

Advice for applying to PhD Programs in Philosophy

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Here is some advice for applying to PhD programs in Philosophy.

A significant caveat: I'm the Director of Grad Admissions at Rutgers, a program that focuses on 'analytic' philosophical approaches, and the advice sometimes is specific to applicants looking at those kinds of programs.

This originally appeared on Twitter as a mega-thread, but that was super hard to read and follow, so here it is written out.

In Spring 2021, I offered to give personalized feedback to people who applied to the Philosophy PhD program at Rutgers and were not admitted. I have now sent 103 such replies. I apologize if I missed your request. If this general advice isn't helpful, and you still would appreciate personal feedback, please send me an email.

What follows are some general thoughts about the Big 4 components of your PhD application: (1) grades/transcript, (2) personal statement, (3) letters of recommendation, and (4) writing sample. I begin by providing some general context regarding the process, and I conclude by briefly talking about a few other things, such as GREs, etc.

General context about the application pool. This past year, we received almost 400 applications. We are looking to enroll 5-7 people, and typically admit 10-14 people in order to hit that target. Those are absurd numbers. It's much more competitive than law school, or med school, or anything else. From what I've heard, other programs range from 150 applicants up to around 300-400. It's very competitive everywhere.

Our process. The Director of Graduate Admissions makes an initial cut from the full pool (380) down to around 100 applications. That's the first big cut. I've now been in that role for several years, and although my process isn't perfectly precise, I typically make this cut by looking at (1) grades/transcript, then (2) personal statement, then (3) letters of recommendation—in that order. I rarely do more than glance at (4) writing samples at this stage.

The 100 or so remaining files are then reviewed by members of a graduate admissions committee, newly constituted each year. Each member of the 5-person admissions committee (4 people plus me) is assigned 20-25 files to read closely, with each committee member recommending 4-7 people to the final pool for discussion by the full committee.

The committee is composed of people working in a wide range of subfields, and files are typically assigned to committee members based on their expertise. The full 5-person committee then meets to discuss the 25-30 files that make it to the final pool, and to decide who in that final pool should be admitted, wait-listed, and rejected.

The applicant pool. It's very strong. Every year, we see files with stellar grades in philosophy from fancy places like Harvard, Oxford, Princeton, Stanford, and so on. And we see files from people who got stellar grades at big public schools, SLACs, leading international institutions, and so on. Few people apply to graduate school if they have not excelled in philosophy wherever they happen to be.

There are also the many students who have also done high-level work as graduate students in terminal MA programs, or at other PhD programs. Each year the pool has dozens of people who have already published in significant professional philosophy journals.

Given all of that, it's helpful if you have some sense of yourself as either a "paper perfect" applicant or someone who is a bit outside of that box. Paper perfect applicants will have near-perfect grades (3.8 or 3.9 or above, straight firsts, etc.) from elite institutions, with superlative letters from fancy well known people, they will work on perfect fit topics (more on that later), and maybe even have significant publications or professional philosophy accomplishments already. Honestly, there are probably 25-50 "paper perfect" applicants each cycle.

Some of those paper perfect applicants get in everywhere. But many do not. Some struggle to get in anywhere. And many who are not "paper perfect" do very well. This is interesting. And probably confounding. I expect much of it turns on the writing sample. More on that later.

For each thing I say, I can imagine—and have probably seen—exceptions. We regularly admit people with imperfect grades, or from schools that I know nothing about. We often don't know the letter writers of successful applicants. The writing samples are usually excellent, though. Still, there are many general things that can be said. I hope some of them might be helpful.

(1) Grades/Transcript

For most applicants, the single best evidence we have of your ability, effort, and potential as a philosopher comes from your record as a student, particularly in philosophy courses. There are cases in which a person starts slow, or has a rough patch, or finds themselves as a student only late in the game, but it is hard to overcome a troubling transcript.

