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So, You Want to Write a Great Letter of Intent?



Maggie Washburne Nov 4 · 10 min read ★



This was written for the students in the program I ran at the University of New Mexico. I learned as much or more from them as they learned from me. They are

my lifelong colleagues.

Why doesn't my letter work? This document was written to help prepare letters of intent for graduate school, but these letters can be useful for other purposes. I tend to talk to scientists, but clear writing, good narratives, and writing so that the person reading it really WANTS to get to know you are universally appreciated. I've seen wonderful people not get accepted simply because they left something out in their letter or wrote a letter that could have come from anyone off the street. That's not you. Don't be arrogant, but, in this process, you might begin to see what you bring to the table or the small things you need to do to be a real star.

Why write a great letter of Intent? You will learn a great deal in this process about yourself and your abilities and get important, new perspectives on your path forward. A great letter of intent requires you to have insight about yourself, your values, background, research experiences, and goals. In one or two pages, you can convince the reviewer — even if they have kids, it's 10PM, they want to sleep or work, and the last thing they want to do is read your letter that they WANT to meet you.

There are three or four parts to a great letter. First, something about you. Second, a professional account of research or other work you have done — with the questions you would ask. Third, why you want to be accepted in that school. Fourth, why any problem in your transcripts, GRE, a DUI conviction, a semester of Ws or Ds, or other issue, has become a great teacher for you. You'll see the way to turn what might be a liability into an asset in your application.

General principles

- A good letter takes time, thought, love, and joy.
- In a very short letter, you will give an image of who you are, what you care about, what great scientific questions you have, and what kind of student and academic/businessperson/researcher you are likely to be.
- The conversations you can have around the letter of intent are often very valuable. Putting a great letter together takes time but it can be enormously rewarding.

Finally, do not procrastinate. Do not procrastinate. Do not procrastinate. Just breathe, embrace your fear, and write something down. Did I say, don't procrastinate?

Writing your letter.

The first paragraph or two should be something interesting about you that engages the reader and shows you had some characteristics of a scientist (or whatever your aspiration is). This will take time. *The goal of this paragraph is two-fold. First, to show that you didn't just decide this morning to be a scientist but that you showed some early signs of having scientific potential. Second, you want to give the person reading your letter something that will get them engaged, so they remember you and set you apart from the other 350 letters they will have to read.*

This isn't about bragging or telling a reviewer "this is really interesting" — it's about telling them a story that they can discover is interesting. A description of a scene, an experience where you had a blinding flash or figured out your lego fixation was about math not architecture, something that makes them smile or imagine a color or relate specifically to you, so they remember your letter. It can be an experience that you had, especially something that makes them smile or think of a color or begin to see you have great questions, so when you are interviewing you hear "oh, you're the person that saved your lab mates from the fire" or "I loved the description of your life as solving an engineering problem — very funny and true!" Inspire them to WANT to meet you.

- Ask yourself, what are characteristics that make a wonderful scientist or whatever your aspiration is? Do this now and write it down.
- Ask your parents, friends, and relatives: What are the funny or compelling stories they remember about you. Did they think you might be a scientist or whatever your goal is and what made them think that? You were immersed in your childhood, but you can get from others' stories, what it might have been like to know you from birth to now. It will help you not only see threads of interests and characteristics that got you to here but will be a life-long resource for figuring out the direction of your next step.
- It's not hard for most of us to come up with something — so stop your internal dialogue that says you can't do this or that you are boring. **Stop it!!! Have fun.**

Second, you will write a paragraph or two about your research or other experience related to your aspirations. *In this part, you need to keep in mind that **questions are the drug of science.** Good questions are what drives researchers and gets them interested in having a conversation with you.*

· Your writing voice will change in this part. *Your personal story (first paragraphs) will be informal, this part will have shorter, direct sentences. Common words (the goal here, as in writing a scientific paper, is to avoid ambiguity). Try to keep the subjects of your sentences the same to avoid a random walk or a stream of consciousness.*

· You need to focus on what questions you are asking in your work (have a good conversation with your mentor about this) and what questions you have for the future. Keep the questions at high level — ones that, when answered, can have larger impacts.

Remember, never tell a scientist that something is interesting, let them discover that (and you) by themselves.

· What questions is the lab addressing, why is this important, what questions have you addressed, what have you learned, and what questions do you have now?

· What are the greatest questions you can think of right now? *I think this is important because it will tell the faculty member what your interests are and, if you have a great question, it will leave them thinking about you and WANTING to meet you.*

Third, you will write a paragraph that says why you want to go to that university.

· This needs to be specific and do not say that you will bring so much to their program. They want to know that you are going there to learn and be a good colleague.

· What faculty or research projects look great to you?

· Why is that university of interest?

Fourth, dealing with red flags in your transcript or your life. (This is typically put before your final paragraph of how great the school is and who you want to work with.)

