you have a "safety net.")

5. When will I start hearing from the schools?

You'll hear from most of them between early February and late April.

6. When do I have to give them a firm answer?

By April 15 if you're receiving any form of financial assistance, such as a fellowship, teaching or research assistantship, etc. See the Council of Graduate Schools handout later in this packet.

Useful Publications

1. The Gourman Report Provides rankings of programs.

(Reference)
LA
228.5
.G 68
8th ed.
1997

2. Peterson's Guide to Graduate Programs in the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences

(Reference) Capsule summaries of programs: # of students and faculty, % of applicants admitted, # of financial aid awards made, tuition costs, contact addresses and phone numbers. Sometimes lists the areas/periods a program is especially strong in.
L
901
.P46
Bk. 2
1999

3. The Real Guide to Grad School: What You Better Know Before You Choose

Top drawer of Includes rankings and inside tips on particular English programs' reputations and quirks. Published in 1997.
file cabinet in
inner room of
Classics Library,
HUM 375
NOT FOR CHECKOUT

4. U.S. News and World Report: Best Graduate Schools

Annual publication ranks top programs; recently began ranking programs by specialty in addition to providing a general ranking of English programs.

Factors to Consider When Selecting a School

(in no particular order)

Number of professors who teach in your area of specialty

Compatibility of their interests with yours

Overall size of department

School's ranking/reputation

Number of volumes in library

Any special library collections related to your field?

Financial aid available: fellowships, etc.

Teaching opportunities available

Size of school

Region of country school is in

Size of town school is in

Special resources pertaining to your specialty, such as a Center for Medieval Studies, etc.

Number and kind of courses typically offered in your specialty

The general "bent" of the department: heavy on theory? Big on post-colonialism? etc.

Success in placing students (most schools don't provide much info on this topic, though once you've been admitted to a program you should certainly ask a representative of the program about it; still, you may get some sense of how well the school does in this area by looking at hints dropped in its brochures, reading the info in The Real Guide to Grad School, and asking current students for input)

On Contacting Students by E-Mail

First line of approach: Call the department and ask if they have on file any e-mail addresses of students now in the doctoral program who would be willing to answer questions from prospective students. Request students who are in your area of specialty if possible.

Second line of approach if the department can't provide addresses:

E-mail a professor at the school who teaches in your area of specialty and ask whether he/she knows of any students in that specialty who might be willing to be contacted and, if so, whether he/she could pass along their e-mail addresses to you.

Questions You May Want to Ask Students in the Program

1. How many of the English Ph.D. candidates there are focusing on [your area of specialty]?
2. Does the program focus primarily on developing you as a researcher, or does it foster your growth as a teacher also?
3. What do you like most about the program?
4. What would you change about the program if you could?
5. Is the department's approach to [your area of specialty] primarily historical or theoretical or . . . ?
6. How would you rate the sense of community/camaraderie among the doctoral candidates?
7. How actively does the department seem to work to place its graduates in positions?

How to Reduce Your Stress When Filling Out Applications

1. Do "dress rehearsals"! Make several photocopies of the application before you start filling it out. Handwrite your info onto one photocopy so you know what you want to say; then type that info onto another photocopy so you can see where and how you'll need to abbreviate BEFORE you type the actual application.
2. Try to fill out one application per weekend; don't leave them all until December, when you're writing seminar papers, etc.!

Tips for Writing a Good Statement of Purpose

- Keep it short: no more than 1-2 pages.
- Give it a lively beginning, preferably introducing a theme you'll allude to throughout the statement.
- Keep it focused on your scholastic interests and achievements instead of making it a sort of general autobiography.
- Show what your strengths and qualities are; don't tell the readers what they are.
- Mention your particular research interests early in the statement (by the second or third paragraph) and be as specific about them as you can.
- Mention any teaching or tutoring experience you've had to illustrate your potential as a TA.
- Tailor the final paragraph to each school; use it to explain why you want to go there. You can mention particular courses offered, library collections, etc., but pay special attention to mentioning how the research interests of some of the professors there tie in with your own, citing aspects of specific books/articles you've read. This is an important part of your application!
- *Try to avoid an opening statement about your passion for literature; committee members will see many such statements.*

Info to Include in Packets for Reference-Letter Writers

1. Miscellaneous info such as a list of what courses you took with your letter-writer, when you took them, what grades you got; anything you'd especially like the writer to mention
2. A chart of application deadlines (usually, though, it's best to set one deadline for picking up all the letters)
3. A copy of your Statement of Purpose
4. Photocopies of one or more papers you've written with the professor's original comments on them (check with each professor to see whether he/she wants you to provide one paper or several)
5. Letter of recommendation forms (with your portions of the forms filled out already, of course!) plus addressed envelopes to seal them in

Planning a Campus Visit: Useful Things to Request

Ask if it can be arranged that you:

1. Sit in on one or more courses in your area of specialty
2. Talk with several of the professors who focus upon that area
3. Talk with some of the doctoral students specializing in that area
4. Tour the campus