The big problems: (a) very little philosophy coursework, (b) a difficult to discern amount of philosophy coursework, (c) few philosophy courses that are like the courses one might take from Rutgers faculty, (d) multiple grades in philosophy courses that were B+ or below, or (e) a downward trend in philosophy course performance.

With (b), you can sometimes help us out by listing the philosophy courses, their instructors, and maybe even what you covered somewhere. This is particularly true for non-US transcripts, where it is sometimes opaque what the applicant studied.

On (d) and (e), we know there are reasons that people might have a rough semester or two, and it does help to address those directly in your personal statement, an additional document, or via your letter writers (if you can talk to them about it). But it is hard to get into a competitive PhD

program with a B-average in philosophy courses, unless those have been supplanted by later philosophy coursework somewhere, or unless there is some significant explanation provided, as well as signs of exceptional promise elsewhere in the application.

With (a), (c), (d), and (e), if people are serious about getting into a competitive PhD program and they are having trouble on that front, I typically recommend that they consider a funded terminal MA program.

There are many excellent MA programs in philosophy, and you can learn more about those programs and funding [here](#) and [here](#). Many do very well at placing people into top PhD programs, and they can be a very good way of addressing (a)-(e). They allow you to focus on philosophy. Most graduate school grades are in the A range. The professors will help you engage material at greater length and depth. You can take courses in areas like those you might study in graduate school. And so on.

(2) Personal Statement

The personal statement serves a very specific function in the application; it tells those reading the application (a) what topics you want to focus on in graduate school and (b) why we should expect you to flourish if you focus on those topics in our program. Those reading the personal statement will also be thinking about our program is a good fit given what you say in (a), which is a part of assessing (b).

It is also nice to get a little window into who you are, particularly if how you came to the topics you are interested in is relevant to (b) why we should expect you to flourish in working on these topics. Maybe you bring something distinctive to them, based on your education or life experience.

But the personal statement is not a place to try to convince us that you love philosophy (we assume you do!), or that you have been aiming toward a Philosophy PhD your whole life (surprising! implausible?), or that you can't imagine doing anything else (depressing!).

Also, I have 400 of these to read. Don't make it hard to figure out what topics you want to work on. Indeed, I would start the personal statement by saying: "My main philosophical interests are X, Y, and Z."

X, Y, and Z should be relatively broad, even just established subfields of philosophy (e.g., political philosophy, moral philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, etc.). Avoid being excessively narrow; it makes you seem somewhat philosophically incurious if you seem like you only have an interest in one super-specific thing.

Ideally, at least 2/3 of the areas you mention should be things that our program is strong in, so that the fit is clear. Be wary of listing things that we have no coverage of at all. It will make it seem like you would be happier somewhere else. If you list such areas, you should reveal awareness that we don't focus on those areas.

After identifying your interests, the rest of the personal statement should be aimed at making the case that you will flourish if you work on those topics. This often involves detailing work you've already done in those areas—classes taken, papers or theses written, relevant empirical fields you've studied, etc. This is where we can see if you seem to know something about what you are getting yourself into.

A peek behind the scenes... The personal statement helps us to categorize you. That informs who I will assign to read your application. If you say 'metaphysics' I will give you to one of the metaphysics people on the committee. It also helps us with class balance. We can't enroll 7 people all of whom work on philosophy of language (or whatever). This is bad for advising purposes and for job market purposes on the other side.

Many of us like to think of ourselves as philosophers, not just philosophers of mind, or language, or ethicists, or whatever. But there are still these practical purposes. You will end up writing dissertations on a particular topic, not all of philosophy. But it is nice to see people with somewhat broad and interesting X, Y, and Zs, as long as the fit is there.

Some people like to help explain why they will flourish working on a topic at Rutgers by mentioning some names of those of us at Rutgers who work on that topic, how they have read and liked that work, etc. Should you name names? I'm of two minds about this.

The case for doing it: it reveals knowledge of the department (congratulations, you can use the World Wide Web), it makes fit with the department clear, and for most of us, we still feel a little positive buzz when we see our name listed.

