

Writing the Letter of Intent

Thoughts from Terri Senft (terri.senft@nyu.edu)

Disclaimer: This essay is based on my personal experience in the humanities. I am not The Expert on all this, by any means! Please take it as one among many valid opinions. I'm interested in other people's views on this topic, particularly folks who are in other disciplines. Please let me know how your progress goes. Also, I didn't spell check this, so deal. Thanks!

People applying to graduate schools are often asked to provide a Letter of Intent. The Letter of Intent is an important psychological exercise for applicants, as well as a precautionary measure for admissions committees. If you cannot write it, you shouldn't be applying to the department in question. Essentially, you use it to answer the following questions for yourself and your prospective faculty:

1. Why are you interested in this particular program, at this particular point in your life?
2. Whose work has influenced you thus far, and how do you think this department can build on and/or challenge that foundation?
3. Were you to be admitted to the department, how would sorts of intellectual or creative projects might you undertake?

There are so many stories of gifted students who languish in the wrong departments, torturing their faculty members because they want something that isn't being offered, and yet cannot see what IS being offered. The Letter of Intent is to avoid this problem in advance, if at all possible.

ASK A FRIEND TO HELP.

Here is a good way to begin writing your Letter of Intent. Sit down with your best friend and have them ask you, "How come you picked that place to apply

to?" Get a tape recorder and tape the answer. Then transcribe what you wrote. It will be garbled, but that's okay. You just want words to edit later. Just talk... tell your best friend why the program interests you, and expand on that. For instance, many people say something like, "Well, what I like the about the (FILL IN THE BLANK) program is that it combines (FILL IN THE BLANK) creative/studio/whathaveyou classes with (FILL IN THE BLANK) theoretical perspectives." If there are added features in the department that excite you (internships, travel, fellowships, guest lecturers), that's worth mentioning as well.

When you begin to formally write, remember that you are a stranger to your reader, and that they are reading thousands of letters just like yours. EVERYONE will say, "I like the program." You need to be more specific about WHO you are and WHAT CAUSED YOU to wind up liking their particular program. So tell them a quick story or two about yourself (you can cut if for size later) in which illustrate who YOU are, what drives you to THESE sorts of studies, and how you and this program will be a natural fit for one another. Make it as specific to you as you can. Under no circumstances, begin with "From the time I was young I was artistic." Show, don't tell.

A Letter of Intent doesn't have to be comprehensive. It doesn't have to even remain in stone once you get in and explore what the school has to offer. What it DOES have to do is be specific, chronologically arranged, and readable.

Some people despair at this point, saying " But mine wasn't a clear path! My life took many twists and turns to get where I am academically!" You need to understand that nearly all graduate students come from varied backgrounds, and have done many sorts of things. Some things will be germane to why you want to go to this school, and some will not be. It's okay to leave out the non-essential. Really. The biography police are not checking your Letter of Intent. Like all narratives, yours should have a beginning, middle and end, and this will seem a bit "fake" to you. That's okay. You aren't "telling lies" if you make a chronology that is clear and easy to follow. You are being a selective author of

your own life tale, in light of the fact that you probably have 500 words in which to explain what drives you.

HERE IS AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT I MEAN:

When I applied to the Dept. of Performance Studies at NYU, my training was in two weirdly disparate fields: political science and theatre. I was working as an actress and a director in New Orleans, Louisiana, and thought I was "done" with political science when I was asked to apply for a MFA in theatre directing at the University of New Orleans. But I had um, forgotten to finish up my BA thesis at SUNY Albany, so I returned there for one semester.

At Albany, I wound up writing my political science thesis on postmodernism and contemporary political theatre. During my research, I had to read articles from *The Drama Review*, which is published out of NYU. I also read *Women and Performance*, another journal from the dept of performance studies. One of the writers whose work I was most drawn to was a professor by the name of Peggy Phelan. Phelan was working at the time on a book called *Unmarked*, which in part argues for the demise of "identity politics" promoting instead what she termed the "politics of performance."

At this time, I still thought there were two worlds: drama (practical) and political science (theoretical.) But the writing coming out of NYU caused my two different worlds--performance and politics--to suddenly seem a piece. With Phelan and other TDR writers in my brain, I began my directing fellowship at UNO, but by that time my heart wasn't in such a practice-based program. I knew I would fit in better at NYU, where I could rely on people like Phelan to help me work through the question, "What does it mean to say feminist postmodern theatre? How does one make that sort of art?"

When I applied to NYU, I more or less told them this story, and was admitted on a full assistantship there. My work in digital performance (which is my focus now) is a whole different story, and not germane here, so I'll let it go. Now, I did many other things in my life besides focus on politics and theatre. I had different jobs, lived in different places in the country, and overall had a full life. But I

probably wouldn't focus on those things in a Letter of Intent, unless it was germane.

And of course, your Letter probably won't seem anything like what I've just laid out! For a Letter of Intent, a feeling of freshness is everything. It doesn't matter that to other people, the connection between theatre and politics is as old as time! What matters in the Letter of Intent is MY epiphany, how I got there, and what I plan to do with my knowledge now that I have it. You see? I had less theatre experience than some people at NYU, and less theoretical training than others. It didn't matter. What mattered was the rightness of this particular place at this particular point in my history. That's your job--to explain how this is the right thing for you, and to make others see that.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

Four of the biggest problems I've seen in Letters of Intent are:

1. An over-emphasis on past accomplishments (usually combined with an under-emphasis on future plans.)

Too often, applicants think the point of the Letter of Intent is to "prove" their worth as a student or an artist. They spend huge amounts of time in their letter charting their accomplishments and talking about what a dedicated student they are, in the hopes of pleasing an imaginary Authority Figure. I believe this is a mistake, one that takes room where you might be telling stories that help people remember you. Of course you should cite a few past accomplishments, but your entire history should already be evident to the faculty through your GPA, your resume, your portfolio, writing samples, etc. Instead of harping on the past, keep the focus on the narrative of how you got where you are, and what you want the future at this department to be like for you.

