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WRITING ESSAYS FOR APPLICATIONS FOR POST-BACCALAUREATE STUDY AND SCHOLARSHIPS

This handout is addressed to upper-class students who are seriously thinking about attending medical or law school, or who have decided to apply to graduate school. It can also be helpful to students applying for scholarships related to post-baccalaureate studies. This handout focuses on the personal statements and essays applicants are usually asked to submit as part of the application process.

For reasons I'll address in a moment, students have a tendency to put off writing such essays until the last minute. While such procrastination is understandable, it is not very wise. A poorly conceived or slapdash essay can directly work against your chances of being accepted at the institutions of your choice. Conversely, a strong essay will greatly enhance the odds of your being admitted to the school you want to attend. So the primary message to you is

- read over this handout NOW to get a better sense of a positive way to approach these personal statements/essays;
- plan to do the kind of preliminary work I recommend for these essays NOW; there is lots you can and should do even before you start filling out application forms.

The rest of this handout is designed to address those issues that encourage you to procrastinate, and it provides concrete, specific strategies for gathering the information you need to write a powerful essay, as well as strategies for drafting such essays.

TAKING A PROFESSIONAL STANCE

Preparing an essay for an application for post-baccalaureate study can be highly anxiety-provoking. Most of us feel uncomfortable writing about ourselves, and this discomfort can be increased if we perceive an essay as an occasion for "bragging about" our accomplishments or "selling ourselves" to an admissions committee. Moreover, essays that ask us to address our career goals (which they often do) can increase the stress by tapping into our uncertainties and doubts about our plans for the future, and insecurities we may feel about doing graduate-level work.

While all these feelings are quite natural, they are not very propitious for writing a strong essay. How you "come across" in your essay is crucial, but a posture or stance that betrays a sense of inadequacy or unsureness, or one that overcompensates for it, will not work in your best interest. To write a strong essay, you will need a strong, confident stance. One that I encourage you to

take is what I'll call a professional stance, and the key to this stance is your recognizing that, while an admissions or scholarship committee is making choices, so are you. While it is the job of the committee to select those candidates that seem most promising, your job is going to be to tell this committee why YOU have decided that this program of study, this school, is the right one for YOU.

Helpful in adopting a professional stance is an old business concept, "goodness of fit." A model for employment decisions, "goodness of fit" suggests that both a company and an employee are going to be most satisfied when there is a "fit" between the needs and goals of the company and the personal needs and goals of the employee. In the area of graduate study, your background in a field is, of course, important to the school to which you are applying. But just as important to it are your attitudes and needs--your desire to learn, your motivation to complete the program, your commitment to the field or profession. And such motivation and commitment come from conscious decisions you've made for yourself about your personal goals for yourself, and the part graduate work plays in your reaching these goals.

In other words, you want to focus on your own decision-making processes. If you enroll in any graduate-level program, YOU are making a major PERSONAL investment and commitment. You are committing YOUR time, YOUR energy, YOUR money to acquire knowledge, skills, and experiences that YOU deem important because they take you closer to YOUR aspirations. You should be examining specific aspects of graduate programs in light of the skills and knowledge and expertise YOU want and need. And you should CHOOSE to apply to particular schools because of the advantages YOU see these schools offering YOU.

The preliminary stages of writing essays for graduate programs and scholarships (see page 3) provide you with the opportunity to examine and work through your motivations, your needs, your desires--not simply in terms of a set program of study, but, more importantly, in terms of the ways that such a program of study fits with your long-range aspirations, the kind of work that is going to give you a sense of personal accomplishment and satisfaction. The advantages of working these issues out on paper are two-fold. As they give you a chance to decide if graduate work is right for you and, if it is, what type of graduate program best offers you what you want, you will be recording the kind of information that will be the substance of any essay you write.

When you are ready to start drafting essays for particular schools, you will be giving admissions committees insights into your decision-making processes--those motives, values, and aspirations that have led you, at this point in time, to pursue advanced study. Details about your various accomplishments, activities, and experiences will be there to illustrate and concretize these more abstract points. In short, you will be giving admissions committees a portrait of yourself as a specific, unique individual. Your essay will be strong not only because you are the only person who could have written it, but also because you present yourself as one who has given careful thought to this decision and that, as a consequence, you have the motivation and commitment it will take to be a successful graduate student.

