

ADVICE ON WRITING A STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Graduate Committee, Department of History

Applicants to the Department of History's MA in Maritime Studies and MA in History programs are required to write a *statement of purpose* (also sometimes called a *personal statement* or a *letter of intent*). This statement of purpose is read primarily by our department's graduate committee but may be shared with other faculty to assess the degree to which there is *compatibility* between an applicant and our graduate degree programs. The statement may take the form of a letter written to the Department of History's graduate committee, or as an essay. Most personal statements are in the 2–3-page range (single spaced, 12-point font).

This statement is an opportunity for our graduate committee to assess the degree to which you match the strengths of our research and teaching programs. The statement is also intended to facilitate matching you with the academic mentors who will guide you through course selection and thesis writing. The match between mentor and mentee is a critical factor in graduate degree completion. Our graduate committee members spend a lot of time reading statements of purpose; while we are interested in the contents of an applicant's academic transcript, we are particularly concerned with ensuring there is a potential connection between *applicant research interest* and *faculty research expertise*.

A statement of purpose should consider your *past, present, and future* in relation to your intended course of study. The advice below is not a recommendation regarding the structure of a statement of purpose, but rather a series of prompts for the content that should be included in your statement. Keep in mind that another part of our assessment of your statement includes criteria like *clarity of narrative* and *quality of writing*. Critically, the statement should be focused, well-structured, properly formatted, and exhibit exceptional editing skills, while also being *engaging, truthful, and professional*. Your statement should avoid clichés and personal details not directly relevant to an assessment of your potential to excel during your graduate degree.

Past

You should outline your personal and academic successes. Our graduate committee wants to see an honest appraisal of your past experiences in a way that demonstrates that you are not only a good candidate for undertaking graduate degree work, but also the graduate degree work *within our specific graduate degree programs*.

- What are the past experiences that make you a good applicant to ECU's MA in Maritime Studies or MA in History? This could include experiences gained during internships, your attendance at field schools, or your involvement with avocational initiatives and projects.
- How does your past academic degree completion predispose you to graduate degree completion?
- What character traits predispose you to success within a graduate degree, and our graduate degrees, specifically?

- What experiences or skill sets gained outside of an academic setting predispose you to success within a graduate degree?
- If you have gaps, discrepancies, or perceived weaknesses in your academic transcripts, how do you account for them? There are always opportunities to discuss setbacks, errors, or challenges within your statement's narrative in a way to convey how they were learning experiences or contributed in some way to your personal growth and maturity.

Present

Our graduate committee is very interested in your personal characteristics, passions, and research interests. We also want to make you know what you are applying to do by seeing explicit evidence of your “homework.” What do you know about your intended field of study? Have you reviewed institutional (ecu.edu), departmental (history.ecu.edu), and program (maritimestudies.ecu.edu) internet content? Have you examined faculty biographies to identify potential mentors [a list of all history professors can be found here: <https://history.ecu.edu/faculty-staff-directory/>, with a listing of maritime professors here: <https://maritimestudies.ecu.edu/faculty/>]? Have you reviewed literature pertaining to your intended course of study (including faculty publications)?

- Does your application articulate connections between your background and experiences and the strengths of ECU's Department of History and its Program in Maritime Studies? Do you mention your research passions or the themes they of inquire you wish to pursue? These research interests needn't be specific (though this is welcome) – they may be broad or thematic areas of inquiry.
- What is the connection between your research interests and the expertise of our faculty? Do you mention which professor or professors you want to work with? *It is strongly advised that all applicants include at least one reference to an academic adviser in their application. If our committee cannot see a potential connection between a prospective student and a potential thesis advisee, an application may not be successful. This may occur even when an applicant has an excellent academic transcript and good letters of recommendation.*

Future

Pursuing a graduate degree is not only intellectually challenging, but also time-consuming and carries a financial cost. Our graduate committee want to make sure that you understand the career options connected to the graduate degree you are seeking to complete. You can work this out by talking with the advisers at your most recent academic institution, engaging with professional organizations (e.g. <https://www.historians.org/> or <https://acuaonline.org/>), by reviewing publications (e.g. <https://www.historians.org/teaching-and-learning/why-study-history/careers-for-history-majors> or <https://acuaonline.org/education-careers/>) or by talking to graduates from our program (or similar programs). You may also wish to contact professors within the Department of History or Program in Maritime Studies to inquire about career prospects. Applicants to the MA in Maritime Studies may want to review the “Where are they Now” section of our annual publication *Stem to Stern* (see: <https://maritimestudies.ecu.edu/stem-to-stern/>.)



- What are the career aspirations of the applicant? How do they see completion of the MA in History or MA in Maritime Studies help them achieve their career goals?

Other Resources (updated 26 July 2021)

- Purdue University Online Writing Lab, “Writing the Personal Statement,” https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job_search_writing/preparing_an_application/writing_the_personal_statement/index.html
- University of California, “Graduate School – Statement of Purpose,” <https://career.berkeley.edu/Grad/GradStatement>
- Rollins University, “Personal Statement Guide,” <https://www.rollins.edu/career-life-planning/documents/grad-school-personal-statements.pdf>
- Yale University, “Writing Personal Statements for Graduate School,” https://ctl.yale.edu/sites/default/files/basic-page-supplementary-materials-files/writing_personal_statements_for_graduate_school.pdf