

Advice for Applying to Grad School

1) MAKE A LIST: Before doing anything else, write up a document for yourself that outlines the reasons YOU want to go to grad school. Are you passionate about a particular research topic? Do you want to learn a specific set of technical skills? Are you pursuing an advanced degree to increase your pay grade in a field in which you are already working? Graduate school is expensive in terms of both time and money, and you want to make sure that it's the best way for you to pursue your long-term professional goals.

2) GET ADVICE: Refer to this list when talking with your mentors—ideally this includes a combination of faculty, grad students at your home institution (if it has grad students) and/or friends in your field who are just beginning their graduate programs at other universities. I recommend having these discussions at least a year to six months before applying. Ask people for any and all advice when it comes to selecting schools to apply to, assembling applications, networking with graduate students and faculty at institutions to which you're applying, programs to avoid, and field, museum, or research opportunities that may increase your chances of admission. You can also ask your cadre of mentors to look over your applications once they are assembled and give you feedback, though you will want to ask them with ample time to spare before the applications are due.

3) RESEARCH GRAD PROGRAMS: Figure out what your research interests are and start Googling. The following list of questions may be useful in helping get you started.

- Do you want to get a master's, or are you aiming for a PhD?
- When looking for potential advisors, come up with a list of papers you've read in your discipline that you find particularly compelling. Who wrote them? Where do they teach now? Where were they trained?
- What are the general requirements of the grad program? How many courses will you take? What is expected time to PhD?
- What kind of financial support does the graduate program offer students?
- If you are applying for PhD programs, do the schools require or recommend having an MA first?
- What programs have a strong reputation in the specialty that you want to pursue? Remember that the ranking of grad programs is distinct from the prestige of a school's undergraduate program. A place that provides a fantastic undergrad education might not have a strong graduate program in your field.
- If you're geographically limited in your search, what are the best programs to help you pursue your career goals in your area?
- I recommend identifying graduate program in which you can identify multiple potential mentors. You can never be sure that you will have a good working relationship with your advisor until you are on the ground, and it helps to have backup mentors in mind at your institution in case things go south.

For context, when I applied to grad schools in the fall of 2008, I applied to both master's programs (Oxford, University of Toronto) and PhD programs (University of New Mexico, Arizona State University, University of Michigan). My goal was to apply to enough programs that I would likely be accepted at one, while not breaking the bank.

4) PREPARE FOR THE GRE: The GRE is a typical standardized test, which means that it isn't a reflection of your intelligence or capabilities—it's a reflection of how well you can take the test itself. I would not advise taking it cold, simply because the structure of many questions is deliberately tricky, and the test is expensive. Preparing for the test by buying a prep book will help you know what to expect on the day of the test and give you a better chance of getting a score in the target range of the institutions you are applying to. Double-check that the institutions to which you're planning to apply still require the GRE, as many grad programs are thankfully beginning to drop this requirement.

5) SEND INTRODUCTORY EMAILS: It's **essential** to email prospective advisors well in advance of application deadlines. Not all faculty take students every year (and not all faculty update their department webpages every year!), so you want to get confirmation that the people you want to work with are taking on students. I've seen excellent grad applications rejected because the advisors the applicants wanted to work with were overburdened, which could have been avoided with a simple email.

Remember that these emails are the first impression you will make on the person who may become your advisor and mentor. It pays to be polite, respectful, and informative. These two blog posts outline useful tips for framing initial emails.

A) <http://tenureshewrote.wordpress.com/2014/10/02/grad-student-mentorship/>

B) <http://contemplativemammoth.wordpress.com/2013/04/08/so-you-want-to-go-to-grad-school-nail-the-inquiry-email/>

Here are emails that I sent to prospective advisors in 2008, with examples of an extremely positive response (Professor A) and a more negative response (Professor B). Ironically, I was accepted into both University A and University B and have since worked with both faculty members.

Example A: Positive Response

From: Jess Beck
Sent: Thursday, November 20, 2008 12:47 PM
To: professorA@university.edu
Subject: Query Regarding Graduate Studies

Professor A,

I am a student in the process of applying to *University A* for a PhD in Archaeology. I have a Bachelor's Degree in Honours Anthropology (archaeology concentration) and a major in English Literature from McGill University. I am currently enrolled in the year long Diploma program in Environment at the same institution, as I wanted to expand my field of study given the short and extremely focused nature of my Bachelor's degree. I've worked on both a Palaeolithic excavation in Jordan and a Neolithic excavation in Finland over the course of the past three years, and I am currently engaged in a field course at McGill involving the excavation of the animal cemetery of a Safari Park. I've spent quite a bit of time both working with lithics in the context of my role as an executive on the McGill Flintknappers' Club and studying Middle and Upper Palaeolithic tools from the Levant in an independent study course in order to prepare for my ACOR sponsored work in Jordan this past summer.

