

CHAPTER TWO

HOW TO APPLY TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

Once you've decided to go on to graduate school, it's time to begin the application process. This chapter provides practical advice on applying to history programs in Canada. Some of our suggestions also pertain to graduate study abroad, but you should be aware that the application process is different for universities in the United States, Britain, France, and other countries. For example, in Canada applications to MA and PhD programs are usually made separately – though some universities offer direct entry into doctoral programs (where students without MAs are admitted directly into a PhD program). In the United States, by contrast, most students apply only once, to a joint MA/PhD program. Some American universities offer a terminal Master's Degree, but they rarely offer financial assistance toward this degree.

Allow plenty of time to decide where you want to study and to complete your applications. It is especially important to get an early start if you are applying to graduate programs outside Canada. For example, many American universities require applicants to take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), while Canadian universities do not. Ordinarily, you should begin the process in the autumn of the year before you wish to enrol. Although deadlines for applications vary, most fall between November and January. Financial aid deadlines may be different; take care not to miss them.

Most universities announce admissions decisions in March or April, although a growing number accept their top candidates earlier. Do not hesitate to contact the universities you have not heard from once you get an offer, and try to negotiate for the best possible funding package.

Gathering Information and Applications

The first step in the application process is deciding where to apply. Don't base your decision solely on the university's prestige; the ranking of a specific graduate history program has as much to do with the reputation of the department and individual faculty members as with the university as a whole. If there is a scholar whose work you particularly admire, find out where that person teaches.

An excellent place to start your research is by looking at departmental websites. Here you will find information on courses, program faculty, and, increasingly, about graduate students currently enrolled in the program. Websites often discuss their faculty's current research; however, keep in mind, that some of this information may be outdated. When in doubt, contact the faculty member directly and inquire about their current projects. Departmental websites also list course offerings as well as admission, degree, tuition, and financial aid requirements. Graduate admissions committees appreciate applications that are familiar with the departmental offerings and faculty research interests.

Your undergraduate professors can be a great help in choosing a graduate school. Ask which

universities they think offer the best programs for your particular interests and abilities, and find out if they will put in a good word for you with acquaintances in those departments. Do not hesitate to ask professors for advice, even if you have not taken a class with them. Their advice may be especially useful if they studied at a school you are interested in attending. Some professors will speak frankly about the strengths and weaknesses of particular departments or faculty members. Others may drop hints. Listen carefully for hints about department politics or personality clashes: you don't want to wind up in a department where the two people you want to work with haven't spoken to each other in a decade! But don't just talk to your professors; find out as much information as you can about a university from a variety of sources.

To apply to a graduate program, you must have the necessary forms. Most applications for Canadian and American schools are submitted electronically, and so the forms will also be found online. However, for institutions overseas, you may have to write individual schools for paper copies – again this information will be found on departmental websites. Address your request to the director of graduate admissions or the department of history if you cannot find a specific name. You will receive in reply a packet of forms and information. Then your real work begins.

What to Look for in a Program, Department, and School

You will be spending many years in graduate school, especially if you are working toward your PhD, so you should learn as much as you can about the history department and related programs, and about the university as a whole. Faculty members, curriculum, library holdings, computer facilities, financial aid packages, health and counseling services, accommodations for persons with disabilities, and location are important considerations in deciding where to apply. Find out as much as possible about the program requirements and how flexible they are. Must you limit your coursework to history, or can you take courses outside the department or at a neighbouring university? What are the language requirements?

It is important to find a program where your interests match the strengths of the department, and where you want to work with faculty members who want to work with you. If there is a historian whose work you particularly admire, find out where he or she teaches. Check out the books written by other department members, and find out the dissertation topics of current graduate students and recent PhDs. The dissertations written within a department reflect the interests of its faculty members as well as students, and the available research facilities. Recently completed dissertations are often listed on the department websites. They are also listed in the Canadian Historical Association's *Register of Dissertations* (<http://www.cha-shc.ca>) and in the Dissertation Directory of the American Historical Association (<http://www.historians.org>).

