

American Historical Association

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Navigating the Graduate Admissions Process

By **Michael H. Creswell**

For undergraduates bitten by the history bug, pursuing a graduate degree in history seems the next logical step. The application process for graduate school is relatively straightforward. You are required to take the Graduate Record Examination, compose a personal statement, include a writing sample, arrange for letters of recommendation, send your undergraduate transcript, write a check, and await a response. Yet when that letter arrives, it might not contain the response you wanted or expected. Even if admitted, the school might decline to offer financial aid or an assistantship to help you pay for your studies. "How can this be?" you wonder. "I received excellent grades as an undergraduate. I also told them how much I love history and that I want to become a college professor. What went wrong?"

As the director of graduate studies for my department, I read a great many applications for graduate study. What is surprising is the number of bright students who submit poor applications. Some simply do not know any better, while sloppiness or overconfidence undermine the others. What follows are a few suggestions that, if followed closely, will significantly improve your chances of being accepted into a graduate history program and increase the odds that you will receive funding.

Start the Process Early

Do not wait to begin your application only a week or two in advance of the submission deadline. This is simply too late. You ought to begin thinking about graduate school well before your senior year, which means researching various graduate history programs and finding the ones that will enable you to reach your academic goals. Once you have identified the schools to which you intend to apply, assemble an application package tailored to each individual program, as the procedure varies among the different history departments. Despite these differences, however, some elements are common to all departments. These include a statement of purpose, a writing sample, a c.v., and letters of recommendation. These common requirements, as well as those that are more specific to individual departments, are discussed below.

Needless to say, the entire application package should be accompanied by a brief cover letter (of not more than two pages) that summarizes your motivation and qualifications for undertaking a graduate program, and also lists the various documents that you are submitting. The letter should also express your desire to be considered for all available fellowships and other financial aid.

The Statement of Purpose

All programs require a statement of purpose in which you explain your preparation and motivation for graduate study. Graduate school entails considerable time, energy, and expense. Admissions committees therefore want to know if you are sufficiently prepared and motivated for graduate study and what you plan to do upon completing the degree. You should therefore ask yourself, and answer in the statement, the following questions: Why do I want to pursue a graduate degree in history? What do I want to study? Academically, how well prepared am I for graduate study?

Why Graduate School?

You should explain in the statement why you want to pursue a graduate degree in history. Do you intend to focus exclusively on either teaching or research or are you committed to both? If teaching, do you want to teach in a public school, a community college, or a state university? Do you seek a graduate degree for self-fulfillment or to augment your current teaching credentials? Or do you intend to work outside of academia once you receive the degree? Answering these and related questions will go far in helping you to make your case to the admissions committee.

Bear in mind that this process is a two-way street. In addition to knowing how you would benefit from being admitted to the program, admissions committees also want to know what you have to offer in return. What makes you unique? What might set you apart from other applicants? Do you have experiences that might inform your approach to history and, if so, how do they relate to your

academic goals? Remember, you are just one of many applying to graduate school, so emphasize what you uniquely bring to the table.

What Do I Want to Study?

Explain what you intend to study. Although many students write passionately of their love of history, it is often unclear what kind or period of history they want to study and why. Specify which area and period of history you want to study. Is it medieval England, colonial America, modern Middle East, or Meiji Japan? Also indicate which approach interests you. Is it gender history, political history, or cultural history? Moreover, is this a topic that you could envisage studying for your entire professional career?

Briefly recount what sparked your interest in this field or period. Perhaps it was a book or a film or a teacher or a vacation that inspired you. Admissions committees are interested in knowing the source of your motivation. If you wish to study a foreign country, mention if you possess the appropriate language skills or have lived in that country. If you do not possess the requisite language skills, make known your plan for acquiring them.

Your Academic Record

Indicate your current level of training in history. This information is especially important for applicants with undergraduate majors in fields other than history. If you have no prior training in the field, explain what led you to history and why you believe that you are qualified to study it at the graduate level. Anticipate these and other concerns about your academic preparation and respond to them fully and candidly. For example, if there has been a long gap in your education, explain why. If your GPA is relatively low, explain why they should nonetheless admit you into the department. Head off problems before they arise.

If you are a history major, highlight the historical research skills that you have already acquired. For instance, if you have participated in several history seminar courses, taken a graduate-level history course, or written a senior thesis, note the types of research questions you crafted, the skills that enabled you to complete the projects, or the archives you worked in as a budding historian. Students writing senior theses would do well to describe their research and possible findings, as admissions committees often see a senior thesis as an indicator of aptitude for independent historical research.

