

APPLICATION GUIDE TO GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PHILOSOPHY

For those interested in the further study of philosophy, graduate school is a natural option to consider. After graduation, you can of course continue to read philosophy, discuss it with others,¹ and even attend department colloquia, all without giving a thought to graduate school. But going to graduate school is probably your only opportunity to pursue your interests in philosophy full-time and, what's more, in the company of some of the leading figures and best fellow students in the world. If that sounds good, you're not alone. Admission to graduate programs is highly competitive. Very few majors in any discipline go on to graduate work, and fewer still go on to a career as an academic. 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 of success.

*Section 1: Academic Careers in Philosophy*²

Many apply to graduate school with plans of an eventual career in academia, and although those with graduate degrees in philosophy can and do find non-academic jobs,³ most graduate programs in philosophy are geared toward training future academics. Academics get to pursue their intellectual passions professionally, often with considerable autonomy, and have comparatively flexible schedules. But you also need to be realistic. Graduate school is difficult and takes many years, and academic jobs, especially good academic jobs, are scarce and getting scarcer. To begin, then, here are some things you ought to know about professional philosophy:

- ***Job types and responsibilities.*** There are three basic kinds of academic positions in philosophy:
 1. *Tenured and tenure-track positions.* 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."
 2. *Fixed-term positions.* These are full-time positions, usually with benefits, for a fixed contract period (usually between one and three years). Some are potentially renewable and, in certain cases, effectively continuing positions. Others are presumed to be temporary, like visiting professorships and post-docs.

¹ There are a large number of open philosophy meet-ups and reading groups in the Portland area. For just a few, see <https://www.meetup.com/topics/philosophy/us/or/portland/>.

² The first three sections of this document are a revised version of David Brink's "[Graduate Study in Philosophy](#)." Many of the revisions and supplementations draw substantially on other sources that are credited where appropriate. A couple other useful pages to compare are Matthew Lu's "[Applying to Grad School](#)" and Eric Schwitzgebel's "[Applying to Ph.D. Programs in Philosophy](#)."

³ For information on alternative career options for philosophy PhDs, see the APA's "[Beyond Academia: Professional Opportunities for Philosophers](#)."

3. *Adjunct positions.* These are part-time positions, usually without benefits, contracted on a per-course basis.

Typical responsibilities include research, teaching, and service (to the department, university, and profession). These responsibilities can vary depending both on one's job type and on the sort of program and institution at which one works. For example, while adjuncts might only be expected to fulfil teaching-related duties, a tenure-track professor will standardly have duties of all three types, though the balance among them is likely to skew towards research at a research university, towards teaching at a community college, etc.

- ***Degree qualifications.*** You will need a Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy)—not just an M.A. (Master of Arts)—for tenure-track positions and, for the most part, for fixed-term positions as well. A Ph.D. is typically preferred even if not generally required for adjunct positions.
 - An M.A. degree takes roughly 2 years to complete and normally 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. Expect to do 2-3 years of coursework and preparation for qualifying exams before undertaking a dissertation, which is a book-length independent research project that makes an original contribution to the advancement of an important issue in your field (see *Section 2: The Demands of Graduate School on One's Time and Finances*).
- ***Competition for academic jobs.*** Admission to doctoral programs in philosophy is itself highly competitive (top programs often admit only 5-10% of applicants). But it is no guarantee of a degree (anywhere from one quarter to one half of those who start Ph.D. programs do not complete them, changing their minds about the Ph.D. or not succeeding in graduate school), let alone a job. There are many more Ph.D.'s than there are academic positions. Jobs are scarcer today than they were just a few years ago, and there is a backlog of recent Ph.D.'s still looking for positions. Tenure-track jobs are particularly competitive, especially at research institutions with graduate programs and at prestigious liberal arts colleges. Most, but by no means all, of the better Ph.D. students at top programs eventually succeed in getting tenure-track jobs, though not necessarily at research universities and often only after one or more post-doctoral or visiting assistant professor positions (i.e., fixed-term positions) at other institutions. The placement rates at lower-ranked programs tend to be lower.⁴
- ***Mobility.*** Careers in some fields are relatively portable. If a Portland-based network administrator wanted to move to Nashville, for example, she'd find plenty of relevantly similar job opportunities there. Academic philosophy is not such a field. Even if there are colleges and universities all over, those in a given

