



Applying to PhD Programs

- *Selecting Programs
 - *Taking Time Off
 - *Crafting the SOP/Personal statements
- 

The COVID Elephant in the Room

- Many departments are not accepting new PhD students this year, or have not yet decided
(https://www.chronicle.com/article/more-doctoral-programs-suspend-admissions-that-could-have-lasting-effects-on-graduate-education?cid=gen_sign_in)
- Send email to professor interested in working with
 - State interested in applying to PhD program in X department to work with them
 - Ask if accepting new students this year
 - Discuss research interests/why them/why there
 - Provide CV
 - Be brief (see template) <https://www.aimacbain.com/single-post/making-contact-with-a-prospective-advisor>

What if I don't apply this year?

- **Upsides:**

- Will have finished MA upon applying
- Break from academia/working experience
- Take time to improve relevant skills (language, work, analysis)
- Opportunity to “plug” notable gaps or weaknesses
- Plenty of time to research programs and professors
- Everyone is in the same boat

- **Downsides:**

- No certainty when applications will reopen
- Available spots will absolutely be reduced
- Two+ years of students applying for same, reduced spots
- Can take a while to find a job, let alone one in a related field
- Funding may be affected
- Everyone is in the same boat

Deciding to apply this year or not

- Are your dream programs still accepting applications this year?
- Are you willing to wait until your dream program is accepting applications, even if it means a year or more waiting?
- Are you willing to go to a lower-tiered program or a less perfect fit of a program in order to avoid a gap?
- Do you have a Plan B in mind for the meanwhile?
- Do you know where you would go if not to a PhD program?

Remember the poor state of the job market and the possibility you will not be accepted to a PhD program, or that you won't find a university job upon graduating. These are realities that should influence your decisions.

Some possibilities for time off:

Even without COVID, many applicants apply multiple times before being successful. Consider ways to keep using/improving your skills.

- Language Programs
- Teaching overseas
- Tutoring
- Working or volunteering at an Asian-related institution/museum
- Translating/Interpreting
- Being a Research Assistant
- Working at a college/university, school, library, research institute

How to find programs

- Research your academic heroes
 - See where they are now
 - See where they went to school
- Look at conference presenters
 - Who is currently working on material you're interested in?
 - What schools are hosting conferences related to your topic?
- Look at scholarly associations
 - Search membership directory
 - See where members are working
- Look at book flaps and article bios

<https://www.aimacbain.com/applying-to-graduate-school>

Things to Consider

- **Resources:** What do you need to do your research in terms of materials, technology, languages, classes, professors, and funding?
- **Funding:** How much per year and for how many years are they offering funding? Do they cover summers? How about insurance? For dependents? Are there additional funding resources on campus?
- **Advisor:** Do you like your potential advisor? Are there other people you can work with when they are away, or if it's a bad fit?
- **Environment:** Do you like the campus? Is it a good city for you (and dependents)? How is the weather? Will you flourish there or be miserable?

A PhD is a major commitment - make sure it's in a place you'll be OK

Written components

<https://www.aimacbain.com/statement-of-purpose>

<https://www.aimacbain.com/post/writing-a-savvy-statement-of-purpose>

- **Statement of Purpose (SOP)**

- Responds to a prompt
- Lays out relevant experience/research interests to make case for suitability
- Allows applicant to explain reasoning behind applying
- Provides key words that can help make a match with a potential advisor

- **Personal Statement**

- Sometimes identical to SOP, sometimes distinct
- If distinct, may allow for a narrative to explain interest or history in field

- **Diversity Statement**

- Explains how your experience will contribute to the university
- Purposefully open-ended; might connect with funding opportunities

- **Mini-essays**

- Asks a single question, usually with a small word limit
- Should not overlap with SOP

Statement of Purpose

An SOP is:

- A persuasive essay on why you are a good fit for that program and vice versa
- An opportunity to express future research goals and interests
- A place to demonstrate your ability to flesh out a research project
- A chance for a prospective advisor to get a feel for you as a student

is not:

- A lifetime achievement award application
- A place to discuss how much you want this
- A step-by-step narrative of how you came to be interested in this topic
- A full history of all of your education and life experiences

Opening paragraph

- Signposting (what they will see in rest of application)
- Memorable fact/feature/strength
- The core message of your overall SOP
- Your proposed project/topic
- **Treat it like an essay**

The opening paragraph serves as an indicator and reminder of what is in the rest of the statement. Let it serve as a reminder for someone looking to give it a second read.

Responding to a Prompt

Columbia's Prompt (in 2012):

All applicants must submit a statement of academic purpose. Please compose a succinct statement of approximately 1,000 words describing your past academic work and preparation related to your intended field of study, your plans for graduate study at Columbia, and your subsequent career objectives. If you intend to transfer from a graduate program at another university, please explain why you wish to do so. If you are not currently attending an academic program, please describe your activities since you were last enrolled. Additionally, if there has been a break in your educational experience, please include a brief explanation.

My SOP Opening Paragraph

After a four-year period gaining valuable working and language experience, I am ready to return to academia and fulfill my long-term goal of earning a PhD and becoming a professor. In the next stage of my studies, I plan to build upon my previous academic work in looking at the interaction of Buddhist and Shintō concepts of divinity, temporal power, and religious ritual in Japan's late classical and early medieval periods (approximately 8th to 14th centuries). I am particularly interested in viewing trade and communications with mainland Asia to see how they influenced Japanese religion and culture during these periods. By looking at the historical and political contexts within which religious materials entered the country, I aim to better understand Japan's role in Buddhism's spread via the famed Silk Road. Additionally, I hope to gain greater insights into how other countries' examples may have influenced Buddhism's acceptance and development within Japan. (153 words)

How I'd Write it Now

After spending four years developing my administrative and language skills working at a Japanese consulate, I am returning to my long-term goal of earning a PhD and becoming a professor of premodern Japanese religion and history. For this next stage of my studies, I will build upon my prior work investigating the eighth century Japanese court's use of Buddhism for state protection by investigating continental influences as well as ritual recitations intended to protect the court from natural disasters, invasion, and sickness. I am particularly interested in examining Japan's role in Silk Road trade and communication through the lens of the Buddhist state protection cult during this period. Due to the combination of advanced language training, research materials, and especially the large number of faculty members whose research interests overlap my own, I believe that the Department of East Asian Languages & Cultures at Columbia University is the best place for me to pursue my degree. (156 words)

Sample Prompt

Please prepare a statement of no more than 1,500 words expressing why you want to enter graduate studies at XYZ University. Include your intended program, career objectives, and an overview of your research plans while at XYZ University. If you know the individuals with whom you would like to work, please identify them. Briefly explain what academic or personal experiences have helped prepare you for this program. You may also include any additional information you feel is pertinent in aiding selection committees evaluate your suitability and aptitude for advanced academic study and research.

Points to Include

- Why XYZ university
- Which program
- Future career
- Research plans as grad student
- People I want to work with
- Academic/personal preparations
- Additional stuff that might help them want to pick me