If you are attracted by a special program, such as environmental history or the history of medicine, do your best to find out whether the program is securely established and if any history student may take courses in it, or if you have to apply separately. If you expect to depend heavily on one or two faculty members, find out if they work regularly with graduate students,

and investigate their teaching status. Professors sometimes leave for sabbaticals, reduce their teaching load to do administrative work, move to another campus, or retire. If your interest in a particular program is based primarily on one faculty member, find out if there is a backup person to work with should that professor leave. This is particularly important as you begin to select among the schools that have accepted you. Identify the resources available to graduate students, for they indicate the level of commitment to graduate research and teaching within a department and school. Does the library have extensive holdings in your field? Are there relevant sources in the university archives? Is travel funding available to graduate students? Are there special interdisciplinary programs? What are the computer facilities or resources? Is there a common room where graduate students can socialize? Is there an active graduate students' association? What accommodations and support services are provided for students who have special needs?

You will also need to research tuition costs and financial aid, for they vary tremendously between schools and even between departments. Find out if financial aid is channeled through the department, or if you need to apply separately to a different office. Some important questions to ask include: is the financial aid package only for the first year or does it cover subsequent years of graduate study (and if so, how many)? Do you have to pay tuition out of your stipend or is it covered as part of your funding package? Must you pay tuition over the summer and when you are no longer taking courses? Does the financial aid package require you to work as a research or teaching assistant (or in another capacity), or is it an outright stipend? Is it contingent upon performance? Is there additional funding for travel to archives or conferences? While some universities have 'guaranteed funding systems' for doctoral candidates, aid is often contingent on students applying for funding from outside sources, such as Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Doctoral Fellowships, Canada Graduate Scholarships, Ontario Graduate Scholarships, the Fonds Québécois de la Recherche sur la Société et la Culture (FQRSC). Being competitive for major external awards will only bolster any application you make for graduate programs. For details on these matters, see chapter 3.

Canadian students are often shocked by the high fees at American universities, but do not be dissuaded from applying. Most universities offer very substantial aid packages to promising students, and some universities have fellowships flagged for students of colour and specific ethnic groups. Aid arrangements vary by university; you should discuss grant opportunities with the graduate director. When you receive an offer, weigh the financial aid package with the quality of the school. If possible, don't just go to the institution that offers you the most money. A school that offers less money may have a superior job placement record or be a better "fit" for you.

Although most financial aid packages require you to enrol as a full-time student, some people go to graduate school part time for economic or personal reasons. Being a part-time student does not mean that you are less committed to graduate study, and part-timers have the right to the same education as full-time students. Besides, "full-time" does not mean "all-the-time." Many full-time students have family responsibilities, have to work for wages at some point during their graduate education, or are engaged in activist pursuits outside the academy.

Graduate study does require a big commitment, however. It is not easy to do graduate course work and exam preparation on top of a long commute or another job, and it is even more difficult (though not impossible) to successfully complete a dissertation part-time. You will not be able to earn a PhD "on the side" if you already have a full life in another city or a demanding career. Moreover, you may miss the intellectual community of graduate school if you are not at the university during the day. Part-time students may have to make a special effort to break down isolation and meet other grad students.

The location of the university may also be a factor in where you choose to apply. Are you a big city person, or would you prefer to live and work in a smaller town? Are you more comfortable in surroundings that are ethnically and culturally diverse? Some students cannot relocate; others are limited to schools near their families or where there are job opportunities for their partners; still others don't care where they live, as long as the library is close by. If you cannot relocate, you may find yourself with several degrees from the same institution. Opinions vary on whether multiple degrees from a single university might pose a problem in your career. It is definitely to your advantage to work with several professors at more than one university, and staying at the same small university may make course selection a challenge. The courses you took during your Honour's year or as part of your department's MA program probably cannot be repeated as part of doctoral work. If you know you want to continue on at your undergraduate institution for your PhD, you should consider going somewhere else for the MA. On the other hand, don't worry if this is impossible. To a large extent, graduate study – and your career in history – is what you make it.

Never hesitate to write or call a department to get further information. If possible, set up an exploratory on-campus interview with the graduate director. Ask the secretary for the names of students in the program; they will probably give you a more candid assessment of the program's strengths and weaknesses than the history office! Many departments run graduate student conferences; the programs will give you a sense of student research interests, and, if you are able to attend the conference, you can meet your future colleagues in person.

