



**American Institute  
of Certified Planners**

*Creating Great Communities for All*

# AICP Guide Planning Experience Essays

This guide contains valuable information to help you prepare successful Planning Experience Essays.

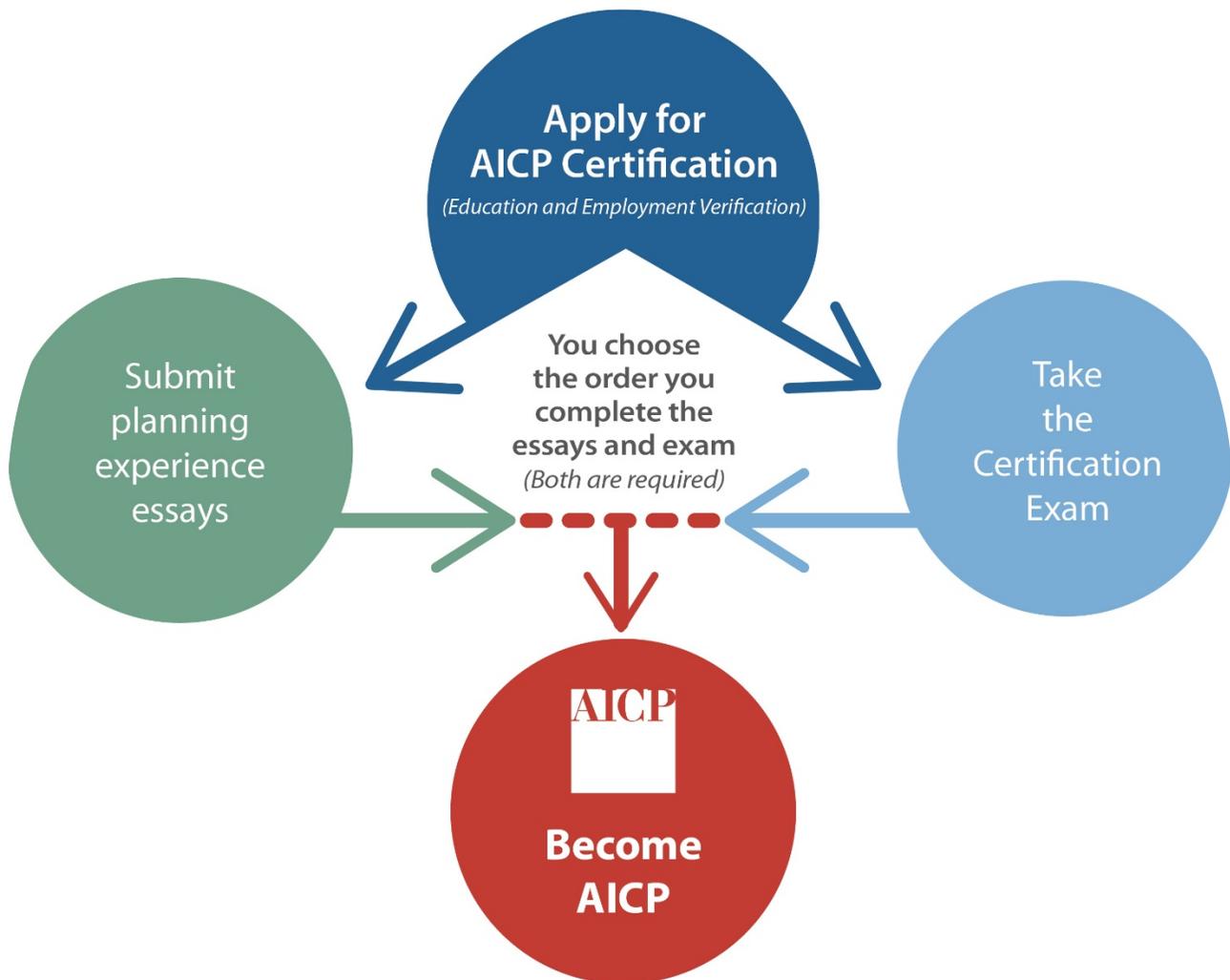
*Updated October 2020*



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>PATH TO BECOME AN AICP-CERTIFIED PLANNER .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>PLANNING EXPERIENCE ESSAYS .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>PLANNING EXPERIENCE ESSAY PROCESS .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>DEMONSTRATING PROFESSIONAL PLANNING EXPERIENCE.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>PLANNING EXPERIENCE ESSAY CHECKLIST .....</b>	<b>14</b>

