

APPLYING TO GRAD & PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL

10/08/2025

Becky Anderson (she/her) – Centre for Career Development

Liz Newbery (she/her) – Writing and Communication Centre



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Centre for Career
Development

writing and
communication
centre



Territorial Acknowledgement

The University of Waterloo acknowledges that our work takes place on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinaabeg, and Haudenosaunee peoples. Our main campus is situated on the Haldimand Tract, the land cared for, stewarded by, and stolen from Six Nations, which includes six miles on each side of the Grand River. Our active work toward reconciliation takes place across our campuses through research, learning, teaching, and community building, and is coordinated within the Office of Indigenous Relations.



FURTHER EDUCATION FAIR

Connect with over 70 Canadian and
International schools all in one place!



TIME

11 a.m. - 2 p.m.

WHERE

SLC - Student
Life Centre



THURSDAY
**OCT
09**



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Centre for Career
Development

Learning goals

- Understand the genres of grad and professional school applications
- Explore some example texts
- Understand the key steps to applying
- Share ideas



Question:

What is the purpose of the statement?

What does it need to be?



- an argument for scholarly or professional potential
- a persuasive piece of writing (not a list of accomplishments)

Big Picture



PURPOSE



AUDIENCE



GENRE



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Centre for Career
Development

INTRODUCTIONS

Example statements



Example One: Opening paragraph

As public school educators, my parents understood that learning went beyond the four walls of the classroom. With an open door policy for students and their families, my parents modeled for me how to welcome and nurture relationships with newly arrived immigrant and working class communities. The house I grew up in was home to parent-teacher conferences over cafecito, informal English-language lessons, and communal gatherings during American holidays. In our home, I remember providing gentle guidance to a heartbroken mother whose gay child was being bullied and harassed. As a gay and Latinx child, school taught me that the key to avoiding harassment was a series of rather unsuccessful attempts to codeswitch and hide my truths. Thankfully, my home, my parents, and my experiences as Latinx and nonbinary propelled me to further explore how queer students could be supported outside school—particularly through museums and community centers. I am confident that my aspiration to create spaces of truth-telling and healing for queer, Black, and Latinx youth can be fortified through the Family and Community Education concentration within the International Educational Development program at Teachers College.



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Centre for Career
Development

Example Two: Opening paragraph

My research interest lies in quantum information science and technologies, especially quantum information processing. Building on a strong background from my undergraduate research in this field and the related field of photonics, I am applying to MIT's PhD in EECS to conduct research with the top experts in this field.



Notes on introductions

- They are specific
- Starting with a 'hook' that captures your reader's interest is good if you can come up with something very relevant and brief. But it isn't required, and a bad hook is worse than no hook!
- The crucial thing is to begin right away making your argument for admission.

What are the types of grad programs?

Course-based masters

- 1-1.5 years
- Courses, practicum*
- No supervisor
- Not funded

Research-based masters

- 1.5-2 years
- Courses, thesis; defense
- Supervisor required
- Funded

PhD

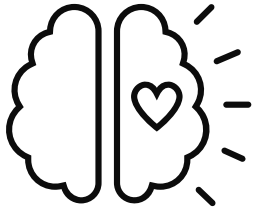
- Min 4 years
- Courses, exams, dissertation, defense
- Supervisor required
- Funded

Second-entry undergrad

- 2-4 years
- Courses, exams, practicum*
- No supervisor
- Not funded



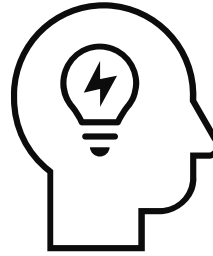
How do I know where and when to apply?



