

## WRITING YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

Autobiographical information is relied upon to distinguish between candidates of graduate or professional programs. Experience profiles, autobiographical application forms or statements of interest are prime considerations to some schools and programs once academic credentials are met. To others, they are one factor of many, including marks, letters of reference and admission test results.

### What does it take to prepare good answers or write a good statement?

- you need to be knowledgeable about the institution and program as well as your own attributes and goals.
- you should have a good understanding of the questions (what's really being asked) and have relevant experience to draw upon
- you should have good writing skills and give yourself sufficient time to prepare sincere, thoughtful and concise answers.

### Where do applicants go wrong in preparing autobiographical statements, supplementary application forms and experience profiles?

- By basing their responses on a superficial understanding of the nature and intent of the questions
- Having insufficient information about the programs to which they are applying and the careers that follow.
- By providing an exhaustive review of experience without showing its value and link to program/career goals.
- By failing to have a clear vision of their learning goals or career goals.

### The good news is that the steps to creating a fabulous application are strikingly similar to writing an essay. As in essay writing, it is essential to:

- present your information in a logical order,
- provide proof to support the content, and
- unify points around an underlying theme.

The remainder of this document will guide you through the process of writing your personal statement or supplementary portions of the application process.

## 1. UNDERSTAND THE KEY OBJECTIVES OF THE PROCESS

For the moment, let's step into the shoes of the folks who design and administer admission and selection processes, and let's imagine what their concerns must be.

Their role is very similar to those of employers, who have a real stake in the successes and outcomes of the people they hire. What characterizes an ideal applicant for a professional or graduate school program? For every admissions coordinator or team the answer is the applicant who demonstrates clear potential for completing the program and succeeding in the workplace as a graduate.

## 2. DO YOUR RESEARCH

A common mistake made by applicants is beginning to write before doing the necessary research. It is easy to overlook the need for research when we begin to write about a topic as familiar as ourselves. But application processes ask us to write about particular information about ourselves in a way that is new and sometimes uncomfortable. How often do we sit down to communicate our hopes for the future and successes from our past to someone we've never met? How often do we practice doing that in writing?

There are clearly three research tasks facing an applicant:

- The career/profession,
- The program and school to which the application is being made,
- Experience, qualifications, and qualities of the applicant.

### RESEARCHING THE CAREER / PROFESSION

Setting aside the time to research the career/profession will help you fully understand what the necessary skills and characteristics are to be successful in the position. Furthermore, it will help clarify whether this career is a good fit with your interests, personality, values, and lifestyle expectations; thus help you with step three in the research tasks.

- Review job descriptions to determine themes in requested competencies.
- Access Career Cruising to research up-to-date, comprehensive, Canadian sources of career information
- Conduct informational interviews and make contacts in the field

### RESEARCHING PROGRAMS & SCHOOLS

The goals of conducting program research are twofold: to gain clarity and insight into the criteria that programs will use to determine applicants' potential fit and to gain the information required to answer questions that directly measure applicants' knowledge of a program. To accomplish this task consider:

- Reviewing program content, program objectives, and research or specialties of the department
- Speaking with program staff, faculty, students and grads.
- Reading school information to learn about strategic directions, new research grants, resource allocation and student supports
- Arranging a personal visit.

### ASSESSING YOURSELF

This is the effort that generates most of the content of an autobiographical application form. Completing a thorough, systematic review of past experiences (including experiences in school, at work, and in extracurricular) pays big dividends. It provides the detailed data necessary to answer application questions and can be instrumental in developing insight into the value of these experiences as evidence of suitability to a given career and program.

- Consider first constructing a detailed, comprehensive list of activities over the past five or more years, broken into sensible categories such as Education, Employment, and Other.

# PROFESSIONAL

- Next, analyze each experience by writing answers for each of the following questions:
  - Why did I choose to participate in this activity?
  - What did I do? What did I learn?
  - What did I enjoy? What did I contribute? What did other people say I did well?
  - What did I accomplish, succeed at or achieve?

## 3. DEVELOP YOUR STRATEGY

Reviewing autobiographical information to develop an application strategy and determine one's qualifications is the final step before beginning to write. It is simply the step of putting together information about past experiences with knowledge of the kinds of skills, knowledge, characteristics and experiences a program considers vital to success.

A simple table is often helpful in organizing the information, for example:

List all the program criteria or requirements (your research on the program and career path)	List possible experiences as proof of criteria or qualifications.

The purpose of a table of this kind is to first list all the possibilities in order to strategically choose amongst them for best overall effect. To make choices among the possible experiences an applicant could include the 3 R's of experiences:

- those that are the most related (similar environments, people and tasks),
- the most responsible,
- and ideally also the most recent.

## 4. NOW YOU ARE READY TO WRITE

With research done and a sound strategy in place, it is finally time to begin the writing process. The collective experience and wisdom of many writers and reviewers of application forms suggests the following:

- When you do write, remember to be insightful – to focus on what you learned or demonstrated through a situation, rather than simply listing the details or duties involved.
- Be sure to make the links between the skills and the experiences clear by showing proof. Before you write about any experience, be sure of your purpose in including it.
- Consider the approach of being selective, rather than comprehensive.
- Remember to focus on the peaks of your experiences – your reader will assume you've done the preliminaries.
- Be sincere, concise and to the point. Don't over or undersell yourself.
- And above all, answer the questions.
- And the bottom line: your application must be letter perfect in grammar, spelling and style.

## FINAL CHECKLIST – TIPS ON WRITING AN EXCELLENT APPLICATION...

- Give yourself lots of time. Start early
- Research before you begin to write
- Know why you are including an experience before you begin to write about it.
- Be clear about your goals and your reasons for admission.
- Provide the reader with insight into what drives you
- Remember to be analytical rather than simply descriptive – it's your job to identify and communicate the value of your experiences.
- Be selective. Show them your best stuff.
- Be yourself. Use your own words and your own style.
- Proofread carefully for grammar, syntax, punctuation, word usage, and style

## SUPPORTS AND SERVICES AT STUDENT SUCCESS CENTRE:

The Student Success Centre offers individual career advising, career counselling and workshops and programs to help you explore your career and educational options.

### Career Development Advising Appointment

Advisors can help with job search support, further education questions, career information, building experiences, and helping you find the right services and resources. Graduate school application support is available. You can schedule an advising appointment (30 min) [on OSCARplus](#)

### Career Counselling Appointment

Career counselling helps you strategically define your career path and develop a career development plan. Use this appointment to examine your values, interests, and skills, and to develop self-directed career and education goals. Graduate school application support is available. You can schedule a career counselling appointment [on OSCARplus](#) in Gilmour Hall 110. Appointments are 50 minutes in length.

### Alumni Career Counselling Appointment

The Alumni Career Counsellor is available for one hour appointments in person in the Student Success Centre, or by phone, Skype or email. Book an appointment by calling our resource centre to schedule an appointment at 905-525-9140 ext. 24254 or can schedule an appointment [on OSCARplus](#)