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## **Where and how—applying to USC and preparing for what’s to come**

In November 2016, I got a call from the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation. They had chosen me as the next recipient of their scholarship to USC Annenberg. It meant that if the university approved my application, I would get to move to Los Angeles and earn an M.A. in Specialized Journalism during the academic year of 2017–2018. The nine-month long Specialized Journalism program is meant for journalists who already have some professional experience and are looking for ways to improve their journalistic skills.

The application process started right away. In December, I took the TOEFL test, which measured my English skills, and in January, I did the GRE test, which assessed my mathematical, linguistic and analytical skills. In both tests, I had to achieve certain scores that USC required. After doing the tests, I updated my résumé, had samples of my work translated from Finnish to English, asked two colleagues to write me letters of recommendation, and wrote a Statement of Purpose, in which I stated why I would be a good addition to the Specialized Journalism program and what my goals and aspirations were.

Writing the Statement of Purpose was the hardest part of the application process because as a Finn, praising myself and my skills in an American, exuberant style felt uncomfortable. But at the same time, writing the statement was very useful because in order to get it done, I had to go through USC’s Course Catalogue and really think about what kind of classes I’d like to take. The Specialized Journalism program has only four mandatory journalism classes, and each student gets to pick and choose all their other classes from all USC schools, including schools outside of Annenberg. One of the mandatory classes is a course in specialized journalism, and students can choose a topic they’re interested in: If, for example, a student has a background in science journalism, she can choose a class in science journalism, or if she is a science journalist hoping to move on to covering economics, she can choose a class in economics journalism. The options for the specialized journalism beats are sports, globalization, entertainment and popular culture, education, religion, science, environment, economics, and U.S. population, but not all classes are offered each year. For example, during my time at USC, only classes on sports, religion and entertainment and popular culture were offered. But luckily students can replace the Annenberg specialized journalism class with a class from another school, for example by choosing a class from USC Dornsife’s Environmental Studies program to replace the class in environmental journalism.

My application process ended in March 2017 when the acceptance letter from USC arrived. Right away my husband and I started taking care of business: We rented our apartment in Finland, purchased travel and health insurances, got our vaccination certificates, and started looking for a place to live in Los Angeles. We arrived in L.A. in the beginning of July, three weeks before school started. We had enough time to buy a car, open a bank account, get U.S. phone numbers and explore our new neighborhood. We ended up in Silver Lake, which is about nine kilometers away from campus, and from day one we were very pleased with our choice. Silver Lake is popular among twenty- and thirtysomethings working in the creative industries, and there are a lot of cafés, restaurants and shops at a walking distance from our home. The metro station is also close, and I took the Red Line—L.A.’s first underground metro line—to school, transferring to the Expo Line, which resembles the trams of many European cities. The commute took 35 minutes at best, 55 minutes if I

had to wait to transfer. I spent my metro rides listening to podcasts, completing class readings and just spying on other metro riders.

### **Taking the plunge—the beginning of the Summer semester**

USC is home to around 45 000 bachelor's and master's students each year but that was hard to believe during my first weeks of school. The campus was quiet before the beginning of the Fall semester as our program started at the end of July with a mandatory class called Summer Immersion. It was a four-week class that was meant to familiarize us with all forms and types of content of today's journalism. The class comprised of us 15 students in the Specialized Journalism program, hailing from seven countries (the U.S., Finland, China, Italy, Hungary, Mexico, and Canada,) of the students in the Specialized Journalism (Arts) program, and the students doing an M.S. in Journalism—all together about 70 people. This was the third year that all journalism master's students at Annenberg attended Summer Immersion together.

From day one, it became clear that it is much easier to work hard under the California sun than it is in the Finnish slush—you have more energy to do all the work that is required, which for us was a lot. During Summer Immersion, we were given a glimpse into *all* the job requirements of journalists today. We were taught how to make a segment for TV news, how to do a radio piece, how to create content for different social media channels, how to write and take photos for print publications, and we learned why it is important for a journalist to understand at least the basics of coding. We were divided into groups of four, and each group made a final project that was reflective of all the skills we'd learned. The class was an interesting experience because most of the M.S. students were just over twenty years old, students who had just finished their undergraduate degrees and had come straight to graduate school. They had none or very little professional experience but they understood many of the technicalities much better than us older students, and I learned a lot from their enthusiastic attitude. I also got lucky: In my group of four, one student had done her undergraduate degree at Annenberg so she knew the people and the places. Our group dynamics worked very well, and we became close as we finished our final project on the legalization of street vending in L.A.

