Applying to Graduate Programs in Philosophy

Department of Philosophy

Agnes Callard, *Director of Undergraduate Studies*
Tyler Zimmer, *Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies*

Should You Go to Grad School?

Many highly ranked programs receive upwards of 300 applications but only accept a small handful of students every year, e.g. five to eight per cohort. Of those accepted, fewer will actually finish and obtain their Ph.D. Of those who are awarded the Ph.D, only a minority will ever be offered a tenure-stream position. And not all of those who assume tenure-stream positions will be granted tenure when the time comes.

We don't say all of this to scare you away from applying to graduate school, but we do want you to be aware of the considerable hurdles you'll have to clear in order to advance in this profession.

Apart from weighing the risks and challenges of pursuing a Ph.D in philosophy, those contemplating grad school should also ask themselves the following questions about their scholarly interests, their motivations and preferences so far as lifestyle is concerned:

1. Are you sure philosophy, in particular, is the right fit for you? Would you be more comfortable and happier pursuing a Ph.D in another discipline?
2. Why do you want to go to graduate school? What reasons do you have for wanting to get a Ph.D? Are these sufficiently weighty to propel you through the long and tedious process of completing your degree?
3. Do you love reading, writing and talking about philosophy? Are you comfortable spending a large proportion of your time doing this and nothing else?
4. Even at the top programs, the stipends grad students receive are modest in terms of the amount of money they provide. How do you feel about spending, say, seven years living on that amount of money?

What Goes into a Grad School Application?

Most Ph.D programs will require the following application materials:

1. Three faculty letters of recommendation.
2. Writing sample.
3. Statement of purpose.
4. Transcript.
5. GRE scores.
6. Application fee.

The most important part of the application is the writing sample, followed (in descending order of importance) by letters of recommendation, transcript and statement of purpose. Many programs are no longer requiring GRE scores and in many cases it is possible to apply for an application fee waiver.

Letters of Recommendation

Ideally, you should consider asking faculty members to write letters on your behalf in the Spring of your third year or during the Summer between your third and fourth years. When deciding who to ask, bear the following in mind:

1. Typically, the more specific and concrete a letter of recommendation, the better. Faculty who know you well, who are familiar with your work, are therefore well-placed to write good letters. Bear this in mind as you select courses and write papers. This is also a reason to make time to talk with faculty in office hours so that they can get to know you.
2. All else equal, the more well-known a faculty member is in the profession writ large, the better so far as your letter of recommendation is concerned. More specifically, admissions committees may be better able to evaluate a recommendation letter from someone they know than from someone they've never met. This consideration, however, should be weighed against the first consideration above—in other words, a well-known faculty member who doesn't know you particularly well may not be in a position to write a personalized letter that conveys detailed acquaintance with your strengths.
3. Don't be shy about checking in with faculty members to ensure that they are on track to meet important deadlines. If you're having trouble getting in touch with your letter writers, contact the DUS or the ADUS.

The Writing Sample

This brings us to the writing sample. Many times, students select the raw material for a writing sample from among the best papers they've written for coursework. We strongly encourage you to ask a faculty member, point blank, whether they think the paper you've chosen makes for a suitable writing sample.

As early as is feasible—ideally no later than the summer before your fourth year—you should seek feedback on the draft writing sample from as many people as possible, whether they be faculty, grad students or peers. Remember: the feedback you get on it from faculty mentors,

grad students or peers can only improve your competitiveness as an applicant. None of these parties will be charged with deciding whether to admit you to a Ph.D program—their only role as readers would be to help you make your writing sample as strong as possible.

A good writing sample will be very clearly written, intuitively organized and tightly argued. The sample should address a substantial philosophical problem—*e.g*. it might present an argument, evaluate an argument put forward by someone else, or offer an interpretation of a difficult text. That problem should be precisely stated and motivated early on in the paper.

How long should the sample be? Standardly about 15 pages, though individual programs may vary in terms of their requirements. Certainly it should be no more than 25 pages—indeed, it is wise to assume that most admissions committees will not have time to read anything longer than 20.

