

Brief Guide to PhD Applications

Applying to doctoral programs can be an extremely stressful task, especially since each university has its own guidelines and requirements. Given the wide-ranging requirements by different programs, it is impossible to provide an all-encompassing guide to applications. This short guide, however, is an attempt at providing assistance to those interested in pursuing higher education. I treated my applications as a “course”. That is, I spent an average of 10-15 hours per week working on applications, writing, re-writing, editing, and perfecting each application. My mentors were immensely helpful in paring down my work, but my friends were crucial during this process. We set up “PhD Dates” at cafes or somebody’s apartment, ordered food, and made sure we were productive. After all, Downton Abbey and Game of Thrones repeats were a great distraction.

I applied to nine academic programs in Fall 2012, all in the Humanities. Five programs admitted me, and I accepted the University of Chicago’s Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations.

Letters of Recommendation (began process in August):

I found it appropriate to ask three individuals who could speak to and emphasize three very different but important qualities about me. It is a bit daunting (and sometimes embarrassing) to approach a professor or teacher to ask for a letter of recommendation. What exactly is the best method of asking, “Professor, can you write a letter about how awesome I am?”

First, I chose the three people I thought would provide the fullest “picture” of who I am as an individual and as an academic. The initial email, which I sent in August (about four months prior to the first deadlines), requested a meeting to discuss my future and to receive advice. I prepared packets (although incomplete) with my curriculum vitae, a copy of my writing sample, a draft of my personal (academic) statement, and a list of potential programs and application due dates. These packets were prepared in the hopes that if my professor agreed to write a letter, I could immediately provide application information.

My undergraduate professor from Cal State Northridge, my language instructor from UChicago, and my Master’s thesis advisor from UChicago were the three people I approached to write letters of recommendation. Though I did not see all of the letters, I know that each wrote about my strengths from the experience they had working with me. This was vital, since three repetitive letters would have been pointless. Every 4-6 weeks leading up to the December and January deadlines, I would email or meet them in person to discuss the progress of each application (i.e. whether they had started their letters, how I could improve my CV or statement).

Networking (ongoing September-November):

The most important (and difficult!) part of this process was meeting every professor I mentioned in my applications. I made it a point to visit many campuses (yes, I traveled quite a bit), and I went to many conferences with the knowledge that the professors I wanted to work with would be at those conferences.

Much like I did with my recommenders, I wrote a personalized email to each professor. Writing personalized emails proved useful in November when two professors from different universities forwarded each other the emails I had sent them. This could have proved quite embarrassing had I sent them the same email.

In each email, I outlined my academic trajectory, but mostly focused on soliciting advice on my work. I also asked them questions regarding their published and ongoing work. This was the most time-consuming part of the application process, since I researched each professor and made sure they would be somebody I could work with for an extended length of time.

Curriculum Vitae:

The easiest aspect of the application was refining my curriculum vitae. I began it as an undergraduate and continued adding to it through my Master's program. The most troubling aspect of the CV was the order (education; presentations; publications etc). Some applications only allowed a one-page CV, so I would agonize over which sections to cut. The link to my current CV is below, and this CV is (almost) the same as the one I submitted to most doctoral programs: <https://augustsamie.com/cv/>

Writing Sample:

The first thing I noticed about each application was that the lengths of the writing sample varied (anything from 10 pages to 30 pages). I had three substantial papers that I produced during the first year of my MA that I thought of using for my applications. Each paper had strengths (and unfortunately weaknesses!). The first paper had little to do with my interests as an academic, but was (as I was told by a professor) very convincing and well written. The second paper was completely in accordance with what I proposed researching as a doctoral student, but it was, I felt, not as well researched nor as credible as the first. The third paper, which I ultimately submitted, needed some work, but had aspects that exemplified what I am capable of doing as an academic. I spent the next two months refining it, but it already encompassed one critical aspect that the other two papers did not: my language capabilities. I had produced this paper using secondary sources in multiple languages.

Personal Statement:

I found writing a personal statement to be impossible at first, but once I began approaching it as a puzzle, it turned into an entertaining experience. My first draft was commented on by at least ten people, each with their own opinions on what should be added or omitted. With all the comments in hand, I proceeded to write more than six versions of my personal statement. Since the information in my statement is private, I will not provide a draft here. The following outline is of the points made in each paragraph.

Paragraph 1: describe how my family background led to inquiries of race and religion in Central Asia; what activities increased and informed my knowledge of my proposed area of research

Paragraph 2: discuss my arrival at the University of Chicago for my Master's; explain briefly my thesis and theoretical approach for my MA thesis

Paragraph 3: explain how my travels through Russia and Central Asia have helped form my opinions on my research; my contacts have helped provide indispensable sources

Paragraph 4 and 5: what I am proposing to do as a doctoral student; my theoretical approaches; current scholarship on the subject and the gap my research will fill; why my research will be important

Paragraph 6: "history lesson" (remember, there are people on the acceptance committees who know nothing about your proposed area of research, so it is important to provide a brief "lesson"); after providing three or four concise sentences about your focus, tie it to your research; how and where will your research add to what we know

Paragraph 7: discuss the professors you intend on working with at the institution (mention you have met them); explain that your language skills will help in working with sources; make clear that this institution is essential for you to continue your research because of the professors and the resources at the institution.