

Tips for Writing the CPGC Internship Applications

Crafting a personal statement often proves the most difficult part of the application for students. After all, it contains the word “personal,” which in our academic culture is often assumed to be opposed to the “public” world of intellectual exchange and community action. Not only is it an unfamiliar genre, but especially at Haverford, where students are socialized into a community-oriented, consensus-based culture, stressing one’s own unique strengths can seem uncomfortably close to bragging. The internship application is the place the committee looks to get a sense of who you are and why that person is a good candidate for a particular internship. In other words, the way you describe “who you are” should be shaped by what makes you a good candidate (i.e., you might have all sorts of wonderful qualities and experiences that make you a good and interesting person but that are not relevant for this application). This makes the application not so much about “you as a person” as about “you as a person applying to do a specific project.”

What the CPGC is looking for:

Knowing your audience and what they’re looking for is crucial to effective writing. In general, the CPGC committee is looking for someone who is well prepared for their project, personally mature, and eager to share the fruits of their experiences upon their return to Haverford. They are looking for students from a range of disciplines, including those in the natural sciences and humanities, whose internship proposals relate to the CPGC’s mission of promoting peace and global citizenship. While successful internship applicants may have very different backgrounds and interests, they all share a demonstrable commitment to learning, both in the classroom and in communities, and in integrating that knowledge into their academic work and broader social engagements.

What to include in your statement:

What experiences (don’t forget intellectual ones) have brought you to the place where you want to do this project?

- Relevant experiences do not need to have been international, or unusual, or expensive. Being sparked by a book you read, a class you took, a person you met, or a question that compelled you are all valid experiences. Of course, if you’ve spent time in the region you’re applying to work in, have studied the language, or have taken a class that has provided you with important background information, by all means mention that in your statement.

Example: The fact that you have traveled to Mexico or spent a summer in Paris might not actually be all that useful in making a case for why you’re a good candidate to work in an AIDS clinic in Kenya; the fact that you’ve taken specific classes on health policy in developing nations, volunteered at a local HIV/AIDS organization, or been a leader of a campus AIDS project would, as would classes or experiences that have given you knowledge of Africa.

What experiences have prepared you for the challenges you'll face doing this project?

- Don't rely on general statements about your maturity or your strength of character. First consider what challenges you anticipate your internship might bring: cultural differences, language barriers, the need to be self-directed/flexible/open-minded, etc. Then consider what experiences have prepared you to meet such challenges.

Example: Writing that you have always been an independent, self-motivated kind of person – no matter how true this may be – is far less compelling than describing, for instance, how volunteering at a hospice, or growing up in a multicultural family, or doing an independent research project gave you some of the particular abilities you'll need in your internship.

What do you hope to do with the knowledge you've gained once you come back?

- How will your internship affect the courses you'll take? Feed into your thesis? Help you with the organizations you participate in? Make sure you give serious thought not only to how your internship will benefit you personally, but to how you might share your knowledge upon your return to Haverford. This is often the weakness part of applicants' essays, too frequently seeming to have been tacked on simply to satisfy the committee.

Example: Proposing to "give a talk to other students about my internship" may sound vague and lacking in planning. Proposing to give a talk in a particular class related to your internship when you've already secured the professor's approval, or planning to collaborate with other students and professors working on similar issues to put together a panel discussion/workshop/exhibition sounds like something more interesting and appealing. If you're looking for ideas for what you might do, browse the CPGC's database.

General Advice:

- Be concrete: it's great to list actual classes taken or planned; particular organizations you're a part of or jobs you've had; people you've consulted with in thinking through your internship plans.
- Don't feel compelled to offer grand narratives: Haverford students often set high standards for themselves (and internalize a lot of pressure). You don't, however, have to have a ten-year post-graduate plan for what you're going to do with the fruits of your experience. Neither do we expect that you are going to change the world or radically transform people's lives in the course of a ten week internship. What we are looking for is a realistic, well thought out understanding of what you might contribute, what you might learn, and how this might contribute to your ongoing intellectual development and community participation.

