

GRADUATE SCHOOL

The Application Essay

The application essay or personal statement is a standard component of most graduate and professional school applications. The requirements for such essays vary from program to program, but some general principles apply.

Application essays give you an opportunity to explain -- through narrative, example, and analysis -- aspects of your personal, educational, and professional history that may have led you to pursue an advanced degree at a particular institution. Admissions committees rely heavily on these essays to put a face on impersonal test scores and GPAs.

Purpose and Audience

Aim for a clear, succinct statement showing that you have a definite sense of what you want to do and enthusiasm for the field of study you have chosen. Before writing anything, stop and consider what your reader might be looking for; the general directions or other parts of the application may indicate this. Additionally, you should research the school, department, and faculty to which you are applying. Your audience for this essay will consist of faculty and staff members of the department to which you are applying. These readers will often have varying levels of knowledge in your field; therefore, keep your readers in mind when explaining any technical work or research you have done.

Admissions committees may be trying to evaluate a number of things from your statement, including the following things about you:

- Motivation and commitment to a field of study
- Expectations with the program and career opportunities and major areas of interest
- Writing ability
- Research and/or work experience
- Educational background
- Immediate and long-term goals
- Maturity
- Reasons for deciding to pursue graduate education in a particular field and at a particular institution
- Personal uniqueness – what you would add to the diversity of the entering class

Content and Format

An essay or personal statement for an application should be essentially a statement of your ideas and goals. Usually it includes a certain amount of personal history, but, unless an institution specifically requests autobiographical information, you do not have to supply any. Even when the requirement is a “personal statement,” the possibilities are almost unlimited. There is no set formula to follow, and, if you do write an autobiographical piece, it does not have to be arranged chronologically. The following areas are typically addressed in a graduate school essay, but pay attention to the specific content requested by your school.

Background & Abilities

- Correlate your personal information with the degree program you wish to enter.
- Highlight your unique skills, abilities and character traits, focusing on those that correlate with success in grad school.
- Show a logical transition from your experience in school/work to graduate school. How has that experience cultivated your interest in this degree program?
- Feature your relevant experience. Balance content between academic and work-related experience.

Goals & Motivation

- Discuss your motivations for pursuing graduate education. Demonstrate how the degree program can help you achieve the goals you have set for yourself.
- Relate your qualifications, experiences and skills to your goals and to your school’s resources.
- Ensure that your goals are a logical extension of your qualifications, experiences and abilities.
- Spell out your short- and long-term goals, including proposed areas of research and professional interests.
- Answer the question, “Why this school/program and why now?”

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Quick Personal Statement Tips

Less is more	Organize your essay around a unifying theme rather than merely listing your accomplishments.
Give good examples and explanations	Avoid making statements that could be cut and pasted out of your essay and into someone else's with little difficulty. For example, "I have always wanted to be a doctor because I enjoy helping people," is a sentiment, which almost anyone applying to medical school might agree. Make this idea meaningful by giving an example of something that inspired your interest. Explain how and why it had an effect on you. These details show your enthusiasm and dedication far more effectively than just saying that you care about something.
Help your reader	Help your reader understand how the information you are providing demonstrates your potential for this kind of advanced study as well as the soundness of your reasons for pursuing it.
Follow instructions	Make sure that your essay is responding to the question(s).
Cover your bases	Make sure that you've called attention to your successes and relevant experience and that you've explained any discrepancies in your record.
Proofread your essay!	Spelling, typos, and grammar errors immediately suggest a lack of professionalism to a reader who has to make quick judgements about potentially hundreds of candidates. Proofread and enlist the help of others to make sure that your essay is immaculate.

Personal Statement FAQs

Is it all right to use the first person?	In most cases it's essential. The application essay is about you and what you think about yourself and the field you want to study.
How far back should I go in tracing my background?	Choose the details that you want to highlight in order to best answer the question at hand. The application itself may provide you with a chance to give detailed educational and job history. Stories about how one became interested in a particular field might reference things as far back as grade school. However, more recent honors will carry more weight.
How long should the statement be?	Your essay should never exceed the limit given in the application instructions. If no limit is specified, make your essay no longer than two pages.
How much of the information should I repeat?	Admissions reviewers may not read every detail of your application carefully. Highlight information from your application that you definitely want noted. Do not merely list things, though. Be sure to explain the significance of the items you mention and make them relevant to the essay as a whole.
Should I include or explain negative experiences? Should I call attention to a low (or high) GPA?	In some cases, yes. Discussing a negative experience that taught you something valuable or helped you make important life or career decisions can sometimes be a good way to provide a reviewer with insight into your character and professional goals. However, if you don't want to draw attention to a particular situation (or have nothing positive to say about it), you might best avoid bringing it up at all.
How "personal" should I be?	These essays are "personal" they ask you not only to tell things about you but to reflect on their significance to your past and future educational and career goals. Some applications specifically request that you provide a personal narrative, others focus more on educational and professional experience. In either case, it's important to connect your experiences to the goals and requirements of the program and to be guided by the essay instructions.
How experimental should I be?	It can be risky to do something unusual to stand out, and it requires a high degree of sophistication and skill. Whatever flashy or clever tactic you choose to use, you want to demonstrate your preparation and suitability for the program to which you are applying. While some appreciate a break from the more standard essay, others may see it as a failure to follow instructions. A safer strategy is to use compelling details and a clear, artful writing style.
Should I format this as a standard essay (with intro, body, conclusion)?	Yes, you want to give your essay a discernable shape -- one that indicates a direction, takes your reader to a destination, and helps him or her understand the significance of what you've written about.