The Statement of Purpose

As with your writing sample, ask for faculty to read and give you feedback on your statement of purpose. Many applicants produce a "generic" version of the statement of purpose and then tailor it to the specific programs to which they're applying. "Tailoring" here might mean: highlighting a specific faculty member with whom you'd like to work, emphasizing continuity between your interests and the specific strengths of the department, etc. While faculty tend to disagree about how best to craft one's statement of purpose, there is general consensus that you should try as much as possible to be honest and straightforward about what actually interests you and why you'd like to go to grad school.

It is common for faculty letter writers to ask to see your statement of purpose before they write your recommendation. Keep in mind that without a statement of purpose, a faculty member's sense of your interests might be skewed by the courses you took with them.

Transcript

Your transcript conveys at least two things to the admissions committee. First, your performance in philosophy courses is an indicator of scholarly potential. Do as well as you can in your philosophy courses, but know that grades are not the most important part of your application. Many times, committees will look to grades to see if there are any "red flags" that might disqualify an applicant.

Second, the array of courses you've taken will give the admissions committee a rough sense of whether you have a solid background in philosophy. What counts as "solid" will vary from program to program, but many top schools will expect applicants to have a good grounding in the history of philosophy, to have taken logic, and to have some familiarity with contemporary work in theoretical and practical philosophy. Thankfully, philosophy majors in our department are required to pursue a course of study that covers all of these bases.

Must you do the Intensive Track version of the major in order to be maximally competitive for graduate programs? Not necessarily. In the last two years, about half of the students admitted to Ph.D programs, including those admitted to the most highly ranked programs, were not Intensive majors. So, while it may well help you to do the Intensive Track rather than the Standard Track, doing the Intensive major should not be viewed as a necessary condition for securing admittance to top grad programs.

GRE Scores

As noted above, many top programs are no longer requiring GRE scores as part of their application process. Nonetheless, it may still be the case that many programs to which you apply do require them. Two things are worth bearing in mind here: first of all, GRE scores (if required) are the least important part of the application. The thing they're looking for, as with grades, is a "red flag" (a particularly low score) that would speak against admitting you. If your grades aren't as high as they could be, however, you might consider trying to score highly on the GRE, taking it more than once for instance, in order to strengthen your application.

The second thing to note about GRE scores is that, generally speaking, your verbal score is much more important than your math score. There may be cases in which this is not true—for example, applicants hoping to do formal work in epistemology or logic may well need to have high math scores as a condition of being accepted. But, as a general rule, philosophy programs will tend to care more about your verbal score than your math score—if they care about your GRE scores at all.

Where Should You Apply?

Figuring out where to apply is often tedious. It is therefore important to begin the process early and to enlist faculty in order to assess whether a program would be a good fit. As you vet programs, ask yourself a few questions:

- What area in philosophy, or what set of problems, or which figures in the history of philosophy are you interested in focusing on as a Ph.D student? Does the department have faculty with the knowledge base and research focus to satisfy these interests?
- To what extent is philosophical diversity important to you—*e.g.* being able to take courses in theoretical as well as practical philosophy, continental as well as analytic, contemporary as well as historical?
- What is the composition of the graduate student body in the department in terms of philosophical interests as well as demographics (e.g. gender and race)? To what extent does this strike you as a welcoming, inclusive environment for graduate study?
- What interdisciplinary opportunities does the university offer? If you're interested in political philosophy, for example, are there theorists in Political Science with whom you might take classes?
- What is the job placement record of the program? Note that this should be publicly visible on the program's website. Placement record is correlated with the Philosophical Gourmet Report's ranking system for Ph.D programs.
- What sort of funding package does the program offer? Does it offer a stipend and health benefits? Does it guarantee tuition remission for the duration of your career as a grad student? Does it guarantee funding for at least six years? What sort of teaching responsibilities will you have and when are you required to begin teaching?

Aside from asking people in our department about grad programs, you might also consider reaching out to people in the programs to which you're considering applying. In particular, you might email current grad students at those programs and ask them about their experience so far. Most grad students will be happy to answer your questions and, being students rather than faculty members, they have fewer reasons to be anything other than candid and open about their experience of the program. The American Philosophical Association (APA) has a guide that's worth glancing at, too.

