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RECOMMENDED TIMELINE AND FAQs FOR PROSPECTIVE APPLICANTS TO THE DOCTORAL PROGRAM IN AMERICAN STUDIES AT YALE UNIVERSITY

Hello prospective applicants! Before emailing or calling me or any of my colleagues, please read the following list of recommendations for preparing to submit an application for admission to the doctoral program in American Studies (AMST) at Yale University. As the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS), I run the admissions process for AMST at Yale, while also doing all of the standard work that faculty members do: researching, writing, teaching, departmental and university service, and advising both graduate and undergraduate students. The primary work of the DGS in any department is to run the graduate program; running admissions is only a very small part of that job. We receive hundreds of applications every year, and many, many inquiries from prospective students. This document is an attempt to answer common questions and to offer advice as to how to engage with the department prior to applying and/or admission.

Keep in mind that the recommendations below do not speak for the American Studies department as a whole or Yale University more broadly; they simply outline a list of recommendations from me, as the current Director of Graduate Studies and the person who runs the admissions process.

SUGGESTED TIMELINE FOR PROSPECTIVE APPLICANTS

This timeline assumes a 12/15 deadline, so for earlier deadlines, adjust accordingly.

By May 1 of the application year: make the decision to apply to PhD programs or not.

By May 15: Secure letters of recommendation from three references. Advise recommenders that the letter should be ready by 10/15 (to build in a buffer in case of late recommendations).

By June 1 of the application year: study for and take the GRE. Note that the Yale American Studies department does not consider or require GRE scores, but many graduate school policies and individual programs do require you to take the GRE.

June 1: Start working on your Writing Sample and Statement of Purpose. Do not imagine that these are easy documents to write. A good statement of purpose generally requires multiple drafts, multiple rounds of feedback, and multiple revisions. Alongside the writing sample, this is one of the most heavily-weighted sections of your application. This is absolutely ***not*** a document you draft the night before the application is due if you hope to be successful among a pool of hundreds of applicants.

July 1: Update your resume. Continue working on your Writing Sample and Statement of Purpose. If possible, have multiple people read both documents for you; ideally, these readers

would be someone who is currently in graduate school or who has attended graduate school in a humanities field.

August 1: Finalize your list of the programs to which you plan to apply. Make a list of 5-7 faculty at every institution to which you plan to apply who work in a field or fields that would make them an appropriate mentor for you. Look at the course catalog for the previous several years and make sure those faculty are still teaching. See <https://courses.yale.edu/>

September 1 of the year you apply: Continue working on your Statement of Purpose and Writing Sample. Make sure your transcripts are up to date and that there are no holds on your account so that your transcripts can be released. Send clean, polished drafts of your resume, writing sample, and statement of purpose to your recommenders so they can build that information into their letters for you.

December (or whenever the application deadline is): submit your application at least 24 hours before the deadline. The 24 hours provides a buffer in case of any technological difficulties.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is a statement of purpose?

A statement of purpose is a 1.5-2 page, single-spaced document (or 3pp. double-spaced) that outlines a dissertation-sized project or set of questions, offered to describe the kind of work that you intend to pursue in the doctoral program to which you are applying. It does not describe work that you have already done, but rather *work that you intend to do as a doctoral student*. In this sense, it can be a difficult document to craft because it is largely prospective; you are describing research you hope to do but have not yet done. You can and should, of course, briefly describe the experience in a field, or with a set of questions, that you are building on in the proposal. A statement of purpose is not a personal statement; it is not a document that is primarily or largely concerned with your non-academic experiences, unless those experiences directly engage the scholarly questions you hope to work on. Does this mean you can't bring your own experience in? No, of course not— but any discussion of your own experiences should be used to illustrate or elucidate how you came to the questions at the center of the proposal, or to illuminate your insight or perspective on these questions. The statement of purpose is very short, and it is one of many, many pages of writing that the admissions committee reads. It should be clear, powerful, and immediately understandable. Avoid jargon and neologisms where possible; remember that you are writing for a nonspecialist audience. The admissions committee is made up of faculty from a vast range of fields who may know nothing about your project or field, so write for an interested but inexperienced reader.

