

GUIDE TO WRITING A PERSONAL ESSAY, LETTER OF INTENT OR PERSONAL STATEMENT

PART 1: THE PERSONAL ESSAY, LETTER OF INTENT or PERSONAL STATEMENT

WHAT IS IT?

The Personal Essay (PE), also called a Letter of Intent (LI) or Personal Statement (PS), is a piece of writing about you and explains why you are a very good candidate for an academic program, scholarship or job, and why the program, scholarship or job is right for you. You might write it to describe your values, qualities and abilities or to explain why you want to enter a particular academic program, need funding or want to work for a particular organization. **For the purposes of this hand out, we will assume you are writing as part of your application to graduate school or other academic program.**

WHAT IS THE FORMAT?

A Letter of Intent is not a letter, but rather, a short text, usually no more than 2 pages, answering the questions outlined in the application package.

A Personal Essay is not a formal essay, but follows the structure of introduction, body and conclusion, connecting to the content/information requested by the selection committee.

For either, at the top of the page, you should identify yourself, and specify to what you are applying, give the date and include your application number (if applicable). No salutation is required.

WHEN DO YOU WRITE IT?

Most often, you are writing the PE or LI as part of your application package, which has a deadline. You might write the PE or LI over several weeks, even months, in advance of the deadline. You want time to do your research, write a few drafts, and get lots of feedback from friends, mentors, your referees, professors or from Writing Assistance. <http://www.concordia.ca/students/success/learning-support/writing-assistance.html>

WHO WANTS IT?

The people who want this information about you, and your intentions, are usually members of a selection committee who have the task of choosing the best applicants. The purpose of the Personal Essay or Letter of Intent is to give them a chance to get to know you as an individual, to see the person behind the application form. They already have your transcripts and your CV, so now they want more personal information about you. They also want to know how effectively you express yourself in writing, how you identify and prioritize your values, personal qualities and abilities, and how you correlate what you have to offer with what they need.

READ THE DIRECTIONS VERY CAREFULLY. DON'T ASSUME ANYTHING.

If there are specific directions in the application package, read them carefully and make sure you give the committee what they ask for. Make sure you answer the questions the university wants you to answer; don't make do with an essay or letter you already wrote for some other university just to save time and energy. If you have any doubts about the intent of a question or even of a word, contact the university and ask for clarification. Be prepared to answer questions such as: 'what interests you about our program?', 'what experiences have you had related to this field of study?', 'what are your strengths and weaknesses?' and 'what do you see yourself doing after you graduate?'

WHAT IF THE DIRECTIONS ARE NOT PRECISE?

If the university gives only general instructions, such as *Write a personal statement of no more than 500 words*, think about the goals of the program that interests you and the reasons why you want to enter this program of study. Think about how your previous experiences— academic, extra-curricular and professional— relate to the program and about the personal strengths that you bring to it. Use these ideas to help you sketch a plan for your statement. Stick to the length requested.

WHAT IS YOUR PURPOSE IN WRITING A PERSONAL ESSAY OR LETTER OF INTENT?

Your writing should help the selection committee see what your experiences and goals are and why you want to be in their program. Show your readers what you have done and explain what you hope to gain from their program. Use your letter as an opportunity to sell yourself to the Committee. Be honest, be engaging, and positive. Let your personality come through.

QUALITY VS QUANTITY

Make sure your letter is well written. Some selection committees use a Letter of Intent to see how well applicants can write, so make sure your letter is clearly written and free of errors. Use a simple, concise style. Avoid clichés and gimmicky introductions. Write about yourself in the first person. Put your ideas into **your own words**.

For more about how to write a Personal Statement, Personal Essay or Letter of Intent,
See: **PART 2: HOW TO WRITE AN EFFECTIVE PERSONAL ESSAY,
LETTER OF INTENT OR PERSONAL STATEMENT**