Good graduate applications start with what historians do best: research. Your first step in applying to graduate school should be to research graduate programs. The best way to identify potential schools is to determine what programs have faculty on staff whose specialties match your own interests. Keep in mind that you will need to work with at least three members of the history faculty (your committee), so you’re looking for a school where you can find an advisor whose area(s) of interest match yours, and where there are at least two additional faculty members with complementary interests. If you are interested in U.S. women’s history in the Progressive era, for instance, you might work with a primary advisor who is a specialist in that topic and time period, another faculty member who studies immigration in the Progressive era, and a third who studies urban America. You’re looking for an intersection of interests that matches your prospective thesis topic. It’s also a good idea to look for programs with at least one additional scholar whose work is relevant to your interests, to allow for personality conflicts, sabbatical leaves, and the like.

Your advisor will be the most important consideration, so you should begin your research by looking up scholars whose work you admire, next determine if their institution offers the degree you are seeking, and then evaluate the rest of the department. Most school websites, as well as the AHA Directory, offer lists of recent Ph.D. and M.A. topics; you should also look these over to see if graduate students in the department are doing work that you find interesting. This will help you to evaluate the department’s likely support for your project, which is the most important factor both in your chances for admission and in your satisfaction with the program. If you have identified a prospective advisor, it’s a good idea to contact that person (e-mail is fine) with a brief statement about your research interests and a query about their availability to work with you. It is not a good idea to go to a school to work with somebody who is not accepting students, or who is going to be on leave for a significant portion of your graduate school years, or who simply does not seem interested in your work. However, you are also likely to get a more favorable reply if you’ve already put in the time and effort to learn something about the program, so you may want to combine this step with drafting your statement of purpose, as your query should take the form of a very brief version of that statement (see below).

You should also consult with your current professors for suggestions about good departments or good faculty members for your project. Schools acquire reputations in certain areas of specialty precisely because they have a concentration of excellent scholars in particular areas; this is a much better measure of how “good” a school is than the name-recognition factor of the school. For a southern historian, for instance, UNC is a much better school than Harvard, even if Harvard is the more famous institution. This is not to say that a school’s status is entirely irrelevant. The general guideline is—or at least, used to be—that you should expect to get a first job in a school that is one step, or tier, down from the one at which you receive your degree. So, if you get your degree at an Ivy League school, you might get a job at a highly selective private school such as Vassar. If you get your degree at a state school, you might get a job at a “directional” or a branch school, going, say, from State School to Northeastern State School, or from the University of Montana at Missoula to the University of Montana at Dillon. But in the current job market, these guidelines are not particularly useful or accurate; take a look at where UM’s faculty got their degrees, for instance, and you’ll see that this “rule” doesn’t apply to most of us. So it’s much more important to choose a school where you will get good academic guidance from the faculty than one with a “big name.”

Of course, you also want to look for a program that will support you financially as well as intellectually. There are two dimensions to this: First, the school’s ongoing support in terms of tuition breaks, TA-ships, fellowships, and/or stipends; and second, the school’s support for your research, especially travel. In terms of the school’s ongoing support, you should find out what kinds of financial support the school
offers, and what workload you should expect in exchange. A fellowship with no teaching responsibilities, for instance, is preferable to a TA-ship with a heavy teaching load, because the former will allow you more time to devote to your own work. In terms of the research support, you should find out what kinds of support you can expect for travel to conferences or to archives. You may need less of such support at a school located near the archives where you are likely to conduct your research. In other words, if you are studying a North Carolina topic at UNC, you will not need as much financial support as if you were studying the same topic in California. For both ongoing and research support, you should find out if the program offers a “write-up” fellowship, or extra support for the final year of the program, while you are completing your dissertation, and you should also determine what the “cut-off” is for funding; do you have four years, or six years, to complete your degree? If at all possible, you should avoid taking any employment other than jobs related to your career (TA-ing, teaching at a community college, working in the archives, being a research assistant, doing editorial work, etc.) while you are in graduate school. The more you can concentrate on your own professional development, the faster you will complete the program with the skills you will need in the academic or professional job market.

It is becoming increasingly important for historians to gain teaching experience and/or special skills (editing, archiving, website design, etc.) while in graduate school. While a burdensome TA-ship may not be the best thing for you, you should look for a program with teaching opportunities, preferably the opportunity to propose and teach a class of your own design. You also may want to look for programs that are linked to museums, professional journals, or archives and that offer internships or other special training. Having experience in one of these areas can give you an extra edge on the academic job market once you finish your degree and/or open up additional career possibilities outside of academia.

