

# Career Counsellor

## Counsellor's Newsletter

### WONDERING WHAT TO DO IN A GAP YEAR?

Taking a gap year—a break from academia to pursue experiential learning—can offer more than just time off to relax. With careful planning, it can provide both résumé-building opportunities and an intentional pause dedicated to self-development and self-discovery.

But with so many possibilities for how to spend your gap year, how can you decide what's right for you?

If you don't know whether a gap year is right for you, or if you've decided to take the plunge but don't know what to do in a gap year, you've come to the right place. This guide can help you weigh your options.

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<https://thumbor.forbes.com>

## Pros and Cons of a Gap Year

Gap years have long been common among students in Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Today, the practice is growing in North America, with many reputable higher education institutions such as Harvard University encouraging newly admitted students to take a year off before starting classes.

A gap year may not suit everyone, though. Before giving notice at work or sending your future university a request to defer admission, take some time to consider the benefits and drawbacks so you can make the best choice for your needs and goals.

### Pros

Personal growth: Many gap year participants return to their studies or jobs feeling more inspired, engaged and focused. Stepping away from the relentless forward march of school and career can help people clarify what matters to them.

Improved academic performance: A gap year can nurture independence and a sense of purpose, which may help you become a better student. A study by Colorado College's Gap Year Research Consortium reported that gap year participants exceeded their predicted GPAs by about 0.15 points, with positive effects often lasting throughout college.

New perspectives: Many gap year pursuits, like travel and service work, expose you to others' life experiences and backgrounds, encouraging you to see the world in different ways. This expanded perspective can build maturity, empathy and cross-cultural awareness while improving communication and interpersonal skills.

Résumé boost: Having a gap year experience on your résumé can help you stand out in the job or internship market. Make sure to document everything during your gap year so you can draw on those memories to craft winning cover letters and interview stories.

### Cons

Expense: A gap year can be costly. Even with the break from paying for school, expenses like airfare, food and housing can add up quickly. Choosing a working holiday or applying for scholarships may help you stay on budget.

Achievement gap: Being one year behind your peers can feel like a big deal, especially during college, when each year represents a major step forward. A gap year may put you behind your graduating class, but for many, the benefits outweigh this drawback.

Lost momentum: In 2013, researchers Karl Haigler and Rae Nelson found that 90% of the gap year participants they surveyed returned to their studies within one year. While these are great odds, that still means that one in 10 students did not go back.

Stress: Like any major undertaking, a gap year can be stressful. You may experience homesickness, loneliness, uncertainty or culture shock. And yes, things can go wrong. A medical emergency or travel complication may be harder to handle when you're on your own, away from your familiar support system.

### When Should You Consider Taking a Gap Year?

According to the Gap Year Association, about 40,000 U.S. and Canadian citizens make this leap each year. Many people take their gap years between high school and college. However, current college students, graduates and even working professionals can also benefit from time to recharge, refocus and reinvest themselves in their passions.

There's no wrong time to take a gap year. Older participants may have more responsibilities to consider—like dependents and mortgages—but with determination and planning, a gap year can fit into nearly any stage of life.

### Before College

Getting through high school can seem like a frantic race to the finish line, jumping through ever-higher hoops each step of the way. A gap year allows you to pause and regroup before diving into college life, all while building the self-reliance, confidence and maturity to succeed in your academic pursuits.

Many schools allow accepted students to defer admission for a year, though they may request a proposal for how you plan to spend your gap year. However, financial aid, including scholarships, may not carry over, so make sure to find out how deferring college entry might affect your funding.

### During College

According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, 30% of undergraduate learners change their major at least once. For students who are questioning their educational direction, a gap year can provide some time to step back and reassess. It can also offer relief from academic burnout.

If you are considering a gap year during college, bear in mind that most federal student loans allow only a six- to nine-month grace period after a person graduates, pauses their studies or drops below half-time enrollment. This means that you may need to make student loan payments during part of your gap year.

## After College

The need for reflection, growth and rest does not end after college graduation. A gap year after your undergraduate studies can help you meet these needs as you prepare for a graduate degree or your first post-college job. A sabbatical can also help working professionals who are feeling burned out or questioning their career choices.

A gap year can give college graduates and young professionals a much-needed break after the rigors of study or the intensity of early career development. While you may have more commitments and obligations at this stage of life, there may also be more options for financing your gap year, such as remote work.

## Top Ways to Spend a Gap Year

Gap years traditionally focus on international travel, but domestic and virtual gap years can also offer valuable experiences. The most important thing is to choose a goal that means something to you and, ideally, can help you further your career goals.

There's no rule that your gap "year" must last exactly 12 months, either. Many experiential learning programs offer single-semester or even shorter options for individuals who don't need a full year away from school or work. Of course, if you're organizing your own plans outside of a formal program, you can take as much or as little time as you wish.

## Travel Abroad

World travel is the most common goal among gap year participants. The Gap Year Association's 2020 alumni survey found that 89% percent of respondents traveled outside of the U.S. or Canada. Traveling also goes hand in hand with another important focus for many gap year participants: language study.