Generally speaking, however, you may wish to forgo spending enormous amounts of time researching a program before you've been admitted. Thus, one way to approach applying would be to cast a wide net and then, from among the programs to which you've been accepted, do intensive research—along the lines sketched above—in order to determine whether the department would be a good fit.

M.A. Programs vs. Ph.D Programs

There are basically two kinds of grad programs in philosophy: Ph.D programs and terminal M.A. programs. Ideally, after graduation from university one would obtain admittance to a top-ranked Ph.D program straight away. But, of course, things don't always work out as we plan. Thus, one option for applicants who did not get in to the Ph.D programs of their choice is to apply to a Terminal M.A. program. The raison d'etre of these programs is to prepare their students to be competitive applicants for highly-ranked Ph.D programs. Highly regarded programs of this sort, *e.g*. Tufts, Brandeis, Arizona State, Georgia State, tend to have impressive records of placing their students in top Ph.D programs.

One drawback of terminal M.A. programs is that they are rarely fully-funded, meaning you may well have to pay tuition and/or study without a living stipend or health benefits. For this reason, some students prefer to attend a lower-ranked Ph.D program for a year or two (with full funding) and then attempt to transfer out to a higher ranked program after their first or second year.

As we'll discuss more below, one needs to have a Ph.D to navigate the highly-competitive academic job market. Thus, there is not much reason to obtain a philosophy M.A. as such; it is, rather, a means to the end of getting a Ph.D from a high-powered program with a strong placement record.

Detailed Timetable for Applying to Graduate School

Note: the timetable below assumes that you'll be applying in your fourth year. But many students also apply in the year just after graduation. Both options are fine—there's no advantage, in terms of competitiveness, to applying in one's fourth year. If you should apply after graduation, simply push the timetable below back one year.

1. *Autumn of Third Year*. Begin to talk to faculty and graduate students about the possibility of doing grad school. Ask them what their experience was like, why they decided to go, what they thought they wanted to study when they first began a grad program versus what they ended up writing their dissertation on, and so on.

2. *Winter and Spring of Third Year*. Begin to research Ph.D programs. Continue conversations with faculty and grad students about the costs and benefits of pursuing a Ph.D in philosophy.
3. *End of Third Year*. Approach faculty about letters of recommendation and begin to determine what your writing sample will be.
4. *Summer before Fourth Year*. Work on your writing sample and finalize dealings with faculty letter writers.
5. *Autumn of Fourth Year*. Get a final round of feedback on your writing sample and statement of purpose. Create a spreadsheet with all of the schools to which you'll be applying and all of the appropriate deadlines. If necessary, check in with faculty letter writers to ensure that they meet their deadlines.
6. *Winter of Fourth Year*. Applications due! Deadlines vary by program, but most will require you to submit your application between November and February.
7. *Spring of Fourth Year*. The timeline will vary by program, but many programs will send acceptance letters out in the early Spring and host on-campus events for prospective students soon thereafter.

The Academic Job Market

As you've probably heard, the job market for Ph.D's in philosophy is very competitive. There are far more Ph.D's awarded each year than there are jobs. And among the jobs that are available, fewer and fewer are tenure-stream and more and more are contingent. If you remain committed to finding a tenure-stream position, you should be prepared to take whatever opportunities come your way, no matter where they might be located.

This doesn't mean you should simply give up hope of ever finding a job in academia. But you should go into grad school knowing that it is likely to be an uphill battle finding a suitable position after you finish. For this reason, you should ask yourself how you would feel about not working in academia after having spent almost a decade completing a Ph.D in philosophy. If you have the thought that this would be highly unfortunate but that you'd forever value the training and intellectual stimulation this process entailed, that's a good thing. If you find this possibility intolerable, you might reassess whether the risks and rewards of pursuing a Ph.D are the right fit for you.

Non-Academic Job Opportunities After Grad School

The training you receive as a philosopher develops a number of transferable skills that can be employed in a variety of jobs, e.g. consulting, higher education administration, finance, publishing, etc.