
Apply Yourself: Writing the Graduate School Personal Statement

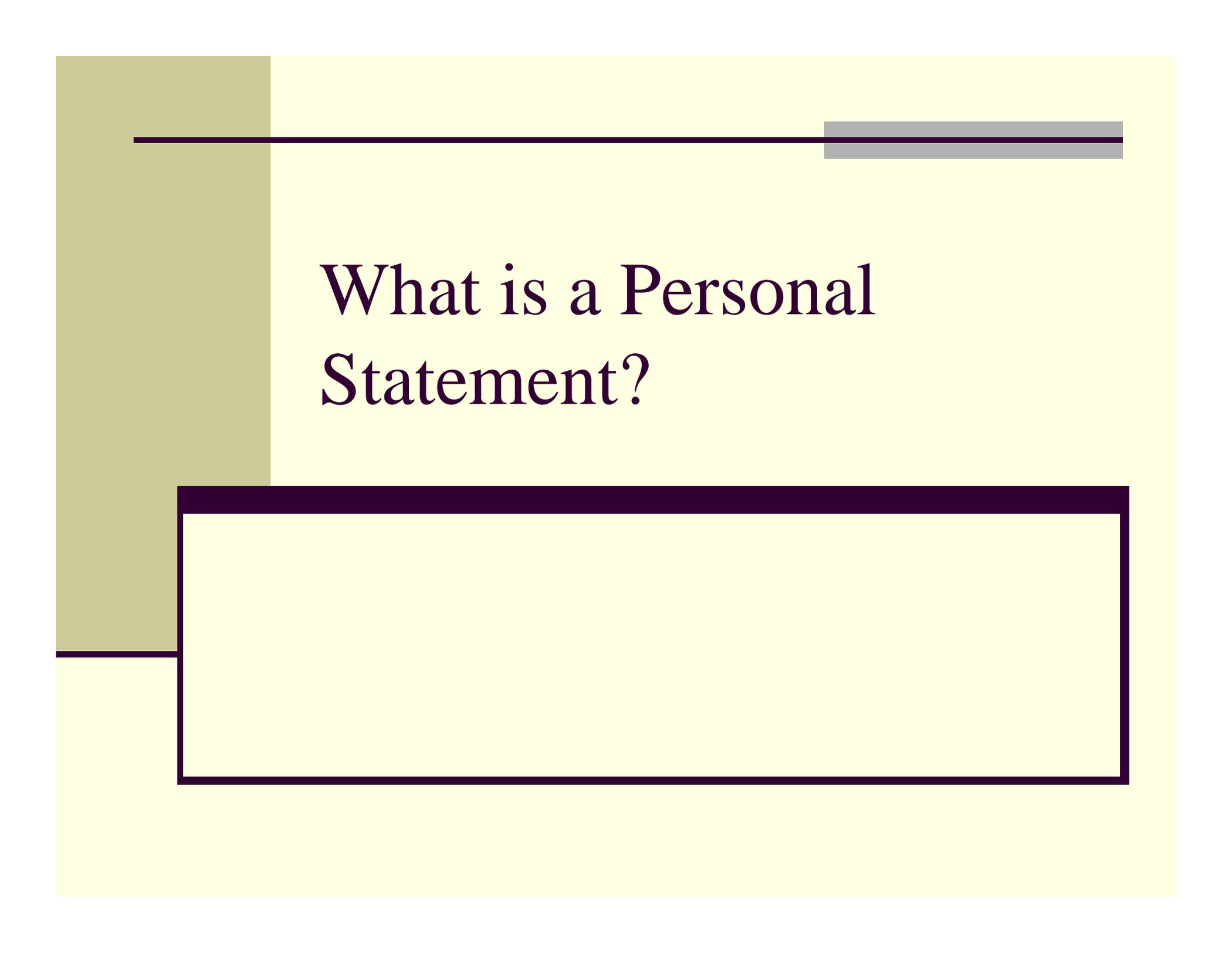
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Why This Workshop?

- Career Perspective: what does the personal statement need to accomplish?
- Writing Perspective: how do we, as writers, accomplish this?

Goals of the Workshop

- What is a Personal Statement?
- Purpose of the Statement
- Preparing to Write
- The Importance of Language, Grammar, and Style
- The Revision Process
- Getting Feedback



What is a Personal Statement?

