

Applying to Graduate School or Professional School: Perspectives from an Admissions Committee Member

1. Developing Your Academic Resume (Curriculum Vitae or CV)
2. Writing Your Best Personal Statement or Admissions Essay
3. Interviewing for Graduate/Professional School Admission

Presented by:

**Katharine E. Stewart, PhD, MPH
Associate Dean for Academic Affairs
Fay W. Boozman College of Public Health
University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS)**

Director of the Combined BA/MPH and BS/MPH Programs in Public Health

www.uams.edu/archd/educore/educore.asp

Co-Director of the DrPH Program in Public Health Leadership

www.uams.edu/coph

Developing your Academic Resume (aka Curriculum Vitae, or CV)

What is a CV?

A CV is a resume that is specifically designed to highlight your academic achievements. Many applicants to graduate and professional schools, when asked to submit a resume, submit the same resume they would use in applying for a job. I recommend you use a CV instead, because a CV gives the admissions committee the specific information they are looking for when considering your application. It also conveys the impression that you understand the "culture" of graduate school and academia, and that makes you look like a more serious applicant.

What information should be included on a CV?

- **contact information** (name, address, phone, email, website)

- **education**; list EACH college or university attended, and for each, include:
 - dates of attendance (list in REVERSE chronological order; if still attending, list expected graduation date)
 - major/field of study
 - degrees awarded (or degree expected to receive)
 - current GPA (see "do's and don't's" for additional info)

- **honors and awards**
 - focus on academic, research, and service awards (including scholarships, if merit-based)
 - date of award (again, REVERSE chronological order)
 - name of award
 - granting institution or organization

- **research experience**
 - List the institution (including department) where you worked in a research capacity (including practica/internships), and describe the job you held, the duties, and the name of your mentor/supervisor.
 - For each position, include a list of scientific skills you developed (e.g., specific laboratory procedures, patient assessments, regulatory procedures, statistical analyses, software packages that you learned or mastered while there).

- **teaching experience**
 - List courses for which you served as a teaching assistant, tutor, or lab assistant. Include the institution, department, course name and number, and supervising instructor.
 - For each position, include the specific tasks you engaged in (teaching lab procedures, grading exams or essays, giving or preparing lectures, tutoring students or running exam prep sessions)

- **presentations and publications**
 - If you have several of these, separate publications in refereed journals and presentations to scientific conferences into separate categories
 - Be sure all presentations and publications are scientific in nature, and are formatted in an acceptable style appropriate for your discipline (NLM, APA, etc.)

- **professional affiliations**
 - List professional and scientific organizations in which you are a member, including a student member.
 - Do NOT include community or social organizations here.
 - If you have held office, include dates of service and office held.

- **professional experience**
 - List relevant professional experience, including summer jobs and military experience.
 - Be VERY brief if including jobs that are not as relevant to grad school (e.g., retail work), but do include enough to show any managerial/technical skills used on the job.
 - Be sure to note if the job included responsibilities that are relevant to grad school (e.g., lots of writing, technical work, statistical analysis, lab work, patient care, or other related work).
 - Be sure to note if the work was a volunteer/practicum/internship experience (and consider whether it should go under community service).

- **community/university service**
 - Include community service, participation on college or university committees or clubs (focus on academic and service activities, not purely social activities, although those may also be listed).
 - List dates of service, institution or organization served, supervisor or mentor's name (if applicable) and the nature of your service.
 - Note any responsibilities that are relevant to graduate school skills.

- **references**
 - List 4 to 6 individuals who can provide references on your ability to do graduate-level work in your chosen discipline.
 - Ideally, some of these individuals will be listed as former supervisors/mentors in the sections above.
 - These should NOT be family, friends, or peers; they SHOULD be people who have known you more than six-nine months and know your academic ability.
 - Be SURE all individuals have given permission to be listed in this section, know how they are listed (e.g., don't list phone numbers if they don't want it listed!), and are willing to provide a reference.
 - See "Do's and Don't's" for more information.

