

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING A SUCCESSFUL APPLICATION

We think that it is important to demystify the process of applying to the MAT program as much as possible. Here are our suggestions for a successful application:

First of all, the most important parts of the application are your statement of purpose and your letters of recommendation.

To be sure, other components of the application are all significant. We look for an excellent writing sample, and we expect good grades--and very good grades in history courses. Still, these are generally not quite as critical as the statement of purpose and the letters. (To be honest, the GRE score is in most cases not terribly important; we find the test to be a radically imperfect marker of talent and potential performance in the program. If you have a terribly low score, though, we'll want to be sure to see other indicators that make up for it.)

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE. What we are looking for here is, above all, a deep and genuine commitment to history and to teaching. Tell us about your GPA if you want, but much more important is for us to get a sense that history really calls to your very being. That you have a "passion for the past," in the words of the brilliant Virginia high school teacher James Percoco. Tell us about your childhood connections to history, or about the inspiration and intellectual challenges you've received in your college history classes. Tell us about historical books and issues that you deeply care about.

At the same time, lots of history geeks shouldn't be *teachers*. Provide us with a sense of what your talents might be in the classroom. In turn, don't be afraid to tell us what frightens you about the prospect of teaching, and what you need to learn. After all: a two-year program should teach you something! Please be open and honest; communicating about your weaknesses is, to us, a great strength. Most of all, tell us about your dreams and visions, as well as your practical commitments, experiences, and ideas. We don't mind if the statement of purpose runs a bit long. Also: be sure to have plenty of friends and mentors read drafts. Finally, while we genuinely do appreciate creative and unconventional writing, we caution you against too much informality.

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION. Obviously, these are confidential, and you can't control them after you've requested them. But be thinking about who can speak most powerfully, and in the most detail, to why you would be not just a good--but potentially a great--middle or high school history teacher. We highly recommend that you get at least two letters from college history professors with whom you have worked. These faculty will be the best gauge of your ability to do genuine graduate-level historical work. Three letters from such professors is great. But it also can't hurt to have a letter from someone who can speak more directly to your personal background and your potential teaching abilities. These people might include employers, supervisors of internships, coordinators of tutoring programs, professors from other disciplines, or sometimes even your old high school history teacher. And we don't mind receiving more than the standard three letters.

WRITING SAMPLE. Here we are looking, above all, for excellent analytical skills, talent in historical research and writing, and careful craftsmanship. We strongly prefer primary source-based papers that are also sophisticated in their interpretation. If you do not have such a paper, consider writing one specifically for this application: even if the writing sample is generally only third in our level of importance, a truly fine writing sample can definitely make the difference between admission and non-admission. Other forms of writing can, however, suffice. Analytical book reviews, historiographical surveys, short biographies of historical figures, or—if necessary--papers from other disciplines can count. Be sure that your writing is crisp in style and clean in terms of grammar, punctuation, and—above all—citations. (We strongly recommend that you follow the advice of a good writing manual, such as Christopher Lasch’s *Plain Style* or Kate Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers*.) Also, once more: have friends read and help you revise your writing sample. Just because you received an “A” on the paper doesn’t mean it can’t stand some improvement.

TRANSCRIPTS/COURSES/GPA. As stated above, an excellent GPA, especially in history courses, is valuable. But what we’re most interested in is your sophistication in historical thinking and writing, and the writing sample often speaks much more powerfully to those qualities than your GPA. When we do examine the transcript, we look to see that you’ve taken a good strong dose of history classes. That definitely does *not* mean that you have to have been a history major. But you do have to have shown considerable commitment to the discipline by taking (and doing well in) at least a handful of upper-division history courses. As for the grades, a string of As in upper-division courses can effectively cancel out a few Bs in lower-division classes taken while you were younger. We formally require you to take 16 hours of history courses prior to admission (along with 9 hours in the other social sciences), but we can be flexible about that admissions requirement if you otherwise show great promise. (Everyone, however, still needs to finish our program with at least 32 total history hours.)

Those are the general foundations of a successful application. That said, we do strongly encourage applications from career changers and other folks who have not taken the standard route to the program. You do *not* need to be a 22-year-old recently graduated history major to be a successful applicant; indeed, we often discourage applications from undergrads straight out of school, preferring that they get at least a bit of further experience in the “real world” or in graduate classes before joining us. Give us your best, recognizing that we’re flexible but also that our most immediate purpose is to determine whether you can do well in intensive, rigorous, and extremely challenging graduate-level readings courses populated not just by MAT students, but also by other MA and (mainly) Ph.D. students. Then, of course, our more long-term purpose is to determine whether you will be a successful teacher.

Finally, if possible, we encourage you to come in and meet us. A personal visit allows us to chat about a wide variety of issues. Such a visit, however, is not required. For out-of-towners, a phone chat can serve just as well.

Any questions? Please do not hesitate to let us know if we can help in any way. We very much look forward to receiving your application and, if all goes well, working with you in our very exciting program

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