

Graduate School Handbook For UFV English Students

Important Upcoming Dates:

1) English Department Grad School Information Drop-in Sessions:

- Thursday October 15, 12-1 pm
- Friday October 16, 11-12pm

Zoom Link: <https://ufv-ca.zoom.us/j/63350950014?pwd=ZzhUY1lSNzIMdHd4RXJjdCtWVW9oUT09>

One or more faculty members from English will be on hand to field questions and offer advice about applying to grad school. Come and chat – even if you're just curious.

2) Canada Graduate Scholarships Workshop (hosted by UFV Research):

- Tuesday October 6, 10-12 (register online through UFV research)

The research office is hosting a workshop for students who plan to apply for NSERC, SSHRC & CIHR scholarships for graduate school. Brad Whittaker, Director of Research Services, will give a presentation, go through an application step by step, and answer any questions.

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Who you can contact in the English department for more advice and info:

- english@ufv.ca
- alex.wetmore@ufv.ca
- heather.mcalpine@ufv.ca
- amy.tang@ufv.ca
- ceilidh.hart@ufv.ca
- andrea.macpherson@ufv.ca (especially for Creative Writing grad program advice)
- john.pitcher@ufv.ca (Department head, English)

Note: UFV English faculty are happy to answer questions and support your applications!

Introduction

Now that you are taking upper-year English courses you are likely starting to think about what comes next. *What do I do once I'm finished my undergraduate degree?*

Have you thought about applying to graduate school?

Many students from UFV English have moved on to successfully pursue Master's degrees and Doctoral degrees in English and related fields. As you will learn from their testimonials in this booklet, grad school can be a deeply transformative and richly rewarding experience, despite its challenges. And it can open up unique professional opportunities in academic and non-academic lines of work.

UFV students sometimes do not realize graduate school is a viable and attractive option for them, or they realize it too late and have to scramble to put together their applications for programs and – importantly – for major scholarships and fellowships like SSHRC or OGS.

This booklet is designed to help students understand a bit about what graduate school is, whether it is a good fit for them, and, most centrally, how to put together a strong application.

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Overview of English Graduate Studies

Master's programs (MA) in English are typically one or two years in length, and they either focus on course work or a thesis (often departments offer both options).

- In a "course work" Master's degree, students take a range of small seminar courses with professors who are active researchers and respected experts in a particular area of English studies.
 - o Often the topic of the course will be related to the professor's current research, and students are introduced to the leading edge of debates, critical concepts, and research.
- In a "thesis option" MA, students work primarily on a single area of inquiry (a particular period or genre of literature, for instance, or an area/ school of literary theory) in close concert with a thesis advisor who also specializes in that area. This is somewhat similar to the structure of the Honours program here at UFV.

Doctoral programs (PhD) often require a Master's in English as a prerequisite, but in some cases, you can go straight into a doctoral program and gain your Master's degree along the way.

- In a typical doctoral English program, students spend their first year or two taking seminar courses, much like the Master's degree; then students complete comprehensive exams to establish their expertise over their fields of research interest; and then they propose, complete, and defend a book-length dissertation that makes a significant contribution to scholarly knowledge about an area of English studies.

Reasons to go to Grad School:

- You have a genuine and ongoing enthusiasm for English studies.
- You feel like your English studies journey is not complete; perhaps there is a topic, question, author, or period that you wish you could study in greater depth.
- You are motivated by the notion of engaging with (and possibly contributing to) the highest level of research, scholarship, and critical thought in this field.
- You wish to contribute in some way to the growth and dissemination of knowledge in this area of study.
- You want to open doors to a wide variety of academic or para-academic fields (like museum curation, archival and library sciences, government service and policy analysis, scholarly editing and publishing, etc.).
- You value these things enough to take on the various challenges (intellectual, emotional, financial, professional) that stem from the rigors and demands of graduate studies and academic life.
- You're interested in upgrading your salary category, or increasing your qualifications and competitiveness in your job (like teaching, for instance).