Personal Statements

Also known as:

- Statement of intent/
purpose/interest
- Plan of study
- Personal essay
- Autobiographical
essay
- Profile of experience

Format

- Unique to each school
- Usually 1- 2 pages
- Usually between 500 –
2000 words
- May be open-ended, or
may be a series of
specific questions

Important:

Pay attention to the guidelines of each school / program
you are applying to and the cues they give you
for writing your statement

Purpose of the Statement

*Why are you applying to this program?
What do you want to accomplish?*

- demonstrate to the admissions committee why you are a good candidate and will be successful
- explain why you have chosen this program department, and university
- show how your interests align with their focus
- see you beyond your transcripts and references
- show the quality of your writing

How do you show you are a good candidate?

Highlight:

- your goals for the program (realistic!)
- your motivation, interest, focus and commitment
- what you have to contribute
 - ie original thought, scholarship
- your most relevant skills and experience
- your “fit” with this program
- your knowledge of relevant theory, research
- what makes you and your application unique
- your writing skills

Professional Schools

- how your experiences have helped you develop relevant professional skills
- usually want to see your knowledge of the profession and your suitability for it
- often interested in your career goals

Academic/Research Programs

- more focussed on your research interests and the reasons why you have chosen this particular program
- for a thesis or research program, you will usually describe your plan of study, potential thesis or research topic & a supervisor