SOME CV-RELATED DO'S AND DON'T'S

- Make sure you proofread your CV carefully! Spelling and grammar errors or typos make a very bad impression. Similarly, avoid slang, "text-speak" or other informal communication styles in your CV and cover letters and in ALL correspondence with the school or its representatives. (I once received an email that read: "Hey, 'sup? I'm thinking of applying to ur school! ☺ Could you pls send me the application forms? Tx much!" Guess how much this person impressed me!)
- Be sure your email address and/or website names are appropriate (e.g., luvs2partee@hotmail.com is not recommended as an email to share with grad schools!)
- Be sure that you have created and maintained your "online persona" carefully. Assume that admissions committee members will not only go to your website (if you've listed one), but also may Google you and may search for you on Facebook and/or Twitter. What will they find there? Does it convey the image you want them to see? I cannot overemphasize this point enough, whether you are applying for graduate/professional schools or jobs!
- If it's to your advantage, consider creating specific GPAs for your CV: separating out your overall GPA, your last two years' GPA, your GPA in major field, and/or your science & math GPA.
- Remember that some activities, if you list them, will give schools potentially personal information about you (e.g., your religious affiliation, your political leanings). Consider whether you wish this known before listing these activities.
- You may choose to leave off your reference list. If so, you could include a statement that "References are available upon request" and you may wish to carry a separate reference list with you to school interviews.
- Give ALL individuals on your reference list (or those who are writing recommendation letters for you) a copy of your CV. Be sure each person knows why you chose him or her to write a letter, and what you hope they will describe about your abilities when they write a letter. Give those who are writing letters AT LEAST eight weeks to get their letters written, and provide all necessary materials (forms, addresses, pre-addressed stamped envelopes or instructions for online recommendations). Remember to write thank you notes to all those who write letters or references for you.

Writing Your Best Personal Statement/Admissions Essay

Also known as an admissions essay or autobiographical statement, the personal statement is a crucial part of any application portfolio. This is the part of your application that allows you to share information with the admissions committee that may not be obvious in your CV or transcripts, and helps the admissions committee see how you are a good fit for their program.

The personal statement should follow basic rules of essay writing; that is, it should have an introductory paragraph that provides an interesting “hook” and overview, a body of several paragraphs that contain supporting information and details that are relevant to the program for which you are applying, and a concluding paragraph that “wraps up” the essay and concludes with a clear statement of interest in or connection to the program. The statement should be well-written: it should follow rules of good grammar and style and should flow well, including topic and transitional statements between paragraphs. Review a good essay-writing guide or style guide to help you do this.

The process of writing a personal statement is a long one. Allow at least eight weeks to write a personal statement. Here are some of the steps involved in writing a personal statement:

- Conduct a personal assessment
- Research the programs you are considering
- Consider the question asked by each program
- Draft your essays
- Edit them so they fit the length requirements
- Ask a trusted person (or two) to review and provide feedback
- Revise the essays, including proofreading very carefully (x3!!)
- Check the essays to be sure they address the question asked and represent you well

There are several things you may wish to accomplish in a personal statement. You may want to provide details about your academic preparation for graduate school, including coursework, research experience, teaching experience, or other relevant experience. You may want to address weaknesses in your admissions portfolio and explain how you have strengthened your abilities in these areas. You may want to share with the admissions committee the specific things you hope to accomplish in graduate school, or the reasons why you believe their program is a good fit with your interests, background, and abilities. All of these are good things to do, but be sure that you don't try to do TOO MUCH, which will result in a disorganized or confusing essay.

SOME PERSONAL STATEMENT-RELATED DO'S AND DON'T'S

- Proofread your essay carefully. Grammatical and spelling errors are deadly; they communicate poor writing ability, and writing ability is a crucial skill in graduate or professional school. Do not use slang, curse words, or "txt-speak." Similarly, remember this is a *personal* statement, so avoid overly academic jargon or stilted, formal language. Read your essay OUT LOUD to yourself to pick up some errors you might otherwise miss.
- Avoid clichés. Many individuals become interested in health careers because of a personal experience, but you should remember that admissions committees get very weary of reading statements that begin, "I knew I wanted to go into [*medicine, nursing, public health*] after seeing how [*wonderfully, badly*] my [*grandmother, grandfather, aunt, uncle*] was treated when [*she, he*] had [*cancer, diabetes, pneumonia, bipolar disorder*]." If you are going to write about how you were inspired by a personal experience, move quickly to how you have made sure you have the academic preparation, not just the passion, to succeed.
- Be specific. When describing your experience and skills, be specific, but don't just make lists, either. Explain exactly what courses you enjoyed most or were most challenged by, exactly what skills you developed while working in Dr. So-and-So's lab and explain how those connect to your graduate school aspirations. Be specific, too, about what you envision in terms of your graduate school career. Are there specific areas in which you hope to focus your studies or your research? If so, state those, and explain why they interest you. If you are addressing a weak area, explain exactly what caused the weakness (do not make flimsy excuses) and then be SURE to explain specifically what you have done to improve yourself in this area. (A special note here: "I'm not a good test-taker" is not a good thing to say; there are a TON of tests in graduate and professional school! If this has been an issue for you, you need to explain what you have done, specifically, to improve your test-taking skills.)
- Be honest and upbeat. Some personal statements end up being rather negative in tone. It's important that your essay conveys an optimistic tone that shows you are excited and motivated about the program for which you are applying. Another important aspect of honesty: do not plagiarize ANY part of your essay. Plagiarism includes borrowing material from others' statements or online services. Many schools use electronic plagiarism detectors, some of which maintain banks of previously-submitted statements from multiple colleges and universities.
- Avoid "preaching." Most applicants to graduate and professional schools are passionate about their discipline. As a result, they may have strong opinions about certain aspects of their chosen field. Be careful; it's good to share your enthusiasm, but remember that you don't know the members of the admissions committee well. Avoid taking positions on controversial issues in your field, and avoid taking positions on political or religious topics.