Reasons *not* to go to Grad School:

- Being a professor looks like fun!
 - o Even among those fortunate few who complete their PhDs, not many land permanent jobs as university or college professors.
 - o And while lots of English MAs and PhDs eventually find rewarding careers within or beyond academia, it sometimes takes time after graduating to find the right career path, and there are no guarantees.

Other Notes:

- Graduate schools are competitive and prestigious, but you don't have to be superhuman to get in.
 - o If you are a strong student with a solid GPA and can put together a well-prepared and effective application package, you have a good chance of being accepted.
- In many ways, your experience at UFV is an asset.
 - o We have a strong undergraduate program, and our small class sizes mean your instructors can write detailed, personalized reference letters.
- Graduate school is not as expensive, necessarily, as people assume.
 - o In fact, it is more common than not to be offered a funding package to attend a Master's program or a PhD. This may include scholarships, tuition waivers, and/or a teaching assistantship to offset the cost of schooling.
 - o As well, many students successfully apply for external funding, like the federal SSHRC fellowships, or the provincial Ontario Graduate Scholarship.
- Seriously consider taking English Honours, if you haven't already.
 - o Honours is a distinction that will set you apart from other applicants; your Honours project can also serve as a writing sample for applications; your Honours advisor is often an ideal referee; and the project itself will demonstrate your ability to pursue and complete advanced scholarly work.

Applying for Graduate School

The Application Process:

If you break it down into pieces, give yourself lots of time to tackle each piece, and draw on the support that's available, putting together a strong application package is very manageable.

The Pieces (and some points for consideration):

Most graduate programs ask you to submit the following items:

1. Application form (typically filled out online)
2. Application fee (typically paid online)
3. Transcripts (sent directly from UFV – and any other institutions you attended – to your prospective school)
4. 2-3 Letters of Recommendation (submitted directly to the school, or sometimes requested by the school after you've provided contact information)
 - Give your referees lots of time to write the letter.
 - Give them clear, written instructions and all the tools they need:
 - any forms they need to fill out (some schools require referees to also fill out and submit a form along with their letter)
 - the name and address of the institution to which they're sending the letter
 - the name of the person they should be addressing in their letter
 - the date the letter is due
 - your full name, the details of your academic history, and other pertinent information (awards you've received, research projects you were involved with, and so on)
 - a copy of your Letter of Intent/Plan of Study
 - Choose professors with whom you have a positive relationship, who really know who you are as a student and can "comment in detail on your ability to do advanced work in literary studies."
5. Letter of Intent/Plan of Study (typically 500 words)
 - Describe your interests and the goals you hope to achieve in graduate school.
 - Explain how your previous studies have prepared you for advanced scholarship.
 - Don't approach this as a thesis or project proposal; however, show that you have thought deeply about a particular topic or issue, and explain why it's worth pursuing.
6. Writing Sample
 - Using an essay you wrote for an upper-level class is fine, but revise carefully and submit a clean copy.
7. C.V.
 - This is an academic version of your resume; foreground academic work and achievements.

Application Deadlines for Some Canadian MA Programs in English:

University	Deadline
UVic	15 Jan
UBC	2 Dec
SFU	15 Jan
U of A	7 Jan
U of C	15 Dec
Lethbridge	1 Feb (for Fall start)
Saskatchewan	1 Feb
Regina	no set deadline
Manitoba	5 Jan
York	15 Dec
Toronto	10 Dec
Ryerson	18 Jan
McMaster	15 Jan
Waterloo	1 Feb
Guelph	30 Jan
Western	15 Jan
Ottawa	1 Feb
Carleton	1 Feb
Queen's	15 Jan
McGill	15 Jan
Dalhousie	8 Jan

Disclaimer: Please double-check application deadlines!

This is just a sampling of Canadian universities; it's not meant to be comprehensive.

Only English programs are listed, but other interdisciplinary programs may be open to you.

Supporting Documents:

Applications for each of these universities require a variety of additional documents. It's very important to carefully read and take note of all application requirements – and to make sure you order and submit all your documents in the correct format, on time.

Application Fees:

Each institution charges an application fee. Fees are usually around \$100 – for example, \$90 for SFU, \$100 for Western, \$105 for McGill, \$120 for Toronto.

