

## Application Essays

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### What this handout is about

This handout will help you write and revise the personal statement required by many graduate programs, internships, and special academic programs.

### Before you start writing

Because the application essay can have a critical effect upon your progress toward a career, you should spend significantly more time, thought, and effort on it than its typically brief length would suggest. It should reflect how you arrived at your professional goals, why the program is ideal for you, and what you bring to the program. Don't make this a deadline task—now's the time to write, read, rewrite, give to a reader, revise again, and on until the essay is clear, concise, and compelling. At the same time, don't be afraid. You know most of the things you need to say already.

1. Read the instructions carefully. One of the basic tasks of the application essay is to follow the directions. If you don't do what they ask, the reader may wonder if you will be able to follow directions in their program. Make sure you follow page and word limits exactly—err on the side of shortness, not length. The essay may take two forms:
  - A one-page essay answering a general question
  - Several short answers to more specific questions
2. Do some research before you start writing. Think about...
  - **The field.** Why do you want to be a \_\_\_\_\_? No, really. Think about why you and you *particularly* want to enter that field. What are the benefits and what are the shortcomings? When did you become interested in the field and why? What path in that career interests you right now? Brainstorm and write these ideas out.
  - **The program.** Why is this *the* program you want to be admitted to? What is special about the faculty, the courses offered, the placement record, the facilities you might be using? If you can't think of anything particular, read the brochures they offer, go to events, or meet with a faculty member or student in the program. A word about honesty here—you may have a reason for choosing a program that wouldn't necessarily sway your reader; for example, you want to live near the beach, or the program is the most prestigious and would look better on your resume. You don't want to be completely straightforward in these cases and appear superficial, but skirting around them or lying can look even worse. Turn these aspects into positives. For example, you may want to go to a program in a particular location because it is a place that you

know very well and have ties to, or because there is a need in your field there. Again, doing research on the program may reveal ways to legitimate even your most superficial and selfish reasons for applying.

- **Yourself.** What details or anecdotes would help your reader understand you? What makes you special? Is there something about your family, your education, your work/life experience, or your values that has shaped you and brought you to this career field? What motivates or interests you? Do you have special skills, like leadership, management, research, or communication? Why would the members of the program want to choose you over other applicants? Be honest with yourself and write down your ideas. If you are having trouble, ask a friend or relative to make a list of your strengths or unique qualities that you plan to read on your own (and not argue about immediately). Ask them to give you examples to back up their impressions (For example, if they say you are “caring,” ask them to describe an incident they remember in which they perceived you as caring).

### **Now, write a draft**

This is a hard essay to write. It’s probably much more personal than any of the papers you have written for class, because it’s about you, not World War II or planaria. You may want to start by just getting something—anything—on paper. Try freewriting. Think about the questions we asked above and the prompt for the essay, and then write for 15 or 30 minutes without stopping. What do you want your audience to know after reading your essay? What do you want them to feel? Don’t worry about grammar, punctuation, organization, or anything else. Just get out the ideas you have.

Now, look at what you’ve written. Find the most relevant, memorable, concrete statements and focus in on them. Eliminate any generalizations or platitudes (“I’m a people person”, “Doctors save lives”, or “Mr. Calleson’s classes changed my life”), or anything that could be cut and pasted into anyone else’s application. Find what is specific to you about the ideas that generated those platitudes and express them more directly. Eliminate irrelevant issues (“I was a track star in high school, so I think I’ll make a good veterinarian.”) or issues that might be controversial for your reader (“My faith is the one true faith, and only nurses with that faith are worthwhile,” or “Lawyers who only care about money are evil.”).

Often, writers start out with generalizations as a way to get to the really meaningful statements, and that’s OK. Just make sure that you replace the generalizations with examples as you revise. A hint: you may find yourself writing a good, specific sentence right after a general, meaningless one. If you spot that, try to use the second sentence and delete the first.

Applications that have several short-answer essays require even more detail. Get straight to the point in every case, and address what they’ve asked you to address.

### **Audience**

Now that you've generated some ideas, get a little bit pickier. It's time to remember one of the most significant aspects of the application essay: your audience. Your readers may have thousands of essays to read, many or most of which will come from qualified applicants. This essay may be your best opportunity to communicate with the decision makers in the application process, and you don't want to bore them, offend them, or make them feel you are wasting their time.