Interviewing for Graduate/Professional School Admission

Graduate and professional schools often require interviews. Some of these are phone interviews and some are in-person. Some are very brief (10 minutes) and others are extended (multiple hour-long interviews with several people). It is important to prepare well for interviews and practice prior to any interviews.

The purpose of most interviews is to evaluate how thoroughly you fit with the goals of the program. The program's faculty are considering making a very large investment of time and resources in you and your education, as are you! They want to know how well prepared you are for graduate study, and they want to know if you have the skills needed for graduate study (including maturity, professionalism, communication ability, and stress tolerance). It's important that you have learned quite a bit about the program (the curriculum, its goals for its graduates, etc.) and the faculty (their research and teaching interests) prior to the interview, so that you can specifically describe how you and your interests fit with the program.

Take the time to consider what questions you are likely to be asked, and prepare answers that focus on your interest in and preparation for graduate study. You don't want to sound overly "rehearsed" during your interview, but a well-thought-out answer is always received well. Common questions asked during interviews include the following:

- Tell me a little bit about yourself.
- Why did you choose to apply to our program, specifically?
- Why did you choose this career path?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses as a student?
- What do you think will be the biggest challenge for you in our program?
- Explain a situation in which you had a conflict and resolved it. What did you do, and what would you do differently if you could?
- Tell me about your experience in this field.
- What are your career goals? How do you see this program contributing to your career path?
- How do you intend to finance your education?
- What is the most pressing problem in our field today?
- What skills do you bring to this program? How could you help a faculty member with whom you are working?
- Are you a leader or follower? Can you give an example?
- What do you think you will like most about graduate (or medical, etc.) school?
- What do you think you will like least about graduate (or medical, etc.) school?

Also, be ready to ask questions (your interviewers will almost certainly ask if you have any). Some common questions you might consider asking:

- What do most students do after graduation?
- How are mentoring and advising relationships established or assigned?
- What opportunities for professional presenting or publishing do students have?
- How long to most students take to finish course work? Theses or dissertations?
- Are there teaching or research assistantships available? How are they awarded?

SOME INTERVIEW-RELATED DO'S AND DON'T'S

- Be prepared. Rehearse your answers to some of the more common interview questions. Study important information about the program and the faculty, so you will be well-informed. Know who will be interviewing you, if possible, so you can think about how you could tailor your response to them. Make a list of your strengths, achievements, and skills, so that they will be on your mind. Do a "practice" interview with a friend or, even better, with a faculty member or mentor who is familiar with graduate admissions.
- Present yourself professionally. Dress professionally. Clothes don't have to be expensive, but they should be clean, well-fitting, modest, and "business attire." Arrive a little bit early so you will have time to get oriented and will not be rushed. When meeting people who represent the program, shake hands firmly (get feedback from friends/family ahead of time about your handshake!), smile, and make eye contact. Address the interviewer by their title and name (e.g., Dr. Smith). Do not use slang or curse words. Use your body posture to convey an alert, interested, curious, and thoughtful demeanor. Thank the interviewer after the interview and shake hands again.
- Know your nervous "tics" and work to avoid them. Common "tics" include talking too fast or talking too much. Answer questions thoughtfully and succinctly. If you need to, take a deep breath before jumping in to answer a question (this can help you settle your mind). Other "tics" include overuse of filler phrases such as "like" and "um" and "you know." Ask a friend to tell you honestly whether you overuse these words/phrases, and practice answering questions so you can reduce your use of these. Another common "tic" is interrupting. Do not interrupt an interviewer.
- Don't be shy about selling yourself. You don't want to brag, but be ready to share your accomplishments, your skills, and evidence of your preparation to begin graduate school. Be ready to talk about your career goals. The more specific you can be, the better. Similarly, don't be shy about telling interviewers what they need to know about weaknesses in your application (see personal statement tips, above). Be specific about what you have done or are doing to ameliorate those weaknesses so you are ready for graduate study. Never criticize others in an attempt to sell yourself or make yourself look better, however.
- Be honest. Do not exaggerate or lie in an interview. Don't make excuses for weaknesses or problems. Don't pretend to know something you don't; it's better to say "I don't know," than to fake it.
- Treat everyone as an interviewer. You may have the chance to take a tour of the school or the research facilities, and you may be given some social time with current students. Enjoy these, and ask lots of good questions during this time. But remember that the tour guides and current students may be asked by admissions committee members about their impressions of you, or about what questions you asked. If you are offered adult beverages during a social gathering, avoid getting even mildly "buzzed." You need to be thoughtful and present yourself professionally at all times.