

Graduate School in Philosophy

The Application Process

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Abstract

“Graduate School in Philosophy: The Application Process”

Those who seek a career closely related to philosophy will need to apply to graduate school. Because most jobs related to philosophy are academic positions at universities, most applicants need a Ph.D. to be competitive for them. Unfortunately, applying to graduate school in philosophy is not simple, and few resources are available to guide applicants through the process. This document addresses common problems applicants encounter and provides information and resources that should help applicants increase their chances of being admitted to an excellent graduate program.

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The Truth about Graduate School in Philosophy

Before considering where to apply to graduate school in philosophy and how to prepare your materials, consider whether it is worth applying to these programs in the first place. The facts about graduate school in philosophy and what graduate students face after they finish their graduate education can be quite sobering:

- **The job prospects in philosophy are extremely limited.** A Ph.D. does not guarantee a stable career of teaching philosophy. Some Ph.D. recipients are unable to find anything beyond 1-year positions, especially those that have recently received their Ph.D. Job prospects for students who only acquire an M.A. are even worse. In most cases, geographic flexibility is crucial to acquiring a tenure-track position because jobs are too scarce for one to rely strictly on the local market.
- **Admissions to philosophy programs are extremely competitive.** Even the very best students from the most prestigious undergraduate institutions (e.g., Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford) often struggle to gain admission to the most prestigious graduate programs. Although gaining admission to less prestigious schools can be easier, the task remains difficult. To be competitive for admission to any graduate program in philosophy, expect to need at least 3.8 undergraduate GPA and an overall GRE score of 1250. You will also need three excellent letters of recommendation and an exemplary writing sample. Of course, even if you provide all these things, you may still be denied admission to graduate programs, including those of lower prestige.
- **The attrition rates of Ph.D. programs in philosophy are fairly high.** Although data on the exact percentages are scarce, some professors estimate that about 50% of those admitted to Ph.D. programs never complete them.¹ Those who do not finish tend to drop out of the program during the dissertation phase after being in the program for three years or more.
- **Those who do acquire a Ph.D. often take longer than the projected five years.** Most funding for Ph.D. programs lasts for five years, but many students do not complete their coursework and dissertation within that time. Typically, because of its length and importance, the dissertation is the task which substantially delays their completion of the program. Generally, graduate students should be prepared to spend 7-8 years in graduate school to attain the Ph.D.² They should also be prepared for the possibility that their departmental funding (which typically lasts five years) will expire before they finish the program.
- **The application process requires significant investments of time and money.** In order to have a reasonable chance of gaining admission to a program with a decent funding offer, you will need to apply to many programs. (Some students apply to 15-20 programs, but 10-12 is probably a more reasonable target.) The costs will vary depending on what the university and philosophy department require, but the total costs for materials should average \$100-120 per program. Consult **Table 1** for a breakdown of the typical costs of the application process. Every application will also require a significant amount of time to complete. Many aspects of each application will be the same, but the process is still tedious and can quickly become frustrating.

Table 1: A breakdown of the costs of applying to graduate school in philosophy.

Part of Application	Cost Per Program	Total Cost (8 Programs)
Application Form	\$35-90	\$280-\$720
Taking the GRE (If Needed)	NA ^I	\$0-300
Reporting GRE Scores	\$23	\$0-184 ^{II}
Transcripts	\$10-40	\$80-320 ^{III}

I. The GRE costs \$150 per test.

II. As an alternative to score reports, you can send scores to four schools after taking the GRE.

III. Costs vary depending on how many transcripts a program requires.

Why Apply?

Based on the previous section, you might wonder why anyone would apply to graduate school in philosophy. After all, if the admissions are so competitive and the job prospects so limited, why would anyone want to commit their time and energy to applying to graduate programs and then (if admitted) working through one for such a long time?

Some seek a graduate degree in philosophy as a supplement to another degree or as preparation for work in another field, but most apply simply because they love studying philosophy. Unfortunately, some applicants to philosophy programs have unrealistic expectations about what awaits them and underestimate the need for an intrinsic motivation to study philosophy.

