

## **Tips for Applying to USF's History MA and PhD Programs**

We are thrilled that you are interested in studying with us! Before you begin the application process, we recommend carefully reading this guide and [checking out the FAQ on our website](#) so that you are able to assemble the strongest possible application for admission into our MA or PhD program. If you have questions about this process after doing these readings, please contact the Graduate Director, Matt King, at [matthewking1@usf.edu](mailto:matthewking1@usf.edu).

### One Year Before Applying

Most applications for history MA and PhD programs in the US are due near the end of the fall semester – usually in November or December. The process of assembling a strong application typically takes months of work and coordination, so you should start seriously considering the schools to which you want to apply a year before their application deadline. This means that if you want to apply to study at USF beginning in Fall 2043, then you would want to start formulating the components of your application in November/December 2042.

A year before your application is due, you should start looking at the resources that the department in question has to offer (relevant centers and institutes), any faculty members who could potentially supervise your work, and the application requirements for admission into the program. It is often helpful to create a spreadsheet with all of the applications you plan to submit and their requirements so that you have a centralized location to reference the many, many documents that you will be creating for these applications.

### Six Months Before Applying: Contacting Potential Advisors

MA and PhD applications are strongest when you show a clear connection to our department and faculty. At the graduate level, you will be working closely with at least one faculty member in the history department, and it is very helpful if you know with whom you want to work when assembling your application.

We therefore recommend that you send an email to the professor that you think would best work as an advisor/co-advisor around six months before your application is due (around June or so). In this email, you should politely introduce yourself, talk briefly about your research interests, and then ask if the work you do is the sort of work that this faculty member would be willing to supervise at the graduate level. It helps to include a CV and/or transcript to this email so that the faculty member has a sense of your previous experience with the discipline of history. Within this email, it helps to be specific. A faculty member will be much more impressed with someone who says, “I am interested in studying the social networks of US Civil War widows using digital technologies” than someone who says, “I would love to study the US Civil War.” If a faculty member responds positively to this email, then you can put on your application that you have corresponded with them about your interests – and this is a great thing to have on an application. If they do not respond or are unwilling to supervise your project, then you can still apply to the program, but your application will unfortunately be weaker for it.

Our department at USF does not have faculty with expertise in every historical period. If you want to study the history of feudal Japan or early modern China, for example, then this is probably not the graduate program for you because we do not have a faculty member with expertise in either of

these topics. We therefore recommend that you only apply to graduate programs that have a faculty member (or ideally faculty members) with expertise in your proposed field of study.

### Six Months Before Applying: Assembling Application Materials

Our graduate applications (both MA and PhD) require a statement of purpose, writing sample, letters of recommendation, and transcript(s). It can take a very long time to get all of these application components in working order, so we recommend assembling them at least six months before the application deadline. If there are missing materials in your application, it is less likely that you will be admitted into the program.

Your statement of purpose, which should be no more than two single-spaced pages in length, should clearly convey what you want to study at USF and why USF is a good fit for your work. It is fine if you want to include some biographical information about yourself in this statement of purpose, but your work should be front and center. We want to know that you have a specific area of interest that you want to study at the MA or PhD level and that USF has the resources/people available to make facilitate this learning. It is much better, for example, to say “I would like to study lobbying efforts from environmental groups in Florida during the 1980s using archival materials scattered across municipal archives in the state” than to say “I love history and want to learn more about Florida.” In general, we expect that PhD applicants will have a more refined idea of what they hope to study than MA applicants. Still, we want you to be as specific as possible about your desired area of study and certainly would prefer you to be more specific than saying that you want to study “World History since 1500” or “History of the Americas.”

It is also useful for us to know that you are aware of the kind of sources available for your research and that you know how to attain them. You could be working with original archival sources, digital databases, printed editions of ancient texts, oral histories, or any other kind of historical source. What is helpful to us, though, is knowing that you are aware of these sources and will be able to undertake your proposed studies using them. Having relevant non-English language proficiencies (when relevant) or a plan for how you will acquire these proficiencies is an asset too. You should also show within your statement of purpose that USF has the personnel and resources available to make this project a reality. We want to know that there are faculty here willing to supervise your work, that you are aware of any centers or institutes that could enrich your education, and if there are specific grant/fellowship opportunities that could provide you with funding to conduct your research. In other words, show us that USF is a good fit for the kind of work you want to do.

Your writing sample, meanwhile, should show us that you have foundational skills in historical research that you can build on at the MA/PhD level. Most students submit an original research paper or historiography paper that is no more than 15 double-spaced pages in length (excluding bibliography and notes); we recommend that you choose one of these two types of paper for your writing sample, as they are foundational to the field of history. We do not expect you to have a published journal article or perfectly pristine research paper for your writing sample, but it should show us that you are able to analyze historical sources and craft an argument from them. Ideally, this argument should be related in some way to your proposed research project too. If you want to study the effects of European legal standards in postcolonial Brazil, for example, then it would be helpful if your writing sample involved in some way legal history, South American history, and/or

postcolonial history. These papers should be free from grammatical errors, contain relevant citations, and articulate a clear argumentation.

Once you have completed drafts of your statement of purpose and writing sample, it is helpful to let them sit for a few weeks or months (time permitting). Then, you can return to them with a fresh pair of eyes and edit them to the best of your abilities. Seek out friends and family to read your materials too. This editing process can be long and painful – but this is the kind of work that you can expect to do in a history graduate program.

#### Three Months Before Applying: Request Letters of Recommendation

You should solicit letters of recommendation from academic sources (namely professors, archivists, and museum curators) at least three months before your application deadline. Your letters should come from people who are familiar with the quality of your work and can thus speak to your potential to succeed at the graduate level. If you have less than the required number of letters of recommendation (2 for MA and 3 for PhD), then this will negatively affect our assessment of your application.

#### One Month Before Applying: Check Transcripts

You must send official academic transcripts to USF for your application. At least one month before the deadline, you should contact the institution(s) where you have transcripts and learn about their procedures for sending them to USF.

#### Up to the Application Deadline: Edit, Edit, Edit

You want your statement of purpose and writing sample to be as good as they possibly can be for your MA or PhD application. Keep refining them until you think they represent your best work. Then, you can submit them with the rest of your application.