The case against doing it: we already know who is on our faculty, there is the danger of leaving off someone relevant (who might be on the committee! yikes!), there is the danger of including someone who no longer wants anything to do with that topic (or, at other departments only of course, someone who no one should want to work with), the positive buzz thing is kind of icky and it shouldn't work even if it does.

So, the choice is yours. If you are going to name names, do your homework. (Look at who has been advising students from the placement page. Look at the websites of professors to see what they are working on now, not just 20 years ago.)

If you don't name names, you should still think about how what you are discussing fits with our program. Some people say something generic like "Rutgers would be an excellent place to pursue these interests, given the Philosophy Department's strengths and coverage of these areas." But you don't need to do that.

(3) Letters of Recommendation

Admission committee members vary widely in how much attention they pay to letters of recommendation. A few basics. You should have 3 letters from *philosophy* instructors. Ideally, they should all be philosophy *professors*. Go with people who know you and your philosophy

work well. That is more important than that they are big names. Big names don't hurt, but only if they are really in your corner.

Some people were double majors or took lots of courses in some nearby field. They sometimes want to get letters from non-philosophers. I would counsel against that, unless it is someone who sometimes publishes in philosophy journals, or co-authors with philosophers, or teaches philosophy.

We won't trust that your Nobel Prize-winning chemistry professor knows what it takes to flourish in philosophy. They can say generic things about you being smart, responsible, etc., but that won't help that much. It would be better to have an upper-level philosophy grad student who taught you, ran a discussion section, and graded your work, if you don't have a philosophy professor. They won't have as big a comparison class, but they at least know a lot about philosophy.

To get strong letters, you need to have interacted with your professors both in print and in person. They should have read and commented on your written work, and you should have talked philosophy with them—at least in class, but ideally also sometimes outside of class, while working on a paper, etc.

Depending on the kind of institution and program you are in, this might require some extra work on your part. I always thought going to office hours was for other people and didn't do it. That's a mistake. Especially once you are in upper-level, smaller seminars with a professor, you should take the time to talk to them, get feedback on your work, revise your work for them, etc.

Also, your letter writers should know your plans. After you take a class with them, talk to them about graduate school. Get their advice, provide them with all of your materials—grades/transcript, personal statement, CV, writing sample—well in advance of their letter being due. Meet with them to talk about your materials and plans. Ask for feedback on your materials.

A good letter writer is someone who is invested in your project of going to graduate school, who knows you and wants to help you take that step. If they seem highly skeptical in your interactions with them, they might not be the right letter writer for you.

(You might think about why they are skeptical, although also remember that they will have their own biases etc., so don't let one person get you down, particularly if your grades and other 'objective' measures are strong.)

If you don't have at least 3 fairly high-level philosophy courses (a thesis-writing course would count) in which you have received A-range grades and have come to know the professor well, it will be difficult to do well with PhD program admissions.

If you came to philosophy late, or came to the academic path late, you might consider first attending one of the many excellent MA programs in philosophy. You can learn more about those programs and funding [here](#) and [here](#). These programs are great for building relationships

with professors, working closely with them, getting in depth into philosophical ideas, and so on. All that makes for much stronger letters.

In my experience, the main role that letters end up playing is in the end stages, where the champions of a particular applicant might point to particularly glowing letters as an additional oomph in favor of their candidate, and opponents of an applicant might point to less than glowing letters as a red flag.

Often, their main value is in helping to put the applicant's achievements in context beyond what we can see on the page: to give a fuller sense of how much the applicant did on their own, how diligent they are in sticking with something hard, what other difficulties and obstacles they might have faced, etc.

But when you read enough of these letters, you learn to take all of them with several grains of salt. Some people are always over the top, others are always muted, others seem to kind of blow the task off. And even the strongest letters can't compensate for an underwhelming writing sample.

