

## What is a PhD?

One answer to this question is purely functional: the PhD is a terminal degree that qualifies a person to teach at BA- and BS-granting institutions, just as an MA can qualify a person to teach at AA- and AS-granting institutions, and a BA can qualify a person to teach at K-12 institutions.

However, a PhD was not conceived as a teaching certificate. The PhD is a medieval degree. It emerges in the 12th century as a mechanism for distinguishing a person who has spent a long amount of time at university study—a study that develops from, and was deeply tied to, monastic contemplation. (As you may know, the *philosophiae doctor* means “a teacher of philosophy”; and “philosophia” is a Latin transliteration from the Greek word, φιλοσοφία, which means “wisdom.”) I think it’s important to recognize the historical and etymological aspects of the degree, especially during a period of economic uncertainty and diminished employment prospects, because they have not faded with time. To embark on a PhD was and still is, above all, to embark upon a period of deep and meaningful contemplation. Many scholars experience this contemplative life as a spiritual journey, such that the PhD is a calling, not simply a mechanism towards gaining secure employment.

Likewise, the PhD is an apprenticeship program. The PhD student studies *under* one or more faculty members. This relationship can mean many things, depending on the student, the faculty member, and the university department: it can mean that the student will learn by studying the same material as the teacher; it can mean that the student will learn by using the same methods as the teacher; it can mean that the student will learn by constellating ideas in similar ways as the teacher. Regardless of the relationship, it is an apprenticeship program which can lead to an intimate and long-lasting relationship that exceeds the PhD. Advisors will write letters of recommendation for their students upon graduation, and they may continue to provide professional and intellectual guidance for their students for 5, 10, or even 20 years afterwards.

## Identifying PhD Programs

### *With whom do you want to apprentice?*

Whose scholarship have you been reading during your MA program? Who is doing compelling work, and does their work line up with your interests, topically, methodologically, and/or conceptually? Are they tenured? (This question is key. At many universities, an untenured faculty member cannot direct a dissertation; and an Assistant Professor’s letter of recommendation may not be as compelling as the letter of an Associate / Full Professor.)

If you do not know the answers to these questions, find them out. Given the critical function of the student-faculty relationship, you need to make this information your top priority.

### *Which departments have program strengths in your area of specialization?*

Although you may want to work with one person in a department, you should think about how the department as a whole matches up with your research interests. This is important for several, distinct reasons. Firstly, you may arrive in a PhD program and find out that you cannot work with the faculty member with whom you hoped to work. Faculty move between universities; faculty may be “difficult” to work with; faculty change their interests; and *your* interests can change. You don’t want to pin all your hopes on one person. This is true in the world of PhD programs as it is in life. Secondly, while you may have one dissertation director, you will have three committee members. You want to have more than one faculty member on your dissertation committee who works in your area of specialization, knows the texts of your dissertation well, and can therefore guide and respond to your dissertation project in a fully-informed way.

Research programs in order to find out what area strengths they advertise. Look for programs that have at least two faculty who specialize in your field and other faculty who employ methods and theories that may be important to your project. Likewise, find out what requirements a program may have for PhD admits. Are there language pre-requisites that you will be required to meet and/or languages on which you will be examined? Does a program require that its PhDs re-take MA exams?

### *What funding packages are offered to admitted PhD students?*

No one ever got rich from a PhD, and you should consider cost as a factor that determines where you apply. I don't think anyone has ever walked away debt-free from a degree, but in my personal opinion, a PhD program should fully fund and provide health insurance to its students for a minimum of four years. The PhD is also a degree that involves travel to archives and conferences, so it is important that you consider what secondary and tertiary funding opportunities are available to you through the department and/or the division of graduate studies.

Research all the funding opportunities that are available to you. Look not only at departmental funding but also (and perhaps, more importantly) divisional funding. What kinds of dissertation completion fellowships are offered? What kind of travel funding is offered? Are there interdisciplinary programs which might have additional pockets of funding for advanced graduate students?

