

Workshop on the Mysteries of Applying to Art History Graduate School Programs

**Art History Department
University of Wisconsin
4 Oct. 2007**

General Tips on Graduate School Applications

- Discuss your application with your advisor!
- Research graduate programs for their individual strengths (such as museum collections) and for the strengths and fields of individual faculty members, rather than making a decision based merely on a school's reputation. In many fields, the good programs are NOT at the so-called "top" universities. For example, you might find out where the author of a book you admire teaches and then apply to that program. You can also look at lists of course offerings on department websites to give yourself a sense of the range of fields offered in a program.
- It is always a good idea to go straight to the horse's mouth (whatever that means exactly!) and talk to currently enrolled graduate students. You can get contact information of those willing to discuss their programs from the department administrator. They can tell you about everything from the nature of the curriculum to the living conditions in the area to the best place to get pizza.
- Also, talk to faculty other than your advisor about various schools. You never know who knows whom, and many professors have insider information on certain programs.

Writing Sample

- Plan your writing sample early and work closely with a faculty member on what to send.
- Some programs ask for a senior thesis; if you are applying in the fall before your thesis is complete, submit a seminar or term paper. Sometimes, shorter is better if it represents your best work. Above all it should be well-written, properly edited, and demonstrate an ability to combine research and original analysis.
- The writing sample can be about a different area of visual studies from the one in which you are applying; as long as it represents the most-polished display of your research, writing, and analytical skills, the subject does not matter.

Letters of Recommendation

- Think about recommendation letters in advance and choose your recommenders carefully. A letter from someone in the field you wish to study is of most use to you. Supporting letters should come from other faculty who know you and your work. Letters from Internship supervisors or bosses can be useful, but in general admissions committees are looking for someone who can speak to your academic potential.
- Do not be shy about asking faculty members for letters; it is their job!
- In order to get the best results, provide your recommender with key pieces of information, such as your statement of purpose, a transcript, papers you wrote for his/her class, and a list of the schools to which you are applying **with their deadlines**. Check with your recommenders to see if they prefer online or hardcopy letters, if there is a choice, and ask if they would like stamps for the letters.
- **DO** check the box saying you waive your right to review the letter, as confidential recommendations carry much more weight than ones you have been able to review.

- ### Hints on How to Write a Statement of Purpose

The statement of purpose is a very important part of your application, sometimes outweighing even your transcript and GPA. You should take it seriously and treat it as a proper essay about your academic work and interests, not as a diary entry. Grammar, punctuation, and spelling should all be correct, and the text should be as fluent and eloquent (without being flowery!) as possible. For help with writing this statement consult the Writing Center, or even better a UW faculty member with whom you have worked (we are thrilled to support graduate school applications!).

Introduction: State very clearly the field in which you are interested and with whom you would like to work if you were accepted into that particular program (make sure to insert the appropriate names for each school: proofreading is essential here!). Remember you are trying to prove to the admissions committee that you are a good match for them. Even if you make this part up, it is important to sound directed. You can always change your mind about your field once you are in a program. **Think about this as an exercise in marketing yourself rather than a set-in-stone prescription for your entire future.**

Body of essay: This section should contain information about the academic (and perhaps personal, to a much lesser extent) paths you have taken, and how they have led you to make the very significant decision to go to grad school. You might want to elaborate on research or internship experiences that have convinced you to make this decision. Suggest commitment without burbling enthusiasm. **Avoid the obvious “I love art” angle, as admissions committees take that for granted and are not interested in your museum experiences at age 12.**

- Put past experiences in the context of how they have prepared you for graduate school rather than simply spouting off all the great things you have done.
- A section of the statement should be devoted to some of the ideas, issues, or papers with which you have been most engaged (an Honors Thesis, for example). Demonstrating passion about and commitment to your **area of research**, rather than to art itself, scores lots of points.
- Indicate what approach or methodology most interests you, even naming specific books or scholars whose works you admire.
- In general, committees are looking for a combination of academic ability, writing skills, research skills, and that extra special spark indicating a student's ability to synthesize all of the above and engage in original thinking.