

Graduate Application Strategy Guide

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Contents

Purpose

This strategy guide was written to help prospective graduate students, primarily PhD program applicants in the humanities, effectively apply to competitive programs. It covers the following elements of the graduate application process:

- Graduate Record Exam (or equivalent: MCAT, LSAT, etc.)
- Statement of purpose (a research statement)
- Personal statement (more general to graduate programs)
- Writing sample (research-directed in this guide)
- Networking during the process
- Letters of recommendation
- Online application

Audience

Although the most relevant audience is prospective graduate students in the humanities (especially those applying to the University of California system, where much of this research was gathered), numerous points correlate with other graduate programs, including for medical or law school.

Research

The strategy guide presented here is a product of primary and secondary research, consisting mainly of in-person interviews with graduate advisers, PhD directors, department chairs, faculty, and administrative assistants across several academic departments at USC, Claremont Colleges, UCI, UCR, and Cal Poly Pomona.

Dissemination

The following research has been presented at MA program orientations, PhD application workshops, summer research seminars, and in individual MA graduate courses upon request, especially at Cal Poly Pomona.

*** Readers are encouraged to share this guide widely ***

Taking the GRE

- **Take the GRE seriously** for schools that require it and use it to narrow applicant pools, especially the UC English PhD programs that often “suggest” a competitive score, which essentially turns out to be a cutoff score of 89% on the verbal section. I know this to be a fact for English PhDs at UCI, UCR, USC, and UCLA, as I met and spoke at length with professors and department chairs at these campuses. I would also recommend from experience at least a 40% on the quantitative section and an 80% on the writing for good funding, though these are less fixed. For UCs, you need at least a combined score of around 310 to be funded.
- **Take an 8-week GRE prep course** if you can afford it, as studying on your own with the books will not provide the same advantage. Kaplan’s “online anywhere” course almost single-handedly prepared me, which includes all books and materials, along with literally thousands of practice quizzes online, numerous step-by-step video lectures, and four full-length computerized tests exactly like the GRE, all the results of which are scored and broken down by category, study strategies for improvement in a particular area, and clear explanations of every question and answer. If nothing else, I would highly recommend the investment, around \$300-\$400.
- **Create a study routine** that is consistent, manageable, and extensive enough to cover the needed material. Make it a habit and live by it. My routine, for three months during summer-fall, was to wake up each morning on weekdays and get right to studying for 3-4 hours, following the Kaplan course and materials, along with the helpful guide by Princeton Review. Again, habit is key so that studying becomes second nature. I would sit at the same table, drink coffee, listen to the same songs, and have nothing else around me except my study materials, over and over and over to the point where I didn’t know what to do with my mornings after I had taken the GRE. Find your own routine and make it a top priority.
- **Leave ideology at the door**, as one of the biggest hurdles for me was overcoming the fact, in my mind, that standardized tests do not judge an applicant’s ability to do well in a program. In fact, the only thing that a GRE score tells you, many say, is how well you take the GRE. But, as many competitive programs with leading scholars and needed funding require it, you must leave your ideology at the door and do what you need to do. Once you get past the GRE, which is unfortunately a tool to cut down huge applicant pools (around 200 applicants per year at UCR, 300 at UCI, of which they accept 6-10), things like the writing sample and statement of purpose make much

more sense, and, afterwards, your relationship with standardized tests will be over. Many programs (like UCR, UCI, and CGU) only require the general test, not the subject test.

Statement of Purpose

- **Cut to the chase**, beginning in the first sentence with your best, brightest idea that will contribute both to your field and this particular department. Spend considerable time crafting this first sentence, but, as is key to the writing process, you of course need not craft the perfect sentence before you write the rest of your statement. Compulsive revision is your friend.
- **Mention the professors you want to work with** in your statement, showing your familiarity with their work, your ability to contribute to it, and their ability to shape your own. There is a fine line between deliberately trying to appeal to a professor merely to get in and illuminating the productive potentials of working together.
- **Don't merely enhance your CV**, as the key here is to articulate both the work you have done and the work you want to develop if admitted. Really, the statement should contextualize your cutting-edge work within your field's current developments, illustrating your professionalism, passion, and commitment; however, it's fine to perhaps highlight a few of the most critical parts of your CV (as I did in the end of my statement) in order to stress your potential to do well.
- **Avoid generalities**, such as statements about how much you love English and have loved it since you were eight years old, which is what I said in my first statement. It's a PhD program. Of course you love your field, and so does everyone applying (I hope).
- **Balance general and specific interests**, my general interests being rhetoric and composition, and my particular interests being the rhetoric of space and place, and critical-democratic composition pedagogy. In this sense, you will both situate yourself in the larger field and demonstrate where your specific contribution lies.

