

Personal Statement Sample #1

Mystics, Feminists, and Anne Boleyn: My Journey Through History

I arrived at Princeton thinking that I wanted to study Anne Boleyn and Elizabeth I. At that point, history existed for me as a dichotomy. On the one hand, it was mechanical memorization of right, rote answers from dry textbooks for AP exams. On the other, it was free-ranging, creative inquiry, as my AP European History teacher encouraged in papers. In my senior year of high school, I wrote three “history papers”: (1) an exploration of sameness versus difference feminism in the *querelle des femmes*; (2) a look at marriage and passion in Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë’s novels; and (3) an analysis of gender fluidity and essentialism in the writings of Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir.

“History” was what I made of it. It had no disciplinary rules; it entailed literary, theatrical, artistic, and poetic investigation of questions that interested me, like “how menstruation has been used from Aristotle to the present to make arguments about women’s inferiority” (a paper idea recently re-discovered in a note on my phone from 2014). When I took the Humanities Sequence my first year at Princeton, I thrived in the interdisciplinary space it created, eagerly writing about breastfeeding in Plato’s *Republic* and prostitution in Herodotus. I took my first history departmental course in the spring, Margot Canaday’s brilliant *Gender and Sexuality in Modern America*. Only then did I begin to learn that history was not what I thought it was. I told my preceptor that for my final paper I wanted to analyze the poetry in *Sinister Wisdom* and *Chrysalis* through the lenses of Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality” and Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex.” She gently informed me that my plan was essentially an English paper and advised me on how to make it historical.

My sophomore year, I fell in love with the approach we took to history in the course *Religion, Gender, and Sexuality in Early Latin America*, taught by Jessica Delgado. We read

thrilling tales of “deviant orthodoxy”: pious women who had elaborate sexual fantasies about saints; lay mystics who had visions of themselves breastfeeding Jesus and conversing frankly with the Virgin Mary about how she had considered having an abortion. That same semester, I took Asian American History and the History of African American Political Thought, followed by Latino History the following spring. For the first time in my life, I was in the racial or ethnic minority in classrooms. I took this as a sign that I was going in the right direction in my studies, but also felt troubled that more white students did not enroll.

My history education at Princeton has been a conscious study of the margins. I got enough Western European narratives in high school and in the Humanities Sequence. However, I regret not pursuing a more geographically diverse curriculum. This semester, I am in my first African history course. I did not take any courses in South or East Asian history.

My time in the department has also been unusual in that nine out of my twelve departmental courses have been taught by female professors. I did not know how unusual this was until I attended a departmental lunch for female faculty and students and heard how few classes most of the students there had taken with women professors. Though a male professor once told me that I would miss out if I did not take courses with “The Greats of the Department” (a notably male-dominated list), I would not have done it any other way. I learned so much from incredible women in the History Department, and I believe that it is my classmates who took so few courses with female faculty who missed out.

As I studied “the margins” in terms of curriculum, I also felt myself existing at the blurry edges of the discipline of history as I strained toward interdisciplinarity. I learned more “rules” of academic history but could not always make myself follow them. I had to jump to the present in my analysis because I felt the political stakes of history so keenly. I arrived at an increasingly

activist-oriented approach to scholarship, which culminated in my senior thesis. My favorite part of the process was conducting oral histories with powerful feminist health activists who inspire me. I had to learn to juggle the difficulties of writing critically and academically about living subjects who were so important to the social justice causes central to my life.

I have loved my journey through the History department. As I come to the close of college, however, I imagine paths not taken. I could see myself as an Art History or Religion major, but also as a Woodrow Wilson School major studying reproductive health policy. This past fall, I did a creative final project for Elaine Pagels' seminar, *Gods, Goddesses, Satan, and Monsters*, in which I wrote poems and made collages about nine divine female figures. Making this project was one of my most meaningful experiences at Princeton, and made me wish that I had engaged my love of art and poetry more in my time here. I learned to rein in and tone down my interdisciplinary and activist impulses in order to meet norms of academic scholarship, but there is so much that I have learned and will continue to learn from novels, poetry, and art.

That said, I recognize and appreciate how much History taught me. As Jacob Dlamini told us in his last lecture for Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa, "History teaches you to be a critical citizen of the world." I am a better reader, writer, and thinker because of my history major. I learned how to craft a compelling argument with careful attention to detail, and I cannot think of a more useful skill to carry forward into my intended career path in law. Next year, I will be working as a Project 55 Fellow at Chicago Volunteer Legal Services, specifically in the division that coordinates pro bono representation in family law cases. For the two years following, I will be a paralegal at Cravath, Swaine, and Moore in New York. The firm has a strong relationship to the nonprofit Her Justice, so I look forward to getting involved in pro bono representation for women struggling with poverty and gendered violence. After law school, I aim

to become a public interest lawyer working at the intersection of gender, reproduction, race, and poverty.

