

Sample Statement of Purpose

Statement of Purpose:

Please describe your aptitude and motivation for graduate study in your area of specialization, including your preparation for this field of study, your academic plans or research interests in your chosen area of study, and your future career goals. Please be specific about why UC Berkeley would be a good intellectual fit for you.

The writer of the statement below was admitted into UC Berkeley's History Department. With her permission, I reprint her essay parsed with my commentary about why it works as a winning essay.

"Luscious fare is the jewel of inordinate desires,"¹ cautions² the author of *The Gentlewoman's Companion* (1673), one of many early modern conduct books I surveyed this past year for an honors thesis entitled "'Chaste, Silent, and Hungry': The Problem of Female Appetite in Early Modern England, 1550-1700."³ As indicated by the title, this project explores a provocative but as of yet scarcely studied facet of early modern gender constructions: female food desire.⁴ I use the word "desire" here rather deliberately, as early modern definitions of appetite extended well beyond the physiological drive to eat to encompass all those physical (and shameful) longings associated with the body. And, in a culture where women were by definition immoderate and sensual, female food appetite, I argue, constituted an unruly⁵ desire that demanded both social and moral discipline. In brief, my research concerns the patriarchal control of women's bodies in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England vis- -vis a cultural idea about food desire and satiation as suggestive and immodest.⁶

In lieu of a formal introduction of my research interests and aspirations I offer a summary of my senior thesis, which earned me the 2003 Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Research at the University of California, Davis.⁷ This first venture into serious historical scholarship has affirmed my passion for early modern culture and history; and it has given me the confidence to assert and contest my opinions regarding the status of women in early modern Europe and the current state of early modern historiography.⁸ Continuing along these avenues of research in graduate school, I would like to use my thesis as the basis for a future dissertation. Though I remain wary about committing myself prematurely to a specific topic of research, I am also eager to elaborate, modify, and complicate⁹ my original assertions about the nature of the "problem" of female appetite in early modern England. Indeed, many of the conclusions reached in the thesis, such as my claim that the cultural eroticization of feminine appetite in early modern England betrayed a deep-seated masculine mistrust of female sexuality and sexual power, serve as starting points¹⁰ for future research and study.

On a more basic level, writing a thesis gave me the chance to become better acquainted with the essentials of historical research. Suspecting that normative discourses in early modern England participated aggressively in the monitoring of women's appetites, I navigated the sea of early English printed sources in pursuit of the slightest mention of food and diet. Those sources I encountered during my research, which ranged from the popular conduct book, *The Education of a Christian Woman* by Juan Luis Vives, to the anonymous sex manual, *Aristotle's Masterpiece*, challenged my basic understanding of history and the original premise of my thesis in ways not

anticipated. From deciphering esoteric type-fonts to developing an awareness of the importance of time and funds, I experienced the mundane realities of research that inevitably stunt the historian's aspirations. Even more important was my gradual acceptance of the fact that early modern sources, no matter how we read them, do not always accommodate modern biases and expectations.¹¹

Though I cannot predict the course this project might take in graduate school, I expect that it will address the following themes and issues. First is the overarching issue of distinguishing the phenomena I observe from other forms of food restriction and obsession, namely the modern ritual of dieting and its most extreme manifestation, an eating disorder. Though not willing to evade those complicated (and controversial) parallels between modern and early modern usages of food and food symbolism to control the lives of women, I also wish to offer as an historian a nuanced portrayal of how early modern conceptualizations of female appetite were infused with contemporary, historically contingent notions of sexuality and gender.

Furthermore, the question of female agency in a project devoted almost exclusively to male prescriptions for diet and behavior demands further discussion. Admittedly, on more than one occasion, my own extensive use and analysis of conduct books and various obstetric manuals, works composed primarily by educated men, caused me to pause and wonder whether it was best to relate a history about women's actions or the patriarchal apparatus under which those actions were oppressed. While I refuse to see women as simply passive receptacles of masculine command, I neither wish nor aspire to focus solely on their achievements; for, in my mind, the history of women and the history of patriarchy are inextricably related.¹² My goal, then, will not be to detail just another example of how women in history were dominated by men, but, rather, to interrogate the means, in this case food, or, better yet, the cultural meaning of appetite, by which women's desires were suppressed or denied.¹³

Indeed I am proud of my thesis and, given extra time, could say much more. But I should also stress that at the heart of my specific research concentration lies a more general interest in early modern European history, cultural and women's history to be more exact.¹⁴ To date, my knowledge of the early modern period has been informed and my imagination sustained by an array of courses on early modern history and literature (I was a joint history and English major), including a graduate seminar on Renaissance urban culture taught jointly by Professors Margaret Ferguson and Deborah Harkness. My personal penchant for cultural history stems largely, I believe, from my training in literature and literary criticism, where sensitivity to the importance of language and metaphor is a necessary skill. Also of crucial importance to a professional career in history are my growing skills in Latin and French, and my fluency in Spanish.¹⁵

