

Applying to Graduate School--Some Things to Assess:

1. How tired am I? How passionate am I, at this time, about pursuing a PhD?
1. What would be the advantages of applying now? What would be the disadvantages of applying now? And later? What would be gained by waiting and what are some drawbacks of waiting to apply?
2. Would I like to get some other kinds of experience--working, interning and/or travelling--before committing to 6-8 years of graduate work?
3. Am I sure about what kind of program I want to pursue? Do my faculty advisers at my undergraduate institution believe that I am ready to apply? [It is important to ask this straightforwardly. If a faculty member seems hesitant, then you need to ask what she/he thinks that you need to do to strengthen your application.]
4. How strong is the writing sample that I will include with my application?
5. Do I have three letters of references from faculty who know me well and who can write letters of substance—letters that speak to my strengths and from faculty members who will write a strong endorsement of my application? Have I been building relationships with faculty over time? Do I visit faculty members frequently enough during office hours?
6. How strong is my transcript? Would having grades from senior year for the admission committees to review strengthen my application?
7. Have I been able to identify 5-8 different programs to which I want to apply?
8. Have I done enough research about programs?
9. Have I been able to identify at least two different faculty members with whom I would like to study at each graduate program I am considering?
10. Have I confirmed that these faculty members are still at these schools?
11. Have I been working for a while on my statement of purpose? Have my faculty advisers/mentors been able to give me feedback and assist me in revising and enriching my statement? Is it written as an intellectual biography, starting from the present and working backward? What will make your statement stand out in the memories of the many readers who will look at it?
12. Are my statements written such that they speak to the strengths of each department I am applying more generally? Can I communicate something about the work of two different faculty members in the department? How do I see my future research, and how does it relate to the work of those faculty members in the departments to which I am applying? (Remember, you are applying to a department, not to a school. You need to research the programs before you apply to them.)
13. Have I been able to do enough preparation for the GRE? Have I explored what role the GRE will play in the admission decision at the institutions to which I will apply?

Common Mistakes when applying:



- Indicating that you might also apply to a professional school.
- Applying to departments of different disciplines
- Writing a statement that is broad, general, and sentimental
- Adding letters from employers, community service supervisors, etc. For a PhD program, they are only interested in receiving letters from faculty who can say they have taught you. Recommendations from instructors should come from those who hold PhDs, and preferably those who are tenured. They need not necessarily come from “stars.” It is best if they come from those who know you well intellectually.

Where did you leave off with the faculty members when you graduated?

- *Who are the 3 faculty members you will ask to write you letters?*
- *Have you remained in contact with faculty members since you graduated? How often?*
- *What courses and work did you do with the faculty you want to ask? How did they come to know who you are intellectually?*
- *What might you need to communicate to the faculty about what you have been doing since graduating, and how it has informed your decision and your research interests to go to graduate school?*
- *What might you need to do to re-connect with faculty members? How will you go about it?*
 - *Suggestion & Steps:*
 - *Write brief a brief note and ask for a phone appointment.*
 - *. During the phone appointments, elaborate a bit on what you would like to update them on what you have been doing since graduating*
 - *“Invite” them into your process of determining which departments are will best fit their interests and needs.*
 - *Ask if they can give you feed back on draft(s) of your personal statement*
 - *Seek guidance on how to prepare and shorten a longer paper to serve as your writing sample.*
 - *Consider visiting campus to meet with them in person.*

When you go to faculty office hours:

- Make it about “work.” Go in with questions. Explore some aspect of what you have read for her/his course. If you don’t have any questions, make them up. But use questions about research & what you are reading as a “way in” to the conversation.
- If appropriate to your discipline, get into a lab. Look into the research/writing of the faculty member before going. Go with an agenda. Know what you want to get from a meeting. Go



prepared. Make it easy for the faculty member to get to know who you are intellectually. Other things will come with time.

- For those from whom you want to get letters of recommendation, you should aim to take at least 2 courses with each. This affords faculty members to see your capacities grow over time, and offers them a structure in which to get to know you.

When Asking for a Letter of Recommendation:

1. Before asking for a letter, if possible, meet in person. As suggested above, seek advice about how to apply successfully and get faculty input and recommendations about programs to which they think you should apply.
2. When you ask faculty members to write letters, make sure that you also ask if they would be comfortable writing you a strong letter. It is important to give faculty members a way out. Don't make it awkward to refuse you. It is in your best interest to let people tell you that they do not know you well enough to write strong, substantive letters, or that they do not believe your work/application is strong or competitive enough.
3. Always waive your right to see the letter. If you are not secure enough about the quality of the letter that could be written, then you should not be asking that faculty member for a letter.
4. Faculty members should be asked for a letter at least 6 weeks in advance.
5. When you do ask, provide the following:
 - Transcript
 - Copies of papers submitted for previous courses
 - Draft of statement of research interest
 - A resume or C.V.

