

# *Applying to graduate school in philosophy*

November 3, 2018

## 1 *Before you apply*

- Find a faculty mentor (or mentors) to help you with your search.
- Do some research to figure out which graduate programs in philosophy are the best fit for you, given your philosophical interests, goals, and personal circumstances. You may have heard of the Philosophy Gourmet Report and the APA Guide to Graduate Programs in Philosophy.<sup>1</sup> However, it is important to research specific graduate programs to gauge the extent to which they may match—or not—your initial research interests, goals, and personal circumstances. Departmental websites generally include specific information on the structure of the graduate program and its placement record as well as links to individual pages by faculty and graduate students. These can give you a sense of a variety of research interests of people in the department.<sup>2</sup>
- Remember to ask for letters of support as early as you can. The sooner you ask the more time you give letter writers to compose a detailed and informed letter. A last minute request may lead to a brief, generic letter, which, though supportive, may not be informative enough to make your application stand out and bolster your case.
- Make sure to research the deadlines for the graduate programs to which you want to apply. The deadline for USC is December 31, but other deadlines range from late Fall to early Spring.
- Graduate admission is a centralized process in some institutions. At USC, for example, graduate admission is conducted by a central Office of Graduate Admissions in conjunction with each graduate program. This office would be the first step for a variety of practical questions to do with documentation, transcripts, language requirements, etc.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 *Your application*

Your application will be read by multiple members of the admissions committee in the first rounds of assessment, and all members of the committee will look at applications that reach the last stage of evaluation. Readers, however, will make a global assessment of the file, which means that no one aspect of the file will generally rule the application in—or out—of contention. Having said that, it makes

<sup>1</sup> You can find them here:

<https://www.philosophicalgourmet.com>  
<https://www.apaonline.org/page/gradguide>.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the graduate program at USC, you may consult the Graduate Program page:

<https://dornsife.usc.edu/phil/graduate/>

<sup>3</sup> Here is the address of the Office of Graduate Admissions:

<https://gradadm.usc.edu>

At USC, you will find additional information in the To Apply section of the departmental website:

<https://dornsife.usc.edu/phil/to-apply/>

sense to pay special attention to aspects of the applications that are under your direct control such as your personal statement and your writing sample. What follows are some comments on some aspects of a typical application for graduate school in philosophy.

### 2.1 *Biographic information and contact details*

Make sure you use the same contact details in all the documents you submit. It is helpful, in particular, to list the same email address and phone number in your CV as you do in other parts of the application. Your e-mail address will eventually be used in order to contact you with the outcome of your application.

### 2.2 *Academic records*

You should submit transcripts of each of your previous academic institutions. Some institutions, USC, for example, require official copies of your transcripts to be mailed directly from your institution in order to eventually process enrollment. Your academic record plays a role in the overall assessment of the application, but will generally not, by itself, rule it in — or out — of contention.

### 2.3 *GRE*

The GRE is one more piece of information for admissions committees to consider, though it is generally not as central as some of the others listed below. This is one aspect of the application that can be offset by some of your other application materials.

### 2.4 *Personal statement*

Your personal statement is one of the most important aspects of your application. It is an opportunity to introduce yourself and to showcase your sense of purpose and commitment to philosophy.

- Present your main research interests in philosophy and explain how they connect to broader areas of research in the department.
- In order to write an effective personal statement, you may want to look at the research interests of the faculty and graduate students in the program to check whether—and how—they fit your own interests. It may help if you are able to explain how you take the graduate program to fit your research interests and goals.
- Be brief, generally no more than one or two pages, but use the space to make clear you have a sense of purpose and have carefully considered the question of mutual fit with the department.

## 2.5 *Writing sample*

If the personal statement showcases your sense of purpose and commitment to the subject, the writing sample provides evidence of research ability in philosophy. This is another crucial aspect of your application, and you should pay special attention to it. Different graduate programs may have different length requirements but USC, for example, suggests a length between 12 and 20 pages.

- Choose a sample that represents your best work to date and is, to some extent, connected to your primary research interests.
- Make sure to make it accessible to non-specialists in the area. Remember that your application will be considered by multiple members of the admissions committee and they may come with very different backgrounds and research interests. The sample should be a self-contained piece that someone without a specialization in the area is able to profitably read.
- Ask for feedback from your faculty mentor — or mentors. This may even help inform their letter, since they may perhaps want to comment on the sample and how it is connected to your broader research interests and goals as well as illustrate your research abilities and potential in philosophy.

## 2.6 *Letters of reference*

Letters of reference play a significant role in the admissions process, which means it is important to do as much as you can to help your letter writers write effective letters of support.

- If you can, ask someone who knows both you and your work well. It may help if they have had extended interactions with you — as an instructor in one of the lecture courses you have taken or as an advisor for an independent research course — and if they are familiar with some aspect of your philosophical work.
- The best letters tend to be the more informative ones; they are able to speak in some detail to your strength and research potential and they may even mention some of the work they have seen from you. For letter writers to be in a position to write an informed letter, they should have access to information. It helps if you can provide your letter writers with your CV and academic record as well as a list of schools to which you plan to apply.
- Most institutions will nowadays contact letter writers by email to request that they upload their letter. You will often be notified

once they do. Make sure to keep an eye on this to make sure your letter writers submit their letters prior to the application deadline.

### 3 *After you apply*

Most, if not all institutions should eventually notify you with the outcome of your application by early to mid Spring. Unfortunately, different admissions committees work at a different pace, and they seem to be on very different timelines. One constraint across institutions is the national deadline for accepted offers, which is April 15. Students must accept or decline their offers by then in order to be fully admitted into the program. But while some graduate programs issue their offers of admission sometime in January or February others wait until late March. At USC, we generally make an effort to notify all applicants by late February at the latest, but the timeline depends on what dates turn out to be available for admissions committee to meet through the different stages of the process.

#### 3.1 *If you are offered admission to a program*

If you are offered admission to a national program subject to the April 15 deadline, it may be helpful to take your time to consider your options. This is, after all, a very significant milestone, and you should take the time to consider what may be best for you and to make an informed decision. Some programs may organize an Open House and they may invite you to visit the department. This is an important visit, since you will be able to have a better sense of what life in the department may be like and it will provide you with a unique opportunity to talk to faculty and graduate students there. These visits will be a particularly helpful source of information if you are admitted to more than one program and want to be able to make an effective comparison between them.

#### 3.2 *If you are waitlisted for admission to a program*

If you are waitlisted for admission, you may hear so from the admissions committee. Different programs may have different procedures in place, but if you are notified, it is very important in each case to remain in close touch with the point person at that committee. They will let you know if there are any significant developments for your case, and it helps if you notify them of any significant developments on your end.