As a result of my previous fieldwork and academic experience, I'm very interested in significantly broadening my subjects of study over the course of my Master's. While I have a fair bit of

undergraduate experience in the field of lithics and the Palaeolithic, I would like to gain more experience in fields such as human osteology, and I am particularly interested in mortuary ritual and practices within the archaeological record. My Honours thesis "Buried in Ambiguity: The Evidence for Neanderthal Mortuary Practices", supervised by Professor Andre Costopoulos, examined the potential for mortuary behavior among Neanderthals. However, I would like to be able to examine such practices in later periods where a greater amount of better preserved material exists, and I would also like to obtain a greater degree of practical experience in handling, identifying and classifying human osteological remains. Given some of your research interests, particularly your studies of prehistoric skeletal populations and your interest in the social dimensions of mortuary behavior, I would be extremely interested in working with you if I am accepted to *University A*. Accordingly, I am writing to ask if you are supervising PhD students over the course of the next few years. Thank you very much for your time,

- Jess Beck

From: Professor A <professorA@university.edu>

Sent: Thursday, November 20, 2008 4:26 PM

To: Jessica Beck

Subject: Re: Query Regarding Graduate Studies

Dear Jessica Beck:

WHAT a remarkably diverse and intriguing background! Yes, I continue to oversee graduate students and will for the foreseeable future. We will look forward to your application to the *Specialty Approach* at *University A*.

Warmly (and a little hurriedly, as I'm at the AAAs),

Professor A's Name
Professor of *Specialty*

Example B: Not So Positive Response

From: Jessica Beck

Sent: Sunday, December 21, 2008 12:07 PM

To: professorB@university.edu

Subject: Query regarding Graduate Studies.

Professor B,

I am a student in the process of applying to *University B* for a PhD in Anthropology with a focus on Archaeology. I have a Bachelor's Degree in Honours Anthropology (archaeology concentration) and a major in English Literature from McGill University. I am currently enrolled in the year long Diploma program in Environment at the same institution, as I wanted to expand my field of study given the short and extremely focused nature of my Bachelor's degree. I've worked on both a Palaeolithic excavation in Jordan and a Neolithic excavation in Finland over the course of the past three years, and I am currently engaged in a field course at McGill involving the excavation of the animal cemetery of a Safari Park. I've spent quite a bit of time both working with lithics in the context of my role as an executive on the McGill Flintknappers' Club and studying Middle and Upper Palaeolithic

tools from the Levant in an independent study course in order to prepare for my ACOR sponsored work in Jordan this past summer.

As a result of my previous fieldwork and academic experience, I'm very interested in significantly broadening my subjects of study over the course of my Master's. While I have a fair bit of undergraduate experience in the field of lithics and the Palaeolithic, I would like to gain more experience in fields such as human osteology, and incorporate non-Palaeolithic periods into my studies as well. However, my Honours thesis "Buried in Ambiguity: The Evidence for Neanderthal Mortuary Practices", supervised by Professor Andre Costopoulos, examined the potential for mortuary behavior among Neanderthals during the time period, and I am still fascinated by the paleoanthropological puzzle that their existence poses.

Currently, I am interested in examining periods of intense social change within societies, and the resultant impacts social and technological change have on elements that can be accessed through the archaeological record. Societal components such as mortuary practices, symbolism and shifts in subsistence strategies or social organization can be particularly telling. Some of your research interests, particularly those of ecology and the evolution of hunter-gatherers and the Palaeolithic in Europe, parallel my own. Accordingly, I am writing to ask if you are supervising PhD students over the course of the next few years. Thank you very much for your time, I look forward to hearing from you,

- Jess Beck

From: Professor B <professorB@university.edu>
Sent: Friday, January 9, 2009 9:42 AM
To: Jessica Beck
Subject: Re: Query regarding Graduate Studies.

Hello,

The answer to your question is ambiguous – on the one hand, I am supervising Ph.D. students now and expect (hope, as you will see below) to be doing so in the coming years, but on the other hand the economic situation is making it increasingly impossible to accept new students into our program. This year, for example, we have only two new students for all periods and areas, There simply isn't enough money available to take in any more. We have an iron-clad rule that we will not accept any student if we do not have the means to provide them whatever support is necessary for their completion of our program. We never accept anyone and then leave them hanging without adequate financial assistance, in one form or another. So, it's getting almost impossible to accept new students here. You are welcome to apply, of course, but you do need to know the economic realities we are suffering under at the moment.

If it is financially easier for you to attend a Canadian university for graduate work, I can highly recommend working with Professor C at *University C*. He is from *Canadian city*, but studied here with me, and is an excellent theoretician as well as a good fieldworker. His special area is fauna, rather than lithics, but you would learn a lot from him.

If you do decide to give it a try here, I'll look forward to seeing your application soon.

Good luck,
Professor B's Name