

Graduate Study in Philosophy

Philosophy is not the most secure route to wealth and fame. But if you are passionate about philosophy, have demonstrated talent for philosophy, and think you might like to teach, you might want to consider graduate study in philosophy and an academic career. Academics get to pursue their intellectual passions professionally, often with considerable autonomy, and have comparatively flexible schedules.

But you also need to be realistic. Graduate school is no picnic and takes several years, and academic jobs, especially good academic jobs, are scarce and getting scarcer. There are always opportunity costs to significant investments of time, energy, and money for risky goals, and this certainly applies to the decision to pursue a PhD. There are many rewarding careers outside of academia that involve less investment, promise more certain employment, and provide more control over where you live and work. Pursue a PhD out of passion, not inertia. Here are some things you ought to know.

- An Academic Career.
 - Though those with graduate degrees in philosophy can and do find non-academic jobs (<http://www.apaonline.org/?page=nonacademic>), most PhD programs in philosophy are geared toward training future academics.
 - The main responsibilities of any academic are research, teaching, and, to a lesser extent, service (departmental, university, and professional).
 - There are three main kinds of academic jobs in philosophy: (1) positions at research universities, (2) positions at liberal arts colleges or state universities that do not have graduate programs, and (3) positions at community colleges. Though all three kinds of positions involve research, teaching, and service, these responsibilities are mixed in different ratios at different kinds of jobs (e.g. research predominates at research universities and teaching and service predominate at community colleges).
 - A PhD is necessary for (1) and (2) and, sometimes, for (3) as well. There are two routes to the PhD — going directly to a PhD program from an undergraduate degree and getting a terminal MA prior to applying to PhD programs. I focus on PhD programs and address the two routes at the end of this document.
- Be Realistic.
 - Getting In. Top PhD programs receive approximately 150-250 applications and admit between 5-15%.
 - Finishing. On average, 30% of those who start PhD programs do not complete the degree, changing their minds about the PhD or academia or not succeeding in graduate school.
- Getting a Job. Despite increased enrollments at the university level, there are still many more PhDs than there are academic positions. Jobs are scarcer today than they were just a few years ago, and there is a backlog of promising PhDs looking for jobs. Especially if you are interested in a position in a research program, there is enormous competition for these jobs. Most of the better students at top programs eventually get tenure-track jobs of some kind, though not necessarily at research universities, and these tenure-track jobs often come only after one or more fixed-term jobs at different institutions as post-doctoral fellows or visiting assistant professors.
- Be Flexible. While the very best students from the very best programs may receive multiple job offers, many highly qualified PhDs have more limited options. You must be flexible geographically and willing to move, for instance, taking one or more temporary jobs (post-docs or VAPs) before finding a tenure-track position. You can't assume that you will find academic employment near family and friends.
- Qualifications.
 - It's not enough to have been a successful undergraduate philosophy major, who enjoyed her classes and got good grades. Very few majors in any discipline go on to graduate work and a career as an academic. You need to be passionate about philosophy and have potential for original philosophical thought.

- Good philosophers are both reliable consumers of existing philosophical traditions and ideas and producers of original philosophical contributions. The ratio of production to consumption grows over time. Good undergraduates tend to be mostly consumers, with flickers of production, but successful academics are regular producers, as well as consumers, of philosophical ideas. Graduate school is where students are expected to start doing more independent and creative philosophical work, and your application will be assessed partly on your promise in this respect.

What to Expect in a PhD Program

- 5-8 years for the PhD
- 2-3 years of coursework
- Various distribution requirements
- Qualifying and/or candidacy exams
- Writing a thesis
- Financials: Some combination of fellowship and TA support. Don't go to graduate school without some such financial aid package. The prospects of academic employment are too uncertain and the salaries for academics are too modest to justify going into significant debt in pursuit of the PhD.

Applying to Graduate School

- Identify Programs to which to Apply. There are a variety of ways of gathering and assessing information about graduate programs in philosophy.
 1. You can gather information online in a piecemeal way about academics whose work interests you or the philosophy departments at institutions that interest you.
 2. You can find searchable databases of programs and subspecialties at PhilPapers (<https://philpeople.org/departments>) and at the American Philosophical Association (<https://www.apaonline.org/general/custom.asp?page=gradguide>).
 3. Though your first priority should be to identify programs that are a good fit for your interests, at some point you should also try to get a sense of the strength of the programs that interest you. For better or worse, the academic job market, like many professional job markets, is very pedigree conscious. Your mentors may have opinions about the strength of various programs. *The Philosophical Gourmet Report* (<http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com>) provides rankings of programs and subspecialties. It is a survey-based ranking. Though controversial, it is a long-standing and influential source. It can be useful, though you shouldn't attach too much significance to small differences in the rankings, and the specialty rankings deserve to be taken more seriously than the overall rankings.
- Once you've identified potential programs, you can get more information about those programs and their faculty by studying their websites and perhaps by contacting individual faculty members whose research interests you.
- Be selective.
 1. If you want a job at a research university, you should focus on top PhD programs (say, programs in PGR top 30 or so).
 2. Strength of Program, General. All else being equal, focus on strong overall programs, with a variety of productive faculty whose work is exciting to you, and with a strong placement record and demonstrated commitment and resources to graduate student support. It's important to study in a reasonably well-rounded program, both for those who don't yet know what subfields interest them most (you need to be exposed to different areas of philosophy at the graduate level to make an informed decision about where to specialize) and for those who do (specialists in any field need a good background in other areas of philosophy).
 3. Strength of Program, Subspecialties. If you don't know what areas you want to specialize in, focus on general strength of program. But if you do know what areas you want to specialize in, focus especially on programs that are strong in those areas.