Nothing mentioned up to this point in the document is meant to discourage students from pursuing graduate study in philosophy. However, if the information presented has significantly deterred you from submitting an application, ask yourself this question: Would I be willing to study philosophy rigorously for many years without the guarantee of a stable career? If not, it may be time to consider graduate work in another field.

An intrinsic motivation to study philosophy may be the most critical element to succeeding in graduate school and enjoying the experience. Those seeking a high-paying, stable job or a short stay in a graduate program will almost surely be disappointed. Those who should pursue graduate study in philosophy are those who consider studying the discipline valuable regardless of whether attaining a Ph.D. leads immediately to favorable job prospects.

If you have read all of the preceding sections and still wish to apply to graduate school in philosophy, you may be one of the rare individuals with the necessary motivation. You might even enjoy your journey through a graduate program. Read on to learn the details of the application process.

Selecting Schools

This section includes information about the differences between M.A. programs and Ph.D. programs and methods for identifying what particular programs you should apply to.

M.A. Programs or Ph.D. Programs?

In the United States, an M.A. is not required to apply to Ph.D. programs in philosophy. Typically, students admitted directly into Ph.D. programs will acquire an M.A. along their way to the doctorate. Some departments do not feature a doctoral program but will confer an M.A. These programs are known as terminal M.A. programs because they award the M.A. as a final degree. Some of these programs are structured to aid students in applying to doctoral programs and continuing their philosophical education at another institution. Others leave this task exclusively to the graduate students and do not emphasize placing students into Ph.D. programs.

Anything less than a Ph.D. will put you at a notable disadvantage on the job market. Therefore, if you desire an academic career in philosophy, merely earning an M.A. is not a reasonable goal. If you are studying philosophy as preparation for something else (such as law school), then attaining an M.A. (and only an M.A.) may be sensible. Otherwise, an M.A. should serve as a prelude to doctoral studies. Naturally, this means that the best M.A. programs to consider are those that strive to place their M.A. recipients into Ph.D. programs.

Many philosophy departments have both M.A. and Ph.D. programs, but their M.A. programs are rarely designed to move students into more prestigious Ph.D. programs.³ It should also be noted that some departments with Ph.D. programs might prefer to have you begin with their M.A. program. However, if your real interest is in the Ph.D., make this clear in your application. Also clarify whether these departments grant priority to current M.A. students regarding eventual admission into the Ph.D. program. Some programs will give priority to excellent M.A. students, but this preferential treatment is far from guaranteed. Consequently, when applying to M.A. programs with the goal of eventually attaining a Ph.D., the best general strategy is to choose departments which do not have doctoral programs.

Applicants have varying motives for applying to M.A. programs instead of Ph.D. programs. Here are the most common reasons:

1. **They are not confident of gaining admission to a Ph.D. program and are applying to an M.A. program as a safety school.** While this strategy seems sensible, many M.A. programs are actually more competitive than Ph.D. programs with regard to both the number and quality of the applicants.⁴ In general, avoid applying to M.A. programs as safety schools.
2. **They want to improve their chances of gaining admission to a better (or more prestigious) Ph.D. program.** This strategy can be understandable sometimes, but it remains a considerable gamble in most cases. An M.A. program will give a student more preparation for a Ph.D. program, but the student's academic performance, work habits, writing ability, and GRE scores will be what earn him or her a place in a program. Even an M.A. from a prestigious school offers no guarantee of admission to any Ph.D. program. Furthermore, the top programs are so competitive that even those with the most exceptional academic records still have fairly low probabilities of being admitted.
3. **They lack a background in philosophy sufficient to gain admission into the Ph.D. programs they desire.** Compared to most Ph.D. programs, M.A. programs are more willing to admit students with a limited philosophical background.⁵ Earning an M.A. in

philosophy ensures that these students will not be rejected from Ph.D. programs in the future because they lack a comprehensive education in philosophy. M.A. programs may also suitably orient these students to graduate study in philosophy so that they do not feel overwhelmed when they enter doctoral programs.