It is a far cry from Anne Boleyn. But, then again, my fundamental interests have been consistent throughout: gendered power, violence, and victimization; restriction of reproductive autonomy and rights. Anne Boleyn deserved better from the law. Now, in 2019, I am dedicating myself to a lifelong quest to make laws better for women, however I can.

Personal Statement Sample #2

Department of History, Princeton University
Personal Statement

When I arrived at Princeton, my understanding of “history” was circumscribed and tinged grey by high school courses that involved little more than memorizing a textbook and synthesizing curated snippets of primary sources into short essays. It was also geographically and thematically limited: at my high school, the only serious history classes offered were U.S. and European history. “History,” as I understood it, was consequently of little interest. I wanted to major in politics or policy and spent most of my first two years fulfilling the prerequisites for those concentrations.

I did this even as, after a freshman seminar with Nancy Malkiel, I learned that “history” could also mean untangling the processes that led to something as intimate as my own presence, as a woman, on Princeton’s campus. My first archival experience involved reading the correspondence of disgruntled alums who felt that there would be few things worse than the admission of women undergraduates. Coming to terms with the institutional decisions that preceded the acceptance of these first women students—decisions that had much to do with the needs of male students and competition with other prestigious institutions, and little with equality or justice—shaped not only my understanding of history, but also my understanding of Princeton and my place here.

It was the following spring that I began to consider majoring in history. As I debated between it and politics, I was drawn by the ways history can marry an attention to the deeply human—to literature and lived experience—with engagement with the social sciences and concerns for structure. Course readings that encompassed sources as diverse as political cartoons, poetry, and hard data on the production and consumption of drugs highlighted the breadth of “history” and the blurry line between history as what happened and history as the narratives we tell. This self-conscious acknowledgement of ambiguity drew me in from a sea of disciplines less willing to admit their own historicity, without sacrificing the ability to make real claims, tough claims, about the past and its bearing on the present.

A personal investment in issues of language and immigrant rights propelled me initially to Latin America, and I have since found a remarkable home among the faculty and graduate student *latinamericanistas*. Combined with coursework in global history, my work on Latin America has sparked questions about canonicity and the ways knowledge is conceived of, produced, and valued within a U.S. university. In the moments when these questions have been most painfully acute, they have prompted me to reflect on the relationship between what happens—or does not happen—in a Princeton classroom and the way U.S. society and government interact with our neighbors to the south. In limited ways, I have found opportunities to bridge classroom and community, with work teaching English and history to local Latin American immigrant communities as the most obvious examples. I hope, moving forward, to continue finding and occupying these spaces of overlap, which are always spaces of

inequality and tension and, as such, reminders of the inequalities and imbalances within the field of history itself.

My major intellectual interests have been questions of empire, especially informal; state violence, and its attempted erasure; and archives, and the ways they both make possible and circumscribe historical inquiry. Work in global history has highlighted questions of scale and articulation. These were the major influences shaping my thesis project, which was itself a process of self-reflection as I ran into the limits of what I could accomplish with the training and time I had. As I worked on my thesis, I found myself struggling with critical economic debates and phenomena, as well as the ways they interacted with political and social movements. While I don't find traditional economic history very engaging, I do wish that I were better able to understand and incorporate it into my own work—which explains in part my postgraduate plans.

My independent work was also enriched by Professor Grafton's course on historiography. Though too easy to get mired in debates about the supposed value of various modes of historical narrative and analysis, I have found that understanding the general contours of the discipline has enriched my own writing and, more importantly, my thinking. Other formative courses have been "Colonial Latin America" with Professor Candiani, and the undergraduate and graduate iterations of "Modern Latin America" with Professors Karl and Adelman.

Working through the major historical and historiographic trends in the graduate seminar has been an immensely fulfilling experience, while my final undergraduate seminar (Professor Karl's "Digital Histories of Crime") has exposed me to the digital humanities and new ways of thinking about historical representation and narrative. That course, in conjunction with the undergraduate Latin American History Workshop, involvement in Dr. Jessica Mack's online "Into the Archives" course, and the Global History Lab's History Dialogues project, has contributed to my interest in pedagogy, especially with respect to research methods and process, and to more public and democratic forms of historical research and education. The discussions that have begun in these spaces are some I hope to continue in the months and years to come.

