Applying to Ph.D. Programs in Philosophy

by Eric Schwitzgebel, UC Riverside

Below is the full text of *Applying to Ph.D. Programs in Philosophy*, a seven part post on The Splintered Mind, September - October 2007. Some of the original posts have useful comments and discussion, so you may want to check those out by going to the individual original posts:

Part I: Should You Apply, and Where?
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Part I: Should You Apply, and Where?

Last January I posted some thoughts on applying to graduate school in philosophy. Many people seem to have found that post helpful, and now that people are thinking about applications for next academic year (yes, it's time to get cracking!) I'm finding myself beseiged with questions, so I thought I'd expand and update my reflections in a series of posts. The current post will address the issue of deciding whether to apply at all, and where. Warning: This might be depressing!

It's Extremely Competitive

At U.C. Riverside (ranked 31 in the Philosophical Gourmet Report), we received about 200 applications last year, of which we admitted 24 (more than usual for us) for an entering class of 11. Students we admitted typically had GPAs of 3.8 or more, and most of them had virtually straight A's (that is, almost no A-minuses) in their upper-division philosophy classes by senior year, if they were applying as undergraduates. Of our entering class of 11 students, four had perfect 4.0 GPAs in their last enrolled institution (whether undergrad or MA).

To get into the top-ranked philosophy departments is considerably more difficult than to get into UCR. To my knowledge no UCR undergraduate has *ever* been admitted to a top-15 philosophy Ph.D. program (certainly not in the 10 years I've been here), though we've had some students with straight A's, very strong letters, and excellent writing samples. When I was a student at Berkeley, it seemed that almost all my classmates were from top universities (Harvard, Princeton) or renowned liberal arts colleges (Amherst, Swarthmore). The few who weren't from such name-brand institutions seemed to have done time at such colleges (a classmate from Northeastern, for example, had spent a year at Oxford and had letters from professors there). I don't want to suggest that it's *impossible* for a student from a middle-tier school to get into a top Ph.D. program, but the odds appear to be long even if you're valedictorian.

When I applied to graduate school in 1991, I had literally straight-A's from Stanford (except for an A- and a B+ my very first term and one A- later) with a liberal sprinking of A+'s (one semester I took four courses and received four A+'s), very strong GREs (800/790/750, back when it had three sections), what seems to me now in retrospect to be a good writing sample, and letters from leading philosophers (Fred Dretske, John Dupre, and P.J. Ivanhoe) one of whom later invited me to contribute to an anthology based on one of my *undergraduate* essays (and so presumably wrote a strong letter). I was not admitted to Harvard.

For comparison, here are the admissions data from the Harvard Law School admissions site:
Admissions Criteria
Applicants accepted: 12.2%

Number of 2006 applicants: 6,810
Number of 2006 matriculants: 558
LSAT range (25 to 75 percentile): 169 to 175
GPA range (25 to 75 percentile): 3.95 to 3.72

and Harvard Medical:
Admissions Criteria
Applicants accepted: 4.9%
Average MCAT: 11.7
Average GPA (4.0 scale): 3.79

It seems a safe bet that it's considerably harder to get into Harvard Philosophy than Harvard Law or Medical.

The best 1-2 majors at U.C. Riverside every year have GPAs around 3.9. Those who apply to graduate schools typically land in schools ranked in the 25-40 range.

Prospects After Admission

Although I haven't seen data on this, my impression is that most philosophy Ph.D. programs have completion rates of 50% or less; that most of the people who do finish take longer than advertised, often 7-9 years (though Stanford and Princeton have reputations for being quick); and that most of the people who drop out do so during the dissertation phase, after already having completed several years of study. I also suspect that women complete at substantially lower rates than men. (Why that should be is an interesting question!)

Those students who do complete their degrees don't always find tenure-track teaching jobs -- and those who do find tenure-track jobs often have to apply for several years, be willing to move anywhere in the country, and settle for schools they've never heard of. (If you're in a large metropolitan area and willing to teach at the community college level, and if you're patient about piecing together temporary "freeway flier" jobs for a few years, you may be able to stay local after graduation.) Students completing their degrees at top ten universities have a better chance of finding a job at a school they've heard of before, but are often not taken seriously as applicants at lower prestige schools.

Here's what happened to my entering class of eight at U.C. Berkeley (ranked about #3 or 4 nationally at the time were were admitted): One dropped out after the first year, two dropped out after 7-9 years, two completed their degrees after 7-9 years but never found permanent teaching positions, one ended up at a respectable but not renowned liberal arts college (Marquette) after about 12 years of study, one went to SUNY Albany after 6 years of study (then later moved to U.T. Austin), and one (I myself) went to U.C. Riverside after 6 years of study, though for methodological reasons it may be distortive to include myself in these data.

Coming out of U.C. Riverside, my impression is that about half of our successful students end up teaching community college (some never complete their degree and don't show up on the official "placement" lists). Those who land at four-year schools (often after a couple years of looking) are generally (but not universally!) at lower prestige colleges. Here's ourplacement record. Bear in mind that many two-year schools do not have "community college" in their name.

I advise students not to consider graduate school in philosophy unless (1.) they'd be happy teaching philosophy at a low prestige college and are willing to move almost anywhere in the country, and (2.) even if they never finished the degree they would have found the process of studying philosophy at the graduate level *intrinsically worthwhile*.

My sense is that the last criterion is key to completing the degree. Students who are extrinsically motivated in their education are unlikely to complete a dissertation in philosophy. There are no real deadlines, no structure imposed by your advisor. You simply have to sit down and think and read and write about the same topic,

without much outside help or direction, for *a few years*. At the same time, you're in a very anxiety-producing situation: Your whole career depends on how good your dissertation is, and the power your dissertation chair has over you -- in the form of approving or not approving your dissertation chapters and in writing a good or a weak letter for you at the end of the process -- is enormous. This is not a situation in which people who are not powerfully intrinsically motivated to do philosophy are likely to succeed.