Once you’ve selected your target schools, it’s time to work on your application package, beginning with your statement of purpose. This is the element of your application that you have the most control over, and it’s also the item that many members of the selection committee will read first. Therefore, you should devote a great deal of thought and time to it. Allow time for multiple drafts, ask for suggestions from your professors and your classmates, and proofread the final version carefully. A sloppy, careless, or half-hearted statement of purpose will indicate that you are a sloppy, careless, or half-hearted student; a thorough, precise, and thoughtful statement will indicate that you are a thorough, precise, and thoughtful student.

A strong statement of purpose should convey:

1. Why this program is a good match for your interests
2. How you have prepared yourself for graduate study
3. What you intend to focus on in your research
4. Who you intend to work with in the program
5. How this program will further your career goals

It is extremely important that you establish that you have a clear focus, and that this focus fits with the faculty of the selected program. Therefore, you should tailor each statement of purpose to the particular school. While parts of your statement may be “boilerplate,” such as your description of your research project and your explanation of your previous education, you should customize your overall statement for each program. Identify prospective committee members by name and specialty, and indicate how their work has informed or inspired your work thus far. (If you haven’t read their work already, do it now!) It is also imperative that you impress upon the selection committee that you are motivated to work toward a professional career, whether in academia or in a related field such as historical editing or public history. Graduate programs like to produce motivated graduates who go on to successful careers; they do not want to admit dilettantes who may never finish their degree, or never use it.
In writing your statement of purpose, treat it like an essay. Structure the entire statement around your thesis (this school should admit you) and each paragraph around a topic sentence (this program is a good match for your intellectual interests) and support each paragraph with specific examples (Professor X’s study of Y has shaped my approach to my topic, Z, in this way). Write in short, strong sentences in S-V-O form for the most part; limit the number of complex or compound sentences, and alternate them with concise, direct ones. Avoid passive voice. Pay attention to details, including word count, spelling and grammar, and getting the names of the school and the professors correct. A simple typographical error may be enough to cause some readers to discount your entire application. Proofread carefully to make sure, for instance, that you don’t send a statement to Princeton University that still contains the assertion (from a different version) that the program at Cornell University is ideally suited to your intellectual interests and career goals!

Some people recommend that your statement of purpose should have an “attention-grabber” or offer some personal information that makes your statement memorable. For instance, you might begin with a provocative quote, or an anecdote about how you came to the study of history, or an explanation of why history/teaching/museums are important to you. If you do this, keep it honest, and keep it brief. Avoid using hackneyed quotes (“Those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it”) or creating an elaborate backstory. If you are interested in environmental history because you grew up camping with your folks, or if you are interested in labor history because you worked your way through school, it’s fine to say so, but don’t feel like you have to have a “hook.” There’s nothing wrong with a straightforward statement of purpose that addresses the points listed above, and it’s more important to include those than it is to have a heartwarming story about yourself. However, you should try to convey your excitement about history in your statement of purpose in some way, preferably not in a bald statement such as, “I am passionate about history.” (Your letter-writers should say this about you; you should demonstrate it, not say it.) You might, for instance, relate your excitement about a research discovery, or the thrill of making an original argument, or the curiosity inspired by a historiographical debate. You can use this as an opener, or you can include it in a discussion of your intended research project. In this as elsewhere in your statement, be concise, and be specific. Avoid vague generalizations, which tend to be a pet peeve for most academics.

The next aspect of your application over which you have control is your writing sample. Depending on the school’s guidelines, you may wish to submit two writing samples: A brief book review to highlight your ability to succinctly summarize an argument, for instance, and a longer research paper to showcase your ability to conduct independent research in primary sources and make an original argument. In most cases, you are not required to submit a writing sample that is exactly the same as one submitted for a grade; in other words, it is fine (and usually desirable) to revise a class paper and to submit the improved version as your writing sample. Ask your advisor (or the professor with whom you have worked most closely) for suggestions about your writing sample. Choose your best paper for your writing sample. This may not necessarily be the one on which you have received the highest grade; an “A-minus” or even a “B-plus” paper for a demanding professor may well be better than an “A” paper from a professor with lower expectations. Select a writing sample that is based on primary research and grounded in relevant scholarship that makes an original argument, and make sure that it is clearly written, using strong paragraph and sentence structure. As with the statement of purpose, the same rule about paying attention to details applies: Make sure that grammar, punctuation, spelling, and footnotes/bibliography are correct. Many selection committee members will base their evaluation of your ability to write a thesis or dissertation on your writing sample, so take the time to select (and polish) a good one.