If there is something in your materials or your background that you need to explain, e.g. a D in some key class, a felony, a semester with all Ws, etc. — use **Principle 2: See the**

Positive or the Blessing in Everything

(<https://www.lifescied.org/doi/full/10.1187/cbe.18-05-0074>). It takes work to see failures, faults, and challenges as teachers. If you can't do this, they are likely to be barriers of your success. **If you can, they aren't failures, they are teachers.**

Using this principle, if someone is terrible to you, you have 2 immediate positives. First, you aren't that person and, second, you aren't married to that person. It can make you laugh, but it helps you disengage for a second. It helps you see that you don't have to react to or engage with that person. It gives you power over yourself. There's more help with this here: <https://www.lifescied.org/doi/full/10.1187/cbe.18-05-0074>

Failures or challenges that you cannot eventually see as exceptional positives — amazing learning opportunities — can keep you from achieving your goals. If you can see these difficulties as the best thing that happened to you, **you will surprise people with your maturity, optimism, and leadership potential.** *But you will need to dig deep.* If you are superficial about it, e.g., “Getting an F in genetics was the best thing that ever happened to me because I learned you have to study for tests”, it will keep you from achieving your goals. This is deep work, not snarky or silly. **This is where you grow and that's the best thing that can happen to anyone.**

- We all need a team to help us see these things — you need to look around and see who is on your team and whom you might need to add. You need someone with experience who won't say “ignore that” or “that was terrible, there's no good in that.” You need someone who knows how to do this transformation.
- An important ability of a great scientist is to be able to see something from many different perspectives. Hopefully, you can embrace this principle and work on learning how to do it. It can become a key tool for problem solving. Seeing things from different perspectives is a sign of maturity, intelligence, and a critical characteristic of great leaders.
- If you say, “That DUI, that semester, that GRE score — was the best thing that ever happened to me” and give a clear explanation as to what you learned and how it benefitted your growth, it will keep this from being a problem for you, the reason you aren't accepted, and turn it into a great asset. We are life-long learners and integrating this ability into who we are is key to making a difference in the world and being happy in

our lives. **You can do this.** You can talk about this in your letter. It will be a pleasant surprise for an admission committee.

What happens if you decide to ignore something negative in your record. If you skip over the DUI or the D in an important class or a semester of W's and try to ignore this in your letter, it will be seen in many ways that are not positive. For example,

1. You think the admissions committee is stupid and won't look at your record.
2. You don't realize what it takes to be a professional or academic.
3. You haven't gotten to the point or level of maturity where you are forthcoming with who you are, faults and all — and have found ways to learn from mistakes or admit that you couldn't do everything.
4. People could think you are trying to be or are dishonest.

Things to keep in mind:

A. Your first attempt will typically not be great — but it needs to be done.

- You are likely to write a historical piece.
- Sometimes you will try to impress or distance yourself from who you are by erudite or fancy language. Don't do that, it sounds affected and it gives people just the opposite impression that you are trying to give.
- Use an active voice.
- Please realize that you wouldn't be considering higher education if you and others didn't see potential in who you are as a person and as an academic. Be who you are.
- **Use principles 1 (Know your Heart), 2, and 3 (Embrace who you are and bring it to the table) to understand what you have learned and what you want to bring to the program. These principles are powerful, but not widely taught. So, you have an advantage if you incorporate this perspective in your letter. Readers will see you as a mature, resilient, positive student and that is a good thing.**
(<https://www.lifescied.org/doi/full/10.1187/cbe.18-05-0074>)

Additional notes on the parts of your letter.

- **The first part of your letter** should have color or humor or draw them to you because you did brain surgery at 10 or studied worms or learned science through the Magic School bus. It will have specific descriptions at ground level, not 1500 ft. It will be a short paragraph, maybe 2, that makes people remember your letter and want to have you in their program.
 - The second part presents you as an academic scientist. It digs as deeply as you can into your research experience and talk about the **question** you asked in your research and the **questions** you find most interesting. Remember, great questions are addictive for scientists — that will win them over.
 - Finally, a short paragraph about 3–4 faculty at the institution you are applying to and look up their webpages. You might want to look at a paper or two from their labs, but this is generally not necessary. Write a paragraph that says you find many of their faculty extremely interesting but would be interested in the work done in these laboratories. **Do not write how lucky they would be to have you.**
- If you have been in a program and are getting a letter of recommendation from the director** or higher admin, include a note about how the program and/or the person helped you. That will make their letter for you more valuable.
- Your letter will hopefully convey that you are an honest, insightful, enthusiastic, relatively fearless, motivated, and interested young scientist who is excited about learning.
 - Keep in touch with the people writing you letters of recommendation and send them your letter of intent, so they can reinforce your letter, giving specific, supportive examples.
 - You are **grateful** for people taking the time to help you move forward and you realize that experiencing great environments as well as challenges is key to learning how to be a successful, happy, leader wherever you go.

Breathe. Write. Smile. Imagine giving the person reading your letter a lift and making them optimistic.

Writing tips for self-editing:

The IMPORTANCE of GREAT PARAGRAPHS. After you've done some drafts, go back and look at your paragraphs. Paragraphs are a brick of logic in laying your foundation. Generally, paragraphs have one major point. You are describing an event that shows a particular part of your character, or developing a description of your research or your future goals, etc. To ensure that the paragraph has one point, try to make all the sentences start with the same subject — that will help you see if you are staying on track. **Start each paragraph with an introductory sentence that describes what is in the paragraph.**

In my experience, it is best to write your letter with just one other person editing it — either a faculty member you have worked with or director of a program you've been in — or another experienced ally. While graduate students and post-doctoral researchers have ideas, they don't have the same level of experience. The letter will get done faster and be much less painful if you work with one person to start with.

Remember, education should be fun. It will have its challenges, but you need to love what you do. Exercise that creativity muscle as much as possible. Remember what Albert E said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge" as he figured out relativity by imagining himself riding on a particle of light. Go for it!!

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