

GRADUATE SCHOOL ESSAYS

Developed by the Center for Global Communication and Design
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Today, the process of admissions for graduate programs is highly competitive. In addition to the quantitative data (tests scores and academic transcripts) and other materials that you will be asked to submit to a school's admissions committee, a piece of writing— variously called a “statement of purpose,” “personal essay,” or “statement of background and goals”—will probably be required as well.

The overall application package will represent who “you” are to people whom you will most likely not know personally. The written expression of your qualities as an applicant will often be a very important way for committee members to get to know why you are an acceptable candidate for their program. Thus, it is essential to take great care in preparing this part of your application. Because graduate schools make important selection decisions that are partly based on what you say in this essay, the writing of it can be an intimidating prospect.

This handout offers some points to consider as you undertake the writing of an application essay.

Start Early! Be Thorough!

If you have begun your application process early, take the time to investigate thoroughly each institution to which you are applying.

- Locate/browse-through/read texts or abstracts by the school's faculty members who work in your field or area of interest.
- Study and re-study the application materials sent to you very carefully; in particular, read through the school catalog and required course offerings.
- Find your program's particular page on the school's website. Sometimes programs have different or additional application requirements. This is a critical step, as sending in the wrong essay may cause your application to not be processed.

Taking these steps will familiarize you with the department, and allow you to weigh its specific strengths and weaknesses in comparison to those of other schools. While conducting your inquiry, take notes so that you will have something to base your essay on. Additionally, if you happen to know anyone—a friend, family member, colleague, or teacher—who has graduated from a school that you are considering, ask her or him for information as well. Although such people may be very helpful, be careful not to let their advice sway you too much, unless you are quite sure that they are particularly familiar with the department in question, and that their knowledge of it is up to date.

What to Include

The piece of writing that each school requests may be very different from that of others; some programs may even ask for more than one essay. Before you begin to write, study very carefully the essay directions on the application materials provided by the school and by the specific department to which you are applying. While some programs leave the content of the essay fairly “open,” others may place explicit content and length restrictions on it. Try to make sure that you have a good idea of what you are being asked to write about.

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Whatever the particular form of the essay asked of you, there are a number of basic areas committees are interested in. When evaluating your application, each reader will ultimately have this question in mind: “Why should we let you into our school?” In order to answer this question, try to do the following:

- Clearly state your short and long term goals; tell how university “X” can help you meet them.
- Describe your areas of research and professional interest. You might indicate how your proposed studies are located within a broad field. For example, someone applying to a composition and rhetoric program might say, “I hope to examine the relationship between rhetorical invention strategies and demonstrated ability to write for members of diverse discourse communities.” Or, someone applying to an engineering program might say, “My particular interests are in optical communications, networks, and signal processing. As an undergraduate research assistant, I studied the principles of wavelet transforms, one of the most recent signal processing techniques, and I developed software models using Matlab to simulate the transform process. Currently I am investigating new applications of wavelet transforms. University X’s program in electrical engineering provides the direction and environment in which I can pursue my work in optimal communications networks and signal processing.”
- Give specific reasons why you are interested in a particular field, as well as why you have chosen this particular school to apply to.
- Refer to past experiences, both academic and “real world,” that are relevant to graduate study.
- Articulate what is particularly valuable about the perspective that you will bring to the prospective field of study and the specific department.
- Demonstrate your ability to think and express ideas clearly and effectively.
- Show motivation and capacity to succeed in graduate education.
- Write concisely and try to keep your readers interested. Remember that they are reading many application essays and therefore, you need to be considerate of their needs. Offer other information that demonstrates your need and desire to be accepted by the program.

Why this School?

Once you have developed a sense of the faculty’s interests and the department’s special features, you can make it clear in your application exactly why you want to attend that particular school. What is it about the department’s curriculum structure or general approach to the field that makes you interested in being a student there? Don’t waste your valuable essay space, or your reader’s valuable time, telling the reader how wonderful or prestigious their institution is; people on the admissions committee already know this. They want to know about you.