Many other students weren't as lucky as I was. We were divided into groups by a count to four, and in some groups, there was no one who spoke English as their first language, which made working on the final project challenging. In the future, it would be better if the professors made the group divisions beforehand, based on the skills and experiences of the students, and many of us suggested this in our course evaluations. It is still uncertain whether Annenberg took us up on our suggestion, but one thing is changing for Summer Immersion: Instead of a four-week class, it will be a seven-week class in 2018 which is a very welcome change. It gives the students more time to digest what they're learning.

### **Getting started—the ups and downs of the Fall semester**

As I mentioned, there are four mandatory classes in the Specialized Journalism program, and the rest of the classes can be chosen from any USC school. At the beginning of the semester students get to choose a few extra classes and go to the first sessions to see and hear what they're like before making their final course selections. In addition to that, almost any class can be taken as Directed Research. Sometimes it is what the name implies, a one-on-one class tailored to the student's needs, but usually it means doing the class exactly like all the other students attending it, but with a few homework assignments less. Directed Research gives students leeway in choosing their classes because it makes it possible to take, for example, a four-unit class as a two-unit Directed Research class. This is good because the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation's scholarship pays for exactly 34 units, and with Directed Research it's possible to do more classes.

When choosing classes, students should keep three things in mind: how labor-intensive is the class, how does the work load required for it fit in with the work load of other classes, and what does one want to learn. I knew that I had three requirements for the classes I took: I wanted to learn more about the topics I cover in my work in Finland, i.e., feminism and popular culture; I wanted to learn a concrete new skill, which ended up being coding; and I wanted to learn how to do radio. In addition to these requirements, I decided to pick classes for the fall that I knew I could use to advance my thesis that I was completing in the spring. My topic was female nudity in American TV shows, and I chose the topics of all my homework assignments and projects so that I got to interview people whose comments and thoughts I could use in my thesis. With this approach to the thesis, I was one of the few students in our program who didn't feel stressed about the thesis.

In the fall, I took five classes. Two of them were classes organized by the Cinema School, and they were Gender, Sexuality and Media that focused on feminism and popular culture, and The World of the Producer, that explored the work of TV and movie producers. From Annenberg, I chose a class on the basics of coding and a specialized journalism class on entertainment and popular culture reporting. In addition to these classes, I did the mandatory journalism classes: Critical Thinking, focusing on the importance of critical thinking in the work of journalists, and the Master's Thesis seminar. My favorite class by far was Gender, Sexuality and Media. We dove into feminist theories, watched TV shows, movies and music videos and analyzed them from a feminist viewpoint. I was the oldest student in the class, and it was immensely interesting to hear the thoughts of film students a decade younger than me on feminism and how it is influencing their industry, especially as the #metoo movement started unfolding during the semester.

Studying at Annenberg isn't academic in the same way as studying at a graduate level in Finland. I didn't take any theory-based classes in journalism, and instead, all my classes focused on the everyday skills needed by journalists. The range of class assignments varied. I wrote journalistic pieces and essays, did radio stories, coded homework assignments, did presentations and even one group assignment. All the assignments were evenly spread out throughout the semester, leaving very little free time, but by managing my time efficiently and planning ahead, I only stressed during midterms and at the end of the semester when final projects were due. That said, the fall was still straining. Everything was new, and I had to adjust not only to student life, but to a new language, a new city and making new friends. I can't stress enough how much the support of my husband helped in getting me through it all.

### **Getting the hang of it—the ease of the Spring semester**

After a labor-intense fall, I purposely chose a lighter course load for the spring. I wanted to be able to focus on my thesis. At Annenberg, the thesis is a journalistic piece, and students get to choose the form themselves. Some students in our program made a documentary, some a podcast, some wrote a long magazine piece—the other Helsingin Sanomat Foundation scholarship candidate at Annenberg this year, Stefani Urmas, built an amazing news application. I knew from the start that I wanted to write a longer magazine piece than I would ever get to write back home in my job at *Trendi* magazine because of our magazine's strict word counts. In addition to writing my thesis, I coded a website for it and made two radio pieces on the topic.

For the thesis, each student recruits a thesis committee that comprises of three faculty members. The committee evaluates the thesis and helps the student finish it. The chair of the committee edits the thesis, and the two other members are supposed to be experts on the topic and the form of the thesis: in my committee, I had the same Cinema School professor whose class on feminism and popular culture I took in the fall, and a professor of coding from Annenberg who helped me with the coding of my thesis site. My committee was very supportive and liked what they read, saw and heard.