Writing Sample

Submit your best writing sample, preferably from a history course. The admissions committee will evaluate the paper based on its analytic power, creativity, and clarity of expression. Ideally, it should be a research paper that demonstrates your familiarity with the literature on the subject as well as your facility with primary sources. If you are completing a senior honors thesis in history, a draft chapter from the thesis might be appropriate if it is well researched and the prose is fairly polished. Do remember to carefully proofread it one more time before sending it off, even if you have done so many times previously!

Your Professional Profile

Draft a c.v. or resumé that provides a clear portrait of you and your professional experiences. Include honors (scholarships, fellowships, academic honors), publications (if appropriate), professional experience (museum volunteer, secondary school teacher, etc.), foreign language(s) taken (note the language, level, year, grade, and institution), foreign travel, and any other information that an admissions committee would like to know about you. There are several guides available that contain samples of c.v.'s and resumé's.

Letters of Recommendation

Ask three professors familiar with you and your work if they would write letters of recommendation for you. You should preferably make your request in person. Professors are busy, so if they agree to write you a letter, give them at least three weeks advance notice before the deadline. A polite e-mail reminder a week before the deadline is usually well received—especially by absent-minded professors. Be sure to provide them with copies of your c.v. or resumé, the statement of purpose you plan to submit, as well as any other information that will aid them in writing the letter of recommendation. Letters from academics are preferable to recommendations from employers. In addition, letters from senior faculty normally carry greater weight than those from junior faculty.

Potential Advisers

Without exception, graduate students are guided in their studies by a faculty member. Choosing a

faculty mentor is thus an important decision. You should therefore visit the department web site of the graduate program of your choice and find a professor or professors whose scholarly interests mirror your own. Your application will likely be denied if you apply to a department to study a field without faculty representation. And even if the department were to accept you, having your MA thesis or PhD dissertation directed by someone who studies a completely different area of history will not impress funding committees nor increase your attractiveness to potential academic employers.

Once you have identified a potential adviser, ask your current professors if they know this person and to provide you with a professional assessment. If the assessment is positive, the next step is to read an article or book written by that professor to determine if he or she approaches history in a way that inspires you and that you wish to emulate. If the professor's writings resonate with you, write to that person well in advance of applying. Introduce yourself, describe your academic interests, and indicate your intention to apply to the department. Ask the professor if he or she would be willing to serve as your major professor should you be admitted to the program. Many schools have admissions committees, but some have systems whereby one professor can admit a graduate student on his or her own volition. In either case, strive for a match between your intellectual interests and the strengths of the faculty. If you have the chance to visit the university, arrange for a meeting with the professor to see if there is personal compatibility. There is little point studying with a professor if the two of you simply will not get along.

Visit the Career and Placement Center

Visit your current school's career and placement center. Counselors there can provide you advice about specific graduate programs and critique your application package. You should also contact the career and placement center at the university to which you are applying because it might provide more detailed information than can be found in the usual admissions brochures. In addition, many career and placement centers make available samples of personal statements that secured not only admission, but funding as well.

Making Initial Contact

Even prior to formal application, contact the graduate adviser or academic coordinator at the university to which you are applying. Prepare in advance a list of specific questions. For example, ask the academic adviser if the department grants transfer credit. If so, see which of your previous courses are transferable and which ones would benefit you the most. Knowing this information beforehand will make it easier to obtain the needed documents, such as syllabi, before you arrive on campus. You should also inquire about how to apply for departmental assistantships/fellowships. However, be sure to first read carefully the information the department supplies on its own web site. Asking questions about information that is readily available wastes others' valuable time and creates a poor first impression about you (for some possible questions, see the useful lists at www.historians.org/projects/cge/PhD/Questions.cfm).

Visiting the Campus

Seeing in person your intended academic home is an excellent idea. Plan your visit well in advance. Most departments are happy to schedule a tour of the campus and set up lunch with current graduate students. Some departments will also help offset the costs of the visit by providing free lodging. While on the campus, take the opportunity to investigate the library and look for places to live. Try also to meet other faculty besides your intended adviser, as your graduate career will entail dealing with many other people. Finally, put your best foot forward. A successful campus visit could help vault you over other highly qualified candidates who were unable or unwilling to make the trip. While following these suggestions may not guarantee that you will be accepted to the graduate program of your choice, ignoring them altogether will imperil your chances of being accepted to any program, preferred or not.

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