

March 7, 2015
(January Letter)

Hi Samantha

Your first letter of the year makes it sound like you are preparing for another busy one! All the applications you are preparing will seem like a lot of energy, but if you get good at it you will have many more opportunities appear in your life. You have plenty of people who can help you with the process, however, so you should take advantage of them all.

At the risk of sounding like a teacher (after all, I am!) I will give you a few tips from my own experience. Some of that experience comes from filling out my own applications and some of it comes from sitting on committees that evaluate and decide upon applicants. It is the latter experience that I find most valuable.

I remember reading a book about writing titled “The Reader Over Your Shoulder” that is the most valuable piece of advice for preparing applications – or any writing, for that matter. It argues that you should always think about the person(s) who will be reading your application or writing and try to anticipate the kind of information and questions they will have. For applications, this means that you not only think about what they need to know about you, but it includes considering that they will be looking a large number of applications so you have to consider what you can say that will make yours stand out.

For a college program application (like your recreation program) this means anticipating that they will want to know the usual things about your competence (e.g. grades, courses taken, recreation-related experiences) but also what makes you special – and in turn will make their program special. This means that you should mention the following:

- the activities in which you have been engaged (e.g. the Victoria Parks program);
- the types of activities you did (e.g. prepare and supervise daily programs for about XX children between ages Y and Z; collaborate with X other supervisors);
- the skills you learned (e.g. communication, group leadership, supervision, collaboration); and
- how the skills might be relevant to the program for which you are applying (e.g. they have taught you about planning recreation activities for yourself and others, managing potential conflict situations, time management skills, group decision-making, collaboration with others).

These details not only communicate better to the reader, but they make clear that you have thought about the position or program for which you are applying and considered how you fit into it.

It is also very helpful to the reader if you include headings and sub-headings. This is best if the headings refer to each type of information that is requested in the application. Be sure to identify each piece of information the application requests and be sure you provide it. There is nothing worse as an evaluator when an applicant doesn’t address the information requested!

If I were reading a large number of applications I would skip over the ones that didn’t provide me with the information we requested or enough information regarding the details of their activities and I would pay attention to those that guide me to answer questions like:

- Does this person have the skills we need?
- Have they got a good idea of the demands and requirements we need?
- Will they be a good fit with our needs?

Those are the kinds of things that an application evaluator wants to know so it is important to provide the information that answers them. This is the type of reader you should imagine over your shoulder as you prepare the application. If you are writing a different type of material (e.g. telling a story) then you can imagine a different reader over your shoulder and probably be thinking about different information and questions that they will be asking.

I also suggest that you create a file for notes about the things you have done – when you did them, what activities they involved, what you learned, and any things you produced. I have such a file and from many years ago and I always go back to it to recall the things that are relevant for a particular application or request about my activities. Here's an example from many years ago:

- 1950/09/01: Started Elementary school at Kerrisdale Elementary.
- 1955: Moved to 3211 W 39th
- 1956: Moved to Marpole (8792 Montcalm St)
- 1956/09/01: Started High School at Sir Winston Churchill - grade 7.
- 1960: Apartment built on Montcalm & 72nd
- 1961/05/01: Worked at Woodwards
- 1961/06/01: Graduated from High School
- 1961/08/15: Took a trip to Yellowstone National park with family (cf. Photos)
- 1961/09/01: Began at UBC in sciences
- 1962/10/01: Bonhoeffer group at SCM with Jack Shaver

It doesn't include the detail about all the activities in which I was involved, but it gives you an idea about how it is structured. It was later in my life that I realized the value of including the activities and some information about them in my log. You have the opportunity to start earlier.

A good place to start would be with the letter I prepared for the Save-On-Food competition. Just cut and paste the items with the relevant dates.

Okay – I'm sorry if I violated the implied rules of our correspondence – but I couldn't completely eliminate my pedantic genes.

I guess by the time you get this letter you will have got back from your trip to Guatemala. You certainly are fortunate to have so many opportunities to explore the world like you do – and I continue to be impressed with your courage to take them, even though many of them must be somewhat stressful. I didn't even have to stretch the truth when I prepared the comments about you being an Amazing Kid!!

Love,