## PATH TO BECOME AN AICP-CERTIFIED PLANNER



## PLANNING EXPERIENCE ESSAYS

Planning experience essays demonstrate how the employment experience submitted in your AICP Application meets the established criteria that define professional planning.

Approved applicants may register for the exam and submit planning experience essays during the specified submission windows. Members must pass the AICP Certification Exam, and their planning experience essays must be approved before AICP Certification is earned. These steps may be accomplished in any order.

Please use planning examples from only those positions you included in your AICP application. Essays using examples from employment positions not included in your application will be denied.

## PLANNING EXPERIENCE ESSAY PROCESS

This section of the guide reviews the steps for submitting your planning experience essays. Be sure to carefully review these steps to make sure you have all the information you need before you begin.

### 1. AICP APPLICATION APPROVAL

After your AICP application has been approved, you may submit your planning experience essays during one of the submission windows.

### 2. KNOW THE SUBMISSION DEADLINES

The essay submission window is two weeks long and consists of expedited (formerly “early bird”) and regular submissions. Applicants who choose the expedited submissions option get advance notice of their essay review status and may submit revised essays within the same submission window if their initial submissions were denied. Applicants who choose the regular submissions option must wait until the next essay submission window to submit revised essays if their initial submissions were denied.

### 3. WRITE YOUR PROFESSIONAL PLANNING EXPERIENCE ESSAYS

Review the criteria for the planning experience and draft 250- to 500-word essays.

### 4. READ AND VERIFY THAT YOU HAVE READ THE AICP CODE OF ETHICS AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

Check the box to agree to abide by the Code of Ethics.

### 5. SUBMIT ESSAYS

Review your essays prior to submission. You will not be permitted to change or edit your essays once submitted.

### 6. ESSAY REVIEW

Once your essays have been submitted, our teams of staff and volunteer AICP-certified reviewers will evaluate your essays. This is a thorough process so please allow 8–10 weeks for notification.

## DEMONSTRATING PROFESSIONAL PLANNING EXPERIENCE

The AICP Commission has established three criteria that distinguish the experiences of professional planners from those of layperson planners, allied professionals, community stakeholders, and elected/appointed officials:

1. Professional planners demonstrate a professional level of responsibility and resourcefulness while applying a planning process appropriate to the project or situation.
2. Professional planners evaluate multiple impacts to a community when implementing professional planning tasks.
3. Professional planners influence public decision making in the public interest.

To earn the AICP credential, all applicants must write three short essays that describe how their professional experiences align with these normative criteria. This section of the guide provides essay criterion requirements and general tips before explaining each essay criterion and offering criterion-specific instructions and guidance.

### Essay Requirements

- Each essay must be between 250 and 500 words in length.
- Each essay must be based on the member's verified professional experience (but does not need to address the entirety of that experience).

- Each essay must be unique and aligned with its respective criterion (i.e., an essay cannot be repeated for multiple criteria).
- Each essay must be self-contained and self-explanatory (i.e., an essay must not be dependent on information provided in a different essay).

### General Tips for Applicants

- Follow the instructions for each essay.
- Identify the position held in each example used.
- Provide one specific example from your professional experience for each essay to illustrate your alignment with the criterion. Avoid generalities or aspirational statements about planners.
- Describe or explain one specific example in detail for each essay rather than briefly mentioning multiple examples.
- Write about your experiences in the first person and identify your personal contributions to all team efforts.
- Proofread each essay carefully and use the checklist provided in this guide on page 14 to ensure your written essays meet the requirements.