This collection of influences and experiences, more coherent in hindsight than it felt as I lived it, has led to a desire for better training in economic and social history, for methods that lie outside the scope of an undergraduate program. Next year, I will begin a master's program in development studies at the University of Oxford, which I hope will provide me with new methodological and analytical tools that are especially well-suited for my interest in Latin America. After that degree, I plan to spend some time working outside of the academy, hopefully in Mexico, before returning to the United States for a PhD in history. I also plan to continue working with history and language education for migrants and refugees in whatever capacity I am able, to continue finding ways to place history—both as what happened, and as narrative endeavor—and community in conversation.

[998 words]

This statement represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.

Personal Statement Sample #3

Personal Essay

I have The Ensworth School, which I attended for thirteen years, to thank for instilling a love of history within me. In particular, I have to thank two of my favorite and most impactful teachers at Ensworth, Mrs. Roberts and Mr. Jackoboice, who both taught history. They led the classroom with infectious passion and allowed me to appreciate the value of history as an academic discipline, namely interpreting how the world has come to be. At Princeton, at first I pursued other subjects, assuming I would study history as a peripheral interest. However, upon taking a handful of history classes my freshman and sophomore years, I was again drawn to the unique, contagious enthusiasm with which individuals taught History. Ultimately, this led me to pursue my favorite subject in my previous schooling as a major.

Mrs. Roberts' Fourth Grade class cemented my love of history. She inspired students to fully immerse themselves in history by getting into the mindset of the actors involved. In the Biography Fair that year, this advice led me to adopt the persona of Sandra Day O'Connor with painstaking detail, coupling my speech with a white wig, blunt demeanor, and her signature white lace jabot. In high school, I had the privilege of taking History with Mr. Jackoboice my freshman, sophomore, and junior years. For one, he entertained us with musical renditions of historical events, such as his account of the Civil War to the melody of "Only the Good Die Young." Most impactful, however, was his encouragement for students to view history with a critical lens and debate through discussions around our classroom table.

My first two years at Princeton, I prepared to concentrate in the Woodrow Wilson school. While history was still an interest of mine, I also had to balance my interests in Spanish and politics. As I was also passionate about immigration issues in high school, I thought the Woodrow Wilson School would allow me to combine all of my academic passions to better inform and prepare myself for the world of public policy. My sophomore spring, I took *The World of Late Antiquity* with Professor Jack Tannous. The passion with which Professor Tannous taught epitomized the infectious enthusiasm for history that initially drew me to the subject. Moreover, when visiting his office hours, I found he was the most approachable and engaging professor I had had up to that point. Not only did we talk about his class, but he also eagerly wanted to learn more about my background and what I was interested in pursuing as a career. Largely due to this conversation, I realized that concentrating in History would allow me to continue pursuing my lifelong academic passion and would provide me with access to professors who truly cared about my personal and intellectual growth.

Studying History allowed me to hone my skills as a writer. Also, majoring in History changed my conception of the subject as an academic discipline. Before, I considered it as an objective inspection of the events that formulated the world as it exists today. However, through majoring in History, I came to realize history is much more subjective than it initially appeared. Rather, it is dependent on the lens of the actor who is shaping past events or the historian who is documenting them. One way through which my conception of history was reframed was through professors who expertly engaged with historiographical commentary and presented their own views. In particular, Professor Robert Karl in *The History Modern Latin America Since 1810* and Professor Matthew Karp in *The American Civil War and Reconstruction* epitomized this skill. Moreover, through engaging in historiography in my independent work, I was able to not only

discern the events of the past but also engage with historians' arguments and construct my own narrative.

Through my time as a History major, I have developed a much greater comfortability with propagating and defending my own arguments, or my individual lens. My thesis, in particular, challenged me to present a unique narrative of events for which there is still an incomplete record due to government classification. Writing this thesis was easily my proudest accomplishment within the History department, as well as at Princeton as a whole. After graduation, I plan to pursue a career in international development. In my career, I will use several skills with which the History department has equipped me. Chiefly, I believe the ability to engage in debate and more comfortably assert my own opinion will be the most valuable. Moreover, especially through studying modern history in the U.S., Latin America, and the Middle East, I have realized that the root causes of events can often be traced back decades or even centuries before the events themselves; consequently, it is imperative to consider the root causes when determining solutions. My entire academic life, I have been intrigued with studying past events to understand the world today, as have some of my favorite teachers and professors. While there is ambiguity as to what the future holds, I feel certain that the History Department has provided me with skills to succeed in whatever career path I may take. I am extremely grateful to the History Department and proud to have chosen History as a major as it has made me a more confident thinker and writer, a skill that will be invaluable as I step outside the orange bubble.

