

## GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION ESSAYS

### Purpose

The essay is the most personal part of the application package. Transcripts, test scores, resumes, and recommendations--these all give the graduate school a profile of your abilities and experiences. The essay presents the school with a complete portrait: they hear your voice, see you in action, get to know the person behind the numbers, the lists, the scores. When the application asks for a personal statement, then you must aim to write about yourself as clearly as interestingly, and as honestly as you can.

### Audience

It's always hard to write to people you don't know--especially when your future hangs in the balance. But putting yourself in your readers' place can help you write a better essay. You can expect that your essay will be read by several people: admissions staff, administrators, faculty, and, in some cases, advanced graduate students. All of them see the profession that you are trying to join. You need to impress them, then, as a reasonable, interesting, and competent future colleague. Although schools use the essay for different purposes in their admissions procedures, all of them view it as the best indicator of the kind of person you are and of whether you are suited for a career in their field.

Your essay will be one of many--hundreds, perhaps thousands that your readers will see. You can expect that your readers will be somewhat jaded, perhaps thousand cynical: they'll feel as if they've heard it all before, and they'll think that all the essays sound pretty much the same after a while. Your challenge, then, is to make your essay stand out from all the others. Its subject and tone need to be distinctive, yet it needs also to be professional and polite. You need not try to be flamboyant or dramatic, but you do need to be yourself--your best professional self. As you plan your essay, you must keep your readers in mind: they are busy professionals, serious about their job and their career; they value honest, clear, interesting writing; they can spot b.s. quickly; and as they read through those stacks of essays they are looking not for the right answers but for the right people.

### Topics

Applications rarely specify a topic. Instead they ask for an explanation of why you want to go to graduate school or for an indication of your career plans. Most essays ask for a response to this question: "Why do you want to do this?" As you settle on a topic, you again need to be concerned that you don't write about the same thing in the same words that everyone else will write about.

Some possible topics for open questions:

- your motivations for going to grad school.
- the specific influences (people, professors, internships, etc.) that shaped your idea of your career.
- how your education and background have prepared you for grad school.
- what specifically you want to study in grad school.
- how you plan to use your graduate degree when you finish school.
- what you see as the main issues confronting your future profession and how you imagine yourself fitting into that profession.

Be sure you write with a thesis; you need to focus quite narrowly on your topic, not wander

through a whole list of ideas. You must try to develop a single central idea in the essay. And stay within the length guidelines (usually 500 words)—save your energy for your thesis or dissertation.

Another possible essay topic: your weaknesses. The essay is the natural place for you to explain your weaknesses or an aberration in your preparation. If your GPA is embarrassing, if you bombed your entrance exams, or if you've taken three years off to hitch hike through Nepal, the essay is the section of the application for you to explain how these potential weaknesses are to be understood. You may not be able to turn your weaknesses into strengths, to spin straw into gold, but you should be able to explain to a concerned reader why you are still a strong candidate for admission even if your record isn't perfect.

### Quality of Prose

Everyone who reads mountains of material values good writing. Although it's unlikely that a school will admit you solely on the basis of your writing ability, it's not unheard of for schools to reject otherwise qualified applicants because of miserable writing skills. Some guidelines:

1. Everything you've been taught about writing comes to bear on this essay. You need to write with a thesis; you need to support your main idea with examples, details, reasons, and arguments; your paragraphs need to be clear, coherent, and unified; the introductory and concluding paragraphs must be appealing, accurate, and emphatic. Spend a few minutes thinking back to your most effective writing class: What would that teacher value in this essay? What would that teacher look for, criticize, smile about, or comment on in the essay?
2. The tone of the essay should be serious and professional, but not stuffy and pompous. The style of the writer has to emerge; the personality of the applicant must be imprinted on the page. Use your own vocabulary. Sound like yourself. Again, finding the right tone is a bit of balancing act—you can't be too informal, too relaxed, but neither can you be too rigid. You're not talking to your close friends in the essay, but neither are you writing a scholarly article. Aim for the middle ground of polite, professional, lively prose.
3. The essay must flow smoothly. As you revise and refine the piece, be sure it has a distinct beginning, middle, and end. Look for clear transitions between paragraphs, and make sure your sentences vary in length and structure.
4. You can make sure that your writing is active and lively by double checking the verbs. Often in this kind of writing the action may be transferred to nouns instead of verbs—exactly the opposite of what you want. Look for these kinds of sentences to change:

not: After my internship, my conclusion was to attend grad school.  
but: After my internship I concluded that I should attend . . .

not: The decision was difficult, even though my preparation was thorough.  
but: I decided only after long hours of consulting experts, reading about the field, and thinking carefully about whether grad school is right for me. I knew I had prepared myself thoroughly, but . . .

5. Many writers have trouble writing about themselves. They lose their ability to see the essay after a while, and what they intended to display qualifications, they fear sounds only like empty bragging. Two strategies can help here: First try to write about your experiences, not about yourself. Beginning your sentences with nouns instead of the personal pronoun "I" can help (Not: "I cut grass for three years during high school." But: "Establishing my own lawn care business taught me self-discipline and the fundamentals of sound business practice.") Notice that you can't (and don't want to) get rid of personal pronouns altogether, but the shift from a focus on you to focus on your experience solves a couple of problems--it gives you distance on yourself, and it provides variety in sentence structure. The second useful strategy is to get several readings of the essay from friends, professors, and writing experts (Come to the Writing Center!) before you send the essay off. You need to get good responses from several people to know how your writing strikes an audience.
6. If ever you write an error-free essay, this needs to be it. Grammatical and mechanical errors may ruin the entire application.