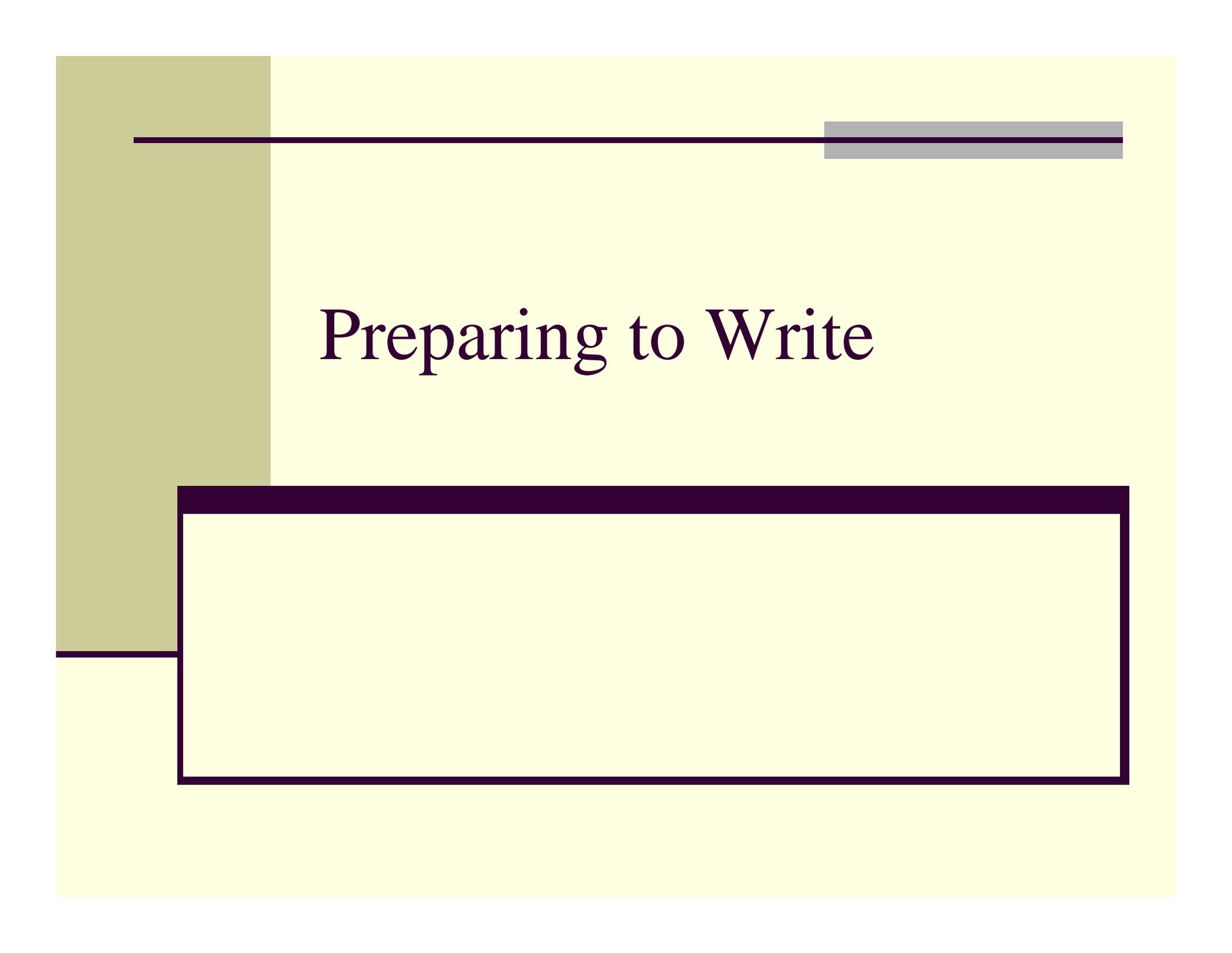
Your research

- “What I Want to Know” (Julia Harrison)
 - It is a worthy project (and why)
 - Your project has to have wider social, cultural, historical, political, community relevance
 - If it builds on earlier work you have done
 - Familiar with academic literature on the topic
 - Theoretical context
 - How are you going to do your research?

(You can find the rest of her presentation slides on the Grad Studies web site)

Graduate Schools Want to See The Quality of Your Writing

- Can you address all of the topics that they ask you to?
- Can you write clear, precise, concise prose?
- Can you hold a reader's interest?
- Do you ensure that your work is free from spelling and grammar errors?
- Keep in mind: it is often more difficult to write 1 really good page than it is to write 5 decent pages.



Preparing to Write

Preparing to Write - Research:

- Specific personal statement guidelines from school's application
- The program, department, institution:
 - web site, visits, orientations, admissions, grad studies, faculty, students
- The career, profession or discipline

Preparing to Write - Assess Yourself

- Knowledge
 - discipline or profession-specific knowledge
- Skills/interests
 - writing/research skills
 - technical skills: lab, data analysis
 - communication
 - leadership, teaching
 - organizational/ time management
 - analytical skills/problem solving
- Personal qualities
 - ethical
 - leadership
 - perseverance
 - creativity
 - self-directedness
 - initiative
 - independence
 - compassion
 - integrity
 - work ethic

- Experience - examples
 - relevant courses, seminars, readings
 - thesis or major papers or projects
 - field work, practica, community-based research, reading courses, independent study
 - conferences, presentations
 - work experience
 - extra-curricular, campus activities
 - community volunteer experience
 - life experience

Select Relevant Examples

- Choose the academic and/or non-academic experience, accomplishments and skills that are most relevant to the program
- Make the connection to the program
(that's your job not the reader's)
- Be selective - you may have to make some hard choices

How Do You Do This? Techniques for Brainstorming

- Free writing
- Mind mapping

My UCAS personal statement

What to include

- Future plans of how I want to use the knowledge and experience that I'll gain
- Why I want to go to university or college
 - Why I've chosen the course
 - Why the subject interests me
 - My suitability for the course
 - How my current or previous studies relate to the course(s) I've chosen
 - Experience and understanding of the subject
 - Any activities that demonstrate my interest in the course
- What I want from the future
 - Give evidence of the skills I have that are required to study my subject or to get the occupation I want
 - Evidence of my academic insight and enthusiasm
 - Evidence showing my understanding of what is required to study the course
- Evidence
- Special attributes
 - Attributes that make me interesting, special and unique
 - Positions of responsibility that I've held both in and out of school
 - How would I be an asset to the university or college?
- Achievements I'm proud of
 - Hobbies, interests that demonstrate my skills and abilities
 - Non-accredited skills and achievements
- About the subject and course
- Work

- Details of jobs, placements, work experience, voluntary work
- Concentrate on aspects relevant to my chosen course
- Explain why an experience or activity makes me an excellent candidate for the course