An important strategy for finding the right PhD program and supervisor, as well as potentially increasingly your chance of admission, is to contact individual faculty members before submitting a formal application. Send your potential PhD supervisor an email providing a little bit of background on your education and research interests, as well as a sense of the topic you would like to explore during your doctoral research. Even if you don't have a clear idea of your project, finding out whether faculty are interested in your candidacy can save you much time and money; showing compatibility between your research interests and theirs is an important initial step. Keep in mind that their interest does not automatically grant you admission into the program – but it may help.

Unlike law schools, history departments do not receive thousands of applicants for admission. For this reason, try to pare down your choice of schools in advance of applying. Each application will cost you well over a hundred dollars, particularly when you factor in transcripts costs. Make multiple applications, but remember that well-qualified applicants will usually be

admitted to one of the schools that peak their interest. One rule of thumb is to choose two or three programs that interest you most – including one ‘safe school’ – particularly if you have contacted potential supervisors in advance.

The Application Process

Application instructions vary with each institution, so read each set with care. There are so many different forms and deadlines that it is important to keep some kind of organized file or you will be easily overwhelmed. Keep all application materials in a file folder. On the inside cover, keep track of each school's requirements and your follow-up. Photocopy all materials you send out.

Submit applications well in advance, particularly if you are doing them electronically, and keep a record of your submission along with its reference number. Once your application arrives at the university, it becomes a file (comprised of your statement of purpose, writing sample, letters of recommendation, and transcript). That file, which may be read by all members of the department, by every professor in your field, or by a small committee comprised of faculty members (and sometimes graduate students) with several different specialties, is used to size up your scholarly potential in a few minutes. For that reason, you should make your application readable and concise. Graduate admissions committees look for students who show potential for solid scholarship and have a lively interest in history. They are not necessarily looking for leadership talent or an impressive resume. To increase your chances of acceptance, make scholarship the focal point of your application.

Tips on the Personal Statement and Letters of Recommendation

Together with your academic transcript, the most important parts of an application are your statement of purpose, the supporting letters of recommendation, and your writing sample. In Canada, your transcript and letters of recommendations are most crucial; the statement of purpose is more important to American universities.

The most effective statement of purpose is specific, well-written, professional in tone, scrupulously accurate in spelling and grammar, and tailored to each institution. It avoids sweeping philosophical generalizations, avowals of political or other ideology, or ruminations about the nature of historical knowledge and its essential role in bettering the human condition. No matter how earnestly intended or passionately felt, such lofty rhetoric all too easily descends to the level of cliché, especially when offered in a necessarily compressed form, suggesting an immature and jejune outlook rather than the intended profundity.

It is appropriate to discuss briefly how you became interested in history and to include something about your long-range career goals. Explain how your undergraduate reading, research, and course work have shaped your particular interests and prepared you to pursue them further. Avoid mention of extracurricular activities and achievements, no matter how outstanding, unless

they have a direct bearing on the professional field to which you are seeking entry.

Your statement of purpose should sum up your scholarly interests and immediate academic objectives in a clear and straightforward fashion. Be as precise as possible about the time period, geographic region, research themes, and kind of history you want to study, and perhaps even the topic you wish ultimately to investigate. You must convince the readers of your application file that you are capable of developing a research project that is original, realistic, and appropriate to your level. At the same time, it is important that your focus not look too narrow. The first years of graduate education primarily involve general training rather than specific research. Therefore, your statement should convey your openness to acquiring a wide range of historical knowledge and research skills rather than a fixation on a single narrow topic.

It is entirely appropriate, indeed desirable, to tailor your statement of purpose to the institution to which you are applying. Feel free, for example, to mention particular courses, interdisciplinary programs, or library resources that make the institution attractive to you. Many departments are keen to attract students from diverse backgrounds, and you should not hesitate to identify yourself if you are a member of a group that has been under-represented in the academy. You may also refer to professors with whom you would like to work (after making sure they will be on campus if you are applying to a one-year program), but avoid a fawning, excessively deferential tone.

The statement of purpose is also the place for you to address briefly any anomalies or ambiguities in your record, such as poor grades, course content that may not be clear from the transcript, or a health problem or disability that affected your grades. Do not appear defensive or apologetic; offer a one-sentence explanation of your situation and move on. If your undergraduate background in history is weak, or you have been out of school for a long time, you need to demonstrate that your commitment to the academic discipline of history is now firm.