One classic structure of a statement of purpose (this is not the only way to do it; it is just a suggestion for anyone who is struggling):

Paragraph 1: Opening anecdote that illustrates for your reader how you came to the questions, archives, histories, or problems at the center of your research proposal. Can be personal but must clearly outline the trajectory of your arrival to the field(s) or subfield(s) in which you seek to

work. Another way to open is to describe a central text, tension, political movement, media phenomenon, community commitment, etc and offer a close reading of how it opens up the questions at the center of your work.

Paragraph 2: Builds on the opening anecdote and clearly outlines a specific set of questions and a specific archive (in a broad sense: texts, media, communities, movements, histories, primary sources in general) you want to focus on.

Paragraphs 3-6: Outlines the current state of the scholarship and explains how this scholarship has both shaped your thinking and also *how your questions will contribute to these fields*. Sharpens the questions and goes into more detail on the kinds of archives (broadly defined) you hope to explore to answer these questions. Discusses possible tensions regarding the current understanding of your questions and archives across multiple subfields.

Concluding Paragraph: Explain why you are applying to the specific program. Name 5-7 faculty members in the department who could potentially serve as appropriate advisors. If there are resources (archives, centers) or particular community strengths (working groups, etc) housed in the department or at the university as a whole, describe how they might push your work forward.

Every statement of purpose should *always* address (at some point in the document) each of the following prompts:

1. A statement of the historical scope of your proposed work, and a justification.
2. A statement of the regional scope of your proposed work, and a justification.
3. A statement of the central archive, texts, works, communities, sources, etc. that will be constitute the center of your work. Another way of describing this: what are you interested in studying? Is it texts, films, media, art? Is it community movements, organizations, and particular political affiliations? Is it a particular historical moment or movements? Something else?
4. A statement of the central questions, problems, challenges, or tensions animating your desire to study the entities in #3.
5. A description of the fields from which your research draws and to which it contributes.
6. The *stakes* or importance of this research. Why is it important for us to address your questions or problems? How do we come to see your archives, communities, historical periods, etc differently as a result of the kinds of questions you hope to ask?

Do discuss your central archive (broadly defined) and central questions / problems with detail and particularity.

Do not simply describe work you have already done. Remember that this is a prospective, or forward-looking, document, intended to give the admissions committee a sense of what you apply to Yale's AMST program to do, and why the Yale AMST department is a good fit for your research priorities.

Do not simply regurgitate the insights of scholars in the department. Do not waste space discussing the scholarship of faculty in the department. It is fine to refer to their scholarship if it has meaningfully influenced your thinking, but that kind of discussion should only be used to

scaffold your discussion of your own proposed work. Consider phrases such as “Building on the work of Scholar A, Scholar B, and Scholar C, **my project.....**”

2. What is a writing sample?

A writing sample is a 20-page essay that should effectively be structured like a short academic article. *Stick to the page limit.*

3. My writing sample is my senior thesis and around 50 pages, but your application process suggests submitting a 20-page sample. Should I just submit the whole 50 pages?

No. We suggest 20 pages for a reason; the admissions committee reads hundreds of applications in the space of 6 weeks and we simply cannot read longer documents. Significantly exceeding the writing sample page limit also exhibits bad judgment and a lack of understanding of the everyday landscape of academic labor. If you have questions about how to cut down your writing sample, I suggest looking at this document:

<https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/bernhardnickel/files/grad-apps-ws.pdf>

4. Should I reach out to the Director of Graduate Studies to discuss my application?

You should reach out to the DGS if you have specific questions about the graduate program that cannot be answered from a deep dive into the department website. Before reaching out to the DGS, please carefully read the material that appears (and is linked to) these sites:

<https://americanstudies.yale.edu/graduate/graduate-admissions>

<https://americanstudies.yale.edu/graduate/graduate-program-overview>

<https://americanstudies.yale.edu/graduate-program>

If you have a question that cannot be answered by the website, feel free to email me. I will respond via email within 3-5 business days. **I will not have phone calls or zoom meetings with any prospective students** unless the student has a documented disability that makes them unable to use email. **This is an equity issue; we receive hundreds of applications from prospective students, and it is not fair to meet with some applicants if I cannot meet with all applicants.**

5. Should I reach out to individual faculty members to discuss my application?

Maybe. First, ask yourself why you are reaching out. Is it because you want to make a connection? Or is it because you have a genuine question about their potential as an advisor of graduate students? For example, if you want to work with Professor X, but your recommender just told you that Professor X is moving a different university and will *not* be in the Yale University American Studies program any longer, it may be appropriate to reach out to Professor X and ask whether they will still be accepting students through Yale AMST—if, and only if, they would likely be the major person in your proposed field. You may also have questions about

whether, given your intended field or subfield, the AMST program is an appropriate program to which to apply. If you have a genuine question about whether the AMST program at Yale can support the work you do, emailing a faculty member *may* be appropriate. Before you do, though, go through the course offerings available for the previous three years and see if there are courses that are *broadly* in the field(s) or subfield(s) in which you intend to work.

Keep in mind that faculty receive dozens, and sometimes hundreds of inquiries from prospective graduate students every summer and fall. Most of these inquiries are simply efforts to make a connection. While I absolutely understand this impulse, remember that faculty have full-time jobs that are organized around research and writing, as well as advising and supporting *current* students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. It is not always feasible, and frankly not generally useful, to reach out to multiple faculty members who you might want to work with prior to being admitted. Furthermore, many faculty simply will not have the time to respond. If you are admitted, you will be invited to campus for a two-day visit and will have the opportunity to meet multiple faculty in the department.

6. Should I schedule a meeting (remote or in person) or office hours conversation using the online calendar on the webpages of faculty members, directors of graduate studies, department chairs, or directors of undergraduate studies?

No, absolutely not. I cannot emphasize this enough: DO NOT DO THIS. If a faculty member or DGS invites you to make an appointment, however, go ahead and do that.

7. Will it give me an advantage in the admissions process to speak to faculty or the DGS prior to applying?

No. Many faculty members take the same approach as I do in my capacity as DGS, which is that meeting with prospective applicants creates an equity problem insofar as we cannot connect with all applicants. Every application gets a thorough read by several faculty members. We take the admissions process extremely seriously, and everything we need to know appears in the application. Candidates who make it to the final round of consideration will generally have their applications read 3-4 times by the entire committee.

8. Should I reach out to current graduate students?

If you have questions about whether the program is right for your particular interests, yes, absolutely. Graduate students are generally the best people to ask about the graduate program because they are the only people who have direct experience of it. If you are going to reach out, make sure to reach out to a student who works in the field or field(s) in which you also work.

9. It is late February and I have not heard from the department about whether or not I was admitted. Should I email the DGS?

No. All applicants will be contacted about the status of their application once the admissions cycle has concluded.

10. Should I apply to a combined PhD program or just the AMST PhD program?

This is a complicated question and might actually be a question for the DGS *if* you are earnestly unsure. The advantage of applying to a joint program (AMST has joint PhD programs with African American Studies, Film and Media Studies, and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies) is that if your proposed research is *centrally* concerned with questions at the heart of that field (AFAM, FMS, WGSS), you will receive training in *both fields* in a way that will make you a scholar with full competencies in both. The challenge of the combined program is that it is more work, usually including both more coursework and more requirements. Also note that each program runs its own, separate admissions process. This means that combined degree applicants must be *independently admitted to both departments* in order to be admitted in general.

11. Will the AMST program accept late applications?

No. This is an equity issue. If your application is not received by the deadline, it will not be considered.