On the bright side: It's delightful to be able to spend your time surrounded by others as nerdy about philosophy as you are -- peer-to-peer interactions are one of the most rewarding aspects of graduate school -- and you have great liberty to explore almost any topic you want in seminars, independent studies, reading groups, and later your dissertation. Also, unlike law school or medical school, almost all ranked philosophy Ph.D. programs will give you some combination of fellowship and teaching support so that if you live frugally you needn't borrow money or hold down jobs outside of philosophy in order to get through school.

Choosing Where to Apply

If all this hasn't soured you on the prospects of graduate school in philosophy, then you're just the sort of maniac who might succeed! The Philosophical Gourmet Report is the natural starting place for thinking about where to apply, along with with advice from your professors. Once you have a sense of about where you might expect to land in prestige level based on the features of your application, you might select about four schools at that level, two more prestigious schools as longshots, and two fallback schools. Look at faculty profiles (on each department's web page) and at the Gourmet's specialty rankings to see what schools have strengths in the areas or points of view that appeal to you. If you find that geography is a major factor for you, you might consider whether you'll be ready to be geographically flexible in your job search later; if not, bear in mind that community college teaching is the most likely outcome.

Should You Apply to an M.A. Program First?

If you're determined to get into a Ph.D. program in philosophy and you don't have the application for it straight out of undergraduate, an M.A. can be a springboard to a Ph.D. program. Generally speaking, however, if you can get into at least a mid-ranked Ph.D. program straight out of undergraduate, it's advisable to do so. The very top-ranked programs seem mostly to prefer stellar undergraduate applicants over applicants with stellar grades in M.A. programs and only nearly stellar undergraduate records. (There are exceptions, though, so if you wouldn't be happy with any but a top ten department and are only admitted to mid-ranked departements, you might consider a good M.A. program; but the odds are low and you might actually end up worse off in the end! Here, for example, is Houston's placement record, and here is Milwaukee's. Bear in mind that students who do not complete the program, which may be a substantial percentage, are not included on such lists.)

About half of U.C. Riverside's Ph.D. students enter with M.A.'s. Most of those students also did fairly well as undergraduates (3.5-3.8-ish undergraduate GPA). I'd guess that the proportion of students entering with an M.A. is higher at U.C.R. than at most peer instititions, but I'm not sure.

Although technically most community colleges only require their professors to have an M.A., most people who find permanent community college teaching positions nowadays either have a Ph.D. in hand or nearly finished.

Update on Ph.D. Placement (Sept. 20)

A reader advised me to look at SUNY Stony Brook's placement record. Although they are not ranked in the Gourmet report, this year they placed students in several good tenure track positions including Emory and Colorado-Boulder, and they have also placed well in the past. I suspect their track record is unusual in this respect, and may have to do with the sense some people have that the Gourmet Report is unfair to a network of schools including Stony Brook, Penn State, and Vanderbilt. Those schools may, then, have better placement records than their unranked status suggests. This could be the case regardless of whether the Gourmet ranking is fair (about which I mean to take no stand): The point is that *some* people will see those schools as very good

and view their Ph.D.'s favorably.

But also, even from schools about which there is general consensus that they're at the middle of the pack, people do occasionally land jobs at ranked Ph.D.-granting departments or at prestigious liberal arts schools. In 1997, U.C. Riverside placed a student at Wisconsin-Madison, and a student of ours from the early 90's, after moving a few times, was recently hired at Washington-Seattle. Also, last year UCR hired a Ph.D. from Georgetown to a tenure-track position. For a fuller perspective on placement, look at departments' websites.

My point is not that such things are impossible -- or that it's impossible to get into Princeton's Ph.D. program from Cal State San Bernardino -- but that such events are relatively rare.

Update: Applying to Your Own Department (Sept. 21)

Undergraduates at schools with Ph.D. programs will be tempted to apply to their own programs. Presumably, they're having a positive experience and enjoying the good opinion of their professors, if they're considering graduate school in philosophy. They will receive good advice against this from their letter writers.

Every department has a character. Certain philosophers and issues will be taken as core, others not much discussed. How seriously is Davidson taken? Wittgenstein? Heidegger? Modal realism? Contemporary English philosophy of perception? Different approaches will be valued -- keeping up with the journals or emphasizing the classics, valuing the empirical or the a priori, applied ethics or metaethics, etc. Of course, faculty will have diverse opinions on these issues, but that doesn't prevent the shock and surprise -- or simply the breath of fresh air -- that students feel going to a department where things are viewed very differently on the whole!

Students who spend their whole careers in a single department thus risk a stunted and provincial view of philosophy. It's also difficult for them to gain an accurate sense of how their advisors are perceived by the field as a whole. They will learn less from taking classes from the same professors again than they would from a new crop of professors. They may also find it's very different being a star undergraduate than an average graduate student; the tone of their relations with their mentors will change.

When I have served on admissions committees I have argued that we should have a higher bar for our own students than for others. Still, it can be difficult to reject a student when your colleague down the hall insists that she deserves admission!

Update (Sept. 25): Some helpful discussion of community college placement here.

Update (Sept. 28): *Should You Despair?*

Okay, you're at Cal State Whatever or Southern Iowa Christian, and you would love to be an Ivy League professor of philosophy someday. Is there simply no hope? I would hate to counsel despair. At every step, there are a small number of people who do the unlikely: Get into a top-ranked Ph.D. program from a non-elite school, get an elite starting job from a middle-ranked Ph.D. program, move from a non-elite university to an elite one later in their career.

Great students from non-elite schools do sometimes make an impression on a "top ten" admissions committee. Maybe our best UCR students have been a bit unlucky. There's certainly some degree of chance in the process. Is your glowing letter from someone that someone on the admissions committee happens to really respect? (It's a small world!) Does your writing sample really resonate with someone?

It can also help to be pro-active. For example, can you drive across town, or apply to an exchange program, or take some time off, to take or audit courses at an elite university (as my friend from Northeastern did)? Can you attend talks, colloquia, conferences around town and out of town, and possibly make some connections or at least give your letter writers fodder for backing up their claims never to have seen so energetic and dedicated a

student?