If I'm a mature student

- Say what I've done since leaving school
- If I've had a variety of jobs and experiences that are relevant, consider sending a detailed CV direct to my university and college choice(s)
- Demonstrate how I will cope with the academic work
- Critically evaluate my experiences, matching them to my chosen course requirements

If I'm an international student

- Say why I want to study in the UK
- Give evidence on how I could successfully complete a higher education course in English: say if any of my studies have been assessed in English
- Give examples of using my communication skills

Preparation

Check uni and college websites and Course Search for the criteria and qualities they want me to have

- Create a list of ideas
- Start drafting it early
- Ask people for their feedback

Presentation and style

- Show my enthusiasm and commitment
- Make it interesting
- Check my spelling and grammar
- Organise it into a logical structure
- Introduction: Write an opening sentence that will encourage the reader to read on
- Conclusion: reinforce my commitment, enthusiasm and skills suited to university or college life and study

Technicalities

Length: Up to 4,000 characters or 47 lines of text (including spaces or blank lines) (approximately 600 words)

Remember, there is only one personal statement, regardless of whether I apply for one or five courses

The personal statement must be my own work and not copied from another source.

Working Toward a Personal Thesis

- What is a thesis?
- How does a thesis apply to a personal statement?
 - You need to give your reader a clear overview, toward the beginning of your paper, of your accomplishments, your goals, and how this program will enable you to pursue them.

For Example

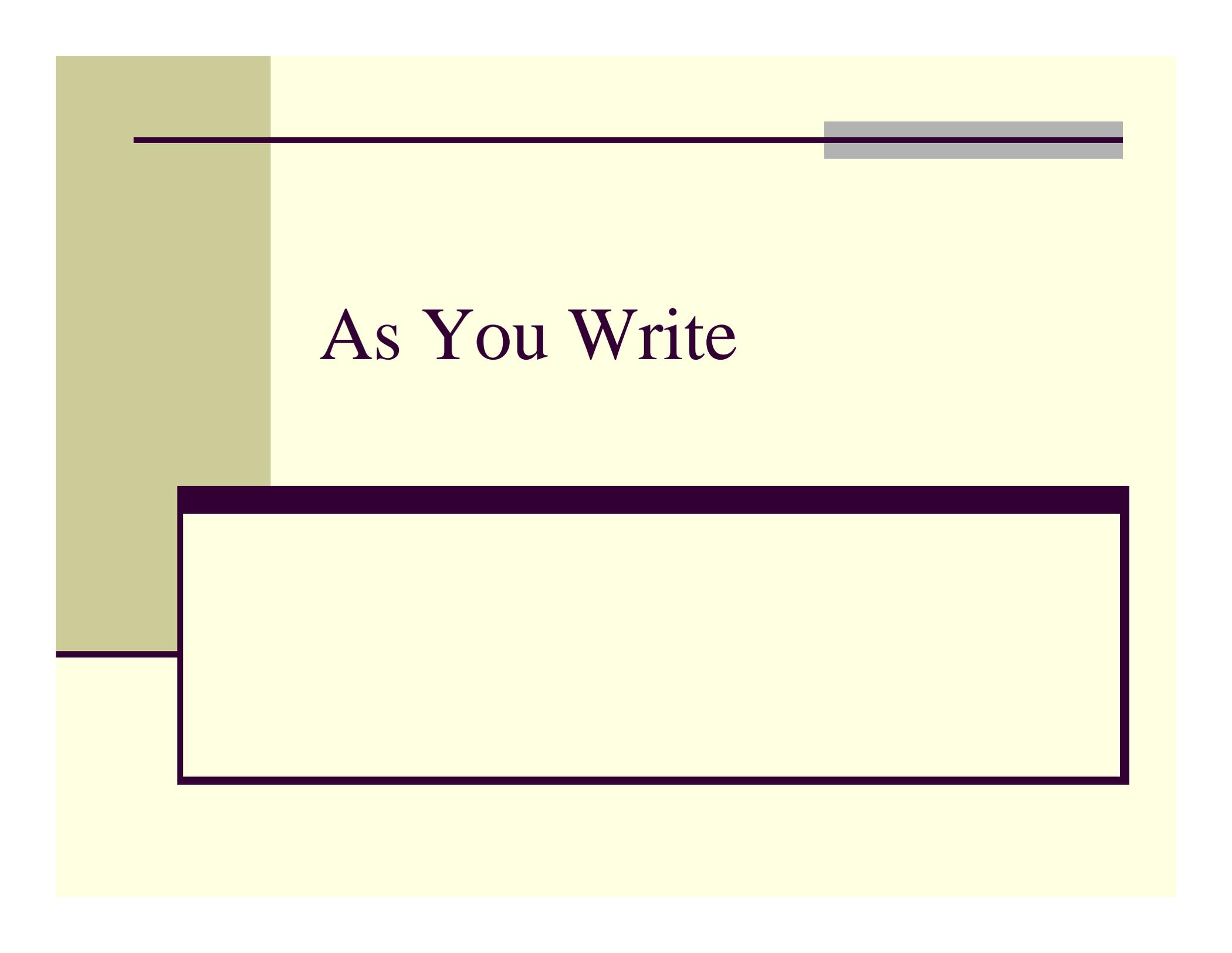
- “Through my experiences, both in my university coursework and my fieldwork in Algonquin Park, I have developed a deep interest in researching wetland ecosystems, an interest that Trent’s PhD program in Watershed Ecosystems would allow me to further pursue.”