(4) Writing Sample

Although usually the last thing to get very careful attention in reading files, the writing sample is the thing that makes the biggest difference at the end. We routinely reject "paper perfect" applicants with 'eh' writing samples in favor of applicants with imperfections in the grades or letters, but who have fantastic writing samples. So, what makes for a fantastic writing sample?

People differ in what they care about most, but clarity, thoughtful engagement with relevant literature, and argumentative quality are three necessary components. The other main characteristics that elevate writing samples from fine to fantastic are creativity, ambition, and topical fit. I'll come to those in a moment.

Let me begin by saying some possibly controversial things about how good philosophy comes into existence. I'll begin by describing a method that rarely works. First, start with an interest in some topic that has been discussed a lot by philosophers. Second, read everything on that topic, over a long time, keeping kind of neutral notes on the views throughout. Third, try to think of something new to say. Disaster!

Maybe some people can do it that way, but it's very hard to find your voice and keep your passion and energy throughout that process. Instead, you learn about the 18 moves that have been made, the 14 positions in logical space that have been occupied (like tanks running over flowers), and you can maybe spot another 2 or 3 that haven't been occupied. You can write a paper that takes up one of those, but often you aren't really excited about that position, it's just kind of left over. And maybe for a reason...

Much better: start with something that is bugging you or disturbing you. Maybe it's an actual thing in the world that is happening. Maybe it's an idea that was presented in a class that just seems wrong somehow. Maybe it's some text or topic that seems philosophically interesting, but

which no one is talking about. Maybe it's just a way of looking at things that comes to you from who knows where, while your mind wanders around (like flowers growing over tanks).

Follow those things. Pull them apart, see what's going on inside. Write about them. Try to sort out what is bothering you. Write about that. Sometimes you'll figure it out. Other times the problem remains, but you understand it better. Write that up. Don't read or research all that much yet. Try to present things clearly, even argumentatively, so that someone outside your mind can join you in your disturbance or your intrigue.

With this animated, emotionally engaged, somewhat analyzed view on the issue or topic, start looking for what else might be out there. Sometimes you will be the first. Often, others will also have been disturbed or interested by the thing. Read what they've said but read argumentatively—bounce what they are saying off what you've come to think about the topic. Note places of agreement and disagreement. Work through their ideas, but only after you already have some of your own.

Go back to what you've written, and bring in these other ideas and voices, without giving them primacy or letting them dominate. Make sure to give credit where credit is due, but paraphrase and cite, don't just directly quote. Keep the focus on the philosophical idea or problem, not the game of who said what about what (I mean, unless that is your game).

When it works out, the thing that emerges is often an interesting bit of philosophy. There might be other ways to “do philosophy”—maybe it depends a lot on the person.

But I find, especially for people starting out in generating ideas and papers, the puzzlement-first method [start with puzzled emotion or annoyance in response to a thing, do some thinking, do some writing, do some reading, do some more writing] works better than the topic-first method [start with a topic, read a ton, try to think of some new thing to say, write that thing up]. Follow your gut about what is interesting to you.

Some of this method depends on immersing yourself in the right waters, perhaps. Sit in on classes, have conversations with people, read twitter threads and blog posts, read the news, dig into some other academic field a little, engage with art or popular culture, read some random stuff, maybe even read some philosophy—and throughout, notice what interests and puzzles you, and follow those leads.

Writing the writing sample should be fun and exciting (and maddening and frustrating, on occasion). If it's not, something has gone wrong. OK, back to what one hopes will emerge from all of this. A clear, appropriately scholarly, well-argued, creative, ambitious writing sample. A little more about each of those.

Clarity: it should be easy to read and understand your writing sample. Ideally, it should be easy for even non-specialists to read your writing sample. If it is somewhat technical in places, at least make the philosophical problem(s) and payoff evident. Explain jargon and technical terms. Polish the sentence-level writing. Make the organizational structure of the paper clear.

