Preparing to Write a Personal Statement or Application Essay

The personal statement or application essay for graduate school, scholarships, Fulbright grants, etc. can be difficult to write. This handout is designed to help you with the first step, generating some concrete ideas and examples that you can draw on when sitting down to write that first draft. See also the Center for Writing and Speaking’s handout “W37 Writing the Graduate School Application Essay.”

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 interested 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?

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.