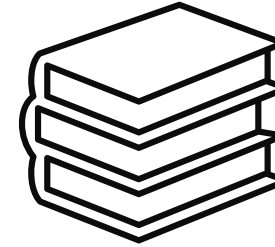
Mental
Health



Financial
Cost



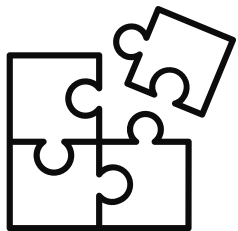
Motivation



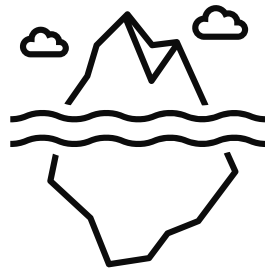
Skills



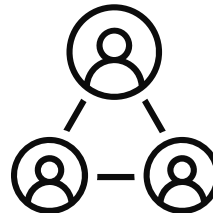
Research
Interests



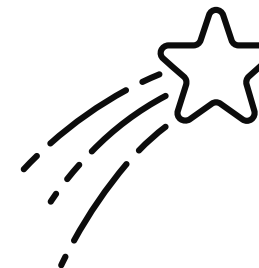
Fit



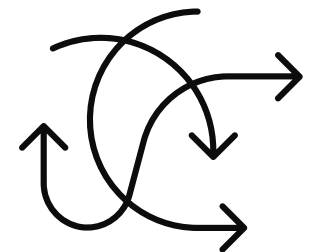
Work
Experience



Mentorship



Goals



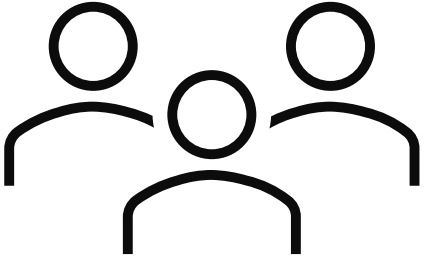
App cycle



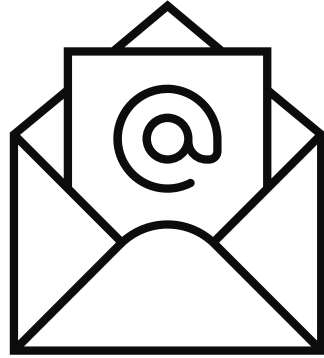
UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Centre for Career
Development

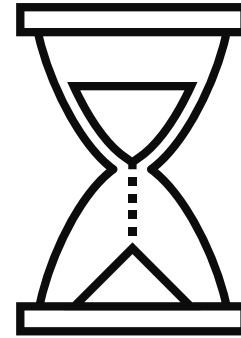
What do I need to know when reaching out to potential references?



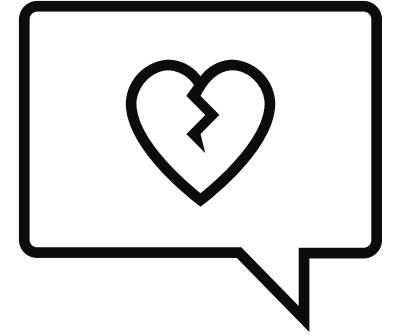
Who do I ask?



How do I ask?



When do I ask?



What happens if they say no?



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Centre for Career
Development

The Ask - a template

Dear Dr. / Prof. [name],

I'm reaching out to ask if you would be willing to write me a positive reference for [specific program(s)]. I'm asking you because [I took X class with you and got X grade / as my supervisor you know my work best / I was your TA and hope you can speak to X].

The letter is due on [date] and will be [submitted electronically]. I have included a [link / attachment / instructions] with more information should you agree to provide the reference.

I have also attached my [unofficial transcript / resume / app materials/etc.] should they be helpful. I'm also happy to meet and chat further about my request.

Please let me know whether you can provide the reference and thank you in advance for your consideration.

Best / Regards / With care / whatever your go-to sign-off is

[Your name]

[additional context like student number / program / etc.]

How to organize a statement

Most statements contain four key sections:

- 1) Opening
- 2) Explanation of your experiences and qualifications
- 3) Your future plans and goals (for research or for career)
- 4) Reasons why this particular school/program is perfect for you



How to think about the focus of your statement

- For research program applications in both the sciences and the arts, the focus is on your research *history* and your research *future*
- In professional school, the focus is on your *history* with research, employment, and community work as preparation for your professional *future*



Small group activity

Genre analysis of example statements

Groups 1, 4, 7, 8: Academic employment, and community experiences

Groups 2, 5, 9: Future professional or academic plans

Groups 3, 6: Why this school is a good fit for me



Questions for analysis of example statements

- How does the writer communicate their credibility?
- How does the author highlight the significance of their experience to the proposed school program?
- How much detail does the letter offer about past experiences? Do they survey many experiences or discuss just one?
- How does the writer provide evidence for the claims (of research potential or communication skills etc.)?
- How does the writer convince you of their passion for the topic and convince you of their readiness to do the degree?
- What kinds of language is the writer using to convey their interest, preparation, or approach to the proposed work?
- In each paragraph, what is the writer Saying – (What is the author's overall message?) and what are they Doing – (What are they doing to achieve their message?)



Small group activity

Genre analysis of example statements

Groups 1, 4, 7, 8: Academic employment, and community experiences

Groups 2, 5, 9: Future professional or academic plans

Groups 3, 6: Why this school is a good fit for me



Academic,
employment, and
community
experiences



MSw -- Social work – Example 1

Through post-degree courses in social development studies, I learned that the **social work field more closely aligns with my goal of addressing mental health through the social determinants of health**, especially in comparison to psychology, which often takes a more biological approach. I am still grateful for my psychology degree, however, as it is also important to be mindful of the **internal aspects of health when supporting clients and their families**. Furthermore, my honours thesis and academic background taught me **valuable research methods skills**, and my co-operative work placements gave me **experience in many different types of work environments**. As someone who is committed to being a lifelong learner, I now look forward to obtaining my MSW, the next step of my academic journey.