Among these common reasons for applying to M.A. programs, only lack of a philosophical background offers a compelling reason to do so. Applying to an M.A. program as a safety school is unrealistic, and applying in the hope of later being admitted to a better Ph.D. program is risky. If applying to M.A. programs still sounds reasonable to you, be sure to also give these factors some consideration:

- **M.A. programs have less funding than Ph.D. programs.** Depending on your background and the program, your chances of being admitted to an M.A. program may be higher, but your chances of acquiring a teaching assistantship and tuition waiver will probably be lower, unless it is understood that you aim to stay for the Ph.D.
- **Acquiring an M.A. and a Ph.D. from separate institutions will hinder your progress toward the doctorate.** If you transfer to a Ph.D. program after getting an M.A. at a different institution, you will almost always be required to complete a minimum of one year of additional coursework before starting your dissertation. In some cases, the extra requirements could even set you back 2-3 years.
- **Some Ph.D. programs view applicants with M.A. degrees negatively.** In the past, terminal M.A. programs were not focused on preparing students for Ph.D. programs, and admissions committees tended to view these applications with skepticism.⁶ Although that trend has changed, this bias remains at some universities and may hinder M.A. students from being admitted.⁷
- **You will need to complete the application process all over again.** M.A. programs typically last for only two years, meaning that you will begin reapplying to graduate schools in the fall semester of your second year in the program. The department will help you to some degree, but this time, you will have to complete the applications while taking graduate courses and (usually) fulfilling your teaching duties. These obstacles may make the application process harder than it was the first time.

Even with these difficulties in mind, there are circumstances where applying to terminal M.A. programs is reasonable. In most cases, however, applying to Ph.D. programs is a better idea, especially for undergraduate philosophy majors and others who do not have deficiencies in their philosophical background.

The Philosophical Gourmet Report

[The Philosophical Gourmet Report](#) (PGR), also called the Leiter Report, is a ranking list of Ph.D. programs in the English-speaking world. Although the report features contributions from many philosophers, [Brian Leiter](#) of the University of Chicago compiles and edits the rankings. The rankings are based upon how other philosophers, particularly those on the [advisory board](#), perceive the scholarly research of the philosophy faculty at other universities. PGR also features [specialty rankings](#). In these rankings, programs are ordered in a tier system based on how experts

in the given specialty area (e.g., philosophy of language, applied ethics, philosophy of mind) perceive the faculties of other programs with regard to that specialty area.

Most philosophy professors will advise you to check PGR to determine what programs you should apply to. Many professors will recommend only applying to programs ranked in the top 50 of the overall rankings, others will advise you to limit your selection to the top 25, and some will recommend that you look for schools in the top 50 that are also strong in your specialty area. Certain professors will give the specialty rankings greater weight than others, but generally, the specialty rankings are not considered as important as the overall rankings. Hence, some professors will not recommend applying to an unranked program even when it is strong in your areas of interest. However, [Leiter does mention some special circumstances](#) (e.g., strongly wanting to study ancient philosophy) where the specialty rankings may be of greater importance than overall rankings, and many other philosophers have offered their thoughts on the subject as comments on his blog.⁸

PGR has a significant influence on professional philosophy and the perceived value of one's degree by other philosophers. Moreover, it is very challenging to find a philosophy professor who discounts the rankings entirely. (After all, no comparable ranking system exists.) As a result, a student who is admitted to a top 25 program with full funding would have to have a very compelling reason to decline the offer in favor of a school ranked more than a few spots lower. Nevertheless, despite its importance, PGR should not be considered the definitive authority on where students ought to apply.

