

Writing Personal Statements and Graduate/Professional School Essays

INTRODUCTION

Writing a personal statement is often the most difficult part of the graduate/professional school application process. However, an essay or “personal statement” should always be submitted with your application, even if the school says it is optional. If your qualifications make you a borderline student at a school that makes a point of considering subjective factors in its admission decisions, then your personal statement could make a difference between acceptance and rejection.

Writing requirements vary widely. Some programs request only 1 or 2 paragraphs about why you want to pursue graduate study, while others require numerous specific essays. Since personal statements/essays can reveal your character more clearly than other application materials, they may provide evidence that you bring something distinctive to the field: unusual ability, background traits, experience, or a unique way of looking at the world. You won’t be admitted to a top school unless you distinguish yourself. Even at a school where your personal statement may not be read closely and can’t help you much, it *can* hurt.

WHAT TO WRITE

Before writing anything, stop and consider what a reader might be looking for; the general directions or other parts of the application may give you some indication. A number of things may be evaluated, including:

- Expectations with regard to the program and career opportunities
- Writing ability
- Major area of interest
- Educational background
- Immediate and long-term goals
- Reasons for pursuing a graduate degree in a particular field and at a particular institution
- Maturity
- Personal uniqueness - what you would add to the diversity of the entering class

Some schools require specific essays, while others provide no direction at all. There are both advantages and disadvantages to vagueness. Since no specific topic is required, one can write about whatever will do the most good. The drawback of not having a precise topic is that you’ll have to choose your own topic. This choice will probably be difficult to make. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

Write about Yourself. Schools want to know about you, your talents and evidence that you will succeed academically and professionally. Usually this would include some personal history, but, unless an institution specifically requests autobiographical information, you do not have to supply any. Even if you write an autobiographical piece, it does not have to be arranged chronologically.

Be Specific. Write about events and activities. Often the best essay topic is a description of some incident or activity which led you to your field of study.

Tell a Story. Stories can keep attention of a tired reader.

Emphasize Your Uniqueness. An essay about a problem you solved or an obstacle you overcame is always appropriate. You could also find an interesting way to write about a feature of your personality or what you have learned about yourself and/or your field. **Be assertive but not boastful** by highlighting your positives in a context that goes beyond just yourself.

Don’t Choose a Topic that Makes You Seem Immature or of Questionable Character.

Avoid Talking about in the Abstract. This can sound like a personal ad or make you seem distant.

Avoid Negatives. A positive, attractive personality is hard to exhibit while dwelling on negatives. Focus on positives. Talk about what you learned, not why your grades were low. Keep the reader’s attention on what is attractive about you and avoid reminding him or her that you are not the perfect candidate.

Avoid Clichés. “I want to help people.” “The human body fascinates me.” “This career would be rewarding and challenging.”

Ultimately, an essay or personal statement for an application should be 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. Your essay should reflect the clarity, focus, and depth of your thinking.

HOW TO WRITE

You’ve done this before. Writing for graduate/professional school is no different than writing anything else, except that it may count more. Writing a clear and persuasive essay takes time. You’ll need to organize and write several drafts, have the essay read and critiqued by others, and polish the grammar and rhetoric. The chief reason application essays are unpersuasive is that insufficient time is taken with them.

When beginning to write, set down all the information as fully as possible, even if there’s repetition. You may outline the points you want to cover and then expand on them, or you can simply put your ideas down on paper as they come to you. Making an outline will likely lead to an organized essay, whereas writing spontaneously may yield a more inspired piece of writing. Don’t worry if the initial drafts are too long, the information will be pared down and refined. Now you are ready to organize the essay.

CATCH THE ATTENTION OF A BORED AND EXHAUSTED ADMISSIONS OFFICIAL BY WRITING A FORCEFUL FIRST SENTENCE. Then, use one of two main approaches for organizing an essay. Begin with specific details and progress to a general conclusion, or state some general first, and then describe the pieces of evidence that support it. Some essays fall more naturally into a deductive, or conclusion first, mode of organization, while others are more effective if told inductively, or detail first.

Regardless of what and how you write, always have others critique it. Don’t be surprised, however, if you get differing opinions on the content. In the end, only you can decide on the best way to present yourself.

TIPS

Before attempting to write the first sentence, construct an outline of your main ideas and themes. **If a specific question is asked make sure to address it.**

There is no need to list your honors, awards, and activities if these were specified elsewhere. However, feel free to highlight things like these in the context of your essay.

Your essay has to be unified and include nothing unnecessary. Prune away anything that is repetitious.

Without required specificity, the best advice for writing a personal statement is to draft and polish one carefully, and then use essentially the same creation for all schools.

Ask people to read your essays. Lots of people. Some of them should be strangers. Friends know your stories and can guess what you are trying to say even if you haven’t written it clearly.

Ask your readers to paraphrase the main point. Also ask if anything was confusing or unclear.

Type your essay unless a school specifically requests that it be handwritten.

Grammar, punctuation, word usage, proper paragraphing, and other writing techniques all count.

Make sure your name appears on each page of your essay. Number the pages and use paper clips rather than staples. Your final application should reflect an attention to detail and thoroughness.

REFERENCES

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