With this in mind:

- Do assure your audience that you understand and look forward to the challenges of the program and the field, not just the benefits.
- Do assure your audience that you understand exactly the nature of the work in the field and that you are prepared for it, psychologically and morally as well as educationally.
- Do assure your audience that you care about them and their time by writing a clear, organized, and concise essay.
- Do address any information about yourself and your application that needs to be explained (for example, weak grades or unusual coursework for your program) include it in your essay, and be straightforward about it. Your audience will be more impressed with your having learned from setbacks or having a unique approach than your failure to address those issues.
- Don't waste space with information you have provided in the rest of the application. Every sentence should be effective and directly related to the rest of the essay. Don't ramble or use fifteen words to express something you could say in eight.
- Don't overstate your case for what you want to do, being so specific about your future goals that you come off as presumptuous or naïve ("I want to become a dentist so that I can train in wisdom tooth extraction, because I intend to focus my life's work on taking 13 rather than 15 minutes per tooth."). Your goals may change—show that such a change won't devastate you.
- And, one more time, don't write in clichés and platitudes. Every doctor wants to help save lives, every lawyer wants to work for justice—your reader has read these general clichés a million times.

Imagine the worst-case scenario (which may never come true—we're talking hypothetically): the person who reads your essay has been in the field for decades. She is on the application committee because she has to be, and she's read 48 essays so far that morning. You are number 49, and your reader is tired, bored, and thinking about lunch. How are you going to catch and keep her attention?

Assure your audience that you are capable academically, willing to stick to the program's demands, and interesting to have around.

### **Voice and style**

The voice you use and the style in which you write can intrigue your audience.

**The voice you use in your essay should be yours.** Remember when your high school English teacher said “never say ‘I’”? Here’s your chance to use all those “I”s you’ve been saving up. The narrative should reflect your perspective, experiences, thoughts, and emotions. Focusing on events or ideas may give your audience an indirect idea of how these things became important in forming your outlook, but many others have had equally compelling experiences. By simply talking about those events in your own voice, you put the emphasis on you rather than the event or idea. Look at this anecdote:

*During the night shift at Wirth Memorial Hospital, a man walked into the Emergency Room wearing a monkey costume and holding his head. He seemed confused and was moaning in pain. One of the nurses ascertained that he had been swinging from tree branches in a local park and had hit his head when he fell out of a tree. This tragic tale signified the moment at which I realized psychiatry was the only career path I could take.*

An interesting tale, yes, but what does it tell you about the narrator? The following example takes the same anecdote and recasts it to make the narrator more of a presence in the story:

*I was working in the Emergency Room at Wirth Memorial Hospital one night when a man walked in wearing a monkey costume and holding his head. I could tell he was confused and in pain. After a nurse asked him a few questions, I listened in surprise as he explained that he had been a monkey all of his life and knew that it was time to live with his brothers in the trees. Like many other patients I would see that year, this man suffered from an illness that only a combination of psychological and medical care would effectively treat. I realized then that I wanted to be able to help people by using that particular combination of skills only a psychiatrist develops.*

**The voice you use should be approachable as well as intelligent.** This essay *is not* the place to stun your reader with ten prepositional phrases (“the goal of my study of the field of law in the winter of my discontent can best be understood by the gathering of more information about my youth”) and thirty nouns (“the research and study of the motivation behind my insights into the field of dentistry contains many pitfalls and disappointments but even more joy and enlightenment”) per sentence. (Note: If you are having trouble forming clear sentences without all the prepositions and nouns, take a look at our handout on [style](#).)

You may want to create an impression of expertise in the field by using specialized or technical language. But beware of this unless you really know what you are doing—a mistake will look twice as ignorant as not knowing the terms in the first place. Your audience may be smart, but you don’t want to make them turn to a dictionary or fall asleep between the first word and the period of your first sentence. Keep in mind that this is a personal statement. Would you think you were learning a lot about a person whose personal statement sounded like a journal article? Would you want to spend hours in a lab or on a committee with someone who shuns plain language?

