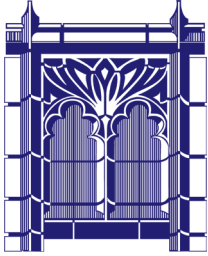


# Finding and Acting on Your Unique Strengths



## THE GRADUATE SCHOOL **mentor memo** AUTUMN QUARTER 2009

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This Mentor Memo, part of a series, responds to graduate students' requests for advice about navigating graduate studies successfully.

The series also addresses topics in career preparation and professional development. For more information and to suggest topics, contact Graduate School Dean Jerry Baldasty at [baldasty@u.washington.edu](mailto:baldasty@u.washington.edu).

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Life, careers and yes, graduate school, center on all types of decisions. Choosing where to focus your energy is the ongoing challenge and opportunity. You can pursue educational and professional endeavors that align well with your unique talents, gifts and skills you enjoy using.

### A process of reflection

The best place to look when identifying significant strengths is to reflect upon good experiences throughout your life: not just happy memories, but good experiences in which you did things well, you enjoyed doing them, and you are proud of what you did. This can be considered a three-part definition of a good experience. Next, consider these questions:

- What is the good experience that first comes to mind? Write a paragraph about it and try to be as detailed as you can.
- In a recent assignment, project, activity or work, which parts of it did you do best and enjoy most? Try for two or more examples.
- What activities give you the most enjoyment when you are not at work/school? These could include hobbies, volunteer work, ventures, projects with the family or anything else. Try for two or more examples.

### Expanding the process

As you get into the mindset, try to identify your top 10 good experiences. It does not matter when they occurred, but rather what you did to make the good experience happen and whether there were outcomes that you felt good about. These experiences can come from any part of your life: school, sports, employment, personal relationships, travel, etc., from childhood to the present.

For each of your top good experiences, write one or two paragraphs using the "STAR" method, describing:

- the Situation
- the Tasks you completed
- the Actions you took
- the Results you felt good about

there's more... ►

Try then to identify patterns of skills or talents which show up repeatedly in your top good experiences. Pay attention to the obvious and more subtle connections.

### **Bringing it all together: Identifying significant strengths**

After identifying a list of strengths appearing in your good experiences, take the next step to see if they are significant strengths or not. For each strength, identify three distinct examples of experiences in which you strongly applied that strength. It should be relatively easy to come up with three examples—if the strength you are testing is truly a significant strength. Try to test 6-12 strengths. This is not necessarily easy, however. Genuine reflection is important. You can do it.

### **Minimizing chance, optimizing intention**

Many people leave decisions about life, careers and relationships to chance. We often hope that things will just work out OK. Make decisions about your future a priority. Carve out the necessary time for these important decisions. There is much about your life, attitude and future which is within your control. Be intentional.

Here are some resources to further explore your strengths:

*[http://careers.washington.edu/gradstudents/  
selfandcareerexploration](http://careers.washington.edu/gradstudents/selfandcareerexploration)*

*[http://www.marcusbuckingham.com/site/about\\_us/books.  
php](http://www.marcusbuckingham.com/site/about_us/books.php)*