Master’s versus PhD
The Basics

Time

The most significant, material difference between choosing to pursue either a Master’s degree or PhD is time. A Master’s typically involves two years of course work (but, it can also involve one) that may end in a capstone thesis of 40-80 pages. A PhD requires several years of course work, followed by comprehensive exams, culminating in an independently researched dissertation of 200-300 pages; it typically takes 5-7 years to complete, and may take longer.

Purpose

The reasons people choose to pursue a Master’s or a PhD are also dramatically different.

People who choose to apply to a Master’s program in English or a related field may be looking to change careers, meet the requirements to teach at the high school level, or may simply be undecided. Earning a Master’s in English can also be a great way to prepare for the rigor of a doctoral program, or see if continued study is the right decision. Master’s programs tend to be career-oriented.

The reasons for enrolling in a doctoral program are much less varied. A PhD is most frequently used as the terminal degree for university teaching. For those wanting to teach at the college level, a PhD is practically mandatory. PhD programs are research-oriented and designed to train students to become “experts” in their chosen fields. Those who succeed most in this environment love their studies and are skilled at working independently.

Money

Which is more expensive? This is not an easy question to answer.

On the one hand, a Master’s degree is significantly shorter, and therefore allows a person quicker entry into the workforce. On the other hand, many (although not all) Master’s programs do not offer a tuition waiver or stipend. Identifying Master’s programs that offer funding will definitely be in your best interest!

Most students (although not all) enrolled in a PhD program will not be expected to pay tuition and will be awarded a stipend. The amount of the awarded stipends varies greatly, but may range from $11,000 to $20,000 a year. However, pursuing a PhD also means later entry into a very competitive workforce.

Admission

Because Master’s programs often require that students pay tuition, admission to these programs is less competitive. Master’s programs that offer tuition waivers or teaching stipends will be more competitive. PhD programs, in contrast, often invest in the students they admit for a longer period of time, and therefore are much more competitive.