2. An inability to situate one's work within the existing field (known as the "I am a Unique Genius" an/or "I Shouldn't Really Be in Graduate School Yet" syndrome.)

Sometimes students are able to talk about themselves, but they are unable to engage the work of anyone else in their field. This is problematic, because it makes the student seem alternately naive or self-centered--neither of which works for good scholarship. If there is one self-evident truth in all graduate schools it is that there is No Such Thing as a Wholly Original Idea. If you want to go to grad school, you should know this now, and your Letter of Intent should reflect that you know this applies to you, too.

Did you ever meet someone who acted as though their work was unique in all the world, with no other precedents or contemporaries? Don't you hate those people? Don't be one in your Letter of Intent. You don't want to spend a huge amount of time in a Letter of Intent speaking about other people's work, but you do want to spend a sentence or two doing what is called "situating yourself."

Situating sounds really sophisticated and all, but really, it is something we do everyday. You know when you are describing a new band, and you say, "Well, they are melodic like the Beatles, but they use serious drum and bass techniques like Massive Attack, but with a female singer who sounds like the chick from Garbage?" It's no different when you qualify your own interests and style for strangers.

If it helps, think about yourself as a band. Who do you "sound" like? Which "big names" in your field influence you? Who revs you up, inspires you, makes you think, "Hell that is great stuff!" If you don't know the answer to this question, you aren't ready to apply to graduate school. Go read more books, go to more galleries, and generally get out in the world more. If you are really really having trouble, think about whose work you absolutely hate, and then make a list of who you feel is the opposite of this. Sometimes saying what you hate helps you identify what you love.

3. An inability to be clear on why THIS department is the right one.

Sometimes, students forget to transition in their letter from articulating a general desire to study a certain field, to articulating a desire to be in a very specific academic department. This is important. You don't apply for a job at Chase

Manhattan bank by going, "I like money. Any place will do!" Likewise, in your Letter, part of your job will be to explain why you need to be in (let's say) an English Department to do your work. Another part of your job will be to explain why you need to be in THIS PARTICULAR English department to do your work to the best of your ability. Everyone likes to think they are special. Academics included.

The simplest way to meet this objective is to be able to say which particular professor in Department X your work would most closely mesh with. If you don't know, you should find out the names of the professors teaching in the program you're interested in (the catalogue should name them--if not call the dept. secretary and tell her you are trying to get a sense of the the work of the professors there. College secretaries are trained to deal with those sorts of questions.) Then get hold of a book or two, or an article or two, by the professors teaching the courses that interest you. Think about who you might feel cool with having as an advisor, for instance (though don't say this explicitly in your essay, because it's premature.)

4. An inability to articulate at least ONE research interest, ideally framed as a question, which can be adequately addressed by existing faculty in the department.

Undergraduates are expected to do nothing more than passively absorb information given to them. Graduate school doesn't work like this. Graduate instructors are resources for YOUR work. Which begs the question: what IS your work? What is ONE question you want to be working through while in graduate school?

Often, people freak out when asked this question. They shouldn't. Usually the problem isn't that they don't have A question, but that they have dozens of them. Just pick one. You can change your mind later. You are trying to give the faculty an indication of what you're gonna be grappling with, that's all. Ideally, you will incorporate your question into a possible solution offered by the department in question.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Let's say you are interested in an MFA in fiction, and your research concentrates on Chicana politics. You might say:

"Though I've long been influenced by mythological imagery in Cherrie Moraga's poetry, I'm also compelled by Gloria Anzaldua's call to enact 'border politics' in fiction. It seems that Professor X's (FILL IN BLANK HERE) class, and others like it, will be ideal for helping me think through the contradictions and connections between mythological and political writing styles."

Or let's say you interested in a Ph.D. program in media studies and your research concentrates on feminism and photography. You might say:

"I'm drawn to the performativity that pervades Cindy Sherman's later photographs, and I certainly remain entranced by the lighting choices Francesca Woodman uses to 'speak her body' through photography. Still, I am nagged by the feeling that neither Sherman nor Woodman's model adequately explains the complex give-and-take that goes on between digital photographers and spectators via the World Wide Web--my particular research interest I look forward to thinking through these problems with the help of Professor X's, as her work on cyberspace and feminism emphasizes the the dynamics of digital spectatorship; an area that I worry is too often overlooked when people speak of photography on the Web."

Or something like that. Do you see where I am going here? It goes: Articulating your research question (framed in terms of the 'big names' in the field), coupled with possible venue for thinking about the question (frames in terms of the specific department.) The goal is to have the faculty think, "Oh yeah, we WOULD be a good place to help someone think through that question."

So to recap, the Letter of Intent covers:

1. How you got interested in the dept. in question, by way of personal history.

2. Briefly, what your own work is like. You do this by situating yourself relative to people in the field.

3. What one research question you have is like. Make sure you illustrate how this particular dept. can help you with it!

After that, you are done. Tell them you look forward to joining them in the department, and sign off.