⁴ The most comprehensive data on academic job placements in philosophy is available at <http://placementdata.com/about/>.

region might not be hiring in philosophy, let alone in one's particular area of research specialization. In any given year, in most sub-fields, there are usually fewer than a couple dozen full-time (i.e., tenure-track or fixed-term) positions advertised across the world. In some sub-fields, there may be scarcely a handful. Success on the academic job market will require you to be flexible geographically.

Section 2: The Demands of Graduate School on One's Time and Finances

- ***Time commitment.*** 5-8 years for the Ph.D. (plan on an additional 2 years if you're getting a terminal M.A. beforehand), routinely upwards of 50hrs/week
 - 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).
 - Sometimes a requirement to show proficiency in a second language.
 - Sometimes concurrent teaching responsibilities.
 - Ph.D. qualifying and/or candidacy comprehensive exams.
 - 3-5 years to plan, research, complete, and defend a dissertation.
 - Sometimes concurrent teaching responsibilities.
- ***Finances.*** Given the time demands of graduate school, it's generally unrealistic to expect to support yourself by working a significant number of hours outside of school. And yet the prospects of academic employment are too uncertain and the salaries for academics are typically too modest to justify going into significant debt in pursuit of the Ph.D. In view of this, most doctoral programs don't offer admission without a financial aid package—some combination of fellowship and teaching assistantship support. (*Note:* financial aid is more variable for students at terminal M.A. programs, but the same considerations against taking on significant debt apply here, too.) 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. Research these awards and make a checklist of requirements, application procedures, and due dates.

Section 3: Planning Your Application to Graduate School

Given the competitiveness of graduate school admissions, it would be a waste of your time and money not to take the application process very, very seriously. Application deadlines tend to range from December 1st to January 15th. This means you will be sending out materials in late fall for admission the subsequent fall. But you should start planning your applications and preparing materials far earlier (see below, *Graduate school application timeline*). In fact, it's never too early to start working on your application. Your writing sample (you will be required to submit a sample of your very

best written work—see below, *Application materials*) will especially benefit from many extra months of sustained research and thought and should go through a series of substantive revisions in light of feedback from your professors. If you plan way ahead, you should also be in a better position to get strong letters of recommendation (see below, *Application materials*) since your letter writers will have a more comprehensive portfolio and better developed work from you on which to base their recommendations.

- ***Application materials.*** Read each program’s application instructions carefully. Be sure to send everything that the instructions require (and nothing that they don’t explicitly invite) since incomplete applications will be automatically rejected. A complete application for graduate school generally consists of seven components: [1] your academic transcripts, [2] your GRE (Graduate Record Exam) report, [3] a writing sample, [4] a personal statement, [5] letters of reference, [6] an application form, and [7] an application fee. Some schools further require a CV (Curriculum Vitae) that describes your interests, goals, educational background, special skills, extra-curricular activities, honors or awards, and so on, and those applicants whose first language is not English may also need to provide a TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) report.

Graduate programs typically receive far more applications than admissions committees can closely scrutinize under the time constraints they have. All of the materials in your application should be treated with care, then, because any weak component could motivate an overburdened admissions committee to decide against more seriously examining the rest of your portfolio. That said, the various components of your application are not of equal importance. Admissions committees will often make a rough sorting or even a first cut on the basis of objective data, such as your GPA and your GRE scores. Their evaluation will then focus on your letters of reference and writing sample.