You can exert some control over your letters of recommendation by selecting your letter-writers carefully. You want your letters to be from professors who know you and your work well and can assess your intellectual, writing, and research ability and potential; your motivation and work habits; and the likelihood that you will complete your degree and achieve professional success. Therefore, you want to choose faculty with whom you have worked repeatedly, in upper-level and/or graduate classes,
and for whom you have produced a significant body of work, preferably a research paper. If you’re an M.A. candidate now, you’ll ask your advisor, your other committee members, and perhaps the director(s) of the graduate program; if you’re an undergraduate now, you’ll ask professors with whom you have taken multiple classes and/or writing-intensive classes. (If you haven’t already taken multiple and/or writing classes with instructors, you should.)

Don’t ask an adjunct or a TA to write for you, as their opinion will carry less weight with the selection committee than those from tenure-line faculty. Visiting professors are acceptable, but not ideal, simply because it’s unlikely that you will have a significant track record with a visitor. Don’t automatically assume that a professor from whom you got an “A” will write a better letter than a professor with whom you got a “B,” either; an “A” in a lower-level and/or lecture class is less meaningful than a “B” in an upper-division writing class. In addition, in general, more demanding professors will devote more attention to letters of recommendation and will write a specific and detailed letter, which will benefit you more than a brief “So-and-so got an A in my class” type of letter. At most, you should have only one letter from somebody outside the department, but in an allied field (NAS, EVST, PSCI, WGS, etc.) and/or from an employer, and then only if the employer supervised you in an academic or professional setting relevant to your graduate study (i.e., Donna McCrea in Archives). Unless you are applying to an interdisciplinary program, the majority of your letters should come from historians.

You should supply your letter-writers with copies of your transcript, your c.v. or resume, and your statement(s) of purpose, so that they can write detailed letters and tailor their letters to each program. You also should give them significant lead time before the deadline, a minimum of a month. It’s not a bad idea to send them a reminder e-mail a week before the deadline, and it’s nice to make a point of thanking them afterward. This is a task that professors perform with no compensation, so make it as easy and pleasant for them as possible. And if a professor seems reluctant to write on your behalf, take the hint; a faculty member who doesn’t remember you, or isn’t invested in your success, or is simply too busy to craft a letter, will not write a letter that you want in your file. Perfunctory letters are a liability, not an asset. (If you are concerned about this, you can directly ask, “Do you feel able to write a strong recommendation for me?” Or, if you create a career placement file, you can have it sent to a colleague and have it vetted for lackluster letters.)

Obviously, you will need to submit a transcript and GRE scores. Frankly, these are not items that (at this point) you have much control over. If you didn’t do well (earning mostly As and a few Bs) during a particular year in school, you can explain this in your personal statement, and show evidence that you have since established a strong record. If you didn’t do well on the GRE, you can re-take it; if you do this, you should take time to prepare by memorizing vocabulary words, taking practice tests online, or enrolling in a test-taking class. What is a “good” score? This varies by school and department, but at UM, a “baseline” score in the history department for the analytical writing is 4.5 or better; the baseline for verbal reasoning has been 500 or better, but the GRE scoring system is changing; see http://testprep.about.com/od/thegretest/a/Revised_GRE_Exam.htm and http://www.ets.org/gre/revised_general/about. Most selection committees will regard your verbal score and your writing score as most important. Unless you are doing statistical analysis as part of your research, your quantitative scores don’t matter much. Basically, while a GPA below a 3.5 or a GRE score lower than 4.5 for writing or 500 for verbal may cause a selection committee to look askance at your application, so long as you make those thresholds, evaluators will pay more attention to your other materials. So put the best spin on your transcript, and do your best on the GRE, but concentrate on the aspects of your application over which you have more control: statement, letters, and writing sample.

Putting together a good graduate school application is a time-consuming process, so you should plan ahead and start the process well in advance of the deadline (usually in mid-winter). The extra effort will pay off, not only in a higher acceptance rate, but also in better financial support.