Federal and Provincial Scholarship Programs:

Scholarship	Amount	Apply	Deadline
Ontario Graduate Scholarship	\$5,000 to a maximum of \$15,000 / year	Apply through the prospective schools	Deadlines vary by school
Canada Graduate Scholarships	\$17,500 for 12 months	Apply online through SSHRC	1 Dec

Other Funding Opportunities

Clubs, organizations, and provincial governments sometimes offer funding programs for specific kinds of graduate school applicants (low-income, with dependants, Indigenous, studying a particular field, etc.) It's well worth your time to do some research on provincial government websites (and even general googling).

Individual universities and programs will also offer a variety of funding options for exceptional applicants, ranging from tuition waivers to assistantship opportunities (providing graduate students with jobs as teaching and research assistants). When filling out your application to an MA program, be sure to check if there are additional applications to fill out for scholarships, bursaries, and/or assistantships.

Some Provincial Funding Information Websites

BC <https://studentaidbc.ca/explore/grants-scholarships>

AB <https://alis.alberta.ca/ps/gs/funding.html>

ON <https://osap.gov.on.ca/OSAPPortal/en/A-ZListofAid/PRDR017871.html>

Other Programs: Creative Writing and Interdisciplinary Programs

Creative Writing Programs:

See UBC's outline for the application process to their Creative Writing MA here →

<https://creativewriting.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2019/10/UBC-CRWR-MFA-application-guidelines-2019-Oct-23-2019.pdf>

Consult with UFV English Creative Writing Faculty for advice about applying to these programs.

Canadian Universities Interdisciplinary Programs:

(credit: Tyler Fontenot and Emile de Rosnay, CSPT, University of Victoria)

1. Acadia University (Social and Political Thought)
<https://spt.acadiau.ca/home.html>
2. York University (SPT and Interdisciplinary Social Sciences)
<http://spth.gradstudies.yorku.ca/>
3. University of Victoria (Cultural, Social, and Political Thought)
<https://www.uvic.ca/interdisciplinary/cspt/home/about/index.php>
4. Trent (Theory, Culture and Politics)
<https://www.trentu.ca/theory-culture-politics-ma/>
5. UBC (Society Culture & Politics in Education) <http://edst.educ.ubc.ca/programs/society-culture-politics-in-education/>
6. Queen's (Political and Legal Thought)
<https://www.queensu.ca/sgs/programs-degrees/political-and-legal-thought>
7. Memorial (Interdisciplinary Graduate Program) <http://www.mun.ca/idphd/index.php>
8. Western (Theory and Criticism)
<http://www.uwo.ca/theory/>
9. McMaster (Cultural Studies and Critical Theory)
<https://english.humanities.mcmaster.ca/graduate-programs/m-a-in-cultural-studies-critical-theory/>

Statement of Interest/ Application Letter

A STATEMENT OF INTEREST IS A CRUCIAL PART OF MOST GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATIONS. It may also be called a "statement of intent", "description of research interests" or something similar. Basically, it is your opportunity to tell the graduate program:

- Your specific area of academic interest (research topic you want to work on)
- How your past education and other experiences have prepared you to be successful in the graduate program
- What you hope to achieve in the graduate program
- Why this particular program at UBC is the best place for you to pursue your interests

The statement is generally in the form of a short essay. Be sure to carefully read the specific instructions given by the graduate program and ensure you provide them with what they are asking for.

Other tips for a strong Statement of Interest:

- State any work you have done in this area already (mention specific skills/techniques you have picked up).
- Connect your area of interest to work being done in the program (mention specific faculty members and projects).
- Refer to academic publications that have informed your interest (use correct citation as footnote).
- Mention any publications, presentations or conferences you have been a part of.

REMEMBER: YOU ARE BUILDING A CASE THAT YOU ARE FOCUSED, SKILLED, ENTHUSIASTIC, AND A GREAT MATCH FOR THE PROGRAM.

*****Useful Link for Letter Writing Tips*****

<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/specific-types-of-writing/admission-letters>

Reference Letters: Embrace the awkwardness!

