

THE PRIOR LEARNING ESSAY

People often go to college to acquire the skills and knowledge to obtain or advance a professional career. Conversely, many come to college with years of professional experience and types of learning that a college seeks to instill. If you are a student at SUNY Empire State College, I am quite certain that the latter pertains to you.

The goal of the prior learning essay (the essay in which you describe what you have learned) is to receive college credit for college-level learning that you may have acquired outside of a college course or a degree. Prior experiences that have the potential to earn college credits can include, among myriad types of experiences, learning through certificate programs that are not credit bearing, volunteerism, continuing education programs or professional, personal experiences that one may not intuitively associate with a college experience. As you reflect, think creatively.

If successful, the prior learning essay provides the opportunity to have your learning acknowledged as being significant enough to accrue college credit. Prior learning essays may also save you time and money as you complete your degree.

For complete information on the process and other resources, please visit Empire State College's webpage, "[Supporting Materials for the iPLA Guide](#)" (iPLA refers to individualized prior learning assessment).

Experience Versus Learning

Learning occurs through active mental, physical and relational engagement with experience. Simply put, learning is learned by doing.

One can usually surmise a degree of skill and knowledge that someone has by simply being told their professional title or through descriptions of their life experiences. In the prior learning essay, this is not enough. In the prior learning essay, the learning has to be communicated and demonstrated for the evaluator to make a professional assessment as to whether or not and/or to what degree your learning is indeed at the college level.

Although experience is important, particularly how long you were engaged and the degree of capacity of involvement in the experience(s) related to the topic of your essay, it is the *learning* that has to be emphasized. Remember, experience is fundamental; learning is key. After all, it is the learning that is being assessed and for which you can earn college credit.

I tend to think of experience (for example, the earning of professional certificates and similar experiences described in the second paragraph, above) as *sources* for the prior learning essay, just as one thinks of books and journal articles as sources for a term paper. The years and capacity of engagement in one or several professions or other experiences and the rank, title, materials created (for example grants) or other accomplishments achieved that demonstrate proficiency can all be considered *primary sources* that demonstrate learning. Keep in mind, any

host of sources can be used in one iPLA essay if those sources are related to your topic. I strongly encourage you to include copies of certificates, your resume, letters of recommendation, materials created and any other relevant sources as evidence of learning when submitting the prior learning essay (there is an option to do so in PLA Planner [the college's software program that organizes a student's iPLA requests]).

WRITING THE PRIOR LEARNING ESSAY

Deciding on Topics and Titles

As you begin to develop your degree program (an individual curriculum), ask yourself: Do I have personal or professional experience that can be considered college-level learning? I'm sure you do.

Once you decide on a topic, think of a title that best encapsulates your learning. This title will show up on your degree plan, so try to be precise. Titles of prior learning essays often (though not always) sound like course titles that are typically found on a college or university transcript. The exact wording of the title can change as your writing process evolves and the learning is more and more fully described in your drafts.

Next, begin "brainstorming" your topic. I often suggest using simple organizing tools like concept maps or other outline formats to begin keeping track of ideas related to your topic as you organize your essay. As your primary mentor, we can begin this process to flesh out a preliminary outline together.

Describe Your Experiences: Length, Degree, Capacity and Accomplishments

Reflecting on your essay's title, ask yourself: What types of experiences have I had, professional, personal, certificate or otherwise that relate to the topic? Remember, these are your primary sources. Begin your outline by bulleting these under the title of your topic.

Did these experiences lead to any specific accomplishments, for example, a job, a raise, a certificate, a promotion, the writing of grants or the creation of a training manual, seminar or training presentations, etc.? Add these to your outline under the respective experiences.

Now ask yourself: What activities did I engage in during these experiences to achieve my accomplishments? Perhaps you researched and wrote a grant, developed a PowerPoint presentation for professional training, or interviewed potential employees, etc. Add these to your outline.

Describe Your Learning: Skills and Knowledge, Abilities, Aptitudes

Because learning comes from doing and is acquired and applied, use descriptive verbs when describing your learning. Great examples of this can be found on any SUNY Empire learning contract (a document that outlines the responsibilities of students and faculty in the learning process) that includes "learning outcomes."

Look at your outline and ask yourself: What skills, bodies of knowledge, abilities, aptitudes, etc., did I acquire or further develop based on my accumulative experiences and accomplishments related to my topic? How were they applied or integrated? Describe the depth and breadth of your learning. These can include facts, skills, concepts, theories, principles and other categories of learning. This is the crux of what you learned and should be the main part of our essay. Be sure to reference your learning with the appropriate experiences, activities and accomplishments.

As your outline begins to take shape, organize your essay so that the skills, knowledge, competencies or other forms of learning are the focus, while the experiences, activities and accomplishments are the foundational support.

Finalize and begin to use your outline as the basis for the writing of your PLA essay.

Introduction and Conclusion

A clear and concise essay that emphasizes learning, supported by experience and accomplishments, furthers your chances of success. A clear and organized introduction and conclusion add to the possibility of obtaining college credit for your learning.

In your introduction, briefly describe who you are, the degree you are going to complete, a brief summary of your topic, and the amount and level of credit that you feel you deserve. Briefly explain how the topic on which you are writing is being used in your degree plan. Are your credits liberal or are they professional? I often tell students that if you are seeking advanced-level credits, quote directly or summarize how Empire State College defines advanced learning. In the body of your essay, remember to remind the evaluator about how and why your learning relates to the advanced criteria.

In your conclusion, remind the evaluator in a summative way about the nature of your topic, the scope of your learning, and, if applicable, why you feel your learning is liberal and/or deserves advanced credit.

Further Reading

Lambe, J. P. (2011). Communicating college learning through noncourse matching: An approach to writing the prior learning assessment essay. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 59(1), 50-53.