Before we leave this all-important matter of adopting a professional stance, there is one other way in which the concept of goodness of fit can help you cope with anxieties that surround completing these applications. There are two ways you can prepare yourself to cope with the possibility of not being accepted by particular schools. One, of course, is to see such decisions as rejections—proof of your inadequacies and unworthiness. But, if you look at them from a

professional stance, you can view such decisions by an admissions committee as a sign that this school or program was not right for you. It is very possible that you yourself would not have been happy in that program, that you would not "fit" in, and, therefore, that your personal needs, desires, and expectations would not have been met. To increase the chances of a goodness of fit between you and a specific graduate program, it makes sense for you to give admissions committees as clear and honest a picture as you can of what you want, need, and expect of their programs.

WORKING ON YOUR ESSAY

In the Writing Center I have had a great deal of experience working with students on essays for applications for post-baccalaureate study, and I've found that the process is most likely to produce a good, strong essay if you go through each of the three stages outlined here in the order in which they are laid out.

I repeat—you should be working on the preliminary stages of the essay-writing process at the same time that you are contemplating advanced study, at the same time that you are consulting with faculty and people active in the field or profession, gathering information about possible degrees and programs.

Stage #1: Preliminary Stages of the Essay-Writing Process—Freewriting

At this stage of the process you have two interrelated goals:

- In this stage you will be finding your professional stance by clarifying for yourself your career goals and objectives, your motivations for pursuing graduate work, and the type of programs that will best suit your needs.
- At the same time, the freewriting you do will be the most efficient way of recording the information—especially concrete and specific details—about yourself that will set your essay off from those of others and reveal you as a unique individual.

In a moment I'll provide a series of "prompts" that will get you started. But for this stage of the process to work as it should, there are a few vital "rules" that you should keep in mind:

- A freewrite is just what the term implies. At this stage you must shut off any critical voices in your head. Don't edit out ideas. Try to overcome any self-consciousness you have. Don't try to write "good prose," and put aside all concerns about grammar and the like. Your aim is to record what is going on in your mind, no matter how disorganized, or silly, or irrelevant your thoughts may seem. You will choose how much, if any, of this freewriting you show to another person.
- Since concrete, specific details will be important to the final version of your essay, you will work particularly hard to capture in words as much as you can of those concrete events and moments that pop into your mind as you are writing.
- Look at this stage as an on-going process. That is, plan to do a series of freewrites over a period of weeks, spending 15 or 20 minutes on them at a stretch. Rereading what you've already written will probably prompt more thoughts.
- Do NOT, under any circumstances, erase or throw away entries or parts of entries. If you don't agree with something you've just written, say that and try again.

What follows are prompts to get you started. They are only prompts. You should not restrict yourself to these topics, nor should you feel obliged to write about all of them. As you get information about “topics” that specific schools ask you to write about, you may need to do further freewrites to cover topics you didn’t consider in this first round.

Prompts for Freewrites:

- Imagine yourself "on the job" 10 or 15 years from now. In the most ideal of all ideal worlds, what kind of activities would you be engaged in? What would you be doing during your work day ?
- What kind of work or activities give you the most personal satisfaction?
- What leads you to believe that you'd be good at the kind of work you want to do? Think about character or personality traits, talents you have, as well as specific skills you've developed.
- Write about those experiences that have led you to consider a particular career or profession. Think about experiences in school and extra-curricular activities. Think about your high school years as well as these you've spent in college.
- Think about events, experiences, moments that have dramatically affected you. How have they changed you? Are they related to your current desires and goals for yourself?
- What do you consider to be your most significant accomplishment? Why? How has it affected your desires and goals?
- What do you consider to be the greatest failure in you life until now? How have you dealt with it?
- Consider you personal learning style and work habits. In post-baccalaureate study, you'll be expected to be a self-directed learner. Will this present problems for you? How do you plan to cope? Where do you find the motivation to get work done?
- What knowledge, skills, and background do you ALREADY have that would contribute to your success in the work you want to do?
- What kinds of knowledge, skills, or experiences do you NOT currently have that you expect graduate work to provide? Be as concrete and specific as you can.
- Talk to yourself about uncertainties and doubts you have about the kind of work you think you want to do.
- Talk to yourself about your doubts, your fears, your anxieties about doing advanced work.
- Consider specific degrees or programs you are contemplating. Be as specific as possible about the appeal each has for you. Now make a list of the drawbacks of each.