Personal Statement Sample #4

Essay:

Prior to entering the Princeton History Department, I was determined to major in the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. I had always had an interest in public policy and economics, even in high school. The summer before matriculating, I interned at a public policy think tank, working with researchers on local and state policy ideas. My course loads were filled with Wilson School prerequisites and departmentals. I spent little time exploring other disciplines – something I deeply regret now. Because of my strong interest in policy, I entered the History Department having taken only one of the history prerequisites while promising to take its companion in my junior fall. I was immediately satisfied that I had chosen the right department for me and began filling my course schedule with as many history courses as possible.

Prior to my matriculation at Princeton, my interests were heavily focused on American history – the subdiscipline I have chosen in history. Even in the Wilson School, I focused heavily on American domestic policy. This is also related to my early interest in the African American Studies. In fact, I think that I had chosen my minor before I chose my major. My focus on race and American studies is related to my background attending the Shaker Heights school system from kindergarten through high school. The district has historically paid special attention to segregation, integration, and inequality of opportunity between its white students and its African American students. The district still has many challenges, but it more openly attempts to tackle these problems than many other districts. It gave me an early awareness of these issues, but it was not until my coursework in African American Studies that I began to have a fuller understanding of the unjust systems in place to disenfranchise and oppress African Americans. In fact, the first history class I took was Professor Joshua Guild's "African American History from Reconstruction to the Present." The class helped me realize my deep appreciation for history and truth-telling and how that power might be wielded for good. It furthermore solidified my initial interest in the discipline of African American Studies and gave me a clearer lens through which to view history. I was excited to pursue history as a form of truth-telling, particularly by studying stories of oppressed people that had previously – and in many cases still are – silenced.

Within history, I have been particularly interested in studying inequality and what I describe as "access to platforms." The latter is something I first explored in Professor Wendy Warren's "American Women's History." In the class, we discussed how women navigated systems designed to oppress them. In particular, we looked at how these women used different tools to overcome – or at least attempt to – prevail over these systems. Of course, women with certain identities, within certain classes, and subscribing to certain political ideas navigated these systems differently – some with access to more tools than others. These tools are what I called platforms: the ways in which women overcame oppression. Examples of this include publishing newspapers, the ability to live certain places, or the ability to speak publicly and be heard. Race and class often determined access to these platforms. As an upperclassman, my interest in how and why people subvert institutions, laws, and norms intensified. Classes such as Professor Sean Wilentz's "Slavery, Antislavery, and the Constitution" and Professor Anthony Grafton's "History: An Introduction to the Discipline" helped give me the intellectual tools and frameworks to better explore these questions. In my fall

junior paper, I applied my ideas about platforms to another group – young ministers in 19th century Cincinnati, Ohio who objected to their seminary’s attempts to censor the students’ speech advocating abolition and African American civil rights. These young (white, except for one African American student) male seminarians had access to many platforms that women and most African Americans did not. In my junior paper, I explored how these young advocates subverted the trustees to access these platforms. In my thesis, I expanded upon this theme, exploring similar questions, and how religion served as a mighty motivator for certain actors in the 19th century as well as a justification for why these actors subverted laws and vile institutions.

There were a number of reasons behind my switch in to the history discipline. One of these was my weak quantitative skills. As a Wilson School major, I would have had to spend significant time honing these skills when I would have rather been reading history. Indeed, I realized that the work I most looked forward to doing were my readings. I also formed the opinion that a strong grasp of history opened the door to a more thorough understanding of current events and political, social, and policy challenges. In addition, I felt that general historical knowledge was either not being taught or read or learned sufficiently. This dearth of historical knowledge was apparent to me in politics and journalism and, I thought, also reared its ugly head in the 2016 presidential election. For me, that election was also a deciding factor. As someone interested in journalism and telling true stories, I thought it necessary to study history in order to pursue journalism as a career. This last factor was particularly important to me. When I chose my major in history, I believed and do believe that a historical foundation might prepare me for a breath of career options, including my desired profession of journalism. Having a historical understanding of the world around us seemed to me to be essential. So much journalism would be better informed had the writer known more of the history around a particular subject. Some of my favorite journalists have done just that. Seeking to emulate these journalists, I believed history to be the right place for me. Studying race, labor, class – and now religion in my thesis – in a historical context, I feel better prepared to enter my desired profession.