Personal Statement

- **Avoid generalities** here, as well. Communicate your passion through relevant experiences, interests, projects, research, etc., as opposed to professing your undying love and dedication to your field. That is to say, "Show, don't tell."

- **Develop and illustrate clear images and moments**, perhaps 2-3, that show, ideally, both how you arrived at the pursuit of graduate school and how you are prepared to succeed. These experiences should be both personal and professional, also ideally blending and blurring these boundaries, such that they form a coherent story.
- **Integrate and unify your images and experiences** into a coherent narrative of your past, present, and future, threading these together with a theme or overarching direction. How do the experiences you discuss overlap, interrelate, inform one another, and build upon one another? Think of it as developing a story. Where does the story start? How does one experience lead to and set a foundation for the next, paragraph by paragraph? Are there any “plot twists” that led you in different, exciting directions? What is the climax of the story—how you ended where you are, pursuing what you are pursuing, and toward what end? Think of it as a story vs. essay.
- **Focus on what you can do for the school and field**, not what they can do for you. As with the Statement of Purpose, invert the focus from you to them. Ensure that the experiences and materials you discuss shed light on your potential contributions.
- **Highlight and elaborate key details** from your CV, developing the best lines on your CV into elements of your larger story on the way to graduate school. Remember that human beings are story-driven creatures. Therefore, your job is not only to get your readers to “understand” your background, but to be interested and engaged with it. Lead them through a developing story that illuminates your background and potential.
- **Be concise (make every word count)**. This will save room, but it will also engage readers better who have hundreds of essays to read. Do not use passive voice or long subordinate clauses to begin sentences. Instead of saying, “Upon taking a course with Professor X early in my educational career, I was inspired to...” say, “I was inspired by Professor X’s course to...” Be direct. Save space. Go through not only word by word, but also phrase by phrase and sentence by sentence to see where you can say something in one word rather than three, in one sentence rather than two. Use short, simple words, as well. Cut out adjectives, adverbs, unnecessary qualifiers or clauses, etc. Be economical like you’re being charged per character. All of this will save space and give your tired readers clear, concise experiences and images to remember you by.

Writing Sample

- **Ensure that this is your very best work**, ideally showcasing the thoughts you will be developing if admitted, although this may be impossible, especially if you're applying to numerous schools, which you should. In any case, the writing sample should be the best example of your intellectual and professional capabilities. If you have time, you might write a new sample that develops cutting edge research in reference to current scholars and ideas. I wrote one new writing sample which I submitted to all five programs, including four English programs and one Cultural Studies program.
- **Balance the old and the new**, meaning that your research should not simply cite "the same old theories" from the "same old theorists" who have been discussed for ages in the way that you're discussing them, unless you are bringing a fresh or relatively underdeveloped perspective to such theorists. In any case (and this is more opinionated), you should cite cutting edge figures in your field, engage intellectually with their work, and balance such work with the longstanding contributions of central figures (figures like Kenneth Burke in rhetoric, Foucault, Derrida, Heidegger, etc.). You can, in this way, position yourself in a larger tradition of scholarship while depicting exciting and fruitful new developments for the future.
- **Carefully revise a seminar paper** if submitting it as your writing sample, as seminar papers are often situated in the more narrow environment of your seminar and may need explication, development, and contextualization to be effective as a standalone paper. In other words, we often quickly jump into our topics in seminar papers since our professors are familiar with the direction of the course and its context already; however, you might consider revising a seminar paper for a writing sample by elaborating that context, especially in the introduction and literature review, so that you don't leave the application committee, who may not be as familiar with the context as your professor, in the dark, thus less able to follow your analysis. I submitted a seminar paper for my first round of applications without revising nearly enough, and I'm sure it played a part in the numerous rejections!
- **Consider beginning with 2-3 introductory quotes** from theorists or authors whom you engage with in your paper, displaying straight from the start your direction, interests, and hopefully unique connections between perhaps both major, longstanding figures and more current, developing figures. This is a strategy I picked up on from reading theoretical texts in general, but I noticed it in the writing sample of a current UCI English PhD student whom I met at a conference. I believe this is one effective

