The Graduate Degree in History

Graduate study in History is personally rewarding and enhances your career options. This guide is intended to help you prepare for and succeed with graduate study, as well as with your career goals.

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Reasons to Pursue Graduate Study

The Master’s Degree:

- enhances your qualifications and salary for many positions in public history, secondary education, civil service, journalism, etc.
- offers the possibility of teaching at a community college
- is especially valuable to individuals who aspire to careers in administrative positions
- is a prerequisite to PhD study
- offers a more direct relationship between your investment and your financial “pay off” than does a History PhD

The History PhD:

- is almost indispensable to becoming a university professor
- is of limited value for most other purposes

A doctorate might be valuable for acquiring a position at a community college and/or for securing some prestigious archival, museum, and administrative positions. But you can often do this type of work upon completion of your MA in History. Job experience, persistence, and geographical flexibility will frequently be more important to your career advancement than education beyond the Master’s level.

Further, pursuit of a PhD is marked by some more pronounced disadvantages than is pursuit of an MA. Earning a doctorate in history is very expensive, time consuming, competitive, and marked by a high drop out rate. (In 2006-07 the Council of Graduate Schools reported that fewer than half of History PhD students completed their degrees within 10 years; the AHA reported a similar statistic in 2008.) In some cases the attainment of a PhD will actually raise questions about your suitability for jobs other than university teaching.
What Graduate Schools Want to See in Your Application

In general, the people reviewing your application want to see:

- signs of academic ability
- seriousness of purpose and sophistication, i.e., knowledge of your field of specialization, historiography, etc.
- compatibility between what you want and what they have to offer

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Important Components of Your Application

Transcripts

Good grades are generally assumed, especially for the last two years of undergraduate study. Grades alone are probably not the main thing that distinguishes one applicant from another.

Your transcripts should reflect appropriate background in history. In other words, if you say you want to study American Civil War history, the reviewer will hope to see that you have had the undergraduate courses that would help support such study.

Appropriate Foreign Language Study

This is crucial for non-Americanists, and especially for PhD applicants. If you are going to do doctoral research in, say, German history, you must know the German language: there is no way around it. Even when studying U.S. history, most PhD programs require reading knowledge of two foreign languages.

Language study relevant to your proposed field of study is best, but any language study is better than none.

The more years of foreign language study, the better—your language preparation is often more important than your preparation in history.

Graduate Record Examination (GRE) Scores

The reason that schools are interested in your GRE scores is because the scores are a way of leveling the playing field. Admissions officers are faced with the problem of determining whether a student from Eastern Washington University with a 3.9 GPA is more or less likely to succeed in the program than a student from, say, the University of Washington who has a GPA of 3.6. The GRE is test that both applicants will take, so it offers one way of sorting this out. There are other ways (i.e., your letters of recommendation, your statement of purpose), but the GRE score is an important factor.
The GRE tests in three areas: verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, and analytical writing skills. In applying to a history program, the verbal and analytical parts are the most important, and you should get as high a score on those sections as possible. Departments will often tell you what type of GRE score their successful applicants have. In any case, if you aspire to a PhD program, you should endeavor to get into the 90th percentile or above in the verbal and analytical sections. This will mean studying for the exam in advance. There are many books available to help you prepare. There are also professional preparation courses available through Princeton Review, Kaplan, and others. Many prospective graduate students take advantage of these preparatory courses and tutoring despite the considerable expense.

**Letters of Recommendation**

Generally, three letters of support are required.

When asking someone to write a letter, it is a good idea to ask them whether or not they want any information from you—copies of papers you wrote for their classes, or more information about your background or plans, for example.

Do not be afraid to ask your professors to write letters of recommendation. They have had many letters of recommendation written for them; they know that it is time to return the favor.

Trusting the people who recommend you is important. Although you have the legal right to see the letters if you choose, waiving that right is highly recommended. If you do not waive your right to access, the admissions officer may fear that the letter of recommendation does not contain an honest opinion about your ability. Keep in mind that most people will not write nasty things about you, even in confidential letters. If someone believes that they would be hard pressed to write a positive letter of recommendation, they will usually find a way to tell you so.

**Statement of Purpose**

This is an important component of your application and you should take it very seriously. This is your chance to tell the program why it is right for you (and why you are right for it).