There are many options for how to spend a gap year abroad. You can follow your own itinerary or go with a structured program. Gap year travel programs can cost between \$5,000 and \$12,000, but thrifty globe-trotters can often save money by winning scholarships, working while abroad or finding a volunteer program that covers room and board.

## Volunteer

Volunteerism also ranked high in the Gap Year Association survey, with 79% of gap year alumni engaging in some kind of service work. Diverse volunteer opportunities abound both abroad and at home in areas like conservation, education and health.

Some organizations, like World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms, provide food and lodging for volunteers. Others, like AmeriCorps, even pay a stipend. However, volunteering may work best for people with some savings to support travel and/or living expenses.



## Work Abroad

Teaching English abroad and working as an au pair—a live-in nanny—are two popular ways to earn a living while traveling the world. The hospitality industry also employs many working travelers.

This option may best suit slightly older participants with more job skills. Securing employment overseas typically requires a work visa. If you find your job through a placement service, they may arrange your visa for you.

## Learn a New Language

Foreign language proficiency can be a big plus on your résumé, and what better way to learn a new language than by practicing with native speakers all day, every day? Whether you're working, volunteering or relaxing, spending your gap year abroad can improve your fluency.

If a domestic or virtual gap year fits your budget or comfort zone better, you can still learn a new language. Try talking with an online language tutor. You can also combine language study with civic engagement by volunteering with local communities that speak your target language.

## Focus on Sports

A gap year can be a great time to combine a passion for athletics with opportunities for travel and personal growth. Consider building your leadership skills while making a difference in young people's lives by volunteering to coach a sports team abroad. Many coaching programs include living with a host family for full immersion in the local culture and language.

Pursuing certification as a ski or scuba instructor can lead to paid work, but training can cost between \$2,000 and \$10,000, or even more. Depending on the program, participants may need to be over 18, but some sports coaching programs accept younger teens.

## Explore a Future Career Path

If you are between high school and college, you may want to gain experience in your chosen field before committing to years of expensive classes. Or maybe you've already started on your educational path, and you're wondering whether you made the right choice. A gap year can help you discover what it's really like to work in your target industry.

Internships, either at home or abroad, can offer a taste of professional life, but remember that many internships are unpaid. In fact, placement programs—especially for overseas internships—can be costly, so make sure to prioritize paid opportunities if you don't have substantial savings to invest.

## Rest and Recharge

Thirty-five percent of respondents to the Gap Year Association survey cited burnout as a prime motivator in choosing to take a year off. These students are not alone—83% of the nearly 33,000 students who took part in a 2021 Boston University study reported that mental health had negatively affected their academic performance.

No matter how you spend your gap year—world travel, career exploration, community service or a combination of goals—make sure to fit in some time for self-care. Focusing on your mental and physical well-being can support your readiness to return to school or work with renewed energy and inspiration.

## How To Write Your Undergraduate Personal Statement



What's a personal statement? An undergraduate personal statement is a chance to get noticed for the unique talents and experiences you have. It's an important part of the application process as it's an opportunity to talk about yourself and your passions, outside of your grades.

In this article, we're going to talk you through how to write an undergraduate personal statement that stands out, without leaving you feeling overwhelmed.

### Preparing to write your personal statement

You'll have heard the saying preparation is key, and that's no different when you're tackling your personal statement. There are two things to think about when you're planning. The practical and factual information you need to get across, and the more emotional, human parts of you that make you different to everyone else.

Before you start writing, take some time to think about the key things you'd want an admissions tutor to know about you, and get them down on paper. Don't worry too much about making your notes perfect – this is more about making sure you know why you should be offered a place.

You can also look at the course description as this'll help you with what to include and give you a good idea of what each uni is looking for.

### How to open your personal statement

Admissions Tutors will be reading a lot of personal statements so it's important to grab their attention right from the start.

Remember, it can only be 4,000 characters, which is about two sides of A4. So, you'll need to use your words wisely to fit everything in.

- Don't overthink the opening. Just start by showing your enthusiasm for the subject, showcasing your knowledge and understanding, and sharing your ambitions of what you want to achieve.
- Avoid cliches! Remember, this opening part is simply about introducing yourself, so let the admissions tutor reading your personal statement get to know you.
- Keep it relevant and simple. You're limited on how much you can include so avoid long-winded explanations. Why use 20 words when 10 can make your point?

### Your personal skills and achievements

Next, you'll need to write about your personal skills and achievements. Universities like to know the abilities you have that'll help you on the course, or generally with life at university.

Don't forget to include evidence to back up why you're so excited about the course(s) you've chosen.

- Be bold and talk about the achievements you're proud of.
- Include positions of responsibility you hold, or have held, both in and out of school.
- What are the things that make you interesting, special, or unique?

Your work experience and future plans are important to include. You should share details of jobs, placements, work experience, or voluntary work, particularly if it's relevant to your course.