## **Criterion 1: Demonstrate a Professional Level of Responsibility and Resourcefulness While Applying a Planning Process Appropriate to the Project or Situation**

Professional urban, rural, and regional planners apply multistep processes related to managing change in communities. Typical process steps include defining a problem or opportunity, setting goals and objectives, generating alternative strategies, selecting a preferred alternative, implementing the preferred strategy, and monitoring and evaluating strategy performance.

### **Essay Instructions**

First, identify the position(s) you held while applying a specific planning process. Then, describe your step-by-step application of this process. Clearly state your role(s) and describe the professional planning responsibilities, knowledge, technical skills, and/or initiative you applied throughout the process.

### **Examples of Planning Processes**

An applicant does not need to be employed by, or provide services to, municipalities or regional planning agencies to satisfy this criterion. The list below highlights some examples of planning processes that applicants may choose to discuss as their example:

- Comprehensive, functional, or subarea plan making
- Regulatory or incentive program design
- Zoning administration or development review
- Economic, environmental, health, or transportation analysis
- Development-project or land-use site selection
- Development-project or land-use entitlement
- Research program or project design
- Research program or project execution
- Plan, program, or project evaluation
- Technical assistance or training
- Course or curriculum development
- Course or curriculum evaluation

### **Examples of Professional Planning Responsibilities**

A typical planning process involves several different professional responsibilities. The list below highlights some examples that applicants may choose to reference when describing their application of a planning process:

- Collecting, analyzing, or visualizing data
- Conducting public, partner, or stakeholder outreach
- Facilitating meetings
- Rendering ministerial land-use decisions
- Preparing staff reports, grant proposals, or grant reports
- Drafting studies, plans, or ordinances
- Providing public information, public testimony, or technical assistance
- Critiquing development proposals or student work
- Defining learning objectives or methods
- Preparing presentations, manuscripts, or exercises

## Criterion 1 Tips for Applicants

**TIP 1: DO** describe either your participation in a single instance of a planning process or your routine participation in a specific type of planning process; **DON'T** list different planning activities in which you have participated or describe your participation in several different planning processes.

**TIP 2: DO** provide details about your personal roles and professional responsibilities when applying a multistep planning process; **DON'T** describe the work of a team without specifying your personal involvement.

**TIP 3: DO** describe an entire multistep planning process; **DON'T** limit your response to your contributions during a single process step.

**TIP 4: DO** explain how you brought professional knowledge, technical skills, personal initiative, or other indicators of resourcefulness to the process you applied; **DON'T** choose a project example comprising mostly administrative or pre-professional responsibilities.

## **Criterion 2: Evaluate Multiple Impacts to a Community When Implementing Professional Planning Tasks**

Professional urban, regional, and rural planners consider the interrelated effects of policies, programs, projects, and actions that cause or influence change in communities. They identify and evaluate the potential positive and negative effects of specific planning interventions and work to shape those interventions in ways that minimize negative impacts and create quality-of-life improvements for the communities they serve.

### **Essay Instructions**

First, identify the position(s) you held while working on a specific planning task that required you to consider the interrelated effects of a specific policy, program, project, or action. Explain your thought process as you identified and evaluated multiple potential consequences of this intervention to community quality of life. Then, describe how your evaluation informed your work products or decisions in such a way as to protect or improve quality of life for the community you served.

### **Examples of Interventions**

An applicant does not need to be employed by, or provide services to, municipalities or regional planning agencies to satisfy this criterion. The list below highlights some examples of interventions that applicants may choose to reference:

- A comprehensive, functional, or subarea plan
- Land-use or development regulations
- A financial or technical assistance program
- A public investment, facility, or service
- A partnership or agreement
- A land-use or development project
- A public awareness or education campaign
- A research project
- An instructional module or activity

### **Examples of Consequences**

Policies, programs, projects, and actions often have multiple intended and unintended consequences that affect the quality of life in a community. The list below highlights some examples of consequences that applicants may choose to reference:

- Effects on housing choice or affordability
- Effects on transportation access, safety, or convenience
- Effects on fiscal health
- Effects on air or water quality
- Effects on habitat
- Effects on public health or safety
- Effects on economic or social welfare
- Effects on energy supply or use
- Effects on historic or cultural resources
- Effects on community identity or appearance

## Criterion 2 Tips for Applicants

**TIP 1: DO** identify multiple, specific consequences of a specific intervention and describe your thought process in considering their impacts to community quality of life (see lists above for examples of consequences and interventions); **DON'T** discuss only one consequence or speak generally about types of impacts.

