FAQ: Applying to Graduate School

Note: In mid-2024 this page was transferred “as is” from LSA’s old website. Please be aware that the original hyperlinks and other information on the page may no longer be current.

How do I choose a program?

First, you want to ask yourself what topic(s) in linguistics have motivated you to pursue a graduate degree. Think about what classes you have particularly enjoyed as well as what research topics have garnered your greatest curiosity. These are likely the topics that drive your interest.

Once you have decided where your passions lie, you should ask faculty from your department what programs may be a good fit for you based on the topics you most want to explore. This faculty member could be your research advisor, a prof from your favorite class, or a faculty member with whom you are close. One of the benefits of asking a faculty member is that they often have an insider scoop. They will know things about other departments you cannot gain from websites.

You can also utilize several LSA resources to help you decide what interests you and what programs are a best fit for you. Find out what resources are available and how to use them here.

Should I apply to masters programs or PhD programs?

There are a lot of differing opinions and advice offered about what type of graduate program to choose, masters or PhD. Your decision should be informed, in part, by your long-term career goals. How much additional training is expected in order to be competitive for the type of position you will be seeking?

A resource that may be helpful, in terms of weighing the pros and cons of differing models of graduate eduation, is LSA member Gretchen McCulloch’s blog post, Should you go to grad school in linguistics? Maybe. In this post, she highlights two separate views, one which falls on the “no” side of pursuing a PhD and one that falls on the “yes” side of pursuing a PhD. Additionally, she offers general advice for deciding whether grad school is right for you as well as choosing between a masters or PhD in linguistics.

Find out what others are saying about deciding between a masters and a PhD. Ask the faculty in your department or program what they think would help to advance your goals. And ultimately, make the decision you believe is the best investment of your time and resources.

Should I contact faculty from departments in which I am interested?
You can! And faculty from some programs have mentioned it as a positive. However, it is most certainly NOT obligatory and it will not be held against you if you do not reach out to faculty.

It is also important to consider why you are reaching out. Have specific questions or topics to discuss. Make your message short and sweet, but informative. Examples of reasons to reach out include:

- (Before applying) If you have a professor of interest, you could reach out by succinctly describing your research interest(s) and asking if the department is a good fit.
- If you would like to know specific information about the department that is not available on its website.

It is important to note that you should only reach out if you have some sort of question that will benefit you. Reaching out to benefit your application is not a good idea. For example, sending a message asking if the department can accept you is not helpful. Likewise, sending a long email outlining your research interests or a question you have may be overwhelming.

It may also benefit you to reach out to graduate students with questions. Often their contact information is also listed on the department website. They can provide a different perspective than faculty members of the department.

Finally, do not be alarmed if you do not hear back! Some faculty members are incredibly busy and others simply are not great at email correspondence. So, do not worry if your email goes unanswered.

**How important is the GRE?**

The answer to this question can vary. However, generally speaking, GRE scores do not often hold a lot of value in linguistics departments. In fact, many university's graduate schools are no longer requiring them. However, there are still plenty of university graduate schools that do require the GRE and they may have a minimum score. Therefore, you want to make sure you know what the requirements are for the universities that house the linguistics departments you’re interested in.

If you are applying where there is a GRE requirement, especially if there is a minimum-score requirement, we highly suggest taking the test seriously. Give yourself plenty of time to prepare (anywhere between 3-9 months), look into ETS fee waivers (and apply for them early), and (if it is an option) invest in some sort of preparation (e.g. prep classes, books, online prep tools).

With all of that in mind, it is safe to say you shouldn’t stress yourself out about the GRE or your scores. Multiple linguistics programs have said they mostly only consider scores if they are extremely high or low.
What should I know about the Statement of Purpose (or Personal Statement)?

First, the Statement of Purpose is one of the most important documents of your application. It is one of the application components that admission committees will spend the most time looking at, so make sure you spend plenty of time working on it.

The Statement of Purpose is essentially an intellectual biography — it provides a personal narrative with a professional tone. You want to outline how you became interested in linguistics: Write about a class or a research paper you wrote that was especially important to you. You also want to demonstrate where you are interested in going in terms of research. You should: Consider what linguistic subtopic(s) you’re interested in pursuing, a specific language family in which you are interested, and/or a general topic interests you. You should also be able to demonstrate why you are interested in the subtopic, specific language family, and/or general topic you’ve highlighted.

