

TIPS FOR APPLYING TO THE SOCIOCULTURAL PhD PROGRAM

Or, everything you wanted to know about applying to the Anthropology Department at Columbia, but were afraid to ask....

We receive hundreds of applications to our PhD program every year, and can admit only a few students—typically about 8. The process is intensely competitive and the review process rigorous. These tips are intended to help you navigate the application process, with the understanding that you should be considered on the basis of the best possible presentation of your abilities and interests.

Preliminaries: Know what you want.

The first question to ask yourself is: ‘Why a PhD in anthropology?’ The second question is: ‘Why a PhD at Columbia?’ Ours is a coursework- and fieldwork- intensive program that demands theoretical sophistication and a deep commitment to ethnography, broadly construed. Our standards are very high, and the workload is heavy. As with any doctoral program in anthropology, you need to be committed to a long-term engagement with a particular set of issues and places. So, you need to have a strong sense of purpose and a long-term horizon.

Research the department.

If you’re applying to Columbia, you need to know why, and you need to articulate that rationale in your application (in the ‘Statement of Purpose,’ see below). The departmental web-site is a starting point and will help you assess the range of interests and areas of research of our faculty members. However, a web-site description of faculty interests is not a sufficient basis on which to judge whether the department is a good place for you. Read the work of the faculty members with whom you think you may be interested in working. Only after you have read someone’s published work can you get a sense of his or her particular approach to issues, and only after such reading should you seek a meeting to discuss your possible study in our department. Bear in mind that if your application’s ‘Statement of Purpose’ quotes only the stock-phrases of the web-site, or identifies faculty only on the basis of thematic focus, we’ll have no basis on which to judge whether you really know why you are applying.

Don’t ask faculty to send you their work; go to a library and make an effort to locate materials of interest to you. Nor is it a good idea to approach faculty and ask them to describe their interests or work if you have not attempted to familiarize yourself with it before hand. However, having done so, it is wise to contact faculty members with whom you feel you would like to work, and to visit the department itself. Students who are admitted to the department are invited to visit during a dedicated period, during which they can meet other students and attend representative events. If you plan on coming to campus before then, please give faculty members sufficient notice and make sure that you arrange appointments with the individual faculty members in advance.

What is true for Columbia is true for many programs. Never commit yourself to a department on the basis of only one faculty member's work. Our program is committee-based, and students work closely with three individuals in addition to others with whom they take courses. So, look for breadth of coverage of the various areal, methodological and theoretical issues that inform your intended research.

Prepare yourself

People come to our department with varying degrees of preparation and involvement in the site of their intended field research. In general, we ask that you have a fairly clear idea of where you want to work and what questions you wish to answer, or what issues you wish to understand. And, to the extent possible, you need to know what you still need and want to learn.

We do not require a prior degree in anthropology for admission to our PhD program, and some students enter after having studied literature, journalism, political science or history, among other disciplines. However, if you have not studied anthropology, you will want to explain why you think anthropology is an appropriate discipline through which to pursue your interests, and you should recognize that additional coursework may be required of you. When preparing your application, take full cognizance of this fact, but even before applying, you should identify for yourself what you believe are strengths and weaknesses in your previous training. Once admitted, you can obtain a suggested reading list as a preliminary to the mandatory introductory theory course.

Languages are essential for field work. You should obtain as much proficiency as possible in the languages in which you will work and, if you lack fluency, you will want to delineate a plan for obtaining more. You should also make plans to continue study to enhance already existing skills, or to acquire additional language skills if they are desirable for your research. Columbia has very substantial language resources in many but not all languages. The department supports additional language work through summer fellowships and encourages in situ language study for languages where formal programs are lacking in the United States.

The Statement of Purpose.

In selecting from applicants, we place a lot of emphasis on the statement of purpose, because this is where you express your intellectual imagination and it is where you demonstrate your capacity to think practically by formulating questions. Sometimes described as a 'personal statement,' the 'Statement of Purpose,' should nonetheless be focused on the ideas and issues that are at the center of your proposed research. Only include personal information that directly informs your research, such as preliminary fieldwork and course preparation, language study, or writing and professional ambitions. We are interested in how you came to be interested in your proposed topic, but we do not encourage autobiographical accounts in which travel or exposure to different cultures is made to appear like an explanation. Many people travel and come from diverse backgrounds, but this does not necessarily compel them to study anthropology. The 'Statement of Purpose' must address this latter issue.

In this as in all other academic pursuits, write clearly. Make your case as elegantly as possible. If you need to invoke the work of other scholars to explain your thought, or if you feel it necessary to acknowledge the ideas that have influenced you, do so. But don't clutter your application with citations, and arguments with other thinkers. The 'Statement of Purpose' is about your ideas; it is not a test of

your previous reading, which should be implicit. In essence, the 'Statement of Purpose' must describe what you want to do and why it is so compelling, explain what you think you need to do in order to undertake that project, and provide a rationale for why you should do it at Columbia.

In the end, we are looking for evidence of truly original thought, intellectual rigor and creativity, for knowledge of a field but real curiosity and a sense of questions still to be answered. We hope for sparkle, intellectual commitment without myopia, and a commitment to understanding profoundly some set of social, cultural, and political issues through fieldwork in a particular region or place. There is no formula. Nonetheless, the above remarks should provide some basic contours.

Other Requirements

You are required to take the GREs and to have these grades sent as part of your application. This means that you must ensure a timely sitting of the exam. Be aware of the schedules in your home location, and remember that failure to take the exam and submit scores will exclude you from consideration. Scores are assessed relatively, and in combination with other factors, but we prefer students whose combined scores are 310 (or higher) in the new system (post 2011), and we privilege scores in the verbal and analytic categories.

Students for whom English is not a first language must also take the TOEFL exam. The graduate school dictates that students admitted to the department have minimal scores of 600 on the paper-based test and 100 on the internet-based test. However, in some cases, we encourage and even demand that students continue to work on their English through supplementary programs offered through Columbia University.

Writing Samples

We require that you submit a writing sample in addition to the Statement of Purpose. This should be exemplary of your best written work, and indicative of the kinds of questions and sorts of analysis that you think are appropriate to pursuit of a doctorate in anthropology. It does not have to be on an 'anthropological topic'; it may be a piece of literary analysis, legal scholarship, journalism, or experimental writing. The point is that it shows us a quality of mind and a style of exposition. Don't send papers that were produced for courses in which you had no particular interest, but that received high grades. And please do not send papers that have comments or other marks from previous readers visible. It is fine to send excerpts from longer works or theses (published or unpublished), but in that case, we advise that you include a brief (1-page) cover that describes the overall project and explains the place of the excerpted pages in it. Please be aware that material submitted, including non-written media materials, cannot be returned to you.