

GUIDE TO WRITING A PERSONAL ESSAY, LETTER OF INTENT OR PERSONAL STATEMENT

PART 2: HOW TO WRITE AN EFFECTIVE PERSONAL ESSAY, LETTER OF INTENT OR PERSONAL STATEMENT

RESEARCH THE SCHOOL AND PROGRAM TO WHICH YOU ARE APPLYING

Do a thorough search of the university's web site, and program's web pages. Look at the school, the location, the faculty, the courses, research and publications of program professors, their areas of expertise, and what opportunities for experiential or extracurricular learning are available. Think about the goals of the program that interest you and the reasons why you want to enter this specific program of study.

RESEARCH THE CAREER POSSIBILITIES ASSOCIATED WITH YOUR INTERESTS AND FUTURE STUDIES

Talk with your academic advisor, your professors, take out some books from the **Career Resource Centre** <http://www.concordia.ca/students/success/career-planning-services/career-resources.html> or attend **CAPS workshops** <http://www.concordia.ca/students/success/career-planning-services.html>. Make sure this is the area of study and the program that will meet your career goals.

READ THE DIRECTIONS FOR YOUR ESSAY OR LETTER CAREFULLY. If you have questions about content, length or format, contact the university or program office to get clarification.

HOW DOES YOUR EXPERIENCE LINK TO THIS PROGRAM?

Think about how your previous experiences— academic, extra-curricular and professional— relate to the program and about the personal strengths and accomplishments that you bring to it. Convince your readers that *their* school, *their* program is what *you* need because you have specific interests, aptitudes and goals.

EXPLORE YOUR IDEAS FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Take time to explore different ideas from different perspectives, keeping in mind the directions/questions given in the application package. Try to be creative and engaging. Perhaps you will discover something about yourself or your context that will make your statement or letter stand out from everyone else's and help the Selection Committee see you as an individual and not just one of hundreds wanting admission to the program.

1. **BRAINSTORM** a list of topics like career goals, academic achievements, volunteer work, interests and achievements especially as they relate to the program that you want to get into. Come up with as many topics as you can such as your goals, personal qualities, skills, training, education
2. **WRITE FREELY** about your personal experiences as they relate to the topics in your list. To keep your ideas flowing freely, imagine that you are talking to a friend or a member of your family
3. **WRITE A STORY** about yourself that shows something special about your experience or interest in the subjects you'll be studying. For example, if you want to study photography and gained experience in taking pictures for your high school year book, write about one of those experience

MAKE AN OUTLINE

Before you write, make an outline. Make a brief statement to indicate the theme for each section or question. Use the university's instructions as the skeleton for your outline. Each paragraph should have a distinct topic, address specific information and follow a theme.

FIND A THEME or IDEA THAT WILL UNIFY YOUR TEXT Your text should create a story about you that follows a thread, builds on a theme. Your text should not read like a grocery list of your achievements, assets and goals. Make it personal. You've always been curious.... you 'got the bug' for politics in high school... you took care of an injured bird as a kid.... You've lived in many countries, and are passionate about helping others adapt better when arriving in Canada.... You grew up with a sick parent, and want to help children cope better.... You've always been a writer, actor, designer.... You did some volunteer work that opened your eyes.... These are just a few examples of starting places for your 'story' that can be build upon, creating a unified, genuine, personal, yet informative text.

A WORD ABOUT TONE If you are not excited by the content of your text, your reader won't be, either. Whatever your 'story', be genuine and engaging. Tell the truth about your assets and achievements. Don't just list your qualities; let the important things you've accomplished illustrate how you are vital, independent, resilient, creative, optimistic, dedicated and thoughtful. Turn the negatives or challenges in your life into positives. Show how you are a problem solver!

WRITE WHEN YOU ARE FEELING GOOD ABOUT YOURSELF Your confidence will come through in your writing; your words will come to life. Before you begin your essay, write a letter to a friend or one of your professors, explaining why you should be in the program. This will help you develop an appropriate frame of mind for writing your essay and will get you thinking about the information you might include. If you prefer composing the first drafts of term papers by hand, rather than on the computer, or if you write better in a quiet rather than a noisy atmosphere, follow the same practice when you write your essay.

PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO YOUR OPENING AND CLOSING STATEMENTS The first few sentences set the tone of your paper and create a mind-set for your reader. They will influence the manner in which he or she reads the entire essay. The closing statement should leave a refreshing aftertaste, the last thing your reader will remember about you.

MAKE YOUR ESSAY CONCISE BUT ELOQUENT You are more likely to have trouble keeping within the required length than struggling to reach it. Get to the point. Use the language you ordinarily speak; don't consult your thesaurus to find more academic sounding language. Be enthusiastic. Let your reader know that you are keen on attaining your goals and that you are proud of what you have already accomplished.

READ YOUR WRITING OUT LOUD If you can't easily read it, revise! Gasping for air? Shorten your sentence. Does the writing sound contrived? Edit! Make it easy, and pleasant, for your reader to learn about you.

LEAVE YOUR TEXT FOR A FEW DAYS and then have another look at it. Make any changes needed.

GET FEED BACK FROM A VARIETY OF SOURCES

- ask a friend, roommate, a graduate student or one of your professors to read your statement or letter and comment on it. Revise again in light of new ideas
- ask a writing professional for feedback. Make an appointment with a Learning Specialist or book an appointment with a Writing Assistant. <http://www.concordia.ca/students/success/learning-support/writing-assistance.html>
- find a good editor. Listen to what he or she has to tell you about style. A good editor can identify problems that you missed, such as instances when you have been too wordy

PROOFREAD YOUR TEXT VERY CAREFULLY

A spelling mistake, a 'cut and paste' gone wrong, an incomplete sentence, can be easily missed and gives a bad first impression. Details matter.