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Centre for Career
Development

MEd -- Example 2

My background offers a blend of professional, academic, and volunteer experiences that align with the Master of Education program in XXXXX. As a Part-Time Teaching Assistant at XXXXXX University, I support required social development courses, **deepening my involvement in adult learning**. Teaching the XXXX101 seminar **highlights my dedication to, and support of**, students who are facing various barriers in academic settings. In my research with Dr. ****, I have been analyzing data on racism in rural Ontario, contributing to community and academic reports, and creating recommendations for anti-racist initiatives; this project has **equipped me with the skills to continue work in research as it relates to marginalized communities**. One of my contributions to the literature review focuses on racism and colonialism in English language educational texts geared toward newcomers to Canada.

Additionally, my experience as a tutor and peer leader has equipped me **with skills in personalized academic support and fostering inclusive environments**. I continue to support adult education and community development at the institutional level by providing my time to committees and executives to ensure the student body is supported and has a voice. These experiences, combined with my work in restorative justice and student leadership, have reinforced **my commitment to community development and anti-oppressive higher learning** environments.



MSw -- Social work - Example 3

I am currently employed as a 2SLGBTQ+ Inclusion and Diversity Worker at the YMCA of XXXXX, where I create workshops and present them to clients and service providers in my community. **As a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, and as someone with disabilities, I appreciate** that this position gives me many opportunities to work collaboratively with individuals who come from different backgrounds and have a variety of life experiences. Furthermore, through my work, co-operative education, and volunteer experiences, **I learned I enjoy** working with clients both one-on-one and in group settings. **I strive to build positive** relationships with the people I work with, whether teaching an elementary school student in a virtual classroom or facilitating psychoeducational groups with adult victims of domestic violence. Thus, I would like to pursue my MSW to continue to learn new methods of working with people with different lived experiences. I have specifically chosen the Clinical Social Work Practice specialization at the University of Calgary, as it will help me achieve my goal of providing individualized and group mental health support to children, youth, and families.



PhD -- Peace Studies and History -- Bonus example

.... In my Master's thesis, which was awarded the University of Amsterdam Faculty of Humanities Thesis Prize, I developed a historical analysis of rescuing during the Rwandan genocide. I used oral testimonies, memoirs, newspaper articles, and government-sponsored content to compare the reasons given for rescuing by Hutu rescuers, UN Commander Roméo Dallaire, humanitarian aid worker Carl Wilkens, and the Rwandan Patriotic Front....

At UChicago, I delved into the history of human rights through the Human Rights minor with Susan Gzesh and Mark Bradley and engaged in the interdisciplinary discourse on mass violence through courses including "Perpetrators, Victims, and Bystanders" (Eric Stover) and "Insurgency, Terrorism, and Civil War" (Paul Staniland). Through Harvard's history study abroad program in Ghana (Emmanuel Akyeampong), I researched how the Middle Passage developed trauma-based communal identities. Building on my coursework, my Bachelor's thesis developed a historical analysis to evaluate early warning signs of genocidal events in Darfur. Arabic classes in high school and college and Arabic lessons with tutors, as well as an immersion course in Summer 2022, will enable me to study primary sources on rescuing in the Middle East.



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Centre for Career
Development

Future professional
or academic plans



MSW – Example 1

I would like to pursue my MSW to continue to expand on the knowledge that I have gained throughout my various volunteer and employment positions, and I would like to learn new ways and methodologies that allow me to work with people with various lived experiences. As I already alluded to, I anticipate this graduate program will help me obtain a career directly supporting the mental health of children, youth, and families in accessible and nurturing environments. More specifically, my long-term goals include directly supporting transgender and gender-diverse children and youth. I am inspired by these young people's abilities to be their authentic selves despite the obstacles and prejudices common in society, and I want to affirm their identities and advocate for their proper care.

PhD – History and Peace Studies – Example 2

I will commit my academic career to expanding how we study rescuing narratives in contexts of mass atrocities and transitional justice, starting with four questions: (1) what do we learn from studying individuals who saved lives but do not meet the “Righteous Among the Nations” eligibility criteria; (2) how might we understand institutions and states as rescuers, going beyond the existing literature on so-called “altruistic” individuals; (3) how would studying rescuing outside of the contexts of the Rwandan genocide and the Holocaust — the primary case studies of academic literature — influence our understanding of rescuing; and (4) how and to what effect has the “rescuer” label been politicized? To begin to explore these questions, I will focus my doctoral studies on a historical analysis of how regional and international state actors in the modern Middle East established themselves as altruistic rescuers, but then used the morally absolute definition of rescuing to deny or rationalize their involvement in subsequent war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide.



