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## On Writing Your Introductory Seminar Application

Who gets into an introductory seminar is determined only by the faculty member who teaches the seminar and, as you'll see below, there are a lot of factors involved. These tips are designed to help you to avoid some of the most common mistakes students make in writing these applications, and to encourage you to represent yourself as genuinely and directly as possible.

- **Don't waste time trying to guess what the right answer is or what the faculty member expects;** each faculty member makes his or her own decisions, based on the pool of students and the faculty member's sense of what will make a good group as well as good individual students.
- **Priorities for one seminar may differ from those for another.** Many faculty look for gender balance, but not all. Some look for previous experience and some don't; some prefer students who want to major in the field related to the seminar, and other prefer students without background in the field; others look for a combination of students with different interests.
- **The moral here is,** the best thing you can do is to explain, in plain English, why you are interested in the seminar.
- **There could be many reasons for your interest, and what follows is an incomplete list but it will give you an idea:** interest is related to your family or friends, your upbringing, your background, work you have done or would like to do, classes you have taken, your discovery of subjects you became aware of once you were at Stanford, your fascination with an idea, your desire to try something new to you, etc.
- **Be specific.** If you're applying to biology seminar, rather than writing that you've always been interested in the natural sciences, be more direct and give an example related to you. Mine your memory for what actually got you thinking about it and write about that.
- **Pay close attention to the course description.** There may be phrases, assignments, or goals given in it that appeal to you and that remind you of what attracted you in the first place. And that's a good place to start writing.
- **About your writing:** one of the biggest dangers is that you will waste half of the essay on a broad introduction that's full of platitudes. There's no room, and besides, introductions like that are space fillers and your faculty reader will recognize them right away.

- After you've written up to your word limit, **see how your application would read if you started at the second paragraph and left the first paragraph out entirely.** First paragraphs are often warm-ups. If your second paragraph sounds more like you and what you wanted to say, keep it and only rescue from the first paragraph what sounds genuine.
- Another suggestion: **Look at the last sentence or two in your draft;** they may constitute a good core statement for your first paragraph. Sometimes by the time you get to the end of your draft you reach the point you wanted to make all along.
- We talk to each other in stories every day, so **think of your application as a narrative you're telling;** it helps to organize your ideas, give a natural flow to what you are writing, and keeps you sounding like yourself.
- **You don't have to limit your applications to seminar in the field you're considering as majors;** also look at seminars that speak to a different interest of yours, to an intellectual exploration that you might not have a chance to do otherwise, to a talent you have or want to develop, to a connection with other interests you have, etc.
- **Show your draft to someone else**—a writing tutor, your AD, a friend who will give your thoughtful feedback. They can tell you what interested them, whether there are parts that are repetitious, vague, or overblown (purple prose, artificial language you would never use anywhere else).
- **You have a lot to gain by applying and nothing to lose;** give it a shot.