Your prose can be powerful and interesting, but don't let the writing obscure the meaning. Don't send us 84 numbered paragraphs. You're not Wittgenstein (probably). Don't send us a genre-bending historical fiction/philosophy/autobiography mashup. You're not Anazldúa (probably). For our program, we need something that looks like high-level analytic philosophy. It can be about anything. (But a caveat on topic in a moment.)

Engagement with literature: a big difference between a fantastic, standout writing sample and an 'eh' writing sample that reads like a competent term paper is that the 'eh' samples often engage only with one or two very prominent papers on a topic (such as one might be assigned in a seminar...). Standout writing samples will go in depth into a philosophical issue, figuring out what is out there that is relevant and engaging with that work in a way that reveals a sophisticated level of understanding.

This kind of research is hard to do and takes time. PhilPapers.org, the SEP, and Philosophy Compass are all your friend in this. Use Google Scholar to see what newer papers cite the big papers on the topic—and read those papers. Depending on where you are, The Philosophical Underclass FB group might be your friend.

This is also where it can be extremely useful to get feedback on your writing sample from your professors or grad students you know. They can point you to relevant issues to dig into more.

Argumentative quality: we are a squarely (ha ha in every sense) analytic philosophy department. I am into philosophy presented in many ways, some of which isn't explicitly argumentative. But I wouldn't recommend that for your writing sample.

Your writing sample should make an interesting or surprising argument for an interesting or surprising conclusion. It should be clear what your conclusion is and how you are arguing for it. I like explicitly stated arguments in premise-conclusion format, but you don't have to be that mechanical about it. But you might think about why you are departing from that choice.

A significant part of argumentative quality comes in setting up the argument(s), making the case for the more controversial premises, and considering the philosophical implications of the conclusion(s). You should also present and respond to plausible objections to what you are arguing!

We are looking for your ability to engage with philosophical issues with subtlety and creativity. It's OK if you don't have an answer for everything! Better to acknowledge that than to just plow over a concern as if it's not there or as if you don't see it.

If you are a "paper perfect" applicant and you have a writing sample that does well by clarity, command and engagement of relevant literature, and argumentative quality, you are likely to do fairly well in the application process. But there are at least three more very important dimensions of writing sample quality that make a huge difference at the very end stages—even for "paper perfect" applicants: creativity, ambition, and topical fit.

Creativity and ambition: I'm going to put these two together, since they so often go together. The most common advice I give to applicants is to have a writing sample that is bold, creative, and ambitious. Do something new. Write about a topic that very few others have taken up or that has been neglected. Make an interesting argument for a weird new idea. Write about something that you are genuinely excited about. Write something you can imagine almost any philosopher getting excited about.

Sure, easier said than done. But we see a lot of perfectly competent writing samples that focus on an article or two by a philosopher or two on some narrow or well-trodden topic, competently reconstruct the views presented in those articles, raise a fine but unsurprising objection to the view, and call it a day. Papers like this get published in philosophy journals all the time.

But it's hard to stand out with a writing sample like that. It's hard to imagine anyone on the hiring committee saying—"this is awesome; this is my person!" It's hard to feel confident that the person writing it will come up with an interesting, compelling dissertation project in 2 or 3 years. It's much easier to feel that way if there's already an interesting new idea, topic, approach, argument right there in front of you.

(This concern is amplified when the debate is an old and well-trodden one. We see a surprising number of writing samples that discuss something like Chalmers and Block on consciousness (or Bonjour and Sosa on internalism v. externalism, or Rawls and Nozick on justice), state their views, and maybe make a few small points about their views. Some of these might be A term papers. But it is hard to see any spark there.)

Of course, there is risk with creativity and ambition. Don't sacrifice clarity, engagement with relevant literature, or argumentative quality. Wild manifestos aren't the way to go. Again: it's a tough assignment. We know. That's one reason it's so impressive when someone pulls it off. Good term papers for classes often won't cut it. If you don't know what to write about, you might try something like the method I describe above.