rhetorical strategy to help your writing sample and interests stand out amongst the hundreds of pages of them.

- **Consider using a few technical strategies to stand out**, as well, such as abandoning the usual MLA seminar paper heading and, instead, center your name in bold (I think I made “Ryan David Leack – Writing Sample” my first page header), followed by your title, quotes, etc., something I also learned from the UCI student. Of course, there is a fine balance here. Don’t put your name in all caps in 40 point font. MLA or APA in general should be fine though.

Other Strategies

- **Meet the professors you want to work with** if applying locally, being prepared to discuss your work and theirs, and to thus discover the best program for you and your research. If you contact professors via email, many will be glad to meet even amidst their teaching and research as long as you express the potential of doing unique research together. Make the focus the research, not the application, although it’s perfectly fine to ask for advice on the application process, as well, as each department is different. Ask, for instance, what they look at first: the statement, the writing sample, etc., and if there are particular preferences on any areas of the application. USC, for instance, for their Literature and Creative Writing PhD, prefers that publications be listed first on your CV. And they also prefer that statements of purpose be as creatively (even oddly) unique as possible.
- **Get to know current PhD students**, if possible, during conferences at the schools you’re applying to, such as UCI’s rhet/comp symposium. Ask if they wouldn’t mind sharing their writing samples and statements with you so that you may learn from those who were admitted. These connections become more than a learning experience for the application, but connections that will last as you begin PhD work and participate in the larger academic community around you.
- **For letters of recommendation**, the most critical thing you can do is to politely ask professors (giving them ample time) who know you and your work best to demonstrate in a letter of recommendation your ability to succeed in a graduate program; they will of course be familiar with the procedure. These letters are important for faculty to see how well you’ve worked with current faculty in your program, so, obviously, it’s a good idea to develop such professional relationships with your professors now, the end goal not merely being an application, but a scholarly

community, a career, and professional development.

- **On the actual online application**, as most all applications are online, take every part seriously. By the time you get to filling out the actual application, after having been preparing your materials for months, you will be exhausted. You will want to hurry up and get it over with once and for all. When you get there, don't rush. Be careful and fastidious with uploading your materials, double-checking everything, and filling in accurate information. When you get to the fellowship section, you may be asked to check fellowships to which you'd like to apply. Check as many relevant ones as possible, and be sure to write additional, excellent responses when asked to. One such fellowship is the ECRA (Eugene Cota-Robles Award), which is usually a \$60,000 fellowship. In this case, it's worth writing an incredible paragraph-response or so in order to secure as much funding, and hence as much writing/research time, as possible. In other words, it's not over until it's over. Do not expect to breeze through the online section of the application process once your materials are in order.
- **Applications are expensive**, around \$80 per application; however, most schools offer fee waivers for students on financial aid, which should be detailed on a program's website, so I was able to have all but two of my fees waived during each application season—a big help!

Lastly, a Word of Encouragement Amidst Chaos

While all of this is surely overwhelming, know that it is *somehow* doable if you are determined, and if you are passionate about and committed to your field. In my experience, I was a full-time MA student and TA mentor, recently married and struggling against various everyday issues like paying rent, managing that thing called “life,” and so forth. But somehow, when you are committed, you find time in places you never thought you could, and you make the sacrifices necessary to pursue your passion. I mention this in a melodramatic-like fashion because applying to PhD programs is a full-time job in itself, and you may need words of encouragement when you get there. If anything, realize that the application is the *short-term*, and several months later it will be behind you and you will be on your way to a fulfilling academic environment, working with the best scholars in their fields, hopefully well-funded, and further on your way to a promising career in the *long-term*.