Remember that your application is one of many being read by busy faculty members who have numerous other time-consuming obligations. Keep your tendencies toward loquaciousness well in check, and observe word limits strictly.

Letters of recommendation are also highly important, particularly in Canada where the historical profession is smaller and many professors are acquainted. It is well worth the effort to get to know professors as an undergraduate; most are delighted when students express an interest in their courses and in graduate work in history.

Select with great care the professors you ask to write on your behalf. Academic letters of reference are confidential; you should not ask to see them. If you are applying to a US university, you must waive your right to see the letter or it will not be taken seriously. Obviously, you cannot quiz someone in detail about the content of a letter of recommendation, but it is acceptable to ask in advance whether the professor feels able to write a reasonably positive letter. If possible, select faculty members whose scholarly work might be known to those who will be reading the letters. (Admissions committees evaluate the writers of

recommendation letters as well as the subject of those letters!) The strongest letter comes from the person who knows you best, even if that person is a teaching assistant. Keep in mind, however, that a tenured faculty member will carry more weight than the opinions of graduate students or sessional instructors. Established scholars have likely taught and supervised more students, and thus have a broader frame of reference to evaluate your work. If necessary, try to supplement letters from beginning or relatively unknown instructors with others from more established scholars.

Generally speaking, try to secure letters of recommendation when you and your work are still fresh in the instructors' mind. If you wish to obtain a letter from a professor with whom you studied a year or so in the past, or who taught you in a large lecture course, remind him or her about your work in the course, your general undergraduate program, and your scholarly interests to fix yourself more precisely in the writer's mind. The more specific a letter of recommendation the greater weight it carries. Even if you know a professor well, it will not hurt to provide your statement of purpose, curriculum vitae (including grade point average and any scholastic honours achieved), and a personal assessment of your goals and ability to fulfill them. It is also a good idea to give the professor a copy of a paper you wrote in the course.

Do not hesitate to ask your professors for letters of recommendation; writing these letters is part of the job. At the same time, do be considerate and talk to the professor well in advance. Make sure your forms (electronic or paper) are filled out properly, and allow ample time, preferably four weeks, before the deadlines. As the deadline approaches, verify that the school received your letters. You may need to give a gentle reminder of the deadlines. When you are accepted, let your professors know and thank them for their help.

A writing sample forms another crucial part of the application to almost all universities. Ideally, you should submit a paper in your chosen field that demonstrates your ability to do research using primary sources. However, the quality of your essay is probably more important than its content or method. Your paper will be read for the evidence it offers about the quality, clarity and originality of your mind; your maturity and skill as a writer and researcher; and your capacity for attention to detail. A thoughtful, well-crafted, coherently organized essay can go a long way toward favourably disposing an admissions committee on your behalf. Conversely, a shallow, hastily-written paper, marred by poor organization, awkwardness of expression or (even worse) outright grammatical errors and typos can seriously undermine an otherwise strong application.

You should take great care in the presentation of every part of your graduate school application. There have been instances of applications where misspelled words or grammatical errors have been circled or underlined by previous readers, with an exclamation point in the margin. Such lapses of detail are not necessarily fatal in themselves, particularly if the admissions committee decides that the applicant is a "diamond in the rough." But such errors are sufficiently damaging, especially in borderline cases, that you should make every effort to avoid them.

Clearly, no single formula can guarantee admission to graduate school in history or any other

discipline. Each admissions decision reflects a variety of factors and subjective judgments by fallible human beings. Admissions committees must match student interests with faculty expertise and try to balance the number of students in any given field. They want to avoid a scenario where most of the incoming class wants to study with one professor! No matter how talented you are, you are unlikely to be accepted into a program that cannot accommodate your interests, either because the specialist in your area is on leave or the field is simply not covered.

Set Your Sights High

Keep an open mind as you consider history-related programs and careers. If you decide that you don't want to invest six to eight years pursuing a PhD, then consider a related field. If you do wish to follow the academic route, determine which graduate programs you are most interested in and consider applying to universities of varying prestige. Don't sell yourself short by assuming that the better-known departments won't accept you or give you aid. They often take more students and have more scholarship money than smaller, lesser-known institutions. If you are not accepted the first time you apply, you can always try again next year. You will be competing in a different pool of applicants and may have a better chance. Good luck!