- Tailor each letter to the university concerned. Show familiarity with what the school has to offer. If you are applying because the school has a great Asian library, abundant offerings in ancient Greek language, or Professor So-and-So, say so.
- Address any obvious weakness in your application and explain what you have done about it. If you were partying the first three years of college, lack preparation in language, or if you learned only last quarter that Irish history is your true love, this is the place to explain it. Present a short, reasonable case that potential weaknesses have been (or can be) overcome.
- Make sure the letter is well written. Grammatical errors, misspelled words, and carelessness will count against you. This is one place where the school gets an actual example of your work, so impress them.
- Unless directed otherwise, assume that your statement should be no longer than one single-spaced, typed page.
- Ask other people to read your letter and offer suggestions for improvement.
• Explicitly state your educational and career goals. If you want to earn a PhD, conduct research, and teach at the university level, say so.

Writing Sample

Most schools ask for a writing sample, some do not. If you are asked, you want to submit a piece that shows that you are a capable writer and researcher. Your paper from History 490 will usually work well for this purpose because it demonstrates your ability to use primary sources, but research papers you have written for other classes might be just as good. A book review is a less desirable submission, because its aims are more limited than the aims of a research paper.

Remember that the people reading your application may have many other applications to read, and they may be in a hurry. From this perspective, submitting a 15-page paper is probably better than submitting a 50-page one. Similarly, submitting a chapter from your MA thesis is probably better than submitting the whole thesis.

NB—Applying to graduate school, especially to PhD programs, is a time-consuming process. You must begin this process by August or September of your senior year if you hope to enroll in a PhD program the following academic year. The application deadline for most PhD programs is between November and January; most universities make their decisions by March and April for admission in the upcoming academic year. If you run short on time, it is better to wait a year, save some money, and polish your application rather than to rush out a slipshod application.

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What to Look for in a Graduate (especially in a Doctoral) Program

Look For Universities Having:

• a national reputation in the field of history (the job market is a national market, so you do not want to be educated within a regional market)
• good library resources in your field of research interest
• graduate students who share your interests (it is better not to be the only student studying Ancient Greece)
• more than one potential advisor (in case something goes wrong with your first choice)
• language training appropriate to your field of interest
• centers or institutes focused on your area of study (an Asian studies center, for example, or an institute on aging)

Look For An Advisor With:

• a national reputation as a scholar (or a very strong likelihood of developing such a reputation within the next 5 years)
• research interests compatible with your own (some advisors have broader scholarly interests than others)
• a reputation for good advising/mentoring
• the likelihood of being intellectually active for at least another 10-15 years (by the time you graduate, you do not want your advisor to have passed away or be in “retirement mode”)
• no more than eight or ten other advisees (the advisor needs to devote considerable time and effort to mentoring you)

Ideally, you should read what your potential advisors have written. Contact them directly through e-mail or snail mail to get a sense of how approachable they are, what their current research interests are, and whether or not they are interested in taking on additional advisees. Remember to be polite, earnest, and brief. To get an idea of what type of student interests them, see what other dissertations they have directed or are currently directing. (You can find this information at the AHA website, or by consulting Dissertations & Theses). Ask the department about contacting a graduate student who currently studies in your field. Consider what the student has to say about the program and your potential advisor.

Keep this in mind: apart from you, your advisor will be the most important person in shaping your graduate career and at least the first 10 years of your professional career. During your graduate career and beyond, your advisor will write dozens of letters of recommendation for you (for further study, for financial support or grants, for jobs). It is very important to have an advisor who will take an active interest in your work and career. Within certain limits, it is more important to have a great advisor than to go to a great school.
Additional Resources

American Association of Museums website, at http://www.aam-us.org

American Association for State and Local History website, at http://www.aaslh.org

American Historical Association website

A wealth of information about graduate programs, dissertations in progress, and the state of the profession is available here. The address is http://www.historians.org.

For information on the history MA degree in particular see:

Philip M. Katz, for the AHA’s Committee on the Master’s Degree in History, “Retrieving the Master’s Degree from the Dustbin of History,”

For information on History PhD programs see:

“History Doctoral Programs in the United States and Canada,”
http://www.historians.org/projects/cge/PhD/


Graduate Record Exam website, at www.ets.org/gre. Includes information on the test, including practice tests.

Perspectives

This is the newsletter of the American Historical Association, available in the History Department office or through association membership. It contains regular articles about graduate study in history.

Society of American Archivists website, at http://www.archivists.org