

Applying to Grad School, Overview

Bernhard Nickel · bnickel@fas.harvard.edu

October 16, 2018

When you apply to graduate school, you'll compile a dossier. That dossier, as a whole, is supposed to provide evidence that you will do well in graduate school, and that you're in a position to take advantage of the opportunities the school and department can offer you. Being able to take advantage, in the relevant sense, is usually interpreted along two dimensions.

- Having background in skills and doctrine.
- Fit with the department.
- Showing excitement about working in philosophy.

Different parts of your dossier will speak to these points.

1 The Dossier

These dossiers vary in their details, but there are various common elements.

- (1) Transcript
- (2) Writing Sample
- (3) Personal Statement
- (4) Letters of Recommendation
- (5) Standardized Test Scores (some schools no longer require GREs)

The transcript, writing sample, and letters, and secondarily the standardized tests, speak to your preparation. The letters and personal statement speak to your fit with the department. The personal statement also speaks to your commitment to the field.

2 Transcript

This is the only aspect of the dossier that it makes sense to think about long term. If you want to go to graduate school in philosophy, you should take *at least* the equivalent of the philosophy concentration in terms of number of courses. Look for a broad range of courses, too.

3 Letters of Recommendation

These are very important parts of your dossier. Your letter writers will talk about what you've already done, their estimation of your promise, etc. If there's anything in your dossier that you think deserves special mention, talk to your letter writers about it. For example, if you had a rough semester and your grades weren't very good, talk to your letter writers about what happened and ask them to mention this.

4 Writing Sample

I've got a whole extra handout on that.

5 Personal Statement

You'll be asked to describe your interests and how you see yourself fitting into the Ph.D. program you're applying to. The personal statement is also a place to explain anything that might not come out in the other parts of your dossier that's relevant to assessing your candidacy.

A couple of recurring problems.

- Don't get too cute here—you want to come across as a mature worker, even if your philosophical thinking is still in its early stages.
- Don't just list the names of professors you found on the department website and say "I'm looking forward to working with such distinguished professors as [alphabetical list of everyone ever associated with the department]". If you don't have detailed plans, just don't say it.

6 Standardized Tests

Many philosophy programs tend to not weight these very highly, but some schools use them at higher levels of the administration to decide on school wide funding competitions. If you have the time, get yourself some test prep books and work on it a bit.