But most importantly: Polish, polish, polish that writing sample! (And do so under the guidance of at least one professor.) If a committee member reads a polished, professional sample she feel she has learned something from, in prose that compares favorably with the typical journal article (not through being flowery or technical but through being elegant and precise), that's an applicant she'll want to admit, more so than the Harvard student with the 3.95 GPA who has a so-so sample. But very few undergraduates can write such samples. Which is why, of course, they're so precious.

All that said, bear in mind that for *anyone* an Ivy-League career is a longshot. (Well, maybe Kripke was destined.) I would not advise pursuing a career in philosophy if you wouldn't be happy teaching at a non-elite school.

Update: Oct. 29, 2008:

David Brink at UCSD has posted some general reflections for prospective graduate students here. I agree with most of his remarks, except:

(1.) If you're aiming for a job in a research-oriented department, you should probably aim for a graduate department more elite than just the top 25 (though a small percentage of people from mid-ranked departments (roughly 20-40) do find research-oriented jobs).

(2.) To say that "Anything below a 3.5 [GPA] at UCSD is going to be problematic at top programs" seems to me to substantially understate the importance of GPA, unless UCSD students are doing *vastly* better than UCR students in gaining admission to top programs and unless UCR is more selective about GPA than top programs in philosophy.

(3.) In my experience, GRE doesn't pay much of a role in making the "first cut" among applications, though I do suspect this varies substantially from department to department, depending on institutional factors and the views of particular committee members about the importance of such measures.

See here for readers' comments on Part I.

Part II: Grades and Classes

It's awfully hard to be admitted to top Ph.D. programs in philosophy, as I mentioned in Part I. Today: What do admissions committees look for in transcripts? In other posts I'll talk about other aspects of the application.

GPA, Overall and in Philosophy

You must have excellent grades to have a reasonable prospect of being admitted to a top-50 philosophy Ph.D. program, unless there's something very unusual about your application. At U.C. Riverside, ranked 31st in the Gourmet Report, admitted students typically have GPAs of 3.8 or more, with students coming directly from undergraduate having basically straight A's in philosophy their senior year. (Think about it: Ph.D.'s in philosophy become college professors. Doesn't it make sense that the people teaching your college classes should be people who were at the top of their own classes as undergraduates? Would you want the guy chewing gum in the back?) Even a 4.0 from a top university is no guarantee of admission to a top Ph.D. program.

Current graduate students (whether in M.A. programs or other Ph.D. programs) are evaluated a little differently, since good graduate programs may be very demanding. Depending on the admission committee's sense of how demanding the program is, a substantial number of A-minuses in philosophy, or even some B+'s, may be

acceptable for admission to a mid-ranked department, *if* the letters and writing sample are excellent.

I went back and looked at the GPAs of the UCR entering class this year. We admitted 24 students and 11 accepted. Presumably the 13 who declined admission were at least as good, on average, since they chose to go to other similarly ranked or better ranked programs.

Here is the distribution of GPAs from the students' most recent institutions (with undergraduate GPA in parentheses if the student did graduate work):

[These data have been removed due to concerns about confidentiality. In summary, there were several perfect 4.0's and the median was 3.89.]

Transcripts are evaluated holistically. Not all 3.8 GPAs are equal. What matters most are grades in upper-division philosophy courses. A "C" in chemistry your first year won't sink your application! Even a significantly lower GPA may be okay, if the low grades are early in your study and outside philosophy. Conversely, a 3.9 that includes a lot of A-minuses in undergraduate philosophy courses doesn't look so good. Also, of course, a transcript from Princeton will be evaluated differently than a transcript from a large state school with low admissions standards -- which raises the question of...

Institution of Origin

At UCR, probably a bit more than half of our students come straight from undergrad, with no prior graduate training. (They get their M.A. here, along the way to the Ph.D.) As I mentioned in Part I, I suspect UCR admits more students from M.A. programs than most similarly ranked departments -- though 8 of 11 entering this year with prior graduate work is high even for us.

I also mentioned in Part I the difficulty of being admitted to a top ten Ph.D. program from a non-prestigious school. At UCR, in contrast, colleges represented among our students run the spectrum. This year's entering class includes students from Fordham, Boston College (M.A.), Kansas State, Georgia State (M.A.), Missouri-Columbia (transfer from Ph.D. program), and Azusa Pacific, among others.

It can be difficult for admissions commitees to evaluate transcripts from small liberal arts schools, foreign schools, and M.A. programs, since grading standards vary widely. It helps if students from such schools have at least one of their letter writers address this point with concrete comparisons. For example, a letter writer might say: "Jill's GPA of 3.91 is the best GPA for a graduating senior in Philosophy in the last five years, among 80 graduates." Now the admissions committee knows better what that 3.91 means! If the writing sample is excellent, that also confirms the meaningfulness of the GPA.

Students who have attended multiple universities must submit transcripts from all their universities. We occasionally admit students who did poorly early in their education then seem to have "shaped up" with consistently excellent performance later on, though we had no such admissions in this year's class.

Types of Courses

You needn't be a philosophy major to apply to graduate school in philosophy, though you do need to have a track record of excellent upper-division or graduate work in philosophy. Occasionally neuroscientists or physicists or whatever decide they want to become philosophers instead. Admissions committees aren't hostile to the idea -- it shows the good sense of recognizing the superiority of our field, after all! -- especially if the student excelled in her original discipline. But without some sort of track record it can be hard to know if the student's skills would transfer well to philosophy, or even if the applicant really knows what she's getting into.

If you have an opportunity to take graduate courses in philosophy, especially if you're at a school with a Ph.D. program, by all means do so. If you can earn an A or two in graduate-level courses in philosophy, that can really

solidify the case that you're ready for graduate school -- especially if one of your letter writers compares you favorably with her current graduate students! Unfortunately, applications generally have to be sent in in early winter, so make sure you do that graduate work by fall term of the year you apply.

Honors Thesis

For some reason, we don't get many applicants who have written honors theses, nor do many philosophy students at UCR write them (I can only recall one in ten years!). However, if your school offers this option, I'd recommend strongly considering it, especially if you're able to complete the thesis by the time of application. It establishes that you can do long-term, independent, self-directed work, and also it gives you a taste of such work so you can think about whether it's really for you; it's likely to be your best piece of work and a natural candidate for a writing sample; it deepens your relationship with a potential letter writer; and on top of all that, it's an intrinsically worthwhile experience!

