
The Graduate School Essay

The thought of writing a graduate school application essay often paralyzes applicants with anxiety. But the essay is a wonderful opportunity to make your application shine. While transcripts and test scores are important to the decision-making process, the essay gives the graduate school admissions committee a real window into what makes you *YOU*.

The first step is understanding why the committee asks for the essay. Some essay instructions ask you to respond to questions while others give little guidance about what to write. Read the instructions carefully and respond clearly to posed questions, if applicable. The committee also wants to know how well you express yourself in writing, so make sure what you write is grammatically correct, concise, and well structured. More generally, the essay is your opportunity to call the admissions committee's attention to aspects of your candidacy that they might not otherwise learn from your application. The essay provides the committee insight into what makes you unique. What has brought you to this place in your life? What goals do you hope to achieve? What interesting perspectives will you bring to the program? (Obviously, this will be an essay that only *YOU* could write!)

How to begin

- **Start early!** You'll need time to brainstorm about content, write rough drafts, revise, get constructive feedback, and finalize the essay – all before the application deadline.
- **Brainstorm content.** With the application in mind, generate a list of responses to questions like:
 - What are your dreams, hopes, and aspirations?
 - What life experiences have had a major impact on your goals?
 - What challenges have you overcome?
 - What events and people have motivated or influenced your education and/or work?
 - What traits, work habits, and attitudes will insure your success in reaching your goals?
 - What do you hope to gain from graduate study?
 - What about you is unique?

Not all your responses will find their way into your essay, but the process of articulating them should give you a mental database from which to draw meaningful information into the essay.

- **The beginning should be terrific.** Grab attention and interest right from the start. But relax – you don't have to write the beginning first. After you've written the middle parts of the essay, a terrific introduction will likely come to you.

What to write about

Think about what the application asks for and how they fit with your brainstormed list of experiences, challenges, motivations, and positive traits. At some point, you'll probably want to discuss the following:

- Your goals and how this graduate program will help you reach them.
- Relevant accomplishments and valuable experiences. If you want to discuss one of your personal qualities, don't just say you possess the quality; illustrate it by relating a relevant experience. Evoke a vivid image of an actual event, placing the reader "with" you in the experience.

- The unique perspective you'd bring to the field and the program.
- The qualities and experiences that show you're prepared to excel in graduate school.
- Specific aspects of the program that interest you. Don't write how prestigious the institution is (they know that already). But if there are special programs that appeal to you and/or key faculty of interest, *briefly* mention your interest in becoming part of them.
- If extenuating circumstances have negatively affected your past academic performance, briefly explain them, but don't overdo it. Be specific and concise.

How to write it

The committee reads hundreds of essays, so make yours stand out! Don't bore them. Write in a concise and engaging manner to help them feel involved in your experience. A fresh, lively, and different statement will put you ahead of the pack. Tell a story. Share specific examples that introduce the readers to who you are, what you can bring to their program, and your potential to succeed.

Don't use the same statement for all applications. Answer each question being asked, and if slightly different answers are needed for different programs, write separate statements. Thoroughly research the program to which you're applying to help you determine what the admissions committee is looking for. Your research should provide enough knowledge about the school to tailor your essay to it.

Good writing skills are important to admissions committees. Be meticulous! Express yourself clearly and concisely and stick to stated word limits.

- **Avoid clichés.** Statements like "I want to help people" or "I am a people person" or "I've always wanted to be a teacher" are unoriginal. Find fresh ways to describe yourself. Tell vivid stories of events that led to your interest in the field.
- **Vary sentence length** and don't start every sentence with "I."
- **Use active rather than passive verbs.** Passive verbs (such as "was," "have," and "is") are forms of the verb *to be*. Overusing passive verbs makes writing feel flabby and dull. Example:
Passive: The classes that have prepared me for my graduate studies were taught to me by my advisor.
Active: My advisor taught the classes that shaped my graduate research interests.

Finalizing the essay

- Plan to write many drafts of your essay. Each re-write will bring improvement.
- Type and proofread your essay very carefully.
- Ask for honest, constructive feedback on your writing from as many people as possible, such as professors (past or current), employers, classmates, or career services staff. Reviewers can help spot grammar problems and can tell you whether your writing is interesting, fresh, clear, necessary, memorable, and relevant to your application. Everyone with whom you share your essay will have their own opinions, but in the end, YOU need to feel comfortable with the content and format.
- When you've written what you think is the final version, set it aside for a day or two and revisit the essay with a fresh perspective so you can objectively judge how it reads. When you're *really* done, reading the essay should make you feel great and you'll have taken a huge, positive step on the way to your graduate school career!