Find a System of Organization

- In writing the body of your proposal, you will need some system of organization. For example, your paragraphs could move
 - Chronologically – throughout your life or university career.
 - Thematically – considering how a certain theme or issue has presented itself for you.

Create an Outline

- An outline can help you to avoid the terror of the blank page by taking a big task and breaking it up into smaller tasks.
- Your proposal is not a list of information. It is organized around a central purpose, or thesis. An outline helps you to visualize, and stick to this purpose.
- Outlines help you to identify gaps in your reasoning or logic.



As You Write

Introduction

- Hook - a short description of a problem, issue, or event that draws the reader in.
- General introduction to you and your academic background.
- Personal thesis – what have you done, what do you want to do, and why is this program the ideal place to do it?

Sample Introduction

“The rapidly growing elderly population is becoming a serious social problem in many countries. Some countries have been successful at finding solutions for this problem but others have not. Japan is one of the latter countries. Although Japan has one of the highest life expectancy rates and a reputation for good quality of life for its elderly population, it has been unsuccessful at addressing this problem. Compared to other industrialized countries, Japan lags behind in programs for elders who are physically disabled, bedridden or in need of long term care. The current economic crisis is exacerbating this situation as the government is cutting funding for elder programs. This problem resonates deeply with me, and I hope to someday work on finding a solution. It is for this reason that I am applying to the graduate program in social work at Boston University: I seek the skills and knowledge I need to return to Japan and work for a social work service.”

Source: Kansas Wesleyan University, <http://www.kwu.edu/current-students/student-development/career-services/graduate-school-preparation>

Body Paragraphs

- In your body paragraphs you will develop your qualifications and explain your academic interests.
- Avoid clichés and vague generalizations!
- Instead, be specific and include examples.
- Vary your sentence structure. Try not to begin every sentence with “I.”

Sample Qualifications

“I believe I am well prepared for graduate work. During my undergraduate study, I acquired the necessary background knowledge by taking advanced courses in the areas of psychology and sociology, including sociological research methods, social theory, statistics, psychological research, and psychotherapy. Along with these courses, I had an internship at the Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence, a non-profit organization. I also volunteered at Sawayaka-en, a nursing service, and Asunaro Children's Mental Hospital in Japan. From this internship and my volunteer work, I have gained practical experience which I feel will contribute to my academic and professional success.”

Sample Qualifications/Goals

“In the realm of engineering, I have developed a special interest in the field of laser technology and have even been taking a graduate course in quantum electronics. Among the 25 or so students in the course, I am the sole undergraduate. Another particular interest of mine is electromagnetics, and last summer, when I was a technical assistant at a world-famous local lab, I learned about its many practical applications, especially in relation to microstrip and antenna design. Management at this lab was sufficiently impressed with my work to ask that I return when I graduate. Of course, my plans following completion of my current studies are to move directly into graduate work toward my master's in science. After I earn my master's degree, I intend to start work on my Ph.D. in electrical engineering. Later I would like to work in the area of research and development for private industry. It is in R & D that I believe I can make the greatest contribution, utilizing my theoretical background and creativity as a scientist”

Source: Purdue Online Writing Lab,
<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/2/>

Sample Goals

“In my course of study, I would like to explore the ways that digital texts in the humanities can be both illuminated and limited by inclusion of contextualizing material and explore whether or not these texts can be made into effective teaching tools....The end goal would be the creation of hypertexts using existing works of literature in the public realm.”