Timing Graduation

Oddly, students completing their studies in a spring term, as is traditional, are at a bit of a disadvantage in applying compared to students who finish in the fall. If you take 4 years to graduate and apply at the beginning of your fourth year, 1/2 or 2/3 of your senior year won't show in your transcripts, you'll have fewer essays to draw on as potential writing samples, and you'll have had less exposure to potential letter writers then if you take 4 1/2 years to graduate and apply at the beginning of your fifth year.

I myself took an extra quarter at Stanford and applied in the fall quarter of my 5th year -- and I know my application was much better than it would have been had I applied in the fall quarter of my 4th year. I then had fun for nine months, doing other things (hanging out in Humboldt County in far northern California), holding a temporary job I didn't much care about, and I had plenty of time to travel to the schools that admitted me -- a very positive experience I'll discuss in a future post.

Another possibility is to graduate your 4th year, then apply the year *after*. However, this potentially doesn't look as good to admissions committees. Why didn't you go straight to graduate school, the committee might wonder. What are you doing now? Such questions don't doom your application by any means (especially if you're just fresh out of your B.A.), but it's preferable if they don't arise. So if you're not ready to apply in fall of your fourth year, it's better to postpone graduation until fall of your fifth year, if you can bear the wait! (Besides, that's all the more philosophy, right?)

Update, October 3:

This last section seems to have caused panic and consternation among some readers. Let me stress that it's a minor issue at most, if you're applying less than a year after graduating! Don't feel you *have* to stay enrolled through fall if you were planning to graduate in spring. And a strong application after graduation, with good letters, good writing sample, etc., is much better than a weak application submitted early one's senior year, if one isn't really fully ready.

See the comments section for advice to students who are several years past their B.A.

See here for readers' comments on Part II.

Part III: Letters of Recommendation

Good grades alone won't secure admission to a Ph.D. program in philosophy. Writing samples and letters of

recommendation are also very important. I believe writing samples should carry more weight than letters (and admissions committees often say they do), but I suspect that in fact letters carry more weight. An applicant needs at least three.

Whom to Ask

If a professor gave you an A (not an A-minus) in an upper-division philosophy course, consider her a candidate to write a letter. You needn't have any special relationship with her, or have visited during office hours, or have taken multiple classes from her -- though all those things can help. Don't be shy about asking, we're used to it!

No matter how friendly they seem, you should be wary of asking for letters from professors who have given you A-minuses or below, since if they have integrity in writing their letters, it will come out that your performance in their class was not quite top-level. If a professor has given you both an A and an A-minus, there might still have to be some restraint in the letter -- though less so if the A is the more recent grade.

Letters from philosophers are distinctly preferable to letters from non-philosophers. Letters from eminent scholars are distinctly preferable to letters from assistant professors. Of course, these factors need to be weighed against the expected quality of the letter.

You may submit more than the stated minumum of letters, but be advised that three strong letters looks considerably better in an application than three strong letters and one mediocre one.

Although it's a delicate matter, you *can* ask a professor whether she thinks she'll be able to write a strong letter for you.

Should You Waive Your Right to See The Letter?

Most applicants waive the right, and some professors will feel offended or put on the spot if an applicant does not waive the right. However, I must confess that in my own case, I think I *might* be slightly less likely to say something negative, and I might think more carefully about how the letter will come across, if I think the applicant might view it. On the other hand, for the few very best of my letters, I might also slightly restrain my transports of enthusiasm. (I suspect professors don't really have good self-knowledge about such matters.)

Enabling Your Professors to Write the Best Possible Letters

Think of all those wonderful things you've done that don't show up on your transcript! You audited some philosophy classes at Harvard for fun (and on the sly) for a few weeks one summer. (I did this once, going to every upper-division class on offer for two weeks before Stanford's quarter started in late September; it was a kick!) Or you gave free tutoring to needy high school students. You won the Philosophy Department award for best undergraduate essay. All on your own, you read Kant's*Critique of Pure Reason* last summer and two commentaries on it. You play piano in nightclubs. You have a blog that gets 1000 hits a week. (But be careful what's on your blog, since the admissions committee might look at it!) You got a perfect 1600 on the SAT.

Your letter writers want to know these things. Such facts come across much better in letters than in your statement of purpose (where listing such things might seem immodest or irrelevant). In letters they can be integrated with other facts to draw a picture of you as an interesting, promising student. So give your letter writers a *brag sheet* and don't be modest! Sit there while they read it so they have a chance to ask questions. Explain to them that it's just a brag sheet and that you leave it to their judgment how much of that stuff, if any of it, will be useful to them in writing their letter.

Give your professors *photocopies of all the essays* you've written for them, including if possible their comments on those essays. I don't always remember what my students have written about, especially if it has been a year, even if the essays are excellent. With a copy of the essays in hand, I can briefly describe them -- their topics,

what seemed especially good about them -- in a way that adds convincing detail to the letter and gives the impression that I really do know and remember the student's work.

Give your letter writers copies of your *statement of purpose*. If a letter writer says "Karen has a deep passion for epistemology and hopes to continue to study that in graduate school" and your statement of purpose mentions nothing about epistemology, it looks a bit odd. You want the portraits drawn by your letter writers and your own self-portrait to match. Also, statements of purpose are extremely hard to write well (more on that later!) and it's good to have feedback on them from your letter writers.

Give your letter writers your *transcript*. They may not know you have excellent grades across the board. Once they know this, they can write a stronger letter and one that more concretely addresses your performance relative to other students at your school. Also, they *might* be able to comment helpfully to the admissions committee on aberrations in your transcript. ("Prof. Hubelhauser hasn't given a student an A since 1973" or "Although Jill's grades slipped a bit in Fall Quarter 2006, her mother was dying of cancer that term, and her previous and subsequent grades more accurately reflect her abilities". Of course, they can't write the latter unless you tell them.)

Give your letter writers the *cover sheets and envelopes* for all the schools you are applying to, along with an overall cover sheet designed by you. Envelopes should be addressed but needn't be stamped since they'll be going out in the unversity's mail. The overall cover sheet should list the deadlines for all applications. It should also specifically highlight schools that request online letters and for which, consequently, there is no school-specific cover sheet.

