

Writing Your Personal Statement

What does it take to prepare good answers to application questions? To be successful, you need to first be knowledgeable about the institution, program, and your attributes and goals. Next, you should have a good understanding of the questions (what's really being asked), have relevant experience to draw upon, good writing skills and sufficient time to prepare sincere, thoughtful and concise answers.

So where do many 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, together with 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 career goals.
- By failing to have a clear career goal.

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 should help demystify the application process. Consider attending the "How to Write your Personal Statement Workshop" in Career Services to get additional guidance on this process.

Step One: 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.

Step Two: 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 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:

1. the career/profession,
2. the program and school to which the application is being made,
3. 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 (located in the Resource Centre section at (<http://careers.mcmaster.ca>).
- Conduct information interviews and make contacts in the field; for a database of contacts access Career Links on the Career Services website.

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 literature provided by the programs themselves.
- Speaking with program staff, faculty, students and grads.
- Reading alumni publications and school newspapers to find up to date information on campus issues, strategic directions, new research grants and resource allocation
- Reviewing articles and books that provide program rankings.
- Arranging a personal visit.

Assessing Yourself

This is the effort that generates most of the content of an autobiographical application form, while research into the career and the program is necessary to determine the criteria for making selections amongst this content. Completing a thorough, systematic review of past life 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 your skills, abilities, strengths and 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. Next, analyze each experience by writing answers for each of the following six 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?

Of the utmost importance in assessing yourself is arriving at a career goal. However, defining a goal often seems to be the most elusive aspect of all – but it too is achievable when broken down into a series of steps involving the careful consideration of personal and career information.

Step Three: 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, by listing in one column all the program criteria or requirements, and in another, all the possible experiences an applicant could use as proof of fulfilling them. Many criteria can be determined by a close reading of the application form. Others may be more subtle and apparent only to the applicants who have taken the time and effort to do the thorough research outlined in Step Two. 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 amongst the possible experiences an applicant could include, students should consider using 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.

Step Four: 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. A simple formula to consider is:” Through _____ (an experience) I demonstrated/learned _____ (a skill, an insight) with _____ (a successful result).”
- Consider the approach of being selective, rather than comprehensive. To the reviewer of many applications, comprehensive means reading about everything, which means hard work.
- 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, do answer the questions. Be sure to include, wherever possible, the situation/task, the action you took (be specific, especially if you worked in a group) and the result.
- And the bottom line: it almost goes without saying that your application must be letter perfect in grammar, spelling and style.

Final tips on writing an excellent application....

- Give yourself lots of time. Start early.
- Approach it like a research project on the topic of “My Qualifications”.
- 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.
- Remember to be analytical rather than simply descriptive – it is 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.

<http://careers.mcmaster.ca/tools/fyi/writing-your-personal-statement>