Applying to Grad School in Philosophy

Contents

I. Introduction
II. Getting Your Application Together
III. The Waiting Game

I. Introduction

So you want to go to grad school? There are plenty of resources on the web pertaining to the application process. You should set aside some time to visit various sites to get a sense of what to expect in terms of timelines. This page is meant as a starting point for UWF students considering graduate study in philosophy.

The decision to apply to graduate programs, ideally, should be made by the end of your junior year. The reason for this is that you will want to spend the summer polishing a piece of philosophical writing, e.g., a successful research paper from an upper division philosophy course, and preparing for the Graduate Records Exam (GRE). If you do not have such a piece in mind by the summer after your junior year, this would be a great time to get started on the writing sample. Once you’ve made the decision to apply, notify your advisor. Close consultation with your advisor or some faculty in the Philosophy Department will be invaluable in this process and will help you to maximize your chances for gaining admission to a program.

Be prepared for the fact that applying to graduate school is not cheap, and you should apply to as many programs as you can afford. Remember, this is an investment in your future. Pick a couple “long shots,” several more reasonable options, and at least one “fallback.” The application process is also time consuming though definitely manageable if you plan well. Consult with your advisor regarding which programs may be reasonable choices. Select a long list of possible programs early on and narrow the list down from there on the basis of whatever considerations are important to you. Geography should not factor in heavily since you want to attend the best possible program. If you are not competitive for a prestigious Ph.D. program, then consider a terminal MA program; your chances of getting into a prestigious Ph.D. program are much better if you have a Masters degree. The Philosophical Gourmet Report is a good place to start in selecting programs. Specialty rankings probably matter more than overall rankings. You want to go to a school that is strong in the areas that interest you. Also be sure to read the section “A Realistic Perspective on Graduate Study.”

http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/

II. Getting Your Application Together

For your application packet, typically you will need the following:

1. Statement of Purpose
2. Writing Sample
3. Letters of Reference
4. GRE Scores
5. Official Transcripts
It should go without saying that everything you personally write, down to the envelopes in which letters of reference are enclosed, should be typed and free of errors.

Let us consider these elements of the application packet in turn.

**Statement of Purpose**

The statement of purpose is your opportunity to let the admissions committee know who you are. You want the statement to convey a sense of who you are, though you do not want it to be eccentric. Things that one may wish to include in such a statement would be why you want to pursue graduate studies in philosophy, what your research interests are, why you think you’d be a good fit with the program to which you are applying, and what the draw to philosophy is for you. Also, if there are things you wish to flag in your application, this would be the place to do it (preferably at the end of the statement). Most of all you want to convey that you are a serious student with a scholarly mindset, and that you have a genuine love for philosophy and scholarly ambitions. As with any written portion of the application, typos and spelling errors are inexcusable. The statement should be concise and well organized. Remember that admissions committees will be reading scores of these and will admit only a very small proportion of those who have applied. Do not give an admissions committee an easy excuse to pass your application over.

**Writing Sample**

Graduate programs will want to see an example of your best philosophical work. It is not important for the writing sample that you break new philosophic ground. Committees are looking for evidence of scholarly promise in the form of clear writing and the ability to state faithfully and clearly a philosophical problem. There is no presumption that the topic of your writing sample will be what you focus on in your graduate studies. The only exceptions may be if you are applying to specialized logic programs or history and philosophy of science programs; for such applications it would behoove you to submit a sample of writing in the relevant sub-discipline. That polished and well-argued paper on free will you wrote for your metaphysics class probably won’t help you get into a high-powered logic program, though it may be a wise choice for a more traditional philosophy program. As with the statement of purpose, the writing sample should be free of grammatical and typographical errors. Make it easy to read by using a standard font, double-spaced, and consider including an abstract so that the reader can get a sense of the paper before reading it. Looking around online, you’ll see differing advice regarding the length of the writing sample. For example, I have read on one site that up to 30 pages is acceptable. 30 pages is probably too long. As a ballpark, you should aim for 15-25 pages including references. Consult with your advisor regarding the acceptability of your paper for the purposes of serving as a writing sample. Also confirm that the institutions to which you are applying do not impose restrictions on the length of the sample. If the program says “no longer than 20 pages,” then do not submit something longer than 20 pages or else you run the risk of having your application thrown out. You will (in all likelihood) not impress the authors of such stipulations with a 50-page thesis on Spinoza, however great it may be.

**Letters of Reference**

Letters should be written by faculty who are in a good position to assess your promise as a scholar and teacher honestly. The individual programs will tell you how many letters to have sent. Send exactly the number requested. Keep in mind that your letter writers are likely to be writing letters of support for other students as well, so they will require advance notice. You should give your letter writers at least three weeks notice to prepare your letter. If letters are to be submitted in hard copy, it is considerate to provide your letter writer with an addressed and stamped envelope for each hard copy of the letter to be mailed. You should also provide your letter writer with the following materials:
1. Writing Sample
2. GRE scores (if available, and unofficial scores are fine)
3. Statement of Purpose
4. Other examples of your best philosophical work
5. A list of the schools to which you are applying along with the application deadline for each program.

The more information your letter writers have, the easier it is for them to write you the best letter possible.

GRE Scores

In all likelihood you will have to submit your scores from the Graduate Records Exam for at least one if not all the programs to which you are applying. It is best to take this test as early as you feel prepared, for if something goes wrong and you get a score that you think underestimates your ability, you want to have time to retake it in December of your senior year, which is the last opportunity before application deadlines. November of your senior year is the latest you should aim for your first attempt. Go into the exam knowing where you’ll be applying as you will get a limited number of free score reports which must be submitted at the end of your test. You are not required to submit scores at that time, but it will save you a considerable amount of money if you do so. The GRE is expensive, so walk into the test well rested and prepared. Take a preparatory class if possible.

Official Transcript

Make arrangements with the Registrar’s office at UWF and your other post secondary educational institutions (PSC, for example) to have official transcripts sent to each program. Do this in accordance with the instructions provided by the individual programs.

III. The Waiting Game

Because of funding decisions, you will have until the middle of April to decide which program to attend; hence, you should expect to have heard back from the programs by March. While the applications are out, there’s little one can do but wait, so try to stifle the anxiety and accept that the decision is out of your hands. In general, quality programs will offer some kind of funding with admission including a tuition remission and either a fellowship or position as a teaching assistant. It is not a good idea to attend a program that does not fund you. The academic job market is simply too flooded with qualified candidates to make taking out student loans a reasonable option.