

Guidelines for Writing a Letter of Intent

The letter of intent or personal statement is a standard component of most graduate and professional school applications.

Application essays give you an opportunity to explain -- through narrative, example, and analysis -- aspects of your personal, educational, and professional history that may have led you to pursue an advanced degree at a particular institution. Admissions committees rely heavily on these essays to put a face on impersonal test scores and grade point averages.

For this reason, it's important for you to use details and thoughtful self-presentation to make your face one that stands out in a crowd. Your essay should demonstrate your ability to make connections between your experience, education, and the program you have chosen. The most challenging aspect of the application essay is making those connections in a relatively small amount of space.

Be focused. Take your cue first from the prompt given in the application form. If the prompt is very general or the questions scattered, decide what point you want to make overall: that you are a proven achiever, or that you can deal with challenges, or that you have something special to contribute to the profession....

Be coherent. Being "together" is a quality of writing as well as of character. A clearly organized letter can create a picture of a clear-minded and sensible person. You might want to write from an [outline](#) or a diagram of main points. At least check the topic sentences of each [paragraph](#) in your finished piece to see if they make a logical sequence.

Be interpretive. You need to make an impression concisely, so don't use your letter just to repeat the facts set out in other parts of the application. Provide explicit answers for the question that arises in the mind of any reader. Use nouns and adjectives that name qualities (*outgoing, curiosity, confident*) and verbs that show action (*coordinated, investigated, tried*). Make an effort to find the exact right ones to suit the evidence you are offering.

Be specific. There's no point making claims unless you can back them up. Refer to the fact lists in other parts of your application ("as my academic record shows"), but be sure to offer enough examples in your letter so that it can stand on its own. Say that they are just instances, not your whole proof ("An incident from last summer is an example..."). The concrete language you use for these specific references will also balance the generalizing words of your interpretive points.

Be personal. Your letter substitutes for an interview. In effect, the readers have asked you to tell stories, mention details, expand on facts. So mention things you might not have put into the rest of the application--your ethnic background or political interests, even. Don't be afraid to mention problems or difficulties; stress

how you overcame them. Use "I" rather than phrases like "this writer" or "my experience" or "was experienced by me."

References:

The Writing Center, University of Wisconsin. Application Essays from:
http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/apessay_overview.html

How to Write an Effective Admission Letter from:
<http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/admiss.html>