

LETTER OF INTENT/AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LETTER

FOR UNIVERSITY APPLICATIONS

Getting Started

- Start early!
- Find out from your university exactly what is required. Don't just find this information out second-hand and don't assume that several universities require the same kind of letter.
- Consult with students who are already in your chosen program at the university. Consult people working in the field too, if possible. Try to find out as much as you can about the kind of person your program is looking for. Your letter should also reflect a realistic view of the field.
- Only write a letter of intent if the program application requires one.

Format and Style

- Check the guidelines for aspects covered.
- Address all the components required, but leave out any irrelevant details. Be concise.
- Be passionate about your field but not insincere or cheesy or cute. Avoid clichés, idioms, slang and euphemisms.
- Your writing style must be your own; however, try to make it interesting.
- Vary your sentences; not every sentence should begin with "I."
- Spin and emphasize positive achievements. Avoid the negative or show improvements and reflection.
- Use formal language but a relaxed and personal tone. Try to balance clarity and a unique style.
- Use active verbs, not passive.
- Be clear, concise, relevant and interesting. The people reading it will take at most one minute per page, and because they have thousands to go through, they should be given a clear impression that you would definitely fit their profile and that you have unique characteristics.
- Use a clear, professional format: 8.5 x 11 white paper and envelope, 12 pt. Times New Roman font.
- Proofread for spelling and grammar mistakes. Consult with your English teacher or The Learning Centre for help in editing. However, make sure your final version sounds natural; it must be your writing.
- Do not consult so many people that you become confused as to how to improve your letter. Choose one or two people to work with.
- Pay attention to the length required for the letter. Do not surpass the limit.
- Include a separate cover letter listing all documents (see attached sample cover letter).

Structure

- This is NOT a letter. It is an argumentative essay on why you would be perfect for the program.

- Think of the English Exit Exam essay:

Introduction with an interesting opening, thesis and main points

Body paragraphs with key qualities

Conclusion linking your qualities to the goal

- Each body paragraph develops an important quality for your career and program with key examples. Think of paragraph sandwiches:

Topic sentence with a quality

Example(s) of the quality in action and a short explanation of how the example(s) demonstrate the quality

Relevance of the quality; how it will help you be an excellent... (Career goal)

Content

Analyse what is asked for. You may in the end have to write several different letters depending on how many universities you are applying to. Journalism at Concordia, for example, calls for a description of "your background, interests, goals in journalism and how you feel a Journalism program will help you fulfill these goals." All these areas must be discussed. You will have to decide to what extent you will emphasize each part. In giving what is asked for, how can you present yourself as a well-rounded, interesting person who in the future will be able to make a worthwhile contribution?

Your main goal is to convince your reader that you have many qualities that would make you a real asset in this program and this field. Focus on the career you will be following (with their program or not), rather than your acceptance into the program as an end goal (i.e. when you are a doctor, not when you are accepted by McGill pre-med).

Try making a plan of what you want to say before starting to write. Which major points should you include that will show you as someone special? Decide which specific examples to include to back up your generalizations. Brainstorm before you begin, and think about your life: skills, talents, experiences and obstacles that may have influenced you.

- *Show – don't tell*

Demonstrate your qualities by describing the example; don't just tell us it's there.

Qualities: i.e. mature, analytical, involved, collaborator, leader, hard-worker, part of a diverse community

Examples: i.e. clubs, sports, activities, volunteer work, job skills and responsibilities, awards, publications

Beliefs: about your profession, the importance of academics, ethical behavior, hard work, initiative, etc.

- *Extracurricular Activities*

Make a list of all your activities. Which of these activities should you include? What do these activities suggest about you? When thinking about what activities to include, consider what kind of person your program is looking for.

- *Accomplishments*

Make a list of all your accomplishments, awards, prizes. Think about how you can introduce this information in your letter.

- *Talents*

What special talents and interests do you have? Most programs are looking for a well-rounded person who hasn't just focused on getting good grades. If you have talents in music, arts or sports, don't forget to mention them. Even knowledge of computers can be important, so don't take that for granted!

- *Background*

Consider your background and any languages you speak. If you operate in two or three languages, this is a definite plus. If you have lived in, and adjusted to different cultures, this experience should be talked about. What are the most striking points about your life? What does what has happened in your life tell about the kind of person you are?

- *Work Experience*

Consider any job you have had. Obviously a job that has required specialized skills is important to mention. If you have worked in, or volunteered for, a job in your chosen field, you will probably want to stress this. However, any job, even if not suited to your capabilities, can show you possess certain positive qualities. (However, it is not advisable when writing for McGill Medical School to stress work experience, particularly if it is done during school time, unless this experience is unusual.)

Your letter of intent is only read after you have made the initial cut, marks-wise. There is no need to mention your marks – they have those. It is everything else they need to know that is not obvious on your transcript (use the relevant information from your CV as examples).

- *Other questions to consider:*

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DO NOT:

- Take an essay from the Internet, or even borrow a few sentences here and there from something you find online. You don't want to be accused of plagiarism before you even start university! Besides, the university want to know about you.
- Write a "Boy Scout" essay – an essay that describes the ideal student using only generic characteristics and general examples that could apply to anyone.
- Use clichés that just sound good but don't actually give any useful information.
- Use abstract or empty words such as special, interesting or meaningful.
- Use predictable conclusions, such as, "I learned a lot," or "I benefited from working with others."

Keep in mind that there is no simple formula to get into your chosen school. Just write as well as you can, don't worry unnecessarily, and good luck!