

Steps to start your candidate journey

Whether you are looking for an internship or job, applying to an academic program or study abroad, or applying for a grant or scholarship, **you are essentially telling a story** about why you are a great candidate for that opportunity. To connect to your audience—the employer, school admissions committee, scholarship application reviewer—you need to know why you are a good fit.

Why are you a great candidate? This exercise guides you through a process to help you reflect on this question. Doing this first makes it much easier to address application questions, write cover letters, and answer interview questions.

Use your results from this brainstorming exercise to provide the foundation for many activities that candidates participate including: the body paragraphs of cover letters, personal statements for scholarship or graduate and professional school applications, open-ended interview questions such as “Tell me about yourself.”, “What are your greatest strengths?”, and “Why should we hire you?”, and so much more!

STEP 1. Brainstorming

To begin, **brainstorm 10 (or more) qualities or skills that connect you to the role or opportunity you are seeking.** Think broadly about what you bring to the opportunity. The list does not need to be detailed at this point... just get ideas down. You might consider:

- **What are your interests? What is important to you – or what do you value?** What issues, topics, people, or events have you dedicated significant time and energy to? What do you enjoy doing? What brings you happiness and energy? What do you get deeply engaged in?
Examples: Conservation; Education; Healthcare; Politics; Languages; Sports; Writing
- **What are your skills? What are you good at doing?** What comes naturally to you? What do your friends, families, teachers, or additional significant others recognize you as having talent or expertise in?
Examples: Analysis, Drawing; Programming; Public Speaking; Social Media Content
- **What characteristics or qualities do you embody?** If you asked close friends and/or family to pick 2 – 3 words to describe you, what would they say?
Examples: Empathetic; Hard-working; Organized, Reliable; Sincere; Team-player



STEP 2. Add evidence to your brainstormed list

Select (at least) 10 of your brainstormed reasons and provide an example of where you demonstrated that interest, value, skill, or quality. Your “evidence” could come from experiences in academic classes, student organizations, volunteer/service projects, internships, work, travel, research, leadership, leisure, and more.

Across your 10 reasons, **vary where your evidence comes from** – either in the experiences you draw from or in the projects and examples you reference. This provides range and depth in the stories you tell. For example, you might draw examples from class projects, volunteer experiences, student organizations, and work experiences. When you draw multiple examples from one experience, it is valuable to reference multiple projects or activities within that role – for example, drawing examples from two different projects carried out at one job.

Example: Reason - Social media content creation

Evidence - Helped develop content for the Library's Instagram and Facebook accounts, with a focus on outreach to undergraduate students – increasing comfort and familiarity with the library system and encouraging participation in educational programming; Saw a 10% increase in follower engagement over a 3-month period.

Example: Reason – Build strong collaborations

Evidence - Served as Vice President of ABC Student Organization. Worked with campus offices to design collaborative programs to engage members in leadership training.

STEP 3. Prioritize your brainstormed list with evidence

As you look across your brainstormed list of interests, skills, qualities, values and passions, ask yourself: **which of these are most related to my target opportunity?** Place those at the top of your list.

How do you know which are most related? Review the skills and qualities listed in the job or program descriptions, as well as organizational websites. Where do you see strong alignment between what you have to offer as a candidate and what the organization or program is looking for? Use the most related reasons and evidence to guide the content for your application cover letters and personal statements. Additional reasons and evidence provide great material for interview responses.

Want to Learn More?

Visit a Peer Mentor in the Lisnek LAS Hub

- » First floor of Lincoln Hall, Quad-side, Behind the marble staircase
- » Monday – Friday, 1:30 – 4:30 pm
- » Fall and Spring semesters, while classes are in session

las.illinois.edu/resources/hub

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