Nonetheless, if there are special programs or institutes at the school that seem appealing to you, briefly mention that you are interested in becoming part of them. For example, state that you “want to be a member of the XYZ Group for Blank and Blank Studies because . . .”, but don’t tell them how great, well respected, and world-renowned this part of the school is.

If, during your research on the department’s faculty, a faculty member strikes you as someone whom you might be interested in working with, indicate this in your essay; be concise and specific about why you want to work with this person in particular. A word of caution here: Do not try to use this as a way to “butter up” the

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admissions committee, because if there is any reason to believe that you are not sincere, your application may be adversely affected. Again, mention the person and how their work relates to your interest, but don't load this statement with what might be interpreted as false or superfluous praise.

Personal Information

Some applications may ask you to give a personal history, telling about experiences that you have undergone which have led you to decide to pursue graduate education in a certain field of study. (If personal information of this sort is not required, then you are under no obligation to provide it.)

The information that could be included in a personal-type statement is limited only by your own imagination and life history, but you should be highly selective about what you include. There are two things to watch out for: (1) saying too much and/or (2) not saying enough.

Some applicants may ramble on about themselves in a manner that may appear self-indulgent and not very appealing to the committee. Remember, this is an application essay, not an autobiography. Conversely, some applicants tend to say too little, perhaps hesitating to promote themselves too explicitly or not knowing what would be interesting to people whom they don't know. In such cases, perhaps focusing more on what you want to do than on what you have already done (let your record speak for itself), may help in getting beyond self-inhibition.

Generally, keep in mind that the points about your life that you highlight should be somehow relevant to both your own interest in the field of study, as well as to the concerns of the admissions committee. In judging what information to include or exclude from your essay, try to balance academic, work-related, and personal information in a manner appropriate to your situation, goals, and the application requirements.

Additional Considerations

If you have additional, relevant information about yourself that does not easily fit into the essay, or into any other section of the university's application, you may want to include a condensed resume or curriculum vitae with your application package. This is especially applicable to those who have worked professionally since having graduated from school. Relevant items here might include work experience, publications, and presentations, as well as language and computer skills.

Also, if you have experienced times of great hardship or extenuating circumstances that have negatively affected your academic performance at any time, provide a short explanatory statement. This is another one of those places where caution should be exercised: you want to explain the cause of your poor grades, etc. without alienating the reader by overdoing it. Once again, be specific and concise.

(Re)Writing

Although some people may be able to write an essay from start to finish in one sitting, most would probably not be particularly satisfied with the results of such an effort. Outlines, including a list of possible components to include in the essay, are often a good way to get started on your essay. Some writers prefer to start writing one paragraph at a time, re-arranging their ideas for orderly flow later on. Whatever method you use (only a few out of many have been mentioned here), make sure to allow time for revision—don't start your essay the night before you have to send it out!

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Ask others to read your essay and give you honest feedback; tell them that it is important to know what areas they find unclear or unnecessary. Don't feel shy about asking for or receiving criticism; remember, the effectiveness of your essay depends on your being able to present yourself in a manner that is attractive to admissions committees. Comments such as "it's good" are not going to be very helpful to you because they will not help you to improve your essay.

Comm+D is available to offer suggestions on beginning, revising and finishing your application essay, so make use of this valuable resource. Also for ideas on form and style selected application essays that students have written in the past are on file for you to browse-through at the Center.

After considering responses to your work, revise your essay until you are satisfied with it. (Remember to spell check the final draft). Also, make sure that your name and possibly the essay title—for example: "Personal Statement"—is included in a header on the first page, and that your last name is on a header or footer for each additional, numbered page (in case the first page gets misplaced).

Additional Resources

For more advice on how to approach application essay writing, Comm+D offers Graduate School Application Essay workshops each semester. Many graduate schools and programs will also have exemplar essays available on their websites, either through the Office of Graduate Education/Study or the school's writing center.