Show of Knowledge of The Field

“The rigidity of contextualizing material is a persistent problem in bringing it to the interpretation of texts. Critics in the field of New Historicism have identified history itself as a form of narrative existing alongside literature and insist that a wide number of historical documents have to be examined if a literary text is to be contextualized to any effect.”

And Explain The Significance of Your Work

“The difficulty with contextualizing a text on the page, then, may lie in the necessity of inclusion to the point of burying the text under a mountain of scholarship. One aim of this course of study would be to change the aims of hyperlinking a text. Instead of using a wealth of criticism to illuminate a particular narrative, I would like to look at the ways the narrative can be turned and used to explore areas of criticism.”

Sample Interest/Fit with Program

“Currently there is no social welfare program in Japan that offers assistance to these elders and their families. In the light of these terrible problems, the need for such a program is obvious. My interest in social work is to find ways to develop and improve the types of services available to the elderly in Japan at a systematic level. I want to be involved in the organizing, managing, developing, shaping and planning of social policies related to the elderly. I believe the social work program at Boston University will allow me to do that. By studying macro social work at Boston University, I will learn about established social systems, assessment and intervention strategies. In addition, Boston University's emphasis on urban issues appeals to me immensely. As I will be returning to work in Osaka, the second largest city in Japan, graduate work in this area will better equip me for the challenges I will be facing. To me, an urban mission is a commitment to identify and find solutions to issues faced by urban areas.”

Sample Fit With Program

“I’m positive that Trent University’s Public Texts program would be an ideal place to pursue this project. _____ has offered to act in a supervisory role, and I will be meeting with _____ in February to discuss the possibility of his co-supervision. Further, Trent’s association with Broadview Press would be of substantial benefit as Broadview has done so much in terms of contextualizing works in the humanities.....”

Conclusion

- Be brief.
- Do not list everything that you have accomplished.
- Focus on specifically developing why this program would be an ideal place to continue your studies.

Use Simple, Clear Language

- Which is the best sentence and why?
- *The Brobdignagian missive was ostensibly superlative, yet it was problematic and created cognitive dissonance.*
- *The long letter was supposedly excellent, but it was confusing.*

Be Concise

Use fewer words

In today's society — **TODAY**

At this point in time — **NOW**

Avoid redundancies

In the month of August — **IN AUGUST**

At 9 a.m. in the morning — **AT 9 A.M.**

In my personal opinion — **In my opinion**

Active Voice

- In active voice, the subject is the doer of the action expressed in the verb:

From my interactions with grade 6 students, I have learned patience and understanding.

Passive Voice

- In passive voice, the subject of the sentence is not the doer of the action. The doer of the action does not have to be mentioned:

Through experience with grade six students, patience and understanding were learned.