Overview:

- Schools will typically ask for between 2-3 references.
- They are usually private (students do not see them).
- The vast majority of reference letters are positive and supportive. That means you are competing against other applicants, who all have generally good references.
- Nevertheless, these letters are still highly valued by schools to help choose between candidates.

What sets the best reference letters apart? Detail, high level of familiarity, careful tailoring to school and student.

IMPORTANT: You want to know your faculty member well enough that they can *“write a specific, detailed letter of recommendation that speaks to your potential for graduate study and discusses your work and area(s) of interest” (University of Washington).*

This is where going to a school like UFV (with small class sizes) can be an advantage. You have more opportunities to get to know faculty and work more closely with them. **Use this!**

Qualities of an ideal referee:

- familiar with you and your work
- able to speak to your strong record of success in their courses
- background in your specific area of interest (e.g. Canadian literature, eighteenth-century fiction, Victorian poetry, post-colonial literature)
- expressed willingness to compose a strongly supportive letter
- knows where you are applying to and can tailor a letter to the specific institutions/ programs in question

Obviously, not every potential referee will fulfill all the criteria above (perhaps none will, exactly).

Things you can do to help:

- Take advantage of office hours to drop by and talk about research interests with instructors.
- Strongly consider English Honours, if you have not already.
- Approach potential referees early in the application process.
- Ask them openly if they would be willing and able to compose a strong letter of support.
- **(Crucial)** Provide them with material to become more familiar with you:
 - o CV
 - o Samples of your work for their class
 - o Writing samples from other classes
 - o Drafts of your letters of intent

- Samples of the application guidelines and program info from different universities
- Give your referees **a list of deadlines and addresses**, so they know when and where to send their letters.
- Follow up with reminders when deadlines are approaching.

Some General Advice for Applying to Graduate School (courtesy of Miriam Nichols)

- 1. Start the process early.**
 - a. Most universities have application deadlines in the winter months for the following fall start date. Some require applications almost a year in advance.

- 2. Choose your area of interest and research the graduate schools that can best serve you.**
 - a. Even if you change direction later on, it is important to approach admission committees with a plan in place. These committees are more likely to look favourably on candidates whose interests match their department's areas of specialization.
 - b. If you are interested in medieval studies, for example, it makes no sense to apply to York University when the University of Toronto has a more comprehensive program and better library resources for that area.

- 3. Once you narrow down the graduate schools that can support your interests, find out who teaches what.**
 - a. Consider contacting a professor who specializes in what you want to study.
 - b. Find out if that professor is going to be around when you want to attend and if he or she is willing to take you on.

- 4. Check out the scholarship possibilities.**
 - a. The Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) offers scholarships to MA and PhD students, but again you will need to apply well in advance. (Note: look up CGS on the NSERC web site for Master's scholarships).
 - b. You might also check out scholarships and Teaching Assistantships available at the university of your choice.

- 5. Be prepared to spend a little time on your applications, both for admission and for scholarships.**
 - a. You will have to prepare a statement of your research interests and collect letters of reference.
 - b. The application process can be tedious, but it is well worth the effort. This is your future, after all.

- 6. Don't be shy to ask your professors at UFV for guidance and references.**
 - a. If you are a UFV Honours student, be sure to consult with your supervisor.
 - b. We want our students to move on and succeed, so don't feel you can't approach us!

Student Testimonials

Krista Paquin (KP) and Adrea Johnson (AJ); Jess Wind

(All three are former UFV English students who have gone on to graduate studies in English programs in Canada)

Where did you apply? Where did you choose to go?

KP: "I applied to several graduate schools across Canada, on a spectrum of lesser-known to more-renowned graduate programs. My thinking process was that the more schools I applied to would increase my chances of getting into one of them. My final decision was to go to McMaster University because they offered faculty and courses that would enhance my research interests. I responded so well to McMaster that I am now a first-year PhD student here."

