

The Five W's (and an H) of Deciding on Doctoral School

Who? Future Dr. You

WHY? This is in all capitals because it is the most important question. Why do you want a PhD? Doctoral school is no joke, and it affects not only your life but the lives and finances of all those around you. Even if you successfully complete the degree, you may not be able to find a tenure-track position right away (or ever). You have to like all (or most) of the aspects of being a professor: teaching, research, and service. If you love teaching but hate doing academic research, this may not be the path for you. And, at least in the field of English, there aren't many jobs where you can purely research and ignore teaching.

What? What kind of job do you want to have? In what department? What kind of degree do you need to get what you want?

When? Do you have the financial resources to get a PhD? Would it be best to wait a couple of years and save money? What about your family life? Is it a good time for you to devote yourself to your education?

Where? Are you tied to this area? This will SEVERELY LIMIT your ability to get a PhD. If not, what programs do what you want? What theoretical or critical vantage points matter to you, and do the schools you are considering support these? Who are the major figures in your field? Where could you get access to the scholarly resources you need? Where have you always wanted to live?

How? Application procedures (including GREs, reference letters, and essays) are as critical as your grades at the MA level. Financial aid is available, but limited: research how to get it and consider only enrolling in a program that will give you an assistantship. You need to support yourself and also to gain professional experience.