



# Center for Writing and Speaking

## C NO. 1 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

### Preparing to Write a Personal Statement

This handout can help you brainstorm and edit your personal statement or application essay for graduate school, scholarships, Fulbright grants, etc. Also see the other handouts in the CWS 'Career' section!

#### The Preparation Process.

1. **Make a list** of your most exciting and compelling college courses, internships, work experiences, research projects, independent study projects, study abroad experiences, volunteer or community service experiences, etc. Which of these might offer anecdotes and substantive comments for the personal statement? Which of these offers an opportunity for expansion in the essay?
2. Make list of personal events that shows the **timeline** of your growing interests in this field or area of work. Note the **turning points** that led you to applying and the experiences that prepared you for this step.
3. What do you see yourself doing in five, ten, fifteen years? What do you really want to accomplish during that time in your career?
4. How will this particular program or school (or scholarship opportunity, etc.) fit with those aspirations and goals?
5. Create a **tentative outline** with 3-5 of the most important events, ideas, and turning points you want to use. Talk to someone—a friend, a professor, a tutor, etc.—and ask them if your points connect well. Is the place and position you are applying for the best fit based on your experience and vision?

**Editing a draft-** *When answering each question, try to identify a specific example that demonstrate the qualities you're thinking about.*

6. Imagine you are having a conversation with a trusted mentor, advisor, or friend who truly understands your motivations and qualifications. What do they know about you that isn't currently demonstrated in your draft?
7. Why do the people who believe in you believe in you?
8. What abstract qualities or characteristics define you beyond what the selection committee will see on your resume? Or, what qualities and characteristics have guided you in a way that connects the experiences on your resume?
9. If you are generally comfortable in conversational interviews-- what is it about yourself that you know you can communicate by just 5 minutes talking to someone face-to-face that might not be present in this draft?

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### Preparing to Write a Personal Statement, con't

#### Dos and Don'ts

- **Do** talk concretely about your adult interests and experiences using examples. Be as detailed and thoughtful as possible about future plans for research, career goals, service, etc.
- **Do** show how your mind works—how you solve problems and get results.
- **Do** show this essay to one or more faculty members. They have invaluable experience that will help you make your essay stand out.
- **Don't** talk about childhood experiences or even high school, unless they are extremely relevant.
- **Don't** use the word “passion” or similar fuzzy terms. Avoid clichés and be substantive.
- **Don't** spend time on detailing personal stories. The right anecdotes can be helpful, but they must be written succinctly and powerfully and their relevance must be clear.

**Reverse Outlining:** Use this chart to organize what you already have in your draft. Think about where and how you can incorporate your answers to the above questions.

Story	Takeaway/Significance	Connection to Selection Criteria

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### Writing the Graduate School Application Essay

*No matter how they phrase their essay questions or what they call the endeavor (application essay, statement of purpose, personal statement, research proposal), universities and scholarship-granting agencies want to analyze your interests, see how you handle complex ideas in a specific discipline or field, and gauge how serious and how thoughtful you are about your future course of study. Graduate schools and programs also use these essays to assess your writing ability and to see how you handle complex issues in your chosen field. You want your writing to communicate your ideas and plans, your intellectual development during college, and demonstrate your readiness for graduate study or other advanced work.*

#### **Start with the basic essay.**

You are probably applying to more than one place, and each essay required will differ in focus and length. Begin with whichever essay question seems most universal. Once you've written that, you can modify it for the other schools or programs.

#### **Determine the essay's purpose.**

Read the essay prompt carefully and make notes on what the question seems to demand. If there are several essays to be written, be sure you respond specifically to what each one requires; don't let your answers overlap.

#### **Focus on your current and future interests.**

Keep the focus on the courses, projects, and experiences of your undergraduate years (don't tell stories from high school or earlier) and your future plans. The committee wants to hear about your adult interests and experiences.

#### **Analyze the school or program to which you are applying.**

Study the school or program to which you are applying. Make sure there are faculty whose work corresponds with your interests. Read the guidelines and advice provided for applicants. If possible, interview someone who went there (many graduate schools offer this service). While your essay should honestly and thoughtfully represent your intellectual experiences and plans, it should also respond to the context. For example, you might emphasize different aspects of your own experience when applying to an American studies program than you would when applying to an English and American literature program, or a modern thought and literature program.

#### **Supplement don't repeat the application.**

The personal statement or application essay expands on the lists of accomplishments and endeavors that you've listed elsewhere in the application or on your resume or curriculum vitae. The essay provides depth and context to the application, as well as demonstrating your best writing and thinking.

#### **Talk about any teaching, tutoring, or community service you may have done.**

Teaching, tutoring, and community service are obviously relevant to graduate study, especially to programs in which graduate students become teaching assistants. The intellectual and interpersonal skills associated with these activities also provide very relevant experience for many other kinds of professions. Use the essay to expand on these experiences and their relevance to your future plans.

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### **Writing the Graduate School Application Essay, Continued**

**Focus on ideas, interests, research experiences, and plans for future research.**

Write about concrete ideas and interests in your field and their significance to you and in a larger context.

- What ideas, courses, books, subject matter, internships, significant moments, essays and projects, and thoughts of your own shaped you during college and brought you to the decision to apply to this school or program?
- What particular studies have you engaged in that shaped your thinking about your chosen field?
- If you have written a senior thesis, conducted research, or worked on some other kind of major project, you should write about the ways in which this experience confirmed and expanded your interest in the field and your desire to carry out further research, teach, etc. What did you discover? Why was it important? What questions are you interested in studying further?
- What kinds of original thinking have you brought and will you bring to the study of this field?
- For many fields, a focus on future research plans is the most important topic to cover in this essay. Explain what area(s) you hope to specialize in and why. You don't have to have a dissertation thesis worked out, but you should have developed pertinent research questions and concrete plans for future study.