Stage #2: Drafting Your Essay

At least a month, if not 6 weeks, before you intend to submit your applications, it is time to start drafting your essay(s).

Your objective at this stage of the process is

to develop a unified and coherent ROUGH draft that you ask others to read and respond to (these "others" will most definitely include faculty members and people you may know who are active in the field, especially individuals you are asking to write letters of recommendation; they may also include friends and consultants in the Writing Center, and counselors in 3CE).

In a moment I'll give some tips for getting through this stage, but let's stay with your objectives for a moment:

- You will, at this stage, have to consider specific questions or topics individual applications ask you to address. But you may be able to develop a basic "boilerplate" essay that you can modify for individual schools. It's worth writing down all questions/topics you will be addressing, and group them for this purpose. It is easy enough to copy-and-paste these topics into a master file on your computer.
- This essay is NOT going to be a laundry list of your accomplishments and experiences, nor will it be simple, chronological autobiography (unless an autobiography is asked for). Rather, your objective is to find one point or idea—a theme, if you will—that you will develop into an extended response to the topic or question (e.g., why you've decided to study law or medicine or political science, or why a particular event in your life was so significant). This point, idea, or theme will guide choices you make about what you say and how you organize your ideas.
- Do plan to include lots of concrete details to illustrate and give examples of your general points.
- Do NOT worry about length. Since you may cut out the very things you ought to be saying, let the draft run long, assuming that you will shorten it when you reach Stage 3 (Refining and Polishing Your Essay).

Tips for Reaching These Objectives:

- Before you begin, set a deadline (at least two or three weeks before you plan to submit your application) for giving your draft to others.
- With a printed copy of ALL your freewriting, find a quiet place where you will not be interrupted for an hour or two. Read over your freewrites with two things in mind:
 - possible themes or main points;
 - important details (you may want to highlight these).
- Plan on writing a series of drafts, and also plan to work from whole to part. Express your central point or theme in one sentence, then sketch out an outline of the whole essay.
- As you write, develop statements that elaborate on this main point, that explain it. For this reason, they will focus on your perceptions, your values, your beliefs; you'll fill in with details. Main clauses of your sentences should look like this:

From this experience I learned. . .

My objectives were to. . .

I have valued this work because. . .

- Remember that this is a DRAFT. Don't sweat the small stuff, and leave your options open. If you aren't sure about sentences, details, etc., just mark them (underline, boldface, italicize).
- On a separate sheet of paper, make a list of questions and concerns you want to discuss with your readers. Your list may include things that it might not be wise for you to say, or issues you think you should address (e.g., low grades in certain courses, borderline standardized test scores, leaves of absence, etc.).
- When you give your draft to others, tell them that it is still ROUGH, and emphasize that you need their reactions to the CONTENT and STRUCTURE of the essay.

Stage #3: Refining and Polishing Your Essay

You'll be ready to refine and polish when you have a solid rough draft, which is

- one that says everything you want to say
- in the order in which you've said it.

At this point your objectives will be

- to meet the length requirements for the essay.
- to make sure that the entire essay flows (that is, that one paragraph leads naturally into the next, that each sentence clearly relates to the previous one).
- to make each sentence as tight as you can by eliminating flab

NOT:

I worked as a camp counselor for four years. In this position I learned a great deal. I discovered how important it is to cooperate with others, as well as how to respond effectively in emergencies.

RATHER:

In the four years I was a counselor at Happy Valley Camp, I learned how to work cooperatively with others as well as how to respond effectively in emergencies.

Notice how the revised statement focuses on something that happened inside of you.

- eliminate ALL problems and errors in word choice, usage, grammar, and mechanics.

It is CRUCIAL that the essay you submit has NO errors. Line up at least three different people whose knowledge of writing you trust to scrutinize your essays for such errors, and have them look it over after you have carefully copyedited and proofread it yourself.