4. **Realistic Choices.** Try to have a realistic assessment of the strength of your application (a candid discussion with your mentors would be helpful here) and submit most of your applications to places where you have a realistic prospect of admission. Add one or two “aspirational” applications and one or two “insurance” applications.
- **Application Components.** Often a first cut is made on the basis of objective data, such as your GPA, your GREs, and the quality of the applicant’s undergraduate program. These factors can continue to play a role, but at this point references and writing sample will also become important.
 1. **Undergraduate Grades.** A GPA below a 3.75 may be problematic at top programs, and your Philosophy-specific GPA should be higher.
 2. **GREs.** Some programs have stopped requiring the GRE. But many programs still do. If you take the GRE, do so early enough that if you don’t do as well as you’d like, there’s time to take it again.
 3. **Statement of Purpose.** This will be part of each application. It need not be profound, but it should explain your philosophical interests and be thoughtful, mature, and well written. Try to tailor or adapt your statement at different programs to specific features (e.g. faculty) at those programs, rather than submitting the same generic statement to each program. You can also use your personal statement as an opportunity to contextualize any aspect of your transcript that might need explanation — for instance, to explain that a lower GPA in a given term or year was due to financial pressures to work more outside of school, family care responsibilities, or health problems.
 4. **Letters of Recommendation.** You are typically asked for three letters of reference. These should all be academic references, and it’s usually best if they are all from philosophers, though students with genuinely interdisciplinary interests may want letters from faculty in other disciplines. Provide your references with work you did in their courses, transcripts, a rough draft of your statement of purpose, and a list of the programs to which you plan to apply. Try to get to know at least two philosophy professors well — take more than one course from them and have some contact with them outside of class. That way, they can provide detailed and not merely formulaic references.
 5. **Writing Sample.** Give the writing sample some thought and work hard on it. Don’t just use an unrevised short paper that got you an A in some upper-division course. Use a more substantial paper that shows your best and most original work. *Revise and extend it, ideally with the help of feedback from your professor or others.*

Deciding Where to Go

If you get in at more than one program, collect more information to determine which one would be best for you. Many programs offer open houses for prospective students. These are mostly in-person open houses. Where possible, it’s a good idea to attend these open houses. But much information can be collected outside the open houses online or via email or Zoom.

- **Strength of Program.** All else being equal, choose a program with a strong overall ranking. Pay attention to gross differences in overall ranking, but don’t assign much significance to small differences.
- **Strength of Subspecialty.** All else being equal, choose the program that is strongest in the areas in which you want to specialize. Again, don’t attach much significance to small differences in specialty rankings. Whose work most interests you? How many people does the program have in your subspecialty and related areas?
- **Talk to Current Graduate Students.** Contact current graduate students at the programs you are considering. Ask them about financial support, student morale, accessibility of faculty, things they like most about their program, and things they like least. Make a special point of talking to graduate students in your area, especially anyone working with faculty with whom you might like to work. Graduate students, like everyone, can have idiosyncratic perspectives. So try to talk to a few graduate students at each program, if possible.

- Finding Congenial Faculty. Find a program with faculty in your subspecialty whose work especially interests you. Better to find a program with more than one such faculty member. You want to be exposed to different ideas. Also, you don't want to have all your eggs in one basket, in case that one faculty member leaves or you find you don't work well with him or her.
- Compare the guaranteed and/or expected financial aid packages of programs. Which program offers more aid? Which program offers more fellowship aid? All else being equal, you can finish your degree sooner the higher the ratio of fellowship support to support as a teaching assistant.
- Compare the data about job placement of different programs.

A Terminal MA Program?

- There are two routes to a PhD program: (1) going directly to the PhD program from your undergraduate degree and (2) getting a one or two-year terminal MA before applying to PhD programs.
- Though an MA degree could help you decide whether graduate study in philosophy is a good fit for you, it will add time to the already long process of getting the PhD, and financial aid for MA students is more variable than for PhD students. This means that a terminal MA degree is advisable primarily in circumstances in which it would enable you to attend a significantly stronger PhD program eventually. Given the competitive nature of the academic job market, it's important to get your PhD from a very strong program.
- If all your application credentials (GPA, GRE, undergraduate training, letters, and writing sample) are strong and you can get admitted to PhD programs in the top 20, there's probably little reason to consider doing a terminal MA first. But if you didn't major in philosophy as an undergraduate, your undergraduate institution did not provide you with a solid background in philosophy, or some elements of your application are weak, you may want to consider doing a terminal MA first and then applying to PhD programs with new and stronger credentials.
- It's possible to apply to both MA and PhD programs the same year and then choose an MA program if you are not admitted to PhD programs that you are satisfied with.
- Though a one-year MA program might strengthen your application to PhD programs, you won't have completed very much of it by the time you apply again, and so its marginal value might not be great. By contrast, if you apply in the second-year of a two-year MA degree, your PhD application can have a lot of value added.
- A two-year MA program is likely to consist of one year or more of coursework and a thesis. There will be distribution requirements and possibly qualifying exams.
- Some strong terminal MA programs include Tufts, Simon Fraser, Georgia State University, University of Wisconsin — Milwaukee, Western Michigan University, Brandeis University, Texas A&M, Northern Illinois University, and University of Houston.
- As with PhD programs, in choosing among MA programs pay attention to strength of program generally and in your subareas and the faculty with whom you might work.
- Financial-aid packages at terminal MA programs can be variable. Make sure you are clear about the financials at different programs, and do not go into significant debt to get an MA.
- Ask for information about the rate at which MA students are placed in PhD programs and the sort of programs to which they are admitted and attend.