Try to link any experience to skills or qualities that'll make you successful.

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If you know what you'd like to do after a career, explain how you plan to use the knowledge and experience that you'll gain to launch your career.

### How to end your personal statement

It's always good to connect the beginning of your statement to the end and a great way to reinforce what you said at the start.

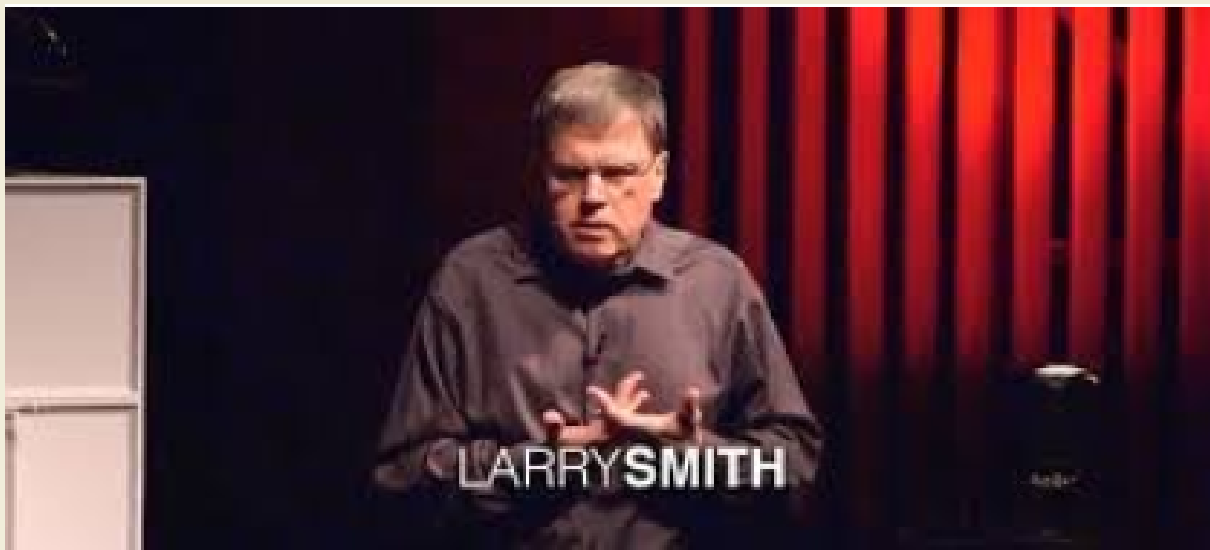
You want to see the ending as your chance to finish in a way that'll make the admissions tutor remember you.

This final part of your personal statement should emphasise the great points you've already made and answer the question of why you should be offered a place on the course.

## Podcast Suggestion For The Month

Why you will fail to have a great career | Larry Smith | TEDxUW

Video Link: Why you will fail to have a great career | Larry Smith | TEDxUW



Throughout his three-decade career here at the University of Waterloo, Larry Smith has inspired legions of students to take up the mantle of economics with his passionate and homespun tales of economic wizardry. A renowned story-teller, teacher and youth leadership champion, Larry has also coached and mentored countless numbers of students on start-up business management and career development strategies.

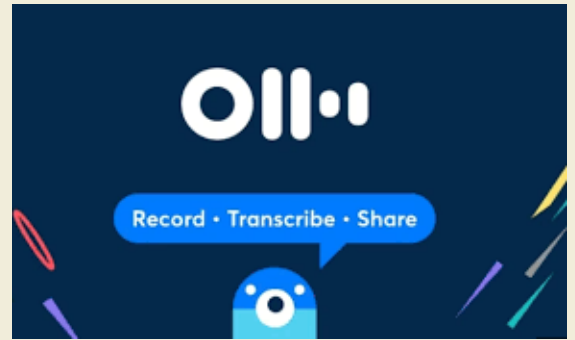
Having taught introductory microeconomics, macroeconomics and entrepreneurship classes, he recently celebrated assigning his 29,000th grade earlier this year.



## Otter.ai: Your Personal Lecture Transcriber

Imagine being able to fully immerse yourself in a lecture without the distraction of frantic note-taking. Picture a tool that captures every word spoken, transcribing it into text in real time. This is exactly what Otter.ai offers – a transformative approach to learning that allows students to focus on understanding rather than transcribing.

Otter.ai is an innovative tool designed to transcribe lectures and voice notes, effectively serving as your personal scribe. It captures and converts spoken words into written text, ensuring no important point from your lectures or study sessions is missed. This means you can devote your full attention to absorbing the information, engaging in discussions, and deepening your understanding rather than splitting your focus between listening and note-taking.



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Why you will fail to have a great career | Larry Smith | TEDxUW

<https://youtu.be/iKHTawgyKWQ?si=VVYmQjk7uQBD5pF9>

The last newsletter for this academic year 2024-25 will be released on 26<sup>th</sup> of May, 2025.