Here's an issue that goes beyond the philosophical quality of the writing sample and into something more practical. Topical fit: people often ask, is it OK if I say that I want to work on X and Y, but then send a writing sample on A, something completely different, and something that I don't want to work on. My response: well, it's not ideal, but if it's the best thing you have, and you can't come up with something else in time...

Here's why it's not ideal. Many admissions committees will have a distribution of subfield specialization. For example, there might be a history person, language/logic person, epistemology/mind person, value theory person, and a metaphysics person.

At many places, to the extent possible, files are given to specialists based on the expressed area interests of the applicants. If you say you want to work on metaphysics and language, either the metaphysics or language person is likely to get your file at the initial close read stage, and both will be given some deference in their assessment of your writing sample at the final stage.

Most of the files we look at will be in our area, until the very final stage, when we all read everything. Sometimes we will ask for another reader on a writing sample if it is way out of our area and we have an expert on the faculty in that area, but that doesn't always happen.

If your file is assigned to a specialist on X, because you say you want to work on X, but your writing sample is on A, it might be hard for that specialist to be as excited about your writing sample—at least when compared to some super-interesting writing sample in area X from some other applicant. You need people to be in your corner! If you say you're a value theory person but then send in something on Descartes's theory of mind, it's going to be tricky to generate the same enthusiasm.

This point might not apply everywhere, and it depends on the mechanics of the process. But I suspect it is significant in many places. It also might be more pronounced when the mismatch is across bigger gulfs: value theory v. non-value theory, history v. contemporary, etc.

(An aside regarding topic: avoid topics that were hot a long time ago (when your profs may have studied the subject). One tell: the papers you are citing are all from the 1990s. It's hard for anyone to get excited about incredibly well-trodden debates from a while ago. If you do have something new to say on one of these topics, that's awesome, but you should be very clear about that up front, and really show that you know all the recent relevant literature, not just the big-name things from 20 or 30 years ago.)

As I hope is clear, the writing sample is the hardest part of the application, and it is the thing that you should spend the most time on. You should expect to spend several months (at least) on the writing sample, and to revise it significantly multiple times.

You should get feedback from at least 2 or 3 people—ideally your letter writers, but also possibly other professors or grad students you know well enough to ask. They can help with clarity and argumentation, identifying relevant literature for you to engage with, and raising objections for you to consider in the paper.

(5) GRE, where to apply, and more

The use of the GRE is in flux at many places, both because of the pandemic, and because of questions about its relevance to anything we should care about in doing graduate admissions. At the moment, Rutgers Philosophy is not requiring the GRE.

In general, for schools that require them, high GRE scores can help a person get a second look at the early stages (particularly helpful for people from programs likely to be unknown to admissions committees), middling GRE scores will make almost no difference either way, and very low GRE scores might raise a red flag. But that red flag can be lowered again by some kind of explanation somewhere, or by countervailing evidence.

How to decide where to apply? When you are clear on your areas of interest, look to see where the authors of important papers in those areas are teaching. Look at important journals in those areas, go to see who is on the editorial board of those journals, and figure out where they are

teaching. Depending on the area, use the PGR specialty rankings or the Pluralists' Guide to get a sense of what programs are worth looking at more closely. Talk to your professors or TAs, if they seem clued in.

Once you have a long list of programs to look at, visit departmental placement pages. Browse through faculty and grad student websites. Check out the APDA surveys on graduate satisfaction. If things still look promising, consider applying. You will get a lot more information later when you see where you have been admitted, go on in-person visits or talk to current grad students, and so on.

Important note: many programs offer fee waivers on the basis of financial hardship or being a member of a demographic group that is underrepresented in philosophy. Look into those if that applies to your situation.

There is a lot of luck involved throughout the process. I wish good luck to all of you (although that kind of defeats the point, given the nature of grad admissions; interpret it more generally so that it applies to whatever path you end up on).