**Discuss the program to which you are applying and why it's right for you.**

Show how your interests and previous work have prepared you for the particular program you are applying to. If applying to graduate school, in some fields it is a good idea to mention the names of several faculty members at the institution whose work you know and whom you might want to work with. Specific references to the strengths of the program, particular courses, facilities, etc. show that you are focused and know that the school is the right match for your interests. Don't simply praise the program (they know they're good!); instead you should make connections to what you have done and plan to do in the field.

**Use specific language and provide examples; avoid generalities and clichés.**

Good writing uses specific terms and provides illustrative examples, taking us deeper into the subject. Avoid grandiose claims. Don't say you want to save the world through literature or chemistry or by opening young minds to ...and so on. It may be true, but it's been said before.

**Show your best writing.**

The essay and sometimes a writing sample provide the evaluators with opportunities to assess your writing ability. In some cases, good writing is even more important than knowing exactly what you want to do because they realize that plans may change. The first sentence and first paragraph are very important and should be constructed so as to capture and maintain readers' interest. An opening anecdote that illustrates something important coming up in the essay is often a good way to begin. A concise essay with succinct ideas will be considerably more respected than a rambling one.

**Follow the Rules Regarding Length, Font Size, etc. and get help to PROOFREAD!**

Faculty generally have a lot of experience with these kinds of essays; they can provide helpful suggestions and keep you from making mistakes that might weaken your application. Ask one or two faculty members to help you, particularly someone in the field or close to the field you are pursuing. CWS tutors also have training in reading and critiquing these application essays. You may receive conflicting advice, so listen to what these readers say and use your own good sense to make the final decisions.

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# Center for Writing and Speaking

## **C NO. 3 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES**

### **How to Ask Faculty for Letters of Recommendation**

*It's never too soon to begin thinking about securing letters of recommendation from faculty members who have taught you in class or who know you through other means. You may need such letters as an undergraduate when you apply for scholarships, study abroad, internships, etc. and you will definitely need them to apply to graduate or professional school. Most faculty members keep these letters on hand and can update them later on as your needs change. Here are some important tips for securing these letters.*

#### **Faculty members want to recommend you!**

An important part of a faculty member's job is recommending students for graduate school, scholarships, jobs, etc. This is usually done by letter but can also be done over the telephone. Don't be nervous about asking for recommendations, but do think carefully about whom to ask and do provide all necessary information about what you are applying for well ahead of time.

#### **Choosing your recommenders**

Choose faculty who know you well and who will have good things to say about you—teachers, research directors, employers, or advisors, for whom you did your best work or who saw you at moments of transformation or other kinds of achievement. Most faculty are willing to speak frankly about the type of recommendation they could write and may ask you what you want them to cover. Make sure the person you've chosen is willing to write an enthusiastic letter on your behalf. You may want to select an array of letter writers who can capture your best sides: for example, someone with whom you did research, someone for whom you worked as a student aide, someone who had you in class. The choice of recommenders depends, of course, on what you are applying for and how you want to represent yourself.

#### **Ask in advance and in person**

Asking for a letter in person is more courteous and more useful since you and the faculty member can then discuss your plans and the letter's possible content. Try to give your recommenders at least one month notice regarding deadlines for recommendations—more time is also appreciated.

#### **Materials for the letter of recommendation**

Some faculty members have checklists for letters of recommendation; others need specific materials for certain types of letters. Ask each faculty member what he or she needs from you in order to write a letter, but be prepared to offer these items:

- ✓ a description of the program or scholarship or position for which you are applying;
- ✓ a list of the email/physical addresses to which recommendations should be mailed to and/or websites where they must be submitted;
- ✓ a current resumé;
- ✓ any forms required for the recommendation;
- ✓ a copy of your statement of purpose.

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### How to Ask Faculty for Letters of Recommendation, continued

#### **Stamped, addressed envelopes or not?**

Make sure you know if the recommendation must be mailed as a letter. If so, it is not always necessary to provide stamped, addressed envelopes for the letters. Many faculty recommenders prefer to send recommendations in their own stationery envelopes. Ask each of your recommenders what they want you to do about envelopes if you must submit a hard copy.

#### **To waive or not to waive: waive!**

Most graduate schools and scholarship programs require applicants to sign a form stating whether they do or do not waive access to the letter upon the completion of the application process. It is strongly recommended that students choose the “do waive” option, since confidential letters are viewed as more reliable.

#### **Electronic references**

When the letter recommendation is to be turned in electronically make sure to check whether your faculty recommender has received the email invitation with link, password, etc. or not, as sometimes these get lost in spam filters.

#### **Email reminders**

It is generally a good idea to send occasional email reminders to the faculty members who are writing letters for you. This is something you can arrange with each recommender when you present your materials. However, stay courteous and do not send frequent emails! Usually a single reminder a week before the due date should suffice.

#### **Follow up with the institution to which you are applying**

Well before the deadline, be sure to check with the institution to which you applied to make sure all letters have been received. A reminder marked “urgent” to the faculty recommender may be necessary if the letter has not been received.

#### **Thank-you notes and results**

A “thank you” note or email when the process is complete is always appreciated. You do NOT need to give thank-you gifts! Faculty members are eager to hear about acceptances (and rejections) and really appreciate hearing from you throughout your education, career, etc. Keep in touch!

#### **Asking for recommendations more than once**

Once you have asked a faculty member for a letter, that letter will be on file and can be updated for later requests, so it is not usually a problem for a faculty member to provide letters on more than one occasion and at a later date. Provide a narrative of your more recent activities and accomplishments so that the letter can be updated appropriately.

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