Another important note is that while you want to demonstrate where your interests lie, you don’t want to be overly technical. You do NOT want to pick a very specific research topic and say that it is exactly what you want to work on. You can use technical past research as a for instance (in showing what you’ve done and why you may have interest in a sub-topic, language family, and/or general topic). However, referencing a technical area of research as your future interest may show a lack of flexibility.

You should have everyone read it. Have a trusted professor read it, a friend, your mom, etc. You cannot ask too many people to read over it.

Keep in mind, some schools ask for both a Statement of Purpose and a Personal Statement. A Statement of Purpose is the intellectual biography discussed above, while a Personal Statement is going to be about you as a person (there will be a description of what the program is looking for on their respective application webpage). Make sure to always read the descriptions of documents you must include in your application. If an application only asks for a Personal Statement, it could very well be the case that what they are calling a Personal Statement is more or less a Statement of Purpose (as it is defined here). So always double-check exactly what they describe the document as. If in doubt ask a professor in your department or the department to which you are applying.

Should I mention faculty members in my Statement of Purpose?

Typically, you only want to mention a faculty member if you have a strong connection with them or their work. Do NOT just mention faculty members because you feel like you are supposed to. It is also important to keep in mind that you want to show that you have some flexibility in your future research interests. Even if you go into a PhD with a certain topic in mind things may (and likely will)
change. No one wants to marry you to a certain topic. Therefore, do not feel pressure to mention faculty members.

However, if you do have a strong connection to a faculty member and you firmly believe mentioning them will support your application and your statement, then you should.

**What should I know about Writing Samples?**

The Writing Sample is an important part of the application. It gets more important towards the end of the selection process, when committees are trying to decide to whom offers will be made.

If possible, it is good to submit a writing sample that applies to linguistics. What may be even more beneficial is submitting a paper from one of your recommenders’ classes or a research project you worked on with one of your recommenders. This will give reviewers an opportunity to possibly hear about your work with the recommender and also see the product of your work with them.

The Writing Sample does NOT have to be a completely finished publishable product. Perfection is not necessary. If it is a paper you did well on or received positive a critique on, it is likely more than suitable.

**What are the most important parts of the application?**

Several professors who have served on admission committees have agreed that the following items are the most important (in order of importance):

1. Statement of Purpose
2. Letters of Recommendation
3. Writing Sample

**If I reach out to faculty from a program I am interested in, what should I say?**

There are a few things you can say, but the overall goal when reaching out to faculty is making sure your email is short and sweet, but still informative.

If you have a question, make sure you are specific about what you want to know. While your question should be specific, it should also be easy to answer. Make sure you don’t ask in depth questions about research or questions that will require multiple follow-up questions.

See ‘Should I contact faculty from departments in which I am interested?’ for specific examples of the types of questions that are appropriate and the types of questions that are not. It is also fine to send an email letting them know that you exist, that you are applying, and that there is no need for them to respond. And remember, it is not a big deal if they do not respond.
How helpful and/or necessary is formal coursework in linguistics?

You do want to have some coursework in linguistics. If these types of courses are not offered at your university, attending the LSA Institute, the LSA Annual Meeting, or other linguistic learning opportunities can serve as a substitute.

It may also be relevant to consider completing a master's degree in linguistics. This will provide you with the opportunity to get formal coursework under your belt before moving on to a PhD program.

I want to take a break from school (or I DID take a break) before applying to graduate programs?

Breaks are great! A lot of students take a break between undergrad and graduate school. These graduate programs are rigorous and tough, so taking a break can give you time to consider whether it is truly something you wish to pursue.

Working before going on to graduate school also demonstrates that you have life experience and focus, which are good things.

Additionally, if you are worried about losing letters of recommendation, don't worry too much. If you cultivated relationships with professors and reach out to them (reminding them who you are) when applying, they will likely be happy to help. It is also a good idea to keep them posted after you graduate — professors often enjoy hearing how old students are doing and it will help when you decide to apply to graduate programs.