Why the school is
a good fit



MEd -- Social Justice Education – Example 1

Overall, the Social Justice Education program at XXXX offers the perfect blend of theoretical knowledge, practical application, and a supportive, diverse community, making it the best place for me to advance my research and contribute to meaningful social change. The potential to pursue doctoral-level studies after completing the program is particularly appealing. It aligns with my long-term goal of contributing to academic scholarship and influencing policy and practice in higher education and community organizations.



MEd – Example 2

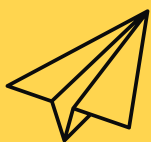
Teachers College would provide an opportunity for me to further develop my quantitative and ethnographic skills in assessing how community institutions support Black and Latinx queer youth. I am also interested in the global lens of this work with professors like Regina Cortina. Professor Cortina's research in the education of Indigenous children across Latin America piques my interest in how communities unite to preserve their unique heritage, culture, and identity. At Teachers College, I will further investigate the pedagogical practices that shaped my belief in the power of education to strengthen families and foster the type of community-based learning I first experienced at home. I ultimately seek to follow my parents' model of community engagement by supporting LGBTQ+ youth who face close-minded individuals, closed borders, and closed doors.



What are the formatting conventions of this document?



Length



Addressing & submitting the document



Required parts



Ask for clarification



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Centre for Career
Development

What are the unspoken conventions of this document?



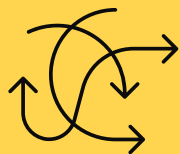
Essay-style



First-person narrative



Sharing experiences



This is hard!



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Centre for Career
Development

Show don't tell

I am an independent learner and a strong problem solver.

VS

In preparation for my future evolutionary projects, I have taught myself optimal control theory and its implementation in MATLAB, have developed a collaboration with



UNIVERSITY OF
WATERLOO

Centre for Career
Development

Show don't tell: Be specific

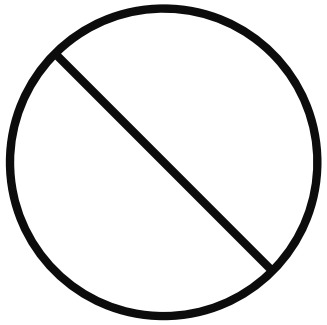
I have strong model development skills and am familiar with Monte Carlo methods.

Vs.

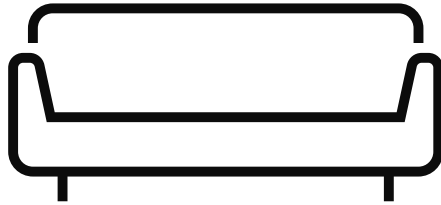
Exploring flexibility in malaria parasite developmental schedule has allowed me to expand my model development skills to systems of ordinary and delay differential equations and introduced me to model selection using AIC scores and sensitivity analysis using Monte Carlo methods.



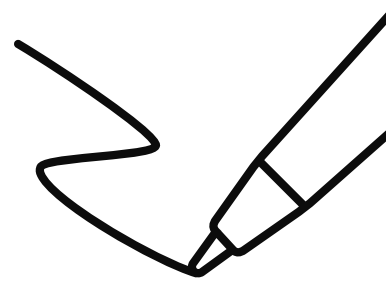
How do I disclose life stuff?



You don't owe anyone
a story



Trust your sense of
comfort with what and
how you share



Share details you want
to; it's okay to leave
some out



It's okay if this brings
up emotions for you



Should I use GenAI to help me write my statement?

Would it be productive?

- What will help you write the strongest statement possible?
- Your goal is for your statement to stand out, be original, and shine with your own unique voice. GenAI homogenizes and flattens text.

Would it be ethical?

- Academic integrity
- Bias reinforcement
- Copyright & data sovereignty
- Climate impacts
- Worker exploitation



Resources to help you

- One-to-one Writing and Communication Centre appointments

[Appointments: In-Person, Virtual, and by Email | Writing and Communication Centre | University of Waterloo](#)

- Centre for Career Development

- Virtual & in-person appointments & virtual drop-ins. Book via [WaterlooWorks](#) or [LiveChat](#)
- Virtual [workshops](#) and [CareerHub](#)

- TAs, Profs, Grad students in your program
- Recruitment or admissions staff at university and program you're applying to
- Recruitment events & program-specific info sessions (see program website for details!)