

Graduate School Application Essays

DePauw University Writing Center

Purpose

The essay is the most personal part of the application package. Transcripts, test scores, resumes, recommendations, these 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. Some of these people have direct knowledge of the profession which 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, one of the chief uses is 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 cynical; they will feel as if they've heard it all before, and they will think that the essays sound pretty much the same. **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 jobs and their careers; they value honest, clear, interesting writing; they can spot BS 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 out the same thing in the same words that everyone else is writing out.

Be sure you write with a thesis; you need to focus quite narrowly on your topic, not wander through a host of ideas. You must try to develop a single, central idea in the essay. Stay within the length guidelines usually provided; save your energy for your thesis or dissertation.

- You can make sure that your writing is active and lively by double-checking the verbs. Often in this kind of writing the action they've transferred to nouns instead of verbs. See 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 grad school.*

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...*

Many writers have trouble writing about the selves. They use their ability to see the essay after the headline and what they intended to discuss as qualifications they fear sounds on your page. Try rereading. Two strategies can help here.

- 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.*

You can't and don't want to get rid of personal pronouns together. But the shift from focus on you to focus on your experiences so verbs couple of phrases. 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.
- If ever you write an error-free essay, this needs to be it. Grammar, punctuation, and mechanics errors may ruin the entire application.