Preparing to Apply to Graduate School

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Preparation for Graduate School

- Where can I find information on applying for graduate school?
- What should I do to prepare for graduate school while I'm still an undergraduate?
- How do I choose a graduate program?
- To how many schools should I apply?
- When are graduate school applications due?
- How do I find funding for graduate school?

Where can I find information on applying for graduate school?

See the information provided by the American Historical Association on graduate school, including articles on applying to graduate school and questions to consider when applying to graduate school, as well as other articles and resources.

What should I do to prepare for graduate school while I'm still an undergraduate?

Undergraduate students planning graduate study in History can do a number of things to prepare:

- Talk to faculty. History faculty are your best resource for graduate school preparation. They can assist you in discovering and developing your academic interests in History, make suggestions about schools and programs, supervise independent writing and research you may take on as an undergraduate, and write letters of recommendation to graduate programs.

- Take additional upper division History courses beyond the minimum course work required in the undergraduate major in your area of interest.

- Begin to study the foreign languages that a graduate program may require.

- If possible, complete the History Honors program.

- Begin to develop your writing sample. Most graduate programs have an autumn or winter deadline for students seeking admission for the following autumn, so you'll need to have your writing sample ready early. The writing sample is usually 12-20 pages of your best writing, often a revised paper from an undergraduate course or part of a senior project. It is helpful if the paper concerns works or issues within your stated area of interest for further study. If you've written a paper for an History course that you're thinking of developing into your writing sample, tell your instructor. He or she may have suggestions for you on how to improve it, or may be willing to work with you on further revisions.

- Begin to write your statement of purpose. Your statement of purpose is an extremely important part of your application materials; you should plan to spend a lot of time on it and rewrite it many times. Some relatively low-cost statement of purpose writing courses
are offered through the UW Women's Center.

Investigate schools and programs. Ask faculty and current graduate students for their recommendations. Read college catalogs, look at websites, request admission packets and begin to look over the materials. See the American Historical Association's Directory of History Departments or Peterson's Guides.

Prepare to take the Graduate Records Exam (GRE). Some students choose to take GRE preparation courses; others use books or software programs. Most schools will require only the General Test. Check with each school for their admission requirements. Some relatively low-cost preparation courses are offered through the UW Women's Center.

How do I choose a graduate program?
First, talk to UW faculty members in your field about what schools are best in that area.

Read about graduate programs to see if they meet your needs:

- Do they offer what you want to study?
- Do they have both MA and PhD programs?
- Do they require more fields or languages than you want to take?
- Do they have faculty members that you want to work with?
- Is the faculty member you want to work with going on leave, or is he or she likely to be retiring soon and therefore not taking on new students?

Consider writing letters or emails to appropriate faculty members at your target schools. Tell them about your academic interests and ask them about the graduate program. Read some of their published work to see if their interests correspond to yours. Try to maintain some dialogue with prospective faculty mentors so that you become more than just another name on a list of applicants.

To how many schools should I apply?
Apply to a range of schools. The nationwide increase in the number of applications to graduate school makes the competition for the limited number of openings in most graduate programs very rigorous.

When are graduate school applications due?
Most graduate school applications are due between December and February.

How do I find funding for graduate school?
Look into what types of funding are available at the schools to which you are applying.

Look into fellowships, Research Assistantships, Teaching Assistantships, and other funding from the schools; there may be different deadlines for applying for funding, so read the information carefully.

Look into outside funding. See the UW Graduate School and the US Department of Education for information on sources of funding.

What are the components of a graduate school application?

Transcripts
Most schools have a minimum GPA for graduate applications (the UW's is 3.0 based on the last 90 quarter credit hours or last 60
semester credit hours). But, in the current competitive climate higher GPAs, usually in the range of 3.5 (A-/B+) or better are the norm.

Please note that not only are your grades important, but also what courses you took. For example, if you are applying to study Chinese History and you have little or no preparation in that area, you will not be a competitive applicant, even though you have a strong GPA. (See also language preparation below.)