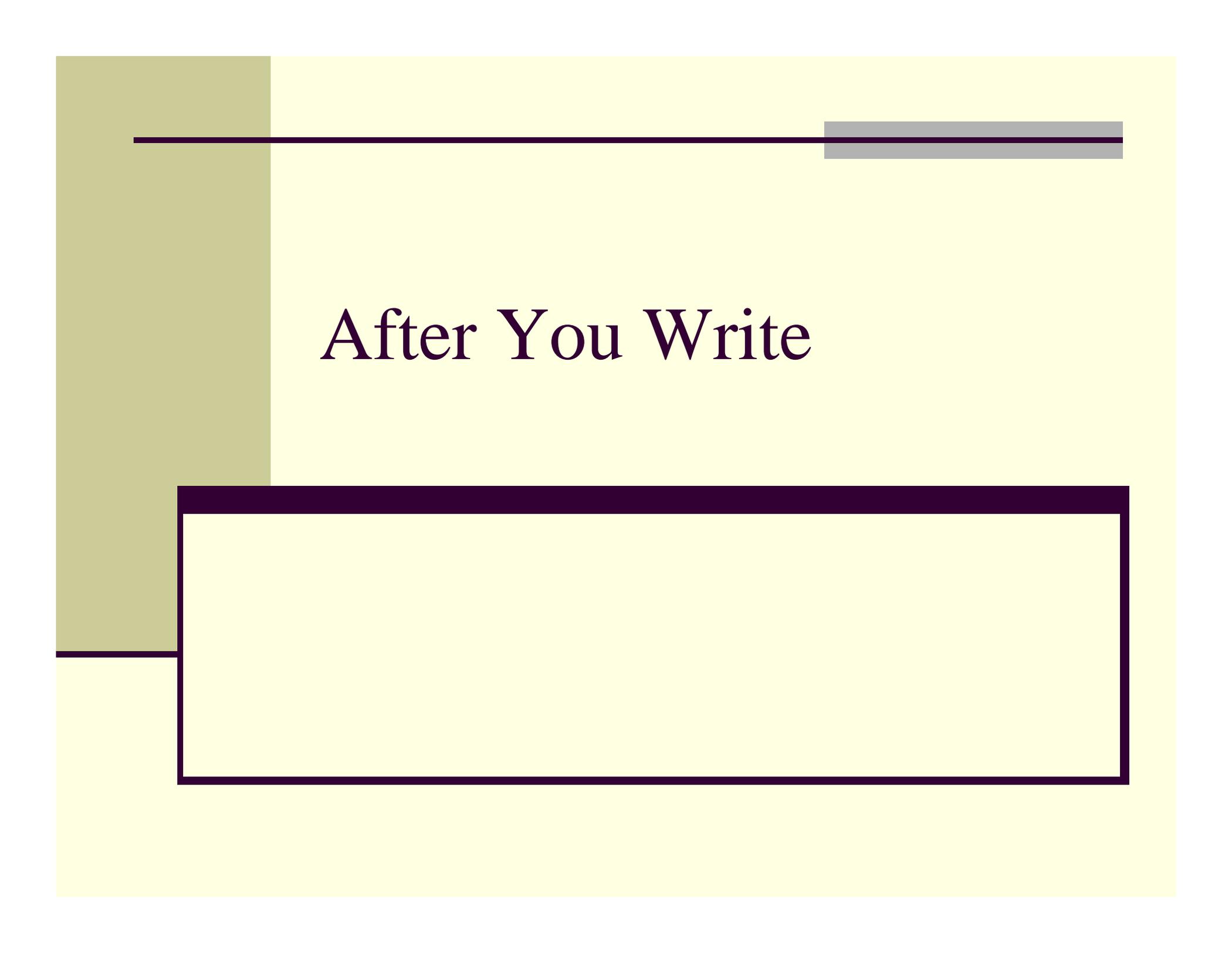
(The person gaining the understanding is not mentioned.)

Use the Active Voice, At Least Most of the Time

- Generally, the active voice is considered to be more direct and therefore stronger than the passive voice. In most writing, the active should be used and the passive kept for situations where there is good reason to use it, for example, when the doer of an action is not important or is understood :

The active voice *is considered* to be more direct.

(The doers of the action "consider" are writing experts or teachers or editors or those who consider such things)



After You Write

The Importance of Revision

- Do everything in your power NOT to send off a first draft.
- Try to take a break between drafting and revision. This will help you to gain perspective.
- If you are feeling frustrated and stuck, involve someone else in your revision process.