**TIP 2: DO** describe your thought process in identifying, considering, and addressing the multiple impacts of an intervention; **DON'T** focus on the procedural steps of a planning process you applied.

**TIP 3: DO** explain how your thought process informed your specific work products or decisions to result in outcomes that benefited the quality of life for the community you served; **DON'T** focus on project background without showing how your work made a difference at the end of the day.

**TIP 4: DO** use an example of a planning intervention that directly impacts a community's quality of life; **DON'T** use an example of an administrative or management process.

### **Criterion 3: Influence Public Decision Making in the Public Interest**

Professional urban, regional, and rural planners influence decisions related to managing change in communities made by elected or appointed public officials in ways that protect or improve the well-being of the general public. This influence may be through direct communication with public officials or through intermediary processes.

#### **Essay Instructions**

First, identify the position(s) you held while participating in a specific planning process that provided you with an opportunity to influence either a specific decision or a type of decision by elected or appointed public officials. Then, explain how your actions or work products influenced either a specific public decision or a type of public decision. Be sure to clearly describe the decision point, the decision maker(s), and the decision made. Finally, explain how your influence over this decision or type of decision protected or improved the well-being of the general public.

#### **Examples of Methods of Influence**

An applicant does not need to be employed by, or provide services to, municipalities or regional planning agencies to satisfy this criterion. The list below highlights some examples of methods of influence that applicants may choose to reference:

- Providing formal written recommendations
- Providing public testimony
- Drafting research or policy briefs
- Preparing educational or training materials
- Conducting educational or training activities
- Presenting research findings or analysis
- Participating in advisory body meetings

#### **Examples of Decision Points**

Professional planners influence a wide range of public decisions. The list below highlights some examples of decision points that applicants may choose to reference:

- A legislative body votes on adoption of a plan, ordinance, resolution, agreement, or budget
- A chief elected official signs an executive order
- A planning commission votes on approval of a plan or discretionary use permit
- A zoning board votes on approval of a variance
- A chief appointed official issues an administrative rule or policy
- A judge or court issues findings and conclusions

### **Criterion 3 Tips for Applicants**

**TIP 1: DO** explain how you or your work influenced either a specific decision or type of decision by elected or appointed officials (see lists above for examples of methods of influence and decision points); **DON'T** use an example in which you influenced a staff-level decision or a decision by a private individual or organization rather than a decision by public officials.

**TIP 2: DO** explicitly identify the decision makers, the decision point, and the decision that was made; **DON'T** assume that reviewers will read between the lines about whether a decision was actually made regarding the example you provide.

**TIP 3: DO** explain how you or your work successfully shaped a public decision-making outcome; **DON'T** use an example in which public officials made a decision that conflicted with your recommendations or analysis or an example for which no decision has yet been made.

**TIP 4: DO** explain how your influence over a specific decision or type of decision served the public interest; **DON'T** use an example in which the primary beneficiaries of a decision were a small number of private individuals or organizations rather than the general public.

NOTE: For those planners in research or academia and not practice, focus your essay for Criterion 3 on how your work (studios, lecture materials, publications) promotes decision making in the public interest. Your essay must make a direct connection between your work and the criterion requirements by focusing on how decision makers use your work. Simply describing how your students will take what they have learned and one day apply it to influence decision making in the public interest will not meet criterion requirements.

## Denied Essays

If one or more of your essays are denied, you will receive notification via email. The email will include information that addresses the specific reasons behind the denial decision. Depending on your situation, you may need to wait to gain more professional planning experience, or simply reapply with more focused essays that better describe how your work experience meets the professional planning experience criteria required for certification.

## Appeals

Members whose essays are denied have the right to appeal the decision. Appeals are reviewed by the AICP National Membership Standards Committee.