Give your letter writers all this material at least a month before the first application deadline.

Gentle Reminders

Professors are flaky and forgetful. They are hardly ever punished for such behavior, so their laxity is unsurprising. Also, it's part of the charm of being absent-minded and absorbed in deeper things like the fundamental structure of reality!

Consequently, it is advisable to email your letter writers a gentle reminder a week before your first deadline. If you don't receive an email in reply saying that the letters are sent, send another reminder a week after the deadline.

Don't panic if the letters are late. Admissions committees are used to it, and they don't blame the applicant. However, if the letter still isn't in the file by the time the committee gets around to reading your application it will probably never be read. (You may still be admitted if the two letters that did arrive were good ones.)

It's also advisable to call the schools a week or so after the deadline to confirm that your application is all in order. Departmental secretaries sometimes goof things up, too.

Advice to Letter Writers

Reading hundreds of letters of recommendation, things become something of a blur. Most letters say "outstanding student" or "I'm delighted to recommend X" or "I'm confident X will succeed in graduate school in philosophy". It would be strange not to say something of this sort, but still -- my eyes start to glaze over. I suspect that trying to detect nuanced differences in such phrases is pointless, since I doubt such nuances closely track applicant quality. More helpful: (1.) Comparative evaluations like: "best philosophy major in this year's graduating class"; or "though only an undergraduate, one of three students, among 9, to earn an 'A' in my graduate seminar"; or "her GPA of 3.87 is second-highest among philosophy majors". (2.) Descriptions of concrete accomplishments: "Won the department's prize in 2006 for best undergraduate essay in philosophy"; or "President of the Philosophy Club". It's also nice to hear a little about the applicant's work and what's

distinctive of her as a student and person.

Regarding those little checkboxes on the cover sheet ("top 5%, top 10%" etc.): My impression is that letter writers vary in their conscientiousness about such numbers and have different comparison groups in mind, so I tend to discount them unless backed up by specific comparison assessments in the letter. However, my experience is that other people on the admissions committee often take the checkboxes more seriously.

Most letter writers write the same letter for every school and simply attach it to the cover sheet rather than addressing the specific paragraph-answer questions that some schools include on their cover sheets. However, if you think an applicant is a particularly good fit for one school, a specifically tailored letter that explains why can be helpful.

See here for readers' comments on Part III.

Part IV: Writing Samples

Do Committees Read the Samples?

Applicants sometimes doubt that admissions committees (constituted of professors in the department you're applying to) actually do read the writing samples, especially at the most prestigious schools. It's hard to imagine, say, John Searle carefully working through that essay on Aristotle you wrote for Philosophy 183! However, my experience is that the essays*are* read. For example, when I visited U.C. Berkeley in 1991 after having been admitted, I discussed my writing sample in detail with one member of the admissions committee, who very convincingly assured me that the committee read all plausible applicants' writing samples. She said that they were the single most important part of the application.

At UCR, every writing sample is read by at least two members of the admissions committee. How conscientiously they are read is another question. If an applicant doesn't look plausible on the surface based on GPA and letters, I'll skim through the sample pretty quickly, just to make sure that we aren't missing a diamond in the rough. For most applicants, I'll at least skim the whole sample, and I'll select a few pages in the middle to read carefully.

Few undergraduates can write really beautiful, professional-looking philosophy that sustains its quality page after page. But if you can -- or more accurately if some member of the admissions committee judges that you have done so in your sample -- that can make all the difference to your application. I remember in one case falling in love with a sample and persuading the committee to admit a student whose letters were tepid at best and whose grades were more A-minus than A. That student in fact came to UCR and did well. I'll almost always plug for the admission of the students who wrote, in my view, the very best samples, even if other aspects of their files are less than ideal. Of course, most such students have excellent grades and letters as well!

Conversely, admissions committees look pretty skeptically at applicants with weak samples. You definitely want to spend some time making your sample excellent.

What I, at Least, Look For

First, the sample must be clearly written and show a certain amount of philosophical maturity. I can't say much about how to achieve these things other than to be a good writer and philosophically mature. I think they're hard to fake. Trying too hard to sound sophisticated usually backfires.

Second, what I look for in the middle is that the essay gets into the nitty-gritty somehow. In an analytic essay, that might be very detailed analysis of the pros and cons of an argument, or of its non-obvious implications, or

of its structure. In a historical essay, that might be a very close reading of a passage or a close look at textual evidence that decides between two competing interpretations. Many otherwise nicely written essays stay largely at the surface, simply summarizing an author's work or presenting fairly obvious criticisms at a relatively superficial level.

Most analytic philosophers favor a lean, clear prose style with minimal jargon. (*Some* jargon is often necessary, though: There's a reason specialists have specialists' words!) When I've spent a lot of time reading badly written philosophy and fear my own prose is starting to look that way, too, I read a bit of David Lewis or Fred Dretske.

Choosing Your Sample

Consider longish essays (at least ten pages) on which you received an A. Among those, you might have some favorites, or some might seem to have especially impressed the professor. You also want your essay, if possible, to be in one of the areas of philosophy highlighted as an area of interest in your statement of purpose. If necessary, you can adjust your statement of purpose, but that can only go so far. If your best essay is in Chinese philosophy or medieval philosophy or Continental philosophy or technical philosophy of physics or Bayesian decision theory, or some other subfield that's outside the mainstream, and you aren't planning to apply to schools that teach in that area, it's a bit of a quandary. You want to show your best work, but you don't want the school to reject you because your interests don't fit their teaching profile, and also the school might not have someone available who can really assess the quality of your essay.

Approach the professor(s) who graded the essay(s) you are considering and ask for her *frank* opinion about whether the essay might be suitable for revision into a writing sample. Not all A essays are. You might even consider taking a term of independent study with that professor, with the aim of deepening your knowledge on the topic and generating at the end a truly excellent longer essay that goes well beyond what you originally covered in class.