Revise For

- Substance
- Structure
- Style

Common Grammatical Errors

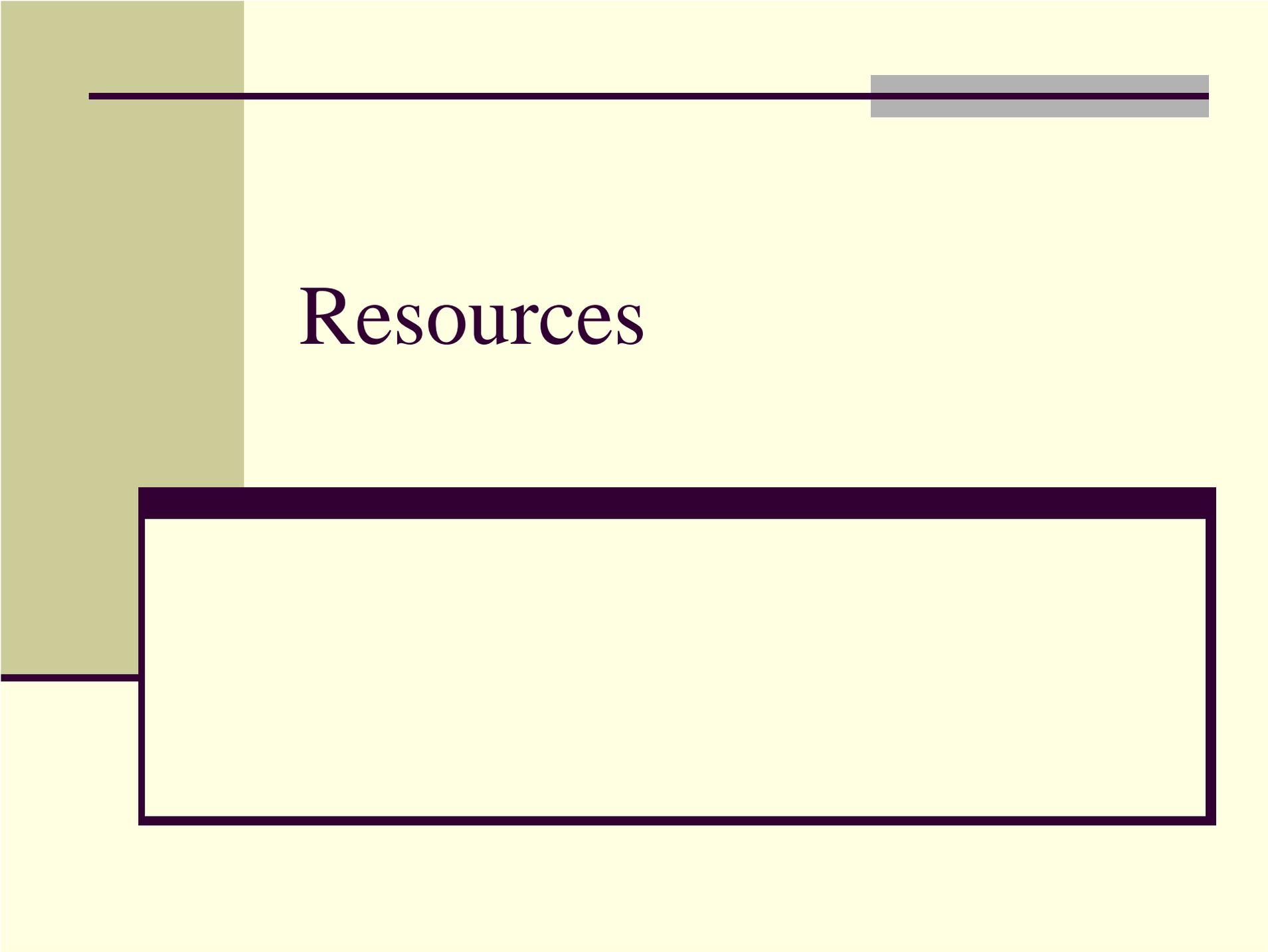
- Run-on Sentences
- Sentence Fragments
- Commonly Confused Words
- Passive Voice

Strategies for Proofreading

- Read from a hard copy and do not put all of your trust in spelling/grammar check.
- Read your work aloud. Or, have someone read it to you.
- Read backwards, starting from the last sentence and working toward the first.

Feedback

- Professors / teaching assistants
- Grad students
- Professionals



Resources

Need Grammar Help?

- Academic Skills Centre's Grammar and Clear Writing Guide: <http://www.trentu.ca/academicskills/resources/grammar.php>
- OWL – Purdue Online Writing Lab
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>
- *Easy Writer*, Bedford St. Martins
<http://bcs.bedfordstmartins.com/easywriter3e/20errors/default.asp>.
- Academic Skills Centre

Statement resources

- Career Centre:
 - appointments to review your statement
 - assistance with grad school application
 - Call: 748-1011 ext. 6012
 - Room 204 Champlain College