On reasons to choose graduate school:

KP: "Some people know right away that they are cut out for academia; they know grad school is in their future. For me, all I knew was that I wasn't finished with my newfound passion with literature. I was inspired by many of my professors, and I wanted to learn how to think at the intellectual level that they were showing me; more importantly, I wanted to become part of the ongoing critical conversations among modern scholars that I was being introduced to. At some point, I realized, I wanted my name to be on those scholarly articles that I was reading for class. I saw grad school as a way to do this."

AJ: "As you consider this next step I think it is good to contemplate where you imagine grad school taking you, i.e. the type of work you ultimately want to do, as this might shape your choice of school, supervisor, course work, etc. This was wise advice I received as well. However, I do think it is actually more important that the decision to go to grad school be driven by determination, curiosity, and excitement; let your passion for the material be your ultimate motivation."

Have you found grad school overall a rewarding experience so far?

KP: "Going to graduate school is the biggest and best decision I've made in my life. It has surpassed my expectations.... The most rewarding part of grad school so far is that I get to see my idea, conceived during my undergraduate degree, come to fruition in my dissertation. While the intellectual growth I have experienced since being in grad school is a fantastic reward in itself, my personal growth throughout this entire process is an even greater reward."

AJ: "Grad school gives you the opportunity to finally write about what excites you, to explore ideas, texts, and genres that you love and with professors and colleagues who are equally excited to be reading and writing about these ideas alongside you."

What main piece of advice or information do you wish you knew ahead of time going into the process of applying?

AJ: "As I was finishing my last year at UFV and considered grad school it may have been helpful to hear that, in my experience, it is actually less intimidating than it sounds. It is true that there are higher expectations in terms of how much you are asked to write, to push the development

of ideas, and to balance more work with the challenges of a new environment (or even province). [But] the good far outweighs the scary.”

KP: “Going into the application process, I wish I would have known how to write a statement of intent or proposal for both graduate school and scholarship applications. Writing for applications is much different than writing proposals for an honours project or term essay, as there is a lot of strategy involved. I relied heavily on my professors for guidance and researched successful graduate student letters and proposals.”

Finally, what can you share about your experience with the application process that might be useful?

AJ: “It is...wise to be sure you have what it takes; the application process is indeed competitive. Though it's important not just to have the GPA, but to also be willing and able to hear feedback, sometimes harsh feedback, on your own writing.”

KP (*Note – Krista provided a substantial, multi-part, response to this question. Her many pieces of useful input are divided into a few categories for clarity*):

On when to Start: “First of all, start early and be organised. Well in advance, research potential schools that you want to apply to, and think of a few professors you feel will write you a strong reference letter. I started somewhere at end of October, early November.”

Application Process: “Applying to grad school can get expensive, and this is something to keep in mind as you choose how many applications to send out. I chose ten schools to apply to – perhaps a bit ambitious. I had the attitude that I was going to grad school no matter what, so I purposefully selected a wide range of universities in order to increase my chances.”

Tailoring the Application: “Every application is different. Be sure to follow each university’s guidelines for the statement of intent, writing sample, or proposal because they will all differ — this is the most difficult part of the application process.”

Reference Letters: “I chose professors with whom I had forged both a personal and academic relationship. You want to choose someone who you have worked with closely, someone who knows you and your work well, so they can not only talk about how brilliant you and your potential work are, but by default their letter will have a personal touch to it, and this is what admission committees like to see.”

Narrowing Down Schools: “When researching schools, I looked into the programs offered, upcoming courses, potential supervisors and their work, and if the school provided funding for their graduate students. While I narrowed down my options I also looked into the cities and locations of these schools to see if it was actually somewhere I could see myself living long-term.”

The Writing Sample (and Faculty Support!): “Because I knew ahead of time that I was going to need a writing sample, I used my last undergraduate class to create one. I told my professor it was my plan to turn my term paper into a writing sample and he was more than willing to work on it with me. By the end of term, I had a polished writing sample ready for my applications. You would be surprised at how much your professors want you to get into grad school and will help you out in any way they can. They often wait in anticipation as much as you do for the response letters!”

