



GRADUATE SCHOOL TIPS: Graduate School Application Essays

Source: The Writing Center: The University of Wisconsin Madison
<http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/ap-faq.html>

Frequently Asked Questions

**Important note: Expectations for application essays vary widely. The answers below are meant to give some general guidelines, but may not be applicable to the particular program to which you are applying.

Is it all right to use the first person?

In most cases it's essential. The application essay is about you and what you think about yourself and the field you want to study.

How far back should I go in tracing my background?

For your essay, choose the details that you want to highlight in order to best answer the question at hand. The application itself may provide you with a chance to give detailed educational and job history.

Stories about how one became interested in a particular field might reference things as far back as grade school. At the same time, mentioning academic accomplishments prior to college might be viewed as naive. More recent honors will carry more weight.

How long should the essay or statement be?

Your essay should *never* exceed the limit given in the application instructions.

If no limit is specified, make your essay no longer than two pages.

How much of the information already in my application should I repeat?

Admissions reviewers may not read every detail of your application carefully. Therefore, highlight information from your application that you definitely want noted.

Do not merely list things, though. Be sure to explain the significance of the items you mention and make them relevant to the essay as a whole.

Should I include or explain negative experiences? Should I call attention to a low (or high) G.P.A.?

In some cases, yes. If something in your academic record is weak or questionable, a thoughtful explanation could help.

Discussing a negative experience that taught you something valuable or helped you make important life or career decisions can sometimes be a good way to provide a reviewer with insight into your character and professional goals.

However, if you don't want to draw attention to a particular situation (or have nothing positive to say about it), you might best avoid bringing it up at all.

How "personal" should I be?

By their nature, these essays are "personal" in that they ask you not only to tell things about you but to reflect on their significance to your past and future educational and career goals.

Some applications specifically request that you provide a personal narrative, while others focus more on educational and professional experience.

In either case, it's important to connect your experiences (personal, educational, or professional) to the goals and requirements of the program to which you are applying and to be guided by the essay instructions as to the main content of your essay.

How experimental should I be?

Sometimes doing something unusual with your essay can be a way to stand out from the crowd.

It can be risky, however, and it requires a high degree of sophistication and skill. Whatever flashy or clever tactic you choose to use, you have to be able to use it to complete the task at hand, which is to demonstrate your preparation and suitability for the program to which you are applying.

At the same time, readers of experimental essays have vastly different reactions to them. While some appreciate a break from the more standard essay, others may see it as a failure to follow instructions. A safer strategy is to use compelling details and a clear, artful writing style.

Should I format this as a standard essay (with an introduction, body, conclusion)?

To one degree or another, yes. You want to give your essay a discernable shape – one that indicates a direction, takes your reader to a destination, and helps him or her understand the significance of what you've written about.

Before you begin: useful tips for writing your essay

Before you start writing, keep these principles in mind:

Less is more

That is, you have a lot you *could* say, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you *should* try to say everything.

Be selective. Organize your essay around a unifying theme rather than merely listing your accomplishments.

Give good examples and explanations

Try to avoid making statements that could be cut and pasted out of your essay and into someone else's with little difficulty. One detail is worth a thousand clichés.

For example, "I have always wanted to be a doctor because I enjoy helping people," is a sentiment with which almost anyone applying to medical school might agree.

Make this idea meaningful by giving an example of something that inspired your interest. Explain *how* and *why* it had an effect on you. These details *show* your enthusiasm and dedication far more effectively than just *saying* that you care about something does.

Help your reader

Be sure that at some level, you are helping your reader understand how the information you are providing demonstrates your potential for this kind of advanced study as well as the soundness of your reasons for pursuing it.

Follow instructions carefully

Make sure that your essay is responding to the question(s).

Cover your bases

Make sure that you've called attention to your successes and relevant experience and that you've explained any discrepancies in your record.

Proofread your essay!

Spelling, typographical, and grammatical errors are the written equivalent of having wrinkled clothes and bad breath on a job interview.

They immediately suggest a lack of professionalism to a reader who has to make quick judgments about potentially hundreds of candidates.

Leave yourself time to proofread and enlist the help of others to make sure that your essay is immaculate.

Getting Started: Brainstorming Exercises

This form provides spaces for you to brainstorm and draft parts of your essay.

Writers of application essays often feel that they have either too much to say or too little. In either case, a good way to get started is to do some writing that will help generate and focus your ideas.

The form is divided into two parts that you can fill out selectively depending on where you are in the process. The first section includes questions you can use to brainstorm content and the second section guides you through the process of drafting your essay. You can move back and forth between the two sections using the buttons on the bottom of the form.

Use the space below to do some brainstorming and mail your writing to yourself later (using the form below) to keep a record of what you've written. If you're more comfortable writing by hand, take this opportunity to brainstorm on paper in response to the questions and suggestions below.

1. What experiences and/or education have made you want to pursue this degree program?

2. When did you first become interested in this field of study? How have you been pursuing your interest (e.g., education, volunteer work, professional experience)?

3. What most appeals to you about this program -- in general (i.e., the field of study) and more specifically (i.e., the particular department or school's program)? What makes you and your interests a good fit?

4. What do you plan to do with the education you hope to receive?

5. What do you think is the most interesting or notable thing about you? How do you think it might relate to the program that you want to pursue? How could you use it as a jumping off point or organizational device for your essay?

6. Make an outline

Use the space below to make an outline for your essay. What will the main theme be? What points do you want to be sure to include? If you already have a draft written, use this space to jot down the organization of your essay based on what you've already written.

7. Develop your body paragraphs with examples and explanation

Try developing examples and explanations for one statement that you'd like to make about your experience or interest in this program. Be on the lookout for those cut-and-pastable sentences and replace them with details that show, rather than tell.

8. Back to the beginning: The introduction

Once you have a good sense of your essay's focus, try writing an introduction that will engage your reader and suggest the direction in which your essay will go.

Not every essay has to have a clever or original introduction. One which is straightforward and to the point can also be effective and may, in some cases, be what a particular program wants to see. Most important is its effectiveness in setting a tone and direction for what follows.