Request official copies of your transcripts as early as possible. Transcript offices get very busy in December and January due to the large number of last-minute requests. Your file will be considered incomplete and may be denied if the transcripts do not arrive by the application deadline.

Graduate Record Examination (GRE)
Most schools require the General Test, but some schools may also require the Subject Test. Read each school's application materials to find out what exam you need to take. Be advised that GRE scores are not valid after five years.

Be sure to take the GRE well in advance of the graduate program's application deadline to ensure that the scores arrive in time. You can register for the GRE online.

The verbal and analytical scores tend to be given the most attention; a score below the 80/85% range will require added strength in other areas of the application to offset the lower scores.

Letters of Recommendation
Most applications require three letters of recommendation.

Good letters of recommendation are an important component in admission decisions. Request letters of recommendation from faculty members who know you well enough to discuss your work and your potential in detail and can attest to your scholarly abilities. Graduate admission committees need to see letters that speak specifically to your accomplishments as an undergraduate, your potential as a graduate student, and your potential for fitting into and contributing to a community of scholars. It is also important to have the support of a professor whose specialization closely relates to the field that you want to study so that he or she can speak to your potential in that area.

To assist faculty whom you've asked to write recommendations for you, consider providing them with a draft of your statement of purpose or a brief summary of your recent work and accomplishments and your plans. It can also be helpful to them if you're able to provide them with copies of papers you wrote for their courses or other work you completed under their supervision.

Ask for letters well in advance of application deadlines. If possible, collect letters and mail them with the rest of your application materials. Letters should be in sealed envelopes and the professor should sign his or her name across the seal. If it is not possible to send the letters with the rest of your materials, check with your recommenders to be sure that they send the letters directly to the graduate program.

Writing Sample
Above all, the writing sample should show your mind at work. The writing sample should be a seminar paper or other research paper written in the general field of History that you intend to pursue at the graduate level. Graduate programs require writing samples of 10-25 pages. The most impressive writing samples demonstrate an ability to conduct research in a variety of sources, to write analytical prose, to construct a reasoned argument based upon evidence, and to create a context for assessing the significance of what has been presented.
Your critical writing sample should represent your best work in an area related to the academic interest(s) you want to pursue in your graduate study. Continue to revise and refine. Work with faculty whenever possible on your revisions. Prepare to turn in a clean, polished writing sample that has been edited thoroughly.

Statement of Purpose
Overall, give an impression of purpose and self-awareness. Be specific about the intellectual experiences that led you to your proposed areas of study; include courses you have taken, research you have done, books read, methodologies discovered, etc. Note any special relevant skills that you possess. Link these to some reasonably specific statement of your research or teaching interests and ultimate career goals. Discuss how these interests and goals can be advanced by pursuing graduate work in a particular graduate program by working with specific professors or by utilizing resources of the school. If you are aware of any weakness in your application, mention your plans to deal with them.

Work hard at perfecting your statement of purpose. Your statement of purpose is an extremely important component of your graduate admission packet. Ask peers, faculty, or advisers to review what you've written, and plan to make multiple drafts.

Foreign Language
Good foreign language preparation is impressive evidence of seriousness and likely success in a graduate program. Language training is often neglected by undergraduates, but is vital to graduate study, particularly in areas such as Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern, Asian, Latin American, Western and Eastern European, Russian, and African History. Speak to faculty members in your field about what languages will be necessary for graduate study.

If you do not have sufficient language study, discuss in your statement of purpose your plans to acquire the appropriate language training, such as taking intensive summer courses or attending foreign language institutes.

Note: Fill out all of the application paperwork completely and submit all requested information (personal statement, GRE scores, recommendations, etc.) on time. Most schools have an application checklist. Make sure that there's nothing missing. If you have questions about any of the materials, contact the graduate adviser for the targeted program. Be sure to read the application materials carefully. Failure to complete application forms accurately and to submit required supporting materials to the appropriate offices by the indicated deadlines may result in denial.

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