1. *Academic transcripts.* Get to know the [Registrar](#)’s procedure for requesting transcripts. Be sure to note their processing time and fees.
2. *GRE.* Doing well on the GRE is partly a matter of knowing how to take tests. Take a couple full-length practice tests straight through to familiarize yourself with the exam. And do it early on. This will not only help you focus your studying, it will also leave you with options if your practice scores are low, like enrolling in a test prep course or even taking the exam multiple times.
3. *Writing sample.* Final decisions will be made on the basis of your writing sample. It’s the most important component of your application. Work hard on it. Page limits differ from department to department, but in general, writing samples fall in the range of 12-25 pages. Don’t just use an unrevised short essay that received an A in some upper-division course. Even if revised and extended, it’s probably not your best bet for securing admission into a graduate program. This is because the writing sample

needs to demonstrate that you have the capacity for actually doing philosophy, and for conducting philosophical research in particular. The best way to do that is to submit a well-crafted research paper as your writing sample. In the confines of a 10-week course, producing such a paper is a tall order. It can easily take that long just to get an adequate handle on your topic and some of the current literature on it. A good research paper, however, will not only substantively engage current literature but also make a focused contribution to advance that scholarly conversation.

At PSU, the best way to develop a research paper of this kind (and also to see whether you actually enjoy doing philosophical research, which is much of what graduate school and professional philosophy is about) is to take the Department Honors track (see *Section 4: Still Interested in Graduate Study in Philosophy?*). If you don't have a suitable research paper to submit, you'll want to show that you can write effectively and develop rigorous, sustained philosophical thought. Readers will be looking in particular for the clear exposition of complicated and serious philosophical ideas and texts. Work with your professor(s) to determine which of your papers might be a good writing sample, then solicit feedback from them, rethink and revise the paper on the basis of that feedback, and repeat. Whatever you submit, the writing needs to be uniformly good so that quality of your reasoning can come across even if the paper is skimmed. To that end, the writing should be analytical and tightly argued. It should also be highly polished—no typos or spelling mistakes.

4. *A personal statement or statement of purpose.*⁵ This should be thoughtful and well written, demonstrating maturity, commitment to philosophy, and seriousness about research. The statement of purpose should be approximately one to two pages long, although different programs may have different requirements on this point. Write about what you have been up to philosophically and why, as well as what you would like to do in graduate school. Let them know that you are hardworking, serious, and enthusiastic about philosophy. But do not do this by saying, "I am hardworking, 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,

⁵ This advice on the personal statement was taken in part from the University of Glasgow Philosophy Department's "Applying to Graduate Schools in the US," which regrettably no longer appears to be openly accessible on the web. For three examples and more advice, see "[Applying to PhD Programs in Philosophy, Part V: Statement of Purpose](#)."

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 a 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. (Having said that, don't start trying to 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.
- Do you have any special academic achievements, for example, philosophy prizes? If so, be sure to mention them.
- How have you spoken to *this* particular program in your statement? 'Personalize' your statement for each graduate school. The personal statement is a communication between you and this 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 (see below, *Deciding Where to Apply*), 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 simply 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

5. *Letters of recommendation.* You are typically asked for three letters of recommendation. It's usually best if they are all from philosophy professors that have known you well in an academic setting for an extended period of time.

Do not ask someone to write a letter at the last minute. Writing strong letters of recommendation takes a great deal of thought and time (and you will need *strong* letters, not just cursory endorsements). You should request a letter of recommendation in person *at least* one month prior to the earliest application's due date, and ideally much earlier. A good time is in the winter or spring of your junior year, when you should already be conferring with those professors about the development of your application materials and their assessments of your prospects in graduate school (see below, *Graduate school application timeline*).

Since the quality of your letters matters, when you ask for letters of recommendation, do it in a way that gives your professors a way out if they don't think that they can write supportively enough. Ask, for example, not just whether they'll write a letter, but whether they're willing to write a strong letter of support. Further, since strong letters will offer a detailed assessment of your work and potential, it's important to provide your recommenders with materials that will allow them to convincingly develop that assessment with detailed examples (see the checklist below).

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 reference later on, should you be admitted. Always sign the waiver. Academic recommendations are supposed to be confidential.