If you decide to appeal, please email us at [aicpexam@planning.org](mailto:aicpexam@planning.org) and staff will provide you with a link where you can upload a letter of appeal. You must contact APA and submit your appeal before the deadline specified in your denial notice. An APA staff member will contact you via email once the AICP Membership Standards Committee has reached a decision.

The appeal letter must be professional in tone and must explain why your application should have been approved. Your appeal letter must demonstrate how your existing essays meet the professional planning criteria requirements. It should clearly address the reasons for denial cited in the notice and may clarify the information provided in your submitted essays to demonstrate how you have met the criteria; however, it cannot include new or supplemental examples and materials that were not included as part of your original application.

When writing your appeal letter:

- **DO** carefully review the denial information provided.
- **DO** prepare a professional appeal letter that addresses each point of denial in your appeal letter.
- **DO** cite specific information from your original essay(s) and articulate how it meets the requirements outlined in the criteria guidance above.
- **DON'T** provide additional information that was not included in your original submission. Only the information provided in the original essay may be considered in your appeal.

## **AICP Certification Scholarships**

A limited number of reduced fee scholarships are available through APA Chapters. Each chapter is allotted a minimum of one scholarship. Larger chapters may have more available. The reduced fee scholarship will reduce the cost of submitting your essays to \$70 and the exam fee is reduced to \$70. The application fee still applies and is nonrefundable. To learn more about the requirements, please contact your [Chapter PDO](#).

## PLANNING EXPERIENCE ESSAY CHECKLIST

Please use this checklist to make sure your Planning Experience Essays meet the criteria requirements described in this Guide.

If your answer to any of the following questions is NO, please revise your essays accordingly before you submit.

### Overall Checklist Items

- Are my essays between 250 and 500 words in length?
- Do my essays use examples drawn from the professional experience verified in my AICP application?
- Are my essays self-contained and self-explanatory?
- Did I follow the criterion-specific instructions when writing my essays?
- Did I carefully proofread my essays?

### Criterion 1: Demonstrate a Professional Level of Responsibility and Resourcefulness while Applying a Planning Process Appropriate to the Project or Situation

In this essay, applicants must describe how they have applied a complete, multistep professional planning process in their professional work; they must make clear the sequential nature of the steps in the process, the role they personally played, and the special knowledge, techniques, or initiative they applied.

- Does my essay identify the verified professional position I held while involved in the project example I describe?
- Does my essay describe, in detail, my step-by-step application of a complete, multistep planning process, using either a specific project example or describing my routine participation in a specific type of planning process? (See page 6 for a list of examples of planning processes.)

- Did I write this essay in the first person and identify my personal role(s) and professional planning responsibilities while applying this planning process? (See page 6 for a list of examples of professional planning responsibilities.)
- Does my essay demonstrate how I used my planning knowledge, technical skills, personal initiative, or other indicators of resourcefulness while applying this planning process?

### Criterion 2: Evaluate Multiple Impacts to a Community When Implementing Professional Planning Tasks

In this essay, applicants must show that they understand the big-picture effects of their planning work on the communities in which they work; they must demonstrate that they are able to identify, evaluate, and balance multiple, potentially conflicting consequences of planning-related interventions to the community.

- Does my essay identify the verified professional position I held while involved in the project example I describe?
- Does my essay describe multiple specific potential consequences of a specific planning-related intervention that could affect a community's quality of life? (See page 8 for lists of examples of interventions and examples of potential consequences to a community.)
- Does my essay describe my thought process as I evaluated those multiple specific consequences of the intervention?
- Does my essay demonstrate how these considerations affected my work products or decisions to result in beneficial outcomes for the community?

**Criterion 3: Influence Public Decision Making in the Public Interest**

In this essay, applicants must demonstrate that they or their work has influenced a decision made by elected or appointed officials in a way that serves the public interest.

- Does my essay identify the verified professional position I held while involved in the project example I describe?
- Does my essay explain, in detail, how I or my work influenced either a specific decision or type of decision by elected or appointed officials? (See page 10 for a list of examples of decision points.)
- Does my essay clearly identify the decision makers, the decision point, and the decision made?
- Does my essay explain how my influence over a specific decision or type of decision served the public interest?