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Getting started: Brainstorming exercises

Writers of application essays often feel that they have either too much to say or too little. In either case, a good way to get started is to do some writing that will help generate and focus your ideas. Use the space below to do some brainstorming in response to the questions and suggestions below.

1. What experiences and/or education have made you want to pursue this degree program?

2. When did you first become interested in this field of study? How have you been pursuing your interest (e.g., education, volunteer work, professional experience)?

3. What most appeals to you about this program -- in general (i.e., the field of study) and more specifically (i.e., the particular department or school's program)? What makes you and your interests a good fit?

4. What do you plan to do with the education you hope to receive?

5. What do you think is the most interesting or notable thing about you? How do you think it might relate to the program that you want to pursue? How could you use it as a jumping off point or organizational device for your essay?

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Writing a draft: From outline to essay

Now that you have a sense of what you want to write about, draft your essay.

1. Make an outline

Use the space below to make an outline for your essay. What will the main theme be? What points do you want to be sure to include? If you already have a draft written, use this space to jot down the organization of your essay based on what you've already written.

2. Develop your body paragraphs with example and explanation

Try developing examples and explanations for one statement that you'd like to make about your experience or interest in this program. Be on the lookout for those cut-and-paste-able sentences and replace them with details that show, rather than tell.

Once you've gotten a good draft of the main body of your essay, go to the next section on introductions

Back to the beginning: The introduction

Once you have a good sense of your essay's focus, try writing an introduction that will engage your reader and suggest the direction in which your essay will go. Not every essay has to have a clever or original introduction. One which is straightforward and to the point can also be effective and may, in some cases, be what a particular program wants to see. Most important is its effectiveness in setting a tone and direction for what follows.

Sample Introductions:

As you read the examples below, remember that different types of applications require different approaches. If, for example, your essay requires a clear and concise statement of your experience and professional goals, a straightforward introduction would be very appropriate (see Example #1). For some applications, you may have a particular question to answer. In such cases, your introduction should be responsive to the question at hand (see Example #2). When appropriate, a creative approach can also be quite effective, provided that its relevance to your career choice is clear and that you are able to use it to communicate essential information about yourself (see Example #3). If possible, read examples of successful essays for your particular field and seek feedback from those knowledgeable about your chosen field.

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Example #1 (Graduate study in the sciences)

The application prompt: Tell us why you want to pursue an advanced degree in this field and what has prepared you for such a course of study.

I wish to enroll in the Environmental Toxicology doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in order to pursue my interests in the mechanisms of neurotoxicology and the impact of chemicals on the environment. My undergraduate course work, research experience, and exposure to environmental negligence while living abroad have all contributed to my interest and preparation for graduate study in Environmental Toxicology.

In this very straightforward introduction, the applicant clearly identifies her particular interest in the field and introduces the main points of her essay.

Example #2 (Medical school application)

The Application Prompt: Describe some people who have influenced your decision to pursue a career in medicine.

My high school sociology teacher gave my class an unusual project one week. Mr. R-- asked our class to write an obituary in the manner that we wished to be remembered by our peers. Mine started like this: "Dr. T-- G-- passed away one week ago today. He was a physician who cared, knew all of his patients by their first name and never thought a question was either too small or too trivial..." In actuality, I could use this excerpt to describe my pediatrician, Dr. G-- S--. The picture of medicine he painted inspired me to look further into the science field and the rewards that a career in medicine offered. Others like Dr. Ortwein influenced and reinforced my decision to select a career in medicine.

In this introduction, the applicant has found a creative way to introduce people who have influenced him. He has also included enough detail to indicate right from the start why they have been influential.

Example #3 (Veterinarian School Application)

The Application Prompt: Your personal statement should help the admissions committee learn something about you as a person, about the development of your interest in veterinary medicine and about your career goals.

Up to your eyeballs in alligators takes on new meaning when you work at the Emergency Clinic for Animals (ECA). It was a typical Sunday afternoon and the waiting room was full with a variety of pets and their owners, including an iguana, a hamster, and an assortment of cats and dogs. One of the dog owners brought along two small children who were busy inspecting all of the pets in the waiting area. Working as a veterinarian assistant, it was my responsibility to admit new patients and discharge animals well enough to go home. As a veteran Registered Nurse of 18 years this scene was not unlike thousand that I had encountered in my nursing career, with of course the addition of animals. And what a wonderful addition they make. On this day a very fragile 16-year-old kitty, Morris, was to go home, but would require a lot of supportive care.

In this introduction, the applicant's use of description helps to convey information about her interest in veterinary medicine as well as something about her personality. Rather than say that she's interested and has experience, she shows it by painting an affectionate and thoughtful picture of the waiting room. At the same time, she provides valuable facts about her background as a nurse and her position as a veterinarian assistant along the way.