The Limits of the Philosophical Gourmet Report

The ranking system in PGR is essentially a measure of perceived prestige of philosophy programs. The rankings are generated by a collection of subjective evaluations about the quality of philosophical research being done at a given institution. While the methods of achieving this information have been refined over the years, PGR still has a considerable number of limitations:

1. Although the correlation between a program's perceived prestige and the quality of its program is generally thought to be positive, there will be exceptions, and the extent of this correlation remains unclear.⁹
2. Evaluators cannot possibly know the quality of the research of every member of other philosophy departments. Therefore, the surveys used to produce the rankings cannot be completely accurate.¹⁰
3. The quality of a faculty member's research does not necessarily have any relation to his or her teaching ability or commitment to educating graduate students.
4. Programs' placement rates have no impact on the rankings.
5. The Leiter Report has an obvious bias toward larger departments.¹¹

Applicants ought to be aware of how PGR's rankings are produced and the potential flaws associated with the process. These shortcomings, however, do not undermine PGR's usefulness as a means of identifying strong graduate programs and philosophy departments, and it would be foolish for any applicant to discount it completely.

Other Preliminary Research

After consulting PGR and developing a tentative list of schools, visit the websites for each program, and see which ones seem to suit your interests. Look for special features of the program and recent events that the department has sponsored. Visit the faculty pages, and see what they are currently researching. Consult the program's graduate handbook to learn more about the course offerings, the distribution requirements, and the duties of teaching assistants. Consider where the program is located and whether you would enjoy living there for several years. Email graduate students or faculty members at the university with questions about the program if there are details which your other research has not uncovered, and do not forget to consult your professors for advice. The philosophical community is smaller than you think, and you may be surprised by how much your professors know about the programs you are considering and the faculty members in those departments.

Above all other things, be sure to check the job placement rates of the schools you are considering. You may learn something unexpected: Prestigious schools do not always have exceptional placement rates, and many unranked schools place their program graduates remarkably well.¹² If a program has poor placement rates or its placement information is not available online, this fact alone may be a sufficient reason not to apply there.

How Many Schools?

In most fields, aspiring graduate students only apply to 3-4 schools, but if you want to have a decent chance of getting admitted to good graduate program in philosophy with a funding package, you will need to apply to a few more. Professors will usually recommend between 8 and 12 schools, with 10 commonly suggested as an ideal target. Theoretically, it would be better to apply to even more schools, but there is a limit to the number of high-quality applications you can submit with limited time and money. This consideration does not stop some applicants from applying to 15 programs or more, but few should try to manage that many applications.

Preparing and Submitting the Required Materials

Once you have selected 8-12 schools, you must complete the tedious process of preparing applications and submitting all the required materials. For each program, expect to submit these items: GRE scores, transcripts, an application form, three letters of recommendation, a resume or curriculum vitae, a personal statement, and a writing sample of 15-20 pages.

The GRE

The Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) general test is a standardized test designed to evaluate verbal skills, mathematical knowledge, and writing ability. There are GRE subject tests in a variety of fields but not in philosophy. Almost all graduate programs in philosophy, whether an M.A. or Ph.D. program, require submission of your general test scores.

The GRE general test features three distinct parts: a verbal section, a quantitative section, and an analytical writing section. The verbal and quantitative sections are scored on scale from 200-800

in 10-point increments, and the analytical writing section is scored on a scale from 0-6 in 0.5-point increments.

There are plenty of [resources to help you prepare for the GRE](#). Your goal should be (at a minimum) a cumulative score of 1250 with a 5.0 on the analytical writing section. At most programs, a score below 1250 will hurt your chances of admission, a score of 1250-1400 will neither hurt nor help your chances, and a score above 1400 will help your chances.¹³ Any score below a 5.0 on the analytical writing will definitely hurt your chances. In fact, since your graduate studies in philosophy will feature a lot of analytical writing, attaining a 5.5 or 6.0 is preferable.

If you strive to be competitive in applying to the most prestigious programs, set your minimum goal at 1400. Many applicants to these programs will have scores of 1550-1600, and anything less than a 1400 will put you at a considerable disadvantage.