### *Is teaching tied to funding packages? What is the relationship between an English department and a university's writing program?*

TAing in the DU English department is not a typical experience. At large universities, TAs manage all of the grading and much of the teaching for 50-70 students, and they do this with little supervision. At many universities, English graduate students function as the TA labor pool for composition/writing classes. While TAing is its own form of labor exploitation, it also provides graduate students with a predictable and steady paycheck that usually comes with health insurance. (At many universities, graduate students are unionized, which gives them wage/benefits bargaining power.) Likewise, TAing can enable students to find regular university employment in multiple departments beyond their years of PhD funding.

Even though you have not yet applied to a PhD program, you should already be thinking about how you can find work past your funding package. Does a university have the labor needs to support you should you take five or six years to finish your degree? Does it have a large writing program that could employ you?

## Applying to PhD Programs

### *Contacting potential faculty advisors*

Before you decide to apply to a school, email the faculty with whom you would like to work. State that you understand they work on x topic, have published y scholarship, and express your interest in their research. Explain, in 1-2 sentences, your research interests. Ask if they are taking on new PhD students.

*Do not ask if a faculty member will work with you.* How could a faculty member know the answer to this question if they have not seen your application? Moreover, the faculty member may not be on the graduate committee that determines admission.

Making this contact is useful for several reasons. For one, you might find out that a faculty member has accepted a job at another university or plans to retire soon. (More than once, I have seen a student enter a graduate program only to find out that the faculty member they want to work with is no longer in the department.) For two, by sending an email, you will present yourself to a potential faculty advisor as a well-informed and serious graduate student.

If the faculty member writes back, expresses interest, and states that they are taking new students, you should ask to meet them, either in person or over Zoom. Remember, a PhD is an apprenticeship. The more you know about a faculty's work, interests, and demeanor, the better off you will be.

### *The Application Cover Letter*

Few documents are as important to your professional future as this one is. It is a prequel to the academic job letter. It should be 1.5-2 pages long, and it follows the following five-paragraph formula:

## INTRODUCTION

Your name, the program to which you are applying, your academic credentials, and your area of interests.

## AREA INTERESTS AND QUALIFICATIONS (2 PARAGRAPHS)

In what period-specific / theory-specific area(s) do you want to specialize? This should not be generic. If you want to work on 18th-century British literature, for example, you should already know that you want to work on the epistolary novel, that you want to write on Richardson and Montisquieu, and that you would like to examine politics and gender in relation to these authors. In this paragraph, show the admissions committee that you have a focused interest that is close to, if not already, a dissertation topic. As you write this paragraph, explain how you are qualified to take on this project. Discuss your MA thesis, coursework, grades, conference papers, teaching, and any publications that may show your expertise in, say, 18th-century literature, the novel as genre, and politics and gender.

## HOW DO YOUR INTERESTS LINE UP WITH A DEPARTMENT'S INTERESTS

With whom would you like to work? Why? What research centers are in the department and/or unit, and how could you benefit from them?

## CONCLUSION

Express your interest in the program, how to contact you, and send thanks to the committee.

*A good cover letter cannot be written in 1 draft. It cannot be written in 2 drafts. A good cover letter should be written over the course of multiple drafts and in consultation with your MA advisor and/or the job placement officer.*

## Writing Sample

This is the most important piece of your application. It gives the graduate committee an actual sense of your talent and promise as a scholar. A writing sample will be about 20 pages, and it should be the most well-revised and complex piece of academic prose you have written. You will probably be admitted on the merits of this document. Revise. Revise. Revise.

## Accepting an offer of admission

Good applications will yield multiple offers of acceptance. Before committing to any program, talk to your MA advisor, the job placement officer, and the directors of graduate studies at each program that you are seriously considering.

Admissions offers are not negotiations, so don't ask for anything that is not offered in your acceptance letter.