The Letter of Intent (or Cover Letter): “For me, getting and then keeping proper documents together and altering my letter of intent or proposal for each application was the most exhausting. I altered each letter of intent or proposal to fit in with each particular school. I wrote a sentence or two of why their school is the best option for me (most times you can take this right off their web page). Sometimes I mentioned upcoming courses, I even name-dropped some potential supervisors; the important thing is to show them that you’re actively interested in their program.”

Krista on her particular approach to the letter: “I also wanted my letter of intent or proposal to be original so I decided to open with a quote followed by an observation of how it relates to my current research interests. I did it for all of them and it worked well:

‘Things do not simply have the power to make persons; they have the capacity to be persons,’ suggests Mark Blackwell in ‘The People Things Make’ (91).

This statement is captivating in its claim to give human traits to inanimate objects. How does a simple material object have the power to develop subjectivity, being and agency? This question led me to the on-going critical discussion regarding the role of objects and nonhuman animals in eighteenth-century literature that scholars such as Blackwell, among others, are actively exploring.”

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Jess Wind (UFV English Grad; MA in Communication, Carleton)

Why did you decide to go to grad school?

I wasn’t done asking questions yet. I was in my fourth year at UFV, completing an English degree with a creative writing concentration and a sociology minor when I decided to complete my honours requirements and apply to masters programs. My interests leaned heavily in the MACS direction — I already knew I wanted to study zombies in our mainstream media, so I was applying to more media/pop culture focused programs rather than English ones.

What was the program like?

It was a two year program, with an option to do all coursework, a Major Research Essay (with some coursework) or a thesis (still with some coursework, but the least of the three). I had a project in mind, and I’d already done the creative writing honours project, so I was no stranger to a year-long massive writing assignment. We were a cohort of 12, five of us decided to do the thesis stream and I was one of two that graduated on time. They made it clear that most people choose MRE these days, and that it is not necessarily a hindrance if you’re looking toward a PhD after.

The course work was seminar/discussion based, a lot like what upper level courses at UFV are like. We sat around a table, having (mostly) done our readings and discussed them and their place within the field. Some courses were open electives, meaning we were in classes with the PhD students as well.

How did you feel your UFV English BA prepared you for grad school?

For me, coming from an undergrad program like UFV, this wasn't all that difficult a transition. We are prepared for graduate level courses because we are used to small classes, sharing our ideas with the room, developing presentations, and asking critical questions about what we're reading. Carleton is a massive university, and many of my cohort members had completed their undergrads there, so they were used to hundreds of students in a lecture hall with only some experience in small discussion groups or presentations. I counted myself very lucky to be prepared with these skills.

Would you recommend grad school to others?

I would definitely recommend grad school. [Doing an MA is] not the time commitment that a PhD is, so you don't need to worry about being a career student. You ask harder questions, explore your own ideas and really stretch your learning.

What advice do you have? What do you wish you had known?

When I was applying I wish I'd known... [that if] you get multiple offers, you can absolutely ask questions, compare funding packages and negotiate for the offer that works best for you. A lot of schools will set you up with current students if you have questions, or if you're local, let you tour the campus etc. They want you, they're bidding on you because you're attractive to them as a scholar and potential money maker down the line. I didn't use this to my advantage, and perhaps I should have when I was applying — maybe I would have gotten more money.

Also, if you can, apply for funding, look at SSHRC and their past winners and apply based on what you think will get money, not what you might actually accomplish. This feels super underhanded, but it's understood that projects change, develop or hit road blocks. Don't assume you have to have it all figured out when you apply. If you have some questions about some stuff that you'd like to ask, or some half-baked ideas that you'd like to explore, that's okay. You're expected to change your mind, develop new interests and be challenged in grad school, and with that goes your ideas for a final project.

Final thought: if you get in, be proud and appreciative, not everyone gets to go to grad school. But also, impostor syndrome is a real thing and you will probably get it at some point. It's the creeping idea that you're not *really* supposed to be there, that you're not equipped to be there, and that they're going to figure you out and ask you to go home. I felt it, I know others that felt it, and it's just not true. You're there because you're supposed to be there. You're smart enough, capable enough, and interesting enough. Don't let impostor syndrome get you down — have confidence in your work and in your ideas because you deserve to be there just as much as everyone else.