Personal Statement Sample #5

Essay:

I never appreciated history in high school. Though I voraciously read historical fiction, I hated memorizing the dates of wars and writing essays under a time crunch. When I arrived at Princeton, I intended to major in chemistry or biology, which fit within my pre-med course of study. I signed up for the Humanities Sequence, along with math, chemistry, and biology. Amidst all the engaging works of literature, philosophy, and history, I noticed that I gravitated most toward the works of Herodotus and Livy. During my Sophomore Spring, I took Jan Gross' History of World War II; Professor Gross lectured without looking at his notes, weaving together the stories of the past. I continued to enjoy supplementing my pre-med courses with an array of studies in the humanities.

I first heard of the History of Science from a friend who had studied with Professor Katja Guenther. I knew immediately I had discovered the hidden gem of the university. The History of Science became an opportunity to combine my scientific bent with my passion for history. Ultimately, this intellectual oasis has reinvigorated my path toward becoming a physician in the 21st century.

My first History of Science course was my junior seminar with Professor Guenther on the history of psychiatry. For my first Junior Paper, I encountered the difficulty of creating a contemporary social history and grappled with how to incorporate sociological theory within my historical work. I invoked the lens of medicalization to explore how women suffering from postpartum depression sought recognition from the medical profession, straying from traditional tropes that medicalization is inherently anti-feminist. I also grappled with writing a history of a mental illness that even today does not have a precise definition. Professor Guenther became an incredible mentor for me. I took her course "Broken Brains and Shattered Minds" my junior Spring, which remains my favorite history course at Princeton.

For my second junior paper, Professor Yaacob Dweck, my Spring advisor, encouraged me to begin with a primary source rather than analyzing secondary sources for a missing area within the historical literature. I had never attempted a translation project before, but Professor Dweck pushed me beyond my comfort zone. He guided me toward a medical treatise written by Tobias Cohn in Venice in 1707 in Hebrew. I translated Cohn's two chapters on women's sexuality and analyzed how his portrayal of women's sexual diseases reflected broader concerns percolating within European Jewish Communities. This project allowed me to draw connections between my two junior papers, even though they concerned separate time periods. Society often medicalizes conditions which do not conform to social norms: Cohn wrote about women who had swollen clitorises and sought sexual pleasure in other women. By framing this behavior as a disease, he established normative domesticated behavior for women within his time.

Beyond my History of Science courses, I took *History: An Introduction to the Discipline* with Professor Anthony Grafton during my Senior Fall, though I wish I had taken his class as a sophomore. Professor Grafton's class inspired me to consider the nuances of constructing social histories that depend upon oral interviews.

My senior thesis was a continuation of the work I did for my junior paper with Professor Guenther. While Professor Guenther was on leave, I had the privilege of working with Professor Erika Milam, who pushed me both as an academic and as a human being. When I encountered an uncomfortable situation as a female researcher, Professor Milam provided a listening ear and we reflected together upon the challenges of being a woman in the history profession. For my thesis, Professor Milam particularly influenced how I framed my thesis: instead of explaining why it took so long for the medical profession to recognize postpartum depression, I reframed my thesis to explore the factors within the 1980s that particularly precipitated its recognition. A good historian ought not to hypothesize why something did not happen. I visited two archives with funding I received from the History Department and analyzed fresh primary sources, including oral testimonies, written letters, audio tapes, pamphlets, and diaries. Sociological theory continued to color my analysis of social movements and how the medical profession and feminists negotiated the definition of disease. Through this senior thesis, I explored how humans have classified and treated disease in the past, and how society, medicine, and patient expectations intertwine to establish notions of health.

My time in the History Department at Princeton has transformed my professional aspirations. Next year, I am continuing my history education through the Gates-Cambridge Scholarship. I will pursue my Masters of Philosophy in Health, Medicine, and Society, which is a new program offered by the History and Philosophy of Science, Sociology, and Anthropology departments at University of Cambridge. My focus will be to continue researching and writing about the historical politicization of women's health. My dissertation will expand upon my senior thesis research on the medicalization processes of postpartum depression in the UK and US and, more generally, the historical and continuing efficacy of social movements in the evolution of medicalization. I want to immerse myself in the global history and personal stories of women who have experienced postpartum depression and who continue to encounter a toxic combination of painful etiological symptoms and the weight of societal expectations.

Upon completion of my studies and research at the University of Cambridge, I intend to attend medical school and then specialize in psychiatry or obstetrics (or perhaps both!). I am also considering pursuing a PhD in the History of Science. I hope to rotate among clinical practice, the academy, and government service and become a resource for patients, professionals, and policymakers. My time with the people comprising the History Department at Princeton, specifically within the History of Science – students, faculty and staff - has propelled me to look to the past to inform my commitments as an empathetic physician.