The Educational Testing Services (ETS) website provides a quick means of [registering for the GRE](#). Schedule your first test date for no later than the second week of October. The GRE can only be taken once per month. A few weeks after the test, you will receive your scores from ETS, and this way, you can take the exam a second time in November if your scores were lackluster the first time. Because ETS can take 2-3 weeks to deliver your scores to schools, place a request to send score reports as soon as possible.

Transcripts

Your academic records cannot be altered in any way, so preparing them for submission merely entails paying the registrar a little money to mail them for you. Most programs will expect current transcripts. Hence, depending on the deadlines, you might need to wait to request transcripts for certain programs until after grades for the fall semester have been posted. Nevertheless, among all the materials, transcripts should be the simplest thing to submit.

Application Forms

Every program will have an application form that you must fill out and submit to the graduate school. The information required is generally minimal (e.g., address, ethnicity, birthday, social security number, etc.). In the past, submitting these forms was still a tedious process because they had to be mailed, but because most of these forms are now available online, the process of completing and submitting them has become simpler, faster, and easier to manage.

Note that some programs will require more forms than others. Some require separate forms as applications for teaching assistantships and graduate fellowships while other schools nominate their best applicants for these awards without requiring any additional materials. Be aware of what each particular program requires: Losing eligibility for financial aid because you forgot to submit an extra form would be tragic.

Some online application forms will have sections where you upload your personal statement and writing sample. In these circumstances, the application forms will probably be the last part of the application that you submit.

Letters of Recommendation

Submitting letters of recommendation is another relatively easy aspect of the application process. Identify three people who are familiar with your philosophical ability (preferably professors who gave you A's in their classes), and ask them if they will write letters of recommendation for you. Virtually every application will require a minimum of three letters of recommendation.

Admissions committees typically receive so many applications that they prefer not to receive unnecessary letters of recommendation. As a result, some programs require that applicants submit *only* three letters of recommendation. It could be useful to have additional letters of recommendation in some circumstances, but it is certainly not a requirement. In fact, having a fourth letter that is noticeably weaker than your other three could actually hurt your chances of admission. Choose three letter writers at first, and only ask others for letters of recommendation if you are confident that they could write letters of comparable strength and could address your qualifications in a way that the other letter writers could not.

Provide your letter writers with copies of your transcripts, personal statement, and resume or curriculum vitae. They need to know as much about you as they can, and what they say needs to correspond to what you say in your personal statement. Provide them with addressed envelopes or instructions for submitting their letters online if that is what a program requires. Once you have provided these materials, leave your professors to write and submit their letters. Check back with them within a couple weeks of the first application deadline. Professors can get wrapped up in their teaching or research and forget about your letters, but a gentle, well-timed reminder will go a long way toward preventing this.

Resume or Curriculum Vitae

Not every application requires a resume or curriculum vitae (CV). Instead, many of them have sections of their application forms where applicants are instructed to list their honors and awards or provide their employment history. Before applying to programs, revise your most current resume or CV. If you have never written one, now would be a proper time to do so. Even if you do not have to submit the actual document, you will have a list of your accomplishments prepared in case you need to fill in some portion of the application form with that information.

Of all elements of the application, the content of the resume or CV may be the least important. Even your conference presentations and pertinent academic awards (e.g., 2010 Outstanding Student in Philosophy) will not mean much to most admissions committees.¹⁴ Nevertheless, without a solid document, you could be placed at a slight disadvantage, and should you be admitted, a strong resume or CV can help you earn an assistantship or fellowship.

The [MIT Career Development Workbook](#) offers a comprehensive account of how to write both resumes and CVs and provides a useful comparison of the two document types. For these applications, the content of the documents should not vary much from one to the other: You will

want to stress your academic accomplishments and preparation for studying philosophy as much as possible in both documents. Length, on the other hand, may vary considerably. A CV can be any length, but a resume should be limited to one page.