This year I find myself in that difficult and frustrating transitional period between undergraduate and graduate studies. Though I would have preferred to directly continue graduate school after graduation, I opted to take a year off. A year away from school, I reasoned, would afford me the time needed to recuperate from an exhaustive undergraduate education, gain some perspective, and work on fulfilling the language requirement for a doctorate in European history. In fact, I am currently enrolled in a French course at a nearby university and plan to take a subsequent course during the upcoming spring semester. This academic hiatus, moreover, has imposed some much-needed distance between myself and my thesis, which I can now reread from a more critical, less

invested stance. And, finally, a break from school has given me sufficient time to search and research for graduate programs that best suit my needs.¹⁶

UC Berkeley's history program looms large in my mind, largely because of its outstanding faculty and interdisciplinary approach to history. In my own quest for a suitable graduate program, I was thrilled to learn that Professors Thomas Laqueur and Carla Hesse both taught at Berkeley. Professor Laqueur's book, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, stands out among the many books I read during my undergraduate education; and I credit his book with introducing me to the nascent but fascinating field of the history of sexuality and the body. Together, Professor Laqueur's cutting edge research and Professor Hesse's knowledge of early modern women's history would make my experience at Berkeley a challenging and enjoyable one.¹⁷

In addition, Berkeley provides an ideal climate for me to develop my cross-disciplinary interests. In particular, I am interested in pursuing a designated emphasis in women, gender, and sexuality, a unique option that distinguishes Berkeley's history program from that of other institutions. The cross-disciplinary nature of Berkeley's graduate program would foster, I hope, fruitful discussions with other departments, notably the department of English and Women's Studies, thus broadening and enriching my research as well as my general understanding early modern culture and history.¹⁸

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- ¹ The writer begins with a vivid quote that grabs the reader's attention right away.
 - ² "Cautions" is an excellent verb choice. Careful word choice makes for lively writing.
 - ³ Note how neatly in one well-packed sentence, the writer gets right to the point of her current research.
 - ⁴ "Provocative" is an apt and colorful word choice. This sentence explains the nature of her study and situates her subject in historical and thematic context.
 - ⁵ "Unruly" is another aptly chosen adjective. Adjectives can create "dead places" in writing if they add nothing significant to the noun that it is describing.
 - ⁶ The summary sentence not only recaps the gist of the first paragraph, but also provides further nuance of the subject at hand.
 - ⁷ This first sentence makes clear that research first and foremost will be central to her argument in the essay. Mentioning the "Chancellor's Award" in the context of her research is a clever way of boasting without seeming to.
 - ⁸ It is a very good idea to explicitly state the chosen subfield within history: early modern Europe. You can't assume that your readers will make the inference from the research topic alone. To "assert and contest" opinions is, of course, the marksmanship of historians; making reference to "the current state of early modern historiography" conveys familiarity with the subject on the one hand, and confidence and intellectual poise on the other. Notice how much more powerful is such a statement as compared to one poorly written, such as "I am passionate and committed to my interest in early modern Europe."

- ⁹ Again, to say that as a historian, she will "elaborate, modify, and complicate" the subject matter is to show that she really understands the work of historians. A less experienced candidate might have written that she wants to uncover the "truth" in history.
- ¹⁰ "Starting points" --referring to her research interests--is a very measured way of saying that she knows what tugs at her heart, has done enough research to have some hunches, but is open to surprise endings. A beautiful rendition of a historian's sentiment. You may turn off your readers if you come off sounding overly confident. Maintaining a measured tone is very important.
- ¹¹ This paragraph details further specific lessons and skills earned through this research project. Note the use of colorful verbs such as "navigated" and "stunt."
- ¹² Note the nuanced and carefully measured way of speaking about her subject. Clearly the writer is well-read in theory and shows strong ability in critically evaluating her subject. Moreover, she tries to be the "objective" scholar in that she does not champion any cause. That is, she does not champion the cause of women even as she conveys deep empathy.
- ¹³ The reference to a parallel example of female appetite in contemporary culture as holding interest for the writer is aptly placed here. Were she to have mentioned it any earlier, it would have clouded the primarily historical nature and focus of her venture.
- ¹⁴ It is wise at this point to zoom out a bit and show that the writer's interest lies more broadly in early modern Europe and the history of women. Zooming in and out from the narrow to the general shows that you are capable of becoming a specialist without being overly narrow.
- ¹⁵ Showing interdisciplinarity and your abilities in language are key to your academic biography. In this case, the reader learns that she is a historian with training in literary and critical theory.
- ¹⁶ This is a model paragraph for showing what you did in your "time off" from school. Note how nothing extraneous to her study is mentioned in this paragraph. The paragraph shows that the time off was spent wisely in preparing herself for graduate school.
- ¹⁷ She demonstrates a thorough-going knowledge of UC Berkeley. She mentions not one but two key scholars with whom she could pursue her studies. She mentions how their area of specialty dovetails with her own research interests. Note how she does not make empty, flattering remarks about the professors or the school.
- ¹⁸ She continues to list bounties beyond the department strengthening the argument that Berkeley is well-suited for her. The reader will be impressed with the research and the seriousness with which she has examined UC Berkeley as an option for graduate school. A well-written essay unveils much information about the writer, not only in her intellectual capacity, but also about her character and core values. Through her writing, she makes a distinctive impression.