In addition to finishing my thesis, I chose three classes for the spring: advanced coding, a radio and podcast class, and a TV class from the Cinema School. It was a big class, almost a hundred students in the auditorium, and every Monday night we would gather to hear the lectures of Mary McNamara, who in 2015 won the Pulitzer prize for her work as the TV critic of the *Los Angeles Times*. After each lecture we would watch an episode of a new TV show or the first episode of the new season of an existing show, and after that the creators of the shows came to class for a Q&A. The class gave a fascinating look into the world of American TV and was a true manifestation of the networks the USC faculty has, as the creators of huge shows like *Jessica Jones* or *black-ish* came to class.

In addition to the classes I chose myself, I was supposed to do two mandatory journalism classes in the spring: The Master's Thesis seminar that was to continue from the fall, and Reporting Decisions, focusing on the choices made in newsrooms before a story is reported on and published. Unfortunately, Professor Michael Parks who is the head of the Specialized Journalism program and who was supposed to teach both classes, broke his shoulder during winter break and was on sick leave the whole Spring semester. In Parks' absence, the Master's Thesis seminar wasn't organized at all, and for Reporting Decisions, the leaders of Annenberg got together and gathered four professors to teach the class, giving two sessions each. The class ended up being four weeks shorter than anticipated and it was a very easy and laid-back class because the substitute teachers didn't have the time or the resources to give us proper class assignments. Instead, they gave us articles to read and in class we discussed them. The most enjoyable part of the class was when professor Sasha Anawalt invited reporters from the *Los Angeles Times* to class to tell us about how they reported on the misgivings at the Getty Museum over the years.

### **From here on—what do I take with be back home**

Above all else, the main lesson Annenberg taught me was to say “yes”: first say yes, and *then* figure out the rest. I used to fear the disappointment of risk, and often chose “no” to stay on the safe side, but not anymore! Leaning in to new opportunities is what I most enjoy about the California way of doing things. The end result doesn't have to be perfect on the first go: it's enough that something gets done. But sometimes this “yes we can” mindset has its downsides. For example, many Annenberg professors will say “yes” to students who are asking for help, even at times when they really don't have time to help them. Some of my classmates ended up in situations where their schedules suffered because they were waiting for help that never came. I, myself, was fortunate to be in situations where the energy I got from the enthusiastic responses of my professors helped me get things done by myself.

During my year at Annenberg I also learned that the things I knew from working in print before coming to Annenberg were already very valuable and could take me further than the places I've been in my career thus far. Because I understand the rhythm of a text piece, I am better equipped than most to understand the rhythm of a radio or a video piece. I truly understood my pre-existing skillset when I received the Outstanding Scholar in Specialized Journalism award from Annenberg at the end of the year and was invited to join Phi Kappa Phi, an honor society that invites bachelor's and master's students who are among the top 10 percent of the nation to be its members. I realized I didn't achieve these merits only because of the things I learned at Annenberg, but because of the foundation I built my new skills on.

During my year I didn't learn what the one saving grace for future journalism is, but I learned that it is still important to tell people's stories—and while doing it, thinking about who you want to read, see or hear those stories and how, and then focus on that way of storytelling. Technological advances and applications are nice but not all of them will serve journalistic purposes, and the ones that do are worth learning—and it's important to keep learning new ones. For example, it was intriguing to see how we were taught at the beginning of the year that Snapchat is going to revolutionize journalism and by the end of the year, no one

talked about the app anymore. In the future, not every journalist has to know each platform or outlet perfectly but it makes the job of each member of the editorial staff easier if everyone has just a hunch as to how one, for example, makes short social media videos, how much time it takes to make one, and what kind of material works best in them. I also didn't get an epiphany on how one makes a profit with journalism but I did learn that it won't be made by just aiming for the highest number of viewers.

My year at Annenberg broke down all barriers for me. I have the courage to go out and try new things and confidence that I can learn from those experiences. And why wouldn't I? After all, I was able to learn how to write magazine pieces in English, do radio stories, edit videos and code in one year. Although, I didn't become perfect in any of these skills, just speaking the same language as the people who are masters at these skills will go a long way—for example, talking to coders will be a heck of a lot easier now that I understand the basics of HTML, CSS and JavaScript.

In addition to all of this, I am returning to Finland with a handful of new, close friends. Befriending people from different countries and cultures has made me less cynical and much more open. It is hard to survive a crunch like the Specialized Journalism program without having people around you to share it with. It is also enriching to share things with them outside of classrooms. Our group of friends organized dinners and get-togethers, we went to the beach together—I even got my Canadian classmate excited about aqua jogging—and I could not have survived without these moments of relaxing together. I learned as much from my classmates as I did from my professors and I understood that in the future I want to be as enthusiastic as the people I met at Annenberg: still having the punctuality and organizational skills that I would characterize as Finnish, but adding to them a Californian quality of being open to new ideas.