Personal Statement

The personal statement, also called the statement of purpose or letter of intent, may be the most despised portion of the application. These statements are incredibly hard to write. Professor Schwitzgebel of University of California Riverside summarizes the problem quite well:

“It’s hard to know even what a ‘statement of purpose’ is. Your purpose is to go to graduate school, get a Ph.D., and become a professor. Duh! Are you supposed to try to convince the committee that you want to become a professor more than the next guy? That philosophy is written in your genes? That you have some profound vision for the transformation of philosophy or philosophy education?”¹⁵

The important elements of a personal statement seem self-explanatory, and applicants often struggle to write a statement which makes them seem more deserving of admission than the other applicants. After all, how can you expect an admissions committee to think your reasons for wanting to study and teach philosophy are better than those of other applicants? In their efforts to differentiate themselves from the other aspiring graduate students, applicants often make mistakes in their personal statements. **Table 2** displays many of the common mistakes and provides examples of them.

Table 2: A list of the most common ways in which applicants’ personal statements can go wrong, largely based on examples from Professor Schwitzgebel¹⁶

Applicant’s Remark Is...	Example
Corny	“I have pondered life’s deepest mysteries since I was ten.”
Brown-Nosed	“I consider Sample University the best philosophy program in the country.”
Unrealistic or Arrogant	“I plan to teach philosophy at a top-ten program.” (This applicant would almost surely be claiming to become a more eminent philosopher than those that are evaluating his or her application.)
Self-Important	“I will attempt to revive empiricism.”
Self-Promoting	“I was always one of the best philosophy students at Random University and actively participated in every class discussion.”
Ignorant	“Sample University suits my interests well because of its strengths in applied ethics.” (In this example, the faculty at Sample University has strengths in metaethics, and no one specializes in applied ethics.)
Obvious	“I hope to teach philosophy someday.”
Presumptuous	“I showed in my senior thesis in philosophy that Peter Singer’s argument that abortion is morally permissible is undeniably sound.” (Endorsing a philosophical view in a personal statement is a mistake: Admissions committees will question how the applicant can be knowledgeable enough to hold such a strong view and may view him or her as narrow-minded.)

In personal statements, avoid discussing your personal accomplishments, how you came to be interested in philosophy, and the particular philosophical views you hold. Instead, focus on philosophical issues that interest you, particularly those that you have researched, and elaborate on them in a neutral manner (i.e., without explicitly endorsing any specific views).¹⁷ Discussing your philosophical interests will demonstrate not only how much you know about your interest areas but also enable the admissions committee to evaluate how well your areas of interest match the research interests of the faculty.

The statement of purpose is also an opportunity to explain any weaknesses or anomalies in your file (e.g., one semester of poor grades) and to explain why this particular university appeals to you.¹⁸ The latter aspect is not necessary, but if a program has some notable features you like, mentioning these things can be beneficial. Similarly, mentioning a faculty member's work that intrigues you can make you seem like a better fit for the program. However, this strategy can be risky because you could be perceived as brown-nosing, even if your interest in the professor's work is genuine. Ultimately, if you tailor your personal statement to a particular program, keep these changes fairly minimal, and avoid offering excessive praise of either the program or a professor's work.

Although writing a stellar personal statement remains a daunting task even if you avoid all the mistakes mentioned earlier, standards for personal statements are low. Most personal statements are flawed in several ways, and the essential "thing that committees want to see is a match between (most of) your interests and what they can teach."¹⁹

Writing Sample

Of all the application materials, the writing sample takes the longest to prepare. Revising a philosophy paper so that it becomes a solid writing sample is no easy task. Even if you received an A on the original paper, it will need substantial revision. Your goal should be to turn your current draft into an A+ paper that reaches the limits of your present philosophical ability.