Of course, you don’t want to be chatty to the point of making them think you only speak slang,

either. Your audience may not know what “I kicked that lame-o to the curb for dissing my research project” means. Keep it casual enough to be easy to follow, but formal enough to be respectful of the audience’s intelligence.

Just use an honest voice and represent yourself as naturally as possible. It may help to think of the essay as a sort of face-to-face interview, only the interviewer isn’t actually present.

### **Too much style**

A well-written, dramatic essay is much more memorable than one that fails to make an emotional impact on the reader. Good anecdotes and personal insights can really attract an audience’s attention. BUT be careful not to let your drama turn into melodrama. You want your reader to see your choices motivated by passion and drive, not hyperbole and a lack of reality. Don’t invent drama where there isn’t any, and don’t let the drama take over. Getting someone else to read your drafts can help you figure out when you’ve gone too far.

### **Taking risks**

Many guides to writing application essays encourage you to take a risk, either by saying something off-beat or daring or by using a unique writing style. When done well, this strategy can work—your goal is to stand out from the rest of the applicants and taking a risk with your essay will help you do that. An essay that impresses your reader with your ability to think and express yourself in original ways and shows you really care about what you are saying is better than one that shows hesitancy, lack of imagination, or lack of interest.

But be warned: this strategy is a *risk*. If you don’t carefully consider what you are saying and how you are saying it, you may offend your readers or leave them with a bad impression of you as flaky, immature, or careless. Do not alienate your readers.

Some writers take risks by using irony (your suffering at the hands of a barbaric dentist led you to want to become a gentle one), beginning with a personal failure (that eventually leads to the writer’s overcoming it), or showing great imagination (one famous successful example involved a student who answered a prompt about past formative experiences by beginning with a basic answer—“I have volunteered at homeless shelters”—that evolved into a ridiculous one—“I have sealed the hole in the ozone layer with plastic wrap”). One student applying to an art program described the person he did *not* want to be, contrasting it with the person he thought he was and would develop into if accepted. Another person wrote an essay about her grandmother without directly linking her narrative to the fact that she was applying for medical school. Her essay was risky because it called on the reader to infer things about the student’s character and abilities from the story.

Assess your credentials and your likelihood of getting into the program before you choose to take a risk. If you have little chance of getting in, try something daring. If you are almost certainly guaranteed a spot, you have more flexibility. In any case, make sure that you answer

the essay question in some identifiable way.

### **After you've written a draft**

Get several people to read it and write their comments down. It is worthwhile to seek out someone in the field, perhaps a professor who has read such essays before. Give it to a friend, your mom, or a neighbor. The key is to get more than one point of view, and then compare these with your own. Remember, you are the one best equipped to judge how accurately you are representing yourself.

After you've received feedback, revise the essay. Put it away. Get it out and revise it again (you can see why we said to start right away—this process may take time). Get someone to read it again. Revise it again.

When you think it is totally finished, you are ready to proofread and format the essay. Check every sentence and punctuation mark. You cannot afford a careless error in this essay. (If you are not comfortable with your proofreading skills, check out our handout on proofreading).

If you find that your essay is too long, do not reformat it extensively to make it fit. Making readers deal with a nine-point font and quarter-inch margins will only irritate them. Figure out what material you can cut and cut it.

Finally, proofread it again. We're not kidding.

### **Other resources**

Don't be afraid to talk to professors or professionals in the field; many of them would be flattered that you asked their advice, and they will have useful advice that others might not have.

If your schedule and ours permit, we invite you to come to the Writing Center. Be aware that during busy times in the semester, we limit students to a total of two visits to discuss application essays and personal statements (two visits per student, not per essay); we do this so that students working on papers for courses will have a better chance of being seen. Make an appointment or submit your essay to our online writing center (note that we cannot guarantee that an online tutor will help you in time).

There are a lot of handbooks and websites dealing with personal statement essays. The following are just a couple:

Curry & Kasbar. *Essays That Worked: 50 essays from successful applications to the nation's top colleges*. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1990.

Stelzer, Richard J. *How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Princeton, New Jersey: Peterson's, 1997.

Many colleges and professional programs offer websites addressing the personal statement. You can find them either through the website of the school to which you are applying or by searching under "personal statement" or "application essays" using a search engine.

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