Revising the Sample

Samples should be about 12-20 pages long (double spaced, in a 12-point font). Longer samples can be submitted, but I'd recommend including an abstract on the first page along with advice about what sections (totaling 20 pages or fewer) the admissions committee should focus on in evaluating the sample.

If possible, you should revise the sample under the guidance of the professor who originally graded it (who will presumably also be one of your letter writers). Your aim is to transform it from an A paper to an A+ paper. Deepen the analysis. Connect it more broadly to the literature, maybe. Consider -- or better, anticipate and defuse -- more objections. With your professor's help, eliminate those phrases, simplifications, distortions, and caricatures that suggest either an unsubtle mind or ignorance of relevant literature -- things which professors usually let pass in undergraduate essays but which can make a difference in how you come across to an admissions committee.

See here for readers' comments on Part IV.

Part V: Statement of Purpose

I've never read a first draft of a statement of purpose (also called a personal statement) that was any good. These things are hard to write, so give yourself plenty of time and seek the feedback of at least two of your letter writers. Plan to rewrite from scratch at least once.

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?

Some Things Not to Do

Don't let someone in business tell you how to write a statement of purpose. The kind of sales pitch that results will rub professional philosophers the wrong way. Indeed, bad statements of purpose can go wrong in many ways. For example:

Corny: "Ever since I was eight, I've pondered the deep questions of life."

Brown-nosed: "In my opinion, U.C. Riverside is the best philosophy department in the country." (Shh! Don't let out the secret!)

Unrealistic or arrogant: "I plan eventually to teach philosophy at a top ten philosophy department." (Do you already know that you'll be a more eminent philosopher than the people on your admissions committee?)

Self-important: "I will attempt to revive American pragmatism."

Ignorant: "U.C. Riverside suits my interests especially well because of its strengths in the philosophy of artificial intelligence." (No one here works on AI.)

Self-promoting: "I have always been at the top of my classes and active in class discussions."

Obvious (the least of these sins): "I hope to become a philosophy professor and teach philosophy."

A more subtle way in which statements of purpose can go wrong is in endorsing a particular substantive philosophical position. You are probably not far enough in your philosophical education to justifiably feel confident that you know enough about some particular philosophical issue that your mind is immune to change on it. Thus, saying things like "I would like to defend Davidson's view that genuine belief is limited to language-speaking creatures" comes off as a little bit close-minded and if not exactly arrogant at least not as charmingly humble as you might like. Similarly, "I showed in my honors thesis that Davidson's view...". If only, in philosophy, honors theses ever really showed anything! Much better: "My central interests are philosophy of mind and philosophy of language. I am particularly interested in the intersection of the two, for example in Davidson's argument that only language-speaking creatures can have beliefs in the full and proper sense of 'belief'."

Don't tout your accomplishments. Let your letter writers do that. It comes off so much better! (Make sure, in advance, that your letter writers know what your accomplishments are. See my discussion of letters in Part III.)

Don't tell the story of how you came to be interested in philosophy. It's not really relevant.

What To Write

So how do you fill up that awful, blank-looking page? With a cool, professional description of your areas of interest. If you have, say, three main areas of interest, devote one short paragraph to each of them -- a few sentences describing what questions or subareas within that larger area you find particularly intriguing or have already thought and written about. For example:
I took a two-term independent study course with Prof. Hoffman on Descartes' theory of the passions and its connection to freedom of the will. I anticipate that the history of modern philosophy will continue to be a central interest of mine, especially early modern philosophers' conceptions of the mind. For example, how is Hume's theory of the passions similar to and different from Descartes'? What is the relationship between mentality and

personhood for Locke, Hume, and other philosophers of the era? To what extent was Malebranche's occasionalism about causation a development of views already implicit in Descartes?

A statement of this sort tells the committee two things. First, it tells them that you are knowledgeable about the areas of philosophy you plan to study -- not every undergraduate knows about Hume's theory of the passions and Malebranche's occasionalism! -- and it does so without risk of sounding arrogant or close-minded by making pronouncements about what philosophical views are right or wrong. And second, it gives the committee a sense of whether you would be a good fit for the department. If no one in the department teaches the history of modern philosophy (unlikely, actually, but if my example were different the issue could more plausibly arise) or if the people who do teach early modern really focus only on moral and political philosophy (possible), you won't seem like a good match. On the other hand, if the department has specialist(s) in your area(s) of interest, being a "good fit" can boost the likelihood of acceptance.

Explaining Weaknesses in Your File

Although hopefully this won't be necessary, a statement of purpose can also be an opportunity to explain weaknesses or oddities in your file -- though letter writers can also do this, often more credibly. For example, if one quarter you did badly because your health was poor, you can mention that fact. If you changed undergraduate institutions (not necessarily a weakness if the second school is the more prestigious), you can briefly explain why. If you don't have a letter from your thesis advisor because he died, you can point that out.

Tailoring to Specific Schools

It's not necessary, but you can tailor your applications to individual schools. I'm not sure I'd recommend changing your stated areas of interest to suit the schools, though I see how that might be strategic. (If you change them too much, however, there might be some discord between your statement of purpose and the letters of recommendation in your file.) If there is some particular reason you find a school attractive, there's no harm in mentioning that in a final paragraph. For example, you might mention 2-3 professors whose work especially interests you. (But if you mischaracterize them or they don't match your areas of stated interest, this can backfire, so be careful.)

Some people mention personal reasons for wanting to be in a particular geographical area (near family, etc.). Although this can be good because it can make it seem more likely that you would accept an offer of admission, I'd avoid it since graduating Ph.D.'s generally need to be flexible about location and it might be perceived as indicating that a career in philosophy is not your first priority.

On the bright side: Most statements of purpose are flawed in one or more of the ways described above. Committees are used to it and generally don't hold it much against the applicant. Though you can shoot yourself in the foot by coming across as *particularly* arrogant or poetical or uninformed, this is the one part of the application where standards are low. Philosophers are not, as a rule, especially talented at self-presentation! (I include myself.) The main thing committees want to see is a match between (most of) your areas of interest and what they can teach.

See here for readers' comments on Part V.