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.
- Waive your right to see the reference letters.
- Provide the professor with all of the relevant information for their recommendation, including:
 - Copy of your CV
 - Copies of your transcripts to date (unofficial copies are fine)

- List of courses you have taken with them, the grades you received, and a copy of graded material(s) from those courses
 - Writing sample
 - Statement(s) of purpose
 - List of schools/programs you are applying to with application due dates
 - Electronic applications are now the norm; however, if a program you are applying to requires a paper application, you should also include the recommendation forms for each program and pre-addressed and postage stamped envelopes.
- Thank your letter writers.
 - After you hear from the schools, be sure to tell your professors where you were accepted and consult with them about your decision.
6. *Application form.* You might also have to fill out additional forms required by the graduate school.
 7. *Application fee.* Most graduate programs charge an application fee of between \$50 and \$100.⁶
- ***Deciding Where to Apply.*** Two particularly valuable resources to help you identify the programs to which you may want to apply are [*The APA Guide to Graduate Programs in Philosophy*](#) and [*The Philosophical Gourmet Report*](#) (PGR). The APA Guide allows you to search programs by specialty area, degree type, geographical region, and more. The PGR provides lots of information and advice about graduate study in philosophy along with useful rankings of programs and subspecialties, though you shouldn't attach too much significance to small differences in the rankings.

For each program you consider, think about its overall strength as well as its recognized subspecialties. 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).

⁶ A number of graduate schools either charge no application fee or grant waivers. Eligible students can also request waivers from some third-party programs (e.g., [FreeApp](#)), and at PSU, additional support is available to [McNair scholars](#).

But if you already have special areas of interest, you should of course also pay serious attention to the programs that are strong in them.

Here are some other things you may want to know about the schools that seem interesting when you visit their websites:

- 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? In which specialty areas?
- 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? (Remember that the cost of living may differ from place to place when making comparisons).
- What is the quality of life like? What's the town or city like?
- Are there a number of people there you'd like to work with (there should be)? 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 in. Do they seem to be active—i.e., actually teaching courses, publishing, and supervising grad students?
- What are their application procedures? Individual philosophy departments will have their own forms, requirements, and deadlines.

As you're developing a list of programs that interest you, confer with faculty members who know you reasonably well in an academic setting to get a sense of your prospects and the strength of your application materials so far. This will allow you to better strategize about where to apply. There is no simple answer as to the question of how many applications you should make (keep in mind that applying can cost quite a bit of money once all the fees are added up) but try to spread your applications over a range of schools. Submit most of your applications to places where you have a realistic prospect of admission. But also consider applying to a couple of places of exceptional interest to you even if you think your odds are not great.

Since it's possible to apply both to M.A. programs and to Ph.D. programs in the same year, even the most promising undergraduate majors should look at M.A. programs as well. Most of the best doctoral programs don't offer a separate M.A. degree (though their students typically satisfy the requirements for an M.A. along the way and so become eligible to receive one). But there are many stand-alone (or "terminal") M.A. programs. An M.A. program can help you better decide whether graduate study in philosophy is a good fit for you and might be an attractive option if you don't get a good offer from any strong Ph.D. programs. Graduates of top M.A. programs often go on to more elite Ph.D. programs elsewhere. However, there is no guarantee that an M.A. at one of these feeder programs will lead to admission at an elite Ph.D. program, and even in the best case, it will add time to the already long process of getting the Ph.D.

- *Graduate school application timeline.*⁷
 - 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 faculty letter writers
 - Begin working on a research project
 - Winter and Spring of Junior Year
 - Enroll in the Department Honors Seminar to further pursue that research project and develop a strong writing sample
 - 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 and talk philosophy with your peers. 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
 - 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; make a checklist of due dates, required materials, etc., for each application; draft and revise a personal statement; and revise your writing sample.
 - Research financial aid
 - Get in touch with your recommenders and provide them with your application materials
 - Take the GRE
 - Fall of Senior Year
 - Finish up writing sample and statements of purpose
 - Update your CV
 - Thank recommenders
 - Gather and send complete application materials out in November-January

⁷This graduate school timeline is based on one composed by Wes Anderson. It assumes you intend to enroll the fall after graduating.

- Winter and Spring of Senior Year
 - If successful, evaluate offers. Between February-March 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 15th: 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 4: 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 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 recommended particularly for students considering graduate work in philosophy. However, you must apply to the honors track. 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.