

Graduate School Resumes, Goals Statements, Recommendation Letters

What are “they” looking for in your application?

Graduate programs look at your resume, goals statement, and recommendations for evidence of the following:

- You are prepared academically for graduate school generally and this program in particular.
- The program will be a good fit—you demonstrate an understanding of what the program offers and a sense of how that fits with your academic and professional goals.
- You will contribute to the program culture and reputation in positive ways.
- You have the professionalism and maturity to handle the academic and social aspects of graduate school.
- You are capable of working more independently than is generally expected at the undergraduate level.
- You will take a more active role in your courses and every aspect of your education than is generally expected at the undergraduate level.
- You are capable of the heavier and more complex reading, writing, conceptualization, and application required of graduate study.
- You are capable of the larger time commitment required to succeed at graduate study.
- Especially in the sciences: your interests fit with those of faculty available to take on new students at this time.
- You would be a good candidate for an assistantship (research, teaching, or otherwise).

Resumes

Are there requirements for formatting, categories, or set up for the resume or cv?

Consider the following categories:

- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| • Education | • Work (Teaching, Tutoring, Advising, Lab) Experience |
| • Relevant Coursework | • Professional Development |
| • Honors and Awards | • Academic and Community Service |
| • Publications | • Professional Memberships |
| • Conference Presentations | • Languages |
| • Grants | |

Ask someone who knows you to review your resume and help you remember what you’ve done

Consider using tables to set up columns and help with formatting

If sending electronically, save as a pdf

Goals Statements (aka Personal Statements)

Are there specific requirements?

Do they ask you to answer specific questions?

Goals Statements Require Time, Feedback, and Revision

- Begin writing early (months ahead of the deadline if possible)
- Check out online and library resources for specific advice for particular programs
- Work with a faculty mentor to receive feedback on drafts
- Consider personalizing the statement for each program
- Revise, Polish, Proofread

Do's and Don'ts in the Statement

- Do talk about specific interests
- Do tailor your statement to the particular program (faculty you might want to work with, aspects of the program you like)
- Do provide a sense of your short-term and long-term goals
- Do mention things that may make you an appealingly unique applicant if those things seem relevant
- Do “own your story”—provide a coherent narrative that demonstrates how your academic, extracurricular, and/or professional pursuits to now have prepared you for your goals and this program
- Don't use clichés
- Don't adopt a negative tone
- Don't include extraneous anecdotes

Note: If you have questions about what is expected in the goals statement, contact the program directly and discuss your questions with the graduate program director or advisor.

Recommendation Letters

Who to ask:

- Academic vs. Nonacademic
- Prestigious vs. Personalized

When to ask:

- As soon as possible
- Minimum two weeks' notice—two months is better
- If you plan to take time off, ask for letters right away and request they be updated later

How to ask:

Dear Professor Smith,

I am applying to graduate programs in Environmental Studies and Environmental Communication. Would you be willing to recommend me for graduate programs? I've included the list of schools and my timeline below. If you are willing and able, I am happy to meet with you to discuss my application, and/or to send you my resume/cv and personal statement if it would be helpful.

- Western Illinois University
 - M.A. in Environmental Studies (recommendations submitted online by 12/15/13)
- University of Nevada Reno
 - M.A. in Environmental Communication (recommendations postmarked by 1/20/13)

Thank you for your consideration,

Amy Mossman

What to provide:

Be willing to provide recommenders your resume or cv, a copy of your personal or goals statement, and any materials they need to write and send the letter (e.g., forms and deadlines, web or email addresses).

Be willing to direct them in what you'd like them to focus on (for example, your research and writing skills, your teaching skills, your ability to assume a leadership role in the lab, a particular project, award, etc.).

NOTE: Always waive your right to see recommendation letters. If you have concerns that someone may not write a strong letter, discuss these concerns up front.

Evaluating a Résumé or Curriculum Vita

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Format

- Hold the document at arm's length. Is the design visually appealing?
- Are margins at least 1 inch on all four sides?
- Is there a clear hierarchy, with primary and secondary focuses (e.g. subheads)?
- Does the document have a strong, consistent visual alignment?
- Does spacing keep items which should be grouped together, and make the division between sections clear?
- Are a limited number of fonts used (no more than one serif and one sans-serif)?
- Is white space on the resume not "trapped"—that is, does document alignment ensure that white space is contiguous?
- Does the document use no more than two readable fonts, between 10 and 12 point?
- Are printing and paper quality good?

Organization

- Is the résumé or vita organized using reverse chronological order (newest items first), functional order (using functions or skills), or a consistent combination of both?
- Is information for each item consistently organized and developed?
- Are categories easy to understand?
- Do categories follow the usual conventions?
- For vitae, is the general pattern of research, teaching, and service discernible?
- Are they consistently applied?
- For the information being presented, do the categories used make sense, or would other categories be more effective?
- Does organization highlight the writer's most impressive qualifications and skills?

Development and Clarity

- Is contact information for the writer and the references complete and accurate?
- If an objective is used:
 - Is it less than two sentences long?
 - Is it specific, focusing on the type of job the writer is seeking?
- For résumés tailored to a job description:
 - Are most, if not all, aspects of the description addressed?
 - Are employer's specific interests and needs recognized?
 - Is the language clear, specific, and appropriate for the job, internship, or application?
 - Does the writer successfully emphasize his or her qualifications?
 - Work experience?
 - Education?
 - Writing and communication skills?
 - Other skills: foreign languages, computer skills, leadership, etc.?
- Are desirable qualifications clearly part of the writer's background?
- Are descriptions of skills specific and detailed, yet not overly verbose?
- Is the resume or vita content well-considered?
- Appropriate for the section or category?
- Understandable out of context, but not too long or detailed?

Writing Style

- Is the word choice clear, economical, and accurate?
- Does the writer use past tense for past experience and present tense for current experience?
- Does the writer use active, specific verbs?
- Does the writer set up information following parallel structure? (That is, do items of equal importance use the same grammatical forms?)
- Are there any grammar or spelling errors?
- Is the punctuation correct and consistently used?
- Are abbreviations and acronyms used consistently?

Overall

- Are there any errors in punctuation, spelling, or in contact information? (Yes, this is repeated—this material needs to be double checked!)
- Is your overall impression of the résumé positive? (Is the candidate worth interviewing or accepting? What's your impression of the writer?)