Most students who apply to Ph.D. programs will have excellent grades, excellent GRE scores, and excellent letters of recommendation, but not all of them will be able to write an excellent philosophical paper. If you can write cogent, persuasive arguments, you may be able to distinguish yourself from the rest of the applicants. Moreover, the ability to write an exceptional philosophical paper carries more weight with the admissions committee than anything else: Philosophy is about presenting and critiquing ideas through rational argument, and demonstrating a strong ability to do that will make you an ideal addition to any graduate program.²⁰

Pick a paper from a previous philosophy course (preferably one on which you earned an A) that you think could be expanded into a suitable writing sample. The topic of the paper does not matter as long as it concerns a topic that can be suitably evaluated by the admissions committees who will review your application.²¹ Do not, for example, submit a paper concerning philosophy of language to a department where no one works in that area of philosophy. The admissions committee may have a difficult time assessing the quality of your sample.

After selecting a paper, consult the professor who graded it. Specifically, ask if it would be a suitable writing sample and if he or she would be willing to help you revise it. Your professor will tell you if the paper is not suitable for a graduate school application. Be sure your professor looks at multiple drafts, and follow his or her advice. If possible, have another professor look at it. Professors will vary in the errors they uncover, the objections they raise, the ideas they offer to support your position, and the source material they suggest you consult. Naturally, this makes additional opinions about your paper very valuable. Moreover, if more than one professor identifies the same section of your paper as containing weak arguments or being unclear, that section indisputably needs major revision.

Expect to expand the original paper considerably, and be prepared to make at least three substantial revisions. Divide your work on the writing sample over several months. Do not attempt to transform your paper from good to exemplary in one week; you need ample time to let the ideas resonate and conduct additional research. The process will take time, but the writing sample needs to be the absolute best you can produce.

The ideal length of a writing sample is usually 15-20 double-spaced pages, but the desired length can vary slightly from one program to the next. Check the specifications for each program to be sure what each prefers. Occasionally, a program will want a writing sample that is as short as 3000 words (9-10 double-spaced pages), and this could mean crafting a separate writing sample for that program if you wish to apply there. You could try to cut your main paper down to a suitable length, but by discarding so much material, your arguments will lose a lot of their explanatory and persuasive force. To avoid this type of problem, consult the admissions requirements of the programs that interest you early, and if necessary, be prepared to write additional samples to satisfy troublesome length requirements.

Timeline of the Application Process

Table 3 (available for printing in [Appendix B](#)) illustrates a reasonable timeline for the application process. If you start the process in the first week of October, time should not be a tremendous obstacle, but starting the process earlier can be very helpful. While some programs have deadlines in mid-January and early February, others have deadlines at the beginning of January and middle of December. If you want to apply to these programs and avoid working on your applications during finals week and winter break, starting early is your only option.

Table 3: A checklist of when you should complete certain tasks as you apply to graduate programs in philosophy.

Month	Tasks
October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Conduct preliminary research on graduate schools, and select a tentative list of 8-12 schools. <input type="checkbox"/> Take the GRE. <input type="checkbox"/> Identify the professors who will write your letters of recommendation. <input type="checkbox"/> Pick a paper to revise for your writing sample, and discuss it with the professor who will help you revise it.

November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Revise your list of schools as needed, and <i>commit</i> to applying to the schools you have selected. Beyond this point, do not add or remove schools from your list without a truly compelling reason to do so. <input type="checkbox"/> Retake the GRE (if needed). <input type="checkbox"/> Request any remaining GRE score reports. <input type="checkbox"/> Make the first and second rounds of revisions on your writing sample. <input type="checkbox"/> Contact your letter writers, and give them the addressed envelopes. <input type="checkbox"/> Request transcripts for programs with mid-December and early January deadlines. <input type="checkbox"/> Revise your resume or CV. <input type="checkbox"/> Write and revise a draft of your personal statement. <input type="checkbox"/> Send all your letter writers copies of your transcripts, your resume or CV, and the current draft of your personal statement.
December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Finish revising your writing sample. <input type="checkbox"/> Finish revising your personal statement. Tailor it to specific schools as you see fit. <input type="checkbox"/> Send all your letter writers an email notifying them of all the deadlines, and emphasize those that are approaching. <input type="checkbox"/> Complete your applications to programs with mid-December and early January deadlines. <input type="checkbox"/> Request transcripts (after the fall semester grades have been posted) for the remaining programs.
January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Complete applications to the remainder of your programs. <input type="checkbox"/> Follow up with the graduate secretaries at programs with earlier deadlines to verify all application materials have been received. <input type="checkbox"/> Request additional transcripts, letters of recommendation, or GRE score reports if needed.
February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Follow up with the graduate secretaries at remaining programs to verify all application materials have been received. <input type="checkbox"/> Request additional transcripts, letters of recommendation, or GRE score reports if needed.

