

A Guide to Admissions

PhD Program in English and Comparative Literature Columbia University

How to Apply to our Doctoral Program

All students apply to the doctoral program in English and Comparative Literature through Columbia's general online graduate school application portal, which goes live every September on the [GSAS Admissions website](#). The application deadline generally falls in late November. [Check here for the current deadline](#).

Application Requirements

Document Name	Required?	Details
Statement of Academic Purpose	Yes	1-2 pages, single spaced, 12-point font, on your plans for doctoral study, your past academic experience, and why our program is right for you
Personal Statement	Yes	1000 words (max.), on how your personal experiences and history will contribute to a community that values diversity of perspectives
Writing Sample	Yes	15-20 pages, double-spaced throughout, 12-point font. Preferably a single research essay, on a topic relevant to scholars of English and Comparative Literature, and connected to your Statement of Academic Purpose
Resume	Yes	1-2 pages, focused on academic study and relevant professional experience
Transcripts	Yes	Copies in English of all official transcripts from colleges and universities you have attended. Do not send high school transcripts. If you have not yet graduated from your current degree program and don't have

		official transcripts, send a screenshot or PDF of your academic record. You will have to submit official transcripts before enrolling
Letters of Recommendation	Yes	3 letters, preferably from teachers or mentors familiar with your academic work
GRE General Exam	No	n/a
GRE Subject Exam	No	n/a
TOEFL for non-native English speakers (or equivalent)	Yes	See GSAS Admissions FAQ for current requirements.

The most important parts of the application are the Statement of Academic Purpose and Writing Sample. In both these documents, our admissions committee looks for a sense of a personal voice and direction, an awareness of relevant scholarly debates, and a good match between the applicant's interests and those of our faculty. The committee pays close attention to applicants' overall undergraduate record (and prior graduate record, if any), as well as letters of recommendation. However, we are most interested in the direct written evidence of your individual abilities and interests.

For more information about general application and admissions requirements at Columbia, please read the [GSAS Admissions FAQ](#).

Admissions Categories

In order to ensure an intellectually diverse entering cohort, and to help ensure that your application will be read by the right combination of faculty, the online application system will first prompt you to choose among three broadly geographical and linguistic areas of concentration, then select two narrower subfields reflecting your specific disciplinary or interdisciplinary interests.

We acknowledge that some applicants' interests will not fit neatly into these categories. Please feel free to address such issues in your Statement of Academic Purpose. Please also understand that you will not be locked into these choices: students admitted to our PhD program regularly develop new interests and field affiliations over the course of their study at Columbia.

1. Geographical Area

Choose one of the following options:

- a) American

Applicants selecting this concentration intend to work largely on literary or cultural texts, objects, and histories relating to the North American continent. Applicants selecting “American” may wish to work on canonical US texts and authors, or in an established literary-historical field. But applicants in this concentration may also take hemispheric, transnational, multi-ethnic, or multilingual approaches to the Americas – *e.g.*, topics in diasporic, expatriate, or indigenous literatures that overflow familiar national, disciplinary, or linguistic boundaries.

b) British and Irish

Applicants selecting “British and Irish” expect to study some aspect of the literatures and cultures of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Again, for some students this will mean research in an established regional/national field such as British Romanticism or Irish Modernism. Others may work in a trans-Atlantic, global, or imperial frame, with British authors read alongside authors from, *e.g.*, South Asia or Africa. Still others may study English-language texts alongside one of the many other languages written or spoken in Britain and Ireland, now or in the past, from Old Norse to Urdu to Jamaican Patois.

c) Comparative, Postcolonial, and Global South

Applicants selecting “Comparative, Postcolonial, and Global South” will typically work across multiple national and linguistic traditions, with many also working across media and periods, or on topics of a theoretical nature. PhD applicants who wish to be formally affiliated with the [Institute for Comparative Literature and Society](#) should note the rigorous language skills required for the ICLS Graduate Certificate. Students with an interest in postcolonial studies and the global south should understand the need for specialized training in local and regional languages and cultures.

2. Disciplinary/Interdisciplinary Fields

After selecting your area of geographic concentration, you will be asked to select two disciplinary/interdisciplinary fields of study from the following list.

18th Century British 19th Century British 20th-21st Century British Pre-1865 American Post-1865 American African American Literature Asian American Literature Comparative Literature	Environmental Humanities Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Indigenous Studies Jazz Studies Law and Literature Latinx Studies Medieval Modernism
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Contemporary Literature Digital Humanities/Media Studies Disability Studies/Health Humanities Drama, Theatre, and Performance Early American	Poetry Postcolonial and Global South Renaissance and Early Modern Theory
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Application Fees

GSAS charges a nonrefundable fee of \$125 to apply to Columbia. (Please note: this fee is not levied by, nor does it go to, the Department of English and Comparative Literature.) If you cannot afford this fee, you may apply for an application fee waiver. For information, [please see this website](#).