- Avoid the clichés that often afflict personal statements: assume, for example, that everyone who applies wants to share their many advantages and feels strongly about working to lessen global inequities in wealth and resources. It's not that you shouldn't feel these things but that you shouldn't write them in an abstract or general (i.e., clichéd) way. It's much more powerful to have your motivations made specific: what kinds of people do you want to work with? What have you done in the past that demonstrates this interest? How do you envision turning "a desire to help those less fortunate" into concrete plans and actions?
- Anticipate potential concerns: There are no "perfect interns," just as there are no "perfect projects." If you think your application might be weak in some areas – you're a freshman without much coursework, you're applying to go to Thailand but you don't speak Thai, you want to work in a small village in South America but you've never traveled before – don't ignore these issues and hope the committee won't notice. It's far better to address them in a straightforward manner and propose how you will overcome these challenges. For example, maybe you can arrange a half-credit spring semester independent study with a professor who's expert in your area; find a student in the Tri-Co to tutor you in Thai; put together a reading list on the area you'll be going to so you'll be better prepared before departure.

Some Writing Tips:

- Confidence and directness are not necessarily the same as arrogance: Most of us feel insecurities at one time or another. For many students, however, these often translate into "qualifying" language that unnecessarily weakens an application.

Not: I hope that through my internship I might be able to think of ways to help disadvantaged children in the future.

But: I plan on using what I learn during my internship about the challenges of working with children in resource-poor settings to inform my senior thesis in education.

Likewise, avoid overestimating your knowledge or ability to impact the organization you will be working with.

Not: The theories of conflict resolution I have learned in my classes will help my organization put a stop to violence.

But: Through dialogues with members of my organization, I will be better positioned to share an understanding of how theories of conflict resolution can be applied in programs to end violence.

- Avoid jargon: the committee reading your application is made up of people from a variety of academic backgrounds who will not necessarily know the

buzzwords of your organization or discipline. The organization you are applying to work with may describe themselves as engaged in “stakeholder capacity-building” or “promoting sustainable/participatory development/empowerment.” Your job is to translate what that actually will look like in the context of your internship and how that relates to your goals and interests.

- Sound like a person rather than a bureaucrat: This means using active verbs whenever possible, avoiding strings of prepositional phrases and fancy Latinate “-tion” diction (e.g., “facilitation,” “implementation,” “utilization”).

Not: It is the intention of this internship to improve the interface between organizational leaders and clients.

But: As an intern at X organization, I will be working with the staff and kids participating in the Y program to better communicate their concerns about Z.

- Proofread! The easiest way to give a negative impression of carelessness and lack of seriousness is to let spelling and grammar errors mar your application. If you’ve read it over too many times yourself, get a fresh pair of eyes by asking someone to proofread it for you.

Some Resources:

The Writing Center: At the Writing Center, specially trained peer advisors (Haverford juniors and seniors selected for their writing and tutoring abilities and representing a wide range of majors) are ready to help you at any stage in the writing process. Make an appointment, or drop in during their open hours.

Peers & Professors: Asking someone – or several people – to look over your application to give you feedback can be extraordinarily helpful. Often the best feedback happens when you pose specific questions to your reader. For example, instead of asking your friends or faculty advisor, “What do you think about my personal statement?” ask questions designed to elicit specific responses, such as “Do you think my statement conveys my real commitment to social justice issues/public health/the arts as a method of peace-building?” or “Does it demonstrate enough of a background to reassure the committee that I will successfully complete my internship?” or “Does it give a sense of me as a person who is prepared to face challenges?”

CPGC Staff: We’re here to help! While CPGC staff cannot read drafts of personal statements, they can offer general advice as well as answer specific questions about the application process. If you have questions that haven’t been answered here or in the internship informational materials, please feel free to contact CPGC program staff, Janice Lion (jlion@haverford.edu) and Chloe Tucker (ctucker@haverford.edu).