

A Life of Learning: Personal Statement
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I have enjoyed learning for as long as I can remember. As a child, the only “playing” I did involved reading, begging for extra homework assignments, and grading papers for my teachers. The educational life has (almost) always been close to a perfect fit. Today—four degrees, dozens of publications, dozens of guest speaking engagements, and thousands of students taught later—I find myself craving a formal return to the classroom as a student.

I have never been one to say that learning comes naturally to people. To the contrary, learning how to be a successful learner takes everyone significant work. For years, I struggled. While I could always grab a pen and write and write for hours, reading and spelling especially gave me challenges until I discovered my dyslexia and thereafter read out loud or used audiobooks exclusively for years. Even with these strategies, reading remained a struggle. Teachers did not understand how or why I struggled with reading and often suggested that I could never be the educator I wanted to be and could never be a functioning adult because I had yet to reach their (artificial) expectations for reading. One psychologist even said that I could never be a professor and could probably never earn any college degree because the standardized tests showed my intelligence was too low.

In addition to the invisible disability of dyslexia, I am a survivor of six surgeries so far due to complications from Neurofibromatosis (NF). NF also requires that I wear a leg brace because of brittle bones and requires that I take about twenty medications. (That’s the “elevator speech” version of my medical history!)

Thus, while I thoroughly enjoyed my childhood and never wanted to play sports or to participate in other normative rituals of adolescence, I never had the opportunity. Health problems necessitated that I be watched extra carefully and require that I continue to live a life under regular care of physicians. My curiosity channeled my energy into figuring out how to really learn and how to really excel.

While I still struggled with comprehending and remembering the written word and found spelling almost impossible sometimes, I began to thrive and graduated salutatorian of my intermediate school class in 2002. For high school, I homeschooled myself. I taught myself all of high school math by having scratch paper, textbooks, and calculators spread across the living room floor, and I assigned myself long research papers. Homeschooling myself helped me find renewed confidence and helped me to know that life is full of learning everywhere in countless ways.

In January 2005, I enrolled at our local community college, unsure as to what would happen given what I was told about the impossible difficulty of college. A few weeks into my “Composition And Rhetoric I” class, I was invited to join the honors program. About that same time, I was in the computer lab working on an essay one day, and I found myself thinking, “I could do this for the rest of my life and be happy.” I loved the feeling that writing, thinking, and editing gave me.

And that I have. My experience as an undergraduate was full of rich learning opportunities. I finally found a true “home away from home.” College professors understood me. I deliberately looked for classes with more assigned essays, with opportunities for extra-work, and with possibilities to work closer with my professors. I quickly figured out that I wanted to be a professor myself, and my faculty mentors all responded with encouragement. I finished my undergraduate work in three and a half years and then immediately became a doctoral student at the University of Houston, finishing my History MA in 2010 and PhD in 2016. History grabbed my attention because everything has a history, and I knew my interests would evolve in the future.

During graduate school, especially while writing my dissertation, my interests in the kind of cultural analysis and textual readings that happen more frequently in English departments became clearer to me. One day a colleague in the Composition and Rhetoric doctoral program, after discussing my work and reading some chapter drafts, exclaimed, “You’re a rhetorician!”

This unexpected declaration began my long interest in getting formal graduate training in English. I have since realized that my dissertation is, in many ways, more of an English dissertation than a History dissertation. “If you do not like the past, change it”: The Reel Civil Rights Revolution, Historical Memory, and the Making of Utopian Pasts examines films such as *The Help* (2011) and *The Butler* (2013) to analyze representations of how society remembers and understands Black history and civil rights struggles. While looking at these filmic texts, I considered the implications of each representation from multiple points of view. In part because of the interdisciplinary scholarship found in my dissertation, I have been a full-time professor at the University of Houston teaching gender and queer studies, religious studies, and English since 2017. Now, as I teach each semester and as I publish articles, I find my interests moving even further toward rhetorical and literary approaches.

I am applying to this graduate English Studies program at Arizona State University for the formal training and formal credentials to teach even more classes centered around literature, film, writing, and rhetoric. I know that formal training from experts will help provide insights that I would not otherwise have. And the colleague who pronounced me a rhetorician said all the best rhetoricians he reads are either from or are at the Department of English at Arizona State University.

In addition, I have found great satisfaction with my public scholarship. I have been published in *Time*, in *The Washington Post*, and in a variety of other public-facing publications. In one recent publication, I coined the concept of “cripnormativity” as a way of looking at how and when society accepts disability and the implications of this. An additional MA with courses in literature, rhetoric, and linguistics will aid my public scholarship. I also see this training as helping build the publication I started with a colleague, *Conceptions Review*.

For years I considered acquiring an additional PhD or MA in English but have been waiting for the right time. With the threat of COVID-19 and with my preexisting conditions, I have lived in almost complete lockdown for over a year and will probably have to do so until 2023, according to physicians; thus, I find myself with some extra time. The time, then, is now. As an undergraduate and graduate student, I was so focused on acquiring historical knowledge that I know I have some gaps in my background; thus, I am especially excited to take some literature classes. I am also excited to see how my training as a historian will impact how I interpret materials in English Studies.

I am also an educator at heart. I “teach” in the classroom, in office hours, in workshops (such as the one I did virtually this past March for faculty at the University of North Alabama), and in the articles I publish or edit. I do not do anything, read anything, or watch anything without considering pedagogical perspectives: What is ‘this’ teaching? Would my students or readers like ‘this’? Could ‘this’ help my readers? I always want to learn more so I can share knowledge and the love of learning more effectively. Another reason I am applying to this program is to have new, direct experiences as a student myself. This will help me be a better professor for my own students: I always want to have fresh memories of being a student.

In closing, I would be thrilled to be accepted into your online Master of Arts program. I am ready to learn more, to share my ideas, and to make the most of the time we all have.