

## SAMPLE GRADUATE SCHOOL ESSAYS

### **#1. "From Working Poor to Elite Scholar"**

One of the proudest accomplishments of my life was earning my college degree, despite the fact that my early adulthood pointed in the opposite direction, beginning with my marriage at the age of 19. Throughout the 1990s I lived as one of the "working poor," someone who slipped through the cracks of supposedly historic prosperity. By the age of 25 I was divorced and frustrated with menial, low-paying jobs: clerk, receptionist, and housecleaner. There is nothing like scrubbing someone else's toilet to inspire one with determination toward obtaining an education. Because of my absolute commitment toward earning my degree, I got a flexible shift at a retail warehouse which enabled me to acquire my degree while supporting myself financially.

Enrolled at the local community college, I experienced a different world opening up to me; excited by a new encouraging environment, I excelled academically. I learned that if I tried hard, I could succeed; if I wanted something badly enough, I possessed the ability to take advantage of these opportunities. I worked a minimum 35-hour workweek for five years to put myself through school without succumbing to the temptation of a student loan. I paid tuition up front with the money I earned. It was the example of my mother, a Puerto Rican immigrant working diligently to provide for her family, who instilled a work ethic into me that has stood me in good stead.

With a lifelong passion for history, I have developed an interest in the cultural history of early modern and modern Europeans, especially women's history. The experiences of ordinary women fascinate me: how they constitute their world through popular folk tales and literature; how the seemingly irrational paradoxes of the past to modern eyes are completely rational when taken within the historical context; and finally, how these historical changes and transformations in culture constitute the present. I enjoy studying the early modern period of English history, especially the Tudor- Stuart period, because of the tensions that existed between medieval philosophies and the rising Enlightenment intellectualism. My influences have been diverse. I read the popular historian Barbara Tuchman, not for her technical accuracy, but for her beautiful prose. Natalie Zemon Davis's research inspires me in the way that she cleverly picks out fresh life from tired sources. And finally, Michel Foucault's philosophies have profoundly influenced the way I write, for now I have a philosophical grounding that makes me highly sensitive to my own biases. In fact, Foucault's post-structuralist matrix has been instrumental in shaping my current project focusing on the 17th-century midwife Elizabeth Celler. In this project, I am reexamining the current histories of English midwifery using Cellier as a case study, detecting a decided bias embedded within them. The underlying assumption of these histories is that pre-industrial professional women-and Cellier in particular- struggled against patriarchy and oppression from the male medical community, when in fact Cellier's literature shows that she utilized the accepted discourses of patriarchy available to her in her writing and turned them into useful tools of political and religious power.

As a student, I feel that my success lies in the fact that I approached my studies as if I were a professional (historian, not student, that is). I always enrolled in the most challenging courses and worked with professors I felt were the most qualified in my areas of interest. Never did I settle for an A- or B+. If I got one, I would ask what I could do to improve--and ultimately, I utilized the advice to strengthen my work. My personal academic milestone occurred while I was completing a research seminar on historical methods. This required course was taught by an Americanist-Dr. Julie Worth, director of the [school withheld] history department-so our research topics were limited to American sources. I was able to work within my main interest, which is marginalized women, while using the primary sources of *The New York Times*. The resulting paper, "Biologically Unsound: Women, Murder, and the Insanity Plea in the Progressive Era" examined the preponderant use of the insanity plea for women who went outside their "innate nature" and murdered, regardless of the circumstances which drove them to kill. Although the topic was outside my focus, which is European history, this paper was selected for publication in the Phi Alpha Theta journal, *The Historian*.

My focus as an undergraduate has always been with an eye toward graduate school and a career as a professional historian. Aware of the rigors of graduate study, I have not only completed an undergraduate language requirement in Spanish, but I am also currently enrolled in an accelerated French course. In addition, I have become active in the historical honor society, Phi Alpha Theta, including serving as chapter president. During my tenure our chapter hosted the Phi Alpha Theta Regional Conference, the largest regional conference in the nation. With the help of faculty adviser Dr. Judith Gaillard, I created the conference sessions, chose appropriate student commentators for those sessions, and gave a keynote speech. The experience taught me that I have a flair for organization as well as mediation. Under my leadership, our chapter also published its first journal, and hosted a variety of campus activities. This year I am working with the Computer Society in order to establish a Web site for students who need help succeeding in history courses; we are going to call it the Clio home page. My position as an authority figure both in classroom work and within these various organizations has awakened a desire to embrace teaching.

# Sample Graduate School Essay

**SJ Ball**



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