

So You Want to Write a Study Abroad Cover Letter?

Problem 1. (Understanding the genre)

- a) Who will read your essay and make decisions about your admission?
- b) Why do they make you compose this text instead of just looking at your academic record? What signals are they searching for?
- c) What is more important for the host university: your personality, your academic achievements, your ability to take courses in English, or something else?
- d) Is there a word limit? If yes, why do you think this is the case?
- e) Are you expected to write a conventional cover letter? Or do they want you to be creative and tell them your personal story? (Think about statements of purpose for MBA vs PhD programs)

Problem 2. (Planning time and effort)

- a) How competitive is the program that you are applying to? Browse the HSE Study Abroad web-page or the host university website for information.
- b) Will a good cover letter contribute a lot to your application (e.g. substitute for a mediocre GPA score)? How likely is that a poor cover letter would ban you from getting in?
- c) Think about the baseline quality of a successful letter. How much would it take you to write such a text? Plan your time ahead.

Problem 3. (Brainstorming ideas)

- a) Recall your reasoning when you decided to apply to this particular program. Why exchange? Why this country/town? Why this university? Be honest in your answers.
- b) What courses will you take? What student activities will you participate in? What are the things that you are most excited about? Learn more information about the program of your choice.
- c)* Why have you chosen that program over other programs of the same level?
- d) What makes you a strong applicant?
- e)* Why would they choose you over a person with a similar academic record / background / interests?

Problem 4. (Refining your argument)

- a) Pick your best answers from **Problem 3**. Would they convince the admissions committee?
- b) Is there anything that weakens your application? Can you turn it into your strength? (e.g. low GPA → success outside your studies.) Frame all your arguments in a positive way; otherwise, omit them.

c) Can you combine your arguments into a strong personal story? Any remarkable details / germane anecdotes are highly welcome. Build a pithy, vivid, and engaging argument within genre limitations.

d) Ideally, most of your statements in your cover letter should be:

- credible (Not "I have done behavioral finance since I was 14")
- sincere (Not "I believe Hofstra Un. has the best economic dpt. in the US")
- specific (Not "Your university offers excellent opportunities")
- well-informed (Not "Your dpt. is ranked 28/29 in QS Rankings")
- personal (Not "I love meeting interesting people from all over the world")

If your statement fails on one of those filters, think whether it would send a bad signal to the host university. Do you include it because it is a genre requirement? Will your text become better if you just scratch it out?

Problem 4. (Composing your text)

a) Think about possible ways to organize your text. How will you cluster your ideas? Will you tell a story with a timeline? Or will you just tell them your answers to the questions they pose?

b) Write a cohesive text with a thesis map and smooth transitions. Think carefully about your thesis. Do you have any binding motif except the one that you want to get admitted?

c) Does the word limit allow you to have proper introduction and conclusion? If not, still include introductory and closing sentences.

d) Be aware of the trade-off between clarity and complexity.

e) Hedge risks. Use words and constructions you are sure how to use.

f) Be aware of the thin line between set phrases and clichés, confidence and bragging, formal style and dullness. Adopt an appropriate tone.

g) Make sure that your text does not look a recycled version of your other applications.

e) Proofread your text after writing. Make someone read it and give you the feedback.

Problem 5. (Formatting the document)

a) Make sure that your formatting solutions do not make the task of the reader harder. (Is 9pt Calibri Light legible?) Configure paragraph- and line-spacing, font size, and margins. Check whether there are formatting requirements (fonts, margins etc)

b) Would you choose a serif (academic, bookish, conservative) or a sans-serif (business-like, web, modern) font? If you trust your tastes, carefully experiment with the fonts but not too much.