Regardless of when your final deadlines are, strive to finish the process near the end of January. Afterward, you can double-check with the graduate secretaries of each program to make sure your materials arrived in good order. After that, focus on the spring semester and wait until faculty from the programs contact you with news regarding your application.

You may be tempted to consult the posts at [Who Got In](#) and [The Grad Café](#) to learn what experiences other applicants are having, but keep your perusal of these sites (and your resulting speculation) minimal. Even if you are worried about your chances of admission (and fear you have wasted a lot of time and money), relax and feel good about what you have done. No one gets into graduate school without applying, and very few (if any) enjoy the process.

Endnotes

1. Eric Schwitzgebel, "Applying to Ph.D. Programs in Philosophy: Full Text," *The Splintered Mind: Underblog*, <http://schwitzsplintersunderblog.blogspot.com/2007/10/applying-to-phd-programs-in-philosophy.html>.
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Appendix A: Acknowledgments

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Although the bibliography lists some of the most significant contributors to this document, many are omitted. Much of the advice offered here is based on my personal experiences and observations, including a wealth of information acquired through conversations with professors and graduate students. Therefore, my final acknowledgement goes to all the professors and students that responded to my emails, returned my phone calls, or shared their thoughts over a cup of coffee. Had they been more reluctant to share their personal stories and offer candid advice, I doubt I could have written this guide.

Appendix B: Printable Timeline and Checklist

Month	Tasks
October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Conduct preliminary research on graduate schools, and select a tentative list of 8-12 schools. <input type="checkbox"/> Take the GRE. <input type="checkbox"/> Identify the professors who will write your letters of recommendation. <input type="checkbox"/> Pick a paper to revise for your writing sample, and discuss it with the professor who will help you revise it.
November	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Revise your list of schools as needed, and <i>commit</i> to applying to the schools you have selected. Beyond this point, do not add or remove schools from your list without a truly compelling reason to do so. <input type="checkbox"/> Retake the GRE (if needed). <input type="checkbox"/> Request any remaining GRE score reports. <input type="checkbox"/> Make the first and second rounds of revisions on your writing sample. <input type="checkbox"/> Contact your letter writers, and give them the addressed envelopes. <input type="checkbox"/> Request transcripts for programs with mid-December and early January deadlines. <input type="checkbox"/> Revise your resume or CV. <input type="checkbox"/> Write and revise a draft of your personal statement. <input type="checkbox"/> Send all your letter writers copies of your transcripts, your resume or CV, and the current draft of your personal statement.
December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Finish revising your writing sample. <input type="checkbox"/> Finish revising your personal statement. Tailor it to specific schools as you see fit. <input type="checkbox"/> Send all your letter writers an email notifying them of all the deadlines, and emphasize those that are approaching. <input type="checkbox"/> Complete your applications to programs with mid-December and early January deadlines. <input type="checkbox"/> Request transcripts (after the fall semester grades have been posted) for the remaining programs.
January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Complete applications to the remainder of your programs. <input type="checkbox"/> Follow up with the graduate secretaries at programs with earlier deadlines to verify all application materials have been received. <input type="checkbox"/> Request additional transcripts, letters of recommendation, or GRE score reports if needed.
February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Follow up with the graduate secretaries at remaining programs to verify all application materials have been received. <input type="checkbox"/> Request additional transcripts, letters of recommendation, or GRE score reports if needed.