Selectivity, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Our doctoral program is highly selective, with an admissions rate between 2-3 per cent.

While this means it's extraordinarily difficult to get into our program, that doesn't mean we only accept students with perfect academic records from elite universities—indeed, we regularly admit students with a wide range of educational experiences and from diverse backgrounds. You do not need to have been an English or Comparative Literature major to apply, but it will certainly help your application if you can show experience in literary or cultural studies; training in a related discipline such as Art History, Classics, History, Modern Languages, Philosophy, or Religion; or a background in an interdisciplinary field such as Gender Studies or Media Studies.

Institute for Comparative Literature and Society

Many of our doctoral students have an affiliation with the [Institute for Comparative Literature and Society](#), the interdisciplinary home for comparative cultural and social analysis at Columbia, where around half of our faculty hold appointments. You may check a box on the online application signaling your desire to be considered for ICLS affiliation, or you may apply to be affiliated with ICLS after your arrival at Columbia. Visit the ICLS website for further information about the requirements of its [graduate certificate program](#).

Program Structure

Like all doctoral programs in New York State and at Columbia, ours is sequential in nature, with students proceeding through three degree stages:

- MA Stage (Year 1)
- MPhil Stage (Years 2-3)
- PhD Candidacy (Years 4-6)

The vast majority of students complete all three stages, graduating with the PhD in an average of 6.7 years. Between 2018-26, our doctoral program attrition rate (the percentage of students who leave the program without receiving the PhD) was only 9.7% (reports suggest the national rate is between 30-50%)

Progression through the three stages is not, however, guaranteed. At the end of Year 1 and Year 3, we encourage students to talk to their advisors if they have any doubts about continuing in the program. Faculty will also sometimes initiate this discussion, especially if a student has struggled with exams, research, writing, or speaking in public. In most cases, the decision to continue in the program is easily reached. Still, the sequential nature of our program provides two natural departure points for students having second thoughts or experiencing academic difficulties.

All doctoral students must be enrolled full-time.

Advanced Standing / Transfer Credit

We regularly admit students with and without Masters degrees. We do not require the MA to apply, nor do we discourage students with an MA from applying.

We do not, however, offer advanced standing to students with an MA. All doctoral students must complete the full first year of coursework, including all MA requirements, before applying to transfer any credit from a previous graduate degree.

Program Size

We currently admit 7-8 students per year to the doctoral program, with an additional two students per year being admitted to the PhD program in Theatre and Performance, also based in our Department. With the addition of an MA cohort of around 15 students per year, this number allows us to offer a full range of graduate classes across most fields of literature in English, and to offer a variety of courses in comparative, theoretical, and interdisciplinary subject areas.

Funding

All doctoral students are fully funded with tuition, fees, and a stipend. Funding is guaranteed for 6 years. International students and U.S. citizens receive the same funding.

See here for full information about current GSAS Doctoral Fellowships. See [here](#) for a detailed breakdown of the annual fellowship support offered to doctoral students in Humanities and Social Science departments. Please note that, due to ongoing negotiations between the University and Student Workers of Columbia/UAW Local 270, fellowship rates for 2026-27 are not available. See [here](#) and [here](#) for information about those negotiations.

Teaching

We pride ourselves on the excellence of our graduate student teachers, as well as the range of teaching opportunities we have been able to provide them. Currently, our doctoral students teach for three of their six funded years, with the standard schedule as follows:

Year 1: Coursework (no teaching)

Year 2: TA for departmental lecture or similar

Year 3: Oral Exams and Dissertation Prospectus (no teaching)

Year 4: TA for departmental lecture class/lead a 15-student seminar for introduction to the major, ENGL 2000: Approaches to Literature

Year 5: Dissertation Fellowship (no teaching)

Year 6: Options include: TAsip, Approaches to Literature, GSAS Teaching Scholars Program, and teaching in the Core Curriculum and University Writing

Pre-Application Appointments, Tours, and Emails

Given the volume of applications, we cannot answer all admissions queries individually, nor can we generally facilitate pre-admissions Zoom meetings, in-person meetings, or campus tours. We apologize for not being more accessible, but we need to reserve most of our attention for students already enrolled in the program.

You should feel free to email professors whose interests align with yours, or whom you envisage as potential advisors. (See the [faculty directory](#) for more information.) Please note, however, that our professors receive many such emails and cannot reply to them all, so please don't be discouraged if your note goes unanswered. Likewise, please understand that a lively email exchange with a professor does not guarantee admission, even if they express interest in working with you. Entry to our doctoral program is decided by vote of the faculty. No individual professor can guarantee admission to our degree programs.

Further Information

If this document leaves a question unanswered, please first read the [GSAS Admissions FAQ](#) and only then contact the Department by writing to Steven Barroga, Graduate Coordinator, at enclgraduatecoordinator@columbia.edu.