Part VI: GRE Scores and Other Things

GRE Scores

GRE scores are less important to your application than grades, letters, writing sample, and statement of purpose. A few schools don't even require them. In my experience, some members of admissions committees

take them seriously and others discount them entirely. My own opinion is that they add little useful information. However, since some committee members take them seriously, it's worth studying for the GRE and retaking it if you didn't do well. Also, since the higher-level administrators who oversee the process and often make the decisions about fellowship funding can really only evaluate your GPA and GRE scores, people who do well on these quantitative measures are likely to get better funding offers -- more years of fellowship without teaching, for example (being paid simply to be a student!). Also, it looks good for the department if the students they admit have better average grades and GREs than the students in psychology, economics, etc. We don't want to send too many 1100 GRE offers up to the dean's office for approval!

The GRE scores for this year's entering class at UCR ranged from 1230 to a perfect 1600, with most in the 1300s and 1400s. At UCR I'd say below 1250 is a strike against an applicant, above 1400 is a bonus. There is no GRE Subject Test in Philosophy.

Awards

Of course you made dean's list! If you list too many awards, the really good ones may escape notice. Among the most impressive awards: Magna Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa, departmental or college "outstanding student" or "outstanding essay" awards (if the department only selects one per year and the college only a few), awards from nationally- or internationally-recognized institutions such as the NSF or DAAD. Generally, though, even fairly impressive awards don't count for much. It's your grades, letters, and sample that really matter.

Race and Gender

Some schools give you the option of specifying your race and gender. Letter writers must also choose pronouns and can choose to mention race if they think it is relevant. (Some would never do so. Others think they help the applicant by doing so, if the applicant is a minority. If you prefer to keep the information confidential, tell your letter writers in advance.) Committees will often guess gender and ethnicity based on names.

Philosophy is largely a male discipline in the United States, and it's overwhelmingly non-Hispanic Caucasian. (Tenured men outnumber tenured women in philosophy by a ratio of about 4-to-1. The ratio of non-Hispanic Caucasians to minorities is probably even more skewed.) I believe there are persistent systemic biases. However, I also believe that most admissions committees would like to counter these biases and see a broader diversity in the field. Admissions committees may nonetheless show bias *implicitly* in how they read a file from "Maria Gonzales" compared to a file from "Mark Johnson", unconsciously expecting less from the first file than the second. However, at least the admissions committees I've worked on have used conscious strategies in attempt to counteract, maybe more than counteract, these biases. For underprivileged minorities, especially, an application might be seriously considered that would be quickly dismissed if the applicant were a white male.

While we white males might feel disadvantaged by this, we should bear in mind that we profit from persistent bias in our favor in other contexts. For example, it's generally much easier to fit a professor's stereotype for a "promising philosophy student" if you have a certain kind of look and diction, the tone of voice and cultural attitude, that is characteristic of upper middle class white men. Decades of psychological studies suggest that stereotype-driven expectations can have substantial effects not only on how one is perceived (and thus presumably on letters) but also on one's performance on objective tests (through being encouraged, supported, believed in, made comfortable, etc., by one's teachers).

Personal Contact and Connections

Such things don't help much, I suspect, unless they bring substative new information. If a professor at some point had a good substantive, philosophical conversation with an applicant and mentions that to the committee, that might help a bit. But seeking out professors for such purposes could backfire if it seems like brown-nosing, or if the applicant seems immature, arrogant, or not particularly philosophically astute.

Some professors may be very much swayed by personal connections, I suppose. I myself, however, often have a slightly negative feeling that I'm being "played"; and even if I know the person hasn't sought me out for the purpose of improving her admissions chances, in aiming to be fair and objective in my evaluations I will tend to discount that person's application somewhat -- maybe even more than it deserves.

Cover Letters

Your cover letters may be thrown away or lost. Don't include any important information in them.

See here for readers' comments on Part VI.

Part VII: After You Hear Back

When You'll Hear and When You'll Have to Decide

There's a general agreement among philosophy Ph.D. programs that applicants have until April 15 to decide whether to accept an offer of admission. This deadline drives the process.

Schools with a hard cap on their admissions offers might be permitted by the administration to admit only eight students, for example, or to offer funding (in the form of T.A.-ships and fellowships) to only eight students. These schools will try to admit those eight students quickly (in February, maybe) and will often pressure those students to make a decision as soon as they can so that if they decline, another student further down the list can be admitted or offered funding.

Other departments will target a certain entering class size and admit approximately twice that many students (or more or less, depending on the "yield" rates in recent years) with the expectation that about half of the admitted students will decline. (For example, UCR was aiming for 10-12 last year. We admitted 24 and got 11.) In principle, these departments could admit all those students early in the process, but in fact things often fall behind. If the number of students accepting offers seems to be falling short of expectations, a few may be admitted at the last minute.

If you're at the top of a department's list, expect (typically, depending on the committee's speed) to hear mid-February to mid-March. Applicants lower down on the list may not hear until April, even April 15th itself! You may not hear good news about funding, in particular, until very near the April 15th deadline, if the department has a hard cap on funding. Be ready on April 15th to make an immediate decision about an offer should one come -- and don't be too far from the phone! It's not unreasonable to ask for an additional day or two to decide, should you hear on April 15th, but the department may or may not comply with such a request.

It's generally in the interest of the applicants, then, to wait on their decisions until April 15. However, it is in the interest of departments to extract decisions from applicants as early as possible. Unfortunate!

Occasionally, if an entering class is looking smaller than expected, a department may admit someone after April 15th. That student may already have committed to another school. Generally speaking, it's good to keep to your commitments, but if the one program is much more appealing than the other, I'd recommend reneging with a heartfelt apology!

Funding Offers

Most top-50 ranked Ph.D. programs do not expect students to pay their way through graduate school. They'll offer funding (at poverty levels) in the form of T.A.-ships and fellowships. When comparing funding offers

between schools, don't just look at the raw dollar amounts. Some schools inflate their dollar amounts by adding the cost of tuition to their stated funding totals -- money which of course comes right back to them. Make sure, also, that your funding offer includes student medical insurance.

Most departments will guarantee students five years of support (though UCR typically offers only four years to students entering with an M.A.) in some combination of fellowship and T.A.-ship. If you're on fellowship you're paid just for being a student! (Sweet!) A typical offer at a typical department will be for one year of fellowship (your first year, when you aren't really advanced enough a student to be a T.A., anyway, in the eyes of most deparments) and four years of T.A.-ship. Students especially targeted by the department may receive additional fellowship years. (Outstanding GPA and GRE scores help a lot here, since the high-level administrators who often give out those fellowship packages can evaluate those numbers better than they can evaluate writing samples and letters of recommendation.) Although most Ph.D. programs expect most of their students to pay their way through most of their years by T.A.-ing, a few schools -- especially the smaller private schools -- don't expect much T.A.-ing from their students and offer comparatively more fellowship support.

You might also consider how much is expected of a T.A.: Teaching one section of 25 students is much easier than teaching three sections of 25 which in turn is easier (usually) than teaching an entire course on your own. Also consider what happens when your guaranteed years of funding run out, since most students at most schools run out of guaranteed funding before they complete their degrees.

Don't expect too much wiggle room in negotiations about funding. But if a comparable department is offering you a better package than the school that would otherwise be your first choice, it can't hurt to politely mention that fact to the chair of the admissions committee.

Financial offers generally don't include summer funding, though often students can apply for a limited number of summer-school teaching positions. So how are you going to get through the summer?

Unless summer funding is dependable, I recommend considering writing test questions for ETS or a similar organization. Question writing often pays pretty well (by graduate student standards) and since it's piece work, you can do as little or as much of it as you like, on your own time. Such organizations often appreciate the precise turn of mind typical of philosophy students, who as a group do very well on standardized tests. (The organization I worked for, ACT, specifically recruited philosophy Ph.D. students, and the guide to writing questions used philosophical jargon and made reference to Quine!) Unfortunately, it can take several months to get training and certification to write questions, so if you consider this option, plan well in advance. Or -- again, if you're the sort who does well on standardized tests -- you can approach the issue from the other side and teach SAT or GRE prep courses. (Of course teaching philosophy is even better, if you can swing it!)

Letting People Know Where You've Been Admitted

Let your letter writers know where you've been admitted -- or even if you haven't been admitted anywhere -- and ultimately where you decide to go. It's only polite, since they put in work on your behalf. It helps them have a better sense, too, of what to expect for future students. And besides, they might have some helpful advice.

Admissions committee chairs also like to know where you've been admitted and where you decide to go (if not to their school) and why. You needn't share this information if you don't want to, but it helps them in thinking about future admissions. For example, if lots of admittees are going to comparably ranked schools because those schools have better funding offers, admissions committees can make a case for more funding to the college administrators. If admittees are declining mostly for much better-ranked schools, then committees know that their low yield rates are due to having a strong batch of applicants. Etc.

Visiting Departments

I highly recommend visiting the departments to which you've been admitted -- but only *after* you've been

admitted. Admitted students, whom departments now want and are competing to attract, are treated *much* differently than students who have merely applied or who are on the "waiting list" (if there is one), who will be seen as petitioners. Unfortunately, then, it won't be possible to properly visit departments that admit you at the last minute.

Some departments have money to help students fly out to visit, others don't. It doesn't hurt to ask politely. In any case, let the admissions committee chair know you intend to visit. Even if funding isn't available, she can help arrange your stay -- for example by mentioning what times would be good or bad and maybe finding a graduate student willing to put you up for a night or two.

There are two main reasons to visit departments: First and obviously, it can help you decide where to go. But second, and less obviously, it is a valuable educational experience in its own right.

The second point first: As I mentioned in Part I, students who spend their whole time in one department often have a provincial view of philosophy. Even visiting another department for a few days can crack that provincialism and give an invigorating and liberating, broader perspective on the field. Also, you will never again be treated as well by eminent professors as you will when you are a prospective (admitted!) graduate student. The country's best-known philosophers will take you out to lunch or coffee for an hour and genuinely listen to your views on philosophical topics. They'll be solicitous of you. They'll value your opinion. I remember one extremely eminent professor spending a full day with me. We toured his campus *and* another nearby campus; we listened to music late into the night; he shared gossip about the state of the profession. (Spending a full day is highly unusual, though! Don't expect it. Aim for coffee. Interestingly, this particular professor had no idea who I was when I saw him again a few years later.) Graduate students -- who at top schools sometimes soon become influential professors themselves -- will engage you in long discussions about the state of philosophy, and you'll (sometimes) feel a real camraderie. My own graduate school tour, for which I set aside three full weeks (for six campuses) was one the highlights of my philosophical education.

To maximize all this, try to stay at each campus for a few weekdays. Weekends don't really count. If you have to cut classes, cut classes. This is much more important than whether you get an A or a B in Phil 176. Also, I'd recommend emailing in advance the professors you'd like to meet and asking them if they're willing to go out for coffee with you.

When you visit a school, the department will generally set you up with first- and second-year students to meet. No harm in that, *but* bear in mind that first- and second-year students are often still in the glow of having been admitted and they haven't yet started the most difficult part of their education, their dissertation. *Insist on meeting students in their 5th year and beyond*, especially students working with advisors you imagine you might be working with. In my experience, such students will generally be brutally honest. Unlike new graduate students and unlike professors they don't really care whether you come to their school or not, so they have little motive to draw a rosy picture. And often they're just itching to have someone to grouse to.

Meet the professors, but don't expect their solicitious treatment to continue after you've enrolled. The advanced students' opinions about the professors are probably a better gauge of how you'll actually be treated. Nonetheless, if you talk substance with professors on philosophical topics you care about, you can get a sense of whether you're likely to see eye-to-eye philosophically.

The Summer Before

Students often seem to be shy about showing their faces around the department to which they've been admitted until either classes start or there's some formal introductory event. No need for this. Move in early. Meet some professors and ask them for some reading suggestions pertinent to your shared interests or classes you'll be taking with them in the fall. Get a running start. Professors are often quite interested in meeting the new students -- until the inevitable disappointment of discovering that on average they're only average! But if you get a running start, maybe that's a sign that you'll be an unusually good student...?

source: http://schwitzsplintersunderblog.blogspot.com/2007/10/applying-to-phd-programs-in-philosophy.html